

Remarks on the sign of the swastika on pottery from Ożańsk site 5

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The author discusses examples of the swastika on ceramic vessels from an early Slavic village excavated at site 5 in Ożańsk, Jarosław region in Poland and presents several parallels, on ceramics as well as other artifacts coming from different parts of the world, different times and cultures, thus showing the popularity of the ornament and its wide range of symbolic connotations. The swastika was initially associated with light, prosperity and good. It was incorporated as a motif on objects connected with Christianity, where it could have taken on a new meaning: the cross of Christ seen as a symbol of the Christians themselves.

KEY-WORDS: swastika, Ożańsk, Slavic pottery, Middle Ages

Archaeological investigations preceding building investment, such as were conducted on site 5 in Ożańsk in the Jarosław commune, can add substantially to the body of knowledge as well as lead to its reevaluation (Fig. 1). Sławomir Kadrow discovered the site in 1989 (Fig. 2), but it was not until 2010 that it started to be excavated as part of the A4 motorway construction project. Dariusz Niemasiak and Wojciech Pasterkiewicz explored it on behalf of the Foundation of the Archaeological Center in Rzeszów, uncovering a sunken hut (No. 395) that was dated by the assemblage to the early Slavic period. One of the ceramic finds was a piece of pottery decorated with a swastika. Professor Michał Parczewski first drew attention to the symbols of swastika on the fragments of vessels from this position.

This piece of honey-colored coarse ware was reconstituted from two fragments (Fig. 3). The temper consists of chamotte of varied size and crushed rock. The break bears evidence of secondary burning. It was not possible to reconstruct the whole pot from the sherds found in the hut, but it is evident that it was from a large vessel, possibly a pot, pots being the most common type of vessel recorded from the site¹.

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¹ The region is rich in Miocene clays under the sands and Quaternary loess, which could have been of significance for a pottery craft in the area; numerous Bronze Age and modern pottery fragments are scattered all around.

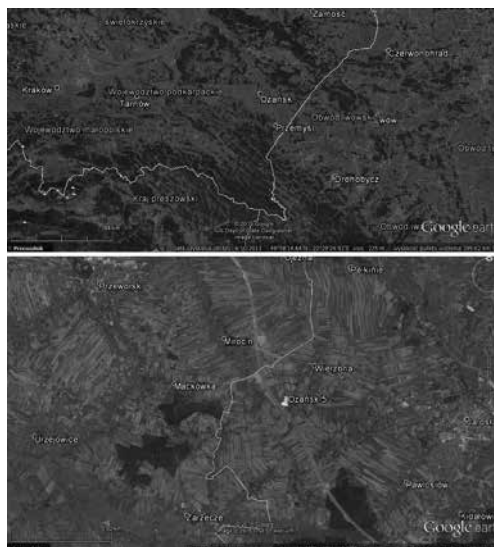


Fig. 1. General plan of the Subcarpathian province with the location of Ożarów village and archaeological site 5 (source: Google Earth)

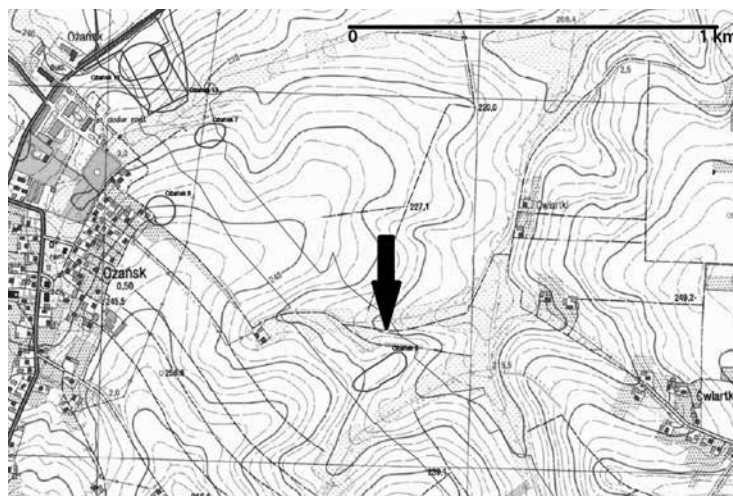


Fig. 2. Topographic map of the excavation site and its environs ('Opracowanie wyników ratowniczych badań wykopaliskowych na stanowisku numer 5 w Ożarowie, gm. Jarosław' report, courtesy D. Bobak)

