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Provenance report regarding Flag (Zulfiqar) - Vlag uit de voormalige Nederlandse koloniën

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Provenance report regarding Flag (Zulfiqar) - Vlag uit de voormalige Nederlandse koloniën

Caroline Drieënhuizen

Photo: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (NG-MC-1889-84-6)

Custodian	Rijksmuseum
Current possessor	Dutch State
Inventory number	NG-MC-1889-84-6
Material/technique	Linen and cotton
Measurements	H: 104cm W: 197cm

Summary of findings

With certainty we can conclude that this flag originated from Islamic political or religious rulers: it displays the **Zulfiqar** (the mystical sword of the Prophet Mohammed and his son-in-law and cousin Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib) and a part of the **Shahada**, the Islamic declaration of faith. And because of the geographical coverage of the Dutch colonial domination we can assume this flag is from what is today the Indonesian or Malaysian Archipelago.

The provenance of this flag **cannot** be determined. The suggested provenance by the museum of the flag being part of the booty of Dutch admiral Jacob Pieter van Braam (1737-1803) cannot be proved and is even unlikely.

Reconstruction provenance

? - ?

Flag was likely made by people in the Indonesian or Malaysian Archipelago.

? – 1889

Part of the “model room” (“Marine Modellen-kamer”) of the Dutch department of Navy in the Hague.

Inventory card NG-MC-1889-84-6 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

1889 - present

Inventory card NG-MC-1889-84-6 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Introduction and context

Object information

This is a rather large (more than a meter in height and almost 2 meters wide) dark blue flag. It is embroidered with white Arabic letters and the **Zulfiqar**: the mystical double-edged sword of the Prophet Mohammed and his son-in-law and cousin Ali ibn Abu Talib which is depicted on this flag as a scissor-like double bladed sword. The letters form the first part of the in this case carelessly formulated **Shahada**, the Islamic declaration of faith: "There is no God but God [Allah, CD]". Remarkably, the Shahada on this flag is missing the most important word of the oath to stress the monotheistic features of the Islam: the concept of "one godhead" misses.[1] Given that the flag is made of textile and decomposes rather easily, the flag is in a rather good condition. [2]

Historical context

The museum documentation states that this flag and the other flags in that same transport (inv.nr. NG-MC-1889-83-*) "share many similarities"[3] with the flags captured by Dutch admiral Jacob Pieter van Braam (1737-1803) and which are stored in the National Military Museum in Soesterberg. To suggest that the flag in the Rijksmuseum has the same provenance is unjustified, however.

In 1783, Van Braam was sent by the Dutch government to the surroundings of Melaka, Selangor, and Riau (areas now part of the states of Indonesia and Malaysia) to help the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to fight the Bugis: namely, traders and pirates. Originally from South Sulawesi, they had been migrating since the late seventeenth century to this area and had become commercially and politically very powerful.[4] The VOC was annoyed and felt threatened by the prosperity of the state of Riau, but lacked the power and arms to enforce control in the area.[5]

With the arrival of Van Braam, a full-scale war ensued near Melaka, Selangor, and Riau; Dutch contemporary sources mention a "big massacre"[6] and around 300 enemy casualties.[7] The Dutch troops were stimulated to capture the enemies' flags: in May 1784, the Dutch stadtholder Willem V had put a reward on every flag that was taken.[8]

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[1] According to historian and Arabist Mirjam Shatanawi, this could be explained by many factors. For instance, it could be that the creator of the flag was unfamiliar with Arabic. There is also the possibility the garble can have a mystical meaning, or that some letters are missing on the flag.
[2] The depiction of the flag on the Rijksmuseum website is, however, incorrect. One should rotate the flag 180 degrees.
[3] Online museum documentation Rijksmuseum inv.nr. RM-NG-MC-1889-84-6. https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/NG-MC-1889-84-6/catalogus-entry The online documentation originates from the museum collections management system, Adlib.
[4] Ibid, 117.
[5] Reinout Vos, *Gentle Janus, Merchant Prince. The VOC and the Tightrope of Diplomacy in the Malay World, 1740-1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1993), 179-182; Ota Atsushi, "Trade, Piracy, and Sovereignty: Changing Perceptions of Piracy and Dutch Colonial State-Building in Malay Waters, c. 1780-1830," in *In the Name of Battle against Piracy. Ideas and Practices in State Monopoly of Maritime Violence in Europe and Asia in the Period of Transition,* ed. Ota Atsushi (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 115-142.
[6] Nationaal Archief, The Hague. Collection Van Braam, 1.10.11.02. Inv.nr. 58a. Personal notes. "Groote slagting."
[7] J.C. Baane, *Reis door een gedeelte van de Nederlandsche bezittingen in Oost-Indië* (Amsterdam: G.J.A. Beijerinck, 1826) 304.
[8] Mariska Pool, "Vergeten vlaggen: de trofeeën van het Eskader-Van Braam in de Indische Archipel, 1784," *Armamentaria. Jaarboek Legermuseum* no. 36 (2001): 50-72, 55.

