# Medieval heraldic flags and how to design them

Handout for Drachenwald kingdom university 2020 by Lady Joanne am Rein

Flags are one of the oldest ways to display heraldry and flags themselves are older than heraldic tradition originating likewise to be used in the warfields. They were used in various forms and sizes all through the Middle Ages.

Different forms of pennons from the Bayeaux tapestry from the end of the 11th century. No formal heraldry seen in the flags yet but some emblems do exist like crosses, rondels and animals. One is shaped in the form of a dragon. It's noteworthy that some sources use the term gonfanon for these tongued pennons.
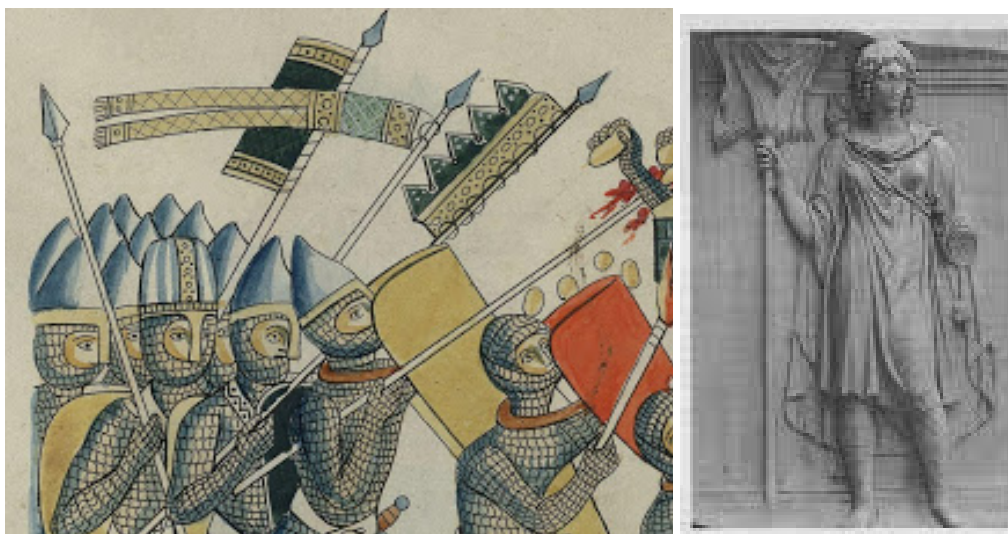
1. Hortus Deliciarum tab. III, made in the 12th century in France depicting crusades. Pennons seem to be created from colorful fabrics without heraldry.
2. Roman relief from 145 AD. showing vexillum.

Formal heraldry starts to appear in flags more regularly toward the end of the 12th century. Different types of flags are created for different purposes and some vague rules for their design. It is important to know that there is no specific rule set for forming flags found in the Middle Ages. Some countries created more rules, like England but most did not. Regional variations even for terminology were great so it's not worth sticking to them too faithfully.

Usually it's not even the actual coat of arms of the person in a flag other than a banner. Flags can have many other things in them. The use of elements other than the coat of arms became more common, especially in the 15th century.

Elements found from the flags

Coat of arms/ arms

= Heraldic design following specific rules usually displayed on a shield. Registrable personal device in the SCA.

Full achievement

= Visual presentation that at least consists of a shield, helmet, mantling, torse and crest. In addition to these it might also have supporters, motto, battle cry, compartment and order emblems. These are not registered in the SCA. Some elements are restricted in some kingdoms, for example one suporter after gaining AoA and two after GoA. Drachenwald has no restrictions but supporters are customary for high nobility.

Crest

= In full achievement the stuff that goes on top of the helmet and mantling. Can be a charge from the device, from the badge or something general like a fan of feathers, pair of antlers or wings. Together with torse this is seen as an independent badge and used as such in England.

Badges and emblems

= Design following heraldic rules and is not the actual coat of arms. Usually used to mark possessions. Multiple can be registered to one person in the SCA.

Motto and war cry

= Slogan, phrase or words associated with a person. In full achievement drawn on banderol over or below the shield. Can be used as a design element in flags.

