

Symbolism of the Skull and Crossbones, otherwise known as the Deaths Head – a brief overview by Hu the Horrible – Februa/Mars 2002

The image of the Skull and Crossbones is recognised in the popular imagination the world over first and foremost as the flag flown by pirates on the high seas going about their business of looting, rape and murder – it seemingly being nothing more than a device meant to strike fear into the hearts of those who saw a ship flying the dreaded flag bearing down on them. And though not complete bull-shit, being the effect would have been existent in those on the receiving end of the banner bearing the Skull and Crossbones, there is a whole lot more to the origin, use and meanings of the symbol; such a simple explanation doesn't suffice.

To begin with, the very image of a legendary pirate captain appears to confirm a grater, deeper meaning. Going out on a limb, firstly the wearing of a patch – being one-eyed is of major significance when we recall Odin/Wotan, the chief of the Gods of the Norse, Teutonic peoples, and Horus, the Hawk-headed son of the resurrected Osiris, who 'sets things to right', are both one-eyed – or at the least have lost an eye; Odin sacrificing an eye for wisdom, while the eye of Horus was lost battling Set (cosmic destructive energies). Then of course there is the obligatory bird on the pirates shoulder; here we might bring to mind Odins ravens, his eyes in the sky, Huginn and Muninn, and their portrayal in John Boorman's excellent film 'Excalibur' accompanying Merlin, or perhaps the Egyptian rendition of a persons soul as a bird – the Ba bird. If one was really game, one could draw comparisons between a pirates wooden leg – bared below the knee with the trouser leg rolled up, and the candidate for 3rd degree, that of a Master Mason, in Freemasonry being similarly attired... and even further, maybe at the extreme limit of where only Fool's don't fear to tread, is the pirates hunt, seizure and secreting away of treasure – just as legend ascribes to the Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon – the Knights Templar.

The Templars, formed in 1118 and 'disbanded' in 1307, are surrounded by myth and legend, from searching and reputedly finding the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, sacred Gnostic texts even more dangerous than those found by the Dead Sea or at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, to the disappearance of their naval fleet from La Rochelle just before King Phillippe of France moved to have all Templars arrested and their assets seized. Some say if it wasn't the first, then one of the trips the Templars made across the Atlantic to various locations in North America(1). And others, while agreeing the Templars most probably did make a couple of trans-Atlantic crossings prior to Columbus famed journey of 1492, the La Rochelle fleet more likely found a sage haven in Scotland(2) as the nation and its King, Robert the Bruce, were excommunicated by Rome at the time and therefore somewhat beyond the reach of Papal Bulls and Edicts. In fact, Baigent and Leigh, and Knight and Lomas agree, contend the very Scottish victory over the English at Bannockburn in 1314, that which ended English designs on Scotland, was due to a mounted charge of Templars throwing themselves into the fray late in the day(3). The connection here with the Skull and Crossbones is that it was the Templars marine battle flag. The Scottish destination of the Templars in 1307 is further implied by the tale relating that Robert the Bruce's remains were placed in such a 'skull and crossbones' manner(4), though the more concrete evidence is that of a large number of Templar gravestones found in Scotland(5), not to mention the very existence of Rosslyn Chapel(6). Whatsmore, the concentration of these anonymous, spartan gravestones, as the centuries go by gradually develop more elaborate, florid and decidedly Masonic, incorporating both the Masonic square and compass and on some examples, the skull and crossbones itself in place of the single, undated flat stones bearing the outline of the particular knights sword(7).

That Masonry has roots in the Templars is a matter beyond the scope of the present piece, is dealt with thoroughly elsewhere and considering the above is undoubtedly a certainty. The use of the Skull and Crossbones in Freemasonry beyond that already mentioned on some headstones, is nearly as prevalent as the aforementioned ubiquitous square and compass; being a feature of the hilt of ceremonial swords, embroidered on the aprons or sashes worn by brethren or most impressively, stirringly employed in the ritual of the 3rd degree, from whence on completion a Mason is thereafter a Master Mason. The 3rd degree is a ritual raising from the dead following the candidate's re-enactment of the first Mason – Hiram Abiff's death at the hands of the traitors Jubela, Jubelo and Jubelum(8), the three Juwees. Already noted is the strange attire worn during the ceremony, which is exactly as a condemned heretic was brought to the gallows in the Middle Ages(9). The Skull and Crossbones themselves are placed on the death shroud from which the brother is raised, the 'Worshipful Master' (a masonic 'master of ceremonies') then explains the bones are 'emblems of mortality', from which this rite of initiation could be speculated to be a revelation of the illusory nature of the material realm, as well as being a

figurative death within the brother of those elements of his person rooted in the physical world and our five most basic senses used to interact and interpret it – eternity awaits...