Apart from 121 (some sources[9] even state 164) cannons, small guns, and other weapons, a *keris*, a golden belt, golden buttons,[10] and slaves,[11] Van Braam's troops captured 27 flags that were sent to the stadtholder afterwards. Today, these flags are stored in the Nationaal Militair Museum in Soesterberg. There is some confusion about *where* these flags were captured: some sources mention 22 flags being taken at Teluk Ketapang near Melaka[12] and one flag in Riau and one in Selangor.[13] There exists an aquarelle, probably wrongly ascribed to painter Engel Hoogerheyden (1740-1807), that depicts 27 flags captured only in Melaka.[14]

Uncertain provenance of the flag with the Zulfiqar and Shahada

The Rijksmuseum's rather unsubstantiated observation that their flag NG-MC-1889-84-6 looks similar to the Van Braam-flags in Soesterberg must not lead to the conclusion that this flag was also part of Van Braam's booty.

The flag is absent on the aquarelle. The flags on the aquarelle are relatively accurately depicted, as modern scholars have been able to trace several flags on the aquarelle back to the actual flags in the museum collection by their characteristics.[15] Not one of the flags on the aquarelle displays both the Zulfiqar and a part of the Shahada. The features of the flags are not described in detail in contemporary sources by Van Braam or his officers. The captured flag of the Sultan of Selangor, for instance, is described only as a "blue flag," without further details. Moreover, displaying the Zulfiqar or Arabic texts on flags in the Indonesian/Malay Archipelago was very common and not exclusive to the flags captured by Van Braam.[16]

We therefore can only conclude the flag is from a Muslim area (because of the Zulfiqar and Shadada), probably from the West of Indonesia or neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, in this instance, since the Dutch trading company, the VOC, had also controlled these regions for some time.

The flag was donated to the Ministery of Navy, where there was a so-called "model room" ("Marine Modellen-kamer"), at a still unknown moment by an unknown donor. As a result, we can also conclude with near certainty that the flag is part of Dutch war booty: most flags that entered the collection of the "model room" of the Dutch Ministry of Navy were recorded as trophies.[17]

Between 1883 and 1889, this collection was transferred from the Hague to the recently opened Rijksmuseum, specifically to the Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst.[18] The flag, together with at least 13 other flags from the Indonesian/Malay Archipelago, entered the

[9] D.H. Kolff, *Driftig van spraak, levendig van gang. Herinneringen van marineofficier D.H. Kolff (1761-1835),* ed. V.A.J. Klooster (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011) 73.
[10] Nationaal Archief, The Hague. Collection Van Braam, 1.10.11.02. Inv.nr. 58a. Personal notes.
[11] Ibid, inv.nr. 87. List goods.
[12] Baane, *Reis*, mentions 22 flags. Aquarel displays 27 flags.
[13] Pool, "Vergeten vlaggen," 55-56.
[14] The title of the aquarelle is: 'Captured flags at Toeloe Catapang by the squadron of commander J.P. van Braam, 1784' ('Veroverde vlaggen te Toeloe Catapang door het esquader van den commandeur J.P. van Braam, 1784'). Scheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. S0585-04. See also V. Enthoven, R. Daalder, P. Blom, *Een Zeeuwse zeeschilder: Engel Hoogerheyden, 1740-1807* (Vlissingen: ADZ, 2007). The attribution of the flags on the aquarelle to Melaka, however, is uncertain: some flag-experts recognise in the aquarelle the flag of the sultan Ibrahim of Selangor and the flags of the Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Selangor and the Yang di-Pertuan Muda of Riau. This would mean the aquarelle not only depicts flags captured at Teluk Ketapang, but also captured flags from other contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian places.
[15] R. Luttervelt, *Beredeneerde inventarislijst van de verzameling oude vlaggen, aanwezig op het Koninklijk Paleis te Amsterdam, opgemaakt april 1948*; Pool, "Vergeten vlaggen."
[16] Luttervelt, *Beredeneerde inventarislijst;* Pool, "Vergeten vlaggen"; D. Rühl, *Vlaggen van den Oost-Indischen Archipel (1600-1942* (n.p. n.d.).
[17] Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem, 476. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv.nr. 1089. Inventory of objects [from the collection of the Navy Model Room, 1886].
[18] https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/rijksstudio/kunstwerken/scheepsmodellen> (accessed 1 December 2021).

Rijksmuseum in 1889.[19] At another moment in that same year, more Asian flags from that same model room entered the Rijksmuseum.[20] These were the last transports from the Ministry of Navy to the Rijksmuseum. However, we can not retrieve this specific flag on the transport lists, which seem to be incomplete.[21] Nevertheless, the flag's current inventory number points with certainty to this provenance.

In the Rijksmuseum, most of them were displayed in the eastern courtyard until the Second World War: "they were trophies of a glorious past," contemporary newspapers wrote.[22]

[19] Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.no. NG-MC-1889-84-1 t/m -14.
[20] See for instance Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. NG-MC-1889-83-25, NG-MC-1889-83-26 and NG-MC-1889-83-27.
[21] According to Jeroen ter Brugge, Rijksmuseum curator of maritime collections, some objects from the model room were stored in various locations and only administratively included in the model room-collection on the moment of transfer from The Hague to Amsterdam. Email Jeroen ter Brugge, 3 January 2022.
[22] *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant*, 15 December, 1887.