

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. UNITED STATES
NATIONAL MUSEUM.

THE SWASTIKA,

THE EARLIEST KNOWN SYMBOL, AND ITS
MIGRATIONS; WITH OBSERVATIONS ON THE
MIGRATION OF CERTAIN INDUSTRIES IN PREHISTORIC
TIMES.

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MIGRATIONS; WITH OBSERVATIONS ON
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By Thomas Wilson, *Curator, Department of Prehistoric
Anthropology, U. S. National Museum.*

PREFACE.

An English gentleman, versed in prehistoric archæology, visited me in the summer of 1894, and during our conversation asked if we had the Swastika in America. I answered, "Yes," and showed him two or three specimens of it. He demanded if we had any literature on the subject. I cited him De Mortillet, De Morgan, and Zmigrodzki, and he said, "No, I mean English or American." I began a search which proved almost futile, as even the word Swastika did not appear in such works as Worcester's or Webster's dictionaries, the Encyclopædic Dictionary, the Encyclopædia Britannica, Johnson's Universal Cyclopædia, the People's Cyclopædia, nor Smith's Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities, his Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology, or his Classical Dictionary. I also searched, with the same results, Mollett's Dictionary of Art and Archæology, Fairholt's Dictionary of Terms in Art, "L'Art Gothique," by Gonza, Perrot and Chipiez's extensive histories of Art in Egypt, in Chaldea and Assyria, and in Phenicia; also "The Cross, Ancient and Modern," by W. W. Blake,

“The History of the Cross,” by John Ashton; and a reprint of a Dutch work by Wildener. In the American Encyclopædia the description is erroneous, while all the Century Dictionary says is, “Same as fylfot,” and “Compare *Crux Ansata* and *Gammadion*.” I thereupon concluded that this would be a good subject for presentation to the Smithsonian Institution for “diffusion of knowledge among men.”

The principal object of this paper has been to gather and put in a compact form such information as is obtainable concerning the Swastika, leaving to others the task of adjustment of these facts and their

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arrangement into an harmonious theory. The only conclusion sought to be deduced from the facts stated is as to the possible migration in prehistoric times of the Swastika and similar objects.

No conclusion is attempted as to the time or place of origin, or the primitive meaning of the Swastika, because these are considered to be lost in antiquity. The straight line, the circle, the cross, the triangle, are simple forms, easily made, and might have been invented and re-invented in every age of primitive man and in every quarter of the globe, each time being an independent invention, meaning much or little, meaning different things among different peoples or at different times among the same people; or they may have had no settled or definite meaning. But the Swastika was probably the first to be made with a definite intention and a continuous or consecutive meaning, the knowledge of which passed from person to person, from tribe to tribe, from people to people, and from nation to nation, until, with possibly changed meanings, it has finally circled the globe.

There are many disputable questions broached in this paper. The author is aware of the differences of opinion thereon among learned men, and he has not attempted to dispose of these

questions in the few sentences employed in their announcement. He has been conservative and has sought to avoid dogmatic decisions of controverted questions. The antiquity of man, the locality of his origin, the time of his dispersion and the course of his migration, the origin of bronze and the course of its migration, all of which may be more or less involved in a discussion of the Swastika, are questions not to be settled by the dogmatic assertions of any individual.

Much of the information in this paper is original, and relates to prehistoric more than to modern times, and extends to nearly all the countries of the globe. It is evident that the author must depend on other discoverers; therefore, all books, travels, writers, and students have been laid under contribution without scruple. Due acknowledgment is hereby made for all quotations of text or figures wherever they occur.

Quotations have been freely made, instead of sifting the evidence and giving the substance. The justification is that there has never been any sufficient marshaling of the evidence on the subject, and that the former deductions have been inconclusive; therefore, quotations of authors are given in their own words, to the end that the philosophers who propose to deal with the origin, meaning, and cause of migration of the Swastika will have all the evidence before them.

Assumptions may appear as to antiquity, origin, and migration of the Swastika, but it is explained that many times these only reflect the opinion of the writers who are quoted, or are put forth as working hypotheses.

The indulgence of the reader is asked, and it is hoped that he will endeavor to harmonize conflicting statements upon these disputed questions rather than antagonize them.

I.—Definitions, Description, and Origin.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF THE CROSS.

The simple cross made with two sticks or marks belongs to prehistoric times. Its first appearance among men is lost in antiquity. One may theorize as to its origin, but there is no historical identification of it either in epoch or by country or people. The sign is itself so simple that it might have originated among any people, however primitive, and in any age, however remote. The meaning given to the earliest cross is equally unknown. Everything concerning its beginning is in the realm of speculation. But a differentiation grew up in early times among nations by which certain forms of the cross have been known under certain names and with specific significations. Some of these, such as the Maltese cross, are historic and can be well identified.

The principal forms of the cross, known as symbols or ornaments, can be reduced to a few classes, though when combined with heraldry its use extends to 385 varieties.[1]

Fig. 1.
LATIN CROSS
(*Crux
immissa*).

Fig. 2.
GREEK CROSS.

