



## EXPRESSION OF REGIONAL IDENTITY IN THE NETHERLANDS THROUGH FLAGS

**Marcel van Westerhoven**

Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde (NVvV, the Netherlands Vexillological Association)

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### INTRODUCTION

For a small country, the Netherlands contains a remarkable regional diversity: most of the 11 old provinces have their own centuries-old traditions, divergent dialects, festivities, food, costumes, music, dances and even sports. The provinces also have a very long history, with medieval counties, duchies, lordships and bishoprics as their precursors.

From the first official adoption of a flag by a province, Drenthe in 1947, followed by the other 10 in the years till 1959, provincial identity has come to be expressed also through flags. Over the 60 years or so of their existence, most of these flags have grown in popularity and can be seen in many places, used not only by local authorities, but also by citizens, at events, by supporters of sport clubs and even in protests against the national authorities.

This is not to say that the national flag is ignored: it is popular all over the country. But a lot of Dutch people consider themselves to have a dual identity: a regional or even local one, and a national one. Provincial identity is not equally strong everywhere. In provinces where provincial identity is weaker or which are less of a unity, national and sub-provincial regional identities are stronger. A recent development is the adoption of regional flags by citizens and even local authorities to express this sub-provincial identity. In the west of the Netherlands, Holland, the people often feel a loyalty to a city before a provincial or regional one and often use the city flag to express this.

### THE HISTORY OF PROVINCIAL SYMBOLS

Most of the provinces have existed in one form or another since the Middle Ages, when duchies, counties, lordships, bishoprics and other local entities in the Low Countries formed within the framework of the Holy Roman Empire. In the 15th century almost all of these lands were acquired by the dukes of Burgundy. The successors of the Burgundians from 1500 onwards were the Habsburgs, who also came to the throne of Spain.

The Dutch resented Spanish rule, not only because of religious differences and the Spanish Inquisition; economy and taxes also played a role. The Dutch revolted and after forming the Union of Utrecht in 1579 and proclaiming the Plakkaat van Verlatinghe (Act of Abjuration) in 1581 went their own way as the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. The Seven (Holland, Zeeland, Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel, Utrecht and Gelderland) each had and used its own coat-of-arms, mostly continuations of their medieval precursors. For instance, armorial banners could be seen on their ships. These were only used by the authorities. The conquered Lands of the Generality (mainly today's Noord-Brabant, Limburg, and Drenthe did not share in this display of local symbols, as they did not have the status of a federal province.

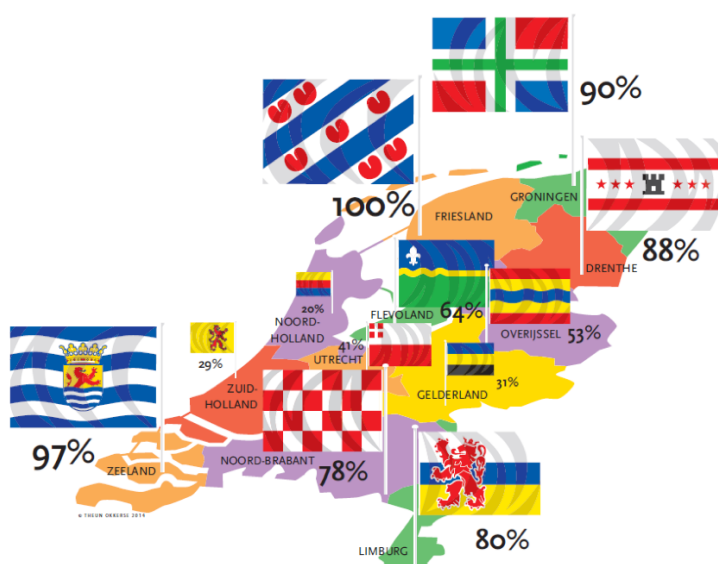
After the transformation of the Republic into the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the period 1795-1815, the provinces (including Noord-Brabant, Limburg and Drenthe) readopted their traditional coats-of-arms, but did not adopt flags: the emphasis in the young kingdom was on unity under one flag. After the division of Holland into Noord and Zuid-Holland, the latter took over the Holland arms. Noord-Holland was granted newly designed arms, as was Limburg after its separation (in 1839 under the Treaty of London) from Belgian Limburg.

