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**Chris Wood**

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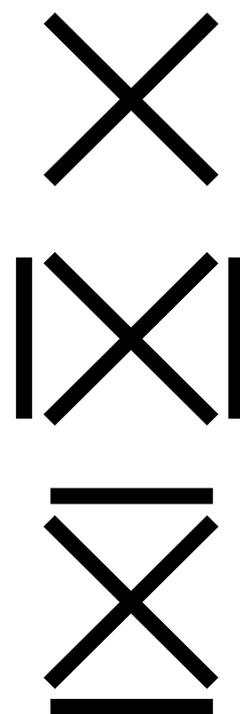
# X Marks the Post

An exploration of a magically protective sign

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There are many marks and signs traditionally used to protect or bless objects, buildings, people and animals. However, their use can also be purely decorative. One of the simplest, and therefore perhaps most debateable, is the group of marks based on the X.

X marks occur frequently on a number of antique items, but especially latches, lock straps, bone scoops and the so-called 'witch posts' found in some 17<sup>th</sup>-century houses in, predominantly, Yorkshire. They may be straightforward or elongated Xs, strings of such marks, or Xs flanked by two uprights - or with horizontal lines above and below, depending on orientation. They may be related to more extensive cross-hatching, lattice or diaper work, to patterns in brickwork, Romanesque stone carving, or even Irish interlace, but the single and short-line examples appear distinctive, especially as they are often found in significant places in need of protection, such as points of entry into a house, or prominently on an object used for a task where malefic influence could harm the result. However, the meaning and magical intent may well be different in different contexts.



## Bone Scoops or Apple Corers

Scoops carved from the metapodial (lower leg) bones of sheep seem to have served several purposes: removing the cores from apples, sampling cheeses, eating utensils for those afflicted by tooth loss, and love tokens cut, carved and given by young men to their sweethearts in a manner similar to Welsh Love Spoons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur MacGregor (1985) *Bone, Antler, Ivory & Horn: The Technology of Skeletal Materials Since the Roman Period*, Croom Helm, p. 180.

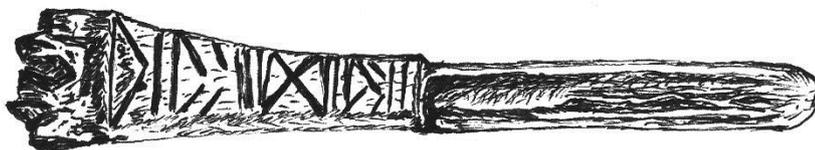
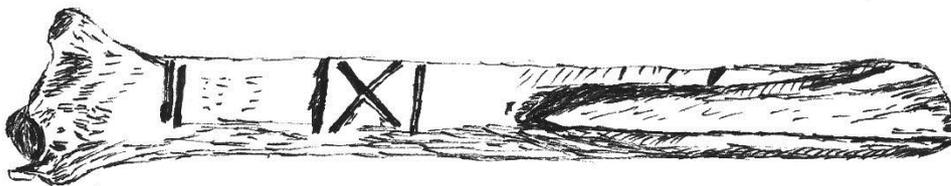
In all probability, they served many purposes, rather than a single one, and they may well have been carved accordingly. Little work has been done to analyse staining and wear marks to clarify actual use, but where it has, the implications can be significant. Similar tools have been found on London's Thames foreshore that appear in fact to be fids for rope working.<sup>2</sup>

The scoop-end on the first example illustrated here does not appear long enough to remove an apple core, and indeed Dorothy Hartley illustrates one with a longer, flatter end.<sup>3</sup> The standard of carving varies tremendously, with some very ornate examples rivalling Love Spoons, whereas this scoop has been carved relatively crudely, surely as a work-a-day tool, and has the patina and wear of use. Similarly, the decoration seems perfunctory, the bare minimum expected perhaps in the tradition perceived by its carver, although the grooves have been blackened to show up better.

The earliest securely dated examples of bone scoops of this kind are from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps reflecting greater availability of suitable fine-toothed saws, which prove to be essential for cutting the bone.<sup>4</sup> This gives some context to the decoration.

*Bone Scoop or Apple Corer*

*Ickeny Collection EAMMM 2004.1, East Anglia, 1920s(?), length: 138 mm*



*Bone Scoop or Apple Corer*

*Ickeny Collection EAMMM 2017.27, Eastern England, 1797-1814(?), length: 125 mm*

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Stokes (2016) A new interpretation of post-medieval bone scoops from the foreshore of the river Thames in London, in Selena Vitezović (ed.) *Close to the Bone: Current Studies in Bone Technologies*, Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade, pp. 324-37.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Hartley (1954) *Food in England*, Macdonald, p. 416.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Smaldon (2002) Bone Apple Scoops, *Antique Collecting* 37(4), pp. 40-3.; Stokes (note 2).

