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Reflections Regarding the Three Pillars
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The whole teaching of Free-Masonry is symbolic. In order to understand the meaning of a symbol is necessary to start by studying its physical aspect; then one should try to deduct its moral signification. It is only after performing these first two steps, by making the synthesis of both, that the third meaning, called by the Ancients the "Sacred meaning" will appear.

Among the essential symbols of the first degree we have without any doubt, the "THREE PILLARS". The pillars are symbols borrowed from operative Masonry. In a construction, the pillars form the essential elements supporting the whole and provide the edifice with its solidity and cohesion. They are truly the masterpieces of the building. According to Vitruvius, a Roman Architect who lived in the 1st century B.C., the origin of pillars is to be traced to a most distant antiquity. Here is what he writes on the subject:

"... in Ancient times men were born in forests and in caverns like beasts, and lived, as them, from savage food only. But as it happened by chance that a raging wind came to push violently close standing trees, they got pressed against each other so rudely that they caught fire. The flames first frightened and put those men to flight who were standing by, but being reassured, and feeling as they got closer, that the moderate heat of fire was a convenient thing, they kept the fire going with wood, brought other people to the spot, and by aid of signs explained how useful fire was. Men being so assembled, and uttering different sounds with their mouths, they made words by coincidence, and from there using the same sounds to signify certain things, they started talking to each other. Thus fire gave men the opportunity to assemble, to form a society and to dwell in the same place; having in this respect particular dispositions not provided for by Nature in comparison with the other animals, such as the ability to walk upright and to stand, to know what is beautiful and magnificent in the Universe, and to make with their hands and fingers all things with great facility, they thus started, some to make huts with leaves, others to dig lodges in the mountains, still others imitating the industry of swallows to make shelters, by aid of sprigs and clay, where they could seek a covering. And thus each considering the work of his neighbour, and perfecting his own inventions by remarks about the others, progress was made day by day in the good way to build huts. For men, who are naturally docile and imitative, gloryfying their inventions, were communicating to each other every day the new finding they had made in order to succeed in their buildings, and thus exercising their minds, they formed their judgment in everything that could contribute to this plan. The Order which they followed in the beginning was to plant forks and to intertwine branches which they would fill up with clay to make walls; they also built by aid of blocks of dried clay, upon which they laid trees across, and covered the whole with branches and leaves to protect themselves from the sun and the rain. But as these roofs did not withstand the bad weather in winter, they made them inclined and covered them with clay in order to enable the water to flow away."

Here is another passage taken from the preface to The Five Orders in Architecture by Vignola (1507-1573) after the French version published by Mariette, in 1760: [1]

"...the Origin of Orders is nearly as old as human society. The rigour of seasons first contrived men to invent small huts to retire and they made openings that they might not resemble to the caverns of the wild beasts that are obscure. They made them in the beginning half in the earth, and half above, and covered them with branches and straw, as are the ice boxes; then becoming more industrious, they planted trees on end, and laid others across to support the covering, which gave the first idea of Architecture, because the trees on end represented the pillars, the bands or ties of green wood, which prevented the trees from splitting, became the base and chapiters, and the cross beams have given rise to the entablatures, as well as the inclined covering to the fronton " [2]

And last, here is again the same story as we find it at the end of the 18th century in the famous "Prestonian Lectures", the content of which, inherited from the Grand Lodge of the Antients, has been maintained unchanged in our California ritual:

"Order in Architecture may be traced from the first formation in society. When the rigour of seasons first obliged men to contrive shelter from the inclemency of the weather, we learn that they first planted trees on end, and then laid others across, to support a covering. The bands which connected those trees at top and bottom, are said to have suggested the idea of the base and capital of pillars; and from this simple hint originally proceeded the more improved art of architecture." [3]

According to Bernard E. Jones, the traditional history, as reflected in the Craft ritual, attaches remarkable importance to the pillars, but today only in lodges still preserving the old style is this importance made evident in the appointments of the Lodge. In the early eighteenth century lodge the pillars were undoubtedly the first things to strike the eye of a Brother on entering. In many lodges of the 1700s, the appropriate pillar stood before the Master and each of the Wardens, but in some lodges there was a pillar on each side of the Master's chair or behind his chair. It is obvious that each lodge had its own idea on the subject, as have those lodges to-day which perpetuate the old style by still having pillars standing on the floor. We still find these large pillars today in the United Kingdom in some old lodges at Exeter, Newton Abott, Gloucester, Cardiff, Penarth, etc., in a Lodge at Ottawa, Canada, in the Danish lodges, as well as in the Lodges in India and in Sri Lanka. [4] Nowadays the pillars are placed either around the altar, in the centre of the Lodge as is done in the American Lodges, following in this the custom of the Ancients, or around the tracing board as is done in the continental European Lodges, according to the Moderns' working. The three pillars are constituted by three columns, where the Ionic is assigned to the Master, the Doric to the Senior Warden and the Corinthian to the Junior Warden. It is necessary, in this respect to remark the apparently curious fact that among the Five Orders of Architecture, esteemed by Masons, all refer to the Greeks and the Romans. Is it not surprising to see that Medieval Art, and particularly, the magnificent Gothic style, which has given birth to the splendour of cathedrals, is completely ignored? Here is maybe an answer, illustrating under a different and "Operative" light the quarrel between the Moderns and the Antients. Let us read again the work from Vignola:

"... the barbaric nations having come from the far North, and having flown as a torrent into the provinces of the Roman empire, and having spread fire and blood, this rich and vast empire came to perish, and with it the Arts, which until this fatal hour had been so much in honour. Better times having wiped out ignorance, Italy saw the birth of Princes who, allying a greatness of spirit with a pronounced taste for Sciences and Fine Arts, employed their glory to protect merit wherever they met it. A great number of happy geniuses, that Nature seemed to have reserved to illustrate this grand century, fertilized with a very well placed zeal, and announced to the whole of Europe the rebirth of good taste (Renaissance). It is in these

circumstances that the face of Architecture changed. The taste for Antiquity took the place of Gothic, which insensibly disappeared. This change did however not happen at once; people were still so busy and the eyes were still full of so many objects introduced by bad habits, that some time went before one realized that it was in the only fragments of ancient architecture that the true principles of the Art had to be sought. Whenever an architect would dare to imagine some ornaments, they would refer to bad taste and the Gothic style..." [5]

Having this passage in mind, we can imagine easily that the operative Masons, especially in England, did not immediately adopt the new style, reviving an "Antient" form of architecture, and that there remained for some time quite a number of supporters of the preceding style. This also explains why this architecture was labelled in a despising way as "Gothic" in comparison with the barbarian Goths. It is only in the middle of the 19th century that the Middle Ages in general and the Gothic architecture in particular were rehabilitated. Anderson, in the Constitutions which he wrote for the Grand Lodge of London, later to become the Moderns Grand Lodge, took the defense of the Gothic style; this is what he says:

"And though the many invasions of the Danes occasion'd the loss of many records, yet in times of truce or peace they did not hinder much the good work, that though not perform'd according to the Augustan stile; nay, the vast expense laid upon it, with the curious inventions of the artists to supply the Roman skill, doing the best they could, demonstrate their esteem and love for the Royal Art, and have render'd the GOTHIC BUILDINGS venerable, tho' not imitable by those that relish the ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE." [6]

When under Henry VIII and Elisabeth I, the Protestant religion became well established in England, and when after the fire of London in 1666, new edifices had to be built, it is the classical style in its full triumph, which more and more replaced the dying Gothic architecture. [7] In the first degree lecture, we learn that a Lodge is metaphorically said to be supported by three great pillars denominated Wisdom, Strength and Beauty; it being necessary that there should be Wisdom to contrive, Strength to support, and Beauty to adorn all great and important undertakings. These pillars are represented in the Lodge by the Worshipful Master, the Senior and Junior Wardens. As the three principal officers of the Lodge: the Worshipful Master, the Senior and Junior Wardens are seated in the East, the West and the South of the Lodge, so are the three pillars placed in the East, the West and the South. [8] It is also therefore that, the United Grand Lodge of England, confirmed by a special decision in 1816, the long-standing usage, which has its peculiar symbolic relevance to our ritual, that at the opening of the Lodge the sequence of lighting the candles should be East, West and South, and that at the closing of the Lodge the order should be reversed and the Master's light be put out last. [9] This passage of the lecture is more important than may seem at first sight. Let us take an example derived from operative masonry: the workman needs two tools to cut the stone, a chisel and a mallet. If one of both is missing nothing can be done. To produce a Masterpiece, the material realisation of Perfection, the Free-Mason must not only possess the knowledge required to know how to incline the Chisel, but he must also have the power for handling the mallet successfully. More, any physical work presupposes a preestablished plan conceived in the mind of the architect. What is true in operative Masonry is also and necessarily true in speculative Masonry. How many brilliant spirits do we not know, among our friends, or in our work, who keep wasting their clever thinking in vain, by lack of giving themselves the trouble to spend enough time put their theories into practise? How many men, full of energy, do we not have, around each one of us, who unceasingly make unbelievable efforts, only to fail? They do not understand Dr. Schweitzer's words: "Thought without Action is nothing, Action without Thought is also nothing." What is the fundamental reason of their failure? It is very simply that Beauty can only result from a balanced alliance between Wisdom and Strength. Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Albert Schweitzer, after having become, as a Protestant preacher, a reputed known theologian and philosopher, being also a renowned Bach player, went to University to study medicine at the age of forty, abandoned his native Alsacia, and went to Lambarene where he was to spend the rest of his days to heal the sick and poor of Equatorial Africa. He had understood the wise words of King Solomon: "*Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity! And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.*" [10] The true moral value of Dr. Albert Schweitzer's example is that he consecrated his knowledge and his energy for the benefit of Good.

