



Four Forgotten Norwegian Ensigns

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Abstract

Standard narratives of Norwegian flag history usually discuss only two specially marked ensigns: the customs and postal ensigns, both based on the swallow-tailed and tongued state ensign of Norway. These were the two ensigns permitted under the 1898 Flag Act that removed the Swedish-Norwegian union mark from civic and state flags and ensigns of Norway. Yet in the last years of the union between Norway and Sweden several more specially marked ensigns existed. At the Yokohama ICV in 2009 I documented the ensign of the Lighthouse Service. In this paper attention is devoted to four more ensigns: those of the State Port Authority, the Port of Kristiania, the Christiania Harbour Police, and the Fisheries Inspection Service. A secondary written description is available for the two port ensigns, though no legal basis has been found for them. The legal basis is available for the Christiania Harbour Police and the Fisheries Inspection Service ensigns; the latter is also illustrated in international flag books of the late 1800s. All four ensigns would have been made defunct by the 1898 Flag Act, though sources indicate the continued use of the Christiania Harbour Police ensign and photographic evidence shows the Fisheries Inspection Service ensign flying as late as 1936.



Redrawing of the ensign of the Fisheries Inspection Service, 1936

Four Forgotten Norwegian Ensigns

In the standard narrative of Norwegian flag history, attention is usually devoted to the flag dispute of the 19th century and the struggle to get rid of the union mark, symbol of the union between Norway and Sweden. Here the civil ensign and national flag is at the centre of attention, along with the swallow-tailed naval ensign and military flag. In this discussion, reference may also be made to a couple of state ensigns, the customs and postal ensigns, both based, since 1842, on the swallow-tailed and tongued state ensign of Norway (Figure 1). Both flags have survived to our time, so that it naturally falls to a contemporary historical narrative to tell their story.

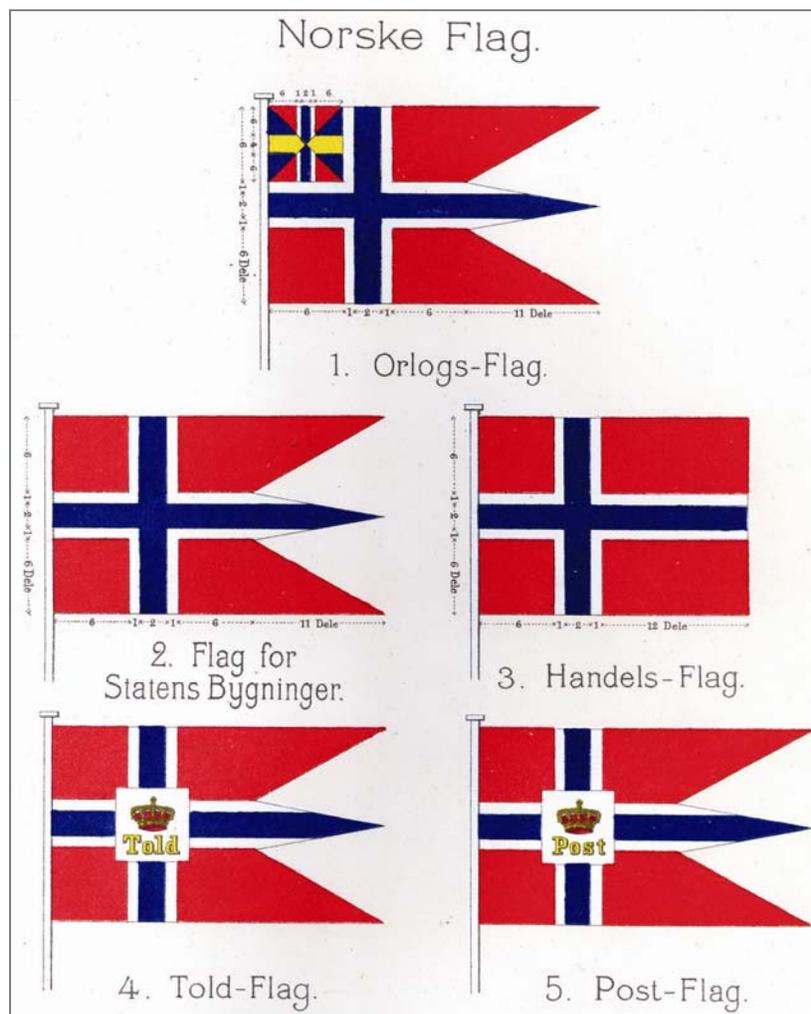


Figure 1. The Norwegian flag system 1899–1905: 1 – The naval ensign and war flag with union mark, 2 – “pure” state flag and ensign, here labeled “flag for state buildings”, 3 – civil ensign, 4 – customs ensign, 5 – postal ensign. Detail from plate in *International Signalbog*, published in Kristiania in 1901.