Ensign or ready flag design

= Some regions inside the SCA have registered themselves a badge that is supposed to be used as a flag on itself or as a part of a flag. For example Drachenwald has two and Aarnimetsä has one. Ensign is mostly post period term for a special maritime flag. Historical famous examples are Dannebrog and Cross of st. George.

Livery colors

= There are usually two livery colors selected. They can be the main color and the main metal from the device but more often than not they are something else and they don't need to follow heraldic rules. You can pick orange, russet, pink, grey… Traditionally these were used to mark the "uniforms" of the staff of the household also just called livery.

Names and initials

= These are not heraldic but still used in flags.

Other ornamental additions

= Beside heraldic elements, flags can have purely ornamental elements. There can be depictions of events, characters and can have added floral flourishes.

Basics of turning a device into a flag

The easiest way is to think of the flag as a shield with a different shape. The sides are determined by the intended use of the flag. It can be hanging either vertically or horizontally. The wrong side of the flag is usually a mirror image. If the flag is thick enough, both sides may be done as the right side but mirroring is more common.
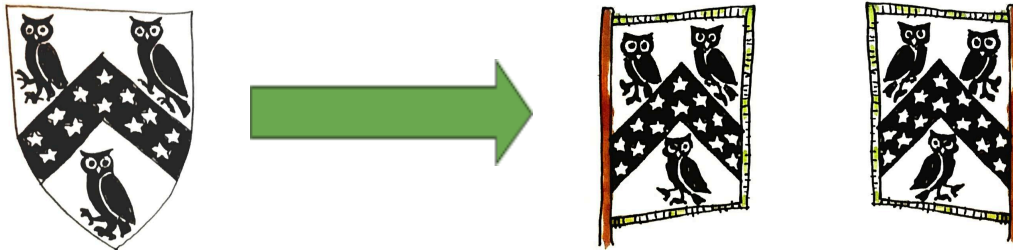
When using a shape other than the familiar shield, might the design need some changes. This might mean taking off some of the secondary charges or changing their placement, or simplification of shapes and artistic details so that the device stays as recognizable as possible in a moving and flowing object. When using the actual device as the base for flag design, you should still be able to recognize the device but there is no need to be able to make the right blazoning from the flag. Visuals first. Medieval aesthetics dictate to fill the available space.

In the first example the device and banner are the same. The second banner has added charge to fill longer space. The third banner has charges in different positions. Heidelberg university library, Cod. Pal. germ. 848 (Codex Manesse). Beginning of the 14th century fol. 166v. 160v. ja 184v.
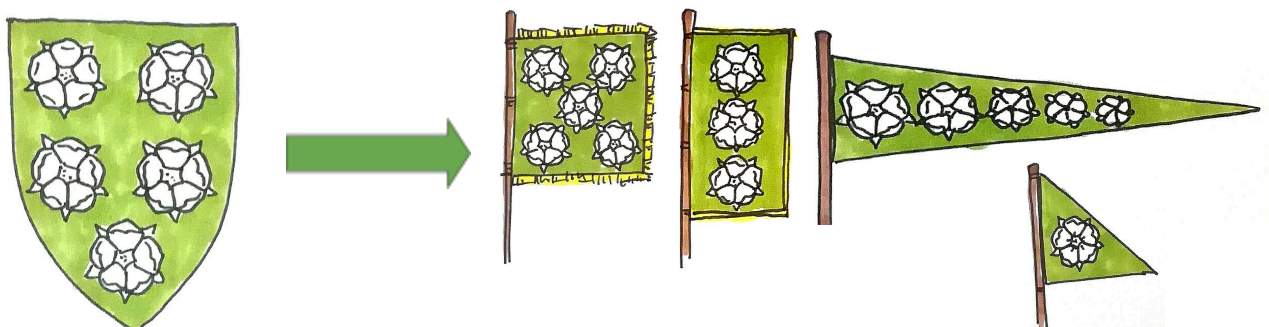
Different types of flags

Pennon

Pennons are small flags with some personal insignia. This doesn't necessarily mean a coat of arms. It can contain livery colors, badge, initials or war cry. These were often better known by the troops of the owner than the actual device. Pennons are signals of presence. They can be hanged outside of the owners tent, they can be used in ceremonies and of course to guide troops in the battlefield.

