Symbols from the 'de Gortter' manuscript from Malines

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[Editor's note: to illustrate his paper, the author submitted his own black-and-white line drawings, with extensive descriptions of the colours. As the 'de Gortter' manuscript is now digitised in colour, however, the digitised originals have been included instead.]

The author describes the meanings and significance of the symbols borne on some of the military flags contained in the 'de Gortter' manuscript in the Royal Library of Belgium.

About 1617 William de Gortter of Malines[1] started his writings in the splendid volume illustrated with over 50 coloured pictures concerning the Dutch revolt against Spain. To explain why a so-called 'Belgian' wrote this work we have to deal with the problems of the origins, progress and decline of the revolt of the Netherlands.[2] It would exceed time and place to give a long account of that war. I only want to remark that a movement which began under the high nobility of the Netherlands was intensified by social and religious differences. That led to a war and resulted in the split of the Dutch Commonwealth. The South, reconquered by Spain remained under the Kings's dominions until the 1700s. The North became the independent republic of the United Netherlands. Malines, an old independent town in the very heart of the Netherlands and nowadays a provincial city north of Brussels, saw a lot of the struggle in the years about 1585 when the author was born. The drawings were made then, so possibly the book was only filled with pictures and had no text when the writing began. The poems, which are not dealt with here, are of religious and political meaning and hardly refer to the pictures.

Uniforms in the modern sense were not common at that time. To maintain their cause both parties had to employ mercenaries. And so the troops depended on the circumstances when they came in service. On good occasions, a whole company was dressed in the colours of the captain, but often they were turned out in random colours, and the soldiers were only identified by other marks of recognition. For many years, the orange scarf was the only permanent sign of recognition in the Dutch army. Nowadays the ceremonial colours of most units in the armed service of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are orange with the royal cypher on the obverse and the Queen's coat of arms on the reverse. In the days of the revolt there were few soldiers with orange scarves. One even had a scarf of white, orange and blue.[3] Of course the Spanish army had the same problems. Some soldiers had their coats marked with the Burgundian cross. Others had a red scarf. In subsequent years this red scarf became the distinguishing mark of the army[4].

Signs of revolt

To show patriotic feelings there were some signs we mostly find on the pictures. The first signs were standards, scarves, pennons and uniforms in the colours of the

1 Royal Library of Albert I, Brussels. Ms No. 15662 de Gortter.
2 P. Geyl, *The Revolt of the Netherlands 1555–1609* (London: 1970); H. H. Rowen, *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times* (London: 1972).
3 de Gortter, f. 2.
4 de Gortter, f. 100

Prince of Orange, leader of the revolt. The first colour was orange: a colour that referred to the Prince's name. A company of his guards had coats of plain orange.[5] Other soldiers had orange and white.[6] The complete set of the Prince's colours (orange, white and blue) are frequently shown on the standards in several stripes, just like on the maritime flags of that period.[7] **(Fig.1)**

Another sign of religious zeal was the diagonal stripe. We first meet that stripe on the standards of the Huguenots in France in the years before the Dutch revolt. The Huguenots were the first allies of the revolting Netherlanders and so there is no wonder that the Dutch also adopted the stripe. **(Fig. 3)** On the stripes were placed slogans beseeching divine help in battle: e.g. *Si Deus pro nobis quis contra nos?* ('If God is with us, who will be against us?'**).**[8] **(Fig. 2)** Or, in a very striking design with a crescent on top, the abbreviation *LTDP* for '*Liever Turks dan Paaps*' ('Rather Turks than Papists').[9] **(Fig. 4)** The Scots also had standards with diagonal stripes.



1 (left) the colours of Captain Hoboken, striped in the Prince's colours.
2 (right), the colours of Captain van Dorth, with a diagonal stripe bearing a motto.



3 Two colours bearing the distinctive diagonal stripe of the Protestant cause.
Left, the infantry company of Charles de Levin, Lord of Famars.
Right, the company of Captain Samuel van Alveringen.

Besides these simple standards were more complex ones. One bore, on alternating stripes of orange-white-blue and white-black-orange, a checked cross, in the centre of which was a black oval bearing a yellow lion grasping a sword. This oval and lion are in the colours of the Duchy of Brabant and it is possible that the troops under

5 de Gortter, ff. 44–6
6 de Gortter, f. 57
7 de Gortter, f. 41
8 de Gortter, f. 2
9 de Gortter, f. 3

that standard were paid by that province.[10] **(Fig. 5)** Another intricate standard from Antwerp, almost in that city's colours, red and white, is adorned with a cloud on which is the divine name of God in Hebrew letters. A veritable zoo of vermin is fleeing to the edges of the standard. The Netherlanders are represented by a black eagle with the motto *Polli Fede* ('Be Strong by Faith'), a lion with the motto in Dutch *Voert Vaderland* ('For the Fatherland'), and a dog with the motto *Om Eyghen Kraft* ('By His Own Strength'). **(Fig. 6)** The fleeing beasts represent the enemy's forces - on a medal some years later this was changed to the Pope, a cardinal, bishops and monks![11]



4 (left) the colour of the company of Lieutenant Colonel Dionys van den Tempel, bearing an Ottoman crescent and the abbreviated motto LTDP (*'Rather Turks than Papists'*).

5 (right) the colour of the company of Captain Pieter Febs, displaying the Prince's colours and the arms of Brabant.



6 (left) the immensely complex colours of Captain Abraham's company, heavy with anti-Papist imagery; and (right) an un-named plain red colour.

