

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

A Sainly and Victorious Symbol

Did you hear the story about Clovis and his wife, Clothilde? Well, it seems that Clothilde was upset that her husband was getting into fights all the time. So she prayed a long time that he would find religion. When her prayers were answered and Clovis was baptized, she suggested that he change his family crest by substituting irises for three *crapauds*, or toads.

No, this isn't the usual Boudreaux and Thibodeaux joke that everyone has come to love. It is merely the beginning of a long series of origin stories for the *fleur-de-lis*, the enduring symbol of Bourbon France, Louisiana, the City of New Orleans and its beloved "Saints" football team (to name but a few).

Actually the war-like King of the Franks, Clovis (c. 466-511 A.D.), was married to the sainted Clotilda (who long prayed for his conversion). One origin tale has Clovis leading his army into battle, and (being in imminent danger of defeat) he presented himself to his Burgundian wife's God and emerged victorious. According to Gregory of Tours, it was this victory at Tolbiac (c. 496) that led to Clovis' baptism at Rheims by Saint Remigius, after which he had each of the three toads on his shield's coat-of-arms replaced by the stylized lily (in French, *fleur* means *flower* and *lis* means *lily*), or iris.

As a religious symbol this design has represented the Holy Trinity and also the Virgin Mary (in connection with its iconic attribute of the archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation). The three petals are said to represent faith, wisdom and chivalry.

Another story which places less emphasis on Christianity and more on the divine right of French kings has Clovis putting an iris flower in his helmet just before his victory at the Battle of Vouillé, leading him to choose the *fleur-de-lis* as a royal symbol. This battle was fought in the northern marches of Visigoth territory near Poitiers in the spring of 507 between Clovis' Frankish army and the Visigoths of Alaric II, conqueror of Spain.

Clovis killed Alaric, but before he did he needed a place for his army to ford the river. Spotting a cluster of yellow irises (which don't grow in deep water), his army successfully crossed the river to victory. In this version, the river crossing was the inspiration for the iris transplant. Another legend has an angel bringing a blue banner strewn over (*azure semé*) with golden *fleurs-de-lis* upon Clovis' baptism. Still another account names the forded stream as the River *Lys* in Flanders.

As a stylized flower, the *fleur-de-lis* is common to almost all eras and all civilizations. This graphic theme has been found on Egyptian and Assyrian bas-reliefs, Mesopotamian cylinders, Mycenaean pottery, Sassanid textiles, Mameluk and Gaulish coins, Indonesian clothing, Japanese emblems and Dogon totems. It even adorned the golden helmet of a Scythian king (on view at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg). Anne Lombard-Jourdan traces the *fleur-de-lis* to a transformation of the Merovingian *crista*, a form of a Greek cross with the horizontals upwardly curved.

The lily is said to have sprung from the tears shed by Eve as she left Eden (just as the lily of the valley is said to have grown from the tears of the Virgin at the foot of the Cross). From its earliest times (it was the flower of Hera, Greek goddess of the moon) it has been the symbol of purity and was readily adopted by the Church to associate the Virgin Mary's sanctity with events of special significance.

An English authority on heraldry, James R. Planche, stated that since Clovis is the Frankish form of Louis, *fleur-de-luce* might be a rebus signifying the "flower of Louis". The "flower of light" symbolism has sometimes been understood from the archaic variant *fleur-de-luce* (Latin *lux, luc* meaning *light*), but the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that this arose instead from spelling variations.

All of these legendary explanations fill a huge gap between Clovis and the first historical appearance of the *fleur-de-lys* (alternate spelling) during the Second Crusade (1147). Louis VII (*Le Pieux*, or the Pious) wore a blue coat with *fleurs-de-lys* and had three upon his banner. It is not known for sure why he chose the flower of the Virgin Mary, but in her he had deep faith. After Louis VII chose the iris as his emblem, it was forever known as the *fleur-de-Löis* (flower of Louis). This was subsequently corrupted to *fleur-de-luce* and ultimately *fleur-de-lis*.

