



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

---

Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem

Sinister Handed

ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

# Sinister Handed

---

First Edition  
2020  
Prepared by



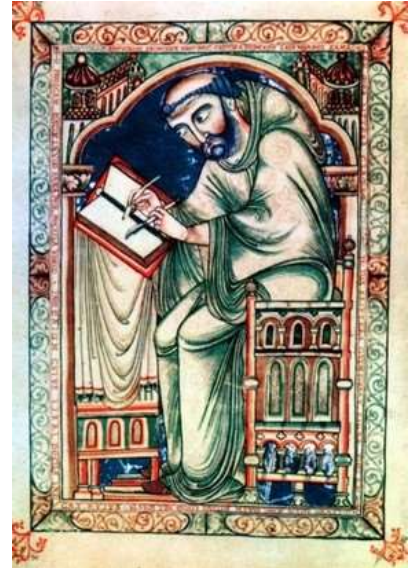
Dr. Chev. Peter L. Heineman, GOTJ  
2020 Avenue B  
Council Bluffs, IA 51501  
Phone 712.323.3531 • [www.plheineman.net](http://www.plheineman.net)

---

# Table of Contents

Introduction ..... 1  
Origins ..... 2  
Wearing a Sword ..... 3  
Spiral Staircases ..... 4  
Customs ..... 4

## INTRODUCTION



## Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>

In human biology, **handedness** is the better, faster, or more precise performance or individual preference for use of a hand, known as the **dominant hand**. The incapable, less capable or less preferred hand is called the **non-dominant hand**. Right-handedness is the most common form, and about 90% of the world's population is right-handed. Handedness is often defined by which hand one writes with, as it is fairly common for people to prefer to do some tasks with each hand. There are examples of true mixed-handedness; however, it is rare, with most people preferring one hand for most purposes.

Most of the current research would suggest that left handedness has an epigenetic marker, a combination of genetics, biology and the environment.

Because the vast majority of the population is right-handed, many devices are designed for use by a right-handed person, which makes their use by left-handed people more difficult. In many countries across the world, left-handed people are or were required to write with their right hand.

The list of famous lefties inevitably goes back deep into history, to Charlemagne or Leonardo da Vinci. But it was only in the last few decades that being left-handed ceased to be a real problem for many people, and instead became something that could be celebrated.



# Origins

*Sinister* comes from a Latin word meaning “on the left side,” and while the earliest uses of the word in English—dating from the 14th century—pertain to some measure of evil, foreboding, or malevolence, others retain the Latin meaning of “left”.

The French word for “right or straight,” *droit*, gives us our word *adroit*, with a meaning similar to *dexterous*. The parallel is carried on by other words. The French word for “left,” *gauche*, is used in English to mean “lacking social grace” (“it’s considered *gauche* to arrive without a gift for the host”); a synonym of *gauche*, also from French, is *maladroit* (“a *maladroit* attempt to express his condolences”), which again utilizes the French word *droit*. And of course, our word *right* is used to mean “correct,” “true,” or “ethically sound” (“a *right* answer”; “didn’t have the *right* address”; “the *right* thing to do”).

The historical association of *sinister* with evil or backwardness is balanced linguistically by the fact that *dexter*, the Latin word meaning “on the right side,” comes with a largely positive connotation that survives throughout its linguistic descendants.

In the Stone Age, or Neolithic times, tools were made of stone or natural objects such as wood, bone, or antlers. In the Bronze Age (4000 BC), man learned to smelt and alloy copper with tin. Around 2000 BC, man discovered how to make iron. Throughout these thousands of years, archeological evidence shows that people had not preference for right or left. However, during the late Bronze Age a significant increase in right-handedness is shown in tools, and this trend increased during the Iron Age.

The association of the directional left with evil is likely attributed to the dominance of right-handed people within a population, and consequently the awkwardness of motions made from the left side of the body.

Such darkness wasn’t always attached to that side, however. The Ancient Celts, for example, worshipped the left side, associating it with femininity and the fertile womb. But beginning with the appearance of Eve on Adam’s left side in accounts of Genesis, the Christian tradition finds instances of the left side being pinned to immorality.

In the 20th century, anthropologists and psychologists identified left-handedness as a biological anomaly, one associated with deviancy but that could be corrected away with behavioral reinforcement.