The Burgundian Cross

Since the days of the Burgundian domination in the Netherlands the Cross of Burgundy was a sign of unity in the various territories of the country. In the sixteenth century it was mostly red on a white field. Both parties, Spanish and Dutch, used it until the Dutch renounced the King in 1581. Some Dutch companies had colours with the Burgundian cross together with the Prince's colours.[12] **(Fig. 7**

10 de Gortter, f. 3

11 de Gortter, f. 9, G. V. Loon, *Beschryving der Nederlandsche Historipenningen* ('s-Gravenhage: 1723) blz. 376.

12 de Gortter, f. 8

and 8) In the Spanish armies, to the cross were added the royal colours, red, white, and yellow, and sometimes red, white, green, presumably referring to the union with Portugal, taken by the Duke of Alba in the same year.[13] **(Fig. 9)**



Orangist civic militia companies with colours that display Spanish symbols.
7 Left, two Antwerp companies: Captain Petitjean (left); Captain du Boys (right).
8 Right, two Breda companies: Captain Crispijn (left), Captain Hoboken (right).



9 The colours of four companies of 'Malcontents' or 'Paternosterknechten'*, Dutch units that changed sides to join the Spanish forces.*
Left, of Pontus de Noyelles, Lord of Bours, and of Emanuel Montigny.
Right, of Philip, Count of Egmont, and of Willem van Horne, Lord of Heeze.

Foreign help

The war against Spain could never have been waged without foreign aid and mercenary troops. When the States General renounced the King of Spain they called on François 'Hercules' de Valois, Duke of Alençon and Anjou, and brother of the French king, to be their new sovereign. Soon his troops quarrelled with the

13 de Gortter, ff. 11–12

States' forces. When they tried to sack Antwerp they were repelled by its citizens. The soldiers wore the national badge of France, the white cross, on their coats.
From the first days of the revolt, Scottish troops came to support the Dutch. They gained a great victory at Rijmenant, a village near Malines, on the first days of September 1578. Some of their standards are pictured in the manuscipt. Both colours depict the captain's coat of arms, and one is adorned with the Scottish national emblem, the cross of St Andrew.[14] **(Fig. 10)** A sad defeat for the Scottish troops occurred near Gembloux, a small town close to Namur. The colour of Captain Gordon, serving under Sir William Stewart of Houston, had a white diagonal band bearing in black lettering a partly legible motto: '*God will defend and maintain Nothing will sustain us'*. Between *Mateme* (maintain) and *Nos* (nothing) a small emblem represents an arm grasping a sword beneath which, barely legible, is the lettering *AUDM*, perhaps an abbreviation of *Aeternum Verbum Dei Manet* ('The Word of God Abides for Ever').[15] **(Fig. 11, Gordon's Company)** Another standard had the heraldic livery colours of Stuart: yellow, white and blue.[16] **(Fig. 12, right)** Here the yellow is coloured orange, perhaps a mistake by the nationalist artist.



10 The colours of two Scottish companies, both bearing the arms of their company commanders. The arms on the flag (left) perhaps belong to Wemyss of Caskieberran; those on the flag (right) are those of Thomas Newton of Dalcove.

Conclusion
The 'de Gortter' manuscript has several other symbols and the elaborate description with an adequate introduction fills the small booklet. I hope to realise the plan to publish it elsewhere. The 59 illustrations of the manuscript have great value for our knowledge of the political and religious symbolism of a time nearly four ages ago, designed in the very heart of the Netherlands.[17]

14 de Gortter, f. 10
15 The correct sequence is VDMIAE (Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternam).
16 By courtesy of Col. Gayre of Gayre and Nigg, Edinburgh, in a letter to the author 21 January 1974; de Gortter, f. 4.
17 I cordially thank Mr Klaes Sierksma of the Foundation for Banneristics, Muiderberg (Netherlands) for his kind help in the preparation of the paper.



11 The colours of two companies in the regiment of James Stewart of Houston. Left, of Captain James Blair. Right, of Captain Alexander Gordon.



12 The colours of two unnamed companies, both attributed to the regiment of 'Colonel Stewart'. One (right) is shown in the Orangist colours, but the author suggests this is a mistake for those of Stewart.

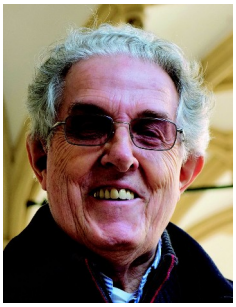
Editorial notes:
A fuller version of this article appeared subsequently as 'Symbolen uit de Opstand in de Nederlanden' in: *De Nederlandsche Leeuw*, No. 9, September 1978.

In addition to the works cited by the author, for the English-language reader a good introductory text on the war remains:
Parker, Geoffrey. The Dutch Revolt (*London: Allen Lane, 1977*)

For the Scots in the Low Countries:
Ferguson, James. Papers illustrating the history of the Scots Brigade in the service of the United Netherlands 1572–1782; *volume 1 1572-1697.* (*Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1899*)
'Two Early Paintings of the Scots Brigade' in: *Scottish Historical Review 28 (1949), pp. 119–20*

For more on the flags of the period:
Smit, J.P.W.A. De legervlaggen uit den aanvang van den 80-Jarigen Oorlog (*Assen: van Gorcum, 1938*)

Author biography



Dr Willem van Ham (1937–2020) was an archivist by profession, and spent all his working life at the municipal archives of Bergen-op-Zoom, becoming an authority on the region. He was a founder member of the Dutch vexillology society, the NVvV, and contributed many articles on historical flags to *Vlag!* and *Vexilla Nostra*, as well as to regional history journals.