

## Symbolism of the Columns

(text adapted from PowerPoint presentation)

The three Great Lights in Freemasonry, the VSL, square and compasses, rightfully deserve pride of place in our ceremonies and hearts. They are given prominence in a central place in our lodge room. Also in a prominent place are what some regard as the three lesser lights in Freemasonry – the columns of wisdom, strength and beauty, represented by the Ionic, Doric and Corinthian columns of architecture. In our ritual the three lesser lights are situated in the South, West and East, representing the Sun, Moon and Master of the Lodge, as are the three columns of the Wardens and Master.

This presentation aims to explore the significance of columns from its historical architectural viewpoint and the symbolic importance of columns from a masonic viewpoint.

You will all be familiar with the basic concepts, and I am not offering anything new masonically. I had a number of quandaries (at the back of my mind) and in the course of this exploratory exercise found answers to many of them (but not all).

The first point I would like to make is an obvious one – that **architecture** is central to our Craft, as for example in the first degree we acknowledge God as the GAOTU. We are encouraged to apply the principles of architecture to our lives, however sometimes the meanings can be very elusive. This presentation looks at some of the perspectives and meanings, arising from my research into columns in particular and architecture in general.

The oldest concepts of **Columns** or **Pillars** (words used interchangeably) go back to the **Tree** and **Pillar** symbols in Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia and Egypt. The tree is represented as a gateway to the Abode of the Blessed. Pillar symbols relate to a stylised form of tree, with the idea of an axis or antenna communicating with the Eternal.

For over a thousand years in the history of the West, beautiful architecture has been synonymous with a classical building, a structure with a temple style front, decorated columns, repeated ratios and symmetrical façade.

**Order** contributes to the appeal of almost all substantial works of architecture.

Architecture excites our respect for the highest of human aspirations.

The second point I would like to make is that we learn lessons from architecture about how to conduct our lives and build our society.

Prof. Curl writes in his book *“The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry”*<sup>1</sup> that in French Freemasonry, the allegorical and metaphorical aspects (of architecture) have much greater significance than in 18th century England.

**Order** and **Geometry** were associated with the structure of society. The temple was the greatest achievement in ancient society, linked to the establishment of values.

Freemasons sought to build a moral edifice based on what was noble, splendid and true from antiquity. They sought a return to simple, primitive and elemental truths. Hence foundations were formed from the simplified forms of architecture in the classical period dating back to the ancient Egyptians and Solomon’s temple.

My third point is that *Wisdom, Strength and Beauty* have a fundamental place in our Craft.

In our first degree Tracing Board, it states:

*The Universe is the Temple of the Deity whom we serve; Wisdom, Strength and Beauty are about His throne as pillars of His works.*

And in the 2nd degree Charge after Passing:

*Study the liberal arts which tend so effectually to polish and adorn the mind, especially the science of geometry which is established as the basis of our Art.*

The importance of classical architecture to Freemasons was also mentioned in “the Constitutions of the Freemasons” first published by James Anderson in 1723. James stated unequivocally that “the arts of building” attained their highest degree of perfection under the Roman Emperor Augustus, who was the patron of Vitruvius<sup>2</sup>. Anderson and his fellows expected masons to share their enthusiasm for the ordered architecture of the classical world and their determination to use the procedures of building to illustrate the process of spiritual development.

Another of the earliest known documents is a published work by Samuel Pritchard<sup>3</sup> in 1730 for “constituted regular lodges”, concerning their “regular proceeding in initiating their new members in the whole three degrees of masonry”.

**Q. What supports a Lodge ?**

**A. Three great Pillars.**

**Q. What are they called ?**

**A. Wisdom, Strength and Beauty.**

**Q. Why so ?**

**A. Wisdom to contrive, Strength to support, and Beauty to adorn.**

Hence the concept of pillars (or columns) to signify wisdom, strength and beauty has been an integral part of the ritual from the earliest days of speculative Freemasonry.

Pritchard's Q&A format was embellished in the First Emulation Lecture<sup>4</sup>, which elaborates on Wisdom, Strength and Beauty in terms of the Master's column and the Wardens' columns.