The second example is more carefully carved, with an expertly defined scoop. Its intended or actual use may have been different to that of the first example above, but the patina of use is again present. Whilst it has no firm provenance, this scoop is believed to have been made by a French prisoner of war interned in the Norman Cross Depot (Huntingdonshire) that existing during the Napoleonic Wars (1797-1814). Bone scoops were indeed a common product made by skilled PoWs in the depots for sale to local people, although it is the ornate bone and straw work that is most prized (it is indeed exquisite), rather than these humble objects.<sup>5</sup>

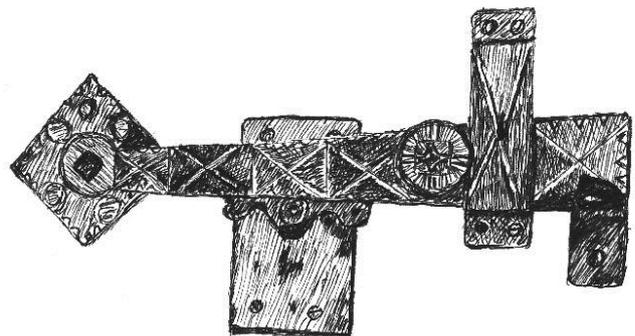
## Wrought-ironwork

X marks appear frequently in significant locations on antique metalwork, especially latches, clasps, locks and hinges, and externally on wall anchors.

Occasionally there is a punch mark in each of the angles. Wall anchors are often in the form of an X as well.

Some of the best-preserved, older examples are to be found in Medieval churches, on latches, locks and lock-straps, securing doors, windows and parish chests. Many of these are Victorian and later reproductions, but some are much older. Jane Geddes illustrates English examples of the | X | mark from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, single Xs from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and X or lozenge marks along straps from the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

Timothy Easton relates that, in 1992, a Suffolk blacksmith told him that the | X | represents the barring of entry between the door or window jambs. However, this evidence of meaning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century could as well be a modern rationalisation of a practice as an articulation of traditional understanding, although it seems plausible.<sup>7</sup>



CW 2017 ©

*Victorian Latch in the Church of St. John Maddermarket, Norwich*

<sup>5</sup> Clive Lloyd (2007) *The Arts and Crafts of Napoleonic and American Prisoners of War 1756-1816*, Antique Collectors' Club, pp. 117 & 119.

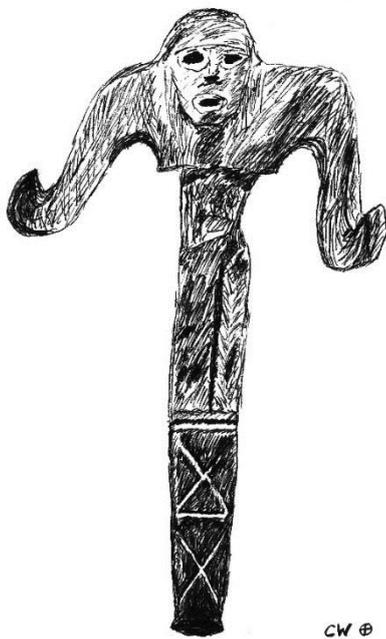
<sup>6</sup> Jane Geddes (1999) *Medieval Decorative Ironwork in England*, Society of Antiquaries.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Easton (1999) Ritual marks on Historic Timber, *Weald and Downland Open Air Museum Journal*, Spring 1999, pp. 22-8; \_\_\_\_ (2000) Ritual marks on Historic Timber, *3<sup>rd</sup> Stone*, 38, pp. 11-17; \_\_\_\_ (2015) Apotropaic Symbols and Other Measures for Protecting Buildings against Misfortune, [in](#)

# Older Metalwork

Archaeology presents earlier examples, such as late Medieval bronze purse bars,<sup>8</sup> iron pins,<sup>9</sup> bracelets from Viking silver hoards,<sup>10</sup> and Anglo-Saxon bronze strap ends.<sup>11</sup>

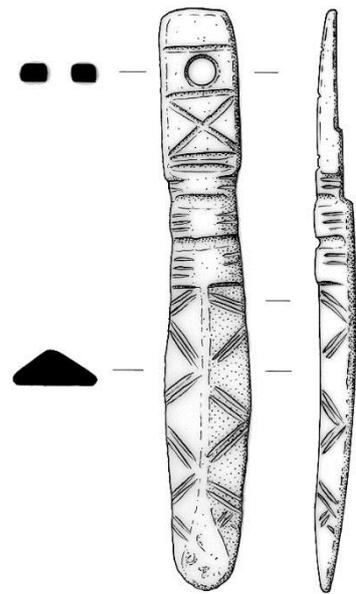
Tantalizingly, very similar marks appear on some Iron-Age bronze metalwork, such as keys.<sup>12</sup> The Landesmuseum Württemberg in Stuttgart has a linch pin with, on one end, a double X and transverse lines above and



between them. The opposite end has a representation of a human head and arms, which may have been apotropaic.<sup>13</sup> One could perhaps speculate that the X may have been doubled to afford additional protection to the vulnerable nether regions of the apotropaic human!