Around 1900, the Frisians were the first to start using their own flag, but it did not get an official status as the provincial flag until 1957. In Limburg at that time an unofficial red over white flag was in use. Only after the Second World War did the provinces adopt official flags, between 1947 and 1959, to be used by authorities,

institutions, companies, associations and citizens alike. In 1986, the new province of Flevoland adopted a flag that is unrelated to its coat-of-arms. In the same year, Zuid-Holland switched from a yellow-red-yellow flag to an armorial flag, the red lion on yellow of the medieval Counts of Holland. So far, this is the only change and the only armorial flag. Gelderland, Groningen, Limburg, Noord-Holland, Overijssel, Zeeland and Utrecht all have flags with colours and symbols derived from their heraldry. Friesland and Noord-Brabant adopted traditional flags without any connection to their armorial bearings. Drenthe uses an entirely new design unrelated to its coat-of-arms, just like Flevoland.

## THE PROVINCIAL FLAG SURVEY

In 2014 a representative survey was carried out among 1,147 Dutch men and women to measure how well the flags of the twelve Dutch provinces were known to their own provincial inhabitants. From the pictures of the twelve flags, they were asked to point out their own flag. **Figure 1** shows the results of the survey in the form of a map with the provinces with their flags and the percentages of recognition; the sizes of the flags are proportionate to these percentages. Although the outcome confirmed what could be predicted, the differences in the percentages of recognition were staggering. It turns out that a clear divide exists between the flags of the northern and southern provinces, with percentages of recognition of 80-100% on the one hand, and those of the western and eastern provinces with percentages of 20-53% on the other hand, with the lowest results in the two Holland provinces.



**Figure 1** Percentages of recognition of flags of provinces by their own inhabitants  
(Kien Consultancy, Apeldoorn 2014; map by Theun Okkerse)

That the flags of the Frisians, Groningers, Drents, Zeelanders (Zeeuwen), Brabanders and Limburgers are expressions of a strong sub-ethnic identity and are therefore well known and used was to be expected. But that the knowledge of the flags among Overijssellers, Gelderlanders, Utrechters and Hollanders would be so meagre came as a surprise. A closer look at the actual use of those flags will reveal that they are mostly flown on or near the offices of the local authorities and are rarely used by citizens, as opposed to the highly popular ones in the north and south, which can be seen everywhere and at all times within their boundaries. The first can be considered more as administrative flags, as opposed those of the north and south, which also have become flags of the people.

How can these results be explained? To answer this question, what has to be considered first is: is there a difference in design quality?

It turns out that there is, as far as judgements about quality can be made objectively. The popular flags can be said to be more colourful, symbolic and distinctive. The flag of Gelderland is a drab affair and that of Noord-Holland is also quite bland. But of the other less popular flags those of Zuid-Holland, Overijssel, Utrecht and Flevoland can be considered as rather well-designed. So, differences in design quality can only partly explain the differences in popularity.

In the west, and to a lesser extent in the east, there is not much of a provincial identity; national identity is stronger. The two eastern provinces each consist of three separate cultural regions. Sub-provincial (or regional) flags in these parts are a newer development and are becoming more and more popular.

All these facts can be traced by analysing cultural differences that have evolved over the centuries through different developments along historical and ethno-linguistic lines, and in which even early medieval tribes played a role.

