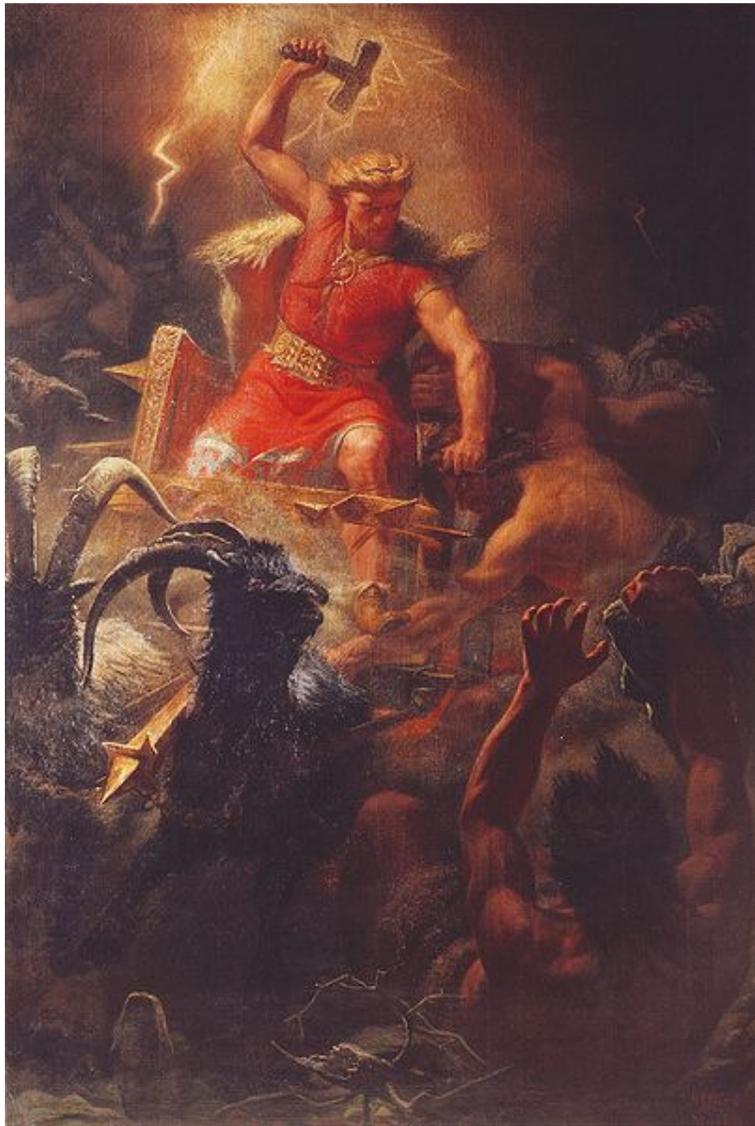


The Meaning of the Swastika Cross and Other Emblems of the Same Nature

by Henri Martin
(Chief of the Archives Division
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Robert K. Stevenson: Translator and Editor



Thor, Norse god of thunder and lightning

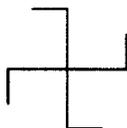
“The Meaning of the Swastika Cross and Other Emblems of the Same Nature”

by Girard de Rialle

ANTHROPOLOGY SOCIETY OF PARIS

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Messieurs, among the decorative motifs found on ceramic and metal objects dating back to the Bronze Age, I wish to discuss today one which has drawn a great deal of attention from archeologists. I am referring, of course, to the cross whose branches are bent back in the shape of a hook:



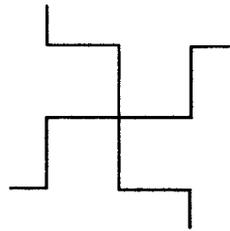
This cross is considered native to India, where one comes across it and where it takes the name of the *swastika*. Also, from this fact can be drawn the conclusion that the various objects which bear this sign and which one finds in prehistoric sites in Europe are of Indian origin or, more correctly speaking, are the products of an art and industry intimately related to those of ancient India.

I shall not concern myself here with enumerating the numerous finds from sifted through debris of this hook-shaped cross. It is sufficient to point out that some have been discovered in most parts of Europe and also in Asia Minor. Additionally, the hypothesis that considers this sign a characteristic mark of the Aryan conquest does not appear to me to be denuded of likelihood.

