

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

Presented March 2009



A Point within a Circle

by

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Lodge of Education and Research

March 2009

Let me state clearly from the beginning that I am not a philosopher. I am more of a down to earth understanding the basics kind of a Mason. And that is no truer than in my investigation and paper tonight on the topic of a point within a circle. I have read through many papers on this topic, some of which are easy to understand while others confusing. Our main source of references tends now to be from the internet. And much of what I have read has come from that source. [On March 17th, 2009, when ‘googling’ “*Point within a Circle*” in 0.27 seconds found 13,400,000 sites.]

This paper is not an academic study. It is a collection of some thoughts that I have after secondary research on the topic and which will I hope give you a greater understanding to this symbol.

We read of symbols in our ritual often but that does relate to us the myriad of meanings this symbol has had and the meaning it gives to us today. Perhaps you will conclude as I have that the point within a circle is the greatest of all our masonic symbols. Its hidden meanings and extensions are truly absorbing. It may make you realise that our ritual can sometimes be considered like concentrated orange juice, so small and rich that one can only take a sip at a time to appreciate the taste. Taking too much would give us the taste but does not quench our thirst. By adding water, - in this case, time for further study - we get a better appreciation of its flavour – a better appreciation of the meaning.

My paper will begin with the early understandings of the point within a circle as know in ancient cultures. The second section will deal with the geometric magic of the circle. Its impact on our operative masons could have been as divine knowledge, the likes of which the stonemasons would know the “how” of what helps them in their constructions, but not necessarily the “why” does it work out as it does. Its impact however on the ability of building tall buildings which did not fall, is in those days remarkable. The third section talks about the various ways we find the point within a circle in ritual and the meanings given.

Finally I trust you will note through all of this how the circle and its point has come to be what I consider the greatest of the symbols shown us in Freemasonry.

By definition a circle is a plane figure, bounded by a single curve line called its circumference. It is created by a marker at the end of a piece of string creating a line (circumference) which is always equidistant from a fixed point, known as the centre. In

creating a circle we divide a plane into three areas, the area inside the circle, the area outside the circle and the boundary between the two.

Our early ancestors saw a circle in their daily observance of the sun. It gave light and warmth to all; it was essential for the reproduction of plants, and therefore necessary for life. It is not too difficult to realize that our early civilizations used the shape of the sun, the circle, as having significance to them. It was for many the only natural circle in nature their perceived. [The moon was changing its shape as it circled the earth.]

The circle has neither a beginning nor an ending. It is this aspect that made it a symbol of the Deity and of eternity. Because the circle is created by the compasses, so it might follow that the compasses were valued because they could draw the perfect circle.



The Ancient of Days – William Blake. 1794

-- denoting the creator's aspects of eternity combined with perfection

My very short summaries from early civilizations really need a paper written on each. I trust what I now speak will give but the flavour of the significance of the circle in these cultures.

In Ancient Egyptian times, the sun god, Ra, was represented by a circle, as was Osiris. Osiris was the “Lord of all things”, and Isis, known as the Divine Mother, was also symbolized in part by a circle. So we read that the divine union of the two sexes is represented by the sacred hieroglyph of the Point within a Circle.

In Ancient India and in Hinduism Rama, identified as the perfect man, dwelt in all humans as a higher self. His wife Sita, symbolized the transformation of the lower emotions into the higher emotions. When these were joined, they represent the dual sexuality of the Deity, and again portrayed by the Point within a Circle.

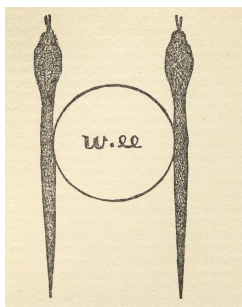
In ancient China, Tao is an ancient religion which comes from the Taoist work, Tao-te Ching translated as *Way and Moral Principle Classic*. Taoism is more generally understood to mean *The Way of the Universe*. In Taoism we find the duality of Spirit and Matter, while Yin and Yan represent earth and heaven and together the dual sexuality of the Deity and all of the creation that is again symbolized by the representation of the Point within a Circle.