## Bronze linch pin

Landesmuseum Württemberg (Stuttgart) A 32/17, Grabenstetten, Germany, C2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> BCE, length: 111mm



Bronze strap end  
PAS NMS-  
6BB7DB,  
Snetterton,  
Norfolk,  
C5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> CE,  
length: 49mm  
(© Norfolk  
County Council  
CC-BY-NC-SA)

Ronald Hutton (ed.) *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 39-67.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Portable Antiquities Scheme ([www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)) SUSS-295D53 and SUSS-C9EB44 (both from Sussex); Ashmolean AN1950.295, illustrated in Eleanor R. Standley (2013) *Trinkets & Charms: the use, meaning and significance of dress accessories 1300-1700*, Oxford University School of Archaeology Monographs 78, p. 63; NM.257 in Nigel Mills (2003) *Medieval Artefacts*, Greenlight, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. no. 1233, figure 101, in Dominic Tweddle (1986) *The Archaeology of York, The Small Finds: Finds from Parliament Street and Other Sites in the City Centre*, Council for British Archaeology, pp. 228-9.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. James Graham-Campbell (2013) *The Cuerdale Hoard and related Viking-Age silver and gold from Britain and Ireland in the British Museum*, BM Research Publication 185, second edition, BMP.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Portable Antiquities Scheme ([www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)) NMS-6BB7DB (C5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>) & NMS-234024 (C9<sup>th</sup>), both Norfolk; AS36 & AS37 (C9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>) in Nigel Mills (2001) *Anglo-Saxon & Viking Artefacts*, Greenlight, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. figure 691 in Helmut Birkhan, Sophie Kidd (trans.) (1999) *Kelten: Bilder ihrer Kultur / Celts: Images of their Culture*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, p. 364; RB237 (C1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup>) in Nigel Mills (2000) *Celtic & Roman Artefacts*, Greenlight, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Figure 516 in Birkhan (*op. cit.*), p. 301; [www.landmuseum-stuttgart.de/sammlungen/digitaler-katalog](http://www.landmuseum-stuttgart.de/sammlungen/digitaler-katalog) (search for 'Achsnaegel'; accessed April 2019).

## Heck Posts ('Witch Posts')

A heck, spere or speer is a partition in a timber-frame building. It is a feature of many cottages, farmhouses and inns built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with a passage across the building, linking front and back doors. Two rooms lead off this passage, and the hearth in the main room is protected from draughts by a short heck, ending in a stout post supporting a cross-beam or bressummer, which in turn holds up the smoke hood of an inglenook fireplace. The heck post has often been carved or given functional additions.<sup>14</sup>

Some 20 of these heck posts (so far recorded) have a prominent X near the top, often with a series of rounded lines or billets horizontally across the post underneath. They are associated with buildings on the North York Moors (and two in Lancashire), dating from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst they are generally known as 'witch posts' today, it appears that the name was not used until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Ford relates the folk memory that these X marks were actually carved by a priest at the end of a ritual, called "laying the witch," to counteract malefic witchcraft presumed to be affecting the farm:

*"After this mysterious ceremony was over and the power of the witch was supposed to have been rendered nil, it was the custom of the Priest to cut the Roman figure X on the upright oak post which went up to the low ceiling. ... This mark cut in the post by the Priest meant that the Witch's spell could not operate for evil any further into the dwelling or beyond the post."*<sup>16</sup>

Three issues arise from this description, one being that the 'witch post' actually stood at the notional centre of the house, faced away from the passage by the heck partition, and would still have allowed any malign influence down the chimney to operate throughout the inglenook. The second is the aforementioned

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<sup>14</sup> R.W. Brunskill (1999) *Timber Building in Britain*, Second Edition, Victor Gollancz; \_\_\_\_ (2004) *Traditional Buildings of Britain: An Introduction to Vernacular Architecture and its Revival*, Third Edition, Cassell; R.H. Hayes and J.G. Rutter (1972) *Cruck-framed Buildings in Ryedale & Eskdale*, Research Report No. 8, Scarborough and District Archaeological Society.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Nattrass (1956) Witch posts and early dwellings in Cleveland, *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XXXIX, 153, pp. 136-46; Nigel Pennick (1997) *Earth Harmony: Places of Power, Holiness and Healing*, Second Edition, Capall Bann; \_\_\_\_ (2015) *Pagan Magic of the Northern Tradition: Customs, Rites, and Ceremonies*, Destiny; Nicholas Rhea (no date) *Farewell to Witchposts – Hello to Priest Marks and stiepelteken*, [www.nicholasrhea.co.uk/postgate/witchposts.html](http://www.nicholasrhea.co.uk/postgate/witchposts.html) (accessed April 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Ford (1953) *Some Reminiscences and Folk Lore of Danby Parish and District*, Horne & Son, Whitby, pp. 95-6.

