

Swastika and Sauwastika

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THE IDEA THAT THE FORM OF THE SWASTIKA USED AS THE SYMBOL OF NAZI GERMANY IS EVIL, IS A MODERN FICTION THAT IS NOT KNOWN BEFORE ABOUT 1932.

By that year, the Swastika, with arms bent to point to the right, had become well known throughout the world as the symbol of the Nazi Party that had been founded in 1919, and Adolf Hitler became its leader in 1921. In 1933, it came to power, and Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany.

It should be noted that the international symbol of the Theosophical Society also includes a Swastika with its arms pointing to the right. Before about 1930, the Swastika was regarded, almost without exception throughout the world, as propitious no matter which its arms pointed. The commonest form of the Swastika is that with the arms pointing to the right, like the Greek letter Gamma Γ \rightarrow . This form is known in India as the Swastika [Figure 14a from *The Migration of Symbols*, by Goblet d'Alviella, 1892]. The form with arms pointing to the left \leftarrow is called the SauSwastika [Figure 14b from *The Migration of Symbols*].

It is informative to compare references to the Swastika in successive editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Here follow the entries

on the Swastika from a pre-1920 edition, an edition published in the 1930s, and the 1976 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Encyclopaedia Britannica: Pre-1920

[There is no separate entry for the Swastika in early editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The following is extracted from the article on the Cross.]

The use of the cross as a religious symbol in pre-Christian times, and among non-Christian peoples, may probably be regarded as almost universal, and in very many cases it was connected with some form of nature worship. Two of the forms of the pre-Christian cross which are perhaps most frequently met with are the Tau cross, so named from its resemblance to the Greek capital letter Tau; and the Swastika or Fylfot, also called Gammadion, owing to its form being that of four Greek capital letters Gamma Γ , placed together.

The acceptance of the word 'Fylfot' as the English equivalent for this peculiar form of the

cross rests only, according to the New English Dictionary, on a MS. of about 1500 in the Lansdowne collection, which gives details of a memorial stained-glass window, "...the fylfot in the nedermost pane under ther I knele..."; in the sketch given with the

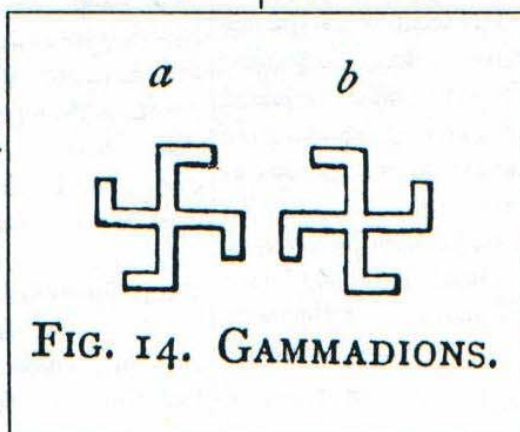


FIG. 14. GAMMADIONS.

instructions a cross occupies the space indicated. It is a question, therefore, whether "fylfot" is a name for any device suitable to "fill the foot" of any design, or the name peculiar to this particular form of cross. The word is not, as was formerly accepted, a corruption of the Old English *feowerfete*, four-footed.

The Swastika has a very wide range of distribution, and is found on all kinds of objects. It was used as a religious emblem in India and China at least ten centuries before the Christian era, and is met with on Buddhist coins and inscriptions from various parts of India.

A fine sepulchral urn found at Shropham in Norfolk, and now in the British Museum, has three bands of cruciform ornaments round it. The two uppermost of these are plain circles, each of which contains a plain cross; the lower band is formed of a series of squares, in each of which is a Swastika.

In the Vatican Museum, there is an Etruscan fibula which is marked with the Swastika. It is a device of such common occurrence on objects of pre-Christian origin, that it is hardly necessary to specify individual instances.

Encyclopaedia Britannica in the 1930s

SWASTIKA: A decorative and symbolic ornament consisting of a cross with equal arms, to the end of each of which is attached a line running at right angles to it, all these extensions occurring on the same relative side, so that all four extensions have the same rotary direction in relation to the centre.