A more completely modern usage of the Skull and Crossbones, in this instance referred to as the Death's Head, was among the SS of Nazi era Germany. Apart from its most visible use on the officers caps, it is probably most famously, or infamously, prominent use was the very highly regarded Totenkopfring/Deaths Head Ring awarded to SS officers in recognition of their "...personal achievement, devotion to duty, and loyalty to the Fuhrer and his ideals."(10) Though to say what reasons the SS had for adopting the Deaths Head/Skull and Crossbones beyond a connection with the past German military units who too used the symbol in their insignia(11), an ongoing tradition, would be pure guesswork, the reverence with which the Totenkopfrings were held intimates something greater than mere military insignia. Upon death or on leaving the SS, the officers rings were returned to officialdom whereon they were sent to the SS castle of Wewelsburg in Westphalia where they were placed in a particular chest kept in the castle's main tower(12,13). Though rarely more than a footnote in history books, Wewelsburg was ultimately of more import to the SS; it was to be reconstructed as the most sacred temple of the SS, emulating Camelot of the Knights of the Round Table(14). At the centre of the Wewelsburg complex, the castle said to house the Holy Grail and/or the Ark of the Covenant(15). Essentially, the castle, more so than the surrounding planned township, was conceived to be the mystical axis of the world(16) – in an esoteric sense, the centre from which all universal creative movement is imparted.

Focussing directly on the Skull and Crossbones or Death's Head, that is the constituent parts to the whole, a further wealth of value may be revealed to us. The Skull and the two human thigh bones crossed are in some instances ascribed the astrological rulership of the first zodiacal sign Aries and the 9th sign Sagittarius(17), both positive, Fire signs, the former cardinal – more dominant, while the latter is mutable – passive. The combination of Aries and Sagittarius, ruled by Mars and Jupiter respectively, brings together leadership and courage with profound philosophical thought. There is however another system that ascribes the rulership of the entire skeleton, and the skin as well, to Capricorn(18), which puts things into quite a different perspective. Capricorn is ruled by Saturn, whom in a shallow sense is more or less just that old scythe carrier, the Grim Reaper or plain old 'Death'. However, looking at the picture in its entirety, the death signified by Capricorn, which is the physical death, is at once the beginning of the path to incarnation, the re-birth itself being the domain of Capricorn's opposite Cancer(19). This death and re-birth is carved into the very fabric of the great medieval cathedrals; Capricorn – death – situated at the portal/doorway, running up the nave through the zodiac to a Cancerian re-birth at the altar(20).

The skeleton of Capricorn finds further significance in the form of the 'Mithraic Cap'; its form at once imitating the sigil of Capricorn – the cap itself being the fish tail while the very skull it is placed on is the head of the goat... this being the case, it serves to bring the head, ruled by Aries in touch with the feet of Pisces(21), the first and last signs of the zodiac. The significance of uniting the first and last – Alpha to Omega – that of completion, initiation, enlightenment is further enhanced by Capricorn's sexual connotations; the sigil being both soft and hard is the phallus while Capricorn's opposite, Cancer, is entirely soft – the vulva, kteis, yoni, cunt(22). The combination of which while engendering life, a Horus to Isis and Osiris, is also the uniting of male and female, the melding of opposites that tantrically (sex magic) is required to attain a state of enlightened initiation – nirvana.

