THE CELESTIAL EMBLEMS OF FREEMASONRY
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Published in Selected Papers, Vol.2
United Masters Lodge, No. 167, N.Z.

Of all the Emblems of Freemasonry the most mysterious, the most distinctive, and in one case the most important, are those heavenly bodies portrayed on our Pavements and on the Tracing Boards of the First Degree, the BLAZING STAR, the SUN, the MOON, and the cluster of SEVEN STARS.

We are here particularly concerned with their significance as Light-bearers; in the heavens the Sun, Moon and Stars provide all the light of the Universe, and as Emblems they typify the Light diffused in Freemasonry, which may be defined as that special instruction which is the essential purpose of the Institution.

It is instruction in what is of supreme importance in the Moral and Spiritual Universe: the Whole Duty of Man, fortified by the use as Emblems of the heavenly bodies which dominate the Material Universe; it must be agreed that it would be impossible to imagine Emblems of greater power.

I wish first to draw attention to their distinctiveness; we are told that it is upon the circumstances attending the erection of King Solomon's Temple that our ceremonial is chiefly based, but it is clear that the primary basis was the usages and customs of the ancient Craft of masonry, building in stone.

Accordingly most of our Emblems are drawn from that source, its plans, tools and appliances, its materials and its clothing, and from such features of its buildings as foundations, plans, altars, steps and stairs, corners, pillars, windows and decorated pavement. This is particularly the case in the First Degree, in which we are introduced to the foundation truths of Freemasonry, of which the importance cannot be over-estimated.

When one entered upon the study of the Emblems of the Craft it seemed remarkable that they should include objects apparently so unrelated to building as Stars, and the Sun and Moon; the mystery surrounding them was deepened by finding in the ritual explanations no practical application, as in the case of such Emblems as the Working Tools and the Ladder: and that one of evident importance is not explained at all; candidates are questioned about the Sun at its Meridian, which they may never have heard of, and have to repeat mechanically an answer which is by no means satisfying.

This Paper sets out some of the results of my own enquiries, which by no means exhaust a very fascinating subject and some deductions I have made; these may be found debatable, and I hope they will be well tested.

It commences with the operative customs, leads through the development of one branch of our symbolism in the XVIII Century, and finally, I hope, shows cause for a belief in the exceptional importance of the Emblems.

The Heavenly Bodies and the Operative Craft. - The Sun, of course, was all-important in the lives of the masons of all ages, therefrom being regulated the time of the Craft; work commenced when possible at sunrise and ended at sunset, and when the meridian was reached at noon an hour or more was taken for rest and refreshment. Night work was forbidden except for study; as the Regius Ms. puts it "in practising wit."
The Moon, as far as I have been able to discover, does not seem to have been used in the work of the Craft, but there is a very curious reference to it in the Graham Ms. of 1726 - "as for the Sun he renders light day and night; as for the Moon she is a dark body off (sic) water and doth receive her light from the Sun, and is also queen of waters which is the best of Leavells (levels)."

The writer of this cryptic statement may have had in mind the astronomical observations I shall refer to presently; they required a perfectly level artificial horizon, which was obtained, in ancient Egypt for instance, by building a low circular wall a few feet in diameter and filing the enclosed space with water; I will ask you to note that one of the appliances necessary for the success of the observations was the Plumbline.

The Stars on the other hand were very important to the ancient Craftsmen, both as builders and as observers of the heavens; vaulted ceilings of temples were sometimes decorated with stars on a blue ground, the "starry firmament." emblematical of the blue vault of heaven itself.

But it is more likely that their practical use led to the adoption of stars, and in particular one constellation of seven stars, as distinguished and beautiful Emblems of the Craft. I have only the superficial knowledge of a layman of such abstruse matters, but I understand that it was by astronomical observations that important buildings were oriented it was required in the case of the great Cathedrals of England, for instance, that their Altars should be in the East, and that their main arms should run toward the other three cardinal points of the compass.

