


The flag of the European Union

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Among the Union's symbols, the flag with a circle of 12 golden stars on a blue background, adopted by the Council of Europe on 8 December 1955 and taken up by the Community in 1986, is obviously a symbol of identity par excellence. Any interpretation of the symbolism of the flag has to start from its symbolic and heraldic description. Its symbolic description states that 'against the background of blue sky, twelve golden stars form a circle representing the union of the peoples of Europe. The number of stars is fixed, twelve being the symbol of perfection and unity.' The heraldic description states: 'on an azure field, a circle of twelve golden mullets, their points not touching.'

The symbolic components to be considered are therefore: (a) the circle; (b) the stars, including their number and shape; (c) the colours.

The *circle* first of all. A circle has no beginning or end, no direction or orientation, and is homogeneous, perfect and indivisible. A circle leads back to itself and is therefore a symbol of unity, of the absolute and of perfection. In a circle, all the points of the circumference are equidistant from the centre. For this reason it is a good illustration of the union of the peoples of Europe to which the official symbolic description refers. However, it is just as good an illustration of the parity of the Member States. Second, the *stars*. They light the night sky and orbit around the polar star and are therefore perceived as symbols of the cosmic order.

In flags, the star illustrates independence, unity, liberty, renewal and hope. It is not by chance that the flags of many former colonies contain stars, together, in many Islamic countries, with the crescent. When there is more than one star, they generally represent a unit of measurement, i.e. they number federal states (United States), provinces (Costa Rica, Venezuela), geographical areas (Philippines), parishes (Grenada), islands (Comoros, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe) and peoples (Burundi, Burma).

One of the features of the stars of the European flag is that they have *five points* which do not touch one another; they are also known as pentagrams or pentacles. Since five-pointed stars can be drawn with a single, unbroken closed line, the Pythagoreans gave them a mystical meaning of perfection. In the European flag, the pentagram fits in well with the circle, which is also a symbol of perfection. The five-pointed star is also the symbol of man as an individual possessing five fingers and toes, five senses and five limbs. If the points of the stars do not touch, this means that the circle is open. Symbolically, therefore, the European Union is not a closed society; it is not, as is often said with a negative connotation, a fortress; on the

contrary, the European Union is above all open to the accession of the States of Europe and is an active member of the international community, being open to the outside world and playing its part in the life of international relations.

The *number of stars* is fixed and was set at 12 in 1955.

Twelve is considered to be an ideal number. It provided the foundation of the Babylonian numerical system (called duodecimal for that reason). There are 12 signs of the zodiac, which therefore represent the universe. There are 12 months of the year, 12 hours of the day and 12 hours of the night, 12 Egyptian gods, 12 Olympian deities who formed the Greek pantheon from the 5th century BC, 12 laps in the chariot races of ancient Greece, 12 labours of Hercules in Greek mythology, 12 tables making up the first codification of Roman law, 12 knights of King Arthur's Round Table in Celtic tradition and 12 gates of Paradise in Scandinavia.

Twelve is also a number in Judaeo-Christian symbolism. The tree of life has 12 fruits; there are 12 sons of Jacob, 12 patriarchs, 12 tribes of Israel and 12 gates of the New Jerusalem. Moses sent 12 explorers to the lands of Canaan, the bread multiplied by Jesus was placed in 12 baskets and Jesus speaks of 12 legions of angels after the kiss of Judas; lastly, there are 12 apostles. The number 12 is also the product of multiplying three, always a divine number (the trinity), by four, the number of the earth with its four cardinal points; 12 is therefore the symbol 'of the union between the divine and the terrestrial world', which, as we know, embodies the central mystery of Christianity.

The number twelve together with stars, the crown of stars, reflects the vision of the Virgin Mary of the *Book of Revelation* (12:1) and is the symbol *par excellence* of popular Marian iconography.

Lastly, the *colours*. The colours have their own expressive and symbolic value.

The rectangle of the flag is *blue*, the colour of the sky and the universe. Blue is also traditionally the colour of the European continent. Many parliamentarians referred to this symbolism when the Council of Europe was preparing to adopt the flag. Lastly, blue is the colour of the Virgin. Mary's stone is the blue sapphire which, again in the *Book of Revelation* (21:19), adorns the foundation of the walls of the New Jerusalem; blue is the colour of Mary's mantle.

The European flag — it has been observed — therefore satisfies all the requirements of an ideal emblem: its good symbolism is simple and easy to interpret and is easily recognisable; it is harmonious, original and also simple to produce. It is therefore a perfect flag from a geometric, symbolic and political point of view.