

# **THE SYMBOLISM OF THE BEEHIVE AND THE BEE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Inside the traditions that have been transmitted to us under the name of Freemasonry, lie concealed a multitude of mysteries. These mysteries have been transmitted, for the most part, down through the corridors of time, through the rituals. A study of masonry's ritual structure, its lectures and charges and the focus upon certain key symbols leads to an unending flow of revelation. Like a pregnant goddess who contains within Her womb, an abundant amount of mysteries in egg form waiting to be, so to speak, born into our consciousness. These seed mysteries, in one form at least, are to be found in the visual representation of certain key symbols. One fountainhead of the Fraternity is the hieroglyphical emblem.

This paper is centered around the symbolism of the Beehive given to the candidate in the Third Degree as a hieroglyphic emblem. Whereas in times past, the emblems were part of the Third Degree lecture; now, they have been related to the Monitor for study at our leisure. Far be it for me to advocate any return to the older longer version of an already interminably long lecture. But, nevertheless, the way it works now leaves me uncomfortable. For one, looking at what is given regarding the hieroglyphic emblems, one has to wonder why they are given at all. Unless one has had a lobotomy, you would hardly ever go back and re-read their explanation. They are remarkable only in their brevity and seeming superficiality. One go through is usually quite enough.

Secondly, with the grandiose proclamation that these are "hieroglyphic emblems", you might naturally expect some profound, or possibly enigmatic treatise that, at the very least, would leave one thinking, pondering, and reflecting. Otherwise, what could possibly be the point?

So my attempt here is to remedy this god-awful situation in some small way. And whether what I have to offer is in line with how you conceive Masonry - that will have to remain your choice. In a very real sense, Freemasonry is like a queen bee whose workers have

built a hive and now search for the nectar of choice flowers to bring back and turn into honey for the nourishment of all. The following is, frankly, the ramblings and rumblings of my own disordered intellect. It is always possible that I may have gathered nectar from the wrong flowers.

The first section of this short talk will look at the common interpretation provided in the written explanation of Masonic symbols - that is - the *Monitor*. I wanted to review what some of the major commentators had to say regarding the beehive; however, I found very little. Besides what is already in the *Monitor*, there is nothing in Macoy's or Waite's dictionaries or encyclopedias. Very little in other sources like H.W. Coil (*A Comprehensive View of Freemasonry*) or Alex Horne (*Sources of Masonic Symbolism*). H.L. Haywood (*Symbolical Masonry*) and Allen Roberts (*The Craft and Its Symbols*) have a few paragraphs I will use. J.S.M Ward makes a good attempt (*Who was Hiram Abiff?*). A.S. Macbride even puts the beehive on the cover of his book *Speculative Masonry* yet I could find nothing therein on the subject. In any case, my purpose here of looking at what is available is not to see what further insight it may provide, but rather, to witness the almost total lack of insight that is provided. You may not hold this cynical view as I do, but whatever the case, this will lay the groundwork for further discussion.

The second section has to do with what we basically know about the bee, its hive and honey. All I will mention here are the facts as we know them, the observable characteristics and behavior (some known to medieval and even ancient people, some not), and some interesting information that while, relatively new to us, is still relevant to the use of the bee and beehive as a masonic symbol. (It is remarkable that many symbols used in ancient times still reveal many mysteries as we find out more about them in this scientific age.)

The third section is completely concerned with the exploration of possible deeper views of this symbol. My intention is to present a number of possible avenues for further inquiry.

I will mention some of the old myths where bees, the beehive, or honey play some major or minor role. We can find the use of bee symbolism as far back as dynastic Egypt. Later we see various uses of bee, beehive, or honey used as symbols throughout classical Greek culture. We find it in the myth of Cupid, god of love, the mythos of the Orphics, and very interesting use in the Eleusinian Rites of Demeter. Some of this we will look at in some detail.

Traveling east the symbolism is used in Jewish and Christian legend. Although the masonic use of the beehive probably draws its source from these two great traditions, I think it will become clear, if you are open-minded, that the Mystery Schools were viable sources as well. Further east there are the Hindu myths depicting bees in the stories of Krishna, Shiva, and Kama - the Hindu god of love. The conclusion that the archetypal significance of the beehive and the bee itself should be so apparent that's its ability to transcend cultural bias, couldn't be clearer if it stung you in the ass!

