

ORIENTATIONS AND PERAMBULATIONS

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To orientate, or to orient, means to face or turn to the east, to the rising sun, thus receiving light and heat, that were, especially in ancient times, the primary source of energy. So, men used to orient themselves to face the east, the sun, in order to receive energy and then balance it inwardly.

According to the far eastern tradition, the universe was made essentially by *Yin* and *Yang*, the two principles of opposing energies and states balancing each other. *Yin* is the feminine principle, while *Yang* is the masculine one. They act as two poles, negative and positive, which must be considered rather more complementary than opposite.¹

They are the two poles of the Manifestation, earth and heaven, night and day, male and female and so on. They can be also considered as the main sources of any stream of energy – like electricity, for instance. *Yin* and *Yang* are in perennial dialectics and life is the relevant outcome, as we can see every day.

Duality is therefore a feature of the manifestation, while unity is that of the Immutable Being. The initiate strives to restore unity, symbolically starting from his earthly life. Hence the importance of catching the outer energy, balancing it with the inner one. To orient oneself properly is just one of the means through which this goal can be achieved.

On this subject, Bro. René Guénon writes:

“In the primordial age man was perfectly balanced in himself in terms of yin and yang. What is more, he was yin or passive in relation to the Principle alone, and yang or active in relation to the Cosmos, or the totality of manifested things. Hence he naturally turned to the North, which is yin, as the complementary to him.

By way of contrast, because of the spiritual degeneration occurring in the descending course of the cycle, the man of later ages became yin in relation to the Cosmos. He must therefore turn to the South, which is yang, to receive from it the influences of the principle complementary to the one which has become predominant inside him, and to restore as much as possible the equilibrium between yin and yang.

The first of these two orientations can be called ‘polar’, in contrast to the second, which is ‘solar’. In the first, man faces towards the Pole Star, North, or ‘pinnacle of heaven’, with the east to his right and the west to his left. In the second case he faces towards the Sun at the meridian, with the East to his left and the West to his right. Here we have the explanation for an apparent anomaly in the Far-Eastern tradition which can be very disconcerting for those who are not aware of its cause.”²

Of course, when we speak of left and right, we must consider these terms vary, depending on the prospective we are considering. Usually, left and right are those of the observer. So, for example, in the Kabalistic diagram showing the 'sephirotic tree', the right pillar and the left pillar are respectively to one's right and to one's left looking at the diagram.

In the western tradition, the right side is favourable. In old Greek *déxios*, from the Latin *dexter*, meaning 'skilled' or able to act well. The English 'right' evokes the Plumb of the Great Architect and Justice. To the contrary *lævus*, left, is joint to the Greek *làios*, which means "bent toward earth," and therefore the evocation of 'cripple' or 'wounded'.

Before we go on to the next concept, we should look at the scalene triangle, which will be important. A scalene triangle is a triangle with a different length on each side. The word scalene comes from the Greek *skalénos*, which means unequal and tortuous, and so evokes the concept of deviousness.

In China, in ancient times left was considered the preeminent side: "In matters that are favorable (or of good omen) the left is placed uppermost, but in affairs that are ill-omened, the right".³ There was a change thereafter, probably in correspondence of a change of dynasty. In any case, whichever orientation is adopted – polar or solar, so to have East respectively to the right side or to the left one – East is invariably the most important side, it being considered the source of light.

The foregoing explains the reason why in Masonic symbolism the Lodge is not supposed to have any windows or light in the North (this being the side that never directly receives solar light), a place that is masonically in darkness. There is, however, light in the East, South and West, which correspond to the three 'stations' of the Sun, and of the three principle officers of the lodge, the Worshipful Master, the Senior and Junior Wardens.

Actually, the Worshipful Master seats at East, but in the Operatives' tradition the Solomon's throne was put at West, so to face the 'rising sun'. I could not find any explanation for this inversion. Maybe the Worshipful Master, so doing, intended to receive the light and the energy of the sun, as a container, to later avail himself of these gifts during the construction of the edifice.

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Another issue directly related to orientation is the direction of ritual circumambulation. The direction determines whether the orientation is 'polar' or 'solar' (using these words in the sense in which we used them above). A diagram will help us to understand this matter better.

