

Speculation on the origin of Symbols

By Harvey Lovewell

As you have probably deduced I am very interested in Masonic esoterism. Symbols speak this loud and clear but what is their genesis?

In speculating about symbols their meaning and genesis, we are naturally led to think of geometric figures. Mindful of the claim that Freemasonry is the inheritor of "the secret tradition" or "learning" from the ancient mysteries, we are drawn to the old priestly groups or castes who exercised the power of knowledge over their rulers and kings, we can assume that these symbols were created or discovered by this learned class of people.

While that may be true of many of the more complex and theoretical figures developed by ancient people, that I want to call geometricians. A little more speculation should lead us to the realization that the most ancient, the most primitive geometrical symbols used by man were discovered and developed by ordinary people for practical reasons. Maybe this early speculation could be seen as the origin of speculative thought. The quest for understanding, the curiosity to develop that skill we now call geometry. What we, would term Freemasonry, the quest for the Light of knowledge.

Because they were the first discoverers of theoretical truths, they had to be expressed in symbols. Why? They had only a primitive language, they had no writing, and their only means of expressing ideas was by symbols. These were the only practical techniques they had of showing their thoughts. The people who were bright enough to understand these ideas acquired a special advantage by which they were able to achieve unusual status and power; they became the priestly class, witch doctors shamans etc.

Primitive man had to climb from a rude state of brutish survival on an individual basis, to a state of social organization, for instance, becoming a group of families or clans, which could specialize to some extent by developing the practical arts of agriculture, the hunt for food, storing surpluses, etc. and so enable the young, weak and the elderly to survive.

It was probably such individuals, the elderly, who first had leisure to investigate, to speculate, in the simplest possible form of that activity. But when their efforts gave them knowledge by which they were able to advise and direct the activities of the tribe, they realized that they had a power and kept it to themselves and so started secret knowledge so they could enhance their status and influence.

This then was passed on to disciples who were sworn to continue the secrecy. The "secret tradition or mysteries" was maybe a practical necessity, for self-preservation, and to maintain status.

Such development I think would have occurred many centuries ago, long before the records of ancient civilizations became known. This development would have taken many thousands of years, over many generations. The development of knowledge would have happened by much observation and thought. The use of pictographs to express these thoughts seems to be a natural means of passing meaning to others prior to the development of writing and expressive language.

The sun and the moon have always been the foremost luminaries of nature influencing the lives of men on this planet. Both are round or circular in shape. Even the most untutored savage probably recognized a crudely drawn circle in the sand as a pictograph of those heavenly bodies. But since the moon changed its shape regularly each month, it could be differentiated from the sun by representing it as a crescent, a shape in which it appeared much more frequently than it did as a circle. Looking at pictures drawn by children today, the sun nearly always, is shown as a circle with rays coming from it and the moon as a crescent.

The circle, therefore, became a universal symbol of the sun, because it was always round when it could be observed. And because it was obviously the one great heavenly body which brought life-giving light and warmth for the growing seasons, it became the first great object of wonder, cosmic fear, and adoration. In other words, was it man's first god? And the symbol of the sun, the circle, became the first representation to denote the divinity that shapes our lives.

One of the earliest observed phenomena of the sun was probably its gradual change of position on the horizon from north to south at its rising and its setting.

Among the oldest relics of man's initial science, these observations are crude markings on stone which show the arc of a circle formed by points of the rising or setting of the sun between what we know to be the summer and the winter solstices.

An ancient monument that appears to show this is that at Stonehenge. This is a highly refined and sophisticated representation of such solar observations, but in the time frame of this discourse, it is comparatively modern.

What do you think are some of the oldest symbols man has used?