## **THE MONITOR AND COMMON MASONIC DEFINITIONS**

Our so-called Masonic textbook - the Monitor - tells us that the Beehive is one of the hieroglyphical emblems. Surprisingly, it does not define what a hieroglyphic emblem is. One masonic author (Alex Horne) says that we should not mix up the idea of symbol with the idea of emblem. A symbol may very well point to something higher while an emblem, he quotes from the dictionary, does not necessarily have this "higher something else" connotation. OK, but then why put the word "hieroglyphical" in front of it if that is the case? So here, I cannot agree. He, and others who have virtually ignored this issue, seem to have no knowledge of the traditions surrounding Freemasonry at the time of its inception, not to mention its cultural use. For example, Thomas M. Greene, in his *The Light in Troy. Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* in writing about English culture around and after 1590 talks about the "storehouse of signifying capacities which was potentially available to each member of that culture: ... a polysemous (*where did that word come from ???: it means existence of many meanings*) allegorical tradition, dream

vision,... emblems and emblem books, devices, hieroglyphs, a vast and confusing body of mythographic materials ... " were common. It could also be applied to other European cultures of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. (Bernhard F. Scholz, p. 3) In another work called *Emblematic Structures in Renaissance Culture* by Daniel Russell he writes: "... the emblematic image is one that can almost by definition, be interpreted in more than one way, but like medieval images it can also, ... carry only one meaning at a time. ... the emblematic image represents ... something that exists independently of any symbolic meaning it may carry; ...". What this means basically is that, as Scholz says: "For what characterizes an emblematic image is not the fact that among its defining properties there is a specific 'metaphoric or other application or use', but the fact that it is - by definition - amenable to having a metaphoric or other application or use'." (p. 5) Enough of this, but I needed to counter this prevailing superficial look at the emblems. They can be, I submit, of the highest and deepest significance.

The *Monitor* lists a series of emblems which, by their very inclusion, must be considered of the highest importance. Interestingly, the beehive is given the longest explanation. We cannot think of it as standing alone because other items are definitely implied: the bee that makes and inhabits the hive, and the honey which is the product.

Our masonic textbook gives the following in regard to the emblem:

*"The Bee Hive is an emblem of industry, and recommends the practice of that virtue to all created beings, from the highest seraph in heaven to the lowest reptile in the dust. It teaches us that we come into the world rational and intelligent beings, so we should ever be industrious ones; never sitting down content while our fellow creatures around us are in want, especially when it is in our power to relieve them without inconvenience to ourselves.*

*When we take a survey of nature, we view man in his infancy, more helpless and indigent than the brute creation. He lies languishing for day, months, and years, totally incapable of providing*

*sustenance for himself, or guarding against the attack of wild beasts of the fields, or sheltering himself from the inclemency's of the weather. It might have pleased the great Creator of heaven and earth to have made man independent of all other beings, but as dependence is one of the strongest bonds of society, mankind were made dependent on each other for protection and security, as they thereby enjoy better opportunities of fulfilling the duties of reciprocal love and friendship. Thus was man formed for social and active life, the noblest part of the work of God, and he that will so demean himself as not to be endeavoring to add to the common stock of knowledge and understanding, may be deemed a drone in the hive of nature, a useless member of society, and unworthy of our protection as Masons."* (Masonic Monitor)

I have not been able to check too many Monitors but the exact wording is used in the *Missouri Masonic Monitor*. Possibly the earliest known masonic example of the emblem of the bee hive is found in an Irish expose called *The Early Masonic Catechisms* printed in 1724:

*"A bee has in all Ages and Nations been the Grand Hieroglyphick of Masonry, because it excells all other living Creatures in the Contrivance and Commodiousness of its Habitation or combe; ... nay Masonry or Building seems to be of the very Essence or Nature of the Bee, for her Building not the ordinary Way of all other living Creatures, is the Generative Cause which produces the Young ones. (you know I suppose that Bees are of Neither Sex.)*

*For this Reason the Kings of France both Pagans and Christians, always Eminent Free-Masons, carried three Bees for their Arms.*

