

FISH AND WATER SYMBOLS.

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IN the issues of *The Open Court* for May, June and July, 1911, are some very interesting articles concerning the fish in Oriental symbolism and pointing out some of its Christian as well as "pagan" uses and meanings.

In these same articles it is to be particularly noted that the fish is almost invariably (and naturally) associated with water or some aquatic symbol. In the August issue, the essay on the catacombs, showing numerous primitive Christian pictures in which Christ is associated, as the Good Shepherd, with the same aquatic symbols, well displays the Christian use of symbols of "pagan mysteries."

The same author, the editor of *The Open Court*, in the October issue, makes some interesting remarks upon "Rivers of Living Water," accompanied by allusions to Christian and Buddhist scriptures and Greek and Oriental picture symbols. His concluding paragraph in "Rivers of Living Water" indicates a correct interpretation of the basic principle upon which the construction of fish and water symbols rests:

"We cannot doubt that the idea of a divine body, consisting partly of flames (or perhaps more correctly of light) and partly of water inhabited by creatures of earth, air and water, was not isolated, and the question arises whether this view does not come down to us from a primeval age and so would naturally be common to all mankind. This conception of divinity *may have acquired a definite meaning in some mystic rite indicative of the attainment of the highest degree of perfection.*"¹

Since the science of symbolism is but very little cultivated by men of intelligence and erudition now-a-days, and such as do pretend to the ability to translate original meanings mostly have a very

¹ The italics are mine.

superficial knowledge of the subject for lack of some authoritative sources of information, the following is here offered merely as suggestion to the general reader and is not asserted as fact.

Those who may be interested in ascertaining upon what foundation these assertions rest, will find plenty of corroborative evidence in the mythologies and symbols of all ages, races and religions. This should perhaps satisfy them, and if not, then their investigations may lead them eventually to the conclusion that there may yet remain traces of "some mystic rite," which might further enlighten a student but would scarcely be of interest to the average reader.

As a first hypothesis, it may be generally stated that the growth of symbolic representations betrays an apparent theological system as a base. It is conceded by most investigators that primitive language consisted largely in, if it was not actually preceded by, signs and picture writing, which gradually evolved into the more ornamental and exact conventionalized symbols of ancient religious and mystic rites. This came about as man's appreciation of harmony and proportion in nature's geometry grew.

Upon one side it produced our alphabets, mathematical and other scientific symbols, and upon the other, those systems of symbolic instruction whereby in certain "ancient mysteries" the allegories and dramatic representations of mystery legends were fully illustrated and concealed from the initiated.

A second hypothesis involves the idea that the original source of all mystery legends, and consequently of their various dramatizations and explanatory symbols, is to be found in some primitive natural conception of nature and deity, perhaps inherent in man, or at least universally diffused.

Such a conception is the ancient universal notion connected with the creation of the world and man, the introduction of the arts and sciences and the progress of civilization.

Briefly stated, the supreme intelligence or builder of the visible and material universe, is conceived as first creating the earth from chaos, in much the same manner as stated in the first verse of Genesis and as expanded and amplified in detail by modern geological theories.

Northern nations imagine a terrific combination of fire and ice and consequent steam resulting in the formation of a universal sea or ocean from which land emerged. In the midst of this sea dwelt a huge serpent.

As we proceed toward the south, the creation legend assumes various forms, sometimes fire alone being the first element to be

followed by water and earth and sometimes the gods building the world from various materials, but always we find the common notion of a completely water-covered globe before land appeared. And always we find this great sea said to have been inhabited by one particularly huge serpent or fish or other representative of aquatic life.

This creation theory seems to have been connected with the theological notion (perhaps allegorical) that deity or the creative forces of nature might be likened to a great sea of space, but space curiously endowed with intelligence. In this sea of universal intelligence floated all created things, which therefore appeared to the imaginative mind of man as the results of the divine thought.

An elaboration of such ideas probably produced the cabalistic representation of the "Ancient of Days" as a huge head, and the curious descriptions of its features, thoughts, beard, etc. Similar allegories are to be found in Oriental characterizations of the supreme deity.

