

Swastikas in Cambridge Chapels

Here in the centre of Cambridge we have Swastikas in a small number of churches and chapels. To be honest, these have to be searched for. However, should you stroll through the central area and look up at the front elevation of the Old Schools building next to the Senate House you might spot a Swastika meander. There's nothing sinister about this.

It is simply an elaboration of the Greek Fret motif that enables the 'Swastika' shape to appear within the design. This Greek Fret with its attendant elaborations is found almost world-wide as a decorative motif (often in synagogues, churches and mosques from early days). Other examples appear to have more distinctly symbolic significance. In this article we take a look inside the chapel of Westminster College.

There are a number of alternative terms to 'Swastika'. Unfortunately, however, there is no one generic term we can employ as an alternative to 'swastika' that is psychologically neutral and devoid of emotive overtones. In the context of Christian churches and chapels we are naturally happier to speak of the 'Fylfot-Cross' or the 'Gammadion' rather than 'Swastika'. Why do we use these other terms?

'Gammadion' has strong links to Christian antiquity and the Roman catacombs in particular, from the third century onwards. The term 'Gammadion' is thought to have originated from the coming together of 4 capital Greek gammas in classical times, and was in use in both secular and sacred contexts. The term 'Fylfot-Cross' is less well documented and is usually reserved for that form of the Gammadion which has feet shorter than the cross-arms. The symbols found in the baptism window of the Round Church are termed 'fylfot-crosses' for this reason.

Westminster College Chapel

The Gammadion in a stained glass window in Westminster College Chapel is located on the south side. This chapel was built in 1921, and the windows were designed by the Scottish artist Douglas Strachan. Carnegie Simpson writes, 'The windows in the chapel form one connected subject-scheme, the theme of which is PRAISE — in nature and in human life, on earth and in heaven... Each window represents some mood or aspect of nature, and, at the same time, introduces some scriptural theme.'



Figure 1: Triquetra, Trefoil and Gammadion

In the college chapel the Gammadion is found alongside two other symbols, the Triquetra and the Trefoil. And what is the key significance of the Gammadion in this context? It is the third letter of the Greek alphabet. The

Triquetra (Latin, "three corners"), clearly representing the Trinity, is often found in similar contexts; the central window of the apse, representing the risen Christ, depicts Jesus wearing a Triquetra.

The Trefoil is a similar device, said to be a stylised Shamrock, which St. Patrick used to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity. Found in the same context, it seems certain that these symbols have been placed together to provide a threefold symbolic expression of the Trinity.

The window in question represents "Praise in the heavenly spheres". The inscription above the scene reads, "O ye heavens, ye angels, powers, sun and moon, bless ye the Lord." The Trefoil is partly obscured by the sun, carried by an angel, but appears to contain the symbol X, [It stands for the Roman numeral for 10,000 when it has a line above it]. With the heavenly throne and the angels, it would seem to be a depiction of Revelation 5: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne..." (Rev. 5:11.)

This Christian symbolic tradition persisted until relatively recently. A church songbook, 'Wings of Praise', by Catherine Booth-Clibborn, for example, used the Gammadion as a decorative device on the preface page of her book in the early part of the 19th century. Such use was not uncommon before the 1930s, and certainly widespread in secular contexts.

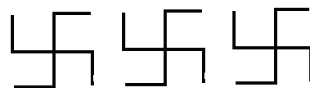


Figure 2: A motif from 'Wings of Praise'

Robert Strachan was also responsible for the design of the stained glass in the War Memorial window in Edinburgh Castle in the 1920s. There we find a reference to Revelation 19:11, signifying that the 'swastika' there represented the overcoming of evil with good within the divine purposes.

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