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American Neḥushtan: Why the Gadsden Flag is Yellow

[DRAFT]

The yellow color of the Gadsden flag and its rattlesnake demands explanation, because yellow flags were as anomalous in the 18th century as they are today, and rattlesnakes of the Eastern seaboard are not yellow. I hypothesize that the Gadsden flag consciously recalls the brazen snake standard or Neḥushtan raised by Moses (Numbers 21:5-9). The power of this symbol in a Christian context comes from Jesus's statement that the Neḥushtan was the prototype for the crucifix (John 3:14-15). The King James Bible translates the Hebrew word נחשׁת (neḥoshet) as 'brazen,' which by Gadsden's time came to mean brass only, not copper or bronze. This determined the yellow color of neḥushtans in the art of the English-speaking world, and of the rattlesnake which is an integral part of the Gadsden flag and its derivative family. The Gadsden flag's Christian symbolism is highlighted by other Gadsden family members which add more Christological elements, including a skull for Calvary (Veteran Exempts flag, 1812) and a pointed fusion of "Don't Tread on Me" with the words of Jesus (Alabama Secession flag, 1861). This Gadsden-as-neḥushtan hypothesis generates further testable assertions, including that the neḥushtan flag family includes depictions of fouled anchors.

Keywords:

Alabama flags; fouled anchor; Gadsden flag; Martinique flags; Rhode Island flags; snake flags

“And Moses made a serpent of brass and put it up as a banner...” (Numbers 21:9, JUB)¹

Introduction: Why the yellow field and yellow snake demand explanation

The 1775 Gadsden flag, a yellow field charged with a yellow coiled rattlesnake and the inscription “DONT TREAD ON ME,” is a universally recognized American icon (Figure 1). Its widely recognized antecedent was Benjamin Franklin’s “Join, or Die” cartoon (Figure 2), reinforced by Franklin’s sometimes tongue-in-cheek insistence that the rattlesnake was an appropriate mascot for the new nation. Another precursor was the Ste. Lucie-Martinique flag of 1766 (Figure 3), which shows the lancehead, a non-rattling pit viper endemic to both islands, in a coiled position with its head pointed hoistward, as on the Gadsden flag. Neither precursor was yellow or depicted a yellow serpent. The Gadsden flag’s innovations included the yellow color of both the field and the rattlesnake charged upon it. Both are distinctive to the point of anomaly, and both require explanation.

The yellow field

The Gadsden flag’s yellow field stands out among Colonial and Revolutionary flags, most of which used the British colors red, white, and blue. While other yellow flags from the same period and place are known (such as the Philadelphia Light Horse flag), they are a small minority. Yellow has a long history of negative connotations in Western culture, and that was true when Christopher Gadsden designed his flag in 1775. For example, the 17th-century *habitants* of Montréal painted their doors all colors except yellow, which signified treachery and cuckoldry.² In English and American culture of the 17th through 19th centuries, yellow signified jealousy, yielding in the 19th century to its familiar, current signification of cowardice.³

Yellow badges meant heresy or unbelief in the Middle Ages, and Jews and heretics were required by law to wear them. This policy was revived rather than reinvented in the 20th century, when the Nazi regime made Jews once again wear yellow badges.

Because the Gadsden flag was originally intended for the navy,⁴ the precedent of nautical yellow flags is important to consider. The nautical yellow flag has had several ill-omened meanings over the years, including as a “disease on board” or quarantine signal, memorialized in the slang term “yellow jack” for epidemic yellow fever. However, this term first appeared in the 19th century, and the question remains what a yellow signal flag meant in 1775. In 1789, closer to the date the Gadsden flag was designed, a yellow flag warned that capital punishment was taking place on board.²

With many factors influencing designers away from the color yellow, it is not surprising that yellow flags are rare. No official flag of the United States, of any state or the federal government, displayed a yellow field until 1925, 150 years after Gadsden, when New Mexico adopted its current flag.⁵ Even outside Western culture, yellow flags are uncommon, with only a single instance of a yellow field (Brunei) among the approximately 200 national and supranational flags of today.

Christopher Gadsden was going against the grain of his culture when he designed a flag with a yellow field. This suggests a conscious decision and raises the question of what the yellow field might signify.

