RITE OF CIRCUMAMBULATION

December 1, 2008

My Brethren,

Tonight, I'm updating a lecture concerning the Rite of Circumambulation first presented back in May of 2003.

First, let's agree that to circumambulate means, literally, to circle on foot, or “circle walk”. Each of us was presented to the WM and brethren early in our Initiation when, arm firmly held by the Senior Deacon, we were led clockwise in one regular circle around the Lodge altar. This 'circle walk' was the Rite of Circumambulation. I think it's good to know that blind walkabout was a Rite and not just the Senior Deacon wandering around with us until he got tired. So, we come to the question, “Why is circumambulation a rite in Freemasonry?” Let's see what surprises we have in store for us.

The Rite of Circumambulation is the name given by archeologists and anthropologists to those religious rites and other observances which consisted of a formal procession around an altar or other holy or consecrated object.

The ancient Greeks, Romans, and even earlier Druids all performed this Rite in honor of the Sun or the Moon (and sometimes, both). In emulating these two heavenly bodies, they traveled from East to West by way of the South. In essence, they followed the Sun or Moon's path.

    The Greeks called it: Ek ouiea ev ouiea - (moving) from the right to the right.

    The Romans called it: dextrovorsum, turning to (or on) the right hand.

    The Druids (in this case the Picts or early Scottish) called it: Deasal, where Deas is the right, or understanding hand, and Sal (or Soil) being one of the ancient names for the Sun.

Interestingly, modern law treats the term "understanding" as found in an 'understanding hand' not just as being aware of something as most ordinary citizens would think of it. The language of the law says that "understanding" means to figuratively "stand under" the laws and jurisdiction of your society, to agree to subordinate yourself to them. So, we have the right hand being an "understanding hand" from ancient times. Do you remember how we learned that the right hand is considered to be the seat of Fidelity in man, named after an ancient deity known as Fides? Well, here are two direct connections from the ancients to our Rite of Circumambulation: in circumambulating along the Sun or Moon's path, they necessarily kept the altar to their right, or BY the RIGHT hand. Our continuing 'fidelity' to God, our willingness to subordinate ourselves to 'understanding' his Rule, is expressed in Freemasonry by the right hand being presented to the altar in our Masonic Rite of Circumambulation.

Now, I mentioned that the ancients observed the path of the Sun and Moon and their regular progressions through the sky. One of the most prominent and enduring monuments to this observation is ancient Stonehenge, the most famous of all megalithic (or rough stone) circles of stones. To get an idea of how old Stonehenge is, as far back in time as it is to our first Most Excellent Grand Master King Solomon, so was the building of Stonehenge to him!

Stonehenge is not just one circle of standing stones. There is an outer circle of 29 ½ stones corresponding to the 29 ½ days of the lunar cycle. Inside this circle is another one of 59 stones, corresponding to two lunar months. Those big stones you recognize when you see a photo of Stonehenge are an inner horseshoe of 10 Trilithons that have stood together for over 5,000 years - 20 feet tall and up to 50 tons each, connected with mortises and tenons carved by ancient stonemasons. And, inside those is found another horseshoe of 19 small bluestones thought to correspond to the number of years in the Metonic or lunar cycle. In the center of all this is an Altar Stone and, roughly in a one-quarter turn to the right (or East) from the altar is the Heel Stone, over which the Sun rises on the longest day of the year. (As a Masonic aside, I think it is wonderful to realize that a quarter turn to the right can also be expressed as the fourth part of a circle.)

To bring this education session to a close, it seems that the ancients watched, with equal regularity, the Sun and the Moon. They built lasting stone monuments to mark and observe their passing. They celebrated the passage of the Sun and Moon by emulating their movements in religious observances; and part of these included what we know as Rites of Circumambulation. So, you may now see that circumambulation is more than just a walk in a circle; this Rite ties us to ancient megalithic traditions of reverence for the Sun and Moon and honoring deities - and it reaffirms our fidelity, our 'understanding' and subordination to the Supreme Architect of the Universe.

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