However, in the shadow of the main flags, several other specially marked flags and ensigns existed. At the Yokohama ICV two years ago I documented the ensign of the Directorate of Lights, the Norwegian lighthouse service, and briefly made reference to three other little known ensigns.¹ This time, attention will be given to these other three forgotten state ensigns, plus an additional one discovered since.

Information on two of these ensigns is available in just one source, a small book by Carl Johan Anker (1835–1903) published in Kristiania (later renamed Oslo) in 1888: *Tegninger af Norges flag i dets forskjellige skikkelser gjennem tiden*. Anker describes how the state ensign, that is the swallow-tailed and tongued ensign, is used by various branches of the government. In addition to the well-known use of the ensign, he adds that specially marked ensigns are used by the State Port Authority (*Statens havnevæsen*) and the Port of Kristiania (*Kristiania havnevæsen*).

***Statens havnevæsen* – State Port Authority**

Most ports in Norway, and certainly the major ones, were run by municipal harbour boards. In addition, there was a State Port Authority charged with developing and maintaining ports in other places, especially where the municipality was too small to handle the development on its own, as for instance in northern Norway.

Anker, writing in 1888, noted that the ensign of the State Port Authority had been in use since 1863. It had a square white panel over the intersection of the arms of the cross. In this panel was placed a badge consisting of a crowned anchor along with the initials “S.H.V.” all in gold. No depiction of this flag is known, so all we can offer is a reconstruction that assumes the letters were placed below the anchor (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Reconstruction of the ensign of Statens Havnevæsen (State Port Authority).

Kristiania havnevæsen – Port of Kristiania

The flag of the State Port Authority may have been inspired by the ensign of the harbour board in the capital, Kristiania (renamed Oslo in 1925). The ensign of the Port of Kristiania (*Kristiania havnevæsen*) is, according to Anker, some years older. It was introduced in 1859. As for the badge in the white square, this is described by Anker as consisting of the initials “C.H.” in *blue*. The colour of the badge is a deviation from the usual gold employed in Norwegian ensigns. No crown is mentioned, which is not strange, as the crown is a symbol of state authority and the harbour board was municipal. And, again, all we can offer is a reconstruction of how the flag might have looked like (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Reconstruction of the ensign of Christiania havnevæsen (Port of Christiania).

But if the city was named Kristiania with a K, then why did the ensign use the initial C? The reason for this lies in the changing spelling of the capital's name. Traditionally the spelling was Christiania, based on the Danish. In 1877 government agencies began using the more modern Norwegian spelling with a K instead of the old-fashioned Danish Ch. City authorities, however, resisted this change until 1897. So, the flag of the municipal harbour board had the initials in the old-fashioned way, while Anker, writing in 1888, adopted the modern variant of the city's name.

Anker does not give us any sources or information on the legal basis of the two port authority ensigns. An initial search in the holdings of Oslo City Archives produced no result regarding the flag of the Port of Kristiania.² Nevertheless, the information offered by Anker is interesting, as we may assume the flags he described were in use at the time of writing. He may have seen the flags in use and described them as he knew them. There is also the possibility that the two harbour authorities simply began using the flags without any legal basis or approval.

***Christiania havnepoliti* – Christiania Harbour Police**

In 1870 a separate police department was set up for Christiania Harbour. Five years later a special ensign was introduced for this police department. By Royal Resolution dated 19 June 1875 vessels of the Christiania Harbour Police received authorization to fly the state ensign with a white square bearing the word "Politi" (meaning police) with a crown above.³ No illustration of this flag is known and yet again the best we can offer is a reconstruction (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Reconstruction of the ensign of Christiania Havnepoliti (Christiania Harbour Police).

This ensign is mentioned in one further source, a Danish encyclopaedia published in 1902.⁴ There it is said that the Christiania Harbour Police now used a different flag, the state flag for public buildings with the word “Politi” added. The crown is now gone. Nothing is said whether the word is placed on the usual white square or some other place in the flag such as the canton. It should be clear, though, that by 1902 the word appears in the pure state flag introduced by the Flag Act of 1898 that removed the union mark from flags used by the state, except for the military. However, legally speaking the 1898 Flag Act should have abolished this flag too. Nevertheless, the description of the harbour police flag is also found in the second edition of *Salmonsens konversationsleksikon*, published as late as 1924, whether this is due to the continued use of the ensign or simply just a lack of updated information on part of the publisher of the encyclopaedia.