The yellow snake

Only one rattlesnake is endemic to all 13 original colonies, the timber rattlesnake *Crotalus horridus*. Its coloration ranges from light brown to blackish brown, with the median color a mid-range brown (Figure 4). The other rattlesnake of the original United States, the eastern diamondback *Crotalus adamanteus*, lives in Gadsden's own South Carolina and coastal North Carolina and Georgia. It displays a range of darker browns, ranging from mid-range brown to blackish (Figure 5). Thus, the yellow rattlesnake on the Gadsden flag is not a realistic depiction of either animal.

While snakes are often unrealistically colored in heraldry and on flags, there is a prominent counterexample in the neighboring rattlesnake flag family, the national flag and emblem of Mexico. Since 1823 the rattlesnake on the Mexican national seal, shield and flag has been various shades of green (Figure 6), providing a fairly realistic depiction of *Crotalus basiliscus*, the greenish rattlesnake of western Mexico (Figure 7).

The choice of an unrealistically yellow rattlesnake for the Gadsden flag again suggests a conscious decision and again raises the question of what the yellow serpent might signify. This observation holds true whether or not one accepts the yellow snake as part of Gadsden's original flag: while Godbold and Woody describe it as gray,⁶ it became firmly yellow when reproduced. The persistence of the yellow snake in non-yellow-field Gadsden family members (see below) either reflects a consensus on the proper color of the snake, or it serves to represent the yellow field of the original flag.

The Jewish Neḥushtan

During the Israelites' desert wanderings, poisonous snakes bite the people as a punishment for complaining against God and Moses (Numbers 21:4-6). Moses asks for God's help, and God instructs Moses to make an image of a poisonous snake and mount it on a standard (Numbers 21:8). Moses makes the image of a snake (נחש, *naḥash*) out of copper or bronze (נחשת, *neḥoshet*), and (as we learn later in the Book of Kings) the bronze snake standard is later called *Neḥushtan* (נחשתן). Israelites who look at the Neḥushtan are cured of snakebite. The Neḥushtan is carried along as the Israelites enter the Promised Land and become a settled nation, and it is eventually stored in the Jerusalem Temple. Almost a millennium later, King Hezekiah of Judah sees Jews burning incense to the Neḥushtan and recognizes that it has become an idol. As part of his iconoclastic reform of the state religion, he has the Neḥushtan broken in pieces and destroyed (2 Kings 18:4).

The Hebrew words נחש and נחשת share a root, perhaps referring to the brownish color of copper/bronze and the similar color of most desert-adapted snakes. By adding the final letter *nun* (ן) to the word for copper/bronze to get *neḥushtan* (נחשתן), the resulting noun is often described as derogatory⁷ but is probably a neutral construction meaning simply 'thing of bronze.' A related non-derogatory example is Naḥshon (נחשן), a prince of Judah (1 Chronicles 2:10) whose name means 'person with the (presumed admirable) qualities of a snake.'

The *Neḥushtan* rarely appears in Jewish art or iconography, probably because of the longstanding Jewish taboo against naturalistic images that smack of idolatry.

The Christian Neḥushtan

The Gospel of John brings the Neḥushtan into the Christian world by an analogy, when Jesus says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14). Theologically, the faithful person who ‘looks at’ (has faith in) the crucified Savior will be cured of ‘snakebite’ (sin and its consequences). Thus the Neḥushtan becomes the Old Testament prefiguration of the central Christian symbol, the crucifix, and it is ubiquitous in Christian art and iconography (Figure 8).

The heraldic neḥushtan

As one would expect for a core religious symbol, the Neḥushtan appears in heraldry. To distinguish the heraldic neḥushtan from the caduceus of Mercury (Figure 9) or the rod of Asclepius (Figure 10), the other common snake-on-stick icons, the snake must be draped over a crossbar (Figure 11). The cross of the heraldic neḥushtan may be a *tau* or St. Anthony’s cross, i.e. T-shaped, or it may be a classic Latin cross. To emphasize that the neḥushtan is a crucifix, it may be mounted on a hill (Calvary) or a skull (*calvarium*).

