

# The Symbolism Of Stone

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A fundamental question, rarely asked, is the reason why our ancient brethren, who developed the complicated symbolic structures of moral and philosophical teaching we now know as speculative Freemasonry, would choose to base their system on such modest materials as the builder's trade, his tools and legends. Such activities as seafaring, metalworking, agriculture and husbandry, among others, could have been used just as well in developing a 'peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.' Indeed, they have been used for this purpose at one time or another, by various individual thinkers and organizations.

However, the Stonemason's trade, and his material – stone – have such profound, far-reaching and universal significance and connotations that the choice was not only justified but inevitable.

Stone has been, since prehistoric times, the principal material used to build and adorn important structures, where solidity and permanence are the paramount considerations. Stone became paradigmatic of stability, hardness and endurance in all languages, bearing a wealth of symbolic meaning, with many deep rooted psychological and historical associations and suggestions.

Stone was in all probability the first material used by primitive man. The first coarse tools were simply rough stones used to hammer, cut and grind. The first giant step taken by mankind towards civilization was the change from using natural stones to chipped or flaked implements and arrowheads, with improved cutting edges or allowing the use of a handle. By this apparently simple act, of modifying a stone before using it as a tool, Man became homo faber and started to fashion his environment, instead of being the passive receiver of what nature had to offer.

Stones were not only used as tools, but became the object of veneration of primitive men, whose survival depended on them. Rubbing and polishing stones is a well-known, exceedingly ancient activity of man. In Europe, holy stones, wrapped in bark and hidden in caves, have been

found in many places; as containers of divine powers they were probably kept there by men of the Stone Age.

### ***STONE IN JEWISH TRADITION***

Sacred stones or pillars, called in Hebrew 'Matzevot,' are mentioned by Herodotus (5th Cent. B.C.) and appear in several places in the Old Testament.

Jacob, after striking a pact with Laban, erected a stone monument which he called Gal-Ed (Testimonial Pillar). Moses erected twelve stone pillars near the altar of sacrifices.

After crossing the Jordan river, Joshua ordered the taking of twelve stones from the river bed, one for each tribe, setting them up in their camps and carrying them later on their shoulders as a memorial of the crossing on dry ground (Joshua 4). Joshua also set up twelve other stones in the middle of the river, in the place where the priests carrying the Ark of the Testimony had stood. Finally, Joshua erects at Gilgal the twelve stones he had brought from the Jordan, so that future generations would know that the Lord had done to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea.

Later, Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal, made of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used (Joshua 8:30-31). Finally, before dying, wrote down the Law on a large stone he set up under an oak tree in Shechem, as a witness against the people of Israel should they betray their covenant (Joshua 24:26-27).

Samuel put up a stone which he called 'Eben Ezer' (Stone of Help) after the Philistines were routed at Mizpah (I Samuel 7:12). Adoniah offered a sacrifice near the rock of Zohelet (Joyful), near the fountain of Rogel (I Kings I :9).

Jacob's ladder, which figures on the First Degree Tracing Board, is directly related to the stone pillar erected by Jacob after his dream. He had used the stone as a pillow and poured a libation of oil to consecrate the memorial (Genesis 28: 18). Jacob names 'Beth-El', the house of God, as the place where he had his dream.

This identity of stone, human being and anthropomorphic deity throws light on the saying: 'Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry whence you were hewn; look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth' (Isaiah 51 :1-2). There is a Jewish custom, of placing a small stone over the grave one has visited. This may be connected to the Greek traveler's adding a stone to the Hermes monuments, in order to secure a safe journey.

### ***STONE IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION***

The best example of the importance of stone in Christian teachings is, of course, the case of Simon the fisherman, called Peter (Petrus – the stone) by Jesus: 'I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18).

The Pope, as linear successor to Peter, is called Holy Father. The connection between Pater (father) and Petrus (stone) is obvious. In the Hebrew language as well, the same letters forming the word 'father' (av: alef-beth) appear in the word for 'stone' (even: alef beth-noon).

In another instance, Christ himself is compared to a rock (1 Cor. 10:4).

A passage in the book of Revelation (2:17) mentions a white stone with a secret name written on it, which only the recipient will understand.

### ***STONE IN ISLAMIC TRADITION***

The central point of worship for a Muslim is the Ka'aba at Mecca. Every pious Muslim must make a pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hadj) at least once in his lifetime, making seven circumambulations around the sanctuary of the Ka'aba, the Black Stone which, according to witnesses' reports, appears to be a meteorite. The pilgrims also throw stones at pillars representing the devil, in the vicinity of Mina.

In Jerusalem, there is a stone in the Dome of the Rock, built on the spot where the Sanctum Sanctorum of the Temple is supposed to have been located, from which Muhammad is said to have jumped to heaven, mounted on 'Al Burak.'

### ***STONE IN MASONIC LITERATURE***

In Masonic rituals and legends, stone plays a leading role. Beginning with the Entered Apprentice, who is enjoined to polish the rough stone with hammer and chisel, and culminating with the variously shaped stones appearing in the Master Mason Degree, there is hardly a ceremony in symbolic Freemasonry which is not connected in some way with stones.

After completion of the initiation ceremony, the new Brother is placed in a particular position within the Lodge and is usually told that he represents the cornerstone on which Freemasonry's spiritual Temple must be built.

In the Edinburgh Register House MS (1696), the Jewels of the Lodge include the Perpend Esler and the Broad Ovall. The first is a perpendicular ashlar, that is, a stone placed crosswise through a wall, while the second is believed to be a corruption of a 'broached dornal,' that is, a chiseled stone.

Similar information appears in the Chetwode Crawley MS (c. 1700): 'perpendester' and 'broked-mall.'

The Mason's work is thus described in the Dumtries No 4 MS (c. 1710): 'to work in all manner of worthy work in stone: Temple, Churches, Cloysters, Cities, Castles, Pirimides, Towers & all other worthy buildings of stone.' In the same manuscript we find a reference to the 'two pillars of stone,' one that would not sink and the other that would not burn, which held the noble art or science.

The Mason himself, as we have noted, is likened to a stone. In Robert Samber's dedicatory Preface to *Long Livers*, (London, 1722), we find this pithy definition: 'Ye are living stones, built up a spiritual House, who believe and rely on the chief Lapis Angularis, which the refractory and disobedient Builders disallowed...'

In conclusion, the deep and various meanings of stone as a physical object and as allegory make it easy to understand why the art of the builder should have been selected as the appropriate vehicle to convey the philosophical and mystical teachings of speculative Freemasonry in its different manifestations.

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