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SOURCES OF MASONIC SYMBOLISM

An historical and archaeological study
by
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A paper presented before the Portland Research Lodge of Oregon No. 198 and the Victoria, B.C., Lodge of Education and Research on October 20, 1977. W.Bro. Alex Home was raised in 1925 in Sinim Lodge, Shanghai (Massachusetts Jurisdiction), which Lodge is now in Tokyo, Japan and subsequently demitted to Doric Lodge in San Francisco where in 1959 he served as Master. By invitation, he later became a full member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076 (London), the premier lodge of research, and is the only American and eleventh in seniority among the distinguished scholars constituting the membership. W.Bro. Alex Home, is a world famous scholar and author.

(The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the Author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research.)

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PART 1

You are perhaps acquainted with the standard formula they have in England - where it all began -- which defines Freemasonry as "a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols." But of course there is nothing strictly "peculiar" about our system of morality, which is only the familiar morality of the Ten Commandments and of the Sermon on the Mount. But it is the way in which we attempt to promulgate this morality, in an effort to improve ourselves, that may be said to be peculiar -- that is, by subjecting the Candidate for initiation to a progressive ritual that is full of allegory, and of symbolism. So Symbolism is in fact the heart of the matter.

And what is this Symbolism?

Well, you and all your non-Masonic friends as well are acquainted with the Square and Compasses you see on the outside of our Masonic Temples. This is recognized, without having to be told, as being an emblem of the Masonic fraternity, just as the Caduceus is the emblem of the medical profession, and the double-interlaced equilateral triangle -- the Star of David -- an emblem seen in the flag of the State of Israel, and on the outside of Jewish Temples and Synagogues.

But, to us Masons, the Square and Compasses is something more than just an emblem. We frequently practice in our Lodge Rooms, as you all know the habit of what is known as "moralizing on the Working Tools" -- the tools being, in this case, those of the stonemason, remembering that we were once Operative Masons, in the Middle Ages, using these tools in our daily work. And in this case, for example, we say that the Square, which has a right angle where the two arms join, signifies to us the obvious morality of "right conduct". And the Compasses which is capable of circumscribing circles around a central point,

teaches us similarly the need to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds toward all mankind. Thus this conjoined emblem has now become, to us, the symbol of good conduct and a good life. What was at first thought to be only a simple "emblem" has now become a "symbol", because of its higher meaning. And "meaning", in fact, is "the name of the game".

Of course we also moralize upon some of the other working tools of the Operative Mason -- the

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Plumb-line, the Level, the Trowel, the 24" Gauge or Foot-rule, the Hammer or Common Gavel, as we call it, and in England they have the additional working tools of the Chisel (which we find in America only in the York Degree of the Royal Arch Chapter), the Lewis, and the Skirret (used to lay out ground lines). Also such items as the Rough and Polished Ashlar, and even such features as the Mosiac Pavement, which we sometimes find as a floor-work pattern in some of our Lodge Rooms, especially in England, with its checker-board of black-and-white squares. Each of these furnishes us with a particular and apt moralization, suggested by its shape or use. Each of them, in fact, teaches us a particular moral lesson.

Where does all this "moralizing on the Working Tools" come from?

The earliest example of this modern habit is found, in documentary form, right around the time when our very first Grand Lodge was formed, in London, in the year 1717, thus ushering in what we now call Speculative Masonry. Yet long after, our first Book of Constitutions published in 1723, came into being, compiled by Dr. James Anderson under the sanction of Grand Lodge. In this first attempt at formally establishing a set of principles that were to guide the future progress of this institution, we find, among other things, a section outlining the method of forming a new Lodge, with the Grand Master in charge, consecrating this Lodge and installing the Officers that were going to rule it, beginning with the Worshipful Master himself. Addressing in turn, each Officer being installed, the Book of Constitutions says, "The Grand Master shall ... present him with the Instruments of his Office, .. and .. shall rehearse the short and pithy Charge that is suitable to the thing presented."

In this set of "Charges" we find the earliest formal demonstration of what we now call "moralizing on the Working Tools". But was this something new? An "innovation" introduced by the newly-formed institution of Speculative Masons? Not so, say some of our Masonic scholars, and they point to the phrase "the short and pithy Charge" -- and not simply "a short and pithy Charge" -- as indicating that this practice was already well understood, and an established institution.

In searching for the origin of this custom, and the general practice of Masonic Symbolism that is involved in it, we turn, almost inevitably, to our own predecessors -- the Operative Masons of the Middle Ages, who went about building churches and cathedrals, abbeys and priories, monasteries and convents for the Church; as well as secular buildings -- palaces for the kings, castles and Manor Houses for the landed gentry and Lords of the realm, city walls and city gates, fortifications and stone bridges -- wherever, in fact, anything had to be made out of stone.

And so we ask ourselves the natural question, whether these stonemasons, or at least some of them, could have indulged in questions of symbolism, alongside of their more practical work. But we sometimes hear it said, in response, that these were only simple workmen --working stiffs we would now

ungraciously call them -- working with their hands and their backs, with perhaps no time or inclination or talent for the more subtle exercise of their minds in the search for symbols, and the application of that search to their more prosaic daily work. All this sounds like a reasonable negative argument.