problem that these posts were not associated with witchcraft, as late as the donation of examples to Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum in 1870 and 1893 by Canon J.C. Atkinson (also of Danby parish), although in 1892 he does refer to one as an "assumed" witch post, suggesting some currency by then.<sup>17</sup> The third is that the grooves on most of the known posts are very deeply incised, carved or cut with carpenters' tools, which seems unlikely for an operation carried out by a priest at the end of a ceremony (whatever the occupation of the Son of that priest's God). Similarly, the section with the X and billets stands proud of the surface of the post in several examples, in a way that suggests a thicker section was carefully worked, or indeed a section below cut away (evident in some examples), such that the operation is again unlikely to have been the culmination of a priest's rite and, indeed, may well have been done prior to the post's installation.

However, the involvement of a priest is perhaps revealing. The late Peter Walker, writing as Nicholas Rhea, argues that if a *priest* was involved in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, then it was almost certainly a *Catholic* priest, one who was practising his faith in times of persecution at that. Rhea has researched one such priest, Father Nicholas Postgate, who walked around the Moors performing illicit masses in farmhouses from 1662 until he was arrested and executed in 1679.

Rhea considers Ford's "mysterious ceremony" to have been a blessing on the house that was to serve as a secret church, and the X mark a sign that it was thenceforth a Catholic 'safe house'.<sup>18</sup> That the X might be the mark of a house blessing makes much more sense than an apotropaic defensive device, especially as the X itself had powerful religious meanings.

Father Postgate was apparently devoted to the Five Wounds of Christ, a symbol used extensively in Catholic resistance to Protestantism, based on Jesus's hand and foot wounds at the four corners and the wound in his side, transferred to his heart, in the centre. This could, perhaps, be reduced to an X.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, the

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<sup>17</sup> Rhea (note 15); Hayes and Rutter (note 14). Note also that, whilst 'witch posts' are supposedly made of rowan, all (except reproductions) are of oak, like the rest of the house timbers. One could perhaps also speculate that the similarity of 'heck' to 'hex' may have been a factor in the naming.

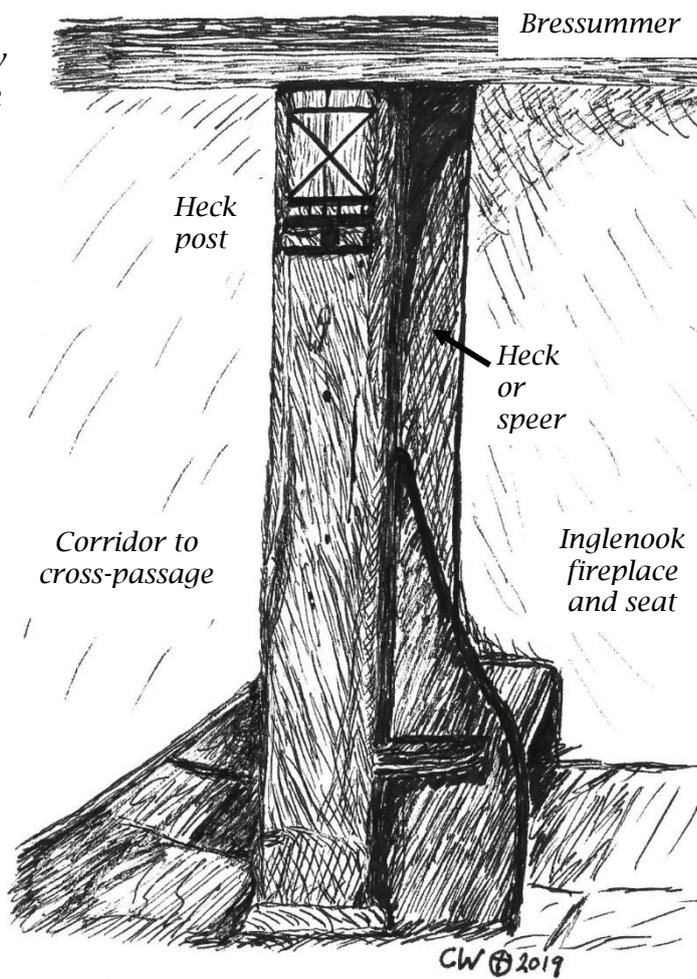
<sup>18</sup> Rhea (note 15). The distinction that Rhea makes between a *Priest* (Catholic) and a *Church Priest* (C. of E.) leaves doubt, however, as Ford (note 16) writes of a *Parish Priest* in a way that suggests a C. of E. affiliation. On the other hand, he makes no mention of Catholicism in his book, where the religious division is between Anglicans and Methodists.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