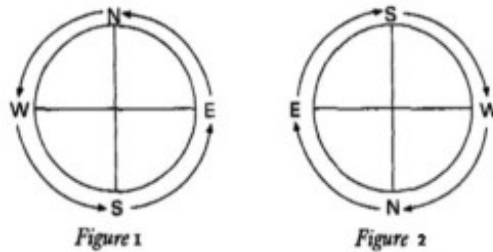


Figure 1 shows the direction in which the stars appear to orbit the pole when man faces the North; figure 2 shows the direction of the apparent movement of the sun for an observer facing South. In the first case, the perambulation is performed keeping the centre to one's left, thus counter clockwise, called "widdershin" in Middle Low German, a word which literally means "to go against". In figure 2, the perambulation is performed keeping the centre of the lodge on one's right (called "pradakshina" in Sanskrit and "deosil" in Gaelic), and is a clockwise movement.

This second modality is the one adopted chiefly in the Hindu and Tibetan traditions, while the former is found mainly in the near eastern and western tradition. Bro. Guénon noted *"it is perhaps not without interest to point out that the direction of these circumambulations proceeding respectively from left to right and from right to left also corresponds to the direction of the script in the sacred languages of these same traditional forms. In the present form of Masonry, the direction of the 'circumambulations' is 'solar'; but it seems on the contrary to have been 'polar' in the ancient 'operative' ritual"*.⁴

Bound up with this difference of the ritual circumambulation is the question of whether the walker should *start out with the right or left foot*. According to Bro. Guénon, it is *"obvious that the foot which has to be put forward first will be the one opposite to the side facing in towards the centre of the circumambulation"*; that is, starting off on the right foot in the case of figure 1 traveling counter-clockwise, and with the left in the case of figure 2, traveling clockwise.

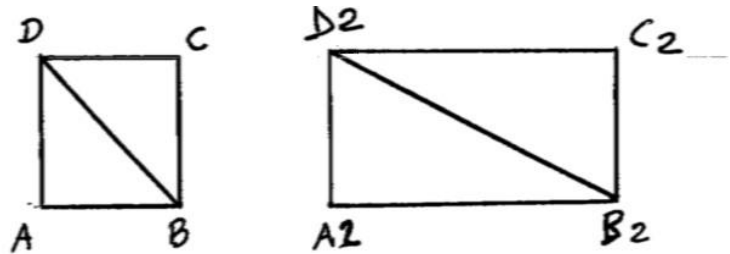
This tradition seems to be generally the case, even when it is not strictly speaking a question of circumambulation as such. It is more likely simply an indication of the predominance of either the 'polar' or the 'solar' perspective. In other words, whether the ritual is to start with the left and travels counter-clockwise or with the left and travel clockwise, the unwritten tradition of the culture.

This predominance may be associated with a particular traditional form, or it can sometimes even vary at different periods in the span of existence of one and the same tradition."⁵ One can see many examples of this in how one is supposed to approach the altar, starting with the left foot in Western and near eastern tradition, and with the right in far eastern traditions. It can also be seen in military rank and file marching, where in the west, soldiers always start off with the left foot, a deeply ingrained and really unnoticed behavior.

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The last – and complementary question – is whether Brethren have to square the Temple when they walk inside it. In my opinion they should, for the following reasons.

The Temple's shape is a rectangle, built in 1:2 ratio. If we trace the diagonal, we obtain two right triangles. From the Pythagorean Theorem, we know that in any right triangle, the square of the length of the hypotenuse (the side of a right triangle opposite the right angle) is equal to the sum of the squares of lengths of the two legs.



Conversely, the metric value of the hypotenuse shall be equal to its square root. In the first figure, assuming 1 as length of each side, it shall be square root 2, so 1,41; in the second figure it shall be square root 5 ($1^2+2^2=1+4=5$), which is equal to 2,2360.

This number corresponds to the proportion with which the various parts of the human body develop in man's phase of growth. By squaring the Temple we are therefore reminded of this reality, thus strengthening the idea of progressive growth at intellectual, moral and spiritual level.

Orientation, perambulation and squaring are therefore just three phases of the same process. In order to catch energy, to balance it inwardly in respect of the 'centre' and eventually to use it for the harmonic construction of our Temple, the beauty of which will recall us the true splendor of Truth.

1 See *Chain of Union*, in this Review, issue 7, July 2006

2 René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, Quinta Essentia, Cambridge 1991 p. 51

3 *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 31.

4 René Guénon, *The Solstitial Doors*, in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, footnote 5, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale NY, 1991.

5 René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, cit. p. 56