It is for the same reason that our ritual states: "that we should apply our knowledge to the discharge of our respective duties to God, our neighbour and ourselves ..." The pillars are also said to represent our first three Most Excellent Grand Masters, Solomon King of Israel, Hiram King of Tyre and Hiram Abif. The pillar of Wisdom is said to represent Solomon King of Israel, as it was by his wisdom that the mighty edifice was erected which immortalized his name; the pillar of strength is said to represent Hiram King of Tyre, who made an agreement with King Solomon to pay the craft their wages, if any be due, that none may go away dissatisfied, harmony being the strength and support of all societies, especially of ours, and the pillar of beauty is said to represent Hiram Abif, the widow's son, who was the architect of the work, and whose duty it was to call the craft from labour to refreshment at high twelve, which is the beauty and glory of the day. [11] The building of the Temple at Jerusalem, of which it is traditionally reported that its several parts fitted together with such exact nicety, that it had more the appearance of the handiwork of the Supreme Architect of the Universe, than that of human hands, was possible only as a result of the alliance of the outstanding qualities of these three extraordinary men. The three pillars, surmounted by three candles, are also known among Masons as the three lesser lights and allude to the Sun, the Moon and the Master of the Lodge. As the Sun rules the day and the Moon governs the night, so should the Worshipful Master, with equal regularity, rule and govern the Lodge over which he is called to preside. [12]

The candles in the lodge are much more than a means of illumination. They are important symbols, with a long and attractive history. The candle came into the speculative lodge not only from the hall of the guild; it came from the votive offering burning before a shrine centuries ago. Its physical light is the emblem of the spiritual. The three pillars can also be compared to the three stations of the sun during the day: in the morning at its rising in the east, at noon at its highest point on the meridian, and in the evening at its setting in the west.

Albert Mackey says this about the pillars:

"In the Brahminical initiations of Hindostan, which are among the earliest that have been transmitted to us, and may almost be considered as the cradle of all the others, of subsequent ages and various countries, the ceremonies were performed in vast caverns, the remains of some of which at Salsette and Elephanta and a few other places, will give the spectator but a very inadequate idea of the extent and splendour of these ancient Indian Lodges. The interior of the cavern of initiation was lighted by innumerable lamps and there sat in the East, the West and the South the principal Hierophants or explainers of the mysteries, as the representatives of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva". [13]

Another eminent Masonic scholar, Pierson, adds " *In the East, as the pillar of Wisdom, this deity— i.e. the Sun God—was called Brahma; in the West, as the pillar of Strength, Vishnu. And in the South, as the Pillar of Beauty, Shva, and hence, in the Indian initiations the representative of Brahma was seated in the East, that of Vishnu in the West and that of Shiva in the South. A very remarkable coincidence with the practice of Ancient Masonry.*" [14]

Finally, the three pillars can also be compared and refer to the three spheres composing the Universe according the teaching of Cabala: Matter, Life and Spirit. [15] This leads us to what the Ancient Egyptians used to call by the sacred name of " the Divine Triad". [16] The Christians name this Mystery the Holy Trinity. The Hindus call it "the Sacred Trimurti". We, as Freemasons are traditionally taught to represent it, in the first degree, by the NUMBER THREE. [17]

" It is a singular coincidence and worthy of thought that the letters composing the English name of the Deity should be the initials of the Hebrew words Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty: G.O.D. Gomer, Oz and Dabar. [18]

As a conclusion to this tracing board, let me read for you an excerpt taken from Jonathan Livingston Seagull written by Richard Bach:

"Me? Jon, I'm just a plain seagull, and you're...the only Son of the Great Gull, I suppose?

"Jonathan sighed and looked out to sea.

"You don't need me any longer.

"You need to keep finding yourself, a little more each day, that real, unlimited Fletcher Seagull.

"He is your instructor.

"You need to understand him and to practise him.

"Fletch, don't believe what your eyes are telling you.

"All they show is limitation.

"Look with your understanding, find out what you already know, and you'll see the way to fly." [19]

Bibliographic References

[1] "VITRUVIUS, Roman architect 1st century B.C., author of the treatise "DE ARCHITECTURA", in ten books. We know very little about his life: he had served in Gaul and Spain under Caesar as a military engineer, was pensioned and is said to have died in 26 B.C. The passage has been translated from the French version made by Claude Perrault in 1684, 1979 facsimile edition, Pierre Mardaga editeur, Bruxelles.