As the Sun rises in the true East only twice a year, it could seldom be used for the purpose, but observations of the stars could be made on any clear night, and it was by calculation based on their positions that orientation was affected. The Great Pyramid, built about 2700 B.C., was faced by the method used exactly North, South, East and West, and though the magnetic compass was not unknown in the XII and XIV Centuries it seems probable that the ancient method was still in use. It may be mentioned in passing that the N.E. corner would be an important point in the operations.

That very sound authority, W. Bro. John T. Thorp, Master of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge in 1908, pointed out that the Pole Star was held in great reverence by our ancient brethren, and there was a good practical reason for it. All stars rise in the East and set in the West, and in the Northern Hemisphere they swing around the Pole, very close to which is the North or Pole Star, Polaris; its circular movement is so very small, however, that to all intents and purposes it is constant in the same place in the heavens; in consequence it has always been the most useful for navigators and for the ancient and mediaeval Craftsmen I have referred to.

The Seven Stars have been a striking feature of Masonic matter since the early days of Speculative Masonry; writers have variously suggested that they represent the Seven Sisters of the Pleiades, the Seven Stars of Astrology, and the Seven Planets of ancient astronomy, though what these have to do with Freemasonry is not at all plain; Bro. Dr. Churchward, who insisted that all the mysteries of Freemasonry were foreshadowed in the religion of the ancient Egyptians, identified them as the "Seven Glorious Ones," the stars of Ursa Minor, the Little Bear; the northernmost of the seven in that not very brilliant constellation is the Pole Star itself, which because of its constancy was to the Egyptians the All-Seeing Eye of the Creator Himself.
I must take the risk of adding to the confusion and point out that there is one cluster of seven stars clearly visible in the Northern Hemisphere, much better known that any of those I have mentioned, and moreover one which may have been definitely useful to our operative forefathers, who were first and foremost practical men.

It is the most conspicuous constellation in the Polar heavens, Ursa Major, the Great Bear, popularly known in England because of its curious shape as The Dipper, the Plough, the Waggon, or Charles' Wain. It also has an intimate connection with the Pole Star, round which it continually revolves in a great circle, because an imaginary line prolonged through the two bright stars which form the rear of the Bear's body always conducts the eye directly to Polaris. It is itself not a star of the first magnitude and not always easy to find; we in the South know that the quickest way of picking out the Southern Cross is through its two brilliant "pointers," and those of the Great Bear are similar useful to observers in the North.

Most of our Emblems being traceable to operative sources, it is possible if not probable that our mysterious Seven Stars are part of our inheritance from our ancient brethren.

I come now to the use of the heavenly bodies as Emblems in Modern Freemasonry, and I shall first direct your attention to Two Famous Engravings - the first is the frontispiece of the earliest Book of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of England, produced in 1723; the other is dated 1726; they are of particular interest to our discussion because they show that as that early period in the history of Speculative Masonry the heavenly bodies were established as among, if not indeed as, the principle Emblems of the Craft. It is impossible to think that this was a sudden development, and it may be concluded that they had been brought forward from a symbolism of the partly Operative and partly Speculative Craft of the preceding century, about which we know very little.

The first engraving depicts Freemasonry on an important occasion as a symbolical Temple, with rows of splendid columns of the Five Orders of Architecture; the principal figures are said to be the Duke of Montagu, the fifth Grand Master, transferring his Compasses of office and the Roll of the Constitutions to his successor in 1722, the Duke of Wharton, behind each being his Officers of Grand Lodge; the figure on the extreme right is the famous Dr. Desaguliers, who is entitled to be regarded as the principal architect of Modern Freemasonry.

Seen through an arch, high above and midway in the heavens, is a magnificent drawn emblematic group - Helios, the Greek God of the Sun, in his chariot with four horses driving over the clouds; he represents the Sun, here unmistakably the Sun at the Meridian; we may take it that it was the supreme Emblem of Freemasonry then, as it is now in another form.

The second engraving is also emblematical, and of even more interest at the moment; it shows a Lodge of masons at work on the construction of a building in what Anderson called "The Augustan Stile," with the Master Mason in the centre foreground with his Compasses, the Senior Warden with his Square and the Junior Warden with a Plumbline.