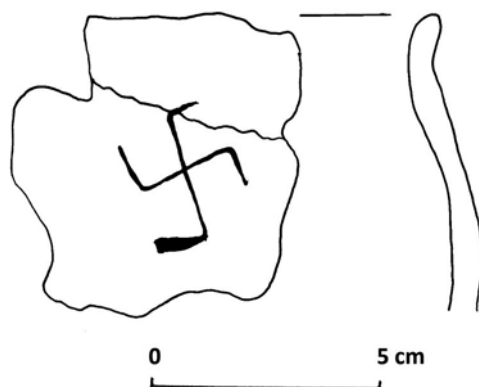


Fig. 3. Swastika sign on a vessel (No. 395), Ożańsk, site 5. Drawing by E.A. Marek

Technological skill is apparent in the making of this vessel, which was modeled by hand, not on the wheel, bearing characteristically uneven marks of finger-modeling, just like other sherds from this and the other huts excavated at the site.

A swastika motif was cut into the surface of the upper body of the pot just under the rim, using a stick or a similar kind of tool. The arms of the swastika are turned to the right, even as the motif as a whole leans gently to the left. The lower arm is slightly longer, possibly because the craftsman found it difficult to cut the motif precisely on the curved body of the pot. The crossing lines are not at right angle and the arms also do not form precise right angles. The arms are not quite parallel with their opposites and the lower one is even thicker and more curved than the other three, which are of fairly equal thickness. The one on the left is also slightly longer. The appearance of the motif could reflect the limited capabilities of the artist or his ignorance of the motif. However, its size and position on the vessel indicate a desire for the motif to be seen, thus making it clear that it was recognized and intended.

A second example of the swastika on a pottery fragment from the archaeological site came from feature 38 (Fig. 4). It is not complete, preserving just one arm, the right one with the horizontal in reverse to the left; it may even not have been a swastika at all. We can take recourse to examples of vessels with incompletely preserved swastikas with arms turning all the different directions. Finds of this kind are known from early Slavic sites in Romania, Dulceanca I and Bratei (Fig. 5), and from the Polish Gniewkowo (cf. Werczyński and Rodak 2012: Fig. 2a) and Wzgórze Świętojakubskie in Sandomierz. The head of a flail from the second part of the early Middle Ages, an object made of entirely different material and with a different function, had two intertwined swastikas engraved on it, one growing from the other (Fig. 6; Kotowicz 2006: 54). Most of these examples of swastikas are of later date or from other regions and they

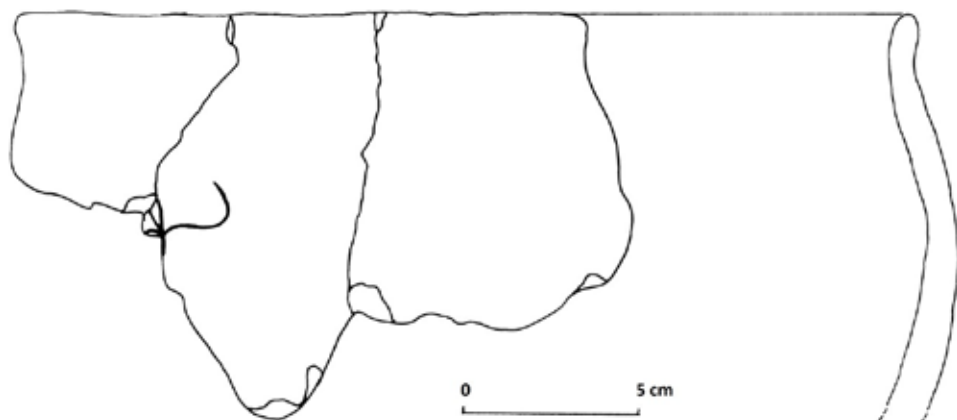


Fig. 4. Presumed swastika sign on a pot (No. 38), Ożańsk, site 5. Drawing by E.A. Marek

