

The Origin and Meaning of the Turkish Flag



So, what is the origin and meaning of the Turkish flag? In EVEHD we discovered a lot of different versions; Turkish, Levant and Islamic friends and volunteers, Zora Kızıl, Nuri Sılay, Sebnem Nur, Leman Yavaş, Hurşit Cem Salar, Serhat Selışık, Mustafa Konak, Seren Başaran, Sophia Conner, Onur Dinçer, Senay Ekingen, Sermet Hasan Kondoz, İslam Ali, all had an input to this short tale of discovery. They

were asked....."please tell me your version of the meaning of the red flag with star and crescent moon?" here are some of the replies...

Sophia Conner: I'd always understood that it was an ancient symbol used by several Turkish peoples and was adopted as the national flag of the Ottomans and then Turkey.

Zora Kızıl: Moon represents Islam, star represents the Turkish nation & red represents blood of everyone who died for our country. Kind of saying whoever died for it, it is theirs. Doesn't necessarily means has to be Turkish.

Mustafa Konak: The star in the flag of Turkey represents the Morning Star as mentioned in the Holy Koran. The white crescent and the star are symbols of Islam

Egeman Kirin: certainly the flag of Turkey is very symbolic, the red is for the blood of the Turkish soldiers.

Vexillologists (who study flags), can spend days or even weeks studying the origin and legends / myths associated with the flag. There are many stories and the various symbols can be interpreted according to which school of history you follow. The crescent and the moon is a predominantly Islamic symbol but research has shown that it was used in Asia Minor, long before the advent of Islam. Now, here are some of the many versions...

1. The most popular story has it that that the moon occulting a star appeared as a reflection in a bloody puddle, after the battle of Kosovo, in 1448. The battle was a decisive one for Turkey as it founded the long and illustrious Ottoman Empire, which ruled until the 19th century. The image is said to be a part of this historic event and commemorated by Sultan Murad II as the motif of the Turkish national flag.
2. Another folkloric version credits the motif as being inspired by a dream of the first Ottoman Emperor. A crescent and a star is supposed to have emerged from his chest and exploded, which was later construed as the dynasty's seizure of Constantinople (Istanbul).
3. Again, another version has the legendary Kemal Ataturk witnessing the image of a crescent shaped star in a pool of blood, after a victorious battle in the Turkish war of Independence at Sakarya; this clearly draws something from the earlier reflection in blood version.

4. A more contemporary version - the basic form of the Turkish National Flag is supposed to have been established in 1793 under Ottoman Sultan Selim III. The green flag of the navy was changed to red and a white crescent and multi pointed star were included. The five-pointed star dates from approximately 1844. When the Ottoman Empire became the Republic of Turkey, the Flag remained the same, except some design specifications.
5. The earliest version about the star and the crescent. Diana (Artemis) was the patron goddess of Byzantium. Her symbol was the moon. In AD 330, the Emperor Constantine renamed the city as Constantinople (the present day Istanbul) and dedicated the city to Virgin Mary. Thus, the star symbol was superimposed on the crescent. In 1453, Constantinople was overtaken by the Ottoman Turks. They called the city Istanbul but somehow did not change the motif.



Now for a bit of science! The 1448 Battle of Kosovo lasted three days, from 17th to 20th October. At this time the planet Venus does coincide quite closely to the crescent moon (see left, from Eearthsky.org)..... so the moon and this bright planet would have shone over the legendary battle field

The battle is described like this: The Crusaders arrived at the Kosovo Field, the same place as the most famous battle in Kosovo in 1389, between the Serbs and the Ottomans. Sultan Murad personally commanded a large section of cannons and janissaries, while his son and successor Mehmed, who faced battle for the first time, led the Anatolian troops at the right wing. Hunyadi commanded the centre of his Christian army at the battle, while the Crusaders right wing was under the Wallachians. The Hungarians had long range barrage cannons.



Detail from a miniature, showing an Akıncı-leader, defeating a Hungarian chevalier.

The next day the battle opened when Hunyadi attacked the Ottoman flanks with mixed cavalry (light and heavy). The Turkish flanks, consisting of soldiers from Rumelia and Anatolia, were losing until

Turkish light cavalry arrived to reinforce them. The Christian flanks were subsequently routed and the survivors retreated back to Hunyadi's main force. When Hunyadi saw the defeat of his flanks, he attacked with his main force, composed of knights and light infantry. The janissary corps were not successful and the cavalry made progress through to the Turkish centre, but were stopped at the Turkish camp. When the main attack was halted, the Turkish infantry regrouped and successfully drove the Hungarian knights back. The light cavalry, who were now without the knights' support were also overcome. Hungarian forces retreated to their camp. During the retreat, the janissaries killed most of the Hungarian nobles and Hunyadi fled. However, Serbs later captured him. During the night, Turkish infantry fired missiles at the Hungarians who replied with cannons. On the next day, a final assault totally annihilated the remaining Hungarian army.

The two-day battle in Kosovo saw both sides take heavy casualties but left the Ottoman force in command of the field at the end of the second day. The Hungarians' army possibly amounted to 24,000 and the Turkish between 40,000 and 60,000.

The importance for EVEHD

Flags either invoke national pride or are seen as old fashioned nationalistic symbols – but we all have them, plus national flowers, trees and anthems. Turkish people are fiercely proud of their country and respect the flag and their former leaders. Learning about the origin of a flag opens many doors for heritage discovery and (in the case of the Turkish flag) may show former relationships and campaigns between European countries. The learning can be done virtually and through the internet but is good to start by a visit to a (usually urban) landscape to see a flag being flown. There are thousands of flags – not just countries but towns, associations, companies, even Individual families; they all try to capture some memory or spirit that is very precise and personal.

In Romania and Slovakia, Turkey was a partial occupier / conqueror / neighbour to be placated. In Iceland, the law allowing Turkish people to be killed with impunity was quite recently revoked (barberry pirates enslaved many Icelandic villagers) – so Turkey was a traditional enemy – working with Turkish people is very important for the EU and for EVEHD

It is very easy to begin a process of volunteer engagement by asking ‘what is the meaning and origin of your countries flag?’



I have a special interest in this story because two years ago, driving to a UK airport, I saw Venus and the crescent moon close together in the dawn sky – no other star in sight. It got me thinking and I contacted many people to see if that view of the night sky had any historical importance. I got answers not just from Turkey but Libya, Tunisia and Morocco and Egypt. On their flags the star is a little differently placed. I was told that the further south, the more Venus appears inside the crescent moon.

From top left (like reading a book) – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia. Malaysia, Mauritania, Pakistan, Libya, Azerbaijan, Egypt (note the ‘3 stars’(planets) thought to be Venus, Saturn, Mars.