The Swastika is one of the most ancient and widespread of all ornamental forms, appearing in both hemispheres. It is generally interpreted as a sun symbol. It occurs in Aegean and archaic Greek pottery. In some examples it appears as two identical S-curves, intersecting in the middle and set at right angles. occasionally three arms are found, and the heraldic symbol of three running legs set radially, may be a development. Adolf Hitler made the Swastika Germany's national symbol.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1976 edition

SWASTIKA, (Sanskrit *Swastika*, "conducive to well-being," derived from *su*, "well"; *asti*, "it is"); an equilateral cross with arms bent at right angles, all in the same rotary direction, usually clockwise. The Swastika as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune is widely distributed throughout the ancient and modern world. It was a favourite symbol on ancient Mesopotamian coinage; it appeared in early Christian and Byzantine art (where it became known as the gammadion cross because its arms resemble the Greek letter gamma), and it occurred in south and Central America (among the Mayas) and in North America (principally among the Navajos).

In India it continues to be the most widely used auspicious symbol of Hindus, Jainas, and Buddhists. Among the Jainas the Swastika is the emblem of their seventh Tirthankara (saint) and is also said to remind the worshipper by its four arms of the four possible places of rebirth - in the animal or plant world, in hell, on earth, or in the spirit world. The Hindus and also jainas) use the Swastika to mark the opening pages of their account books, thresholds, doors, and offerings.

A clear distinction is made between the right-hand Swastika, which moves in a clockwise direction, and the left-hand Swastika (more correctly called the *SauSwastika*), which moves in a counterclockwise direction. The right-hand Swastika is considered a solar symbol and imitates in the rotation of its arms the course taken daily by the Sun, which in the Northern Hemisphere appears to pass from east, then south, to west (see *pradaksina*). The left-hand Swastika more often stands for night, the terrifying goddess Kali, and magical practices. During the Nazi regime in Germany, a black Swastika became the characteristic emblem of Hitler's party.

[End of Encyclopaedia Britannica entries]

Encyclopaedia Britannica got it wrong

As Goblet d'Aviella in *The Migration of Symbols*, makes clear. "In India, it bears the name of Swastika when the arms are bent

towards the right (fig. 14a on the first page of this article), and SauSwastika when they are turned in the other direction. (fig. 14b)

The scholarly 51 page article on the Swastika in *"The Migration of Symbols"*, by the internationally renowned archaeologist, Goblet d'Alviella, is far too long to reproduce here. Originally published in 1892, it is copiously illustrated and gives detailed references to the sources of its information.

The final sentence of the paragraph quoted earlier concerning its right and left forms is: "Among the Hindus, as amongst the Buddhists, its representation has always passed for a propitious sign" and he refers to a paper by Prof. Max Muller.

A little farther on he informs us that the Swastika is the "first of the sixty-five marks of the Buddha, while the fourth of the marks is the SauSwastika. A drawing of the Feet of the Buddha [see figure on this page] includes eleven Swastikas, all pointing to the right, i.e. spinning anticlockwise, like the Swastika on the Nazi flag.

Right-handed and Left-handed

In a footnote added to his book, d'Alviella notes that Sir George Birdwood writing in *Report on the Old Records of the India Office, 1891*], says:

"The right-handed Swastika is, with the Hindus, the emblem of the god Ganesh; it represents the male principle; it typifies the sun in its daily course from east to west; lastly, it symbolises light, life and glory. The left-handed Swastika or SauSwastika, on the contrary, is the emblem of the Goddess Kali; it represents the female principle, typifies the course of the Sun in the subterranean world from

west to east, and symbolises darkness, death and destruction.

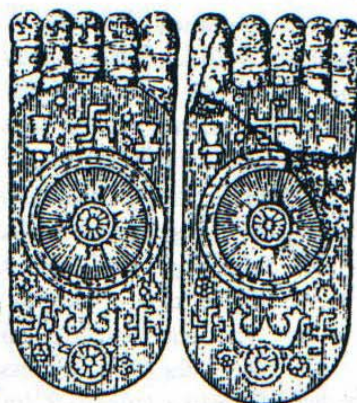
Handbook of Designs & Devices [1932]

In 1932, C. P. Hornung, of Columbia University, published his Handbook, which summarises the standard thinking of his era on the various symbols in common use throughout the world. His bibliography includes all the major works on design published until then. The following extract can be taken to signify the general attitude towards the Swastika before it became almost indelibly associated with Hitler and the Nazi party.