This universal sea of divine intelligence found its counterpart in the terrestrial sea covering all the land. The created thing, or creation thought into being by the universal intelligence, such as the physical world, found its symbolic counterpart in the great fish or serpent inhabiting that sea.

Expressed mathematically, the sea represented the whole and the fish or serpent the part—of divine intelligence. For a fish or serpent to emerge from the waters in the form of one of the numerous fish and serpent gods of antiquity, was equivalent to saying that individual intelligence proceeded and was evolved from the universal.

At this point it may be interesting to observe that in the Phœnician, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English alphabets, all derived from the same source, the letters M and N have a peculiar significance which may be considered mere coincidence, or thought worthy of consideration.

The letter M is *Mu* in Greek and *Mcm* in Hebrew and Phœnician tongues. This word means "the sea," and the early as well as present shapes of the letter indicate its derivation from the hieroglyphic form of a wave or water mark.

The letter N is *Nu* in Greek and *Nun* in Hebrew and Phœnician and means "fish." These letters follow one another as if we read, "The sea; the fish."

Another singular matter is observed in the two zodiacal signs

of Aquarius followed by Pisces. Symbolically they are represented as wave marks and the double fish respectively.

With this conception of the universal intelligence or universal soul of nature represented by the sea or its symbol, we find it easy to comprehend many singular notions of the ancients connected with sea serpents, fish gods, serpent gods, arks, anchors and other symbols derived from them.

A certain class of legends concern the sudden arrival of a god, half fish and half man, who teaches the arts and sciences, especially letters. He usually arises from the sea. Every possible form of this legend can be traced, from the primitive fish-god to Aphrodite arising from the sea foam.

Another class represents the creator of the world, born from an egg spewed from the mouth of the great sea serpent. This form is found among the aboriginal American legends as well as with the Oriental races.

Still another, and no doubt later, version represents the creator god born from a lotus or water lily. This flower is the flower of light in which Hindu and Egyptian gods are observed sitting.

Every conceivable combination of these legends seems to be found among the complicated mythologies of the more esthetic races of antiquity, until in Christian times there appears the greatest profusion of aquatic symbols apparently used in connection with every theological, gnostic, cabalistic and mystic or spiritual exposition of the nature and attributes of deity.

Various Greek and Roman gods, not to mention those of the Oriental nations, were attended in their travels by fishes. From the story of Noah to similar ones of pagan deities, we note many gods saved by dolphins or other denizens of the deep. Oriental and Occidental fairy tales have stories of the intelligence of fishes who act as friends of man, recovering lost valuables.

In some myths the fish becomes translated into a ship, *argha* or ark. The Hebrew Noah, saved in the great ark to repeople the world and preserve human knowledge, finds his counterpart in every deluge story of which there are many versions.

The ark becomes sacred and mystical as the keeper of the holy relics and scriptures; and through curious etymological connections it seems to throw light upon certain of the mystic rites of the Egyptians to be found in the Book of the Dead—more properly the chapters of the "Coming Forth by Day"—in which the Holy Royal Ark figures.

Again we find the Greek and Latin words for archaic, arch, ark,

arc, all apparently connected in an intricate symbolism in which there is more than a suspicion that there is an etymological as well as a mystical interconnection. It would seem as though the roots of such words derived their meaning from the mysteries, rather than that their mystical meaning was the result of coincidence.

However that may be, we find connected with the ark, the symbol of an anchor. While the Greek root from which the word anchor is derived, plainly means a hook, or hooked, it may be suggested that the form of the anchor when used as a symbol, frequently appears to be a combination of two symbols, the ancient Egyptian *ankh* or symbol of life concerning which so much has been written, and the phallic symbol of the lunar crescent in which the phallic sun's ray stands erect. Even in Christian symbolism the anchor is sometimes represented with prongs resembling fish or serpents.

