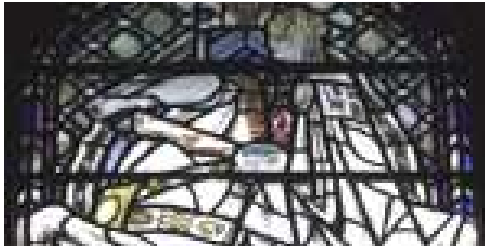


Swastikas in Scottish Stained Glass

To date there have been very few publications 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.

National War Memorial in Edinburgh



Designed by Dr. Robert Douglas Strachan [1875-1950], and built during the 1920s.

Figure 1: War Memorial stained glass window

Why do we find a symbol that looks like a Swastika in a stained glass window in the Edinburgh War Memorial? The guide book writes, 'Even as the mortar was drying in the walls, this ancient symbol of fortune was appearing in the skies over Europe, the insignia of a man who, like the rider on the white horse, would "smite the nations and rule over them with a rod of iron" - Adolf Hitler.' But does this commentary tell us what was in the heart and mind of the artist himself? This symbolic device often popularly deemed to be a 'Swastika' may also here be termed a 'Gammadion'. It is so called because of its assumed derivation from 4 capital Greek gammas. It was used in classical times in both sacred and secular contexts.

Some explanation is called for here. What we discover in fact is a symbol that had been in distinctively Christian usage for many centuries. In this stained glass window the Gammadion has been used as a fully acceptable alternative to the more traditional form of the Christian cross. In the stained glass we find the portrayal of several themes from the last book of the New Testament – the book of Revelation. Windows 6 and 7 seek to depict the overthrow of Tyranny, one section of which illustrates the Horseman, Faithful and True, from Revelation Chapter 19:11. On his cloak is the 'Swastika'. Designed by Dr. Robert Douglas Strachan [1875-1950], these unusual windows were installed during the 1920s.

A similar use of the Gammadion is found in yet another design by Robert Strachan in the stained glass windows of Westminster College chapel in Cambridge. Built in 1921, Carnegie Simpson wrote in 1926, '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.'

The Gammadion is found alongside two other symbols, the Triquetra and the Trefoil. 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 fact that the Gammadion is the third letter of the Greek alphabet further reinforces the message of triplicity here.

The Trefoil is a similar device, said to be a stylised Shamrock, which St. Patrick used in Ireland in his teaching ministry to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity. Found in the same context, it seems 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 [the Roman numeral X with a line above it stands for 10,000]. 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.)



Figure 2: *Triquetra, Trefoil and Gammadion*

Clearly in the Edinburgh War Memorial window the dominant theme is one of victory over the forces of evil, whereas in Westminster College Chapel we have a timeless offering of praise to the glory of God.

Elsewhere we find the Gammadion used to depict some aspect of faith. Each is distinct and peculiar to itself. In the United States it has been used as a symbol on the fabric of buildings, including churches, as well as in stained glass windows. In a chapel in the University of Michigan the Swastika or Gammadion was installed in a stained glass window to represent 'eternal movement'.

In the upper stained glass windows of Central Congregational Church, Providence, Rhode Island, it signifies 'the broken power of death'; and of course, as a symbol, it can have an almost endless variety of meanings, and whoever looks upon these symbols will true insight may have an understanding uniquely their own.

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Description

Why do we find a Swastika in the stained glass windows of a Scottish War Memorial in Edinburgh? Strictly it is a Gammadion, an alternative to the more traditional form of the Christian cross, and found in a variety of contexts.