

The Master's Emblem Explained for Masons

Reviewed by Trevor W. McKeown

This is a small review for a small but perhaps significant book. First, it is refreshing to read a book about some aspect of Freemasonry that doesn't claim to have proven some startling revelation or new interpretation. The author, Marshall Kern is honest: he doesn't claim to have uncovered historical proof, or even of having a theory, only claiming that he has an hypotheses.

He may though have discovered something that most Freemasons may never have thought about: the origin of the three emblems adorning the Installed Master's apron. Most are aware that the design and shape of the Fellow Craft apron with two rosettes and the Master Mason apron with three rosettes date from the English union of 1813, and that the same applies to the apron of a Worshipful Master. The first *Constitutions* after the union described the Master's emblem as "Perpendicular Lines upon Horizontal Lines, thereby forming Three several Sets of Two Right Angles, the length of the Perpendicular Lines to be Half the Horizontal Lines which are to be Two Inches and an Half each." Kern begins his book by noting that the question of why that particular emblem was chosen, or what it denotes, was not addressed, and never has been.

Freemasons are taught that masonry and geometry were once synonymous terms, and also that Euclid's *Elements* is the foundation of the study of geometry. The ritual describes the jewel worn by the Past Master as a representation of the 47th problem of the First Book of Euclid's *Elements*, so Kern suggests that the *Elements* would also appear to be a reasonable place to look for the Master's emblem.

He finds it in the 12th Problem from the First Book of Euclid's *Elements*, which describes drawing a vertical line dropped to a horizontal line with the proof being that the intersection of the two lines forms two square or right angles. Euclidean geometry contributes a number of key definitions in Freemasonry so this being the source of the Master's emblem is an easy conclusion to arrive at. If one adds the significance of Amos's vision of God standing upon a wall made with a plumb line—referenced in the earliest form of the Ceremony of Installation confirmed by the Lodge of Promulgation (1809-1811) —a moral connexion is also made.

Kern cheerfully admits that he poses a pretty hypothesis, but has no proof. The earliest published description of an apron is provided without explanation in the minutes of a meeting of the Board of Works held on 15 February 1814. This report was adopted by the Lodge of Promulgation, and subsequently by the United Grand Lodge of England on 2 March 1814, but with no explanation.

Other explanations have been proposed over the subsequent two centuries. Although some such as W.L. Wilmhurst have suggested they look like a Tau or Greek letter 'T', no plausible reason is given for their being upside down, or what relevance the Tau might have to Craft Freemasonry, or what lesson of virtue and morality is

intended for the Installed Master. Others such as Bernard E. Jones have called them 'levels', but in all the many depictions of the level in Freemasonry, none have the uniform look of the Master's emblem. If they were levels, would not the constitutional description say so? And further, why would the Senior Warden's emblem—even three of them—be used to represent an Installed Master? Again, what lesson of virtue and morality is intended for the Installed Master?

Kern notes that the Rev. George Oliver wrote nothing about the Master's emblem other than to direct his readers back to the *Constitutions* while Albert Mackey and Colin Dyer give no explanation. Others have been equally silent. Kern didn't have access to Quatuor Coronati's proceedings, but in them he would have found that our own Frederick Worts wrote in 1961 that "there is no official name for the squares or levels" and he concluded that "they were designed only for the purposes of distinction."

Which brings us back to the 12th Problem of Euclid. Kern has provided four arguments for his hypotheses: a visual similarity between the proof and the emblem, a congruity in wording in *Elements* and the *Constitutions*, a moral connexion with the installation ceremony and, of course, the contextual relevance of Euclid to established masonic ritual.

Kern has written his short book in three sections: a piece intended for a short talk in lodge, a slightly longer lodge presentation, and a longer piece reviewing his research with additional details. Recognizing his research may be insufficient, he concludes by stating his belief that RW Bro. James Agar, Deputy Grand Master for the Ancients at the time of the union, is responsible for the Master's emblem and its meaning. I believe that W Bro. Kern has done Freemasonry a valuable service and opened the door for much further research.

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