**Wisdom, Strength and Beauty** – these are qualities related to the Grecian orders, which are 'suggested by the diversity of form in the human frame'. The Master's column, the Ionic, representing Wisdom, was created to meet the need for grace and elegance, which were lacking in the earlier Doric order. The Ionic order was employed in the erection of the temple of the goddess Diana. This column 'is formed after the model of a beautiful young woman, dressed in her hair', represented by the volutes, those lovely spiral scrolls appended to each side of the capital.

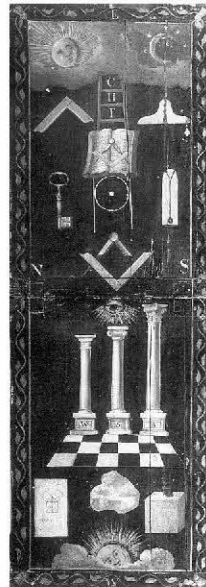
**The Senior Warden's or Doric column**, the simplest of the Grecian orders, representing Strength, is in a sense both counterpart and companion to the Ionic. It 'has no ornament except mouldings on either base or capital . . . the composition of this order is both grand and noble. Being formed after the model of a muscular, full grown man, it... is principally used in structures where strength and a noble simplicity are required'.

**The Junior Warden's or Corinthian column**, representing Beauty, is the most sophisticated of the orders of Grecian origin. It retains the volutes of the Ionic column, adding rows of leaves, and is ten diameters high, giving it more slender and elegant proportions than the others. Paradoxically, this column, adorning the position of the most junior of the three principal officers, is the most graceful, elegant and beautiful of the three.

In many rites, three columns are topped with lights or candlesticks which are lit at the beginning of work and extinguished at the end.

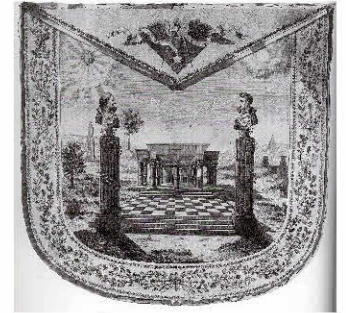
The three orders (Doric, Ionic and Corinthian) are shown in this English Tracing Board of the early 19th century. Note that Ionic is identified with *Strength* instead of *Wisdom*.

When pillars of the three orders came to be attributed to the three principal officers, it should be noted that the pillars were allotted in their historical order, namely Doric to the Master, Ionic to the SW and Corinthian to the JW. In 1791 the Chairs for the English Premier Grand Lodge were made in the same order. However with the revision and standardization of the working by the Lodge of Reconciliation (1813-16) the Ionic pillar was allotted to the Master, the Doric to the SW and the Corinthian to the JW.



This French Master Mason's Apron is printed from an engraved plate.

Note the Egyptian temple and the chequerboard masonic floor. The busts on the columns are of the Pro-Grand master of the Grand Orient (Jean-Jacques-Regis Cambaceres, Duc de Parma) and of Napoleon.

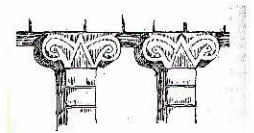


I would like to briefly cover the history of columns from the earliest days in the Egyptian and Phoenician periods.



The Palace of King Minos at Knossos in Crete<sup>5</sup> (pre-1400 BC) is an example of Aegean culture which flourished in the middle of the second millennium BC. It is a forerunner of Hellenic Classicism (though different architectural form), and represents a cross-fertilisation with ancient Egyptian and eastern Mediterranean cultures.

From the early Monarchy period (1030 – 900 BC) have survived several examples of official buildings with rows of pillars. Of fine quality and showing possible Phoenician influence are the carved capitals (proto-Aeolic or Ionic) found at several sites.



While the majority were made for rectangular attached pillars (e.g. those at the palace at Samaria) one has been discovered at Hazor which belonged to a free-standing column about 8 ft high. The rows of pillars in Solomon's palace may well have taken this form.

The ancient Egyptians strongly believed in geometric form as a means of inspiration for the working class, as well as signifying a sacred function such as a temple.

An early document the 'Rhind Papyrus' states "Precise calculation is the gateway to a knowledge of all things".

An important element in Egyptian architecture is the column which appears in various types:

- Palmiform – leaves opening upward at the capital
- Lotus – calyx-shaped leaves closing on themselves
- Papyrus – closed capital
- Composite – more elaborate variations

The shafts of columns were decorated with scenes and inscriptions.