The color ‘brazen’

To explain why a neḥushtan would be depicted as yellow in 1775, we must look at the history of words for copper alloys in English. The word *neḥoshet*, which in Modern Hebrew means copper and in Ancient Hebrew meant any copper alloy, was rendered in Middle English as ‘brass’ as early as 1250.⁸ For about 400 years, ‘brass’ was used for all copper alloys, including the brown copper/tin alloys we now call bronze, and the yellow copper/zinc alloys we now call brass. The King James Bible, published in 1611, uses the word ‘brass’ in this way, so the Neḥushtan is called the ‘brazen serpent,’ or serpent of brass. The word ‘bronze’ does not appear in King James, appearing for the first time in English in 1617, in a description of the Neḥushtan.⁹ Over the course of the 18th century, during which the King James Bible still held sway as the definitive translation for the English-speaking world, the words ‘bronze’ and ‘brass’ came to mean what they mean today in common parlance. Therefore, by 1775, an English speaker unfamiliar with Hebrew would think of the brazen serpent as made of brass, and of a yellow color. Christopher Gadsden did in fact learn some Hebrew; he studied Hebrew texts during his incarceration in Saint Augustine in 1780-81, but that was years after he designed the Gadsden flag.¹⁰ It is reasonable to assume that Gadsden’s 1775 understanding of the brazen serpent’s color was the same as that of the general, English-speaking public, who would recognize a yellow serpent on a yellow banner as a ‘brazen serpent standard.’

In the 20th century, the King James Bible was joined in liturgical use by other modern translations (Revised Standard, New International, etc.), most of which use the word ‘bronze’ for the Neḥushtan. It is interesting to see how, during the King James Bible’s three centuries of hegemony, the

Nehushtan was depicted as yellow in the art of English-speaking countries (Figure 12), but not so in other countries and language areas. In Italy, for example, the Latin 4th-century Vulgate was the official Bible of the Catholic Church as of the 16th century, and it used the word *aeneus* (bronze, not brass or copper) to describe the *Nehushtan*. As modern Italian took the place of Latin over time, the *Nehushtan* was described as *di bronzo* (bronze), so Italian depictions of the *Nehushtan* have always been brown (Figure 13). It seems that, in depictions of the *Nehushtan* in religious art, color follows language.

One further example of color following language is the 20th-century depiction of the *Nehushtan* as the symbol of the Israeli Medical Association. On a 1964 stamp, the snake is depicted on a copper- or bronze-colored field, with no yellow to be seen (Figure 14).

How the brazen serpent fits into early American iconography

Early American leaders saw many parallels between the Biblical Exodus and their project of nation-building on the new continent. For example, the first committee on the Great Seal of the United States yielded two out of three Old Testament designs: Franklin had the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, and Jefferson had the Israelites crossing the desert led by the pillar of fire (Figure 15). Adams favored a Greco-Roman, the Judgment of Hercules.

The flags of the Revolutionary period reinforced three messages: Unity, exemplified by the stars and stripes; Liberty, as in the Moultrie flag; and Faith, exemplified by the Appeal to Heaven flag (Figure 16). The Gadsden flag fits into this scheme as a two-message flag. The first message is a defiant Liberty, shown by the self-reliant snake and its slogan warning off aggressors. The second message, not obvious today but probably evident to all in the Revolutionary period, was Faith: God's protection shown by the brazen serpent, which everyone knew was a stand-in for the crucifix. It fit the Founding Fathers' penchant for using Old Testament citations and iconography.

The Gadsden flag's two messages are thus identical to those of the Ste. Lucie-Martinique flag (Figure 3), which presented a coiled serpent ready to strike—defiance against aggressors, particularly the English—and a cross representing faith and God's protection. One can imagine a Founder like Christopher Gadsden struggling to convert this potent package of symbols into a flag that would resonate in the thirteen colonies. The coiled snake is perfect, but the quartered, armorial design must go, because a republic has no use for heraldry and the royalism it implies. And substitute, for the too-Catholic central cross, a crypto-crucifix by coloring the whole thing yellow, evoking the brazen serpent and its Christian meaning. Now he has effectively translated the Ste. Lucie-Martinique flag into an equally potent and even more concise banner that fits with the Masonic and Protestant sensibilities of his North American constituency.

While the historical relationship between Ste. Lucie-Martinique and Gadsden is unknown, it invites further scrutiny. The hypothesis advanced in this manuscript does not depend on this relationship, however; the designer of the Gadsden flag could have made the same moves independently.

