Irish Church Quarterly

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Source: *The Irish Church Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 17 (Jan., 1912), pp. 44-59

Published by: [Irish Church Quarterly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30067436>

Accessed: 17/06/2014 13:48

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THE USE OF SUN AND FIRE SYMBOLS IN PRE-HISTORIC TIMES.

ALTHOUGH the cross was a symbol, it was not in pre-historic times the symbol of an object. It was the representation or sign of an accepted belief, and not the sign of an object around which worship could centre. But human nature always craved for more than that, it craved for something on which faith could lean, and which would represent the great invisible one; and the swastica was

REASK CROSS,
NEAR VENTRY, CO. KERRY.

made to lend itself to satisfying that purpose.¹ A revolving swastica could be made to represent either the circular disk of the sun or a sun cross. Numbers of these sun crosses are to be found in Ireland, such as the cross at

¹ A recent writer tells us that "among the symbols accompanying the gammadian there is none so frequent as the solar disk. The two signs are in a manner counterparts not only among the Greeks, the Romans, and the Celts, but also with the Hindus, the Japanese, and the Chinese."—The Count Goblet D'Alviella, *The Migration of Symbols*, 1894, p. 56. This shows us how completely the swastica or gammadian had degenerated into a mere sun symbol (*op. cit.*, p. 67).

Inismurray, the cross at Dowth, the cross at St. Fechin's of Fore, and the cross at Reask, near Ventry. This Reask cross we re-produce, as it is such an excellent

ASSYRIAN WINGED CROSS.

illustration of the sun cross of a very early type. We give also illustrations of the Assyrian cross and the cross on the standing stone at Killaghter and the sun-marked stone at New Grange; also the Chimcana symbol. The

FROM KILLAGHTER CHURCH-YARD,
Co. DONEGAL.

Assyrian winged cross usually accompanied the presence of Assur, their chief god, and it may be considered as marking out the figure represented as that of their

god. That this cross is not a wheel is easily seen from the fact that it had only four arms radiating from the one centre, and no one ever tried to construct a wheel with four spokes. That the trend of human nature is to accept the hosts of heaven as the symbol required is plainly to be gathered from the Old Testament Scripture, and this seems to be the degradation of worship that some of the oldest written documents in the world tell us had first of all to be guarded against; for the Bible, although not the oldest written record, is one of the oldest. The first "Thou shalt not" in the Bible is found in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, nor the likeness of any form that is in heaven above. . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them nor serve them;" and in Deuteronomy xvii. 3 the wicked who have served other gods and worshipped them are described as those who have worshipped either the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven. We have it there plainly stated that one of the earliest forms of idolatry was the worship of the sun, which I would say became a form of idolatry when, as invariably happened, the things symbolized were forgotten, and the symbol itself was allowed to take its place. Consequently the necessity for the command against symbolic worship arose. In Deuteronomy iv. 19 we have the warning, "Lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun and the moon and the stars, even all the host of heaven, thou be drawn away and worship them and serve them." Certainly if any definite object was allowed to be taken as a symbol of God, none could be more suitable than the sun. It is God's agency for supplying the world with light and heat, and much of the very comfort of existence depends on the sun. Where there is no sunlight there is practically no life, or life of only the most feeble and unhealthy kind. We have an excellent example of how readily the untaught man turns to the heavenly host as the representative of God in the case of a deaf mute who had never been instructed, and yet who was often seen engaged in prayer. After he was instructed he was asked