Fig. 3.
ST. ANDREW'S
CROSS
(*Crux decussata*).

It is not the purpose of this paper to give a history of the cross, but the principal forms are shown by way of introduction to a study of the Swastika.

The Latin cross, *Crux immissa*, (fig. 1) is found on coins, medals, and ornaments anterior to the Christian era. It was on this cross that Christ is said to have been crucified, and thus it became accepted as the Christian cross.

The Greek cross (fig. 2) with arms of equal length crossing at right angles, is found on Assyrian and Persian monuments and tablets, Greek coins and statues.

The St. Andrew's cross, *Crux decussata*, (fig. 3) is the same as the Greek cross, but turned to stand on two legs.

Fig. 4.
EGYPTIAN CROSS.
(*Crux ansata*).
The Key of Life.

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The *Crux ansata* (fig. 4) according to Egyptian mythology, was Ankh, the emblem of Ka, the spiritual double of man. It was also said to indicate a union of Osiris and Isis, and was regarded as a symbol of the generative principle of nature.

The Tau cross (fig. 5), so called from its resemblance to the Greek letter of that name, is of uncertain, though ancient, origin. In Scandinavian mythology it passed under the name of "Thor's hammer," being therein confounded with the Swastika. It was also called St. Anthony's cross for the Egyptian hermit of that name, and was always colored blue. Clarkson says this mark was received by the Mithracists on their foreheads at the time of their initiation. C. W. King, in his work entitled "Early Christian Numismatics" (p. 214), expresses the opinion that the Tau cross was placed on the foreheads of men who cry after abominations.

(Ezekiel ix, 4.) It is spoken of as a phallic emblem.

Another variety of the cross appeared about the second century, composed of a union of the St. Andrew's cross and the letter P (fig. 6), being the first two letters of the Greek word ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (Christus). This, with another variety containing all the foregoing letters, passed as the monogram of Christ (fig. 6).

As an instrument of execution, the cross, besides being the intersection of two beams with four projecting arms, was frequently of compound forms as , on which the convicted person was fastened by the feet and hung head downward. Another form , whereon he was fastened by one foot and one hand at each upper corner; still another form , whereon his body was suspended on the central upright with his arms outstretched upon the cross beams.

Fig. 5.
TAU CROSS, THOR'S
HAMMER,
OR ST. ANTHONY'S CROSS.

Fig. 6.
MONOGRAM OF
CHRIST.
Labarum of
Constantine.

Fig. 7.
MALTESE CROSS

Fig. 7 represents the sign of the military order of the Knights of Malta. It is of medieval origin.

Fig. 8 (a and b) represents two styles of Celtic crosses. These belong chiefly to Ireland and Scotland, are usually of stone, and frequently set up at marked places on the road side.

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Higgins, in his "Anacalypsis," a rare and costly work, almost an encyclopedia of knowledge,[2] says, concerning the origin of the cross, that the official name of the governor of Tibet, Lama, comes from the ancient Tibetan word for the cross. The original spelling was L-a-m-h. This is cited with approval in Davenport's

“Aphrodisiacs” (p. 13).

a

b

Fig. 8. CELTIC CROSSES.

Fig. 9.
NORMAL
SWASTIKA.

Fig. 10.
SUAVASTIKA.

Fig. 11.
SWASTIKA.
Meander.

Of the many forms of the cross, the Swastika is the most ancient. Despite the theories and speculations of students, its origin is unknown. It began before history, and is properly classed as prehistoric. Its description is as follows: The bars of the normal Swastika ([frontispiece](#) and [fig. 9](#)) are straight, of equal thickness throughout, and cross each other at right angles, making four arms of equal size, length, and style. Their peculiarity is that all the ends are bent at right angles and in the same direction, right or left. Prof. Max Müller makes the symbol different according as the arms are bent to the right or to the left. That bent to the right he denominates the true Swastika, that bent to the left he calls Suavastika ([fig. 10](#)), but he gives no authority for the statement, and the author has been unable to find, except in Burnouf, any justification for a difference of names. Professor Goodyear gives the title of “Meander” to that form of Swastika which bends two or more times ([fig. 11](#)).

The Swastika is sometimes represented with dots or points in the corners of the intersections ([fig. 12a](#)), and occasionally the same when without bent ends ([fig. 12b](#)), to which Zmigrodzki gives the name of *Croix Swasticale*. Some Swastikas have three dots placed

equidistant around each of the four ends (fig. 12c).

a

b

c

Fig. 12.

CROIX SWASTICALE (ZMIGRODZKI).

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There are several varieties possibly related to the Swastika which have been found in almost every part of the globe, and though the relation may appear slight, and at first sight difficult to trace, yet it will appear more or less intimate as the examination is pursued through its ramifications. As this paper is an investigation into and report upon facts rather than conclusions to be drawn from them, it is deemed wise to give those forms bearing even possible relations to the Swastika. Certain of them have been accepted by the author as related to the Swastika, while others have been rejected; but this rejection has been confined to cases where the known facts seemed to justify another origin for the symbol. Speculation has been avoided.

Fig. 13a.

OGEE AND SPIRAL SWASTIKAS.