It may be suggested as a third hypothesis in connection with

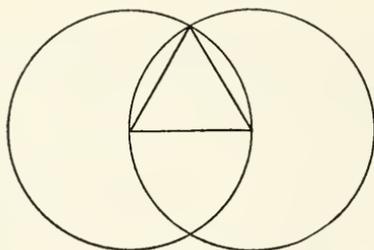


Fig. 1. FIRST PROPOSITION OF EUCLID.

the fish and water symbols, that to one who makes a careful study of the subject as a whole, there appear to be certain underlying harmonic principles upon which the science of symbolism rests and which enable the investigator to trace, with a tolerable degree of accuracy, the gradual evolution of each symbol from its root until it becomes fused with other symbols analogous to the etymology of words. Thus the science of symbolism demonstrates that all symbols of any particular system form an intricate network of hieroglyphics covering the entire range of philosophy which they are meant to illustrate.

While it would require a considerable volume to trace all the allusions to the fish and water symbols and their combinations with other symbols, it may be of interest to suggest some of these.

The guilds of traveling freemasons of the Middle Ages, who built the great Christian cathedrals of Europe, and whose existence is erroneously supposed to have terminated several hundred years

ago, had certain secrets of the trade which were concealed in geometrical formulas and diagrams.

One of these concerned the construction of the pointed or "Gothic arch," the foundation upon which the "Gothic" style of architecture rested. This was no doubt derived or adapted from the Arabians, though this question does not directly concern us here. This important trade secret is contained in the first proposition of Euclid, namely, to construct an equilateral triangle upon a given line, which proposition is the base upon which the Euclidean system of geometry is built. This is evidenced by the fact that Euclid's 47th problem, which closes the first book of his Principles, was and still is the symbol of the Master Architect among all guild masons, several of whose ancient lodges still do active work in England though fast falling into obscurity. The reason for this is that the 47th problem requires a knowledge of all preceding ones back to the first, for its proper solution.

The solution of Euclid's first proposition requires Fig. 1 which of course forms the Gothic arch.

The intersection of the two circles whose respective centers are the ends of the given straight line, encloses a figure popularly known as the *vesica piscis* or fish-bladder from its supposed resemblance to that object. Not only was the *vesica piscis* used in the construction of the arch, but also to enclose the images of the saints as we find it both in Christian and pre-Christian times where it frequently surrounds the pictures and statues of gods.

This symbol had a mystical meaning to theologians as well as guild masons as it formed the "Womb of the Logos," in that with *two* strokes of the compasses, a figure appeared making possible the construction of the equilateral triangle of perfection, representing the sacred *delta* or "Word."

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, this idea is brought out when God is said to have cut out the world with one stroke of the compasses and the heavens with another stroke. After creation only, came the appearance of man, his fall, and subsequently, as in *Paradise Regained*, his redemption by Him that was called the Logos.

This symbolic idea of the "Word" will be at once recognized as adapted and not original with the Christians. The Word within the fish (*vesica piscis*) no doubt was connected with the astronomical and astrological notions of the ancients concerning the supposed birth of Christ under the sign of Pisces. Indeed modern astronomy tells us that the "Star of the East" was a conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the sign of Pisces, B. C. 4.

That this Euclidean *vesica piscis* was an ancient property of the guilds, at least in some crude form, is attested by the use they made of the fish symbol as a common mark to designate their work. Among the many collections of these old marks from European and Asiatic temples extending over a period of several thousand years, are to be found many symbols of two intersecting arcs of circles in the shape of a fish. Sometimes the double fish is used. (See Fig. 2)

Also it may be but a curious coincidence that the water mark so much used in Arabic and Moorish architecture, is a frequent ornament in Gothic architecture. Among the Arabs and Moors particularly, the wave lines are frequently seen in combination with an arch of any description.

A matter that at once carries us back to the original notion of universal intelligence and light enclosing and giving birth to individual creations, is the heraldic name of a certain fish known as the "luce," a shining fish, the perch. Luce of course means light and

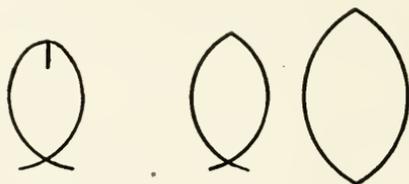


Fig. 2. MASONS' MARKS.

is derived from the same root that gives us *lux*, light, luck, etc. *Lus* is the old French for fish and the Low Latin makes it *lucius*. Thus in the Middle Ages we find the fish as an emblem of light just as we find *luces* and *fleur-de-lis* in French and Norman-English heraldry.

