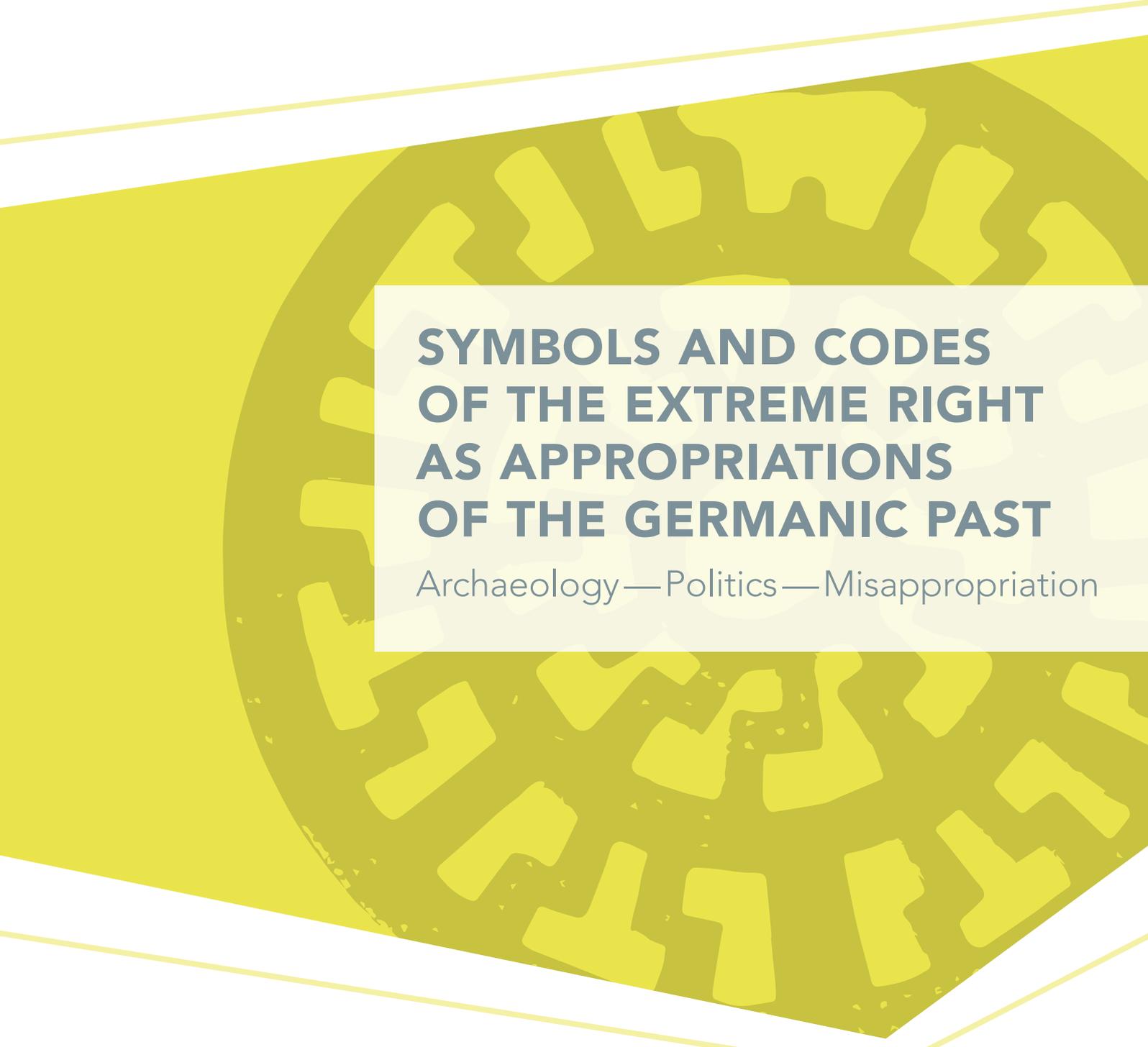


EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR SCHOOLS
"GERMANIC TRIBES. ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES"



**SYMBOLS AND CODES
OF THE EXTREME RIGHT
AS APPROPRIATIONS
OF THE GERMANIC PAST**

Archaeology — Politics — Misappropriation

Exhibition

September 2020 until March 2021 in the Museum of
Prehistory and Early History, Berlin; May to October 2021,
LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn.