Above them are the Celestial Emblems in the light of which the work is being carried on, but it must be noticed that they are not so much in the heavens above as placed close to topmost parts of the building, evidently to emphasise an intimate connection with the symbolical "work." The Sun is directly above the Senior Warden, and
the Moon above the Junior, foreshadowing the present linking of those Emblems with the Wardens in the explanation of the Lesser Lights in the First Degree; the association of the Moon with the Junior Warden is mysterious; one can only conjecture that it may preserve the ancient usage already mentioned - the creation of a level by enclosing a body of water in a circular wall (like the Moon of the Graham Ms.) and the use of the Plumbline in taking the subsequent observations.

For a reason which will become obvious later I should like to draw attention also to the fact that in the picture the Seven Stars are placed directly over the Master, and that he is holding up his Compasses, plainly to focus attention upon them.

He is the only one noticeable wearing an Apron, and that would seem to indicate that he is at labour, and that both the Compasses and the Constellation are emblems associated with his work.

Documentary References to the Sun, Moon and Stars: They are mentioned first, masonically, in the Cooke Ms. of circa 1410, but only in explanation of the seventh of the Liberal Arts and Sciences - Astronomy, "that teacheth a man to know the course of the Sun and of the Moon and of all other Stars and Planets of Heaven."

In Knoop, Jones and Hamer's valuable collection of Early Masonic Catechisms and Exposures there are, however, many passages with a bearing on our subject.

In the Sloane Ms. of 1700 is the first mention of the Sun as a Light in the Lodge.

The extraordinary interesting Dumphries Ms. of 1710 refers first to "ye Sun, Moon and Stars, ornaments of the heavens," and alter invests them with a very special significance: a traditional here of the Craft exhorts his Masons - "as they would wish God to prosper themselves and actions, not to attempt or aim at Idolatry any more, but sincerely to honour and adore ye Great Architect of Heaven and Earth, the Fountain and Source of all goodness . . . ye Ruler of and Governor of Sun, Moon and Stars." Here also is a reference to "the material heavens and starry firmament."

A document of 1724 has this curiosity of catechism:- Question: How many Lights in a Lodge? Answer: Twelve-Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Sun, Moon, Master Mason, Square, Rule, Plum, Line, Mell and Chizzel.

Pritchard's famous exposure of 1730, "Masonry Dissected," to the extent in which it may be relied on, shows that many of our expressions of today were in use then.

The "Covering of the Lodge" was "a Clouded Canopy of various colours or the clouds"; the "Furniture of the Lodge" was the "Mosaic Pavement, Blazing Star, and Indented Tarsel," "the Pavement the ground floor of the Lodge, the Blazing Star the Centre, and the Indented Tarsel the border round about it" (which we now call the Indented or Tesselated Border-the circle of diamond shaped tiles surround the Blazing Star on the fine example of a Pavement we have before us): the other "Furniture of the Lodge: was "the Bible, Compass and Square."

The Lights in the Lodge (which a note says are three large candles or high candlesticks) represented the Sun, the Moon, and the Master Mason, and thee we also "three Fix't Lights, which are three windows supposed tho' vainly to be in every room where a Lodge is held": they were situated in the East, South and West, "to light the men to, at, and from their work,"

"Dialogue Between Simon and Philip," a document of 1740, refers to Three Great Lights, again large candles, representing the Sun, to govern the day, the Moon, the night, and the Master, the Lodge, and also anther, far surpassing Sun and Moon, the Light of the Gospel."
At the end of the Dialogue are two interesting diagrams, purporting to show the form of the "old Lodges" and of the "new Lodge under the Desaguliers Regulations": in the centre of the former is the letter "G" enclosed in a plain lozenge shape, but Desaguliers shows it within an irradiated circle; we are told that it signified "Geometry, the Root and Foundation of all Sciences," with a note that "this circle and the Holy Flame is added when Masters are taken up": there appears in this to be a foreshadowing of both our Blazing Star and the Five-pointed Star of the Third Degree.