### Ancient roots of regional identity and symbols



**Figure 2** The dialects of the Dutch language and Frisian

A useful way to get to grips with the regional diversity within the Netherlands is to consider the dialects of the Dutch language. **Figure 2** shows the main dialects of Dutch on a map of the Netherlands and Flanders (the northern part of Belgium). For a language that is spoken by 23 million people and that covers only a small area, its dialects are very diverse. Hollandic dialects, spoken mainly in the two Hollands and in Utrecht, are the closest to Standard Dutch. People from these provinces consider themselves to be Dutch (Nederlands). It has even got to the point that they themselves confuse Holland with the Netherlands and use both terms indiscriminately when they mean the country, its inhabitants and their language as a whole. People from other provinces will never use Hollands when they refer to their nationality, but Nederlands.

This can explain how people from the two Hollands and Utrecht do not feel a special bond with their province and see it more as an administrative unit. This also can explain the low popularity of their flags.

On the map, the more divergent the colours, the more divergent the dialects are from Standard Dutch. All the dialects coloured yellow and orange are more or less close and derived from Old Low Franconian, originally spoken by the Germanic tribe of the Franks.

Limburgish, and to a lesser extent Brabantian, are rather divergent from the standard; to most Dutch, Limburgish is not intelligible. Frisian is so divergent that it is considered by linguists to be a separate language. People in the north and east, the green areas on the map, speak Saxon dialects of Dutch, originally spoken by the Germanic tribe of the Saxons, that differ a lot from Standard Dutch. This can all explain the strong provincial identity of the people from the southern and northern provinces and the popularity of their flags.

In Gelderland something else occurs to account for the low popularity of its flag: the lack of unity within a province. People from the Rivierenland (Riverland) in South Gelderland speak Low Franconian dialects as opposed to people from the Veluwe and the Achterhoek in the north and east, who speak divergent Saxon dialects. They also differ a lot in their cultural expression.

### The Three Tribes and their symbols

All these dialects can be traced back to when three different Germanic tribes started to settle in these parts after the final collapse of the Roman Empire around 400 AD (**Figure 3**). North of the Rhine, the Frisians and Saxons had already inhabited the north and east for at least a thousand years. South of the Rhine, the Franks were new arrivals from the east, from the first century onwards gradually taking over Roman occupied territory, and absorbing the original Celtic tribes. The Frisians were later pressed back to the north by the Franks in the west and the Saxons in the east.

Older Dutch texts about Dutch heraldry and vexillology like to trace regional symbols to those allegedly used by these three tribes. Although the stories behind these symbols can be dismissed as tendentious, they are interesting stories nonetheless.



**Figure 3** Map of the areas inhabited by the three original Germanic tribes in the Low Countries in the 8th century

## The Frisians

The Frisians use two traditional symbols (**Figure 4**). The red nenuphar leaves (sometimes shown as hearts) on a pattern of diagonal stripes of blue and white, the Pompeblêden-flag, is the flag of the province of Friesland. As will be seen later, the Ommelanden region of Groningen also uses this symbol. Allegedly, the hearts can be traced to Scandinavian roots. They also occur in the old coat-of-arms of Sweden and Denmark. In the case of Ancient Sweden, it can even be said that the background to the lion rather resembles the general pattern of the Frisian flag. Although Frisians are West Germanic, popular belief traces back the origins of the Frisian tribes to the North Germanic Scandinavians.

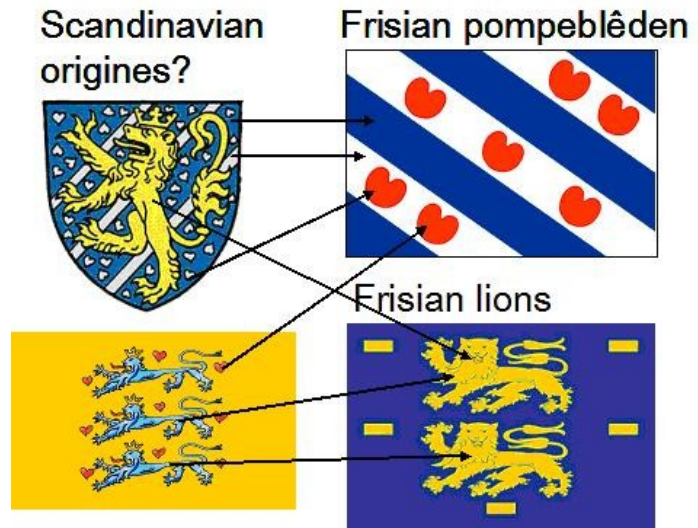
The other traditional symbol of Friesland consist of two lions passant-guardant accompanied by billets, as can be seen in the provincial coats-of-arms of Friesland and Noord-Holland and in the regional flag of Westfriesland in Noord-Holland. These lions are also allegedly derived from the heraldry of the Scandinavian kingdoms.