In Judaism, we learn that the ineffable name IHOH and read backwards gives us two Hebrew words Ho and Hi representing *He* and *She*. We are informed of this in degrees in Scottish Rite. The deity was considered both male and female – the Male and Female Principle, equivalent to the symbolism by the Point within a Circle.

The symbol is found in stone monuments. when one is looking down on these monuments of stone, the symbol would be a circle with a point at its centre. There is now the point within a circle becoming to mean birth as the central stone represents the phallus while the circle the female generative principle. [All ancient references from Falconer, W. M. D. – The Point within a Circle]

[ref: www.theamsonictrowel.com/books/the_square_and_compasses_falconer]

In Egypt the symbol represented the Power and Wisdom of the Creator and was represented by two cobras placed either side of a circle. Here we see that transformation into the diagram that is often accompanied on tracing boards, that of a circle with two vertical parallel lines.

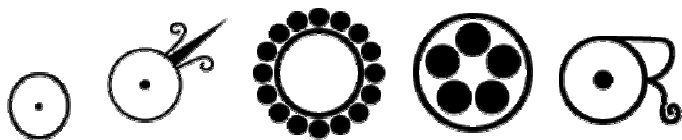


From Encyclopedia of Freemasonry – A. Mackey

Egyptian symbol circle with two serpents supporting and parallel. The circle being the collective people of the world, while the two serpents protectors are the power and wisdom of the creator. Symbols within the circle represent Alpha and Omega, the Egyptian's omnipotent God

In the Ancient cultures, the circle with its point has represented the deity, the sun, birth, and creation. That it had many translations gives us Masons more of an understanding why it was placed in our ritual work and remains there today. But how did it travel from there to the early symbols of the operative masons?

Before we move to the operative Masons a small detour to alchemists of old. The symbol for gold was a point within a circle. Gold is one of the seven metals of alchemy (gold, silver, mercury, copper, lead, iron & tin). For the alchemist, it represented the perfection of all matter on any level, including that of the mind, spirit, and soul. The symbol for gold could also be used to represent the sun in astrology. [Several alchemists' symbols for gold.]



By medieval times the symbol was well known. I believe however its meaning from ancient cultures and by alchemists was not what our operative stonemasons found useful, but rather the circle in geometry became the powerful mechanism through which the

operative masons were able to build so effectively. In geometry, -and remember we speak of geometry and masonry being synonymous terms - the circle becomes the transportation from theory to practice. Masters of Masons had secrets, one of which was the understanding of basic geometry to create accurate 90° angles by using a compasses and straight ruler.

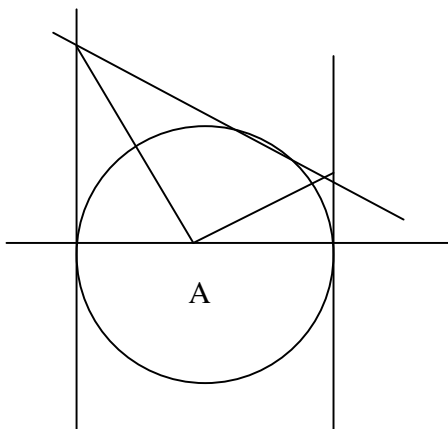
Euclid in his works developed theorems and propositions which built upon each other to understand the science of lines and circles. A point had no dimension, a line one dimension, and a plane two dimensions.

You may recall the interesting paper presented by a Past Grand Master of Alberta, M. W. Bro. Malcolm Berry a few years ago when he talked about the simple knowledge that a circle and straight line can produce an exact angle of 90° . With simple compasses and a straight edge, you can produce a perfect 90° easily.

Directions: Draw a circle. Draw a line through the centre of the circle - (diameter). Place a point on the semicircle above the diameter. Connect that point to each end of the diameter. The angle subtended at the circumference is equal to 90° . This is an extension to the theorem which states that an angle subtending at the centre is twice the angle at the circumference. Since the angle of a straight line is 180° , it follows then that the angle at the circumference is 90° . The Master of Masons needed only the compasses and a straight edge in his hands to produce this angle wherever he wanted.

But even more interesting is the use of two parallel lines also to draw an angle of 90° .