An impression of a heck post in situ, based on that in Stang End, Danby, now in Ryedale Folk Museum, Hutton-le-Hole

X could simply be the symbol of Christ, being the first letter of his name in Greek, and is so used even today as an abbreviation (e.g. Xtian, Xmas). A third possibility is considered in the next section. Whatever the meaning, if the mark was Postgate's, or used by him and a few others, it might explain why it is so localised.

However, whilst X-marked heck posts are only known from one small area of Britain, something similar is to be found across the North Sea in the eastern Netherlands and the German border districts, although in this case on the outside and so more clearly a mark of protection, at a key point of entry and of a supporting structure. In these areas, there is a tradition of marking the central post (*stiepel*), against which double barn doors close, with an X. The earliest known form, from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, is the simple X, with or without horizontal bars above and below, carved as part of the post's manufacture. These marks developed over time, with the horizontal bars becoming attached to the top and bottom of a stretched X, which has become known as an hourglass motif. Other symbols, such as lozenges, hearts, upright crosses, chalices and daisy wheels also appear, and they are often painted. What is noteworthy in addition is that these *stiepeltekens* are from predominantly Catholic districts.<sup>20</sup> Rhea suggests a link may be Douai University, where Father Postgate studied from 1621 to 1630, and which was in the Spanish Netherlands until 1714.<sup>21</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Jan Jans & Everhard Jans (1974) *Gevel - en Stiepeltekens in Oost-Nederland*, van der Loeff. See also the Dutch web-site: [www.zweerink.nl/index.php/stiepeltekens](http://www.zweerink.nl/index.php/stiepeltekens) (accessed April 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Rhea (note 15).

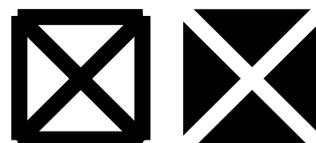
## Christian pillars?

A post or pillar with a Christian symbol at the top is actually quite common, in the form of Celtic and Anglo-Scandinavian high crosses, slab crosses and similar structures. These have been shown to represent Christ as the Tree of Life and the paradisaical source of the waters of life, in a quite visceral way, especially when rain water alters the appearance of the stone.<sup>22</sup>

Some of these monuments have quite narrow crosses, barely wider than the post, and the X-marked heck post may well have appeared similar. Whether or not the X represented the Five Wounds of Christ, or the first letter of Christ's name, it could also, or instead, have portrayed the Cross itself, and by extension, Christ in Paradise, dispensing blessing on the home. The post becomes a cross, which becomes The Cross, and the house becomes Paradise.

The X-shaped cross is unusual, but does exist as a Christian symbol, most commonly in association with St. Andrew: a late development, probably in 12<sup>th</sup> century Britain, as either a conflation of the *Chi Rho* (monogram of the first two letters of Christ in Greek) and Scottish kings' devotion to the saint, or a misinterpretation of images of St. Andrew being crucified on a tree with forking branches.<sup>23</sup>

However, an X carved into a surface can be seen in two ways: as an X, but also as the shape left standing in relief: an equal-armed cross with triangular arms.<sup>24</sup>



There is an interesting folkloric link between X-marked heck posts and one Yorkshire high cross. A tradition is recorded of hiding a crooked sixpence in a hole in the 'witch post', and a knitting needle in a groove at the top. When the butter would not turn, which was assumed to be because of witchcraft, the knitting needle was used to remove the sixpence from the hole and the coin was put in the churn, so countering the curse.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Heather Pulliam (2013) *Blood, Water and Stone: The Performative Cross*, in Jane Hawkes (ed.) *Making Histories: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Insular Art, York 2011*, Paul Watkins. On the Cross as Tree of Life in 15<sup>th</sup>-century devotional books, see Barbara Baert (2017) *Revisiting Seth in the Legend of the Wood of the Cross: Interdisciplinary Perspectives between Text and Image*, in Lorenzo DiTommaso (ed.) *The Embroidered Bible: Studies in Biblical Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha in Honour of Micheal E. Stone*, Brill, pp. 132-69.

<sup>23</sup> Ursula Hall (2006) *The Cross of St Andrew*, Birlinn.

<sup>24</sup> Crucifixes also sometimes have an X at the intersection of the arms, a result of mitred joints, as rays between the arms, or even as a specially applied mark, presumably representing Christ.

