

## THE SWASTIKA: A PROPHETIC SYMBOL.

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**S**AINTE PETER, the Martyr, writing on the earth with his rapidly ebbing life-blood the great Catholic word of faith, "Credo," is but a link in the perfect chain of devoted Christians who have sacrificed their lives willingly for the God-given religion they have received.

In the earliest days of persecution when only the gloomy Catacombs could be counted on for asylum, the hunted Christians made use of secret symbols to safeguard the disclosure of themselves to friends and brothers in Christ. The ichthus I-X-Θ-Y-Σ, fish, is a well-known illustration of this; and so also perhaps the swastika, the most ancient prophetic symbol of our Blessed Lord's coming, was also found of value in concealing the sign of the cross from those ready to betray or destroy any Christian whose profession became known.

Men need a symbol. Nations have their flags; great associations have their different devices. All these are *symbols* that represent to men what is dear to them. Symbols, then, seem to be necessary; and how powerful they are is known to every one. They are rich with sacred memories; they touch the heart and evoke the liveliest enthusiasm; around them men have fought and have shed their blood, even as eighteen thousand of the flower of knighthood perished in defence of the relic of the most Holy Cross. Christ's cross is the glorious symbol of the world's redemption; all other symbols are as nothing if opposed to the religion which He in mercy founded!

The pagan type of Christ, the Hindu "Agni," or God of Fire, whose symbol is the oldest form of the cross known, was in general use in all the ancient pagan world, from India to

Italy. It is found among other forms of the cross in the Christian Catacombs, and must be traced to its original source in order to learn its true meaning. According to the testimony of the best Oriental scholars, the "Vedas" are amongst the oldest religious books extant, dating to the fourteenth century B. C. The Hindus allege that Agni, or fire god, or god of fire, had an existence in an elementary state *before* the formation of the sun! "He was in the beginning with God." It is from the Vedas that we learn the oldest form of the cross to be the symbol of Agni. We claim our *Agnus Dei* to be the second person of the blessed Trinity. When the ancient Hindu worshiper would produce Agni, or fire, at his worship or sacrifice, he took two pieces of wood and arranged them in the form of a cross, and by whirling them rapidly together with a bow obtained the desired fire by friction. This is the arrangement: one piece being set in the other at the center. This instrument, which every Brahmin possesses, is called the Arani, and should be made of the sacred Sami tree. As a symbol it is called Swastika, and is like many other symbols marked on the forehead of young Buddhists as well as Brahmins. "And God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son" who died even upon the cross, the Tree of Shame. By the wood of this sacred tree we are saved. As the Christian is signed by the Sign of the Cross, so the signification of the sign of the swastika is the same as that of the Christian Chrisma marked on the forehead of the baptized, i. e., salvation. This symbol is considered by such great scholars as Burnouf the oldest form of the cross known, the bearer of fire. The modification of this Vedic symbol became the instrument of torture and death to other nations; and was that on which the Saviour suffered.

The swastika was thus the symbol of Agni, as the Life and Light of the world to the ancient Brahmins, as the symbol of the cross in the Catacombs to the Christians. Surely not of any material light of fire, but rather of the True Light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world. That True Light symbolized in swastika and cross, in Ichthus and other forms,—Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten not made. *Agnus Dei*, Who taketh away the sins of the world.

Diogenes, the grave digger of the Catacombs, immortalized in the ancient frescoes, that shrine of the martyrs, is depicted as holding in his hands a lighted lamp with which he finds his way in the dark labyrinths, and lays to rest the remains of faithful Christians. The swastika symbols of Agni are placed upon him. Does this not

signify a type of Christ whose light illumines even the recesses of the grave?