The Romans were responsible for a lot of anti-left customs. They were the most militantly right-handed people in history. Romans invented the right handed handshake, the fascist salute, and that right to left alphabet. However, from early Republican days up to the end of the 2nd Century AD, Roman soldiers almost

## Biblical

## References

The complete concordance of the Bible has more than 1600 references to the hand, most of which are in praise, or at least approval, of the right hand. The psalms contain over 25 favorable references to the right hand. Similar sentiments can be found in both the Torah and Koran. In Matthew 6, we are cautioned, “*Let not thy left hand know what the right hand doeth,*” and in Matthew 25, “*He shall sit the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left... Then he shall say unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.*” It is only in Judges (chapter 3) that one finds any real approval of the left hand. The Benjamites, whose name is derived from Ben Yamin, which means son of the right hand, had a number of left-handed warriors whose deeds are recorded. When fighting the Israelites, the 26,000 Benjamites had among them 700 left-handers, every one of whom, *could sling stones at a hair breadth and not miss.*” They must have been accurate since in the first battle this “Tribe of the Hand” slew 22,000 Israelites.



**Left-handed people** comprise only 10 percent of the population, and the preference for the left hand demonstrated by the popular minority was attributed to demonic possession, leading to accusations of witchcraft.



## Scribes

For those who lived before the invention of the printing press, writing by hand was the only way to record information. This work was almost always done by scribes, who were usually right-handed. Aside from any ideological reason for preferring right-handers, writing was a practical nuisance for a left-handed scribe – it made his life very difficult. So, many natural left-handers might have been steered away from becoming a professional scribe in the first place. In his book *Their Hands Before Our Eyes* (2008), Professor Malcolm Parkes, an authority on medieval manuscripts, points out that as that western writing involves moving from left to right, writing would have been much easier for a right-handed scribe. In addition, medieval scribes had to do this on a sloped desk using quill and ink. A left-handed scribe would have made this controlled movement with much more difficulty than a right-handed writer. A right-handed scribe would pull each stroke to the right, distributing ink onto the parchment as they went, whereas a left-handed writer had to learn to push – a more laborious movement. Problems with smearing the ink would also be frustrating. The resulting slow and laborious writing might have been impractical for a professional scribe who was paid per book, or per page.

invariably wore their swords on the right side of their bodies. This went not only for legionaries, but also auxiliary troops - both infantry and cavalry - and marines.

## Wearing a Sword

Depictions of warriors from a barbarian *numerus* (irregular company) on Trajan's Column show that even allied troops fighting alongside the Romans wore their sword on the right hip.

Roman soldiers, like most soldiers in organized militaries, invariably fought right handed. Presumably left handed recruits were simply forced to fight right handed like everyone else. Therefore, a Roman soldier always carried his shield (and spear/javelins when there weren't in use) in his left hand, and used his right hand for drawing his sword or dagger.

Since a right handed swordsman naturally draws his sword from his left hip, one may wonder why the Romans didn't do it this way. Apparently, this was so was to reduce the risk of cutting the soldier standing to one's left when drawing the sword. If a legionary mistakenly hits the soldier standing to his right with his sword, he will only bump the man's shield - whereas if he inadvertently strikes the man to his left, he will risk cutting the man's unprotected right arm or side.

Swords were worn on the right by a number of ancient soldiers that fought in tight infantry formations - including the Carthaginians, Spaniards, and other Italian peoples in addition to the Romans. Numerous contemporary artistic renditions confirm that it was also the practice of the Celtic and at least some of the Germanic and Dacian peoples with whom the Romans fought, up until the 2nd or 3rd Centuries.

With barbarian peoples, wearing the sword on the right may have held a different significance. Considering that "barbarians" in fact often fought in tight, phalanx-like formations as well (e.g. the Suebi with whom Caesar fought), this partially explains their bearing the sword on the right as well. But barbarians - at least amongst the lower classes - were not nearly as well-armed as the Romans, and swords were something of a luxury in the ranks of the common warriors. A Gaulish warrior who found himself in possession of a sword might wear it on the right so that his shield wouldn't obscure it from view - thus rendering his high-class weapon visible for friend and foe alike to see and envy.

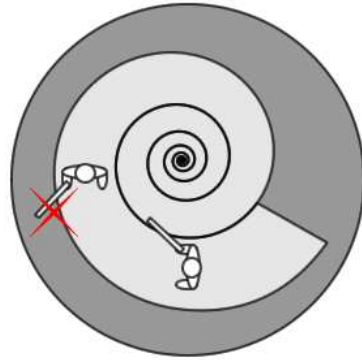
Roman soldiers appear to have been wearing their swords on the right side of the body from earliest times. Pictorial evidence suggests that it was not until the late 1st Century BC/early 1st Century AD that legionary centurions were given the privilege of conveniently wearing their swords on the left - this, along with their *vitae* (vinestaff) and *justis* (riot-baton) was one of the indicators of centurial rank.

In the 190's AD, Septimius Severus made a number of military reforms, some of which lightened the discipline in the Army. One of these reforms was to allow common legionaries and auxiliaries to wear their swords on the left side as well. Tombstones indicate that by the first decade of the 3rd Century, soldiers in every corner of the Empire had taken up this practice. The last depictions of barbarians with their swords on the right also date to the 2nd Century - suggesting that they copied their Roman neighbors in the abolition of this old custom.