to whom did he pray, and he replied, to the heavenly host (the stars). The worship of the sun symbol had undoubtedly a great hold on the world, and it remains in existence still among the descendants of the ancient Persians. It was the only cult that was able to make a stand against Christianity when it became the religion of the Roman Empire. The cultured gentlemen of Greece and Rome were not the stupid idolaters that ill-instructed people seem to think. A well-known writer regards their religion as of such a high and cultured type that if Christianity had developed any mortal weakness, the religion of cultivated Rome would have been the religion of the western world. It was practically a return to patriarchal religion. "The human spirit instinctively turned with reverence to the Father of all spirits, and in its helplessness sought utterance for its yearnings in symbolism of word or act."² The cultured men of those early days sought an image of the infinite God in the sun. Other worshippers sought it under other names, and thus attempted to realize faint shadows of the Infinite. One of their philosophers, Longinianus, a correspondent of St. Augustine, while he believed that the ancient sacred rites had a real value, also believed that the one "great ineffable Creator" was to be approached only by the way of piety and truth in word and deed. Professor Samuel Dill tells us that in the fourth century "the ancient God of light had become in public opinion the Supreme Power who is all-seeing and all-pervading, who is Lord and giver of life, the cleanser from sin, the protector of the miserable, the conqueror of evil demons and death, who assures to his faithful worshippers the hope of immortality."³ Even in its ritual there was a strong resemblance to the Christian faith. "Its expiation for sins by bloody baptism; its ascetic preparation for the Holy mysteries; its oblation of the consecrated bread; its symbolic teaching of the resurrection—all so strongly resemble Christianity that it was not surprising that Christians should consider it a

² S. Dill, *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire*, London, 1910, p. 9.

³ Dill, p. 81.

cunning device of the evil one.”⁴ May we not see in it the remains of the original teaching from which all knowledge of true religion comes? “The mystery of the death of a divine being, his descent to the under world, and his joyful restoration, which was the central idea of many of the cults which most influenced the religious feeling of antiquity,”⁵ may well seem to us the remains of the original deposit of truth which man received from his Maker. Even barbarous religious symbols have often sloughed off their baser elements with the development of a purer morality. Be this as it may, Christianity had no mean foe to contend with before it could plant the cross on the ruins of pre-existing faiths, backed up as these old beliefs were by memories of the past and by patriotism and love of country, which always make the votaries of any faith formidable. We know little of the faith of the druids, but there is every reason to think that it was largely leavened with sun and fire worship, for the two forms of worship seem so mingled together that practically they were the same thing, and the remnants of that worship are abundantly to be found among us from that time to the present. In St. Patrick’s Hymn, as translated by the Rev. Thomas Olden, he not only binds to himself Christian doctrines, but he also claims the very elements worshipped by his opponents. He says:—

“I bind myself to the virtue of heaven;
 In light of the sun;
 In brightness of snow;
 In splendour of fire;
 In speed of lightning;
 In swiftness of wind;
 In depth of sea;
 In stability of earth.”

These separate symbols might be worshipped as separate gods, but far more likely as symbols of the attributes of the one God.

Astley tells us, “The great temples which they erected at Stonehenge, Avebury, and Carnac in Brittany, which

⁴ Dill, p. 84.

⁵ Dill, p. 85.

are the primeval models of the Egyptian Karnac, of the Mycenaean Baitlyon, of the Parthenon, of Baalbec, and of the mediaeval cathedral in all its glory, were for the worship of the mighty sun, the Lord and life-giver to all things."⁶ The Rev. Dr. Olden, in his *History of the Church of Ireland*, tell us, "The worship of the sun is referred to by Saint Patrick as practised in his time,"⁷ and one of the customs connected with it and still retained in Ireland was the lighting of bonfires (once common throughout Europe). The first day of May was known in the Irish language as the Day of Bealltine (either the fire of Baal or the fire of the Lord); these fires are now transferred to the 23rd of June (the eve of St. John the Baptist's day), and this seems to indicate a connexion with the summer solstice. On the Continent the practice survived the Roman occupation and the Teutonic conquest, which survival attests the extraordinary vitality of Celtic tradition. In the Bavarian highlands they are known as *Sonnen-wend-fewer* (solstice fires), and a capitular of Charlemagne condemns them as a remnant of paganism.

We have before noticed the Assyrian sun symbol, and Bunsen notes that the sun god of Heliopolis, in Syria (Baalbec), came from Assyria, and quotes from Macrobius (*Saturn.* i. 23). The Assyrians celebrate with great ceremony in the city of Heliopolis the worship of the sun under the name of Jove. Lanigan, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, tells us, "That fire was in pagan times an object of worship, or at least great veneration in Ireland, and particularly the sun, which was the greatest of all fires, is an indubitable fact."⁸ The so-called sun worshippers and the so-called fire worshippers were one and the same, and in both cases they themselves said they did not worship either the sun or the fire, but God in the fire. Lanigan says that

"Zoroaster, the reformer of fire worship among the Persians, directed that wherever altars on which their sacred fire was kept

⁶ H. J. D. Astley, *Historic Archaeology and the Old Testament*. 1908, p. 151.

