

## ON THE ORIGIN OF THE CROSS SYMBOL.

BY WILLIAM H. HOLMES.

---

The symbol of the cross has especial interest for the Christian world, because of the use of a cross of wood in the crucifixion of Christ; and many forms of the symbol, with varying associations and interpretations, came into use among the various Christian nations as the centuries passed. But the cross as a religious symbol in one form or another came into existence long before the beginning of the Christian era—so far beyond the beginnings of history, indeed, that there is not the least possibility of obtaining definite knowledge of its earliest origin, although significant suggestions may be obtained from a study of the employment of the device among the primitive peoples of to-day.

The cross was in very general use in America at the time of the discovery, but even among the more advanced aboriginal peoples, as those of Mexico and Peru, its history is so enwrapped in the web of obscurity woven by the changing centuries that we cannot hope to penetrate to the very beginnings. But among the more primitive tribes we approach the simpler stages of religious development and of sacred forms and get glimpses that have a suggestive bearing on actual beginnings. It is observed, however, that the cross, even with such peoples, has numerous forms, divers meanings, and, without question, a diversity of origins. As it appears in primitive art, the cross may be: (1) Simply a sign or mark conveying or recording an idea, as in pictography; (2) an ornament pure and simple, arising in the technique of the arts, or

invented as an embellishment; (3) a sacred symbol, arising through the association with it of religious concepts.

(1) The figure of the cross appears frequently in the pictographic art of the aborigines, where it represents animal and vegetal forms, as the bird, the dragon-fly, the tree, etc., or the cosmic bodies, as the sun and the stars; and in this use it usually conveys, or has associated with it, ideas of a simple non-symbolic kind. But the creature represented may be a mythical personage, and the cosmic

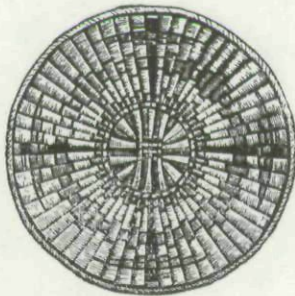


Figure 1. Hopi basket tray showing ornamental use of bird figures forming a cross; each bird figure also takes the form of the cross. The birds in this case may really represent the rain makers of the four quarters.

body may be a deity, and the cross figures may stand for these and thus be symbolic. In this use, however, the device would be local or special rather than general in its application, and thus would hardly develop into a religious symbol of wide or universal distribution.

(2) Distinct from crosses derived from the pictographic use of life and cosmic originals is a large class of crosses and cross-like figures which have an adventitious origin, being the result of the mechanical requirements of embellishment. In nearly all branches of art in which surface ornament is an important factor, the spaces available for decorative designs are rectangles, circles, and ovals, or are borders or zones which are divided into squares or parallelograms for ready treatment. When simple figures—symbolic or non-symbolic—are filled into these spaces, they are introduced, not singly, since the result would be



unsatisfactory from the point of view of the decorator, nor in pairs, as that would be little better, but in fours, thus filling the spaces evenly and symmetrically. This quadruple arrangement in a multitude of cases produces a cross (Figure 1) which is not always to be distinguished from the true cross symbol. The separate elements in such pseudo-crosses may be figures of men, insects, mountains, clouds, lodges, or what not, and hence separately they may have symbolic association; but the cross produced



Figure 2. Swastika cross formed adventitiously in decorating a basket (Pima) with the current scroll-fret.

by their assemblage in an ornamental form is an accident, and not significant, having a purely decorative function, although meanings suggested to the native mind by such forms may at any stage become associated with them. Again, in very many cases, designs are invented by the primitive decorator who fills the available spaces, to beautify articles manufactured, and arrangement in fours is the most natural and effective that can be devised (Figure 2). These figures, primarily non-significant, may also have meanings read into them by the woman as she works the stitches of her basketry or headwork, and these ideas may be wholly distinct from those associated with the cross through any other source. Although any of these crosses may thus become religious symbols, it is not probable that a symbol of general distribution and uniform significance could originate in this way.

(3) It is observed that primitive man generally adjusts himself to his environment, real or imaginary, by keeping in mind the cardinal points, as he understands them. When the Indian considers the world about him, he thinks of it as divided into the four quarters, with himself at the centre or intersection; and when he communicates with the mysterious beings and powers with which his imagination peoples it—the rulers of the winds and the rains—he turns his face to the four directions, in prescribed order, and

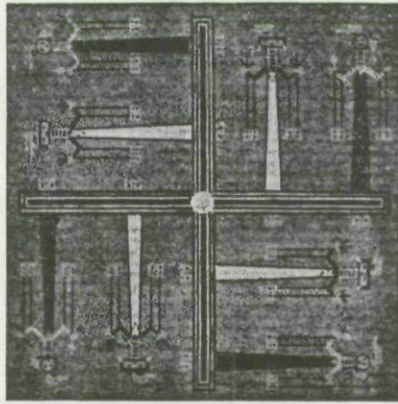


Figure 3. Cross in colored sands. Navaho curing ceremony.

makes to them his appeals and his offerings. It is of vital importance to the primitive man, that he shall not lose his bearings among the influences and beings that surround him, and determine his welfare and destiny. Thus, not only his worship and his ceremonials, but his architecture, his games, his healing rites, his burials, etc., are arranged to conform with the cardinal points, and the various symbolic representations associated with them are arranged in four parts, the separating lines taking the form of the cross. This was and is true of many peoples and is well illustrated in the wonderful ceremonials and paintings of the tribes of the arid region (Figure 3). Although an essential part of symbolism, these crosses exist only for the purposes of the occasion and are effaced when the ceremony



is ended. Nevertheless, they find a prominent place in art and pass into permanent form as decorations of ceremonial objects, retaining their significance and performing their imaginary functions indefinitely. The temple, the altar, the basket, the vase, the shield, the gaming device, fulfill their respective sacred offices through the symbols after which they are modeled, or with which they are decorated, only when properly related to the deities of the four quarters to which the symbols pertain. In the ancient Pueblo



Figure 4. Ancient Pueblo bowl with cross of the four quarters.

bowl shown in Figure 4 the cross is a prominent feature of the design, but, as in the sand painting, it appears to be nothing more than the dividing lines for the four scroll water symbols of the interspaces, which doubtless represent such of the gods of the world-quarters as were supposed to be concerned with the function of the vessel, the filling of which depended on the god-given supply of water.