## The Saxons

Traditionally the continental Saxons are symbolized by a white horse forcené (prancing) on red (**Figure 5**). This symbol can be traced to the last leader of the independent Saxons in the 8th century, Widukind, who after accepting Christianity changed his black horse emblem into a white one.

The Saxon horse (Saksisch Ros in Dutch) is a popular symbol in the east and northeast of the Netherlands, in particular in the Twente region of Overijssel, and also across the border where it appears in the heraldry of the German states of Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia. (There may be also a link with the coat-of-arms and flag of the county of Kent in England).

**Figure 5** Saksisch Ros (Saxon horse) flown in Twente region



**Figure 4** The allegedly Scandinavian origins of the Frisian symbols

## The Franks

Before 1000 AD, the Franconian lands disintegrated into feudal states. In the Low Countries around 1200 AD these all developed their own heraldic symbols, more often than not a lion. The Franks did not bequeath a specific symbol to heraldry. In the Napoleonic era, the bee became a popular symbol to refer to the Frankish roots of France. Bees of gold were found in the tomb of the 5th century “king” of the Salian Franks, Childeric I, in Tournai, Belgium, in 1653 (Figure 6). Other than this, there is no reference to the Franks whatsoever in current regional symbols.

## POPULAR USE OF PROVINCIAL FLAGS

The expression of regional identity through flags is strongest in four provinces: Friesland, Groningen, Limburg and Noord-Brabant. This is not only apparent from the ubiquity of these flags, but also from their frivolous adoption in and on all kinds of items at traditional and cultural events. Although the flags of Zeeland and Drenthe are also in the top bracket of popular flags, they are not used in this way.



**Figure 6** The Frankish bees of gold from the tomb of “king” Childeric I

## Friesland



The Frisian pompeblêden is used frivolously in many different ways. The premier league Frisian football club Heerenveen wears the pompeblêden as their jersey when playing at home (**Figure 7 right**) while supporters use the Frisian flag in multiple ways to express their allegiance (**Figure 8 left**)



Speed skating is very popular in Friesland and racing events are always accompanied by a brass band playing traditional songs dressed in pompeblêden shirts (**Figure 9 below left**). Frisian flags are much in evidence at the rare Elfstedentocht (Eleven Cities Tour) event (**Figure 10 below right**), a one day speed skating race over more than 200 km of natural ice that can only be organized in cold winters. The most recent one was skated in 1997.



## Groningen

The football club FC Groningen from the city of Groningen has a provincial fan base. Therefore, supporters fly provincial flags during matches (**Figure 11 bottom left**). Even in death the Groningen identity can be expressed by being buried in a special Groningen coffin (**Figure 12 bottom right**).



The flag of Groningen has risen much in popularity since in recent years Groningers started protests against the gas extraction from the huge natural gas fields in this province, which has led to small earthquakes and damage to their houses. These protests against the central authorities in The Hague were vehement and in the end are quite successful. To strengthen these protests, they are always accompanied by a large number of Groningen flags (**Figures 13 and 14**).