But, given that this cross was so widespread and occupies, as it does, the center of an ensemble of ornamentation, must it not have some special meaning? Indeed, it does. In India, messieurs, the *swastika* possesses a sacred quality; it is a mystical sign. Unfortunately, the word itself does not reveal to us with precision through its constituent elements the original meaning that it had. It is by extension that it has acquired the meaning of the crossroads—the intersections of lines or ways—of the cross. In fact, it is composed of the word *swasti* and the adjectival suffix *ka*. Now, *swasti* is itself a form of blessing, salutation, and approbation, composed in its turn of the adverb *su*—“rightly” or “well”—and of the third person present indicative of the verb *asti*—“to be.” Therefore we can see that *swasti* is but a simple expression, something like our “c'est bien,” that over time and with continued use has become a sacred formula, being somewhat analogous to the *amen* of Christians. Moreover, the employment of this formula dates back to very ancient times inasmuch as we already find it being used in its hieratic sense in the Rig-Veda (verse 3 of hymn 14 of the 7th mandala). Etymologically, *swastika* therefore only signifies “that which belongs to the form of blessing,” in other words, “a good luck charm.”

We can see that there already existed a sufficient motive for this specially shaped cross to figure so often in common objects, weapons, and jewelry. In abundantly producing and representing the *swastika*, the various peoples who spread into Asia and Europe at first were obedient to a superstitious sentiment, then later on to a custom. Since the diffusion of Christianity a similar process has occurred with regard to the emblem of redemption. Likewise Sivaism has propagated at all times the *lingam* as an object of piety and decorative motif; but, unlike with the *swastika* we do not possess for it the original and inner meaning.

A short time ago I read a recent German work on prehistoric archeology in Eastern Europe (*Materialien zur Urgeschichte des Menschen in æstlichen Europa*, by Messieurs Kohn and Mehlis, 2 volumes, 1879). Now, in the account by Monsieur Jasmin of the diggings of the tumulus of Legnica in Poland I came across the representation of a small, yellow clay vase with handle, on the lowest part of which the following design manifests itself: a *swastika* centered between four groups of three chevrons inserted one inside the other. The *swastika* presents also a second hook. This shape is even, it seems, more accentuated in other cases and each branch of the cross presents the aspect of a repeatedly broken line:



Now, this sign is called in Poland, after the local tradition, “the thunderbolts of Perun.”

This indication, in my opinion, casts great light on the original meaning of the *swastika*. It is the mythological representation of lightning, that is to say of the thunderbolts of the thunder god, and the four broken lines thus simulate the zigzags of lightning.

The thunder god has been the great national divinity of the bellicose and conquering peoples of Aryan origin. In nearly all branches of this family, it is he who has preeminence or who is the most ardently invoked. With the Slavs, *Perun* (with the Lithuanians, *Perkunas*) is the chief god—the king of gods—and by his name and also by his attributes and duties he corresponds to the old Vedic god *Parjanya*, the divine bull who bellows during storms and sprays, in the shape of rain, his semen over the earth in order to fecundate it. The Aryans of the Vedic era transferred their belief in this cult to another thunder god—*Indra*.

The Greeks and the Romans had *Zeus* and *Jupiter* respectively, each being god of the heavens and lightning, victorious enemy of the giants and malevolent genies hidden in the dark clouds who he tears apart with great blows of his thunder. For the Germans and the Scandinavians, *Donar* or *Thor*, although subordinate to *Woden* or *Odin*, were not any less powerful than the latter. That the representation of the weapon of the god of lightning, that the hook-shaped cross—the *swastika*—has thus become the preferred sign and mark of the Aryo-Europeans, altogether their “good luck charm,” to my eyes makes total sense, and I propose that we accept this as the most likely meaning until we are more amply informed.

This symbolization of god by his weapon is, moreover, nothing new. *Thor*, who I just mentioned, is armed, according to tradition, with a magic ax-hammer which he flings upon his adversaries and which returns itself to his hands. Now, messieurs, it turns out that ax-hammers were used by men throughout northern Europe during both the Stone Age and Bronze Age; therefore the mythological tradition of *Thor* should come as no surprise.

In Greece and in Asia Minor, the Ionians, Carians, and Lydians had as their national weapon the double-headed ax. Now, this ax has been the emblem of *Zeus* who at Miletus and Halicarnassus took the surname *Labrandeus* (Plutarch said that "ax" is called *labrus* in Lydia), and who was represented in the temples and on coins as holding this ax in one hand and a lance in the other. Additionally, he was *Zeus Chrysaorias*, with gold sword in hand, that is to say, he was the god of the heavens and lightning.

DISCUSSION

Monsieur GABRIEL DE MORTILLET. What I see in the *swastika* is a representation of the instrument that serves to make fire; my opinion nevertheless also lends support to your well-reasoned conclusion, Monsieur de Rialle.