<sup>25</sup> Natrass (note 15).

Joseph Ford describes (Young) Ralph's Cross, which stands roughly at the centre of the North York Moors, near the head of Rosedale, and is now the emblem of the North York Moors National Park. The story goes that a farmer by the name of Ralph found the body of a penniless traveller, dead from exposure, and was so moved that he had a stone cross erected on the spot to indicate that shelter was within reach (an inn was just a few miles away). He had the head of the cross carved with a hollow so that passers-by might deposit coins, of which other penniless wayfarers might have use.<sup>26</sup> The story seems somewhat unlikely, particularly as the cross stands nine feet tall,<sup>27</sup> but the placing of coins in a cross-marked pillar, for use in need, is resonant!<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the original purpose of these X-marked posts, knowledge of it seems to have declined in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the end of that century, heck posts were often removed in rebuilding work and reused as lintels in out-buildings, where a number of the preserved examples were actually found.<sup>29</sup>

## Possible Meanings

As well as being purely decorative, as for instance on modern jewellery or diaper-work borders on 18<sup>th</sup>-century porcelain, X marks may have a variety of purposes and meanings, some of which have been mentioned above. In the modern world, the mark can mean both a positive choice (on a ballot slip) and a rejection and barring, as well as where to click to close a computer file, an abbreviation for 'ex...', and a symbol of something unknown. The categories below overlap too: the same thing can, at one and the same time, be decorative, practical, symbolic, devotional and protective!

## Practical

There are practical reasons for using an X mark or lattice. It can give a better grip, and so is useful on handles and anything else that has to be held, such as bone scoops and fids.

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<sup>26</sup> Ford (note 16). See also: [www.northyorkmoors.org.uk/visiting/see-and-do/land-of-myths-and-legends](http://www.northyorkmoors.org.uk/visiting/see-and-do/land-of-myths-and-legends) (accessed April 2019).

<sup>27</sup> North York Moors National Park (1981) *The North York Moors: A Guide to the North York Moors National Park*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> Both involve taking the coins out again, charged in a sense with the power of the Cross, and so differ from the (largely) modern phenomenon of the coin tree.

<sup>29</sup> Hayes and Rutter (note 14).

Stonemasons and carpenters use a variety of marks to ensure their materials are cut, shaped and assembled correctly. One of these is what has become known as the ‘butterfly cross’, which looks like a stretched *dagaz* rune (see below), but is used to align the work with respect to plumb lines and levels.<sup>30</sup>

Craftspeople also have identifying marks, although the X and its derivatives are too abundant and simple to serve well in that way. On the other hand, the X is a traditional way of signing for those who cannot write, a way of making one’s mark.

The X is a precise way of identifying a spot, whether on a treasure map or a ‘spot the ball’ competition. It is also an efficient way of covering a space and can be seen in such crafts as cross stitch, basketry, thatching and metalwork (e.g. lattice screens). It is used in this way in decoration, such as diaper work on ceramics, and illustration, in the form of cross-hatching. Similarly, it provides an efficient means of drainage if incised, as with stone fruit presses, still to be found in some parts of the countryside.<sup>31</sup>

## Symbolic

Perhaps the X’s most obvious meaning after the negative is as a sign of a kiss, a token of love and affection. This is connected to its sense of a gift or exchange, in turn linked to the *gyfu* rune (see below). It can be symbolic of skill as well. Craftspeople will add decoration to a piece of work simply because they can. Leaving a blank space would look less skilled, less professional. The X also stands directly for the number 10, as the Roman numeral, which is the origin of the Latin word for the X-shaped cross, *decussata*.

Politically, the X is most common as the Scottish saltire or cross of St. Andrew, and stands for Scottish identity. It also appears in heraldry, from which come the saltires on some municipal flags in Brabant, although others derive from the Burgundy Cross, as do Spanish military flags, as this was the flag of the Spanish Netherlands, adopted from the Duke of Burgundy, whose emblem honoured St. Andrew, although it also resembles a Carolingian crossed-branch motif.<sup>32</sup> The Irish St. Patrick saltire is a modern concoction by the Order of St. Patrick (established in 1782).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Easton (1999/2000: note 7).

<sup>31</sup> See for instance <https://northyorkmoorsnationalpark.wordpress.com/2016/10/17/historical-curious-and-curious-patterns/> (accessed April 2019).

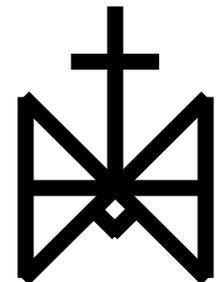
<sup>32</sup> E.g. seen on a C9<sup>th</sup> silver mount found at Roudham, Norfolk: PAS ([www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)) NMS-ADCA16.