In 1742 a London newspaper, the Westminster Journal, published an illustrated account of a mock procession arranged by the self-styled "Scald Miserable Masons" (a skit on the then usual Grand Master's Procession) in which were carried banner and large diagrams displaying a number of Emblems of the Craft; these included a Sun, a crescent Moon, and a large Star, which was exactly like one on a diagram in a French Exposure of a few years later, listed as "Etoile Flamboyante," the Flaming or Blazing Star which "enlightened the chamber in the middle."

The newspaper added a key to the Emblems, which made the interesting point that when the letter "G" was put in the middle of the entered Prentice's Lodge it then became a Fellowcraft's Lodge.

By 1762 the two well-known Exposures, "Three Distinct Knocks" and "Jachin and Boaz," had been published, containing similar and what are said to be fairly reliable accounts of the ceremonies of the time, showing them to be closely approaching the present form. The Junior Warden was in the South, the better to observe the Sun "at High meridian" and "at High Twelve at noon which is the beauty of the day": and three candles were in position before the Master and Wardens and were the Lesser Lights; and both Exposures reveal that at the appropriate moment the Candidate saw the "Three Great Lights in masonry," which were the Bible, the Square and the Compasses.

In neither document is there any mention of either the Blazing Star or the Seven Stars, though in a description of the drawing on the floor of the Lodge there is a reference to "the Throne beset with Stars."

Two interesting points about that period - it seems to have been the custom, especially in Lodges of the Ancients, to have actual models of Emblems supplementing what was drawn on the floor, and accordingly we find in their old records mention of such items as a Brass Sun and Moon; and I have seen a picture of an Ancient's Breast Jewel with a very unusual feature - an All-Seeing Eye surrounded by a circle of Seven Stars, which recalls what I have said about the Pole Star being the All-Seeing Eye of the Creator, and the stars of the Great Bear.

Before proceeding to discuss interpretations of our Celestial Emblems I would like to bring forward some Authoritative Statements on the Symbolism of the Craft, which have a bearing on what I have to say and are also of assistance in solving some of the puzzles which present themselves to Masonic students from time to time.

W. Bro. Thorp made the first, to the effect that no Institution is so rich in Emblems as Freemasonry, but former brethren (by whom one may surmise he meant the framers of our Ritual) found themselves heirs to a number of which the meanings had been forgotten or were never understood; he might have added that there are also some of which the meaning has been changed, and that others have been discarded altogether.
Then there is what the late Bro. J. Herron Leper referred to as the famous dictum of Count Goblet d’Alviella - "There is nothing so indestructible as a symbol, but nothing is capable of so many interpretations."

The Blazing Star. A "blazing" star is a very brilliant and conspicuous one or a comet; the term is used in Heraldry, and the emblem then has six points and a comet's tail.

With us the effect of brilliance is produced by adding extra points, preferably wavy, to the original number, which varies, or, as is the case on the First Tracing Board, by surrounding the Emblem with a so-called "glory" of light; because of that and its position on the Pavement and Tracing Board, and perhaps also because of the sublimity of its meaning, our Blazing Star is called "The Glory in the Centre."

Some writers have said that it represents Sirius, the Dog Star, the brightest in the heavens, but it has no special masonic significance; if it ever represented any particular star it would undoubtedly be the Pole Star, and it is quite possible that it was among the Emblems of the ancient Craft of which "the meaning had been forgotten or was never understood."

The Ritual explanation of the First Tracing Board says that the Blazing Star represents the Sun, which by its benign influence; dispenses its blessings to mankind in general, but here again it may be respectfully suggested that there is no satisfying Masonic significance.

W. Bro. Thorpe, however is on record as having more than once made the unqualified statement that it represents the Sun at the meridian, and I feel that in doing so he drew aside the curtain of mystery which veils this, the most important Emblem in Freemasonry. It would appear that the Sun at the meridian is an altogether different Sun from the one shown high in the heavens on the Tracing Board, not in the centre, as might have been expected if it was at the meridian.

The Blazing Star therefore is a Great Light in Freemasonry, not in the heavens.

It may occur to you to ask why in this connection the Sun should be represented by a Star; it may be suggested that it is to distinguish it from the material Sun, but more importantly because from ancient times their infinite remoteness and mystery have given the stars a special place in Symbolisms as Emblems of the Eternal and the Spiritual.

