

INTRODUCTION TO: *THE FYLFOT FILE*

Why has the term 'Fylfot' been adopted for this study? The question might as well be posed, "When is a Swastika *not* a Swastika?" The answer is simply that one common geometric form has aggregated to itself many different connotations and meanings depending on a host of variable factors, across time and space. So a symbol that may appear to be a Swastika at first glance might be something quite different in origin and meaning.

This simple geometric device goes back through the mists of time to man's early development. Some basic designs were discovered or created far back in prehistory and were probably connected with the elemental psychological functions of early man (fig. 1). [1]

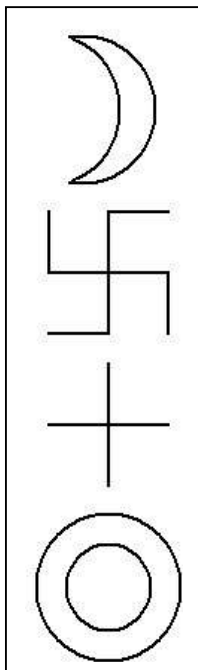


Fig. 1: Some early Signs and Symbols

Unfortunately, there is no one generic term we can use that is psychologically neutral, and entirely devoid of emotive overtones. The Swastika was used as a 'good luck' symbol in ancient India, and spread by various means to neighbouring countries in the East. Similar geometric constructions have been found in many parts of the world. Many examples of this device have local names and distinctive usage.

In the West alone the history of this group of signs and symbols has been extremely complex. There has been a distinct interplay of sacred and secular usage originating from the Greco-Roman world, together with imports from Scandinavian, Celtic and other cultural groups.

Purpose

This book seeks to introduce the reader to this distinctive geometric device, the Fylfot, in a clear and objective manner. It is not an encyclopaedia, nor does it purport to provide an exhaustive study of a symbol that is found virtually worldwide, appearing as it does in so many places over thousands of years. It deals with the origin and significance of this device and its allied symbolism as it occurs within the British Isles. Some instances of its usage are indigenous, whereas others are clearly imported from other countries and cultures over many centuries, if not millennia.

A **sign** is a mark or device having some special meaning or import attached to it, whether appearing on a banner or shield, or some other context (see fig. 2a). On the other hand, a **symbol** is something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else, not by exact resemblance but by indistinct suggestion (see fig. 2b). [2]

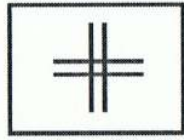


Fig. 2a:
A sign of
equality



Fig. 2b:
A symbol of
Christianity

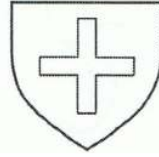


Fig.2c:
An emblem
of a country



Fig. 2d:
A logotype of a
company

Whereas a **sign** is associated with objective, empirical thinking, a **symbol** is associated with emotional and existential levels of human operation. [3] A symbol suggests or generates an aspect of life where the number of possible interpretations is infinite, and eludes all attempts of the human intellect to fix or establish one single meaning. [4]

The Swastika is a sign, symbol and much else. Its significance has varied greatly from time to time and place to place. It should be remembered that signs are only meaningful by convention. We may call them intrinsic symbols, as they have a built-in resemblance to what they signify. Furthermore, the connection between sign and referent is also a matter of convention. For example, in the West, white signifies Purity, whereas in the East it signifies Death. [5]

Accordingly, when looking at the Swastika, we have to recognise that this almost universal device or motif can have a great variety of referents, depending on the culture in which they originated, or the host culture into which they were imported.

When we come to look at crosses in general, we find a great variety of uses and types of imagery. In addition to those images that may be defined as signs or symbols, there are also emblems and logotypes (see figs. 2c and 2d).

Origins

The origin of the Swastika is shrouded in the mists of antiquity and it would be exceedingly difficult to ascertain its first usage, whether in terms of place or period. [6] It may well be that there was no single place of origin. On the one hand, there is the *Diffusionist theory*, which suggests that the Swastika was devised by primitive Aryans in the Indian sub-continent many millennia ago, and spread from there to other civilisations. On the other hand, it is quite possible that it developed independently within other cultures in that early period. This is the *Polygenetic theory*. Seals from the Indus culture of Mohenjo Daro (located in modern Pakistan) have been found with the shape in both left and right-facing forms, dating to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. Both forms were also found on hundreds of objects in the remains of Troy, dating to the 2nd or 1st millennium BC. [7]

This does not answer the question of what the symbol is, or what this shape once signified in the minds of these ancient civilisations. There have been many theories as to the Swastika's ultimate origins, one of the most enduring and likely of which

is that it began as a sun symbol: the Swastika is a stylised representation of the sun, turning across the sky and around the earth. [8] It may have developed directly from the wheel, or separately but alongside it, to represent the same concept of motion. While no one can be certain about the development from the wheel and/or sun disk to the Swastika, there was probably a sufficient confluence of ideas and associations to make this likely (fig. 3).