But, one day, in November, 1830, a remarkable discovery was made. In Limerick, Ireland -- possibly the place of origin of those "limericks" that used to be popular in our "poetic" literature at one time -- a stone bridge, known as Baal's Bridge, had been demolished, an ordinary brass mason's square was found, with two arms about 4" long, at right angles to each other -- a working tool obviously used by Operative Masons for testing right angles in the rectangular blocks of stone used in the work of construction. It was inscribed with the date; 1507, and this possibly indicated the date when the original bridge was built that had now been demolished.

But not the least remarkable element in this discovery was the fact that this mason's square had been dug out of what appeared to be the eastern corner of the foundation of the northern land pier of the old one. This apparently North-East Corner -- on which we symbolize so much -- together with the

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inscribed date 1507, would seem to indicate that at this early date -- more than two hundred years before the creation of our first Grand Lodge in London, and perhaps for some considerable time before that inscribed date, this North-East Corner was of some symbolic significance. For we know, from the historical records of the early constructions, that as far back as the beginning of the twelfth century, it was frequently the custom to lay foundation stones in the north-east corner of the edifice to be erected, or of some prominent feature of it, like the High Altar. Obviously, this particular location must have had some meaning -- and "meaning", as I have said, is what the word "symbolism" is all about. An act, an object, a geometrical pattern, or whatever, if it has some higher meaning than is apparent on the surface, becomes thereby a symbol, whatever it is.

But what was still more remarkable about this Baal's Bridge square was the design of a "heart" found in the corner where the two arms joined -- surely nothing that had to do with the earthly job of stonemasonry -- and the further inscription that was found on both arms of the square, and on both sides of it. If read, in the form of the familiar four-line "limerick";

'I will strive to live,
With love and care,
Upon the Level,
By the Square."

This reminds us forcibly of the question that is asked at our Closing Ceremonies: "How should Masons Meet, Act, and Part?", the answer to which is clearly reflected in this 1507 mason's square.

The sentiment has also been immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his famous Masonic poem, The Mother Lodge, where he writes of the Lodge in Lahore, India, where he had been initiated, and says:

"We met upon the Level, an' we parted on the Square,
An' I was Junior Deacon in my Mother-Lodge, out there."

So it would appear that the Operative Masons, or at least some of them, did engage in Masonic Symbolism; otherwise a Foundation Deposit, left in the

base of a stone bridge for future generations to discover, would have made no sense whatever. And the sentiment inscribed upon this particular Foundation Deposit tells its own story.

The early twelfth century previously mentioned is said to be the date when the style of Gothic Architecture came into being, all around Western Europe, as architectural historians tell us. And our own great Masonic historian -- Robert F. Gould -- who wrote a large and impressive five-volume History of Freemasonry a hundred years ago that is still being consulted today because of its authenticity and scholarship -- this Robert F. Gould was of the opinion that Masonic Symbolism actually originated in the earliest days of that peculiar Gothic style, and that the early stonemasons were well acquainted with its symbolism; even more so, he said, than they came to be in later days, when the Gothic style had come to be superseded by the Greco-Roman Renaissance style, after the Reformation of Martin Luther, about 1530, which brought in Protestant Christianity.

And that is why we now find, in numerous examples of Gothic Architecture, the conscious application of symbolical designs and sculptures, demonstrating the penchant of these early workers for symbolic expression. As one writer puts it -- I think it was John Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice* -- whoever it was that originated Gothic Architecture - and some architectural historians think that it was the Freemasons themselves that did so -- "it is quite certain," he says, "that their intention was not merely to pile up stone edifices, but to embody certain ideas in a material structure." And this, in fact, is the essence of what has come to be known as Architectural Symbolism. A striking example of this we find in Tarragona, in Spain, where a little church called San Pablo is found to show, over the altar in the East, an All-seeing Eye inscribed within a radiating equilateral triangle, a religious symbol of the Trinity --

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perhaps the forerunner of "the Letter G suspended in the East," the initial of the word God, now found generally in our Lodge Rooms. One French writer, in a book on "The Cathedral Builders," actually found, in a modern Masonic Lodge at Laval, a similar All-seeing Eye set within a large equilateral triangle, suspended in the East, with obviously analogous symbolic meaning, and which reminds us of the Old Testament Psalm: "Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him" (Ps. 33:18).

This equilateral triangle, used in France, and in Spain, and no doubt elsewhere, is perhaps in imitation of the Greek letter Delta, which is also in the form of an equilateral triangle, and which could be taken to represent the Greek initial of the word Dieux, in French, and Dies, in Spanish, both of them meaning God, as you of course know. And thus the connection between this Greek Letter D and our English Letter G may therefore be more than just a coincidence. In the Scottish Rite, we also find the equilateral triangle enclosing the Tetragramaton, the Hebrew four letters standing for the Name of God -- YHVH --- but this is also an old religious symbol.