The Blazing Star is pre-eminently the Emblem which directs our thoughts to the Eternal and Spiritual and to the most exalted tenet of Freemasonry.

What that is could not be better explained than it was in the Dumfries Ms. of 245 years ago - that we are sincerely to honour and adore the Great Architect of Heaven and Earth, the Fountain and Source of all goodness, Ruler and Governor of the Sun, Moon and Stars.

This is a conception of the duty and privilege of all men which far transcends the difference of religions, and can deeply move, and happily unite, Freemasons wherever and of whatever creed they may be, and it is perhaps the only one which could do so; it is the Craft's most valuable contribution to human happiness.

Our Institution if sounded upon the fear of God and reverence and respect for His Commandments, which are for our greatest good, and as long as that is its first requirement the Sun will always be at the meridian in Freemasonry.

The Sun, the Moon, and the Constellation of Seven Stars, depicted high in the heavens, appear to be intimately connected with anther of
the triads of Emblems shown on the First Tracing Board in the body of the emblematical Lodge it represents.

The Heavenly Bodies are Emblems of Light, and they shine through heavy clouds, which have been interpreted a signifying both the hidden Divine Presence and the darkness of ignorance.

The first chapter of Genesis tells us how God made two great altights and the stars also, and set them in the firmament of the heaven, so that there should always be light upon the earth; the Sun was the greater and the Moon the lesser light.

In Freemasonry also there are Three Great Emblematical Lights, for the same purpose, and here we may recall Prichard's three windows in the Lodge, which were to "light the men to, at, and from their work"; the "work" of a Freemason is set out by the V.S.L., the Square and the Compasses; they define it and show how it is to be done.

The explanation of the Great Lights given to the newly obd. Candidate is obscure, but what they mean is made quite clear in the Charge after Initiation, where his attention is directed to the V.S.L.; therein, he is told, he will be taught the important duties he owes to God, to his neighbour, and to himself.

They are simple and practical; his duty to God is briefly to bring Him into his everyday life, to his neighbour, to act on the Square, and what that means is fully explained, and to himself to apply the Compasses of self-discipline, which is difficult, but necessary if he is to respond efficiently to the call of his other duties.

The Celestial Emblems and the Three Great Lights. I must now draw attention to what appears to be a quite remarkable correspondence between the three Celestial Emblems and our Three Great Emblematical Lights.

The Sun is the source of the power and light, and the sustainer of all the life of this Earth, which without it would be a frozen and sterile wilderness; similarly, the V.S.L. is the source of all the power, light and life of Freemasonry.

The Moon is an inanimate body which has no light of its own, only reflecting that of the Sun, and in the same way the Emblematical Square when put into practical use reflects the light and instruction of the V.S.L.

The Seven Stars, if my suggestion is accepted that they formerly stood for the Great Bear continually describing a circle round the Pole Star, provide a celestial example of the action of the Compasses which it would be hard to improve upon.

To Sum Up: We have seen that in 1723 and 1726 the heavenly bodies were already important Emblems of Speculative Masonry; also that by 1762 the V.S.L., the Square and the Compasses had been established as the Three Great Lights, and that the Sun and Moon had been relegated to comparative obscurity and were represented by two of the Lesser Lights.

On the First Tracing Boards of today, which generally follow the design of Harris about a century ago, the Sun, the Moon and the Seven Stars are back in the prominent position they had in 1726, great Emblems of the Craft, though it may be said that the Lecture on the Board, eloquent as its language is, does not always do them justice; the reference to the Seven Stars, in particular, seems forced and weak.

We have seen also that there is a striking correspondence between the Great Lights in the heavens and those in Freemasonry.

One is prompted to ask the question: Were the three Celestial Emblems given their present prominence on the Tracing Board by accident, or with the design of vividly emphasizing the importance in Freemasonry of its Three Great Emblematical Lights?
If we can conclude that it was the latter, it was a stroke of genius; as with the Blazing Star, it is an outstanding example of the skill, and the delicate understanding, with which so much of the ancient Craft has been adapted to the use of our system of morality.

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