Archaeology—Politics—Misappropriation

Archaeology and history have been at the center of Extreme Right attention since the end of the nineteenth century, when the *völkische* movement became a powerful political force in Germany. The movement followed the racist definition of the term *Volk* (people) – hence the name – and attracted activists on the extreme right of the political spectrum. These people agitated against democracy, intended to establish an authoritarian state, and spread an ideology steeped in Antisemitism and conspiracy theories.

The Museum of Prehistory and Early History in Berlin itself was a site of conflict between factions of opposing political camps again and again. For instance, University of Berlin Professor of Archaeology Gustav Kossinna repeatedly attacked the work of Museum Director Carl Schuchhardt. Kossinna defined archaeology as a “preeminently national academic discipline” and therefore used it for identifying alleged Germanic characteristics. In trying to establish a historical continuum between the traits of Germanic tribes and his ideas about contemporary Germans, he did not even shy away from willfully misinterpreting archaeological finds that were much older, declaring them as evidence of “ancient Germanic cultural supremacy.”

Another example for co-opting archaeology in the museum can be found during National Socialism. At first, museum director Wilhelm Unverzagt tried to avoid aligning the museum with the politics of the Nazis, but eventually he surrendered: The museum collaborated in the making of the propaganda film *The German Past Comes Alive* (1936). The movie documented an archaeological excavation of a Germanic settlement on the so-called Bärhorst, close to Berlin, and the findings were used in Nazi propaganda. Heinrich Himmler, as *Reichsführer-SS* one of the most powerful men in Nazi Germany, served as the patron for this collaboration. In return for its falling in line, the museum received the necessary funds for the Bärhorst excavation.

Today, archaeology continues to be utilized for ideological purposes by the Extreme Right. A prominent example is the so-called black sun, a symbol that can be found among groups of the Extreme Right across the globe. The black sun is often used instead of the swastika, whose display is prohibited in Germany and other countries. Archaeological models for the contemporary sun were bronze ornamental discs worn by women on their belts—but most likely by Merovingian women of the seventh and eighth century CE, and not Germanic women, who had lived at least three centuries earlier. The SS used the symbol in a floor ornament when it remodeled the Wewelsburg into a castle for its leaders, thus referring to its “Germanic heritage.” It remains unclear, however, which exact meaning the Nazis attributed to the symbol. Perhaps this lack of definition explains why the black sun is so widely used today: For the Extreme Right, it seems to suffice that the Nazis interpreted it as Germanic—even though historical fact has proven them wrong. What is clear is that by using the black sun, Neo-Nazis worldwide can identify with both National Socialists and Germanic tribes.

Activism of the Extreme Right

“The goal is a cultural revolution from the right, the means are the politics of history and an indirect influence of public opinion. Whoever interprets history gets to deliver a plausible narrative about how our present day society evolved – and thus exerts a lasting impact on political awareness.”¹

1 Karl Banghard, *Nazis im Wolfspelz: Germanen und der rechte Rand*. Wuppertal: Verlag de Noantri, 2016, p. 10



Image 1: Alexander Langsdorff, Curator at the Museum of Prehistory and Early History, explains the symbol of the swastika on a Germanic urn (ca. 1st century CE) in the propaganda film *The German Past Comes Alive* (1936).



Image 2: Floor ornament in the Wewelsburg.
Courtesy of Kreismuseum Wewelsburg



Image 3: Bronze ornamental disk (ca. 6th/7th century CE). Found in Balingen, Baden-Württemberg. Berlin State Museums, Museum of Prehistory and Early History.
Photo: Claudia Plamp



Image 4: Members of the Extreme Right displaying the symbol of the black sun during a rally.
Photo: Roland Geisheimer

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Activities

- 1 Describe image 1 and discuss how the archaeological artifact is presented and by whom.
- 2 Compare and contrast images 2–4. Which meaning did the symbol have and how was it used? Discuss any paradoxes and inconsistencies you find.
- 3 Re-read the quotation by Karl Banghard and relate it to the images. Discuss with your group which role symbols like swastika, black sun, or others you know of (conduct your own research if you want!) play among groups of the Extreme Right.