The simplicity and beauty of these ancient Swastikas painted on the walls of the Catacombs as early as the first or second century have deep significance in the history of Christian martyrdom. It is therefore not surprising that we find on the mitre of Blessed Thomas à Becket embroidered the symbol of swastika. There is also one to be found on a memorial brass in Lewknor Church, Oxfordshire, England. The inscription in the Catacombs of the mural painting is as follows: "*Diogenes Fossor in Pace Depositus*" etc.,—pick, lamp and other instrument; swastika on shoulder and one on each flap of skirt. Another swastika has been found upon the slab of a grave in a Catacomb.

John the Baptist proclaimed the Agnus Dei, "that taketh away the sins of the world;" and the Holy Catholic Church has ever since been preaching salvation in the Cross of Him who is the Light of the World, and whose symbol is the grandest triumph ever known. Significance of the swastika is to be accounted for as a great fact or truth divinely communicated in the earliest times as prophetic of the coming of the Agnus Dei, the Light of the World and the Saviour of Mankind.

There are several different kinds of swastika: the Arabian, the Scandinavian, the Phœnician, the Hindu or Indian. In the Hindu form there is a miniature double-armed cross, joining together four double circles within each of which is a small rebated cross resembling the Navajo Swastika. When we try to locate the birthplace of the swastika, we at once come upon the claim put forth by some paleologists that it saw the light in India. In substantiation of their view they bring out the fact that the swastika was first discovered on the hills of Hissor in British India. Late findings, however, disprove their conclusion and make their contention untenable. In Athens, Bologna, Cyprus, Königsberg, in the museums of ancient Vienna and the Vatican, there are to be seen prehistoric vases of all sizes and shapes, profusely ornamented with symbolic signs of the swastika. It is also found amidst the paintings of the Catacombs of Rome; on the pulpit of St. Ambrose in Milan; on the ancient sacred books of the Persians; on early Christian monuments of Scotland and Ireland and in the museums of Toulouse and Rouen.

The form known as the fylfot is frequently introduced on the vestments of the Greek Church and is found also somewhat more sparingly in the West, both in ecclesiastical and heraldic work. It was most commonly employed amongst the Western peoples in the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; and many examples of it may be seen on monuments, brasses etc. Amongst the various mediæval textile fabrics we find one called *Stauracin*, a material taking the name from the Greek word for a cross, and so called from its being figured over with the form of the cross, the design being sometimes of the simplest character, and in other examples of very elaborate enrichment of detail. This was also known as *gammadion*. In the Greek alphabet the letter Gamma consists of two lines at right angles to each other, like an English letter L; and many of the mystical writers of earlier days have seen in this form a symbol of Christ as the corner stone. On this idea as a basis the mediæval designers combined these L-like forms into many more or less decorative arrangements. Four of them placed with their four angles towards each other create the form of the Greek cross; at other times they were so arranged as to form the letter H; or placed with their angles outwards a square is produced. By far the most ancient and most common form fashioned out of the Gamma, is that known as the fylfot. This may be found even in the Catacombs, and from its resemblance to two rough S's or Z's crossing each other,—S and Z in old work being often interchangeable,—it has been conjectured that it was probably the cross represented as *signum*, the sign, i. e., of faith in the Crucifix. In the use of the fylfot the early Christians merely adopted and diverted to their own purpose a symbol centuries older than the Christian era, a symbol of early Aryan origin.<sup>1</sup>

We find the swastika on the drums Laplanders use in the performance of magic rites; the Chinese have it on their flags, their musical instruments and even their guns. The Japanese use it as an ornament on their pottery. We see it among the relics of the ancient races that have succeeded each other on the American continent. The Swastika was found on a shell dug out of a Tennessee mound; also it was taken out of a mound near Chillicothe, Ohio; on a stone ax at Pemberton, New Jersey and on a vase from Arkansas, which is now in the National Museum in Washington.

Morehead is said to have seen the Swastika among the prehistoric scratches found in Yucatan and Paraguay; and it has been found among the tribes of Peru and Brazil. It is especially made use of by the Navajos, and Pueblo Indians. It is also found among the Texas Indians; as well as the Hopis.