Various triangular pennons with badges and initials. Diebold Schilling, Spiezers chronic, Bern 1480s. Mss.h.h.I.16 f. 53.

The early heraldic pennons are from the 12th century. At that time it was usually rectangular with multiple tongues in the fly side sometimes also called gonfanon. During the 13th century the most basic form for pennon was longer triangular flag. The tip of the fly could be round, sharp or slit in tongues (sparrow tail). Pennons can be designed to hang both ways, horizontally or vertically. Attached vertically into a charging lance or spears, it hangs downwards. Pennons can be trimmed with frill or contrasting trim like gold trim.
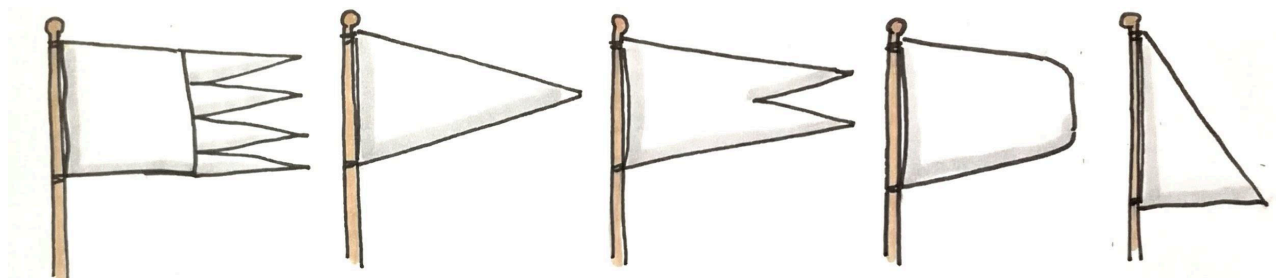
Few basic shapes for pennons. Multiple tongued one was mostly used during the 12th and 13th centuries.

Examples of pennons designed to hang from horizontal poles.
1. Loyset Liédet, Regnault de Montauban, 1450-1500, Brugge. MS. 5073 f. 53v.
2. Literary, MS. M.676 f.60r. Morgan library.

The size and shape varies so much that it is hard to give specific measurements. In the 16th century Tudor England it was recommended for a pennon to be little over 2 meters long. In reality you can find through the Middle Ages in different parts of Europe these to vary from under one meter to 2,5 meters.

1. Pennon (or standard) with chevron charges turned 90 degrees. 1440s. France, Amiens BM MS. 483. Eracles, f. 180r, Amiens library.
2. Flags with the name and picture of St. George. Froissart chronik 1347. National library of France.
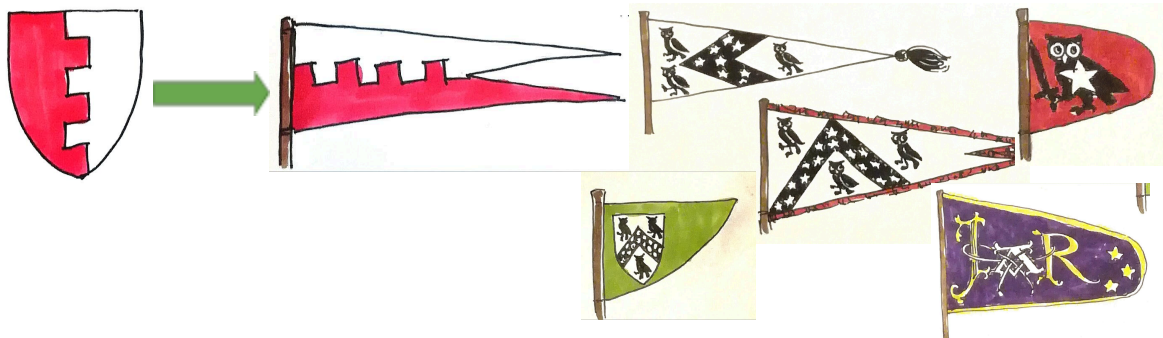
Pennoncello/penselle

Pennoncello is a smaller version of a pennon. Usually they were just called pennons as well. There is no clear line everywhere when pennoncello turns into a pennon. In the 16th century England was recommended for these to be only 45 cm long. These were used by any noble, not just knights.