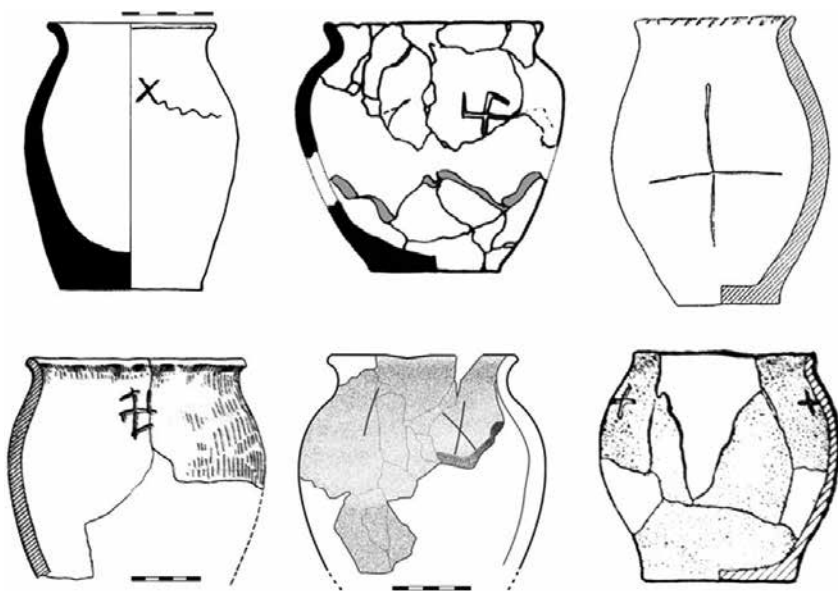


Fig. 5. Vessels with incomplete swastika marks from Romania (after Paliga and Teodor 2009: Fig. 27)



Fig. 6. Head of a flail decorated with two swastikas and concatenated arms
(after Kotowicz 2006: Fig. 1)

show that the idea for the motif was not always presented correctly. However, we have no way of knowing whether swastikas without the proper arms or with the arms in reverse direction bore the same meaning as the most popular version.

Consequently, let us now focus on examining the motif of the swastika, its origin and symbolism. Obviously, as a motif it had many different meanings, specific to the ornamental context in which it was found. In the case of the Ożańsk site, it could well have been part of a message or some long-lost content. Looking at other examples of this decoration(?) on vessels and other objects may be of help in deciding this issue.

The Ożańsk sherd is not the only example of such a symbol on ceramic vessels from the early Middle Ages or from either earlier or later periods. It is known from almost all parts of the world and from different times and it is important to know what it was and what it was identified with. The simplest idea is that it is a cross with arms of the same length, bent at right angle either to the left or to the right. There exist many interpretations, but foremost is the belief that the swastika is associated with the worship of the sun going back to the Bronze Age. The sign was associated with light: the bent and rotating arms were interpreted as the sun's rays. It was one of the oldest characters in Chinese and Indian culture, recognized in India even 2500 BC (Eberhard 1996: 243). In Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, the swastika is considered a sacred symbol associated with prosperity and infinity. It is interpreted as a sign of cyclical fluctuation. The meaning of the word in Sanskrit is 'prosperity, charm' (literally *asti su* 'this is good'). The first such signs appeared in the Neolithic. This millennial custom

of placing the swastika on a variety of objects and in a variety of contexts was compromised in Europe by association with Adolph Hitler and Nazi rule, which made it synonymous with evil, bestiality and death. Increasingly, it is explained in different sources that the Nazis appropriated an ancient symbol for their own purposes. Europe remains ambivalent as to this sign, but the East, Asia in particular, appreciate the original positive meaning of this sign (cf. Zasuń 2011: 251).