*What Modern Masons call a Lodge was for the above Reasons by Antiquity call'd a HIVE of Free-Masons, and for the same Reasons when a Dissention happens in a Lodge the going off and forming another Lodge is to this Day call'd SWARMING. (wording and spelling of 1724)"* (Roberts, *The Craft and Its Symbols*, p. 73)

Other monitors will give more or less the same type of explanation. Some longer and some shorter. No doubt the basic

themes of industry and work ethic, social harmony and cooperation are predominant. Allen Roberts comments:

*"We must assume that the Bee Hive became an important symbol in Freemasonry the way the other symbols entered it. It symbolized what the cathedral builders did na the way they did it. The bee definitely is industrious. He works hard and tirelessly, not for himself, but for the swarm. He has a strength and knowledge of materials that cannot be duplicated. He works in complete cooperation, and without dissention, with his fellow bees. He protects the Queen, refuses admittance to enemies, builds, makes honey, and lives in a society ruled by law. What bees do can be compared with the cathedral builders of centuries ago. ... Undoubtedly, the operative masons saw their duplicate in the bees." (The Craft and Its Symbols, A.E. Roberts, p. 74)*

It is interesting to note, that the beehive is never mentioned, to my knowledge, in any other degree of Masonry, York Rite or Scottish Rite, nor any others of which I am aware.

To me, this basically sums up the scope of what is commonly held to be the meaning of the beehive emblem. And it is here I could leave the subject for the above is perfectly adequate. But of course we will go on and go further.

## **THE MIRACLE OF THE BEE**

In this next section I just want to relay some common information about the bee. As scientific knowledge does not mean much in the use of symbols, I will not go into much here. But one of the first things people notice about bees is that they are attracted to sweet things and not foul. There are about 30,000 species of bees. Our main concern is with one - the honeybee. So when I say bee, I mean honeybee.

In 1923, a scientist named von Frisch published his famous work on the dance of the bee. When a bee discovers a source of food, she fills herself with the nectar and returns to the hive. She then performs what has been termed a dance that symbolically describes

where the food source is. From this symbolic ritual, the other bees can find the source.

Reproduction is interesting. Not all bees have two parents. We have three classes: the queen, the female workers, and the male drones. The one special fertile female is - the queen. There are other females but they do not produce any eggs. The male bees are produced by the queen's unfertilized eggs (in other words - no father). The females are produced when the queen has mated with a male - therefore she has two parents.

Interestingly, the family tree of a colony produces what we know as the Fibonacci sequence. A bee's ancestry fits the exact pattern.

***Draw out the example.***

		great-	great,great	gt,gt,gt	
	grand-	grand-	grand	grand	
Number of	parents:	parents:	parents:	parents:	parents:
of a MALE bee:	1	2	3	5	8
of a FEMALE bee:	2	3	5	8	13
0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, 610, 987 ..					

As you may or may not know, the Fibonacci sequence is one of the major chords played by Nature in her symphony. Everywhere one looks there is the sequence displayed: view the construction of sunflowers, pinecones, pineapples, artichokes, apples, lemons, chiles, starfish, sand dollars, the iris, buttercup, daisies, and you could go on and on.

It is the proportion of living things. One author gives this definition: "The Fibonacci sequence actually begins with two terms, zero and unity, nothing and everything, the Unknowable and the

manifest Monad. These are the first two terms. Their sum, another unity, is the third term. To find each next term, just add the two latest terms together. This process produces the endless series 0,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89,144 ... At first glance we see a chain of numbers. But look beyond the visible numbers to the self-accumulating process by which they grow. The series grows by accruing terms that come from within itself, from its immediate past, taking nothing from outside the sequence for its growth. Each term may be traced back to its beginning as unity in the Monad, which itself arose from the incomprehensible mystery of zero.

This principle of ongoing growth-from-within is the essence of the Pentad's principle of regeneration and the pulsing rhythms of natural growth and dissolution." (Michael Schneider, *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe*)

Other examples:

**Fibonacci example:** of Bee moving over a honeycomb. Let's see how these numbers relate one to the other.

**Hexagram example.** Ask: how do you produce a hexagram? It is the relation of the radius to the circumference. To create the hexagram, draw a circle. Use the compass, keep the radius the same and place the point anywhere upon the circumference. Mark a small arc on the circle and then place the point on that arc and make another one. Continue all the way around the circle until you return to the beginning. There will be six points.