Alchemically, of the 3 great principles of Sulphur, Mercury and Salt, it is Salt by way of a well known sigil hints at further revelations in this area; "...this widely used sigil [salt sigil] was derived from the capital letter, the theta, of the Greek Thanatos which meant 'death'"(23). Salt in this direction is connected with the thought processes of man(24), the very seat of thought – the grey matter of the brain housed by the skull is the very veil to be pierced(25) to gaze upon the true nature of reality/Isis unveiled. In this sense then, Salt is "...the dross left over when life has fled, it is the skull, the death's head; it is the white powder left behind when the gold is extracted, It is the ash of thought."(26) Be that as it may, the skull is not so much a 'sentence of death', but as Hedsel reveals its position in the old mythologies "...tend to present the image of the head as a castle, from which the soul, or princess, peers out from one of the windows. In the fairy lore, the castellated head is the guardian of our spiritual activity. A comely knight rides out of the castle in search of the Holy Grail."(27) This quest for the ultimate truth being no less than coming to grips with, understanding the nature of the cosmos, and hence in turn oneself – essentially a godlike acquisition of profound knowledge, the root of all religious concepts and philosophies(28).

Further, a flower being "...the glorified reflection of last years sun...that flower is not a product of the present years Earthly and Spiritual activity...[but is] a manifestation of forces engendered in the previous year..."(29), the implication of drawing an analogy with humans is the "...the head-forces of man are the transformed forces carried over from a previous growth into the present lifetime."(30) This transmission through incarnations occurs via the thigh-bones, wherein it is the Alchemical 'fixed salt' thus situated where a person's being, their very essence is recorded(31). The femur is thus an 'inheritor' and an 'organ of generation', the intimation though is obviously not sexual, for the 'indestructible nucleus' that is "...the fixed salt transports the conciousness acquired by an individual demanding a modification of form in order to provide his conciousness the means of expressing itself."(32) Goes a long way in explaining a 'ritual cannibalism' such as in the inbibing of the host in Christian churches and perhaps was the reason behind the quasi-masonic group 'Skull and Bones', numbering among them Prescott Bush – George Dubya's grandfather, raiding the Native American leader Geronimo's grave and taking his remains back to their lodge.(33)

Whatever the case, a wealth of meaning encapsulated by the Skull and Crossbones/Deaths Head, and whatsmore, this is just the briefest of outlines.

Notes:

1. Micheal Baigent, Richard Leigh "The Temple and the Lodge" 1996 and Christopher Knight, Robert Lomas "The Hiram Key" 1997
2. Baigent & Leigh, 1996; p 98-116
3. Ibid, p 61-65, Knight & Lomas 1997; p 388
4. Baigent & Leigh, 1996; p 68-9
5. Ibid, p 24-35
6. Rosslyn Chapel, built circa 1440-80, is an elaborately decorated 'chapel' not far from Edinburgh, Scotland. Although it is literally covered with carvings, the iconography contains no Christian elements, rather they are Templar, Masonic and Celtic.
7. Op cit
8. Knight & Lomas 1997; p 11-21
9. Ibid, facing p 176
10. Robin Lumsden "SS Regalia" 1995; p 57
11. Ibid, p 32
12. Ibid, p 57-8
13. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke "Occult Roots of Nazism" 1992; p 187
14. Peter Moon "The Black Sun" 1997; p 67-8
15. Ibid, p 68 & 109
16. Goodrick-Clarke 1992; p 188
17. Emille Grillot de Grivy "Sorcery, Magic and Alchemy" 1991; p 241-2
18. Mark Hedsel "The Zelator" 1999; p 350
19. Ibid, p 351
20. Ibid
21. Ibid, p 353-5
22. Ibid, p 356-7. Of interest, Aleister Crowley's spelling of 'magick' with its 'k' is said by some to derive from the 'kteis' – note also Crowley's self-nomination as the Great Beast 666(the number of Sorath, the demon of the Sun), and his aim of mating with Babalon(the moon) – conjoining of polarities.
23. Hedsel 1999; p 120
24. Ibid
25. Ibid, p 45
26. Ibid, p 120
27. Ibid, p 341
28. A good study of the meaning of the Grail is "The Mystery of the Grail" by Julius Evola, Inner Traditions International, 1994
29. Op cit, p 340
30. Ibid, p 341
31. Andre Vandenbrock "Al-Kemi – A Memoir" 1987; p 172-7
32. Ibid, p 285
33. Moon 1997; p 275-7