***Fiskeri-Opsyn* – Fisheries Inspection Service**

The fourth ensign under scrutiny here is the specially marked ensign of the Fisheries Inspection Service.⁵ This flag is not described by Anker, but its legal basis is known from other sources and we have illustrations in at least two foreign flag albums. It appears in the French *Album des pavillons nationaux et des marques distinctives des marines de guerre et de commerce*, published in Paris in 1889, and then ten years later in the Russian *Album Standartov, Flagov i Vympelov*, published in Saint Petersburg in 1899 (Figures 5 and 6). Judging from the range of flags illustrated, it seems probable that the Russian album is based on the French.

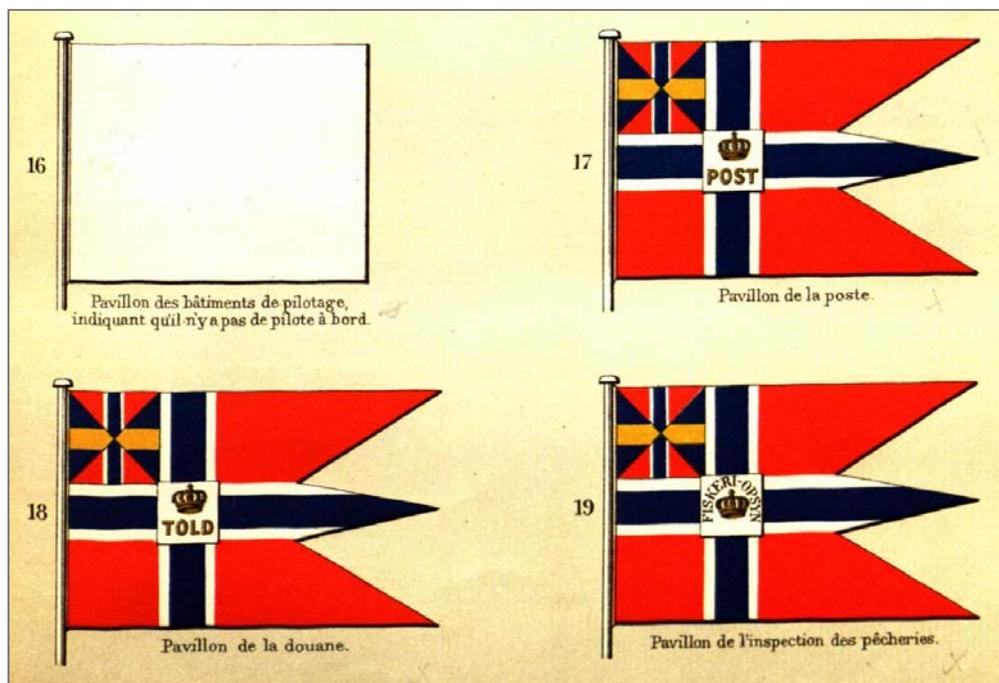


Figure 5. Detail of plate from *Album des pavillons nationaux et des marques distinctives des marines de guerre et de commerce*, published in Paris in 1889. The ensign of the Fisheries Inspection Service is shown bottom right.

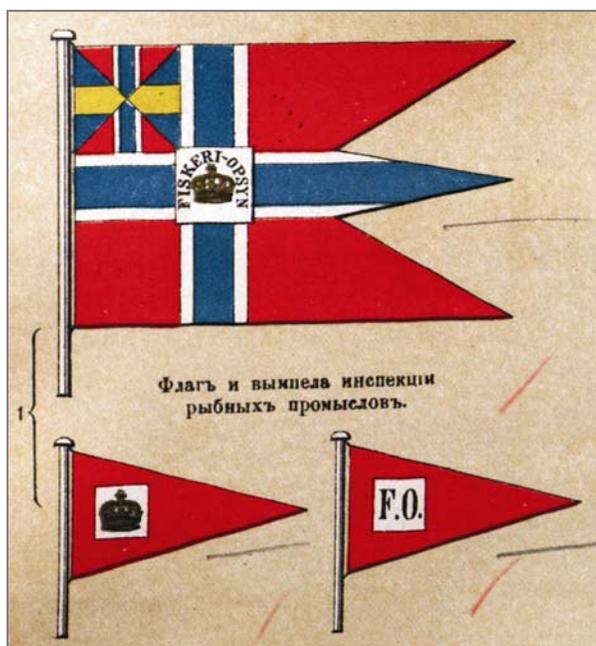


Figure 6. The Fisheries Inspection Service ensign as shown in *Album Standartov, Flagov i Vympelov*, published in Saint Petersburg in 1899.

