

Rough And Perfect

Unknown

The rough Ashlar and the Trestleboard seem to have been symbols in Ancient Craft Masonry at least from the beginning of the Grand Lodge period (1717). They are illustrated on the earliest of the old tracing-boards which have come down to us.

Just when or how the Perfect Ashlar came into our symbolism is another matter, and not as simple as it appears.

In 1731 one Samuel Prichard, who denominated himself as a “Life Member of a Constituted Lodge” wrote and published “Masonry Dissected,” the first of a long series of exposes of Freemasonry. In it is this curious dialogue, purporting to be held between the Entered Apprentice during his initiation, and some initiating officer:

Q. “Have you any Jewels in your Lodge?”

A. “Yes.”

Q. “How Many?”

A. “Six, three movable and three immovable.”

Q. “What are the movable Jewels?”

A. “Square, Level and Plumb Rule.”

Q. “What are their uses?”

A. “Square, to down true and right lines; Level, to try all Horizontals; and Plumb Rule, to try all Uprights.”

Q. “What are the immovable Jewels?”

A. “Tarsel Board, Rough Ashlar and Broached Thurnel.”

Q. “What are their uses?”

A. “A Tarsel Board for the Master to draw his designs upon, Rough Ashlar for the Fellow-Craft to try their Jewels upon, and the Broached Thurnel for the entered Apprentice to learn to work upon.”

The learned Dr. Oliver, most prolific of the early writers on Freemasonry, to whose industry if not to whose accuracy Freemasonry owes a great debt, unwittingly muddied the waters of antiquity in which this Broached Thurnel was apparently immersed! He confused it with the Rough Ashlar, stating that the two were the same.

Old tracing-Boards of the entered Apprentice Degree disclose what we readily recognize as the Trestle-Board, although in those days it was known as “Tarsel!” Adjacent to it is what is plainly a Rough Ashlar. Immediately next is a drawing of a cube, surmounted by a pyramid – a cubical stone with a pyramidal apex.

Early French tracing-boards display the “pierre-cubique,” of cubical stone.

Modern tracing-boards show the Perfect Ashlar (not the rough Ashlar, as Oliver had it) in place of the Broached Thurnel, or cubical stone with pyramid atop.

Mackey quotes Parker’s “Glossary of Terms in Architecture” as follows:

“Broach or broche is an old English term for spire, still in use in Leicestershire, where it is said to denote a spire springing from the tower without any intervening parapet. Thurnel is from the old French, “tournelle,” a turret or little tower. The Broached Thurnel, then, was the Spired Turret. It was a model on which Apprentices might learn the principles of their art because it presented to them, in its various outlines, the forms of the square and the triangle, the cube and the pyramid.”

Modern authorities dispute this. G.W. Speth finds that Broach, in Scotland means to rough-hew. Thurnel, he states, is a chisel with which to rough-hew, rather than a model of a spired turret on which an Apprentice might learn to work. But, he inquires, what then becomes of the pyramid on the cube, displayed on the old tracing- boards? Moreover, the Scotch use “boast” as an alternate word for “broach,” and “boasted ashlar” can be found in modern dictionaries, meaning chiseled with an irregular surface.

As a matter of fact, no one really “knows” just what our ancient brethren meant by Broached Thurnel; what we do know is that somewhere in the early formative period of the modern ritual, Broached Thurnel gave way to Perfect Ashlar.

But it did not necessarily do so because of the presence on the tracing-board of a Rough Ashlar. No less an authority than R.W. Charles C. Hunt, Librarian and Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, presents the “Perpend Ashlar” as its probable progenitor. A Perpend Ashlar – the word has many variations, such as parpen, parpend, parpent, parpine, parpin, parping – is a dressed stone which passes completely through a wall from one side to the other, having two smooth, vertical faces. This perpenstone. or bonder, or bondstone, is the same as the Parping Ashlar of Gloucestershire – a stone which passes through a wall and shows a fair face on either side.

In the “True Masonic Chart” published by R.W. Jeremy L. Cross in 1820, appear pictures of the Rough and Perfect Ashlars, showing them substantially as we know them today. It is noteworthy that the stones illustrated are more than twice as long as wide and high, which seems to bear out the idea that the Perfect Ashlar, at least, was once the Perpend Ashlar.

Before examining the symbolism of the Ashlars it is illuminating to read at least one passage from the Great Light:

“And the king commanded, and they brought great stones, and costly stones, and hewed stones, to lay the foundation of the house. “And Solomon’s builders and Hiram’s builders did hew them, and the stonesquarers; so they prepared timber and stones to build the house.” (I Kings, V 16-17)

There is a distinction between builders and stone squarers – while those who cut and squared the stone and those who built, both hewed, yet they were distinct in functions. It is also interesting to observe the classification “great”, “costly” and “hewed.”