⁷ P. 6.

⁸ J. Lanigan, *Ecclesiastical History*, Dublin, 1822, iv. 407.

were erected on the tops of hills and high places in the open air, temples should be built over them to prevent the sacred fire being extinguished and the holy offices of their religion being interrupted and disturbed," for all "parts of their public worship were performed before these public sacred fires, as all their private devotions were before private fires in their own houses, not that they worshipped the fire, for this they always disowned, but God in the fire,"

or, as we would put it, God as symbolized by fire. He adds in a foot-note :

"There seem to have been in Ireland, as there were in Persia, two sects of fire-worshippers—one that lighted their fires in the open air, and performed their religious ceremonies on hills and high places; and a second who kept the sacred fire in the sacred temples."⁹

This last statement of our writer I think we can only receive in a very modified degree. After the introduction of Christianity, the sacred fire of St. Brigid was probably called into existence to turn a pre-existing fire worship to Christian uses. Nor was the instance of Kildare the only instance of perpetual sacred fires kept burning, for there was one at Inismurray and another at Cloyne. There is also an instance where a newly-converted chief erected an altar at one end of his place of worship to the glory of God, and an altar at the other end to the object of his pre-Christian worship. Keating, in his *History of Ireland*, explains the change of name of three of the chiefs of the Tuatha De Danaan by telling us that they changed their names to the name of the god that they worshipped. Thus one of them changed his name to MacGreine, because he worshipped Grian, the sun.

The alarm of the so-called druids when they saw St. Patrick's fire at his first Easter celebrations, shows that Druidism was in Ireland probably a form of sun and fire worship; and so great was their fear that they fled to the head king of Tara, requesting him to have it extinguished, lest it should get the mastery of their fire and bring the downfall of the kingdom. There is every reason to believe that, whatever Druidism was in Ireland, it was free from the cruel and bloody rites that were associated

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

with it elsewhere, and was of the mild and gentle type that sun worship might be expected to be. That sun worship was a prevailing cult in Ireland cannot be disputed, for St. Patrick, in his *Confessions* alluding to it, says:—

“For that sun which we behold, by the command of God, rises daily for our sakes; but it will never reign, nor will its splendour endure; but all those who worship it shall go in misery to sore punishment. We, on the other hand, who believe in and worship the true sun, Christ, who will never perish, nor will anyone who doeth His will; but he will abide for ever, as Christ will abide for ever, who reigneth with God the Father Almighty and with the Holy Spirit, before the worlds, and now, and for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁰”

The strong conservative instinct of the Celt is nowhere more clearly exhibited than in the fact that after the passing of the centuries the sun cult has left its impress on our customs.

I have already mentioned that the first day of May was known in the Irish language as the Day of Bealltine, but that these fires were transferred to the 23rd of June. In old times mysterious virtues were supposed to be possessed by dew gathered on May morning:—

The fair maid who the first of May
Goes to the field at break of day,
And washes in dew from the hawthorn tree,
Will ever after handsome be.¹¹

A peasant always approaches a holy place from the north side, and he must move from east to west in imitation of the supposed motion of the sun. In the same way a corpse must be carried to its last resting-place a bride should approach her husband, an infant should be carried to the baptismal font, and the glass should be circulated at the festive board. Even now it is believed that every movement of persons or things should be with the course of the sun. To move against the sun was productive of evil consequences, and was called withershins. Witches in their

¹⁰ *Conf.*, 60, White's translation.

¹¹ Wood Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, 1902, p. 176.

dances always went withershins. Mr. Simpson, in his work, *Meeting the Sun*,¹² says,

"The Lama monk whirls his praying cylinder in the way of the sun, and fears lest a stranger should get at it and turn it contrary, which would take from it all the virtue it had acquired. They build piles of stone, and always pass them on one side and return on the other, so as to make a circuit with the sun."