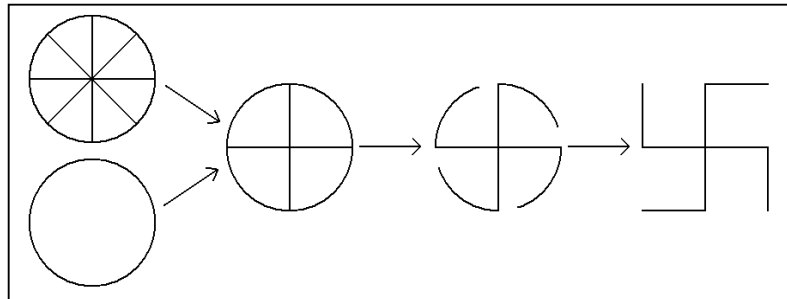


Fig.3: A pattern of possible development from the world wheel/sun disk to the angular form of the Swastika

Etymology

The Sanskrit word “Swastika” [9] first appeared in the epic Indian poem The Ramayana, [10] in which the symbol adorned the sails of a ship. [11] (The Indian Steam Navigation Company, *Scindia*, continued this tradition in modern times until they ceased trading in the 1980s.) [12] This work was set in northern India, probably towards the end of the 2nd millennium BC, but was not written down until several centuries later. The etymology of the word is often given as follows:

- su (radical): ‘good, well, excellent, prosperity’.
- asti (verb): 3rd person singular indicative of verb, ‘to be’.
- ka (suffix): denoting the substantive. [13]

Therefore the word Swastika simply means, “it is well.” The sun-symbol theory goes some way towards explaining the Sanskrit etymology and connotations of well being, which it has carried with it from earliest times. Knowledge of the seasons was – and remains – vital when raising crops and the sun was revered as the source of life in many cultures. We frequently find the Swastika occurring in connection with sun worship. At the earliest stages, the link was quite literal; the shape actually signified the sun. Later, the Swastika took on the more figurative aspects of a symbol, acquiring associations of life and good luck in both right and left-facing versions (fig.4).

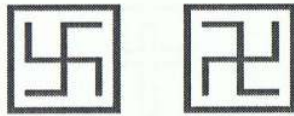


Fig. 4: The Swastika and Sauvastika

The traditional distinction between the two forms of this device is stated as follows. The Swastika has the top crampton turning to the right (“recto”), whilst the Sauvastika has the top crampton turning to the left (“verso”). [14] However, this convention is rarely followed, and both forms are generally known as the Swastika.

Contrary to popular opinion, one form is not exclusively “good” and the other “bad”, and Hitler did not choose the form he did for its evil associations; the two versions are more often used quite indiscriminately. Paradoxically, this erroneous view has been strengthened in recent years, as exceptions have occurred on those occasions in which a conscious effort has been made to alter usage in the light of the Nazi use of the symbol. The groups that have kept the Swastika frequently stress their use of the verso form, to distinguish them from the Nazis, and have sometimes even changed from recto to verso to support this.

Occurrences of the Swastika

This geometric device has many names, depending on when and where it occurs. In the East it has been called *Swastika*, *Wan* and *Manji*, and in the West *Fylfot*, *Gammadion*, *Hakenkreuz* and *Tetraskelion*. From earliest times until the 1930s the Swastika enjoyed wide and extensive use, free from prejudice and antipathy. The legacy of this widespread usage can still be seen on buildings, monuments, and artefacts dating back centuries and millennia. It is a Hindu and Buddhist symbol, and was the Hammer of Thor in Norse religion.

It was widely used among the Celts and Anglo-Saxons, but also by the Greeks and Romans. It was and is still used by Native American tribes. It has been found in Islamic art, as a Christian symbol in the catacombs of Rome in the first centuries AD, and alongside the Star of David in early Jewish synagogues. A number of examples can be given to indicate the wide variety of perceptions and responses to the very existence of this symbol in different contexts.

The East

The Swastika is still in frequent and widespread use today; the symbol appears to be central to the whole hierarchy of Indian mythology and symbolism and is happily used without prejudice in a number of Indian religions. Although it appears to be common property amongst them all, they each imbue it with their own distinctive range of associations and interpretations. The Swastika is found on representations of the Buddha, over the heart and on the soles of the feet and palms of the hands. In Hinduism it is found adorning temples and in religious art,

and the Jains regard it as the emblem of Suparsva, 7th of the 24 Tirthankaras, the saints or mythological founders of the sect. [15]

In India and indeed elsewhere there has been a link between the Swastika and serpent worship from an early period. [16] It is supposed to be marked on the hood of the cobra, and is in fact often associated with the heliolithic culture of snake-worshipping peoples such as the Nagas. The auspicious Swastika, as a symbol of good luck, is often found stamped on various objects. A series of small Swastikas is a very popular motif for border designs on textiles. It marks the opening pages of account books and is frequently used today to signify certain auspicious days in the calendar. A red Swastika is also placed at the beginning and ending of certain writings. [17] It features on commercial calendars and on market stalls and it appears on thresholds and doors. [18]



Fig.5: A market stall in Jaipur, India

All of these modern examples have their roots in a primeval sun-symbol. Behind the religious and popular significance attached to the Swastika and its inverted form the Sauvastika, there are lurking primordial, cosmic forces.