Figures 13 and 14 - Groningers protesting against gas extraction

## Limburg

Fans of Roda JC football club from Kerkrade, Limburg, fly the Limburg flag to support their team (**Figure 15**). Of a more frivolous use is the Limburg flag on top of a cocktail pick for small snacks (**Figure 16**). This was at the occasion of the 60-year jubilee of the Limburg flag on 2 October 2013 in Maastricht. At the same occasion, a traditional banner flourishing (vandelzwaaien in Dutch) display with Limburg flags was performed



Figure 15 Limburg flag in Roda JC football stadium



Figure 16 Limburg cocktail pick

Figure 17 Traditional Limburg banner flourishing (vandelzwaaien)



## Noord-Brabant

Brabants Bont (Brabant Checker) is the name of the typical flag of the province of Noord-Brabant. It is also the name of a kind of table cloth with the same pattern (**Figure 18**). The check is also applied to clothing and tourist kitsch (**Figure 19**).



**Figure 18** Brabants Bont table cloth pattern. **Figure 19** Brabants Bont jacket and tourist kitsch

The supporters of 2015 Dutch football champion PSV from Eindhoven often show Brabant flags to express their Brabantness, as opposed to the Holland clubs (**Figure 20**). In **Figure 21** a group of Brabanders can be seen in a typical pose with the Brabant flag on the cover of the local magazine *Bont*, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the famous picture “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima”.



**Figure 20** Brabant flags in the PSV stadium



**Figure 21** Iwo Jima pose with the Eindhoven Brabants Bont

## SUB-PROVINCIAL FLAGS

Sub-national flag display does not stop with provincial flags. In recent times, a newer development can be seen in some provinces with the adoption of flags by certain regions with their own historical, cultural and linguistic traditions. The map in **Figure 22** gives an impression of how many of these regions there are in the Netherlands.

So far, five of these regions have adopted flags that have become quite popular. Some of them even have a semi-official status. In the region of Twente in the province of Overijssel, the Saxon horse, white on red, is used profusely by citizens (**Figure 23**) as well as supporters of the premier league football club FC Twente from Enschede (**Figure 24**). This is the expression of strong Saxon traditions in Twente. In Twente, this flag is seen far more often than the provincial flag.



Figure 22 Historical geographic regions of the Netherlands

Figure 23 The Twente flag

Figure 24 FC Twente supporters at Enschede with the Twente flag





The same goes for the region of Westfriesland in the north of Noord-Holland province: the provincial flag is eclipsed by the sub-provincial Westfrisian flag, which cultivates its ancient Frisian heritage. In the picture in **Figure 25**, the Mayors of the 15 municipalities within this region are seen holding the regional flag after a ceremony in which they unanimously and officially adopted the flag.



In the region of the Ommelanden in the province of Groningen, a regional flag resembling the Frisian pompeblêden flag can be found flying sparsely, as in **Figure 26 (left)**. This flag obviously refers to the Frisian origins of this region, but uses hearts instead of nenuphar leaves.

The region of Zeeuws Vlaanderen in the south of the province of Zeeland is very peculiar in a couple of ways. Historically, it was part of the county of Flanders and shares cultural and dialectal ties with the Flemish regions over the border in Belgium. Furthermore, it is geographically isolated from the rest of Zeeland and the Netherlands by the Westerschelde estuary.

This region has had its own flag for several years, ratified by the Councils of the three municipalities in Zeeuws Vlaanderen. It shows a Flemish lion emerging from the waves (different from the Lion of Holland lion in the Zeeland coat-of-arms), combining the Dutch and Flemish colours. At the same time it refers to the Flemish roots of Zeeuws Vlaanderen and its allegiance to Zeeland, signified by the Luctor et Emergo (I struggle and emerge) theme of the provincial coat-of-arms and flag. Even so, people from other parts of Zeeland resent the Zeeland Flemish for having their own flag instead of flying the blue and white provincial one shown at right (**Figure 27 right**).



**Figure 28** show this regional flag displayed in Afghanistan by Dutch soldiers who hail from Zeeuws Vlaanderen.



**Figure 29** show another example of the regional flag of Zeeuws Vlaanderen.

The flag of the Westland region (Figures 30 and 31) in the province of Zuid-Holland is a curiosity. Although flown widely in the region, it is not the expression of subethnicity, but rather of economic prowess. Westland is the extensive glasshouse area of the Netherlands, where fruit and vegetables are grown for a large international market. The inhabitants are very proud of this and show it in the pattern of their flag: the roofs of row upon row of (white) glasshouses (see **Figure 32**), where (green) agricultural products are cultivated.



