

The Rite of Circumambulation

PRACTICAL OR SYMBOLIC?

JAMES R. CRAIG REFLECTS ON THE MEANING OF AN ANCIENT PRACTICE STILL EMPLOYED IN OUR CEREMONIES TODAY

One of the clearest definitions of Speculative Freemasonry is given to every newly-made Mason: “Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols.” I realized, even then as a young Apprentice, that Freemasonry was full of symbols and practices meant to allude to greater meanings. Initially, I did not understand quite how pervasive symbolism was within the Craft. Studying the initiation ritual confronted me with words that were incomprehensible at first. The presence of such strange words suggested to me that every part of Freemasonry was purposefully selected and intended to convey meaning.

One of these words that arrested my attention was CIRCUMAMBULATION. My very elementary knowledge of Latin clued me into its definition right away. The word is derived from the Latin word *circumambulatus*, comprised of the prefix *circum*, “around,” and the verb *ambulare*, “to walk.” It seemed to me that perhaps the mere presence of such a precise word indicated the importance of the practice itself. So began my search to better understand that single word. It would eventually conclude with the realization of how truly uni-

versal and transformative our rituals can be.

Masonically, circumambulation is the process in which a degree candidate is guided around the temple in a circular, clockwise motion. Many sources hypothesize that this practice originated in the days of operative masonry, and was intended to allow the company to inspect the candidates in order to check for any physical inadequacy. This makes a certain logical sense, and could suggest a potential origin of the speculative practice; however, this pragmatic explanation is purely theoretical.

By contrast, the documented symbolic practice of circumambulation in the context of human religion is far older and more complex. In *The Symbolism of Freemasonry*, Bro.: Albert G. Mackey connects the Craft’s tradition of circumambulation with the ancient practice of a “religious rite in the ancient initiations which consisted in a formal procession around the altar, or other holy and consecrated object.”¹

ORIGINS: EMULATING THE SUN

The ancient rite of circumambulation predates most, if not all, of the current concepts of religion and appears to derive from a distant period wherein men worshiped the sun and other forces of nature. In his *Introduction to Freemasonry*, Bro.: Carl H. Claudy, F.P.S., emphasizes the importance of nature in the religion of early man:

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Among the first religions were sun and fire worship. Prehistoric man found God in nature. . . . Worship of the sun in the sky was done symbolically by worship of fire upon piles of stones which were the first altars. . . . Early man imitated the God he worshiped. Heat and light he could give by fire, so lighting the fire on the altar became an important religious ceremony. And early man could imitate the movements of his God.²

Supporting this theory is the fact that ritualistic circumambulation is almost universally performed in a clockwise fashion, from east to west by way of the south, following the movement of the sun across the sky from the perspective of observers in the northern hemisphere. This was not necessarily just a physical concept to the ancient mind; it also had mystical implications. Alluding to teachings that may be traced to the Pythagorean brotherhood, Bro.: Mackey wrote that circumambulation “had a reference to the motion of the heavenly bodies, which, according to the ancient poets and philosophers, produced a harmonious sound, inaudible to mortal ears, which was called ‘the music of the spheres.’”³

CIRCUMAMBULATION AS WORSHIP, PURIFICATION AND REFLECTION

It is obvious that prehistoric men who worshiped the sun and nature would strive to emulate their divinities. After the time of sun worship, the practice of circumambulation found its way into the religious practices of many cultures divided by time, geography, and language. As the worship of nature became supplanted by polytheism, henotheism and monotheism, the purpose of circumambulation necessarily changed. Slowly, the practice transformed from the mere emulation of the sun god to a practice of purification made