Europe

In Europe the Swastika (or perhaps, in this Western context, the term “Fylfot” is more appropriate) was also widespread as a religious device. Here too, it was well known as a sun-symbol. [19]

As an Indo-European people, the Celts had access to the iconographic traditions of their ancient forerunners. [20] A number of Celtic altars in the Pyrenees have been found, depicting the Fylfot along with other solar symbols such as the wheel and concentric circles, [21] and the link seems indisputable. The Fylfot was an illustration of solar movement. Some Celtiberian coins take this concept even

further, depicting the triskele, a three-legged variant of the Swastika, with the sun in the centre – as if running across the sky.

The Swastika is regularly depicted alongside other illustrations, symbols and divinities of the sun. Greek coins frequently depicted the symbol with the head of Apollo. On Gaulish coins the Swastika has been found alongside the Apollo Belenus, and a vase (now in the Museum of Ancient Art, Vienna) shows Apollo with the Swastika on his chest. The device, this time composed of four horse's heads, appears on a Gallo-Belgian coin – a likely allusion to the four fiery horses which led the chariot of Helios in Greek and Etruscan mythology. Perhaps one of the clearest links exists on a coin from the ancient city of Mesembria (City of the "Midday Sun") in Thrace, which bears a Swastika.

As a symbol of astronomical movement, it could be argued that the Swastika could be as validly applied to the moon as to the sun. This is, in fact, precisely the case, although the occurrences in this context are far fewer. One example comes from Knossos, Crete, where coins have been found with the lunar crescent taking the place of the more usual sun at the centre of the Swastika (fig. 6).

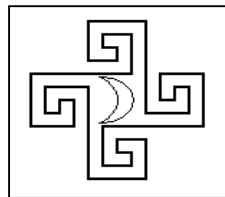


Fig.6: Device on a coin from Knossos, Crete

In other Celtic settings, the form was used to signify the division of the year into the seasons, and the four directions of the compass. In Norse religion the Fylfot was also associated with sky symbolism, though with a different emphasis. It was the emblem of the god Thor, believed to be the thunderbolt he hurled during storms and which returned to his hand.

The British Isles

All of these cultural influences were felt in the British Isles, and the Fylfot enjoyed widespread use in diverse contexts for many centuries. It was common among the Celtic groups that were dispersed across the country, and the device may even have predated their arrival. The Romans brought with them further uses of the Gammadion as a religious and decorative device, on their altars and especially their mosaics. From the 5th century, at the decline of the Roman Empire, a fresh source of influence arose with the Anglo-Saxon invasions, bringing their Germanic heritage with them. A little later, with the advent of Christianity, yet another element was thrown into the melting pot as the symbolism of the Roman Church was introduced to Britain, permeating the culture and fusing with earlier traditions. And so the Swastika persisted, its integrity remaining unquestioned in religious, secular and decorative settings, until for the first time in history the events of the 1930s led to it being viewed in an entirely different light.

Jewish Perceptions

The Gammadion appeared frequently as a decorative art motif in the classical period, often associated with the Greek Fret and meanders on mosaics in particular. It was used in Jewish synagogues, Christian churches and later in Moslem mosques. Thus the Gammadion was accepted as a normal, run-of-the-mill, decorative device in a broad spectrum of contexts. It appeared not only in synagogues but also in the Jewish catacombs of Rome, at the Villa Torlonia. [22] It was used as an ornamental motif in floor mosaics (see fig.7), on lintels and on everyday objects. In more recent times it was used in other parts of the world where Jewish communities had settled and made a home.

