

**The Meaning of Symbols Used in the 21<sup>st</sup> Degree**

**21<sup>st</sup> Degree Essay**

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The objective of the essay is to interpret what the night, the moon and the masks might symbolize in regard to the teachings of the twenty-first Degree. On the surface this would appear to be a straight forward exercise; but such is not the case.

The symbols referred to in the Ritual and supporting documents of the twenty-first Degree assemble into a confusion of means and objectives. This circumstance has not been evident in any of the preceding Degrees. Example symbols to be investigated here include the night, full moon, masks, lime tree and the initials S.S.G.G. The latter two are added to further demonstrate the uncertainty in symbolism that Albert Pike chose to use.

To what sources in the Scottish Rite can we trace these five symbols? Darkness of night, the full moon and the masks are all found in the *Magnum Opus* (Pike, 1857, p. XXI.1). The lime trees and initials, S.S.G.G. are found in the *Legenda* (1992, p.11 and 18, respectively). The source for the *Legenda* material is Kohlrausch (1864), as cited more fully by De Hoyas (2008, p. 442). There is a possibility that Pike has deliberately not mentioned the lime tree and initials in the Ritual; but then why did he include them in his source material?

The lime tree is mentioned by Kohlrausch (1864) as a source of shade (from the sun) for the *Vehmgericht* to meet. Presumably cooler heads addressed these important legal matters when they were shaded by the heavy canopy of the lime. Meeting at night, the canopy of heavy foliage would thoroughly shade the ground beneath from moon light. Pike (1857, p. XXI.1) may be referring to the tree when he states that the full moon must be half way between the horizon and the zenith for the Chapter to convene. This angle of lunar elevation would surely result in the tree's shading the moon light. However, there is further confusion stemming from the fact that the lime (Am. Linden or basswood) is deciduous; thus the tree provides no shade at all, day or night, from fall to spring. With or without leaves the tree would have been convenient for imposing the immediate sentences of death by hanging.

There is a German mythology that the lime/linden tree helps to restore justice and peace. And, because of the trees' large and thick canopy of leaves, they served as gathering spots for daytime public meetings and social events. The tree is also long lived, for centuries, and in some stories for as long as a millennia.

The meaning of the initials S.S.G.G. is also quite uncertain. The *Legenda* (1992, p. 18) states that the initials stand for: stock (stick), stein (stone), gras (grass) and grein (tears). The twenty-first Degree synopsis written by De Hoyos (2008, p. 435) translates grein as woe rather than tears. An alternative interpretation of S.S.G.G. is strick, stein, gras and grun which translate as: rope, stone, grass and green. The English to German dictionary (E.B. Vol.2) reports as follows: tears=Trane, woe=Weh, stone=Stein, stick=Stock,

cord=Strick, and green=grun. The cord might refer to the material used for the hanging as described in the Legenda (1992, p. 11).

When exploited to excess some symbols either lose all of their meaning or simply cast matters into utter confusion. Such is the case for day and night and the sun and moon. Hutchens (1993, p. 425) in making the case for the sun and the moon, states that they: “have now lost their power to convey anything, since they already represent everything.”

Such is the case for the night and moon used as symbols in the twenty-first Degree. Meeting at night presents a practical matter of being able to find one’s way in the dark. Some early Lodges in the United States met on the night of the full moon for the very reason that members could more easily find their way. We have a rural Lodge in Virginia that continues its tradition of meeting on the night of the full moon. One could suppose that the Vehm met at night to be less visible, but then it would make little sense to include the circumstance of the moon being full. This all leads us to the conclusion that the purpose for meeting at night in the light of the full moon was simply to subject their activities to exposure to the light of the full moon.

Pike makes it clear in the *Magnum Opus* (1857, p. XXI. 1-2) that the light of the moon is the only light allowed, as was the case for brethren initiated in the customs derived from the mysteries of Ceres and the old worship of Isis. Hutchens (1993, p. 101 and 226) reminds us that Ceres was an Italian/Roman version of the Greek goddess, Demeter, and that Herodotus had equated Isis with Demeter. The Egyptians associated Isis with the constellation Virgo, who was assumed to hold grain in her hand, as represented by the star Spica. How these Roman, Greek and Egyptian goddesses of agriculture might relate to the lessons of the twenty-first Degree is left to our imaginations. The *Legenda* (1992, p. XXI. 7) does state that the initiates to the Degree see in the Heavenly host (the moon), “... the universal laws of harmony and motion, the two first laws that emanated from God.” Again, a confusing statement because many, if not most, would consider forethought and wisdom to have emanated from God before motion and harmony.

The origin of moon light is of course the sun. The ancients believed that the moon was filled (nourished) with light from the sun during its new to full stages and that its light was then withdrawn during the full to new stages. By the middle ages it must have been known that the moon was only a reflector. What lesson might we glean from the night and full moon symbols?

The teaching learned from the night and full moon symbols may be that judgment should be based upon exposure of the facts to the brightest light of day; but it isn’t – instead the facts are exposed only to a relatively weak light of the moon, a poor substitute indeed. Therefore, the lesson is that man’s jurisprudence has a potential for error.

We turn now to the masks worn by the judges. Why do they wear masks? Certainly they are not disguised by these masks. There are obvious ways to learn who the judges are such as by seeing their horses or vehicles, if nothing else. The judges should not fear being made known to the accused: if found innocent the accused will be gratefully

relieved, and if found guilty he will be dispatched before his anger is aroused. It would seem that the accused is the one who should be masked to protect his identity from the judges.

On the other hand, the masks may be a reference to blind justice; the notion that legal judgment should be free of bias or prejudice. But, if this were the intension then the judges should be blindfolded, not masked.

The twenty-first Degree is an important one because of the value of the lessons it presents; and the subject of the Degree, jurisprudence, was Pike's profession. One would have expected him to have developed a more direct and easily understood set of symbols and circumstances to use in portraying the Degree.

## References

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