The earliest examples of the use of the swastika on ceramics are vessels of the Globular Amphora culture from the last centuries of the fourth millennium BC in central and eastern Europe². The two vessels from Rębków-Parcele village in Mazowieckie province (Garwolin municipality) appear to bear the first attestation of the sign in Polish territory. They come from graves I and II (see Nosek 1950: 83, 103). Four of the at least eight vessels from grave I were reconstructed almost completely (see Nosek 1950: 91). They constitute typical forms for this culture: amphorae, bowls, goblets. A swastika was engraved on the body of one of the amphorae, to the left of a handle, between two zones of dotted vertical ornament and immediately under horizontal lines of the same dotted ornament at the top of the body and around the neck. It runs to the left, its crossing arms straight and perpendicular to one another (Fig. 7)³. Of greater interest is an amphora from grave II, one of 14 vessels⁴, bearing the sign of the swastika surprisingly inside the vessel, according to the excavator (cf. Nosek 1950: 94). The amphora had a short cylindrical neck decorated with an impressed rope pattern around it; the drawing of the swastika, set in a circle, on a sherd does not allow it to be positioned with regard to the vessel as a whole (Fig. 8)⁵; one can only assume that the sign was somewhere inside on the upper body, because otherwise it would never be visible and there is no reason to think that that was intended in this case. An unlikely scenario is that the swastika was drawn in the course of producing the vessel, but it is fairly evident that being as it is, a symbol of prosperity, the sun and well-being, it should have been easily recognized by all who discerned it. Of importance is the present author's conviction that this vessel was buried standing to the left of the head of the deceased⁶. A grave is where the *sacrum* meets the *profanum*, where things used during lifetime take on magical significance by being needed in the after-life, where many things are different or even opposite from what they are on earth.

² See www.ma.krakow.pl/wystawy/czasowe/przemoc_i_rytual

³ There is no scale given in the source.

⁴ Eight vessels were marked on the plan of the grave recording the group at the bottom, whereas Nosek's account totaled the number of vessels at nine; the upper and middle groups consisted altogether of five vessels, giving a total of fourteen, which is consistent with the number given by Nosek.

⁵ There is no scale given in the source.

⁶ The location of the vessel was marked on the plan of the burial; however, the skeleton did not survive and it can only be surmised that the body was laid to rest with the head to the north and in anatomical order.



Fig. 7. Amphorae from Grave I, village Rębków-Parcele (after Nosek 1950: Fig. 17)



Fig. 8. Jar (No. 3) from Grave II, village Rębków-Parcele (after Nosek 1950: Fig. 25)

Cemeteries are places where artifacts are often discovered in their original position. Both inhumation and cremation burials can hold grave goods (excluding graves of the very young or where Christianity banned grave furnishings). Ceramic vessels hold special significance, being containers for food and beverages intended for the afterlife in inhumations⁷ and urns for the ashes in cremations. In the latter case, the urns were often covered with characteristic lids depending on the site and period. In Roman times urns were richly decorated. Decoration occurred also at the inception of the Bronze Age. A house urn from Etruscan territory now in the Vatican Museum (see Wilson 1896: 855, Fig. 183) has a richly decorated conical top seldom seen on similar vessels, including several swastika-related motifs; it is poorly dated with Wilson placing it in the Bronze Age (see Wilson 1896: 855).