<sup>33</sup> See *Flags of the World*: [www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/index.html](http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/index.html) (accessed April 2019).

## Religious

As regards marks used on objects in Western Europe, the religious connotations are predominantly Christian. The Cross is the central image of Christianity, but usually the upright, Latin cross, or various equal-armed crosses. The X-shaped cross *decussata* is uncommon, save as the cross of St. Andrew.<sup>34</sup>

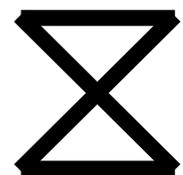
As mentioned above, the first letter of Christ in Greek is the X and can indicate the whole name, as can the first *two* letters, as the *Chi Rho* monogram, used by the Emperor Constantine as a battle standard. A further monogram is that of St. Michael, which, using the Greek characters, is as shown to the right, but which can be found in simplified forms.<sup>35</sup>



Although not necessarily appearing as an X, the Five Wounds of Christ form a *quincunx* pattern (see below), which does appear to have been used as a symbol of Catholic sympathies following the Reformation, appearing subtly above doors at well-to-do, recusant family houses such as Benthall Hall in Shropshire.<sup>36</sup> This may also be the origin of the line, “Five for the symbols at your door” in the traditional song, *Green grow the rushes, O!*<sup>37</sup>

Lattice work survives in Medieval church door ironwork in some places, and Jane Geddes interprets it as representing the fence or gate that shuts off the Paradise of Eden. For Christians, Paradise is regained in Christ’s Cross and, by extension, in the Church (which lies behind the doors on which is the lattice).<sup>38</sup> More generally, the locations of X marks on church ironwork would seem both to keep out evil in the sign of Christ and to mark the space within as Christ’s.

Lastly, the X with a horizontal bar on the top and the bottom can also be seen as a pair of triangles with their points touching. These are the same triangles as conjoin in the Star of David, but separated out so that they just meet, the point of contact being the “straight and narrow gate” between Earth and Heaven, i.e. Christ and the Church.<sup>39</sup>



<sup>34</sup> Ursula Hall (2006) *The Cross of St Andrew*, Birlinn.

<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Ireland (2018) *Saint Michael the Archangel in pre-Reformation England, and implications for the ‘butterfly cross’ graffito*, *Raking Light*: <https://rakinglight.co.uk> (accessed April 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Lydia Greeves (2008) *Houses of the National Trust*, Anova, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> John Timpson (1987) *Timpson’s England*, Jarrold, pp. 7 & 100.

<sup>38</sup> Jane Geddes (1999) *Medieval Decorative Ironwork in England*, Society of Antiquaries.

<sup>39</sup> Derek Bryce (1994) *Symbolism of the Celtic Cross*, Llanerch, p. 53.

## Magical and Apotropaic

There are three basic, overlapping ways to protect someone or something magically, and the X mark can be used in all three:

- 1) direct opposition, blocking or repulsion, and anti-aggressive action (e.g. binding and trapping);
- 2) deflection: turning aside the effect or attention, hiding and being 'invisible';
- 3) blessing: a magical immune-system boost, an overwhelming positive spiritual influence, or simply a good-luck charm.

The single | X | marks on bone scoops have generally been seen as wishes for good luck, whereas on metalwork they are seen as barring entry.<sup>40</sup> The 'butterfly crosses' (where not utilitarian construction marks) may bar entry, confound malefic attack in an endless knot, or perhaps invoke protection from the *dagaz* rune (see below) or St. Michael, as a simplified version of his monogram, which is a well-attested protective mark.<sup>41</sup>

It may well be that people also saw craftsmen's marks, on timber, stone and metal, as symbolic of the mysteries of a skilled craft, beyond the ken of the uninitiated, and then used them as protective marks. Done with intent and belief, there is no reason to suppose they would not be effective.

Just as the X is a practical way of covering a space in terms of craft or drawing, so too in magic. Performing an operation at the centre and at each of the four corners of a piece of land or a house (whether or not calling on the directional powers), so forming an X, seems to be a widespread technique, seen for instance in Europe and in the African-American tradition of natural magic, *Hoodoo*. In the latter case it has been labelled '*quincunx* magic'.<sup>42</sup>

The *quincunx* is a pattern of five dots (as used on a die) which can be represented as an X and by extension a lozenge or lattice pattern. One of its foremost exponents was Sir Thomas Browne, who wrote an entire short book on it.<sup>43</sup> The *quincunx*, along with its extension, the lattice or network, is an alchemical framework, symbolic of the formation of the material world, an illusion which

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<sup>40</sup> Smaldon (note 4); Easton (note 7).

<sup>41</sup> Ireland (note 35).