Guidon

Bigger version of a common pennon. No significant difference and mostly post period term.

Banderole/bannerol

Very long and narrow form of a pennon. These were used with lances, at the top of castles and forts and on the masts of the ships. Used within church as well. Difference between Banderole and streamer (explained better later) is that streamer has a corner to show loyalty.
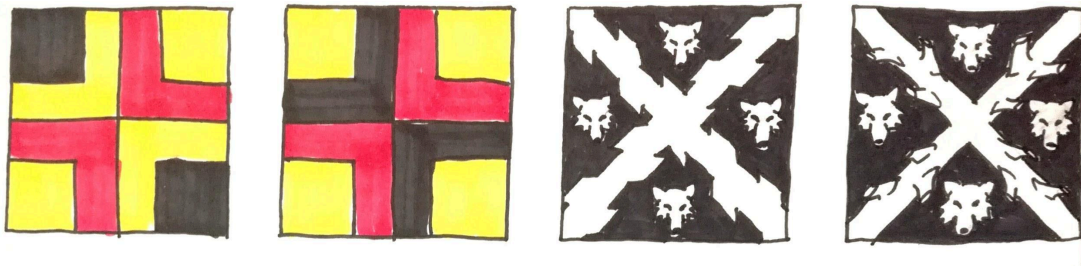
Standard

Type of flag also originating in the battlefields as a rallying point for troops. Standards have similar design elements as pennons but they don't signal the presence of the owner. During battles, these were used to mark the location of the command of a unit. On large battlefields many separate groups could be followed by these simultaneously. They appeared as their own type of flags somewhere around the 1350s.

The shape of a typical standard is a long triangle. The tip of the fly can be rounded, split or both. Very similar to the pennons and sometimes can't be sure what is the correct term. Edges were usually decorated with frill trims and flags themselves made out to be quite sturdy. Typical length in war use was around 2,5 meters and the hoist side about ⅓ of that. In ceremonial use we had much longer standards based on the social status of the owner. Kings standard could be as long as 4,5 meters.

Standards had more clearer design elements than pennons but still had regional variations. Typical was to place a square shaped part at the hoist side of standard to show who the owner pledged loyalty to. It could be the device of the king/country or known flag form of it like the flag of England or the cross of st. Andrew aka flag of Scotland. Note! Only one was used at a time.. You can't be loyal to many rulers. The early standards were usually just the device of the owner. Later we have more variations and other heraldic elements.

These are the two possible squares of loyalty for those pledging loyalty to Drachenwald. Also the coat of arms of Drachenwald can be used. Instead of these, you can use the coat of arms or flag of your barony or principality.


Two flags of Drachenwald and the flag of Aarnimetsä drawn two different ways.

England:

England developed the most standardized and formal form for standard design. The square of loyalty has the flag of England. The background is split horizontally into livery colors. If metal, that on top. Motto divides the flag bendwise usually in three parts. The first part contains the crest and torse of the

