

Swastikas on Scottish Grave stones

To date there has been no publication of any substance or significance on this topic. Very little is known about these examples of the Swastika in Scotland because they often appear in unexpected places, off the beaten track and the relevant artefacts are sometimes only found in museums.

In this article on the Swastika in Scotland we will be looking at some of the earliest examples that have been found. The story begins with that collection of Celtic warrior tribes who came to be known collectively as the Picts. They were well known for their artwork and many examples of elaborately carved stones can still be seen around the countryside.



Figure 1: Design on a grave slab in Meigle Museum

Sometimes we come across simple Swastikas, and sometimes complex designs with the general appearance of Swastikas, as found on a grave slab now placed in the Meigle Museum, Perth. Four figures have been arranged in a Swastika-type pattern. The style is very similar to the Kells Market Cross, in the Republic of Ireland.

While some of these examples clearly come from the earlier pagan period many have a clear and unequivocal Christian connotation. So where did this symbolic device come from?



Figure 2: Likely development of the Gammadion

While most people speak of it as a *Swastika*, other terms may be used. '*Gammadion*' is particularly appropriate when the symbol originated from a classical Christian source, as found in the catacombs of Rome and elsewhere in the early centuries of the Common Era. Its name derives from the quadruplicated capital Greek 'Gamma'. [See fig.2 above].

On the other hand, '*Fylfot-Cross*' may be used when it can clearly originated within the British Isles, or in parts of Western Europe.

The Barhobble cross slab

Was there in fact a settled tradition of employing the *Gammadion* on grave-slabs, as a Christian symbol, in the period in which the Barhobble cross slab originated?

Discovered by Mrs. Sheila Cormack at Barhobble, Mochrum, Wigtownshire, during the excavations of 1984-94. (See fig.3 below) this cross slab measures approximately 2ft by 1 ft. and is in shallow relief with an expanded arm cross, the surface of which is plain except for an incised *Gammadion* or *Fylfot-Cross* on the lower arm. Dating from the 10th or 11th Century, it was closely associated with a local centre of Christian worship.

It has often been thought that the *Swastika* had sprung from pagan sources and was later 'Christianised'.

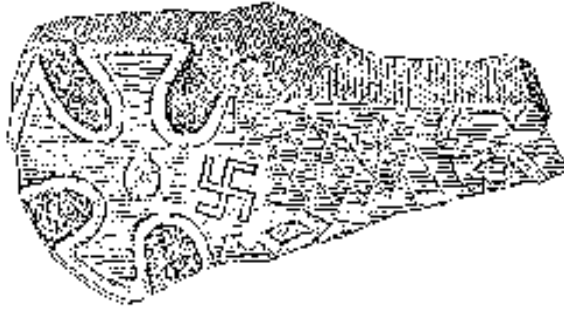


Figure 3: The cross slab from Barhobble

However, we may draw attention to those influences upon Celtic iconography and symbolic tradition from the South. Both St. Ninian (AD 360-432) and St. Patrick (AD 389-461) had warm contacts with the Continent and by association the strong symbolic traditions arising from those early years of Christianity in Rome.

It has been suggested that the Vikings in their exploratory forays into Russia and beyond introduced the *Gammadion* as a sacred symbol from Byzantium, but they were already familiar with this device, whether regarded as a symbol of Odin or of Thor. It would seem then that neither paganism nor Christianity could lay sole claim to a symbolic device which had had such a long and complex history.

Returning to Barhobble, can we answer the question as to whether there was a settled and unequivocal Christian tradition of using the *Gammadion* on grave slabs? The evidence from neighbouring districts of Scotland and Northern England appears to confirm this. Indeed there are a number of examples of parallel usage in Scotland, the Isle of Man and neighbouring Cumbria.

We discover a complex inter-play of Celtic and Viking traditions of sepulchral art. As in Anatolia so in Scotland Christian sculptors were happy to use traditional pagan images but imbue them with new meaning. Cross slabs

from Ireland have often supported the equal-armed Greek cross in close juxtaposition with the *Gammadion*. In all likelihood they were regarded by the sculptors of the day as freely interchangeable representations of the Christian Cross.

As we move across to SE Scotland we find similar examples at Cambusnethan, Wishaw and at The Greens, Carnwath,

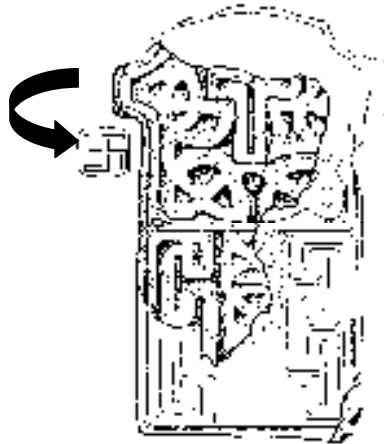


Figure 4: [A cross slab from The Greens, Carnwath, Lanarkshire](#)

Although the matter cannot be fully proven, there is ample evidence to suggest that many, if not all, of the appearances of the *Gammadion* in Scotland were regarded by their sculptors as legitimate variants of the Latin or Greek cross. In our next article we take a look at the War Memorials in Deeside and Edinburgh and the tradition they represent.

Swastikas in Scottish Grave stones

This article may be reprinted free of charge provided that the article remains unchanged, and the author's resource box is included in the reprint.

It is 45 years since Stephen Taylor, a retired vicar, was hooked on this fascinating topic.

= » <http://www.fylfotfile.co.uk>

Description

The Swastika is found on a number of tomb stones and grave slabs in Scotland. This unexpected usage clearly goes back to the time of the early Picts, but it is found in both pagan and later Christian contexts.

It has strong links not only with Scandinavian culture, notably the Vikings, but also with an extensive usage in the Christian catacombs of Rome.