[2] Vignola, in Italian LACOPO BAROZZI DI VIGNOLA, architect born in Vignola (Modena) [1507-1573]. Raised in Bologna, having been active mainly in Rome, he has produced considerable works, constituting a transition between Renaissance et Baroque styles, which have been followed during two centuries in the Catholic West. His treatise named Rule of the Five Orders (1562) is a simple and vigorous interpretation of VITRUVIUS.

[3] Illustrations of Masonry by William Preston, Past Master of the Lodge of Antiquity, acting by immemorial constitution, twelfth edition, with considerable additions, London, 1812.

[4] Freemasons' Guide and Compendium by Bernard E. Jones, P.A.G.D.C., late member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, George G.Harrap & Company Ltd., London, 1950, 1967 reprint. pp.355-361.

[5] Cours d'architecture de Vignole (1507-1573) French translation by Mariette, published in 1760.

[6] Anderson's Constitutions, 1723, bilingual edition English-French, Lauzeray International, Paris, 1978,

[7] Architecture gothique par E.Bruley, Librairie Bloud & Gay, Bibliotheque catholique des sciences religieuses, 1932. p.177

[8] Freemasons' Guide and Compendium by Bernard E. Jones, P.A.G.D.C., late member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, George G.Harrap & Company Ltd., London, 1950, 1967 reprint. p.356: Part of a dialogue between Simon and Philipp, taken from a manuscript of approximately the year 1730: " Q. How many pillars had your Lodge? A. Three. Q. What did you call them? A. Beauty, Strength and Wisdom. Q. What do they represent? Beauty to adorn, Strength to support, and Wisdom to contrive.

[9] Neville B. Cryer. Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076. London. Summons for 8th September 1988. Questions and Answers: "The Master's Light and the Siting of the Pillars".

[10] Ecclesiastes, 12,2.

[11] Freemasons' Guide and Compendium by Bernard E. Jones, P.A.G.D.C., late member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, George G.Harrap & Company Ltd., London, 1950, 1967 reprint. page 356: " They also represent Solomon, King of Israel, who built, completed and dedicated the Temple at Jerusalem to God's service; Hiram, King of Tyre, who supported Solomon with men and materials; and Hiram Abif, whose curious and masterly workmanship beautified and adorned the Temple.

[12] Bernard E. Jones Freemasons' Guide and Compendium: "In the eighteenth century the 'Moderns' at first regarded their three big candles carried in high candlesticks as the three great lights, the purpose of which was "not only to show the due course of the sun which rises in the east, has its meridian in the south and declension in the west, but also to light men to, at and from their labour" and also to represent "the Sun, Moon and the Master of the Lodge." To the 'Ancients' the three great lights were the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and Compasses, while the lesser lights were the candles of the Master and his Wardens. To the 'Moderns' the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and Compasses were known as the 'furniture' of the Lodge. Probably by the end of the century many of the 'Modern' lodges had come to look at the matter differently, and we find the Lodge of Reconciliation, after the union, adopting the 'Antient' practice as to the great lights, and agreeing that the lesser lights are situated in the east, south and west, and are meant to represent the sun, moon and Master of the Lodge.

[13] The Master's Carpet by Edmond Ronayne, Chicago, 1879. 1982 reprint, Ezra A.Cook Publishing, Chicago. (pp.306-307)

[14] The Master's Carpet by Edmond Ronayne, Chicago, 1879. 1982 reprint, Ezra A.Cook Publishing, Chicago. (p.308)

[15] Enel, Trilogie de la Rota, Dervy Livres, Paris, 1979. "Cabbalah teaches that there are three worlds: 1. Nephesh: Matter, the material and visible world. 2. Ruach: Breath, in latin animus, in other words the living world. 3. Neshama: Spirit, the world of thought.

[16] Les origines de la Genese et l'enseignement des temples de l'ancienne Egypte par Enel, Imprimerie de l'Institut francais d'archeologie orientale, Le Caire, 1935: "The trinitarian concept, being an explanation of the creation and of the universe, appears under the form of a divine family: father, mother and son."

[17] The Early Masonic Catechisms by Knoop, Jones & Hamer, Quatuor Coronati Lodge, London, 1975. The Grand Mystery of Free-Masons discover'd (1724): "Q. How many lights? A. Three; a right East, South and West. Q. What do they represent? The three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

[18] Ps 111,10. Job 12,13 Ps 27,4. One hundred and sixty questions and answers pertaining to the symbolism of Masonry and its connection with the bible, compiled from the works of Albert G. Mackey and many other eminent masonic authorities by C.E. Patterson, 1935, 1957, Holman, Nashville, Tennessee.

[19] Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach, 1970, 1973 reprint, Pan Books, London.