The earliest legal basis and official description for the Fisheries Inspection Service ensign dates from 1852. That year a Royal Resolution regulated the spring herring fisheries off the west coast of Norway, covering the counties of Stavanger, Søndre Bergenus, and Nordre Bergenus. In the resolution dated 7 October 1852, article 8 states that Fisheries Inspection Service vessels were to be distinguished by the ensign defaced by a white square bearing the words "Fiskeri-Opsyn" in yellow letters and with a crown above the words.⁶ The exact same description is found in the Royal Resolution that, in 1858, introduced fisheries inspection in Nordland and Senja in Northern Norway during the famous cod season in Lofoten.⁷

Here we are faced with an ensign that has escaped works on Norwegian flag history, but found its way into French and Russian flag books. According to the legal description the badge in this ensign had a crown *above* the words indicating Fisheries Inspection. This would be the normal design in ensigns such as these, the design we know from the postal ensign and the customs ensign. However, the illustrations in the French and Russian flag albums both have the words in an arch over the crown, the opposite of the official description. This is also the case in the only known photograph of the ensign, dating from as late as 1936 (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Photo by Anders Beer Wilse (1865–1949) of the Fisheries Inspection Service ensign in Lofoten, 1936 (reverse image). In the collection of Norsk Folkemuseum (accession number NF.WF 02695).

The photograph was taken by Anders Beer Wilse (1865–1949), a famous Norwegian photographer who left a huge collection of photographs of various parts of Norway. In the photograph from the Lofoten fisheries we can see the Fisheries Inspection Service flag fluttering from the aft of a vessel with the snow-covered islands of Lofoten in the background. The year is 1936, long after the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden, so the union mark is gone from the canton of the ensign. The inscription, in an arch over the crown, is in an old-style typeface. A redrawing is offered in Figure 8.



Figure 8. Redrawing of the ensign of the Fisheries Inspection Service based on photographic evidence from 1936.

The 1898 Flag Act that removed the union mark from civic and state flags and ensigns of Norway authorized only two specially marked ensigns, those of the postal service and customs. All four ensigns mentioned here, those of the two harbour boards, the harbour police, and the Fisheries Inspection Service, would have been made defunct by the 1898 Flag Act. The photo, however, indicates that the Fisheries Inspection Service ensign continued in use for nearly four decades. Was special permission given for the continued use of this flag? Flag historians do not know. Perhaps the tradition of flying the special ensign just continued because the Fisheries Inspection Service was in need of a flag to distinguish its vessels. We do know that not long after the adoption of regulations on the use of the state ensign on 27 October 1927, the Foreign Ministry, the department in charge of flag issues, wrote back to the Ministry of Trade, stating that it had no objection to the continued use of the state ensign by the Fisheries Inspection Service.⁸ That, however, was a reference to the undefaced state ensign, not a specially marked one.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

¹ A version of that paper was also published as Jan Oskar Engene: “Det norske fyrvesenets flagg”, *Nordisk Flaggkontakt*, No. 48, 2009, pp. 17–27.

² E-mail from Oslo City Archives dated 5 April 2011, reporting on a search in archival holdings from the Port of Oslo as well as in available literature.

³ *Love, Anordninger, Tractater, Resolutioner, Kundgjørelser, Departements skrivelser, Circulærer m. m. for Kongeriget Norge. 8de Bind. 1871–76*, Christiania, 1878, p. 904.

⁴ *Salmonsens store illustrerede konversationsleksikon for Norden. XII Bind (Musikakademi–Pantheon)*, Copenhagen, 1902, p. 685.

⁵ This ensign has not been entirely forgotten, earlier I published a brief note on this flag in Jan Oskar Engene: “Et underlig norsk splittflagg”, *Nordisk Flaggkontakt*, No. 30, 2000, p. 35 + back cover.

⁶ *Samling af Love, Tractater, Kundgjørelser, Resolutioner, Departementsskrivelser m.m., som siden 1814 ere udkomne. Bind 5. Indeholdende Aarene 1849 til 1854*, Christiania, 1855, p. 345.

⁷ *Samling af Love, Tractater, Kundgjørelser, Resolutioner, Departementsskrivelser m.m., som siden 1814 ere udkomne, Bind 6. Indeholdende Aarene 1855 til 1860 inclusive*, Christiania, 1862, p. 322.

⁸ Atle Grahl-Madsen: *Forslag til lov om flagg og flaggbruk. Tillegg*, Bergen, 1972, p. 72.

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About the Author

Dr. Jan Oskar Engene (born 1966) is a member of the board of the Nordic Flag Society and editor of its periodical *Nordisk Flaggkontakt*. An author of dozens of articles on flags of Norway, Scandinavia, and the world, he is particularly interested in flags as material for political conflicts and as instruments of national identity. His writings on flags have appeared in Norwegian, Dutch, German, and English. In 2009 he was created a Fellow of FIAV and in 2011 received the Robert de Caluvé award.



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