

Point Within A Circle

Unknown

“There is in every regular and well governed Lodge, a certain point within a circle, embordered by two parallel perpendicular lines...”

Familiar to every Mason, this ancient symbol is too often considered merely as one of many, instead of what it really is, among the most illuminating of the entered Apprentice’s Degree.

It is particularly important not only for its antiquity, the many meanings which have been and may be read from it by the student, but because of the bond it makes between the old Operative Craft and the modern Speculative Masonry we know.

No man may say when, where or how the symbol began. From the earliest dawn of history a simple closed figure has been man’s symbol for deity – the circle for some peoples, the triangle for others, and a circle or a triangle with a central point, for still others. The closed figure, of course, represents the conception of Him Who has neither beginning or ending; the triangle adds to this the reading of a triune nature. It is to be noted that the Lesser Lights form a triangle placed in our Lodges in that orientation which expresses Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. In some Jurisdictions a Lodge closes with the brethren forming a circle about the Altar, which thus becomes the point, or focus of the Supreme Blessing upon the brethren.

Nor must we consider that a reading which is wholly beyond the monitorial explanation of the point within a circle is beyond Masonic conception. A symbol may have many meanings, all of them right, so long as they are not self-contradictory. As the point within a circle has had so many different meanings to so many different people, it is only to be expected that it have meanings for many Masons.

We find it connected with sun worship, the most ancient of religions; ruins of ancient temples devoted both to sun and fire worship are circular in form, with a central altar, or “point” which was the Holy of Holies. The symbol is found in India, in which land of mystery and mysticism its antiquity is beyond calculation. Of its presence in many of the religions of the East, Wilford says (Asiatic Researches):

“It was believed in India that at the general deluge everything was involved in the common destruction except the male and female principles or organs of generation, which were destined

to produce a new race and to repeople the earth when the waters had subsided from its surface. The female principle, symbolized by the moon, assumed the form of a lunette, or crescent, while the male principle, symbolized by the sun, assumed the form of the lingam (or phallus) and placed himself erect in the center of the lunette, like the mast of a ship. The two principles in this united form floated on the surface of the waters during the period of their prevalence on the earth, and thus became the progenitors of a new race of men.” This is the more curious and interesting when a second ancient meaning of the symbol is considered – that the point represents the sun and the circle the universe. Indeed, this meaning is both modern and ancient, for a dot in a small circle is the astronomical symbol for the sun, and the derivation of this astronomical symbol marks its Masonic connection. The Indian interpretation makes the point the male principle, the circle the female; the point became the sun and the circle the solar system which ancient peoples thought was the universe because the sun is vivifying, the life-giving principle, for all the lives.

The two parallel lines, which modern Masonry states represents the two Holy Sts. John, are as ancient as the rest of the symbol, and originally had nothing to do with the “two eminent Christian Patrons of Masonry.” It is a pretty conception, but of course utterly without foundation. The Holy Sts. John lived and taught many hundreds of years before any Masonry existed which can truly be called by that name. If this is distasteful to those good brethren who like to believe that King Solomon was Grand Master of a Grand Lodge, devised the system and perhaps wrote the ritual, one must refute them with their own chronology, for both the Holy Sts. John lived long “after” the wise King wrought his “famous fabric.”

The two perpendicular parallel lines are sometimes thought to have been added to the symbol of the point within a circle as a sort of diagram or typification of a Lodge at its most solemn moment, the point being the brother at the Altar, the circle the Holy of Holies, and the two lines the brethren waiting to help bring the initiate to light.

But it is obviously a mere play of fancy; the two lines against the circle with the point date back to an era before Solomon. On early Egyptian monuments may be found the Alpha and Omega, or symbol of God, in the center of a circle embordered by two upright serpents, representing the Power and the Wisdom of the Creator.

Mackey reads into the symbol an analogy to the Lodge by observing that as the Master and Wardens represent the sun in three positions in the Lodge, and as the Lodge is a symbol of the world (or universe) the circle can be considered as representing the Lodge, the point the sun at meridian, and the two lines, the Wardens or sun at rising and at setting.

This also seems to many students to be a mere coincidental reading. That derivation of the symbol which best satisfied the mind as to logic and appropriateness, students found in the operative craft. Here is more to encourage than in all the researches into ancient religions and the symbolism of men long forgotten.

Fully to understand just how the point within a circle came into Speculative Masonry by way of Operative Craftsmanship, it is necessary to have some mental picture of the times in which the Craftsmen of the early middle ages lived and wrought.

The vast majority of them had no education, as we understand the word. They could neither read nor write – unimportant matters to most, first because there were no books to read, second because there was nothing which they needed to write! Skilled craftsmen they were, through long apprenticeship and careful teaching in the art of cutting and setting stone, but except for manual skill and cunning artifice founded on generations of experience, they were without learning.