Mohammedans make the circuit of the Caaba in the same way. To move "with the sun" is *desiul*, a Gaelic word akin to *dextra*. Withershins (contrary ways) is German, *Wilder Sinn*. The adoption of a foreign form for the ill-omened words is curiously significant.

The ancient dagobas of India and Ceylon were also walked around in the same way. The old Irish and Scotch custom is to make all movements *desiul* or sun-wise. To go withershins and to read prayers or the creed backwards were great evils, and pointed to connexion with the devil.¹³

Pennant refers to these and similar practices in Scotland, such as kindling a fire and the people joining hands and dancing three times around it southwards, according to the course of the sun; indeed, he tells us all public matters were done according to certain fixed ideas in relation to the sun, "all pointing to a lingering ray of sun worship." As I said before, the Bealltine festival seems to have moved about from May Day to the eve of St. John the Baptist's Day, the time when the sun is visible for the longest period. The Beall-

¹² Quoted by Wood-Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹³ "An ancient rite occurring in different branches of the Indo-European family consisted in making the circuit of the object intended to be honoured or sanctified, keeping meanwhile the right side turned towards it, that is to say, following the apparent direction of the sun, known in India by the name of *pradakshina*, and still practised by the Buddhists of Tibet round their sacred stones. This custom has survived to our own times in different parts of Europe. Dr. MacLeod relates that the highlanders of Scotland, when they came to wish his father a happy new year, made in this manner the circuit of the house in order to ensure its prosperity during the year. At St. Fillans, by Comrie in Perthshire, this circumambulation, called *deasil* (*deisul*), was performed round a miraculous well, to which people came in search of health. A similar custom seems to have existed in the Jura Mountains."

tine (the Lord's festival fires) were kindled on the hills or at cross-roads and other convenient places. The writer remembers seeing the bonfires lighting all along the sides of the hills on St. John's Eve, and the young people dancing around them always following the course of the sun. The writer has also seen brands taken from the fire and carried around the houses three times to keep away evil spirits. In some places the young people are feasted on cakes made with milk and eggs, and the cakes are called Bealltine cakes, and in many places it is believed that on this night many who rest in their graves arise and may be met with at the church. Children and cattle are also passed through the bonfires. A gentleman who was standing by these fires in the County Cork told the writer that on the night of celebration he saw little children and cattle passed through the fires. The little children, very sparsely clothed, were made to draw up their legs under them, and two young men would each catch the child by an arm, and whisk it so briskly through the flames that the fire would not rest upon it or the child be in any way injured. The young people of both sexes also jumped through the fire. But the cattle were not so tenderly treated, for although they were sometimes driven between two fires, they were often driven through the fires, and consequently often scorched and their feet burned by the glowing embers. We have here apparently an exact repetition of the worship described in the Old Testament and an explanation of it, for there the idolatrous Israelites are described as passing their sons and their daughters through the fire. This the writer always thought was some fearfully cruel observance, but it seems that it could be done without in any way hurting the children. There are many other still remaining traces of fire-worship, such as the treating of cattle by the "need fire" when they were sick. This method of healing survived to very nearly our own time. In case of sickness every fire on the townland was put out, and no fire was allowed to be kindled until it had been produced by two men rubbing sticks together; and a fire was lit in that way,

the smoke of which the cattle were compelled to inhale. This was plainly a following of the old pre-Christian custom, that, under given circumstances, all fires should be put out, and only lighted again by brands from a sacred fire. Once the sun, the great producer of light and heat, was accepted as the symbol or image of God, bearing within it a presence of God, then it necessarily followed that all flames were regarded in a like way, and nothing can exceed the respect with which present-day sun worshippers treat the flame and light of the fire. So much is this the case that the Parsees for a long time looked on lucifer matches with great doubt as an unlawful method of producing fire, and it was only necessity that at last compelled them to use them. Prideaux, quoted by Lanigan, tells us that, when they came before these holy fires to worship, they always approached them on the left side, so that, having their faces towards them and also towards the rising sun, they might direct their worship towards both.