Hypothesis

The Gadsden flag, by virtue of its yellow field and yellow snake, recalled the Biblical Neḥushtan, presenting a faith message recognizable to the contemporary American public.

This hypothesis makes testable predictions, two of which will be explored here. The others will be listed at the end of this manuscript. These predictions, relating to the 'Gadsden family' of flags, emblems, seals, and symbols, are:

- 1) The yellow color will be conserved, in field or snake, in the Gadsden family; and
- 2) Further Christological elements will be found in the Gadsden family, reinforcing the faith message.

Neḥushtan and Christian symbolism in the Gadsden family

In the Revolutionary period immediately after the Gadsden flag was raised in 1775, several entities and military units used the serpent and "Don't Tread on Me" slogans. In the Sullivan's Life Guards and Proctor's Westmoreland flags (Figure 17), the serpent is yellow, as predicted. In the First Navy Jack, a flag that began as a British parody¹¹ but became an official Navy flag over time, the snake is yellow (Figure 18). The War Office seal, which became that of the United States Army (Figure 19), includes a brass-colored or golden rattlesnake. The Providence Artillery flag of 1776 (Figure 20) uses the yellow color for both flag and snake. This flag also makes an overt New Testament reference, with its slogan "In God We Hope" on the anchor; this refers to Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, in which hope is described as "an anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19, KJV). The snake-on-anchor is a variant type of heraldic neḥushtan that appears in a printer's colophon from 200 years earlier (Figure 21), called at the time the *anchora sacra* (sacred anchor).

Gadsden family members from two later conflicts show more Christological features. The Plattsburgh Veteran Exempts flag (Figure 22) from the War of 1812 includes a quotation from the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Will Be Done" (Matthew 6:10, KJV). It also puts the serpent atop a skull, placing the Neḥushtan atop Calvary, as seen in other heraldic neḥushtans. The 1861 Alabama Secession flag (Figure 23), the first flag of the state as it seceded from the Union, included the by-now-familiar unrealistically yellow snake. It also modified "Don't Tread on Me" to the Latin *Noli Me Tangere* ("touch me not"), which Jesus said to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection (John 20:17, KJV). This is not a translation but a tendentious fusion of the Gadsden slogan and the words of Jesus.

These examples show brazen serpents and additional Christological features in the Gadsden family. Not every member of the Gadsden family carries the faith message, and many family members telegraph only liberty and defiance. These non-neḥushtan Gadsden family members include the 1775 Culpeper Minutemen flag (Figure 24) and various military insignia, including that of the Harlem Hellfighters (369th Infantry Regiment) (Figure 25). There are also non-neḥushtan Gadsden family members that provide counterexamples to unrealistic snake coloration, with at least two 20th-century devices featuring plausibly colored rattlesnakes (Figure 26).

Conclusions and testable assertions

The hypothesis that the Gadsden flag consciously recalls the Neḥushtan is supported by evidence from the Gadsden family: at least some later flag designers recognized and intensified Gadsden's faith message. Most prominent of these are the Providence Artillery flag (1776), the Veteran Exempts flag (1812), and the Alabama Secession flag (1861). The Gadsden-as-neḥushtan hypothesis presented here explains the countercultural yellow field and the unrealistic yellow snake, showing a reason for making them yellow. The peculiar color is explained by peculiarities of English-language history and the hegemony of the King James Bible. The religious symbolism of the Gadsden flag has become less obvious over time, with the decline of Biblical literacy and the retranslation of the Hebrew Bible, resulting in a new consensus that the Neḥushtan was bronze.

Four further testable assertions arise from this work:

- 1) *Contemporary documentation of recognition will be found.* While Christopher Gadsden's writings are silent on the subject, other contemporaries—politicians, sailors, soldiers, etc.—will have described the Gadsden flag as a brazen serpent, neḥushtan, or Mosaic standard.
- 2) *Other Gadsden family members will display neḥushtan or Christological features.* The examples provided here are an incomplete review of the Gadsden family. When other Gadsden family members are considered, the yellow snake and/or field will be conserved, and further Christian and Christological elements will be found.
- 3) *In depictions of the Neḥushtan, color will follow language, based on the translation of the word נחשת (neḥoshet).* Yellow neḥushtans among English speakers and brown neḥushtans from Italy are described above, by way of example. A formal comparative survey of illustrations from art or heraldry would more rigorously validate this rule.
- 4) *Some "fouled anchors" are anchorae sacrae.* The historical origin of the fouled anchor, with rope or chain snaked around the cruciform shank and stock, will be found to be a modified neḥushtan. This in turn suggests the existence of a "neḥushtan family" of flags, of which Gadsden and its congeners form part, but which also includes numerous others. In the American setting, this suggests a closer look at the flags of Rhode Island (Figure 27).