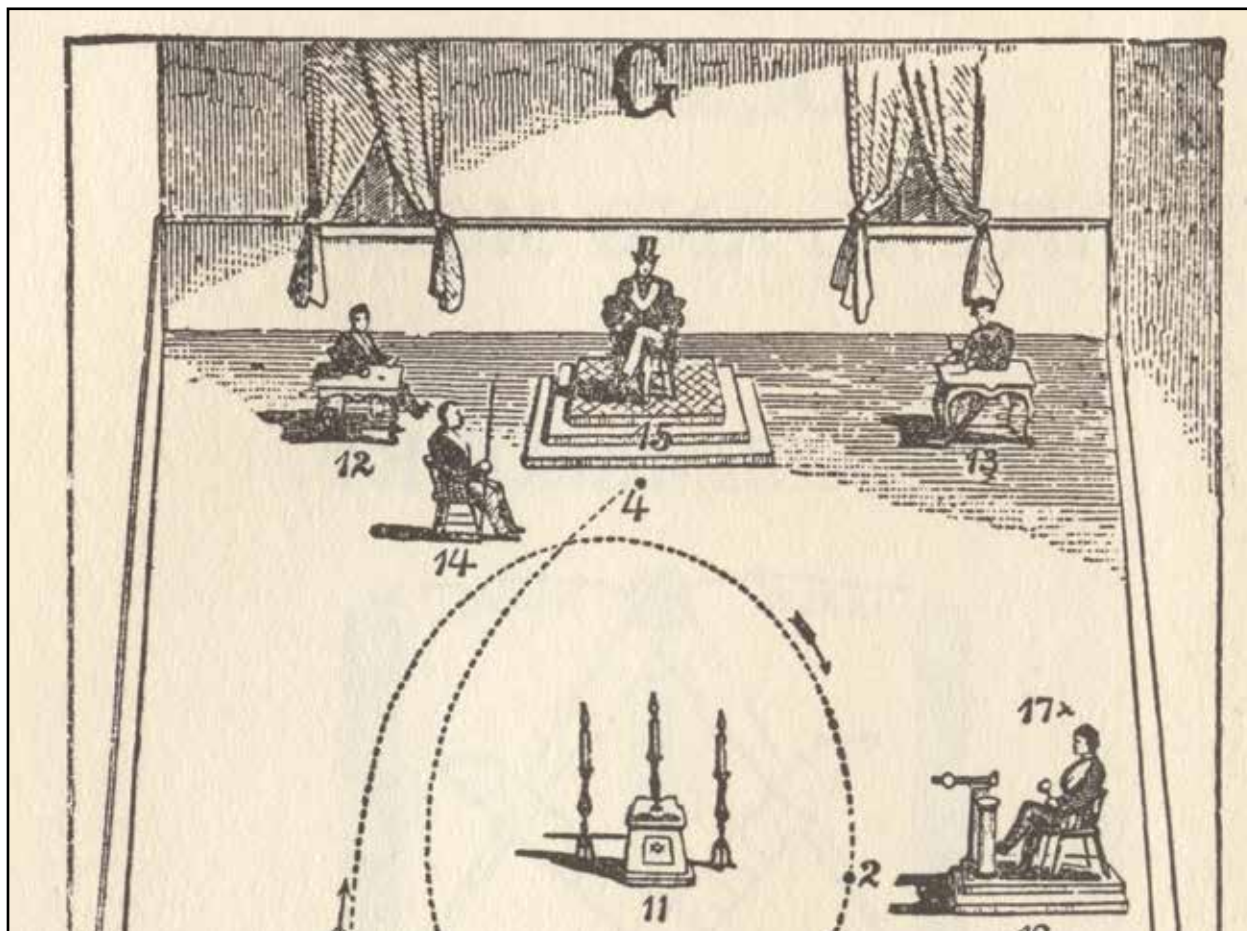
possible through structured proximity with the holy. In ancient Greece, the priest would walk three times around the altar, always keeping it to the right, and sprinkling it with meal and holy water as a sacrifice to the gods. The Romans called this ritual *dextroversum*, “from the right to the left.” It was known as a ceremony of purification.

Circumambulation also holds a prominent place in the ceremonies of the three Abrahamic religions. In Islam, pilgrims circumambulate the *ka'aba* in Mecca, walking seven times in a counterclockwise direction while offering prayers. In Judaism, circumambulations, known in Hebrew as *hakkafot*, have a traditional origin in the story of Joshua and the walls of Jericho. In Joshua 6:3-5, God commands the Israelites to “compass the city” with the ark once for six days, and to repeat the action seven times on the seventh day, after which the defensive walls of the city would collapse. Another Jewish tradition is the circumambulation during Hoshanah Rabbah, where the “four species”—the palm branch, the *etrog*, the willows, the myrtles—are borne seven times around the synagogue at the end of the feast of Sukkot in veneration of the most important prophets. In the Jewish faith, the bride circumambulates the groom three times (seven in some traditions) during the wedding ceremony, symbolically breaking down the walls that divide the couple while also building new, protective walls for their household.

In some ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church, the priest circumambulates the altar, censuring it with a thurible. Scattering incense at the altar in this way is an act of purification and sanctification.

A SYMBOLIC MEANING

Across the array of world religions, it is clear that circumambulation is a nearly universal religious



practice. Whether deriving from one common source, far back before recorded history, or born of man's inherent connection with his environment, circumambulation is a powerful and easily understood symbolic method of conveying the universal ideas and lessons. The purposes of this ritualistic act are many: harmonious interaction with the universe by the ancients; veneration, worship, and purification by polytheists and monotheists. It can also be an act of introspection and contemplation, both in eastern and western practice.

The practice of circumambulation within the Masonic initiation may serve to incorporate each of these purposes and tap into primeval tradition. We emulate the ancients by moving from the west to the east as they once did. We seek to be in harmony with our surroundings. We also circle the

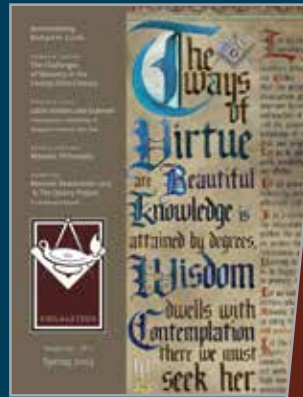
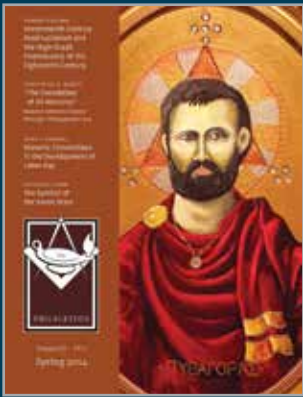
altar to show our respect and veneration for the sacred objects placed thereupon.

The entire process is meant to prepare and purify the uninitiated so that he might finally be prepared to receive the light we seek to emulate. We do so quietly and solemnly, after due introspection and as the first step in our pursuit of self-improvement through our movement *ad lucem*, toward the Light.

NOTES

- 1 Albert G. Mackey, *The Symbolism of Freemasonry* (New York: Clark & Maynard, 1869), 142.
- 2 Carl H. Claudy, *An Introduction to Freemasonry 1: Entered Apprentice* (Washington, DC: The Temple Publishers, 1931), 30–31.
- 3 Albert G. Mackey, *Mackey's Masonic Ritualist* (New York: Effingham Maynard & Co., 1867), 25.

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