The swastika sign on ceramic vessels from the pre-Roman and Roman period in Polish territory appears on two hole-mouthed vessels, one from Biała (Łódź province, Zgierz municipality) and the other from Gać (Subcarpathian province, municipality loco)⁸. The latter, dated by Bugaj to phase A₃ of the Pre-Roman period, shows an ornamental dextral swastika among other motifs in the second zone of decoration on the upper part of the vessel (Fig. 9). The vessel from Biała is decorated with alternately standing and suspended triangles below concentric grooves running around the body. The triangles are filled with line-hatching that goes in the opposite direction, the better to be seen. The decoration below the triangles is eye-catching (Fig. 10) (described in detail in Bugaj and Makiewicz 1995: 89, 91, 93, 96): three human figures, two possibly mounted on animals (horses?), the third as if in a side saddle. To the right of the latter figure is a cross with arms terminating in five prongs (only the right arm has six), similarly as the hands of the mounted human figurines. The first swastika appears to the right of the cross; it is dextrorotatory with doubled bars of the ending of the arms. Last is yet another mounted human figure with the same pronged hands. A second zone of decoration is on the base. There is a cross, like the one above, each arm ending in five prongs. The fields between the arms are filled with left-turning swastikas, two of them (lower left and upper right) with the ends of the arms doubled. Figures of two horned animals moving right appear to the right of this cross; they are approaching the last motif on the frieze, which is a mounted human figure like the ones in the upper zone.

Vessels from Romania from the early Slavic period are of the Prague-type with a sign of the swastika on each one; they come from the following sites: Bucharest-Cătelu

⁷ Traces of alcohol and a variety of foods were found inside the vessels, for instance, in the grave of 'King Midas', cf. www.dydaktyka.fizyka.umk.pl/Wystawy_archiwum/z_omegi/naturemid.html (26.II.2014 r.).

⁸ A *situla* from a Roman-age barrow in New Kraków, commune Darłowo site 1, has a narrow neck and is decorated at the base with a swastika ornament and staggered meandering *quad* zigzag lines (Skrzypek 2005: 232, Fig. 2).

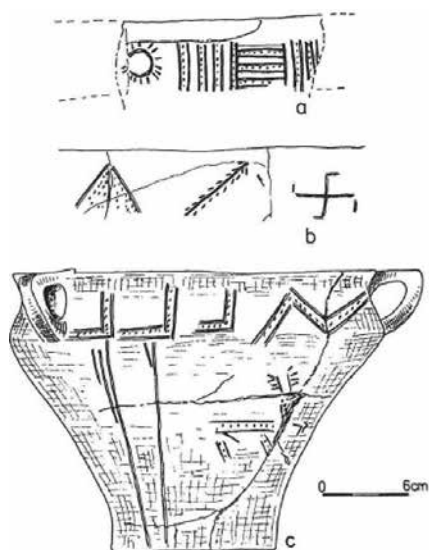


Fig. 9. Vessel from the village of Gać (after Bugaj 1995: Fig. 6)

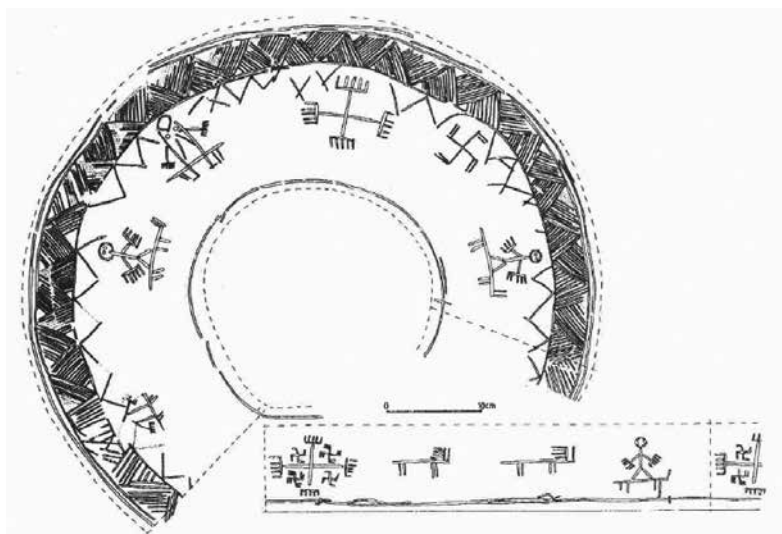


Fig. 10. Vessel from Grave 30 in the village of Biała (after Bugaj 1995: Fig. 4)