The later kings of France repeated this symbol upon their heraldry until it became the symbol of France itself. In order to keep a link between Clovis, historians in the fourteenth century created stories of the *fleur-de-lis* as an evolution of the frogs design. But the only factual details known are that there were three frogs on Clovis' banner and three *fleurs-de-lis* centuries later.

Godefridus Henschenius, a Flemish Jesuit priest (1601-1681) claimed that the *fleur-de-lis* represented the *iris pseudacorus* (yellow flag in English and *lieschblume* in German). The flower is yellow and grows in marshes (one could say a watery azure field). *Liesch* was also spelled *lies* and *leys* in the Middle Ages. It is easy to imagine that, in Northern France, the *lieschblume* would have been called *fleur-de-lis*. This would explain its name and the formal origin of the design, as a stylized yellow flag.

The Official Flag of the City of New Orleans was adopted February 5, 1918, to honor the City's Bicentennial. The white field symbolizes purity in government, the blue stripe liberty and the red fraternity. There are three *fleurs-de-lis* grouped in a triangle upon the white field representing the birth of New Orleans beneath the banner of the three *fleurs-de-lis* (long ago snatched from the blue banner of autocracy, and now resting upon the field of purity and equality, symbolizing Democracy's triumph over autocracy).

Red, white and blue are the flag colors of both the United States and France (with the Crescent City the child of both), and so then is the flag of New Orleans. On July 9, 2008, Governor Bobby Jindal signed a bill into law making the *fleur-de-lis* an official symbol of the state of Louisiana, as well.

The World Scouting Emblem is the *fleur-de-lis*, the symbol chosen by founder Robert Baden-Powell from his army days. It had been used on the arm-badges of British Army Scouts (reconnaissance specialists). Also, a Neopolitan mariner of the fourteenth century named Flavio Gioja began the tradition of using the *fleur-de-lis* as a compass rose marking due North. This also connects with the purpose of Scouting's core principles—namely that Scouting gives one's life direction.

Besides France and Louisiana, the *fleur-de-lis* continues to appear in the arms of the King of Spain and the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, also members of the House of Bourbon. It is also an emblem of the City of Florence, Italy.

"To gild the lily" or "gilding the lily" are misquotes from Shakespeare's *King John*, Act IV, Scene II, line 13). The bard actually penned, "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily" (meaning one should not improve something already beautiful). Will was only being biblical in observing what God had already done for the lily (Matthew 6:28):

"See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these."

The *fleur-de-lis* can be political, emblematic, artistic, symbolic, dynastic and inspirational. Upon the pedestal of the statue of Jeanne

d'Arc, "Maid of Orleans", at Rouen, France, *fleurs-de-lis* are sculptured with the following Latin inscription:

Lilia virgines tuta sub ense nitent.

(Beneath the maiden's sword, the lilies safely bloom).

In America's *La Nouvelle-Orléans*, sword-bearers and entrepreneurs of all kinds have come and gone. Bernard de Marigny brought over the dice game *Craps* named after a not-so-nice nickname for Frenchmen, *Crapauds*, or the toad-frogs that once graced the coat-of-arms of Old King Clovis. Sports promoter Dave Dixon brought about an official NFL football franchise for the City (announced All Saints Day 1966), the New Orleans Saints. Black and gold became the team's colors, "When the Saints Go Marching In" the team song and the *fleur-de-lis* the team logo.

Irises in old-time gardens are sometimes known simply as flags, perhaps because their sagging petals will flutter in the breeze. For the City of New Orleans, the *fleur-de-lis* (especially since Hurricane Katrina) has become an enduring symbol of hope for brighter tomorrows after sagging fortunes. The Saints' hopes have sagged for many years, as well, but at 10-0 there is a resurgent faith in their beloved *fleur-de-lis* and victories that move fans to "believe" in additional conversions on the field.

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