Tetraskelion (four-armed).

Fig. 13c.

SPIRAL AND VOLUTE.

(Five or many armed.)

NAMES AND DEFINITIONS OF THE SWASTIKA.

The Swastika has been called by different names in different countries, though nearly all countries have in later years accepted the ancient Sanskrit name of Swastika; and this name is recommended as the most definite and certain, being now the most general and, indeed, almost universal. It was formerly spelled s-v-a-s-t-i-c-a and s-u-a-s-t-i-k-a, but the later spelling, both English and French, is s-w-a-s-t-i-k-a. The definition and etymology of the word is thus given in Littré's French Dictionary:

Svastika, or *Swastika*, a mystic figure used by several (East) Indian sects. It was equally well known to the Brahmins as to the Buddhists. Most of the rock inscriptions in the Buddhist caverns in the west of India are preceded or followed by the holy (*sacramentelle*) sign of the Swastika. (Eug. Burnouf, "Le Lotus de la bonne loi." Paris, 1852, p. 625.) It was seen on the vases and pottery of Rhodes (Cyprus) and Etruria. (F. Delaunay, Jour. Off., Nov. 18, 1873, p. 7024, 3d Col.)

Etymology: A Sanskrit word signifying happiness, pleasure, good luck. It is composed of *Su* (equivalent of Greek εὖ), "good," and *asti*, "being," "good being," with the suffix *ka* (Greek κα, Latin *co*).

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In the "Revue d'Ethnographie" (iv, 1885, p. 329), Mr. Dumoutier gives the following analysis of the Sanskrit *swastika*:

Su, radical, signifying *good, well, excellent*, or *suvidas*, prosperity.

Asti, third person, singular, indicative present of the verb *as*, to be, which is *sum* in Latin.

Ka, suffix forming the substantive.

Professor Whitney in the Century Dictionary says, Swastika— [Sanskrit, lit., "of good fortune." Svasti (*Su*, well, + *asti*, being),

welfare.] Same as fylfot. Compare *Crux ansata* and *gammadion*.

In “Ilios” (p. 347), Max Müller says:

Ethnologically, *svastika* is derived from *svasti*, and *svasti* from *su*, “well,” and *as*, “to be.” *Svasti* occurs frequently in the Veda, both as a noun in a sense of happiness, and as an adverb in the sense of “well” or “hail!” It corresponds to the Greek εὖεστό. The derivation *Svasti-ka* is of later date, and it always means an auspicious sign, such as are found most frequently among Buddhists and Jainas.

M. Eugene Burnouf[3] defines the mark Swastika as follows:

A monogrammatic sign of four branches, of which the ends are curved at right angles, the name signifying, literally, the sign of benediction or good augury.

The foregoing explanations relate only to the present accepted name “Swastika.” The *sign* Swastika must have existed long before the *name* was given to it. It must have been in existence long before the Buddhist religion or the Sanskrit language.

In Great Britain the common name given to the Swastika, from Anglo-Saxon times by those who apparently had no knowledge whence it came, or that it came from any other than their own country, was Fylfot, said to have been derived from the Anglo-Saxon *fower fot*, meaning four-footed, or many-footed.[4]

George Waring, in his work entitled “Ceramic Art in Remote Ages” (p. 10), says:

The word [Fylfot] is Scandinavian and is compounded of Old Norse *fiël*, equivalent to the Anglo-Saxon *fela*, German *viel*, many, and *fotr*, foot, the many-footed figure. * * * It is desirable to have some settled name by which to describe it; we will take the simplest and most descriptive, the “Fylfot.”

He thus transgresses one of the oldest and soundest rules of scientific nomenclature, and ignores the fact that the name Swastika has been employed for this sign in the Sanskrit language (the etymology of the word naturally gave it the name Svastika, *sv*—good or well, *asti*—to be or being, or it is) and that two thousand and more years of use in Asia and Europe had sanctioned and sanctified that as its name. The use of Fylfot is confined to comparatively few persons in Great Britain

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and, possibly, Scandinavia. Outside of these countries it is scarcely known, used, or understood.

The Swastika was occasionally called in the French language, in earlier times, *Croix gammée* or *Gammadion*, from its resemblance to a combination of four of the Greek letters of that name, and it is so named by Count Goblet d'Alviella in his late work, "La Migration des Symboles." It was also called *Croix cramponnée*, *Croix pattée*, *Croix à crochet*. But the consensus even of French etymologists favors the name Swastika.

Some foreign authors have called it Thor's hammer, or Thor's hammer-mark, but the correctness of this has been disputed.[5] Waring, in his elaborate work, "Ceramic Art in Remote Ages,"[6] says:

The used to be vulgarly called in Scandinavia the hammer of Thor, and Thor's hammer-mark, or the hammer-mark, but this name properly belongs to the mark .

Ludwig Müller gives it as his opinion that the Swastika has no connection with the Thor hammer. The best Scandinavian authors report the "Thor hammer" to be the same as the Greek tau (fig. 5), the same form as the Roman and English capital T. The Scandinavian name is Miölner or Mjolner, the crusher or mallet.

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