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The Cultural Interconnections of the Swastika in Ancient Iraqi Art

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Abstract

*It is universally acknowledged that civilizational dialogue fosters a form of social peace. Accordingly, this study addresses a conceptually agreed upon, yet often misrepresented or dismissed, cultural symbol—one that has been either attributed to a particular people or altogether erased from historical narratives. This prompted an investigation into its origins and its cultural and philosophical continuities. The symbol in question is the Swastika, also known as the hooked cross. It possesses layers of structural and symbolic significance, rooted in its emblematic and teleological essence, which inspired an inquiry into its sustained potency and cultural resonance. This formed the foundation of the first axis of the study, titled *What is the Swastika?* Subsequently, two artistic representations of the Swastika, as envisioned by ancient Iraqi artists, were identified. The second axis of the study focused on the Constructive Connotations of the Swastika, emphasizing its interconnectedness with the broader cultural fabric, wherein the signified often overshadowed the signifier. In contrast, the third axis, titled *The Constructive Signifiers of the Swastika*, explored the symbol's capacity for expressive clarity, where the signifier dominated, rendering the forms distinctly articulated and beyond contestation. This duality culminated in a coherent vision of cultural unity and civilizational embrace, suggesting a path toward social harmony. The study's conclusions reveal the role of both overt and covert semiotic continuity within ancient Mesopotamian civilization in unifying thought and fostering a collective societal vision. Although expressed in fragmented or distorted images, these interpretations of the Swastika may be reconsidered as a conscious effort to reforge ties between civilizations. Among the proposed recommendations is a further inquiry entitled *A Study of the Rhetorical Connections of the Swastika Across Civilizations*.*

Introduction

What is the Swastika?

The quest to understand life stands as one of the earliest motives behind religious rituals across civilizations—rituals that persist in various forms to this day, centered on themes such as immortality, continuity, and survival. Within this context, the ancient Iraqi artist sought to comprehend the overwhelming forces that threatened existence—forces beyond human logic and physical strength, invisible yet profoundly influential, such as floods, earthquakes, rain, and drought. Water, in particular, held a dominant thematic presence, both as an element and through its ritualistic invocations, playing a central role in summoning rainfall and reviving the parched earth for agriculture.

This elemental reverence found its personification in)Enki(, the god of water, a synthesis of the celestial deity)Anu(and the storm god)Enlil(, forming a sacred triad of reciprocal power. Refer to Diagram No. (1). Enki's divine status is distinct from that of Anu and Enlil, owing to his inherently benevolent nature and his practical relevance to humanity. He is venerated as the god

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of wisdom and order, known by the Sumerian name) Ki(, meaning “Lord of the Netherworld,” and the Akkadian name)Ea(, denoting “House of Water().”

Diagram No. (1):

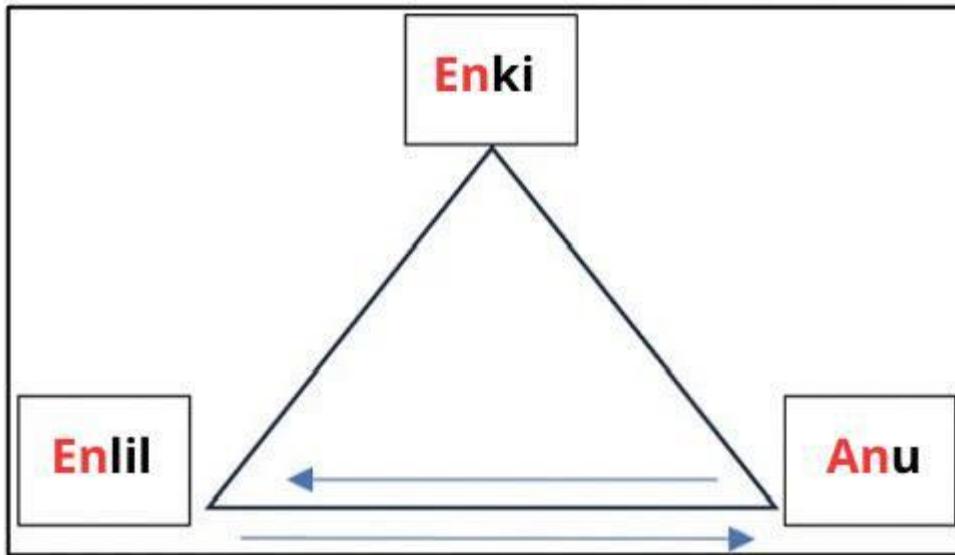


Diagram No. (1):