Thus is illustrated why the Point and Circle (as symbol of the Sun) is related to the hexagram and the number six.

**Talk about relationship of the pentagram to the fibonacci sequence.** The Pentagram (growth and regeneration/golden proportions, golden rectangle, golden spiral)

Lets go on to the next section.

## MYTHOLOGICAL DEPICTIONS OF BEES, THE BEEHIVE AND HONEY

In consideration of some of the myths surrounding our symbols, in general, bees have been thought of as messengers of the spirits. "Telling the bees" was a way to relay messages to friends and relatives who have passed over. In some folklore, the sudden presence of a bee represents the imminent arrival of a stranger.

Looking back to Egypt, bees were considered tears of the sun-god RA. Here we see a relationship with the sun that we will see later. The bee hieroglyphic is a symbol of Lower Egypt. Because of the sudden appearances of bees they became symbols of death and rebirth. Bees also represented the soul. Honey was often offered to deities.

In Hindu myth and iconography, the bee surmounting a triangle is a symbol of Shiva. Sometimes we see a blue bee on the forehead of Krishna, as the avatar of Vishnu. Kama, the god of love, like Cupid has a bow and arrows, and the bow string is made up of bees. In the yogic doctrine, where each chakra emits a different sound in meditation, the lowest chakra (muladhara) emits a hum likened in the writings to a bumblebee. Note that the first chakra represents our strongest bond to the material world and Eros or Cupid in Greek philosophy is the natural impelling force towards sensual objects.

Further in the ancient Greek world, for the Orphics the bee symbolized the soul because they migrated in swarms. The second temple built at Delphi was said to be built by bees. The god of love, Cupid, is often pictured with bees or being stung. Here is a famous painting: **SHOW PAINTING**. In the myth it is written that Venus says to her son after he is stung: "Thou too art like a bee, for although a tiny child, yet how terrible are the wounds thou dost inflict!" Periclymenus, one of the Argonauts, was granted by Posidon the power of changing his shape into a lion, a snake, or a bee. Throughout the Mediterranean the bee was also a symbol of Spring because it was associated with the blooming gorse (a broom) that turned the hillsides all over the region bright yellow as soon as the

Sun's light increased. As soon as this happened the bee appeared. Here is another connection of the bee with the sun and with the idea of resurrection.

A fascinating connection regards the Rites of Eleusis. These mystery rites were widely regarded as the high point of Greek religion. They centered around the goddess Demeter who was the Great Mother deity. The myth regarded nature's seasonal death and resurrection and represented it in the story of Demeter, her daughter Persephone and her abduction by Hades. Persephone or Kore was sometimes called honey-like and the moon (among other reasons because the moon is also called a bull and Taurus is its exaltation). The rites were conducted by the Hierophant and Hiera, the Hierophantides (2 females) and the Panageis Priestesses or Milissae - meaning bees. The function of these priestesses is still not known.

There are coins from Ephesus from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. that depict a queen bee as a symbol of the Great Mother. Ephesus was known throughout the ancient world for its temple to the Great Mother Goddess.

In the Roman Mithraic rites, there were different levels or grades of initiation. One was termed the Degree of the Lion. The neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry writes: "The theologians have used honey to symbolize many different things since it combines multiple powers, and is both cathartic and preservative in its effects. Many things are kept from rotting by honey and it clears up persistent wounds. It is sweet to the taste and is gathered from flowers by bees which incidentally are born from cattle. When they pour honey instead of water on the initiates in the Lion Mysteries, they call upon them to keep their hands pure of all that which is painful, harmful, or dirty ..." (Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*) Porphyry also says that souls coming into the world are "born from cattle, and the god who secretly impedes incarnation is "the cattle thief".