The Maya, the most highly cultured of the North American tribes, called the cross "the tree of the rains," and the elaborate tree-like crosses in the ancient manuscripts and on sculptured tablets (Figure 5) probably represent merely a higher symbolic development and a more artistic treatment of the cross of the Pueblo bowl where the four arms serve simply to orient the gods of the waters.

The ceremonies of the less cultured tribes also embody the quadruple arrangement of the mythical environments. "The rainmaker (of the Lenape), when he would invoke the gods of the air to send the fertilizing showers down upon

the crops, would begin his exercises by first drawing upon the ground the figure of the cross." By this means he properly related himself to the deities to which his appeal was made. (Brinton, *The Museum*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 19.)

In this primitive use the cross had no necessary significance of its own; it served merely to relate properly the gods of the world-quarter regions to the ceremony with which they were connected. It is not in its origin, therefore, a sacred symbol, but an indicator of relations. The sacred

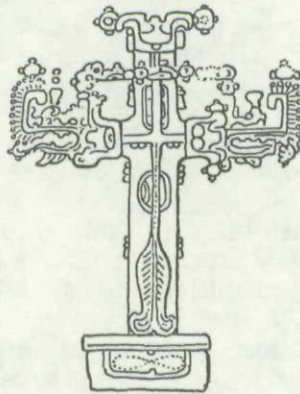


Figure 5. Mayan cross or "tree of the waters," from a Palenque altar tablet.

attributes belong to the deities supposed to occupy the four directions or regions; but the transfer of this sacred significance from the imaginary personages of the four quarters to the figure which locates them in the universe would seem to be a natural and an easy process, and there can be little doubt that, with primitive peoples generally, this was a common occurrence.

This explanation of the cross symbol among primitive peoples leads to the suggestion that the device among the more cultured peoples of the world may also have had its origin in the orientation of the mysterious powers of the universe, as these were understood in very ancient times; and many facts gleaned from the study of widely distributed nations tend to confirm this view.



In China, according to Seymour,<sup>1</sup> "the *lao-tsen*, as the cross is called, is acknowledged to be one of the most ancient devices, known long anterior to the Sakya-Buddha era. . . . It symbolizes heaven."

Among the Japanese, Tartars, Persians, and others the cross is associated with, and is the symbol of royalty and of the supreme deities.<sup>2</sup>

The cross patté is supposed by many to have typified the elysium of the four great gods of the Assyrians—Ra and the first Triad.<sup>3</sup>

"When the officiating priests, on the eve of the Passover in Egypt, sprinkled the blood of a victim in sacrifice upon the consecrated bread and hallowed utensils, it was in the form of a cross. . . . Even, when occasion required the moving of the victims or the waving of the branches of palm, the motion was made to indicate the figure of the cross."<sup>4</sup>

"In India the cross bears the same meaning as in Egypt. When with four equal arms, it signifies the four elements, which the Hindoos consider as eternal and the component parts of all things."<sup>5</sup>

"The Thor's-hammer cross of the Scandinavians was also the symbol of godly power used in worship, and referred no doubt to the dwelling places of the gods, which were everywhere in the universe." . . . "Even to this day this hammer (the fylfot cross) is used in the magical rites still practised in Iceland by the witches, who claim thereby to rule the universe."<sup>6</sup>

Although the division of the mythical environment into four regions is not clearly indicated in all of these citations, it is highly probable that there was originally such a division, and it is clear that the conception was common to many peoples. A corresponding geographical placement is indicated among numerous other peoples by the occurrence of the four rivers in their conception of paradise.

<sup>1</sup> Seymour, William Wood. *The Cross in Tradition, History, and Art*, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 15.

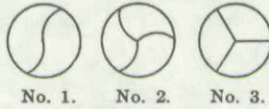
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

Other symbols of wide distribution, corresponding in character and application to the cross, are the Yin and Yang of the Chinese<sup>1</sup> and Japanese, (No. 1); the Ta Ki of the Chinese, (No. 2); and the Triskiles of various peoples, (No. 3); and these may find their proper interpretation in the primitive separation of the universe and its rulers into two or three regions instead of four. These devices also



assumed many differing forms and received ever-changing interpretations with the passing centuries.

It has been shown that the cross as a religious symbol is the common property of many widely distributed peoples. The similarity in its significance and application everywhere has given rise to the theory that it must have spread from some original centre to the farthest ends of the world through intercourse and migration of peoples. But the belief now prevails among men of science that this theory is untenable, and we must look to some source common to primitive peoples generally. Such common source is to be sought neither in the picturing of natural forms, nor in the designs of the decorator, as in such use the cross has usually no deep significance or, at most, no widespread application, but in the use of symbols embodying religious concepts common to many peoples, and deeply impressed upon the primitive mind in general. Such a source is recognized in the separation of the primitive cosmos into four regions, and the transference of the sacred character of the beings occupying these to the device, which in course of common usage came to represent them.

<sup>1</sup> Brinton, D. G. *The Ta Ki, the Swastika, and the Cross in America*, 1889.



Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.