Diagram below shows the construction. Draw a circle and draw the diameter through the centre. Draw two parallel lines at either end of the diameter and perpendicular to it. Above the diameter, draw a tangent to the circle which also intersects both parallel lines. From those two intersections, draw straight lines to the centre of the circle. The angle at the centre (A) is 90° . (see diagram below)



A Master had to produce at any time a perfect 90 degree angle, on the floor of the foundation, on a verticle stone, and on his trestle board. It could be surmised that our

operative Masons saw the importance of the point within a circle more of a practical nature than the mythical nature of our ancient civilizations.

Let's now move to our ritual and the actual words and explanations. You will find reference to the point within a circle in both the EA degree and the MM degree.

Some references:-

“The point represents an individual Brother; the Circle is the boundary line, beyond which he is never to suffer his passions, prejudices or interests to betray him on any occasion.” *Washington State ritual*

Or...

“In all regular lodges there is a point within a circle from which a Freemason cannot err,...and while a Freemason keeps himself thus circumscribed, he cannot err. *GL New Zealand ritual.*

Or...

From the English Constitution reference is made to this symbol in the opening of a MM lodge speaking about lost secrets...

Q.: Where do you hope to find them?

A.: With the centre

Q.: What is a centre?

A.: A point within a circle, from which every part of the circumference is equidistant

Q.: Why with the Centre?

A.: That being a point from which a MM cannot err.

[<http://www.lodgemichael.org>]

Add to the circle two parallel lines and we find in the BC Ancient Work:-

In ancient times Ls were dedicated to K.S., because he was our first M.E.G.M. In modern times, Ls. are dedicated to St. J. the B. and St. J. the E. who were eminent patrons of Fmy. and since their time there is represented in every regular and well-governed L. a certain point within a circle, the point representing the boundary line of his duty to G. and man, beyond which he is never to suffer his passions, prejudices, or interests to betray him on any occasion.

[*British Columbia ancient*

Work p.49]

Suffice to say that we definitely understand three things. There is a point, and there is a circle about that point and in some cases two perpendicular parallel lines.

What could be other meanings? Some say the point is the VSL representing our GAOTU; some say it is GAOTU. Others say it is the brother. A point has no dimension yet one could surmise that the point is indeed a circle in itself, signifying boundaries of its own.

The brother as the centre is looking to the centre for guidance to set his boundaries: he sees the boundaries in front of him and surrounding him. If the VOSL or GAOTU is the centre then a brother could be on the circle walking always with eyes on the centre which keeps him within due bounds and to ensure he does not waiver from the path.

No matter where you stand if you accept that you are to become the epitome of your holy book, then there is a boundary for our lives which will keep us proper towards Freemasonry and its teachings and the holy book which is the guide to our faith. No reference is made to the size of the radius from centre to the circumference, because it is all measures, depending on the circumstances that we are in. Indeed it could be considered infinite.

In life our boundaries tend to be within the realm of the environment we are standing in. In a closed room we may consider the boundary the walls. Our conduct is circumscribed accordingly. In a stadium watching a sporting event our boundary may be larger but again we could posit that we keep our behaviour within due bounds just around the local vicinity in which we are placed. In the street our boundaries are what we see and experiences second by second.

Another part of the symbol is that it is sometimes references with two vertical parallel lines. In one ritual these represent the two saints of Freemasonry – St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. In another ritual they are spoken of as Moses and King Solomon, representing Power and Wisdom. Explanation of the change, see below.

These parallel lines also have been suggestive of the two equinoxes we experience each year. Each is opposite the other, St. John the Baptist for the summer equinox – June 21st and December 21st, the winter equinox, although their respective Saints Days are June 24th and December 27th.

In some diagrams the VOSL is placed above the circle, thus when one walks the pathway around the circle one touches our two saints of Freemasonry, two who have taken life of Christianity, as well as touching the VOSL – the Holy Bible - which is the book of many of our faiths - trappings of the more christian fraternity before 1813. Freemasonry was made non-denominational in 1816, and the Point within a Circle was placed in the 3rd degree. In our jurisdiction we still find this symbol in both 1st and 3rd degrees depending on the ritual used – clearly throwbacks from pre 1816 and pro 1816 (Ancient and Emulation(Canadian)). And it was at this time that the names changed from the two saints (christian) to Moses and King Solomon representing Power and Wisdom.