References

1. Bible quotations are from: JUB = Jubilee Bible 2000; KJV = King James Version.
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5. Although part of New Mexico was obtained via the Gadsden Purchase, the two Gadsdens are distinct and the flags are unrelated. Flag designer Christopher Gadsden (1724-1805) was the grandfather of Purchase negotiator James Gadsden (1788-1858).
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Figure 1. Gadsden flag.



Figure 2. Franklin's "Join, or Die" cartoon.

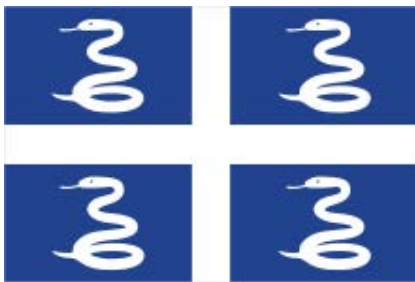


Figure 3. Ste. Lucie-Martinique flag.



Figure 4. Timber rattlesnake, *Crotalus horridus*.



Figure 5. Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, *Crotalus adamanteus*.



Figure 6. Mexican national seal.



Figure 7. Mexican west coast rattlesnake, *Crotalus basiliscus*.



Figure 8. Nehushtan from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling.



Figure 9. Caduceus of Hermes (Lassay-les-Châteaux, France).



Figure 10. Rod of Asclepius (Green Templeton College, Oxford, United Kingdom).



Figure 11. Heraldic nehushtans. First row, left to right: from Grünenberg's 1483 *Wappenbuch*; publisher Vincenzo Valgrisi, Venice, 16th century; Sømme Herred, Denmark; Tokaj, Hungary. Second row, left to right: Protestant theologian Philipp Melanchthon; Lachen, Switzerland; Stalder family, Beckenried, Switzerland.



Figure 12. English speakers' nehushtans, by Harold Copping (British, left) and Judith Mehr (American, right), 20th century.



Figure 13. Italian speakers' nehushtans, by Agnolo Bronzino (16th century, left) and Giovanni Fantoni (20th century, right).



Figure 14. Hebrew speakers' nehushtan, a 1964 Israeli stamp.



Figure 15. Reconstructions of Franklin's (left) and Jefferson's (right) Great Seal designs.



Figure 16. Revolutionary flags with messages of Unity, Liberty, and Faith.

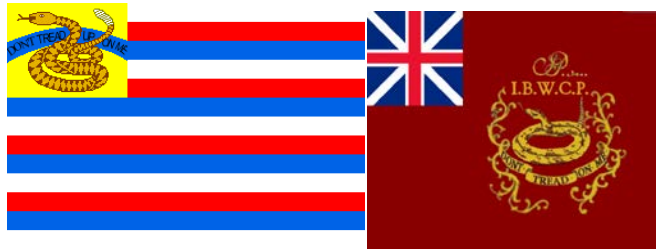


Figure 17. Sullivan's Life Guards (left) and Proctor's Westmoreland (right) flags.



Figure 18. 'First Navy Jack.'



Figure 19. Army seal.



Figure 20. Providence Train of Artillery flag.



Figure 21. Mark of publisher Eustache Vignon, Geneva, 16th century.



Figure 22. Veteran Exempts flag; Beckenried Stalder arms for comparison.



Figure 23. Alabama Secession flag.



Figure 24. Culpeper Minutemen flag.



Figure 25. US Army regimental arms in the Gadsden Family. Left to right: 14th Cavalry, 143rd Field Artillery, 201st Field Artillery, 369th Infantry.



Figure 26. Realistic rattlesnakes in the Gadsden family: George Washington Chapter, Pennsylvania Society, Sons of the American Revolution (left); DoD PARC program (right).



Figure 27. Rhode Island flag, circa 1775; Eustache Vignon colophon, circa 1570, for comparison.