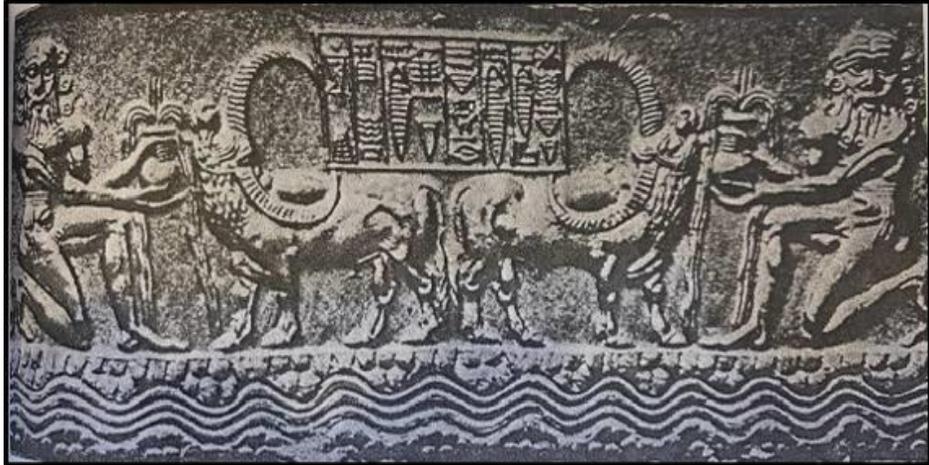
The sanctity of water permeated every aspect of life, whether revered as a singular force or as part of a composite system intended to reinforce broader cosmological principles—chief among them, purification and renewal. In Sumerian religious rituals, especially those concerning ablution, the sacred water of the deity Enki was believed to cleanse and symbolically recreate the human body(). This notion of ritual purification later evolved through Babylonian and Assyrian practices, where bathing with oil and water was also associated with Enki(). Sacred washings were performed in temples exclusively with Enki’s water to dispel sorcery, while domestic purification rites used the same medium for spiritual cleansing. Moreover, ritual drinking of water formed part of purification ceremonies meant to expel illness, evil, and moral decay.

Ancient Mesopotamian thought further developed the idea of “water of life” as a symbol of fertility and renewal, linking it to the amniotic waters of the womb. This concept was embodied in the deity Dumuzi (or Apsu), who joined the pantheon of water gods(). Conceptual interpretations of the Swastika emerged in various artistic expressions—unified, sacred, contradictory, yet complementary. These representations, steeped in the symbolism of dualities and cosmic forces, shall be examined for their communicative dimensions in the next section of the study.

The Constructive Connotations of the Swastika:

In this section, we shall explore the aesthetic forms that conveyed the Swastika’s philosophical essence within ancient Iraqi civilization. One such representation depicts a harmonious

symmetry between two opposing, yet complementary, forces—symbolizing societal balance, productive abundance, and existential unity. In a seal impression, the hero Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu are shown seated on the ground, holding a shared vessel from which water flows symmetrically. Between them, two buffaloes with grand horns drink from the streaming water, which descends over a mountainous terrain and merges with the sweet subterranean sea.



See Figure No. (1)

In another composition, the ancient Iraqi artist rendered the symbolism of the Swastika through a more direct visual narrative. The deity Ea (Enki) is depicted explicitly, with streams of water cascading from his shoulders. The artist integrated fish swimming in a direction counter to the flow of water—an artistic choice symbolizing the abundance and fertility that springs from divine contradiction. See



Figure No. (2)

Linguistically and symbolically, the union of opposites is embedded within the sacred qualities of water—its purifying power and its capacity to cleanse vice. The Laws of Hammurabi, for instance, decree that criminals who commit grievous sins be cast into the river. Priests

performing exorcisms insisted upon the use of Euphrates water, regarded as the sole purifier, and more sacred than the Tigris(). Euphrates water was also sprinkled upon the ill, believed to hold divine cleansing properties linked to Ea. A poetic incantation reinforces this sanctity, intertwining sacred numerology (the number seven)(), and the fertile duality of father and mother. See the following incantation:

Pure water,

Water of the Euphrates that flows upon a holy land.

Water stored in the deep, preserved in the abyss.

