

Serpent Symbolism in Freemasonry

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The Pythagorean Triangle and Euclid's forty-seventh proposition is first brought to the attention of the candidate of Freemasonry in the Master Mason degree as one of the hieroglyphical emblems. We find further elaboration of the Pythagorean triangle in a few of the Scottish Rite degrees, specifically: Master of the Symbolic Lodge (20th) and the Knight of the Brazen Serpent (25th). The Knight of the Brazen Serpent degree is particularly interesting and alludes to deeper spiritual dimensions of the Pythagorean triangle.

The older version of the 25th Scottish Rite degree is inspired by the story of the Israelite wanderings in the desert, lead by Moses, in *Numbers 21:6-9*. It is the story of the people losing faith and because of this God sends fiery serpents to torture and kill them. The people repent, Moses prays for deliverance, and God instructs Moses to fashion a serpent of brass and raise it up on a pole, for that whoever gazes upon it will be saved. The serpent becomes the healer. It is of course a story of faith and redemption; and to the Christian, it is (like Abel) an Old Testament prototype of the crucifixion of Christ.

It seems that Albert Pike substantially revised the 25th degree. His revision lifts it up to a beautiful and universal lesson to contemplate. Although the original form of this rite was Biblical, the revision is somewhat Islamic, particularly Druse. The Druse were

originally an Ismaili sect, a major sect of Islam. Of one Ismaili group, Denning & Philips state: "Mighty was the mystical and secret Ismaili Order of the Faithful Ones of Love which, in Asia Minor, comparably with the Sufis and Dervishes, followed within the Islamic world the path of inner illumination and of devotion to the spiritual elevation of humanity. Mighty was its Ogdoadic power; mighty were its planetary workings." (Denning & Philips, *Foundations of High Magick*, page xxxii – xxxiii) In the Masonic degree, the candidate represents an Ismaili seeking initiation into the Druse.

The lodge is set up with four apartments alluding to the three squares of the 3-4-5 triangle and the inner triangle itself (see Rex Hutchens, *A Bridge to Light*). They are referred to as:

The House of Earth	(the body)
The House of the Planets	(the soul)
The House of the Sun & Moon	(the intellect)
The House of Light (triangle)	(the spirit)

The candidate moves, or is guided, from room to room to experience the symbolism, hear the instruction, and to learn the lessons and virtues to be developed in seeking more light.

What is remarkable to me is the regalia of this degree. There are two sashes worn so they crisscross the chest. One is red and the other is white. The red is obviously masculine and has the inscriptions for Osiris, Ahura and others with a depiction of a bull. The white is feminine, with the names of Isis and Ceres as well as a depiction of a dog's head. The beautiful and bright "dog star" Sirius was linked with Isis. There are Hebrew words: Geburah (force, strength) on the red sash-; and on the white sash – Ain (nothingness, not). It seems to be a further allusion to active and passive, to polarity. The crisscross of the red and white is also highly suggestive of the serpents of the caduceus as well as the yogic concept of the serpent power of kundalini that is sometimes represented as red and white rising up the spine during mystical states.

The jewel is in the shape of the Egyptian ankh, or *crux ansata*. It is a Tau (T) cross surmounted with a circle. A serpent entwines the circle. There are Hebrew letters upon the Tau, a word on the horizontal and a word on the vertical. (The Hebrew on the horizontal is the word used in scripture for the brazen serpent. The word on the vertical means suffering and/or wounded.)

The apron is beautiful and of extreme interest. The backside is black with white star clusters representing the constellations of Perseus, Scorpio, and Ursa Major. The front is white with gold star clusters representing the Pleiades, Hyades, Orion and Capella. The two sides represent the "light" and "dark" parts of the year. For example, when Scorpio rises in the East, Orion is setting in the West.

Also on the front of the apron in the center is an equilateral triangle with the Phoenician letters signifying Diety. Around the central triad are four letters, from the top, R, A, F, and A. These represent four bright stars: Regulus, in the heart of Leo; Aldebaran, in Taurus; Fomalhaut (Arabic for fish mouth) on the edge of Aquarius; and Antares, in Scorpio. These are of course the four fixed zodiac signs (Lion, Bull, Man, and Eagle) and related in Masonry to the tribes of Judah, Epharim, Ruben and Dan. These are also shown on the Tarot keys "The Wheel" and "The World".

On the triangular flap is a serpent biting its tail. Encircled by the serpent is a scarab (beetle). Recall that the sun reaches its zenith of the year (in the northern hemisphere) at the summer solstice (the northeast corner of the lodge) that marks the beginning of the water sign of Cancer (the Crab) and around John the Baptist day. The sun then reverses like the crab. This sign was known as the beetle to Egyptians and which the scarab beetle rolled dung backwards wherein it planted its eggs. To the ancients, this pillar or gate was where the souls entered into life, baptized by water.