It has been suggested also that the circle is the pathway the initiate takes around the lodge while the two parallel lines are representative of the brethren standing in two parallel lines. Thus the brother now has the boundaries with his fellow brethren of his lodge – inferring by extension to all Masonic brethren.

Sometimes the VSL has a ladder resting on it. The following is part of catechism from 1802 with a fuller explanation of the symbol.

Q: Explain that point within a circle.

A: In all regular, well-formed Free-masons' Lodges, there is a point within a circle, in going round which, it is said the Master and Brethren cannot materially err. The circle is bounded on the North and South by two perpendicular parallel lines, that on the North is said to represent St. John the Baptist, and that on the South, Saint John the Evangelist. On the upper points of these lines and on the periphery of the circle, rests the Holy Bible, supporting Jacob's Ladder which it is said reaches to the watery clouds of Heaven. It also contains the dictates of an Unerring, Omnipotent and All-wise Being, so that while we are as conversant therein, the obedient thereto, as either of the Saints Johns were, it will bring us to Him that will neither deceive nor be deceived by us. Therefore by keeping ourselves so circumscribed, it is impossible we can materially err.

[Dyer, C. (1976) Symbolism in Craft Freemasonry, Lewis masonic, London. P. 99]

And it was then also that the explanation of the point within a circle was moved to the 3rd degree.

It was Webb the American writer, and whose ritual is still used in some areas, who wrote in his book, *The Mysteries of Freemasonry* (1871)

The point in the centre represents the Supreme Being; the circle indicates the annual circuit of the sun; and the parallel lines mark out the solstices within which that circuit is limited. The Mason, by subjecting himself to due bounds, in imitation of that glorious luminary, will not wander from the path of duty.

J. S. M. Ward saw the interpretation of the two parallel lines as representing the summer and winter solstices, which became identified by the two St. Johns, and further suggest opposites of night/day, good/evil, male/female. Thus as we travel around the circle we are constantly gaining experiences from both extremes, and becoming more educated.

In conclusion, the circle was considered by our early cultures to represent an all powerful God, of creation and of birth. Alchemists used it as a symbol for gold. Our early operative Masons were more interested in the 'magic' of the circle to create perfect right angles, while us in modern times, see it as a symbol about boundaries. It is interesting to read that the symbol, Point within a circle, identifies the point first before the circle. The point is paramount to the circle while the circle complements the point. In all cases but that of the symbol of gold, the point is critical to the translations of the symbol, while in geometry the point is essential for the creation of other geometric forms.

This symbol has gone through many changes in translation over time. Our ritual books give an explanation in a most simplified form of its meaning and we tend to accept the brief explanation on face value. The value however is really in exploring the history.

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Appendix 1

A summary of this symbol from an internet masonic glossary:-

This is a symbol of great interest and importance, and brings us into close connection with the early symbolism of the solar orb and the universe, which was predominant in the ancient sun-worship. The lectures of Freemasonry give what modern Monitors have made an exoteric explanation of the symbol, in telling us that the point represents an individual brother, the circle the boundary line of his duty to God and man, and the two perpendicular parallel lines the patron saint of the Order--St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. But that was not always its symbolic signification, we may collect from the true history of its connection with the phallus of the Ancient Mysteries. The phallus was among the Egyptians the symbol of fecundity, expressed by the male generative principle. It was communicated from the rites of Osiris to the religious festivals of Greece. Among the Asiatics the same emblem, under the name of lingam, was, in connection with the female principle, worshiped as the symbols of the Great Father and Mother, or producing causes of the human race, after their destruction by the deluge. Here, then, was the first outline of the point within a circle, representing the principle of fecundity, and doubtless the symbol, connected with a different history, that, namely, of Osiris, was transmitted by the Indian philosophers to Egypt, and to the other nations, who derived, as is elsewhere shown, all their rites from the East.

Ref:

http://images.google.ca/imgres?imgurl=http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/glossary/images/slide_62_saints_john_the_baptist.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/glossary/glossary_p.htm&usg=__GGaltLFnA4z04UUGyHw7-