“Great” of course refers to size. The larger the stone, the harder it was to cut from the quarry, the more difficult to transport, and therefore, the more expensive. But “costly” may also refer to the expense of hewing. Then, as now, the more truly and carefully a stone was hewed and smoothed, squared and polished, the more time was required and therefore, the more “costly” the stone became. Few symbols seem more obvious, at least in their simpler aspects. Rough Ashlar, man in his untutored state; Perfect Ashlar, man educated, refined, with mind filled light. It is this symbolism which Brother J.W. Lawrence evidently had in mind when he wrote:

“The Perfect Ashlar, as a symbol, is the summum bonum of Freemasonry. That is to say, everything else in Masonry leads up to it. The V. of S.L. describes it, the checkered pavement illustrates it, the Great Architect no less than the Grand Geometrian desire it, and are satisfied with nothing less. When the craft has fashioned the Perfect Ashlar, it has nothing else to do.”

With part of which all can agree; if some think that there yet remains building to be done, after the Ashlars are hewn to perfection, we may still make our own the thought that the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge Above wants only perfection in the spiritual stones for the “House Not Made With Hands.” But the symbolism can be carried further. In this subject “Introduction to Freemasonry” reads:

“The common Gavel, which breaks off the corners of rough stones, the better to fit them for the builders use, joins the Rough and Perfect Ashlars in a hidden symbol of the Order at once beautiful and tender. The famous sculptor and ardent Freemason, Gutzon Borglum, when asked how he carved stone into beautiful statues, once said: ‘it is very simple. I merely knock away with a hammer and chisel the stone I do not need, and the statue is there – It Was There All of the Time.’”

“In the Great Light We read: ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is Within You.’ We are also there taught that man is made in the image of God. As Brother Borglum has so beautifully said, images are made by a process of taking away. The perfection is already within. All that is required is to remove the roughness and excrescences, ‘Divesting our Hearts and Consciences of the Vices and Superfluities of life’ to show forth the perfect man and Mason within.”

Albert Pike, always original, thought the interpretation of the Rough and Perfect Ashlars, as given in our Ancient craft monitors and ritualistic instruction, to be superficial. He found another meaning:

“The Rough Ashlar is the people, as a mass, rude and unorganized. The Perfect Ashlar, cubical stone, symbol of perfection, is the State, the rulers deriving their powers from the consent of the governed; the constitution and laws speaking the will of the people; the government, harmonious, symmetrical, efficient – its powers properly distributed and duly adjusted in equilibrium.”

Any brother is privileged to extend symbolism in new directions as far as he wishes; if his reading of a symbol is to him satisfactory teaching of a truth, it is a good reading. But the rough and Perfect Ashlars are sufficiently inclusive of the many truths-within the grasp of the average individual, without extending the interpretation to such vast conceptions as the people and the state. Even Pike, great interpreter of symbols though he was, never contended that the original symbolism of the Ashlars, as developed from operative practice by the early Speculatives, was of a political nature.

Hunt’s reading of the Perfect Ashlar, as the successor to the Perpend Ashlar, is most beautiful. In “Some Thoughts on Masonic Symbolism” he suggests:

“We call it the Perfect Ashlar, but we must remember that it is perfected only because it is completely adapted to the purpose for which it was made, namely; to exactly fit into its place in the building, and act as a binder for other stones.

“In order that it may do this, it must possess certain attributes and through these attributes we are reminded ‘of that state of perfection at which we hope to arrive by a virtuous education, our own endeavors and the blessing of god.’ It has two faces to be exposed, and both must be absolutely upright. It does not have one standard for the world and another for the home; the same face, square and true, is presented both to the world and the Lodge, and it teaches that we should not have one code of morals for one place and another for another, but that right is the same wherever we are and under whatever circumstance we may be placed.”

The making of a Perfect Ashlar from a Rough Ashlar requires skill, tools and a plan. Without any of the three the Ashlar cannot be made perfect.

Skills to use the tools means education to wield Chisel and Mallet – education to use the talents God gave us in whatever walk of life we may be called.

Tools must the workman have, for empty hands cannot chip away hard stone; tools must the Speculative Craftsman have. for an empty mind cannot wear away the resistance of our complicated life. Speculative tools are honor and probity, energy and resource, courage and common sense and the like virtues, the generation of which forms character. Most especially must the operative workman have a plan to which to hew. His mind must see both dimension and form, otherwise his tools will cut aimlessly, and his Ashlar will be askew, not square, fit only for the waste pile or the curiosity shop. So must the Speculative workman have a plan to which to fit his Perfect Ashlar of character... an ambition, a goal for which to strive, some hope in the future towards which he can stretch eager hands, bending every energy to accomplish.

Considered thus, the Rough and Perfect Ashlars become symbols of greater interest than appear on only a casual inspection. One interpretation is, perhaps, as satisfactory as another – it is one of the great beauties of symbolism that interpretations can differ widely and yet all be true, and all fit with each other. As one writer puts it:

“Most symbols have many interpretations. These do not contradict but amplify each other. Thus, the square is a symbol of perfection, of honor, and honestly, of good work. These are all different, and yet allied. The square is not a symbol of wrong, or evil, or meanness, or disease. Ten different men may read ten different meanings into a square and yet each meaning fits with, and belongs to, the other meanings... all these meanings are right. When all men know all the meanings, the need for Freemasonry will have passed away.”

(“Foreign Countries”)

Read the symbolism of the Ashlars as we choose, from the simplest conception to the most profound, the thought remains; even as the cornerstone of a temple must be a perfect ashlar, so are these symbols cornerstones of our Speculative Science, the more beautiful and important that learned men have found in them so many and such beautiful lessons.

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