"This mystic symbol, common to both eastern and western peoples, seems to appear and reappear consistently, yet always is its significance one of happy omen. revered in India some 3000 years before Christ, as a charm against evil, its influence has lasted to this day. In China it has meant perfection, infinity, many blessings. In Japan, where it is called manji, it represents the number ten thousand, which symbolises that which is infinite, perfect, and excellent. It is employed as a sign of felicity. It has been found in Persia, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, England, France and Scandinavia.

In America it is found in prehistoric burial grounds in such distantly separated lands as Mexico, Yucatan, Paraguay, and the United States. From the earliest times this famous sign undoubtedly indicated the rotation of the heavens, expressed the power of the sun gods, sky gods, and rain gods, and symbolised all harmonious movement springing from a central source.

It is not unreasonable to imagine it as an early ideograph of the sun's disk as a circle with axial motion achieved by the



THE FEET OF THE BUDDHA

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direction of the arms. Thus it indicated the daily movement of the sun, and perhaps also the annual change of the seasons. The many interpretations assigned to the Swastika are indeed bewildering. The scholar may trace its history in order to comprehend the power of ancient symbolism. But for the sake of brevity we may conclude by saying that in modern times it is best known as a symbol of motion, good fortune, health, and long life.

Occult Geometry [1932]

In the same year that Hornung published his scholarly work, an American occultist, A.S. Raleigh, published a book of lessons about occult symbols. Its full title is :

"OCCULT GEOMETRY

Interprets And Explains Symbols, Nature's Universal Language, Shows How God Geometrizes To Produce The Universe And Man And That In Understanding Himself, Man Understands The Big Universe."

Raleigh makes a distinction between the two forms of the Swastika but, without any explanation, reverses the meanings of the Swastika and SauSwastika.

He says: "There are two forms of the Swastika; one represents the wheel of fire revolving to the right, thus the arms bent backward to the left; the other represents the Swastika revolving to the left, and thus the arms bent back to the right. The right hand Swastika, that is the one with the arms bent to the left, is the true Swastika, representing the constructive principle of nature. The left hand Swastika, the one with the arms bent to the right is the destructive principle, the left hand path, energy going to the left and, therefore, destroying, disintegrating. The one is the principle of creation, the other of destruction. The one represents the centripetal, the other the centrifugal principle. The right hand Swastika, therefore, is the symbol of Kosmic creation, while the left hand Swastika is the symbol of Kosmic destruction."

Raleigh got it wrong

Which is all very well, except that Raleigh got it wrong. In India, which Raleigh elsewhere claims as the source of his information, the right turning Swastika means the one whose arms *point to the right*; the left turning SauSwastika, which is less common, has its arms *pointing to the left*.

At this time, over sixty years later, we cannot tell how or why Raleigh made this mistake. It might have been that already the use of the right hand, good fortune Swastika on the Nazi flag was already colouring people's attitudes, so that Raleigh automatically assumed that the Nazi Swastika was evil and destructive.

To me, the important thing is that the bulk of writing on the various forms of the Swastika made no distinction between the two forms, regarding them both as symbols of good fortune.

The only report of any distinction being made between the meanings of the two forms prior to Raleigh's book appears to be Birdwood's in 1891, and this is quoted almost word for word in the later editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Encyclopaedia Britannica makes a curious remark. After talking of the two kinds of Swastika, it says, "During the Nazi regime in Germany, a black Swastika became the characteristic emblem of Hitler's party." This is literally true. The Nazi flag was red on which was a white circle in which was a black right-turning Swastika. However, I suspect that the gratuitous choice of the word 'black' indicates that the writer was trying to link the Nazi Swastika with the Kali SauSwastika.

Despite the fact that Raleigh got the Swastika and SauSwastika round the wrong way, his essay on the symbol provides much material for meditative thought and I have made it into a separate article, along with some comments on the Swastika by the theosophist Madam Blavatsky. ■