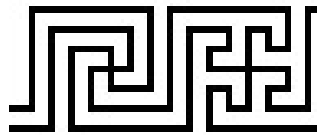


Fig. 7: A typical Swastika meander mosaic motif

Latterly a whole new significance has been given to a device that had quite legitimately, and almost universally, been regarded as a life-affirming symbol. It is not surprising that Jewish perceptions of the Swastika changed dramatically with the rise of Nazism and the ensuing holocaust. This led to an unfortunate tainting of non-symbolic usage in wholly decorative situations. For example, a writer was travelling through India and came to Jewtown, in Cochin, and looked up at the metal grilles of the upper windows outside the Allied Trades shop. He speaks of being utterly surprised and bemused at the sight of the sixteen Swastikas, the Vedic symbol of well being that had always represented sanctuary and protection to the Jews in the area. It became a problem for him, but had never been a problem for members of the Jewish community who had lived there for generations. [23]

Many similar examples of this re-appraisal can be cited. In the United States a certain Rabbi Silverman reported what happened at the Emmanuel Synagogue in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1927 the vestibule of the synagogue had been paved with a mosaic floor in which the Gammadion or Swastika motif frequently appeared. After Hitler's rise to power this was seen with new eyes, and it was decided to rip out the whole mosaic forthwith. What had been nothing more than a pleasing and decorative pattern now took on all the potency and significance of a symbol seen as baleful and abhorrent. [24]

The Fylfot-Cross is still evidenced in churches around the world. Much discussion has centred on examples found on church buildings in the United States. People ask whether they should be explained or whether they should be excised.



Fig.8: A stained glass window in Providence, USA

An interesting example of stained glass design is displayed in Central Congregational Church, Providence, Rhode Island, USA. The dome of the church has eight stained glass oculi. Four depict the Chi-Rho monogram, the other four the Fylfot-Cross. Here, the bent cross-arms represent the broken power of death. These windows were installed c. 1893, when the church building was dedicated.

The Fylfot File: the Swastika in the British Isles

The Swastika was frequently used in Britain and across the world in the early years of the 20th century as a good luck symbol, as suggested by its etymology. The vast majority of uses – in Britain and worldwide – were entirely benign.

In this study we are embarking on a most unusual journey of discovery. As we travel back through the centuries we find a range of uses and associations for this symbol, often in the least likely places. Many a reader will be surprised at the sheer range of meanings with which this device has been imbued. Each chapter of this book has been designed to focus on one strand or cluster of meanings, ranging from the mystical to the mundane.

We find the Swastika on the spines of books published in the early decades of the 20th century (Rudyard Kipling incorporated it in his personal coat of arms), on World War 1 savings stamps, and on playing cards here and abroad. American flying aces painted it on their aeroplanes, on behalf of the Allied Forces on the Western front. Coca-Cola has used it in promotional campaigns from time to time. Unfortunately, it also began to be used as the symbol for a number of German nationalistic and racist *völkisch* movements, leading to its ineradicable association with the hate and anti-Semitism of the Third Reich.

The occult significance of Madame Blavatsky's brooch, devised for the emerging Theosophical Society in the latter years of the 19th century, is a far cry from the somewhat pedestrian use of this symbol as a mark on pottery and porcelain. In the 19th and 20th centuries several geometrical forms appeared on the Trademarks of Minton pottery as it had on Royal Worcester porcelain 150 years earlier.



Fig.9: Godfrey Heathcote family mark

The Fylfot-Cross appeared on a number of church bells (fig.9) mainly in the 16th century, linked it is thought with Germanic and Nordic mythology. The Gammadion appeared on ecclesiastical robes from early times. Examples of its appearance on monumental brasses, both sacred and secular, were most prolific in the 14th century in England. Use of the Gammadion in Christian contexts can be traced back to the era of Charlemagne and further back still to the Roman catacombs. Another distinctively Christian use is to be found in the beautifully crafted Gospel Books, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells.

In these chapters we cover examples from Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man, as well as England and Wales. It would seem that the greatest range of uses and connotations is to be found in the Republic of Ireland. People may well be surprised to find a Tibetan Monastery flourishing in Scotland, complete with its distinctive symbolism. However, there is a great deal more to discover north of the border.



Fig.10: The Shrine Room in the Tibetan Monastery of Kagyu Samye Ling

Much has been written about the Celtic World and the Battersea Bronze Shield, but little specifically on the sky and sun symbolism associated with the Swastika in many parts of Celtic Europe. In the appropriate chapter we deal with examples from the British Isles and neighbouring France in particular.

The Roman invasion of Britain added yet more material from the Mediterranean world for the student of early symbolism to delve into. There are remains of pagan altars near Hadrian's Wall in the north, and there is a plethora of mosaics to be

found in the south. The Swastika Stones of Ilkley Moor may well have a link with the Roman legions that were stationed in northern Italy.

The hope is that you, the reader, will discover the extraordinary breadth of meaning associated with the Swastika and its allied symbolism, not only in the British Isles, but further afield across many centuries and many cultures. You will be better able to see this symbol, this geometric device, objectively and more in context. You will know that the vast majority of occurrences worldwide have been benign, and will always remain so no matter what misfortune may have befallen the symbol in Western Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Although the situation calls for sensitivity, the Third Reich ended nearly 65 years ago, and will soon be out of living memory. Symbols of peace and prosperity have enduring power.

END NOTES

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