## Clan Kerr

origins lie in the Scottish Borders. During the Middle Ages, it was one of the prominent border reiver clans along the present-day Anglo-Scottish border and played an important role in the history of the Border country of Scotland. The Kerrs have typically been associated with left-handedness. Andrew Ker (1471–1545), known as Dand, developed Ferniehirst into a formidable stronghold. Both Dand and his paternal grandfather, Andrew of Cessford, are believed to have been left-handed swordsmen. A left-handed mercenary warrior could command a higher fee for his services, and those who fought under the Ferniehirst and Cessford banners were encouraged to fight "ker-handed". There is an anecdotal link between the Kerrs and left-handedness. An article in the British Medical Journal around 1972 stated that about 30% of those with the surname Kerr were left-handed, compared to about 10% of the whole population. However, a 1993 study found no statistically significant increase in left-handedness among people with the family name Kerr.



# Spiral Staircases

The use of spiral staircases in medieval castles served as clever defense systems. They were almost always built with the spiral in the same direction (clockwise, when looking up from the bottom) so that the defending swordsman, who would either be coming down the stairs or backing up in reverse, could freely swing his sword. Conversely, the attacking swordsman (ascending the stairs) would have his swing blocked by the wall.

This, of course, assumed that both attacker and defender were right-handed, which most were.

Left-handed swordsmen, though rare, had the advantage of surprise when attacking out-in-the-open – they had fought (and trained against) more right-handed opponents than their adversary had fought left-handed opponents. Their attack when ascending standard spiral staircases was also not blocked by the wall. An exception were the newel, left-handed staircases of the Clan Kerr.

Ferniehirst and Cessford castles, located in Scotland, were the homes of two branches of Kerrs. In these castles, a left-handed spiral (or newel) staircase ascending anti-clockwise was built as a defense mechanism. The spiral staircase can also be seen in the battle house in Jedburgh, now called the Mary Queen of Scots House. This battle house was built by the Kerrs and lodged Mary Queen of Scots for one month while she visited the town in 1566. The reverse spiral staircase offered an advantage to a left-handed swordsman if an enemy were to gain entry into the tower.

## Customs

### Wedding Rings

It was no coincidence that the fourth finger of the left-hand was chosen for the wedding finger in 300BC. Before medical science discovered how the circulatory system functioned, people believed that a vein ran directly from the fourth finger on the left hand to the heart. Because of the hand–heart connection, they chose the descriptive name *vena amoris*, Latin for the vein of love, for this particular vein. Based upon this name, their contemporaries, purported experts in the field of matrimonial etiquette, wrote that it would only be fitting that the wedding ring be worn on this finger. By wearing the ring on the fourth finger of the left hand, a married couple symbolically declares their eternal love for each other.

### **Handshake**

Whilst Julius Caesar was left-handed it was he who instructed all of his Roman subjects to adopt the right-handed handshake. Maybe this was because it left his weapon hand free whether greeting either friend or foe. Similarly it is thought that a reason for preferring the right-hand greeting is that this generally was the weapon hand thus clasping them together allowed neither party an advantage on meeting for the first time.

### **Driving on the Left/Right**

The origin of the rule of the road dates back to how people travelled in violent feudal societies. As most people are right handed it made sense to carry any protective weapon in this hand. When passing a stranger on the road, it would be safer to walk on the left, so ensuring that your weapon was between yourself and a possible opponent. Jousting knights would hold their lances in their right hand, therefore passing on each other's right.

Revolutionary France was to overturn this historic practice, as part of its social rethink. Their military general and self-proclaimed Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte was left handed, therefore his armies had to march on the right so he could keep his sword arm between him and the advancing enemy. From this time any part of the world that was colonized by the French would travel on the right, the rest would remain travelling on the left.

### **Politics**

The **left-right political spectrum** is a system of classifying political positions, ideologies and parties from social equality on the left to social hierarchy on the right. Generally, the left-wing is characterized by an emphasis on "ideas such as freedom, equality, fraternity, rights, progress, reform and internationalism" while the right-wing is characterized by an emphasis on "notions such as authority, hierarchy, order, duty, tradition, reaction and nationalism". The terms "left" and "right" appeared during the French Revolution of 1789 when members of the National Assembly divided into supporters of the king to the president's right and supporters of the revolution to his left. When the National Assembly was replaced in 1791 by a Legislative Assembly comprising entirely new members, the divisions continued. "Innovators" sat on the left, "moderates" gathered in the center, while the "conscientious defenders of the constitution" found themselves sitting on the right, where the defenders of the Ancien Régime had previously gathered.





ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

# **Sinister Handed**

---