The Marquis of Madaiillac states that: "In circumstances too

<sup>1</sup> See *Archæologia*, Vol. XCVIII. Also Dr. Schliemann, Max Müller, Vergason, Ludwig Müller etc.

numerous to be recalled, men, no matter at what point of time or in what part of the world they live, acted alike, had the same ideas, made the same inventions, adopted similar practices, without knowing each other, without even as much as being conscious of each other's existence. Are these remarkable coincidences the result of a mere hazard? Is, for instance, the wonderful diffusion of the very complicated swastika, through time and space, nothing else but a fortuitous occurrence? Is it not rather a fact, fraught with great purport for solving the problems of the origin?"

The following letter from a distinguished Jesuit scholar, Rev. A. J. Maas, is very interesting and instructive:

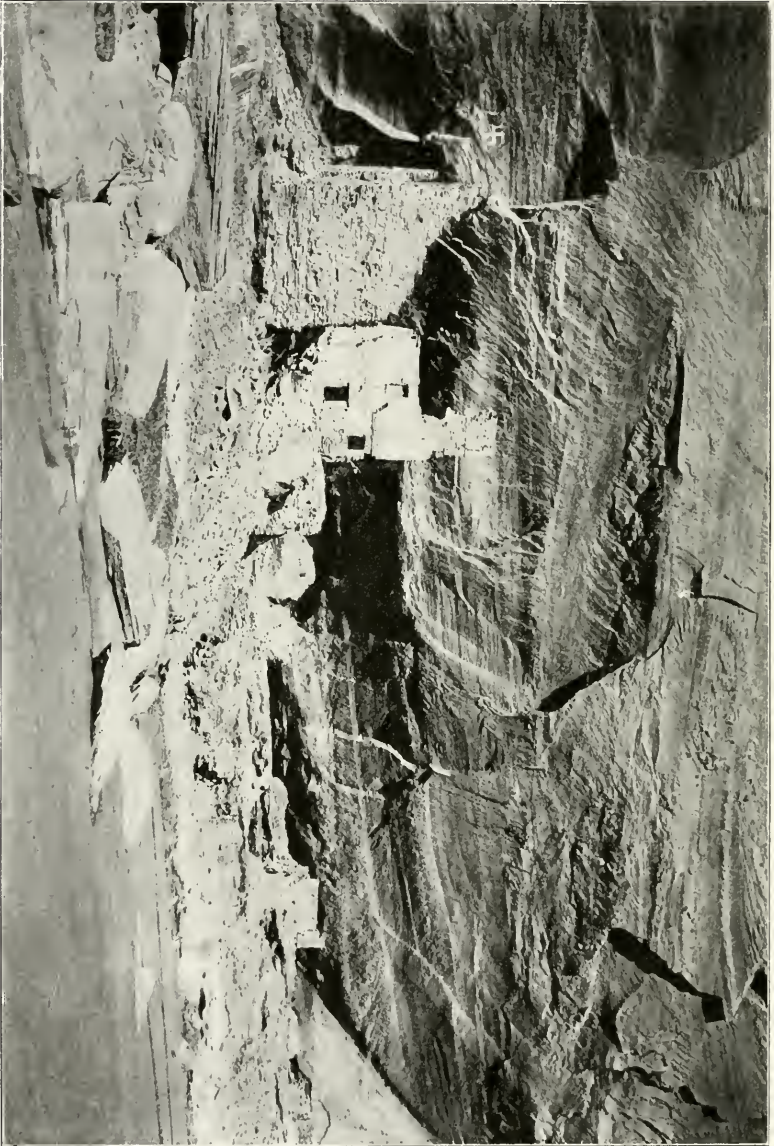
"The figure you sent me has several names: fylfot, gammadion, Thor's hammer, and swastika-cross are perhaps best known. Fylfot is said to be the old form of fyl-fot, meaning the pattern or device for filling the foot of a painted window. Gammadion is said to be derived from the fact that the symbol was considered to consist of four Greek capital "gammas" conjoined; as such it was in high favor with early secret societies but also with Byzantine ecclesiastical decorators. In the mythology of the North it was held to symbolize "Mjölhnir" the formidable cross-formed hammer of Thor, and is accordingly called Thor's hammer. The swastika cross was well known among the Buddhists of India, among whom it appears to have symbolized the Western Paradise or the tree of knowledge. These are the usual meanings of the sign."