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Yronwode (1994-2017) *Hoodoo in Theory and Practice: An Introduction to African-American Root Work*, [www.luckymojo.com/hoodoo.html](http://www.luckymojo.com/hoodoo.html) (accessed April 2019); Nigel Pennick (2015) *Pagan Magic of the Northern Tradition: Customs, Rites, and Ceremonies*, Destiny.

<sup>43</sup> Sir Thomas Browne (1658) *The Garden of Cyrus*; see Chris Wood (2018) An Alchemical Nexus in Seventeenth-Century Norwich, *Quest* 195, September 2018, pp. 13-22.

we make real. Interestingly, cross-hatching is a drawing technique which creates an illusion that effectively becomes real (depending on scale). Our intent to make something real is also indicated by putting our (X) mark on something.

## Runes

Angular marks are easily seen as runes. However, it is easier to carve straight lines than curves, so an attempt to carve an infinity symbol is likely to resemble a *dagaz* rune. The runes conventionally proposed as lying behind X marks and ‘butterfly crosses’ (and patterns in brickwork) are as follows, with a modern interpretation of their meanings, based on the rune poems.

	<i>Gyfu/gebo</i> Gift, generosity, reciprocity, consecration		<i>Ing/Inguz</i> Prosperity, well-being, fertility, the hearth
	<i>Dagaz</i> Day and night, sunlight, protection, invisibility <sup>44</sup>		<i>Othala/Odal</i> (Ancestral) home, prosperity, family

There always has to be some doubt as to the appropriateness of modern meanings, even based on the rune poems, to past usage. Meanings have changed. For instance, Stephen Mitchell analyses Norse charm inscriptions and shows that the rune *nauthiz* was once associated with the dead and ghosts, rather than the sense of need conveyed by the rune poems.<sup>45</sup> Evidence from Early-Modern grimoires in Iceland, a country with a strong runic heritage, suggests that the letter-runes were by then a minor part of magic, that this usage was the preserve of a few, and that their shapes varied considerably.<sup>46</sup> This would not rule out folk-usage, but meanings would then be even less certain. Furthermore, even if X marks do derive ultimately from runes (and the ‘Celtic’ bronze items also militate against), that does not imply a *direct* link.

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<sup>44</sup> Thanks to Val Thomas for pointing out this last meaning. The rune can be seen as a vanishing point.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell (2008) The n-Rune and Nordic Charms, in Audur G. Magnúsdóttir, Henrik Janson, Karl G. Johansson, Mats Malm & Lena Rogström (eds.) "*Vi ska alla vara välkomna!*" Nordiska studier tillägnade Kristinn Jóhannesson, Meijbergs Arkiv för Svensk Ordforskning, pp. 219-29.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Alan Smith (2015) *Icelandic Magic: Aims, Tools and Techniques of The Icelandic Sorcerers*, Avalonia.

Certainly, the dating of bone scoops and heck posts would seem to rule out any direct link to runes, although both *gyfu* and *dagaz* may well lie in the background, as the precursor to the use of the X as a symbol of a kiss (*gyfu*) and as the likely precursor to German and Dutch shutter decoration (*dagaz*).<sup>47</sup> One could speculate that Dutch *stiepelteken* may derive from *gyfu* and that they may come from the same source as inspired the Yorkshire carved heck posts, but that is not the same as saying that the heck posts were carved with the rune in mind, especially if Christian symbolism was intended.

However, as practitioners, we use what we have before us. The X mark has had and still does have a multitude of meanings and uses worldwide. If our magic draws upon one source, and the X mark connects with that source, for us, then it is entirely appropriate to make, use and consecrate that mark with that understanding. However, if the mark in question was made by someone else, perhaps a long time ago, then we need to be aware that the maker and user may well have had very different things in mind, if only because that could affect our magic today.

## Conclusion

It is important to avoid the assumption that people in the past would necessarily have interpreted or used the X mark (or any other come to that) in the same way as us, or indeed that the mark would necessarily have had only one interpretation and use, not only in different contexts, but even in similar ones. My carpenter's mark may be your *dagaz* rune or someone else's simplified protective glyph of St. Michael. Decoration can also be functional – practically, religiously or magically. We must not back-project our assumptions, nor dismiss possibilities out-of-hand based on those modern assumptions. What matters in use is intent and the intent of people in the past cannot be assumed.

As regards our use of the X mark today, its origins do not necessarily matter. If to you it is a simple mark of exclusion or symbolic of a kiss, an endless knot, a lattice-work symbol of the establishment of order over chaos, the rune *gyfu* or *dagaz*, or the sign of St. Andrew, St. Michael or even Christ, the mark can be used on that basis, with appropriate intent and invocation. It has always been thus, which is one reason the meanings of symbols change!

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<sup>47</sup> Pennick (note 42).