owner or the most important badge, usually some sort of beast. Other lesser badges are used as decorations throughout the length. The standard might not resemble the coat of arms of the owner at all.
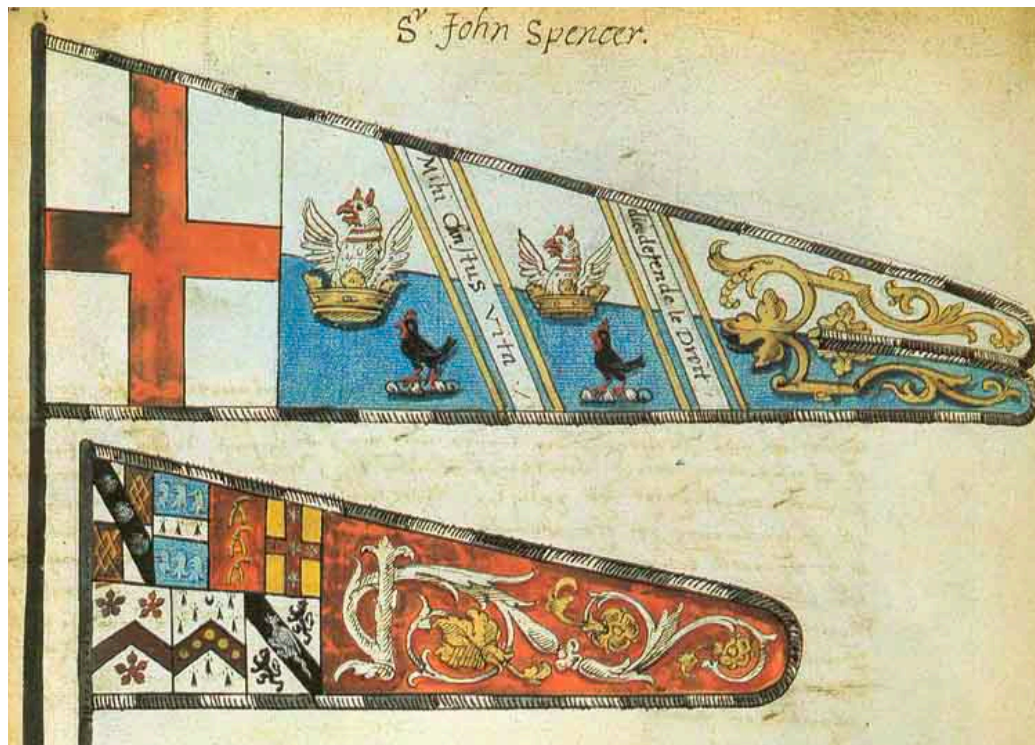
From the funeral plan of John Spencer. he lower one is for family members and in absence of badges is decorated with floral motif.

Scotland:

The square of loyalty has the cross of St. Andrew. Length of the standard is not necessarily split into livery colors. More common to use just one. Motto is written horizontally on top of the livery color/s. Otherwise the same elements as in England.

1. St. George and the Queen of Scotland. Standard follows Scottish style even though the cross is from English version. Hugo van der Goes, altar painting from the end of the 15th century.
2. Extant standard belonging to James Douglas, Earl of Douglas, as used in the battle of Otterburn at the end of the 14th century.

Continental variations:

In other parts of Europe such formal ways to create standards didn't exist. The most common way was to use something from the coat of arms to fill the space. This could mean some changes like adding the main charge multiple times. Motto was not that common but existed in some examples. Square of loyalty, if the standard even had one, contained the coat of arms of the king.

1. Vigiles de Charles VII, France, 15th century.
2. Bellum Gallicum *(Les commentaires de Cesar)*, France and Netherlands, 1473-1476: London, British Library, MS Royal 16 G VIII, f. 189r.

Standard and banner with imperial Eagle. This design could have full achievement as well. Joannes van Doetechum, chapters 22 and 23 of the funeral procession of the Emperor Karel V van Habsburg 1550s. Rijksmuseum, Netherlands.
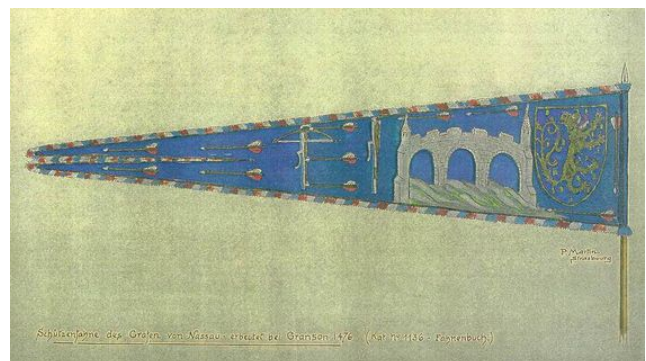

Venetian standard. Le livre de drapeaux de Fribourg (Fahnenbuch/Book of Flags) de Pierre Crolot, f.37r, 1648, Fribourg. The other is standard from Nassau 1476.