It would seem that the highest worship was reserved for the rising sun. There is a well-known stone at Clogher which, before the writer visited that place, had been brought to the Church or Cathedral and laid up against the outside of the north wall. This stone was said to be none other than the Clogh-or, or stone of gold, from which the whole place derived its name, and the stone was called the stone of gold, because a panel of burnished gold was said to be inserted in it, and the stone itself was said to be placed in such a way that the beams of the morning sun, when it first arose above the horizon, would light upon it, and cause it to shine with great brilliancy and splendour. There is plainly visible on this stone a depression which seems to have been made to hold this panel of gold. It can scarcely be doubted that this stone was a remnant of sun worship. The celebrated stone known as Crom Cruach, which stood near the river Gathard, in the plain of Magh Sleacht, in the Barony of Tullyhaw and County of Cavan, seems to have been of a like character; for we are told it was ornamented with gold and silver,

and in the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, published by Colgan, part ii., chapter 31, it is called the chief idol of all the Irish.

Doubtless in St. Patrick's time the thing symbolized had been entirely lost sight of, and the symbol was worshipped in its stead. Even to our own days the shadows

NEW GRANGE SUN-MARKED STONE.

of the sun cult remains with us in our every-day life. We still call the first day of the week Sunday, and Lady Wilde was of opinion that in the May Day processions the sun was figured by a hoop wreathed with rowan berries and marsh marigolds.

The late Rev. Doctor George Stokes mentions an incident in the life of St. Ciaran of Saiger (who, according to tradition, was a bishop before St. Patrick) which goes to prove that it was believed that fire was originally divinely kindled, and could only be renewed in the same way. A sacred fire was allowed to go out by the carelessness of the person in charge, and there was consternation in the monastery, for it was from this fire all the other fires were kindled. Still more, the weather was cold, and there were visitors in the guest house. In this emergency St. Ciaran went forth, spread abroad his hands and prayed, whereupon a thunderbolt fell, which he wrapped up in his robe and took home, and was thus enabled to rekindle the fire. The most recent pre-historic sun symbol that has been discovered has been illustrated in a recent issue of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*. Mr. George Coffey, in his *Memoir of New Grange and Dowth*,¹⁴ mentions as exceptional a stone which is to be found on the east side of the mound. Only the upper surface of this stone, which is covered with a leaf-like figure, was visible at the time the memoir was written. Mr. Coffey tells us that when this stone was modelled for the museum in July, 1901, the lower portion, with incised crest markings on it, was brought to light. These markings, which are of much interest and importance, evidently represent three suns, two of which have their outer rays enclosed in a circle; there is a fourth rougher figure, which also appears to be a sun. Since writing this article, I have read a most interesting article on "Mithraism," which was published in a former number of this journal by Mr. E. H. Alton.¹⁵ I was very glad to find that it was written on the same lines, and came to very much the same conclusion that I did. In some unaccountable way I had missed seeing it. The sun symbols which we have may easily have sprung from a misuse of the swastica, and thus may symbolize a religion which is not

¹⁴ *Trans., R.I.A.*, vol. xxx., p. 61.

¹⁵ *I.C.Q.*, vol. iv., p. 60 ff.

in many ways wholly unworthy of the great Patriarchal religions that existed before Christ. For I think we must take sun worship or the worship of the sun symbol, as reformed in the last century of the Western Roman Empire, as a fair representative of the sun cult as it originally existed. The following extract made from one of our daily papers¹⁶ illustrates how the sun cult, like the swastica, was a symbol which is found all over the world :

"Mr. Clement Wragge paid a visit last week to what are known as the tattooed rocks on the coast near Raglan, New Zealand; and as a result he is distinctly of opinion that they are the work of neither Tamil nor Maori, but are the inscriptions of a very ancient race of sun-worshipping people, antedating the advent of the Maori by untold centuries. The spiral circles, ovals, crosses, and squares, he says, are most significant, and confirm

CHIMU SUN SYMBOL, PERU.

his opinion that New Zealand has been inhabited by early man. He considers the inscriptions are probably connected with those at Easter Island and Central and South America, and are Atlantican or Lemurian in origin. Further, the Maori copied the spiral from the relics of those ancient people, and did not initiate it."