**Figures 30 and 31** The flag of the Westland region



**Figure 32** The Westland glasshouses, inspiration for the regional flag.

### CITY PRIDE FLAGS IN HOLLAND

In the west of the Netherlands, in the provinces of Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland, people do not feel themselves to be “Hollandic”. They are Westfrisians or Westlanders for instance, as discussed above. In the many cities in this densely populated part of the Netherlands, people can have a strong city adherence and express pride in their city by flying the city flag.

Amsterdammers use their city flag with the three saltires on all kinds of occasions (Figure 33), as do Rotterdammers (again an Iwo Jima reference in Figure 34). As a final example of civic pride, Figure 35 shows a student corps marching with the red and white flag of Leiden, the oldest Dutch university city with 440 years of history and academic tradition.

Figure 34 The Rotterdam flag Iwo Jima style

Figure 33 Flying Amsterdam's flag

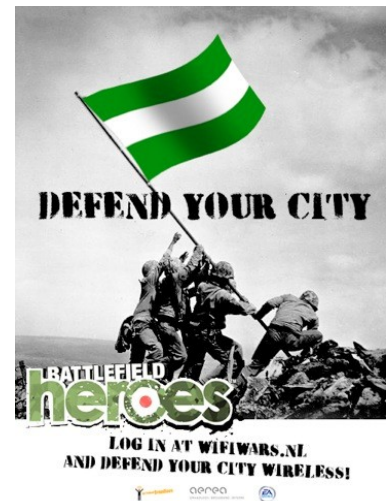


Figure 35 A Leiden student corps showing the Leiden flag



## REGIONAL MUNICIPALITIES

Finally, a development in the Netherlands should be mentioned towards fewer and fewer municipalities with the fusion of many of them in large entities containing 20 to even 60 villages and towns within their borders. More and more, these amalgamated municipalities can be said to resemble the German districts (Kreise). When they adopt flags, these have the character of regional flags, although they are mainly used by the local authorities.



As examples, Figure 36 shows six flags adopted in recent years of this kind of municipality. that have been adopted in recent years.

## CONCLUSION

The expression of subnational identity in the Netherlands through flags can be strong, but depends on the degree to which the local historical, linguistic and cultural identity differs from that of the nation. Without such an identity, a subnational flag is no more than an administrative flag. A flag only becomes popular if people can rally behind it, in situations and on occasions meaningful to them, to express their roots, their

uniqueness, to strengthen emotions. In that case, the flag becomes an inspiring requisite in all expressions of regional identity. This inspiring quality in flags cannot be created simply by adopting a well-designed flag.

## Acknowledgments

The work of Jos Poels on the history and development of provincial flags has been invaluable to this analysis. His article in *Vlag!* magazine Nr.15 about the provincial flag survey was the starting point. Thanks also to Theun Okkerse for his design work on the map (Figure 1) that shows the results of this survey.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL



Marcel van Westerhoven was born in Haarlem, The Netherlands, in 1966. After his university education in chemistry and additional education in environmental science, he worked for a company advising on sustainable development, and is currently Senior Consultant. He is secretary of the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde (NVvV, the Netherlands Vexillological Association) and is a board member of the Stichting Vlaggenmuseum Nederland (Netherlands Flag Museum Foundation). He was also a member of the foundation responsible for organising the 25th International Congress of Vexillology in Rotterdam in 2013.

A member of NVvV since 1990, he was editor of *Vexilla Nostra*, the NVvV periodical from 1995 and since 2008 editor responsible for vexillological content of the successor journal, *Vlag!*. He has contributed many articles to both publications on Dutch municipal flags, his particular field of expertise.

Contact: E-mail: [m.westerhoven@gmx.net](mailto:m.westerhoven@gmx.net)