

Swastikas in Cambridge Churches

Here in Cambridge we have some intriguing surprises for the visitor. Did you know that we have examples of the Swastika in some of our world-famous Cambridge Churches and Chapels? You will find the Swastika meander on the front elevation of the Old Schools next to the Senate House. There's nothing sinister about this. It is simply an elaboration of the Greek Fret motif that enables the 'Swastika' motif to appear within the meander design.

This decorative motif is found almost world-wide. It appeared extensively in synagogues, churches and mosques from early times. While some of these motifs are clearly primarily decorative others appear to have degrees of symbolic significance. Here in Cambridge we can find examples in Westminster College chapel, King's College chapel and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, known locally as the 'Round Church'. In this article we will be looking mainly at the Round Church.

There are certain alternative terms we can use for this geometric device popularly known as the 'Swastika'. In a number of contexts such terms as 'Gammadion' and 'Fylfot-Cross' may be used appropriately. 'Gammadion' is so called because it is thought to have originated from the coming together of 4 capital Greek gammas in classical times, whereas the term 'Fylfot-Cross' [probably meaning 'four-footed'] is usually reserved for that form of the Gammadion that has feet shorter than the cross-arms and used more frequently in heraldry.

The Round Church

Many visitors will be surprised to find Fylfot-Crosses here, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Cambridge. However, the Gammadion or Fylfot-Cross is to be found in a wide range of church settings. Its use dates back to the 3rd century AD in the catacombs of Rome. These devices have been used in both decorative and symbolic contexts; it has been used on fonts, on silver, on Gospel books, on monumental brasses [depicting clergy in mass vestments], on church bells, inscribed in stone, and in stained glass windows. So the examples found here were commissioned long before the rise of any of those nationalistic *volkisch* German groups that later would give cause for negative feelings generally towards this geometric device.

This church is regarded as one of only a handful of Templar Churches in Britain. It was clearly modelled on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and for this reason its link with the Crusades is undeniable. However there is some doubt that this was a Templar Church on account of its presumed early dating.

Whether or not we can safely attribute the Round Church in Cambridge to the Templars, an example of a Gammadion on a Templar Church is to be found at St. Michael's Church, Garway, Herefordshire, probably dating from the end of the 12th century or the beginning of the 13th century. A left-facing Gammadion has been incised on one of the stones in the wall of the South

Chapel together with a Cross Crosslet - in a position corresponding to that of the piscina inside the chapel, with its congeries of symbolic elements – with identifiable links to the Eucharist.

The Fylfot-Crosses in the Baptism window

The fraternity that built the original Norman structure would almost certainly have been too poor to afford glass, and the first stained glass windows were installed during the 15th century refurbishment. In January 1644, the Suffolk-born official and professional iconoclast William Dowsing smashed most of these windows, and other "superstitious" fixtures that were felt too strongly linked to Catholicism. It seems that the windows subsequently remained without coloured glass until the mid-19th century.

The stained glass windows currently in the Round Church date to 1841, as part of a restoration project arranged by the Camden Society. The stained glass window with the baptism scene is located immediately to the right of the entrance. In the four corners of the window, to the left and right of the two larger central circles, there are these encircled Swastika shapes, which we like to term Fylfot-Crosses.

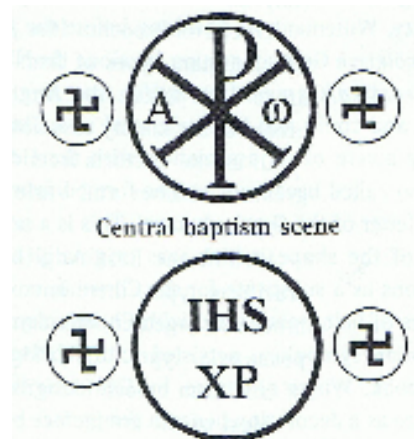


Figure 1: The Baptismal window in the Round Church

Swastikas in Cambridge Churches.

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