What could he mean by this statement - born from cattle? It seems that Porphyry is making an allusion to the Neoplatonic principle that souls descend into incarnation (the Many) and ascend back to the Monad (the One). The summer and winter solstice being the two gates (sometimes referred to as "mouths") in this process: the gate of

Cancer (summer solstice) being the one through which souls descend and the gate of Capricorn (winter solstice) being the one for ascending. The key to Porphyry's statement is hidden in the astrological symbols. The sign of Cancer is ruled by the moon (Kore was sometimes called the moon and also Melitodes meaning "honey-like") Souls were thought to descend into incarnation from the lunar sphere. And the moon is exalted in the sign of Taurus, the Bull. Recall the Taurus symbol: the crescent crowning the circle. Thus, souls are born from cattle.

If we can go back to Egypt quickly I want to point out that at Memphis, the Memphite theology, the Apis bull was worshipped as the ba (or spirit or spiritual manifestation) of Ptah, the creator of the universe. Ptah's symbols were the architect's transit, level, and plumb line. He was the patron of skilled craftsmen and architects.

In Jewish and Christian legend, bees and honey have had various meanings. It must be remembered that when the Jewish scriptures spoke of honey they usually meant a type of thick syrup made from dates and figs. But sometimes as bee honey as well. For example, the story of Samson. You may recall that Samson went out and killed the young Lion and after sleeping with a woman "he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion: and, behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion. And he took thereof in his hands and went on eating." (Judges 14)

As regards the Christian uses of the symbol it was as to be expected centered around Christ. Again, the symbol of industry, fidelity and virtue were predominant. Remember that the bee was not domesticated until the era of the monasteries who learned to cultivate them.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I wanted to close with some speculative remarks about different things related to the bee and beehive symbolism. In some of the more mystical versions of Freemasonry (some may

argue over its "regularity" but that is not the issue here), I found some different interpretations. One author said the beehive is a triple emblem. "The hive proper denotes man's physical body. The honeycomb signifies that which is interior to the physical, the astral body. And the honey is symbolical of the spiritual body, which is composed of the choicest nectars and aromas of earthly experience." (C.C. Zain, *Ancient Masonry*)

In the theosophical lodges, the beehive represents a more subtle structure in their ritual work. One author writes: "It will be remembered that in the process of censuring the Lodge, a beehive-shaped structure was erected in front of the pedestal of each of the principal officers ..."(C.W. Leadbeater, *The Hidden Life in Freemasonry*) At certain times the candidate is placed within these subtle structures so that (it is thought) he or she may absorb the subtle influences invoked by the rites.

And a final consideration to ponder I extracted from the works of analytical psychology. The archetypal idea of the Great Individual. This is he or she who "breaks away from the anonymity of the primordial collective." On the heavenly realm he becomes a god-figure and on the earth plane a god-king, shaman, wizard, or medicine man. He is the Pharaoh, the King signifying Great Man. He is the King Bee (as they thought this in ancient times). At a psychological level, this is a stage of god-identity - the human bearer of an immortal soul (recall the Third Degree). The King has ritually transformed into a god by unifying all the soul's parts. *"the history of Egypt enables us to trace in a unique way how the ego grows out of its original collective identity and how the Great Individual, as carrier for projection of the collective self, paves the way for the formation of each individual ego, and initiates and assists the process. Whereas in a collective composed of incomplete individuals the god-king is the archetypal representative of the group's totality, this figure gradually develops a mediatory function, that is, it gives up more and more of its mana to the group members and is thus disintegrated and dismembered. The same process of incorporating and assimilating the greater, which was originally enacted between the king and God, now takes place between the individual and the king, who is 'eaten'.*

*His divine kingship is continually reduced, but at the same time the incomplete members of the collective, who formerly existed only as instruments of his apotheosis, become complete individuals. ... his (the King's) demotion is accompanied by a process in which every individual acquires an immortal soul, that is becomes Osiris, and introjects the self, the god-king, as the sacral center of his own being." (Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*)*

I am convinced of the appropriateness of the beehive to the Third Degree of Freemasonry. I think that the material considered above is compelling enough to come to that conclusion. As with many Masonic emblems and symbols, it's full impact is not necessarily immediate. Nor should it be. But if a Mason thinks about and explores the various connections presented above while keeping in mind the actual Third Degree he experienced, he will sup the nectar of the gods.