Streamer/pennant

Streamer is a very long and narrowish form of standard attached to the masts of the ships or at the top of the castles and forts. Similar and also sometimes called as banderole. The length could be tens of meters. The length was divided horizontally into livery colors. Hoist side bearing the square of loyalty. No other elements usually. If it had a badge, it was not from the device of the owner since these were not personal flags but more like marking loyalty or ownership. Light materials, and no frills because of the huge size of these.
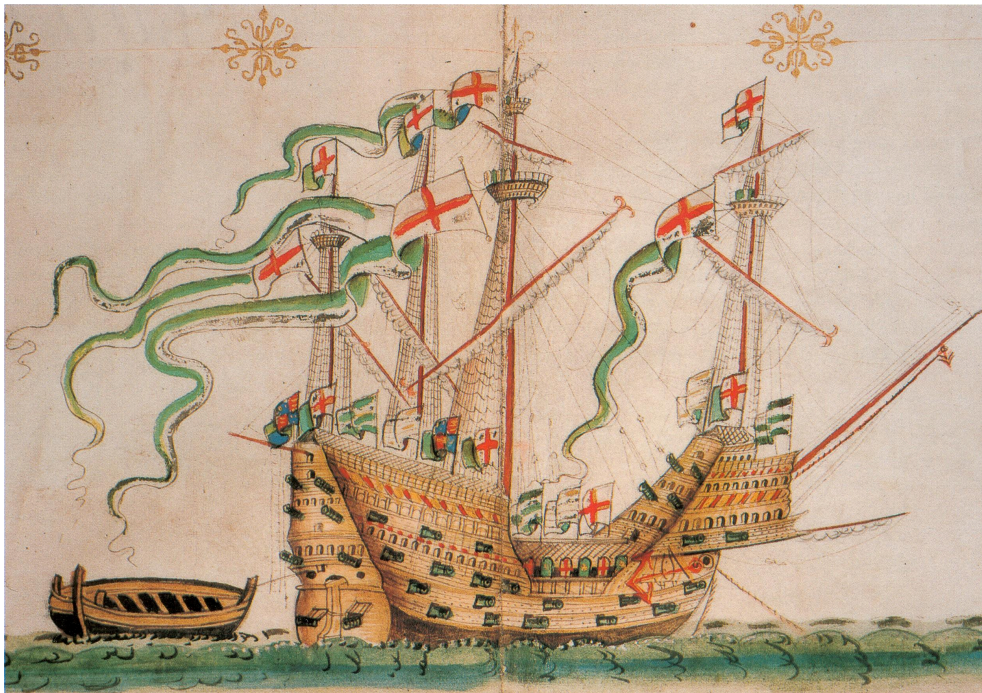
Carrack Peter Pomegranate, from the navy of Henry VIII, Anthony roll, Anthony Anthony. Streamers have the livery colors of Henry VIII, green and silver/white.

Banner

Medieval banner is closest to the flag as we know it now. It's a big, rectangular flag hanging from a vertical pole. The shape is usually square or rectangle longer than wide. This type of flag originated soon after formal heraldry was born. Banners are for displaying the personal coat of arms and no other heraldic elements. During the 16th century some banners had the full achievement. The fly edge was either straight or had tongues but not as long as a pennon. Early custom was to turn a pennon into a banner when a knight bachelor became knight bannered.

René I d'Anjou, Traité de la forme et devis comme on peut faire les tournois. f. 209r. 15th century. National library of France.

Usually banners were created from stiff materials. They weren't supposed to flow around but display the heraldry. This could be ensured by attaching a horizontal pole to the top of the banner. Edges were decorated with metal trims or frills. Surviving banners are made out of expensive materials like velvet or brocade and metal threads were used in embroidery.