Everywhere we turn we find the shadow of the sun cult. Professor Ridgeway, in his *Origin of Tragedy*,¹⁷ tells us the people of Cleonae, like the Athenians, had suffered from the pestilence, and in obedience to an "oracle from Delphi, sacrificed a he-goat to the rising sun." While

¹⁶ Dublin *Daily Express*, 11th February, 1910.

¹⁷ P. 80.

even Dante refers to it, for in Canto vii. of the *Purgatorio* he makes Sordello say, "Not for doing, but for not doing, have I lost the vision of the high sun." As in the old world, so also in the new world. Among the wonderful discoveries made by Mr T. Hewitt Myring in the Chimcana Valley of Peru, which are believed to date from many thousand years B.C., we find very remarkable traces of the worship of the sun symbol. When the grave of an ancient chieftain was opened, the body was found stretched at full length, with the head raised so that the sightless eye-balls might catch the first gleam of the rising sun, and we have also a representation of the sun symbol itself with a widely-extended nimbus around it, which we engrave.¹⁸

It is well worthy of remark how deeply impressed on primitive religion was the teaching that without shedding of blood there was no remission of sin. The most impressive rite in the worship of the sun symbol was the baptism of blood called the Taurobolium. The ceremonial has been described in a well-known passage of Prudentius, in which we are told that a cist was made in the earth, in which the penitent was laid, which was covered with planks, having apertures between them. A bull was led on the platform, and, with due ceremonial conducted by the priests, was slaughtered, so that the blood streaming from his throat might bathe the votary below. It was esteemed a matter of great importance that not a drop should be wasted, and the subject of the rite used all his efforts to enjoy the full benefits of the sacred blood. The ceremony was a long and costly one, attended by great crowds, with the magistrate at their head, and the man who had enjoyed such a blessing left the record of it on stone, often concluding with the striking phrase, "*In aeternum renatus.*"¹⁹ This supposed new birth to eternal life through the cleansing rites of the Taurobolium seems to have been the acting motive of those who offered oblations of blood at the burying-places of the dead. A singular mode of cist burial was in existence both in Ireland and Scotland to within

¹⁸ *Illustrated London News*, December 4th, 1909.

¹⁹ Dill, p. 82 f.

comparatively modern times. In many places there was a parish coffin, which was used for all those who were to be buried, and in which the corpse was borne to its last resting-place. When it arrived there the body was taken out of the coffin, and interred in a cist prepared in the manner I have described as in use for those who received blood baptism in the days of the sun symbol. Could this have been a ray of sun worship from those far-off days? Blood baptism seems to have been in use not only for the living, but for the dead. Professor Ridgeway gives us a graphic description of it. He says:—

“The old chief within his grave now thinks of his family and his people, and if they in their turn think of him, and nourish his spirit with offerings, and keep his vital element strengthened with libations of freshly shed blood, then will he keep them in the hour of peril, and he will use his influence with the earth beneath to make her yield her increase and to make fruitful the herds and flocks and women of his tribe.”²⁰

In offerings at the grave of a notable, no fire was employed, for the blood (or pelanos) was poured into a bothros or hole beside the grave, or even, as at Tronis, through an aperture reaching right down to the dead inside.²¹ We gather from the same source that the offerings in kind presented at this time were of barley, meal, honey and oil—an offering, as we would describe it, of the first fruits. But eventually all offerings to God were burned that the essence might ascend to heaven. This offering of barley, meal and oil, usually made into cakes, will help us to understand the offerings that were made to God in rock basins before hero and ancestor worship had superseded the worship of God, and also the shew-bread in the temple. Several pierced stones having the bothros (holes), which may at one time have been placed over pre-Christian graves, have been sketched and measured. When considering this subject we must not forget the orientation of churches and pre-historic erections, which may be considered as inspired by reverence for the rising sun as a living symbol of Him who enlightens our darkness, the Sun of Righteousness.

J. F. M. FFRENCH.

²⁰ W. Ridgeway, *Origin of Tragedy*, 1910, p. 30.

²¹ Ridgeway, p. 38.