Among the many other masons' marks of antiquity we find the letters or figures M and N frequently used. Their significance in the alphabet has been referred to above. The figures or letters Z and W which so often are used as marks also, betray the antiquity of these signs, probably used without a knowledge of their original significance save as "sacred" symbols.

One of the "monograms of Christ" was an anchor of curious design between two fishes, an obvious allusion to the old astronomical notion of the Egyptians who set the sign of the fishes (*Pisces*) as a symbol of courtship and love in the spring, the survival of which we still have in St. Valentine's day.

This sign of *Pisces* in the Hermesian alphabet corresponds to

the "arch symbol" of the modern "Arch Masons" save that it has a true arch in place of the third *tau*, as will be noted from the figure (Fig. 3). It appears to be an arch surmounting the sign of the double fish—a figure resembling the letter H, and in the Greek zodiacal signs very pronouncedly indicating the "given straight line" and two arcs of circles of Euclid.

Again we must refer to the old guilds, for this "H" figure also plays a prominent part in their symbols and "marks." Indeed it

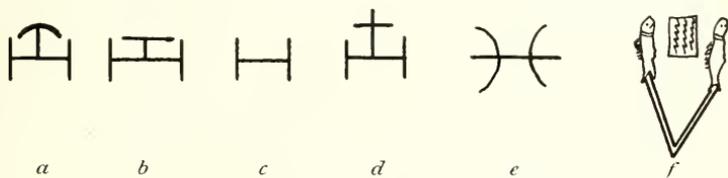


Fig. 3.

- a*, Egyptian Sign of Pisces from Hermesian Alphabet of Ben Wasch.—*b*, Egyptian Symbol used by Freemasons.—*c*, Masons' mark common to guilds of Middle Ages and found on ruins of Solomon's Temple by Palestine Exploration Association.—*d*, Christian symbol, especially of the Society of Jesus; also used by some European orders of knighthood and by the Pulijanes of the Philippine Islands.—*e*, Astronomical Sign of Pisces.—*f*, Sign of Pisces from Dendarah zodiac.

appears as a representation of brotherly love in other systems in the form of two men clasping hands, which takes us back to the double fish mentioned above, between which the anchor of hope is seen to be grounded in love. It also seems to refer to similar symbolic allusions among the ancients, whose type is Damon and Pythias or Castor and Pollux, the celestial twins who appear in the zodiac as Gemini.

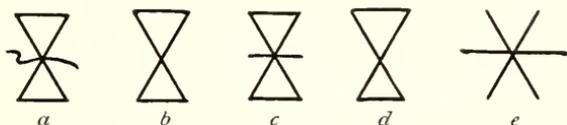


Fig. 4.

- a*, Hindu symbol of the upper and lower "elements" from which the world was built or created.—*b*, Egyptian symbol of the hand. The hand meant building or architect.—*c*, *d*, *e*, Masons' marks.

A careful examination of the numerous uses of the fish as a symbol leads us to suggest a fourth hypothesis in explanation of why in some instances we see the double fish as in the zodiac and in others a single fish. The reason may be that when "light" or "intelligence" is individualized in the person of a single god or deity, one fish appears; but when an abstract idea in connection with this

emanation of individual life denoting celestial light and intelligence from the universal sea, is denoted, then we find the double fish.

In the ancient cosmogonies, there was conceived to be a dual principle in nature which, among other ways, is displayed in the formation of the upper and lower expanses, symbolically indicated by a figure in which the division was marked in a striking manner. Thus two triangles set apex to apex and having a short line of division between would be such an appropriate figure (Fig. 4); or the image of a god, one half of one color and the other half of another color, would likewise be appropriate.