1. Diebold Schilling, Amtliche Berner Mss.h.h.I.3 s.8, 1480s. Bern city library.
2. Extant banner made out of heavy silk velvets and appliqued.

Like pennons, banners signaled personal presence of the owner. In battlefields taking out a banner was seen as declaring to be ready for battle. Banners are the most formal type of flags and they were used only by high nobility, like knights bannered, barons, counts, dukes and the king. Some countries had rules for the size of the banner with different social standing. With square shaped flag this changes from 60cm to 1,5 meters in England. Drachenwald doesn't have any restrictions. If you want to make a banner you are free to do so and make as big as you want.

Very decorated painted banners from the 16th century. Full achievement of arms, frilled edges and tassels. Triumph of the emperor Maximilian I, Augsburg.

Scwenkle

Special shape of flag, usually banner. The top of the flag stretches out forming a long tail or there is a tail added from contrasting color. Very popular within german cultural regions as the name proposes. You can see this form at least from the end of the 14th century onwards.

1. Diebold Schilling, Spiezs chronik, Bern 1480s. Mss.h.h.I.16 Folio 426.
2. Thomas Lirer, Schwabian chronik, Jh. Cgm. 436 f.9. end of the 15th century.

ONB Han. Cod. 2915, f. 47r. Historia belli Troiani soluto sermone scripta, end of the 14th century southern Germany.

Gonfannon/gonfalone/gonfalon

Gonfannon is a little difficult one to study. Different sources give very different meanings for it. I've decided to go for downward hanging flags.

If spear and lance pennons are seen as a separate thing, then this is the only type of flag that is used more outside of battlefields and by others than nobles. Guilds and even merchants could use one as well as districts of the italian city states. This use among others than nobles might be the reason why pictorial sources are almost nonexistent. It seems that the idea of castle halls and corridors filled with this type of colorful flags is the result of pop culture and has no base in reality. The early form might be Roman vexillum.

Usual characteristics for this type of flag are that it is hung from a horizontal pole. The bottom of the flag is usually split into multiple tongues, decorated with frills and tassels. Gonfannot were used during religious ceremonies, in celebrities, city meetings and processions. The designing characteristics of gonfannons are in heraldic sense very informal. They could contain very detailed landscapes, or paintings of certain events or characters. If a coat of arms was used, it was usually in full achievement form. The reason being that when used outside of the battlefield, there is no need for being easily recognizable.

Even without documentability, gonfannons are still a really good type for SCA context. They are perfect for decorating walls of the halls without looking out of place. In small sizes they can be used as signs or decorate your musical instruments with your heraldry or maybe to create a placeholder.

Funeral procession of Queen Anne of France. Biblioteca Marciana, Venice. Family of Tübingen has a gonfannon as heraldic charge. Zürich armorial 1340s.

1. World chronik of Constantine c. 1370. Cgm 426, Bl. f.42r, München city library.
2. Vittore Carpaccio. Legend of St. Ursula: The Meeting with the Pope.
3. Brueghel the younger, St. George's day celebration.

1. Woodcut of a rat-catcher. 16th century England.
2. Alfonso X el Sabio, Cantigas de Santa María, c. 1250-1284.

Sources and further reading:

British Flags; Their Early History and their Developement at Sea, with an Account of the Origin of the Flag as a National Device, William Gordon Perrin, 1922.

Collected articles of international congress of vexillology:
http://internationalcongressesofvexillology-proceedingsandreports.yolasite.com/

Cromwell's death and funeral order:
https://www.british-history.ac.uk/burton-diaries/vol2/pp516-530

Swinburne, H Lawrence. "Flag". In Chisholm, Hugh (ed.). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 456–459. 1911.

Few good pictorial sources with many flags:

-Le livre de drapeaux de Fribourg (Fahnenbuch/Book of Flags) de Pierre Crolot, 1648, Fribourg.
-Diebold Schilling, Spiezs chronik Mss.h.h.I.16., 1480s, Bern.
-René I d'Anjou, Traité de la forme et devis comme on peut faire les tournois. 15th century. National library of France.