Also the following from Rev. Anselm Weber, O. F. M., from St. Michael's Mission, Arizona:

"I received your inquiry concerning the swastika cross. I am afraid I must disappoint you. The Navajos attach no meaning whatever to that symbol. They use it very extensively, it is true, but they were possibly led to do so by the Indian traders. They may have obtained it from the Mexicans or the Pueblo Indians. It is probable, also, that they copied it from a pictograph found in Cañon del Muerto, a branch cañon of Cañon de Chelly in the Navajo Reservation. I send you a photograph on which you can plainly see that swastika cross, painted there centuries ago by the prehistoric cliff-dwellers. You are welcome to the photograph."

Mr. G. P. Milne, a master in St. Paul's School, describes this swastika as about a foot square, and says that it is either painted or slightly cut into the rock about sixty feet above the ground. Mr. Milne has traveled extensively in Arizona but says that he has seen only one other such swastika on the cañon walls there.





PREHISTORIC RUINS IN CAÑON DEL MUERTO,  
Photograph by Schwemberger, St. Michaels, Arizona.

The following item from the Smithsonian Institute is interesting in this connection:

"The swastika is of prehistoric origin. Nothing certain is known about its original significance. It preceded Christianity and even Buddhism, in connection with which latter it is still in use.

"It is true that the Swastika, together with the Egyptian symbol of life (crux Ansata ☩) was used by the early Christians as a symbol of their religion, and in the Catacombs, the swastika is sometimes combined with the Christogram (☩). It was explained by early Christian authors as a combination of two Z's which were said to mean ζῴσσεῖς, "thou shalt live." It might also be explained to mean Christ, who calls himself the "Life" ζωή. But these explanations are an afterthought, just as Greek antiquarians explained the two Z's in the swastika as the monogram of Zeus. It is certain that the swastika was not invented by Christians, but was adopted by them, and was gradually superseded by the Christogram and the definite acceptance of the cross as the emblem of Christianity.

(Signed) I. M. Cassanowicz, Asst. Curator,  
Dept. of Historic Archeology.

It is the well-nigh universal and varied use of the swastika that demonstrates the great part played by this mysterious sign in the life of ancient as well as contemporary human races. It is probable that the meaning of the swastika has undergone many changes, according to the epoch and traditions of each race.

The Catholic must recognize in this mysterious swastika a teaching of far greater import than the conclusions arrived at by ethnologists. Every swastika conceals the sign of the cross, and as the books of the Bible are prophetic of the coming of our Lord so this symbol is prophetic of the coming of the Founder of Christianity.

It is one of the great religious symbols of the world. It has been revered all over Europe and Asia. It is one of the oldest things in history, and there is scarcely a land in whose ruined temples it is not found.

By those who look upon the region to the northwest of India as the primal home of the blonde races of the world that ancient land is also looked upon as the birthplace of the swastika. With the successive emigrations of the Aryans from Northern India all over Europe the swastika spread. The Arabs and Jews knew it not. As the "hammer of Thor" it is fabled to have crushed the head of "the serpent." It is the cross which every swastika contains, which destroys the evil of the serpent to-day, and faith in this holy sign

restores the dead to life everlasting. It is another proof that the inhabitants of the new world came from the old and brought the symbol of the salvation of the Christian faith with them. In the cross of this Christian faith is the salvation for all peoples—and its influence goes steadily on. Believing in His Cross and promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of all things,” we cling to the Christian faith.