Fluted 'proto-Doric' columns were first carved in the entrance to the 12th dynasty tombs, and later made to appear more elegant by tapering towards the top.

The Golden Age of ancient Egypt was from 16th to 11th century BC. The immense wealth of the Pharaohs was spent on temples with obelisks and vivid reliefs and paintings.



This slide shows the Temple of Isis with its decorated columns, built about 247 BC. The capitals are composite design.

This reconstruction from the Ptolemaic age about 150 BC shows the splendid, highly varied decoration of Egyptian temples abounding in symbolic allusions.



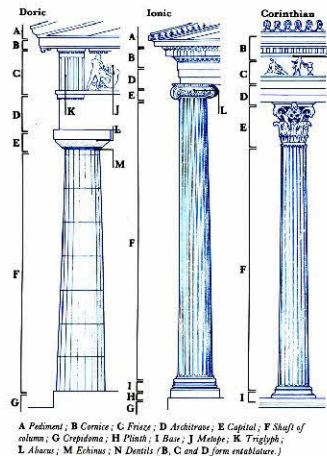
The ancient Egyptians<sup>6</sup> had a well-developed view of temple architecture as the domain of the god. The ancient Greeks also conceived the universe in architectural terms.

Most of the modern study<sup>7</sup> of Greek temples has been into their architectural form. More research is needed on the meaning of the form, including early Greek ideas on the cosmos.

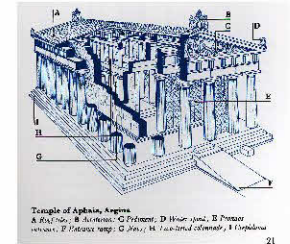
In the poems of Homer and Hesiod (8th to 7th centuries BC) the sky is kept apart from the earth by tall pillars or by Atlas (a god) who supports the weight on his head and hands.

The origins of the classical orders of architecture are lost in mythology, but they have precise rules for proportion and ornament, a combination that means they are able to make tantalising allusions to cultural traditions and beliefs whilst also being subjected to intellectual discipline.

Through trading links, the Greeks learnt from the Egyptians and built in a similar style using columns and beams. Greek architects were required to produce buildings that evoked the spirit of the age, concentrating on subtlety of design, symmetry and above all elegant beauty. Typically a temple was a rectangular walled building surrounded by a pillared colonnade or peristyle.



The colonnaded Greek temple was invented around 600 BC. Driving its creation was a dynamic new society formed in Greek lands from 8th century BC, a young world pioneering its identity in a range of media from poetry to architecture. The colonnaded temple quickly established itself as the architectural flag of the Greek polis or citizen state.



The Parthenon (built ~438 BC) was constructed of Pentelic marble in the Doric style with 8 columns along the front and 17 on the sides.

The Parthenon is regarded as the epitome of ancient Greek cultural achievement, combining order, reason and elegance in a way that typifies the spirit of the age.

This form of Hellenic Classicism has captivated every generation since 5th century BC and inaugurated a tradition that lasted 2,500 years.

The Temple at Artemis at Ephesus, Western Turkey was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world<sup>8</sup>.

It was built about 356 BC and dedicated to Artemis the goddess of the hunt. It contained 127 Ionic columns each over 18 metres (50 feet) high with figured bases and was the largest religious shrine in the ancient world. The many columns are said to have been fashioned in gold.



Trajan's column, in Rome, was built about 112 AD to celebrate Emperor Trajan's victories. It is regarded as one of the masterpieces of the ancient world with its 35 m (115 ft) stylised Doric column. It is covered with an unbroken band of relief sculpture containing 2,500 human figures (two thirds life-size).

Classical architecture was first documented by Marcus Vitruvius, a Roman writer, architect & military engineer (under Julius Caesar & Caesar Augustus).

His book – *De Architectura* is the only surviving major book on architecture from classical antiquity, and perhaps the first complete work on this discipline. He saw architecture as an imitation of man, a theme depicted by Leonardo da Vinci in his drawing of the Vitruvian Man. He asserted that in architecture a structure must exhibit 3 qualities: *firmitas* (to be strong or durable), *utilitas* (useful) & *venustas* (beautiful).