The pure water, sanctified by Ea.

And the seven sons of the deep

Who cleanse the water, refining it to brilliance

Before their father, Ea,

Before their mother, Damkina.

Let the afflicted be purified—let him shine clear and bright.

Constructive Functions of the Swastika:

The swastika emerges through explicit rhetorical representations, rather than through vague symbolic or linguistic inferences that often lack clarity. The ancient Iraqi artist continued to engage with and interpret the symbol through various visual renditions—yet all shared the same essence. These renditions consistently explored the notions of power, vitality, renewal, fertility, and purification. Rather than diverging from these conceptual frameworks, we aim to affirm and seal the symbol within its well-established doctrinal form. This requires an analytical examination of specific artifacts from the pre-literate era, particularly pottery from Samarra, to discern their clearly articulated constructive functions.



See Figure (3)

The ancient Iraqi artist explored civilizational links embedded in the swastika by employing sign-based elements that embodied the union of complementary opposites through:

1. A numerical paradox—juxtaposing the symbolic values of the woman (represented four times) with the scorpion-man (represented eight times).
2. A kinetic contrast—wherein the directional motion of the female signs runs counter to the clockwise motion of the scorpion signs, thus reflecting a duality of movement.
3. A continuous symbolic gesture of rainfall, portrayed through the woman's curved hair motif which connects seamlessly with the deity Enki.

In another depiction, the artist illustrated the swastika's civilizational implications through a different set of oppositional symbols involving birds, fish, and streams.



See Figure (4)

1. The artist rendered four birds gripping four fish, all moving counter-clockwise. This inverse motion is mirrored by the rotation of eight additional fish around them in the same counter-clockwise direction.
2. The artist embodied a profound synthesis by incorporating linear depictions of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—symbols intimately tied to the concepts of rainfall, fertility, and other associative meanings related to Enki, the god of water.
3. He adorned the vessel with decorative units and concentric grooves encircling it. These served a complementary function, echoing the sense of perpetual motion shared by the birds and fish—sometimes angular, sometimes straight—emphasizing continuity and movement.

The final unification depicted was not of contradiction, but of intersection—a harmonious interplay of abundance and fecundity. This was illustrated through triangular-bodied animals, primarily ibexes.



See Figure (5)

Here, the dynamic tension of opposites is infused with symbolic reference to the twin rivers, Tigris and Euphrates. The dominance of the four animals' horns, oriented clockwise, contrasts sharply with the bodies of the animals, which are constructed in counter-clockwise motion. The artist thus distills the entire tableau into a singular, supplementary motif that intersects with itself—only to renew and rejuvenate, affirming the eternal cycle of fertile giving. Furthermore, the artist employed numerical logic, referencing eight horns and four ibexes—possibly alluding to the life-generating duality of male and female.

Findings:

1. The rhetorical connections of the swastika's latent forms were far deeper than the overt symbols in ancient Iraqi culture.
2. The swastika encapsulated numerous intertwined concepts, all rooted in the unification of opposites—manifesting boundless, regenerative power akin to the sun and moon, light and dark, right and left, man and woman, all symbolic of life's primordial structure.
3. The evident and latent semiotic interplay in ancient Iraq facilitated ideological unification and sociocultural harmony, transcending local boundaries and integrating with other civilizations. Thus, the swastika's civilizational symbolism was not confined to any singular group.

Suggestions:

1. Further exploration of the swastika's rhetorical dimensions across various civilizations.
2. Comparative analysis of swastika representations in ancient Iraqi and Islamic art.
3. A thorough investigation of the swastika's constructive symbolism within Mesopotamian civilization.

Recommendations

1. Encourage research into the civilizational and symbolic connections among peoples, fostering dialogue and academic symposia aimed at cultivating cultural familiarity and intellectual

harmony. Symbols such as the swastika, often misinterpreted or obscured, require public education to restore their rightful place as foundational emblems of eternal, fertile life.

2. Promote public awareness of our symbolic heritage—particularly those that are conceptually complex or culturally entangled—through posters, visual exhibitions, and immersive educational experiences.

3. Support the publication of works on ancient Mesopotamia and encourage scholarly authorship, with emphasis on high-quality print materials suited for detailed visual representation.

4. Establish dedicated research centers focused on Iraq's heritage, encompassing all relevant scientific disciplines. Such institutions will enrich the nation's cultural productivity and nurture patriotism and peaceful coexistence.

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