This was not true of the leaders – or, as we would call them – the Masters. The great Cathedrals of Europe were not planned and overseen by ignorance. There, indeed, knowledge was power, as it is now, and the architects, the overseer, the practical builders, those who laid out the designs and planned the cutting and the placing of the stones – these were learned in all that pertained to their craft. Doubtless many of them had a knowledge of practical and perhaps of theoretical mathematics.

Certain parts of this theoretical knowledge became diffused from the Master Builders through the several grades of superintendents, architects, overseer and foreman in charge of any section of the work. With hundreds if not thousands of men working on a great structure, some sort of organization must have been as essential then as now. And equally essential would be the overseeing of the tools. Good work cannot be done with faulty instruments. A square and upright building cannot be erected with a faulty square, level or plumb!

The tools used by the cathedral builders must have been very much what ours are today; they had gavel, mallet, setting maul and hammer; they had chisel and trowel as we have. And of course, they had plumb, square, level and twenty-four inch gauge to “measure and lay out their work.”

The square, the level and the plumb were made of wood – wood, cord, and weight for the plumb and level; wood alone for the square. Wood wears when used against stone. Wood warps when exposed to water or damp air. The metal used to fasten the two arms of the square together would rust and perhaps bend or break. Naturally, the squares would not indefinitely stay square. Squares had constantly to be checked for the right-angledness. Some standard had to be adopted by which a square could be compared, so that, when Operative Masons' squares were tried by it they would not “materially err.”

The importance of the perfect right angle in the square by which stones were shaped can hardly be over-estimated. Operative Masonry in the Cathedral building days was largely a matter of cut and try, of individual workmen, or careful craftsmanship. Quality production, micrometer measurement, interchangeability of parts were words which had not yet been coined; ideas for which they stand had not even been invented. All the more necessary, then, that the foundation

on which all the work was done should be as perfect as the Masters knew how to make it. Cathedral builders erected their temples for all time – how well they built, a hundred glorious structures in the Old World testify. They built well because they knew how to check and try their squares!

Today any school boy knows the simple “secret of the square” which was then the closely guarded wisdom of the Masters alone; today any school boy can explain the steam engine which was a wonder two hundred years ago, and make and use a wireless which was a miracle scarce ten years gone by. Let us not wonder that our ancient Operative brethren thought their secret of a square so valuable; let us rather wonder that in time in which the vast majority of men were ignorant of mathematics, so many must have known and appreciated this simple, this marvelous, geometrical secret.

Lay out a circle – any size – on a piece of paper.

With a straight edge draw a line across through its center. Put a dot on the circle, anywhere. Connect that dot with the line at both points where it crosses the circle. Results – a perfect right triangle.

Draw the circle of whatever size you will; place a dot on the circumference where you will, it makes no difference. So be it. So be it the lines from the dot meet the horizontal line crossing the circle through its center and they will form a right angle.

This was the Operative Mason’s secret – knowing how “to try his square.” It was by this means that he tested the working tools of the Fellows of the Craft; he did so often enough, and it was impossible either for their tools or their work “to materially err.”

From this, also, comes the ritual used in the lodges of our English brethren, where they “open on the center.” Alas, we have dropped the quaint old words they use, and American Lodges know the “center” only as the point within a circle. The original line across the center has been shifted to the side and became the “two perpendicular parallel lines” of Egypt and India and our admonitions are no longer what they must have once been; ... “while a mason circumscribes his “square” within these points, it is impossible that “it” should materially err.”

Today we only have our Speculative meaning; we circumscribe our desires and our passions within the circle and the lines touching on the Holy Scriptures. For Speculative Masons who use squares only in the symbolic sense such an admonition is of far greater use than would be the secret of the square as was known to our ancient brethren.

But – how much greater becomes the meaning of the symbol when we see it as a direct descent from an Operative practice! Our ancient brethren used the point within a circle as a test for the rectitude of the tools by which they squared their work and built their temporal buildings. In the Speculative sense, we used it as a test for the rectitude of our intentions and our conduct, by

which we square our actions with the square of virtue. They erected Cathedrals – we build the “House Not Made With Hands.” Their point within a circle was Operative – ours is Speculative!

But through the two – point in a circle on the ground by which an Operative Master secretly tested the square of his fellows – point within a circle as a symbol by which each of us may test, secretly, the square of his virtue by which he erects an Inner Temple to the Most High – both are Masonic, both are beautiful. The one we know is far more lovely that it is a direct descendant of an Operative practice the use of which produced the good work, true work, square work of the Master Masons of the days that come not back.

Pass it not lightly. Regard it with the reverence it deserves, for surely it is one of the greatest teachings of Masonry, concealed within a symbol which is plain for any man to read, so be it he has Masonry in his heart.

STB – August 1931