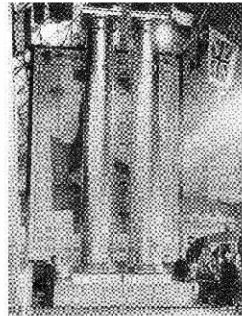
Andrea Palladio was one of the greatest architects of the High Renaissance. He published 'the Four Books of Architecture' in 1570, based on his studies of Roman architecture and his knowledge of the works of Vitruvius.

He played a key part in the revival of classical architecture, adapting this style to the design of buildings around Venice. His neo-classical style was later adopted in England and other countries, in the so-called Palladianism period. This neo-classical revival occurred at about the same time as Operative and Speculative Freemasonry were developing, providing sources of inspiration.

Examples of the noble orders of architecture can be found in many famous buildings around the world. The Colonnade at St Peter's Square in Rome comprises 288 Doric columns and 88 pilasters (square or rectangular pillars). The Lincoln Memorial (1922) was built in the classical Greek temple form, like the Parthenon. The building is flanked by 38 large Doric columns of white Colorado marble, 13.4 metres high.

Gold was the key attraction at the first world exposition<sup>9</sup> in Queensland where Queensland's mineral wealth was on show.

Towering over the mining court were two gigantic Doric columns 35 feet high and gilded to look like solid gold. These columns celebrated the 11,198,600 ounces of gold produced by the colony since European settlement began. Leading up to these columns was an avenue of twelve gilded obelisks, scaled to represent the output of the principal goldfields, from Charters Towers to the recently discovered Coen field in Cape York.



Architects today have little regard for Palladio's laws, and hardly ever use columns of the noble orders of architecture. A primary reason is that engineers have dramatically changed the world in which architects operate, with new ideas, materials and building techniques.

Another quandary faced by architects is how to portray beauty in the design of buildings, a quality which tends to be elusively hard to define and realise in practice. Furthermore there is an ancient maxim that beauty lies between the extremities of order and complexity (thus moving away from the original focus on order, reason and elegance).

Nevertheless the traditional values of wisdom, strength and beauty are alive and well, and I would like to conclude with some thoughts from a relevant article in the American magazine *The Builder*<sup>10</sup> (dated 1919).

Happy is he who has Wisdom to plan his life and to build up his character in Strength and Beauty so as to merit the approbation of his Divine Master!

He must contemplate the columns of Strength and Beauty before he can determine the nature of the spiritual building he ought to erect.

As, in Architecture, an edifice must, above all, be built of sufficient strength to resist all possible stress, so, in "Moral Geometry," a Mason's character must be of sufficient strength to withstand temptation, however powerful. It must be "steadfast, unmovable."

But Masonry requires of us more than strength. It also demands beauty.

The word denotes primarily that which pleases the eye or ear, but it is applied also to that quality in any object of thought which awakens admiration or approval; as, intellectual beauty, moral beauty, and so on."

The aim of this presentation has been to explore the significance of columns and their place in Freemasonry. As you can see they have a long history of well established traditions and key-note importance. The concluding thought I leave with you is that wisdom, strength and beauty – the three lesser lights in Freemasonry (represented by the columns) are a key part of our culture, offering concrete foundations on which to build and relate.

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#### *Bibliography:*

- <sup>1</sup> "The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry" by James Stevens Curl – Batsford 1991
- <sup>2</sup> "The Freemasons" by Jeremy Harwood – Hermes House 2006
- <sup>3</sup> "Masonry Dissected" by Samuel Pritchard (Poemandres Press) 1996 reprint of 1730 original
- <sup>4</sup> "Freemasonry Today" – Issue 26 Autumn 2003 UGLE
- <sup>5</sup> "ISMS Understanding Architecture" by Jeremy Melvin 2005
- <sup>6</sup> "The Complete Handbook of Architecture" by Patrick Nutgens
- <sup>7</sup> "The Complete Greek Temples" by Tony Spawforth – Thames & Hudson 2006
- <sup>8</sup> "Architecture" by Jonathan Glancey DK 2006
- <sup>9</sup> "Showing Off Queensland at World Expositions" by Judith McKay (CQU Press)
- <sup>10</sup> Internet site [www.masonicdictionary.com](http://www.masonicdictionary.com)