We find in the Cabala the curious imagery of God, the great *One*, reflecting himself in the waters below in order to become *Two*. By the One and the Two were all things created, said the Chinese. The Cabala is paralleled in this by the Hindus. In this sort of imagery the Supreme Creative Light proceeds from a triangle. The

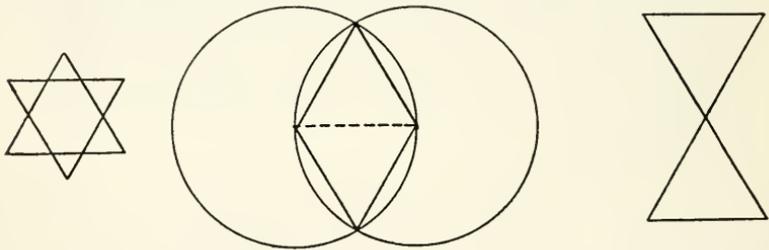


Fig. 5. THE DOUBLE TRIANGLE IN THREE WELL-KNOWN ORIENTAL DESIGNS.

reflection of the triangle in the upper expanse produces the second triangle. Their combination gives us, among other forms, the six-pointed star, the triangles placed apex to apex, and also the diamond or lozenge formed of the triangles placed base to base.

In every instance it is to be noted that "the waters," or the universal sea, is regarded as the symbol of that which is below, while the triangle represents that which is above and by "reflection" descends into the waters.

This double triangle may be perfectly produced in the *vesica piscis* (Fig. 5) before alluded to, and is common either in the apex-to-apex form or the six-pointed star, throughout the mystic systems of the ancients.

The Hindus (Buddhist) had a figure of the former type with a waved dividing line at the juncture of the apexes (see Fig. 4) which indicated the elements fire and water (or light and water) as representative of the upper and lower expanses. The Egyptians

had the same figure without the dividing line, as the hieroglyph for hand. The Romans indicated the number ten ("the perfect number of heaven") by the letter X, supposedly because it represented the "double hand," since "V" or five, was denoted by one hand.

In the Hebrew alphabet the name of the letter *yod* meant hand, and its numerical value was ten. So it is obvious that while numbers and arithmetical ideas were derived from counting the fingers of the hand, their relation to symbolism through the Cabala was the result of associating mystical and practical ideas.

The open hand appears to have been universally considered a symbol of friendship and peace. As such it tipped the wands or ceremonial staves of the Egyptian hierophants. Joined hands among the Romans was an emblem of fidelity, and regarded as the image of the god Fides, being in fact practically the same as the Castor and Pollux symbol before alluded to.

The idea of a dual principle pervading everything in nature is thus well displayed in this hand symbol. The Egyptian double triangle is the "hand of Providence" so to speak and as such becomes identical in meaning with the Hindu form denoting the upper and lower elements, from which it was probably derived.

This double triangle also forms a very common "Masons' Mark" (see Fig. 4), both with and without the dividing line, and very frequently appearing as merely two crossed lines divided by a third, upon which the six-pointed star could easily be constructed.

Applying this dual triangle idea to images personifying deity, we may understand the reason why the figures shown in Dr. Carus's article on "Rivers of Living Water" in *The Open Court* of October, 1911, have attenuated waists. Here the god or goddess represents in his or her own body the heavens and the earth. The "rivers of living water" pour forth from the lower triangle for the reason that he suggests, that they are waters of life and light, emanations of deity.

In conclusion it may be suggested that a consideration of this somewhat chaotic exposition of the fish and water symbols, which it is hoped will not be considered too ambiguous or too lightly touched upon, is meant to set out the following fundamental meanings of these symbols.

I. The waters, denoted by the wave marks, represent the lower expanse always and denote a universal sea, whether it be of light, life, love, intelligence or soul, or merely a physical ocean inhabited by aquatic life.

II. The fish is representative of that which comes from the sea

whether this be individual light, life, love, intelligence or soul, or merely a physical thing such as an incarnated deity, a land or island brought up from the ocean bed on the tip of a rod, or a god of learning.

According to the nature of a legend therefore, it is easy to distinguish the meaning of these symbols. The water-symbol is rarely denoted by other than wave marks while the fish-symbol appears in many guises, and enters in the composition of many other symbols. The one is an abstraction, a universal. The other is concrete, an individualization.

If the waters represent the divine wisdom, the fish-god emerging therefrom is the god of letters and science. If the waters are called the waters of Truth (for wisdom means possession of the truth) then that which is in the waters, whether fish or triangle, stands for that part of the whole which is comprehended by man.