Nou Damaroia Bucharest, Bucharest Str. Soldat Ghivan, Bratei and Dulceanca Dulceanca I and IV, and are discussed more extensively by Romanian researchers (e.g. Paliga and Teodor 2009: 150). The Slavs of the late sixth century AD from the territories of the modern Romania and Moldova were already in touch with the Christian world (Parczewski 2001: 15). The present author is of the opinion that the appearance of the swastika sign on ceramics associated with the Slavs should be attributed to this period and this part of Europe⁹. In the second half the early Middle Ages and later, the swastika was one of a number of potter's marks appearing on vessel bottoms. Examples illustrated here are a pot from Sandomierz (site of Wzgórze Świętojakubskie) dating to the eleventh or first half of the 12th century (cf. Gąssowska 1967: 159, Table. I, 13) and a vessel from Igołomia Wschód (Gajewski 1957). Other examples of swastika marks on vessel bottoms come from Jadowniki Mokre, Giecz, Gniewkowo, Wrocław, Prądkowce, Wiślica, and Kraków Okół.

Coins also often showed the swastika. The sign appears already on Indian silver drachmas in the second century AD (Fig. 11)¹⁰. In Scandinavia, the swastika can be seen on gold bracteates, associated most frequently with a human face in profile or a mounted horse rider (see Rosen-Przeworska 1980: Fig. 3a, d, e; 5a). An ancient coin from the territory of Palestine bears the motif set between two darts facing in the opposite directions, one pointing up, the other down (see Wilson 1896: Fig. 235). Of the Polish coins it is a denarius of Mieszko II that features a swastika on the reverse¹¹. The pattern is repeated: a cross with dots between the arms set within a circle and swastikas outside the circle, marking the position of the ends of the arms of the cross. It is all the more surprising that these examples come from the second half of the early Middle Ages when we are dealing with a nascent state and not an unenlightened tribe, communicating in other ways than by generally recognized metaphors with the same meaning.

The examples discussed in this paper, a fraction of the artifacts bearing the sign of the swastika, come from different cultures, time periods and parts of the world. The first and most likely also the second vessel from Ożańsk indicates that the swastika on

⁹ It cannot be excluded that when they first settled in Polish territories the Slavs came in contact with the peoples inhabiting the region earlier. They could have adopted the sign of the swastika from them, although the assumption today is that they considered it as little more than a decorative element and not a symbol of the solar cults. However, the swastika may have become associated with Christianity in the second phase of the early Middle Ages; in the early centuries of Christianity, the cross was not a common symbol of the religion, probably because of its connotations of persecution and sanctification resulting from the fact that the Son of God ended his earthly life on it, see Budda 2000: 98–99).

¹⁰ There is no scale given in the source.

¹¹ Stanisław Suchodolski has demonstrated persuasively that the coin with the obverse inscription 'MISICO' and the swastika on the reverse belonged to Mieszko II and not his grandfather Mieszko I (cf. Suchodolski 1998, pdf version).



Fig. 11. Indian silver drachma from the 2nd century AD (www.coinindia.com/galleries-parata-rajas.html)

ceramic containers was intended to be seen. Its symbolic meaning as a symbol of light and the sun in this case is determined by the fact that while the settlement at Ożańsk dated to the early Slavic period, its population would not have associated the motif with the Christian religion, even if it had come in contact with the new faith. Assuming however contacts with other peoples, perhaps of Roman or Germanic provenance (possibly even Iranian or generally Eastern) and that as a people they were not originally associated with Christianity, we can interpret the discussed swastika as a symbol of good fortune or merely a decorative element. The Ożańsk example may have also had an eclectic background, being associated with a pagan sun cult on one hand and a still not fully incorporated understanding of the Christian cross as a symbol of rebirth.

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