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SUN, SYMBOL AND CEREMONY.

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The sun is mentioned directly at least a dozen times in the craft ritual and there are several more references which are implied. For example, the master is "to open the lodge as the sun opens and enlightens the day", the senior warden is "to mark the setting sun", and the junior warden is to "mark the sun at its meridian". The sun is referred to in the three lesser lights, and on the first degree tracing board, the sun "enlightens the earth, and by its benign influence dispenses its blessings to mankind in general". There are several more references like this in all three craft degrees which show the influence that the sun has had on those, at least, who first wrote our ritual, and, as I hope to show, on all of us in general.

I must say that I make no pretence of being an expert on this subject. This paper however, only skims the surface of the material which is available.

As a geographer, I might be excused if, at this point, I stick to firmer ground and briefly examine some of the more physical properties of the sun and its radiation.

The sun is a star, like most of the others that we see in the night sky. In fact it is a rather small and insignificant star, as stars go - though not to us, of course. Its composition is basically similar to the Earth, except for the intense temperature, which at its surface is calculated at 6000 degrees C. Its diameter is 100 times that of the Earth and its volume is 1,000,000 times greater. These factors create intense short wave radiation, or insolation which travel through the vacuum to the Earth. If one ignores the influence the cloud cover, then the insolation is modified by the Earth in four basic ways and an understanding of these will help in the following discussion. The first modification is in the elliptical orbit of the Earth. The Earth is nearest to the sun in July and farthest in January. Secondly, the angle of the Earth's axis, to the sun, determines which hemisphere is receiving the greater insolation (Summer) and which hemisphere the lesser (Winter). Thirdly, the revolution of the Earth on its axis distinguishes periods of insolation (day) from periods of non - insolation (night). Fourthly, the curve of the Earth determines how direct or diffuse insolation will be, in simple terms giving the Earth the hot tropics or cold polar areas. Certain dates now need to be understood and all of these are relative to the Northern hemisphere:

June 21 or 22 is the day of Midsummer, or the summer solstice, when the northern hemisphere is nearest to the sun and days are longer than night. December 22 or 23 is the day of midwinter, or winter solstice, when the northern hemisphere is farthest away from the sun and nights are longer than days. Summer solstice in Britain, of course, is at the same time as winter solstice here in New Zealand. Between these two solstices are the equinox, or times of equal day and equal night. March 20 or 21is the spring, or vernal equinox, and September 22 or 23 is the autumn equinox. These variations in dates are the result of our imperfect calendar and it is not surprising that early calculations were slightly inaccurate: the winter solstice was commonly thought to be on December 25, the spring equinox on March 25, the summer solstice on June 24 and the autumn equinox on September 23.

It is not surprising, again, that early man, before the age of scientific investigation, should explain these natural phenomena by imaginative tales and myths; nor too that the sun should become one of the earliest objects of adoration. In biblical times Moses was still warning the Israelites to "beware of looking up to the sky and then as you see the whole host of heaven, the sun and moon and stars, letting yourself be allured to bend in worship to them". (Deut 4:19)

The sun as well as being an object of awe was also surrounded in mystery. Questions naturally arose. How, for example , did the sun travel across the sky? Where did the sun go at the end of each day? Why did the path of the sun fluctuate? Was it the same sun which rose each morning? In fact this drama of the fluctuating battle between daylight and darkness, re-enacted each day throughout the seasons, has provided the motif for a considerable part of our heritage of mythology.

Phoebus Apollo (phoibos-light) was a Greek god of radiance and light who, by the fifth century BC, was identified with Helios, the sun god. To both were attributed brilliance and the power to produce and destroy life, to cause joy or grief, health or illness. To many early people these things lay beyond control and thus were associated with a god (or gods). It is the same logic as that which is used today to explain, for example, creation or apparent miracles.

The sun was represented in a diversity of ways - a ball of fire, a head with streaming golden hair or a spoked wheel, for example. From the latter emerged the imagery of a chariot which was driven daily across the sky, yoked to four horses (the seasons). One belief of the Greeks was that, at night, chariot and horses were carried in a golden bowl pulled by a silver chord (the dawn light) along the northern edge of the Earth. Remember that the Earth was considered flat and stationary while the heavens moved above. In the Third Degree, of course, the golden bowl is broken, and the silver chord is loosed and darkness reigns at the g……. of H……

The feast days of the two St Johns associated with freemasonry occur on June 24 (St John the Baptist) which is approximately the day of midsummer, and December 27 (St John the Evangelist) which is approximately the day of midwinter. The early Grand Masters were always installed on St John the Baptist's day. Our yearly service here in Christchurch is held in the church of St John the Baptist, and of course in some rituals this is said to have been a keen Mason. This year, 1974,the service was on Sunday, 23rd June, and is usually the nearest Sunday to the 27th.

As for Freemasonry, a study of aprons and jewels will show the tremendous influence that solar representations have had. An article on a group of lodges very similar to the masonic lodges in the 18th century - the Jerusalem Sols - will also show this influence well.

Perhaps the best way to observe how mankind in general and the craft in particular have come to regard the sun is to look at the regalia of its leaders – the top athlete, or whatever, is rewarded with a golden disc, the king carries his golden orb and the Grand Master alone carries at the very centre of his apron a golden representation of the sun.