

The symbolism of the 13^e degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Canada.

Souverain Grand Commandeur,

Illustres frères Grands Inspecteurs Généraux du 33^e degré,

Illustres frères,

During my progression through the system of the AASR, which I purposefully kept slow and reflective, the 13th degree, *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, has impressed me the most. In this talk, I propose a brief overview of the thoughts it has inspired.

The legend

The thirteenth degree tells, as you well know, of the discovery, by three workers, “of a Secret Vault, constructed deep underground and meant to contain a sacred treasure”¹. In this vault, built par patriarch Enoch before the Flood, rested a triangular golden plate which was on a cubical stone, all on a marble Altar and on which was engraved the great Mysterious Name of the Deity. To deserve Royal Arch degree, Adoniram, Jobert et Stolkin (other versions mention Jabulon, Johaben and Stolkin) han already discovered the entry of this vault. “They discovered and fearlessly explored a deep shaft sunk perpendicularly in the earth; and descending through nine arches, sealed up from mortal eyes for centuries, they reached the cell hewn in the solid rock, far under-ground, in which a sacred treasure had been

¹*Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, p. 15.

hidden before the Flood”². In order to deserve their own promotion, three aspirants must retrace the steps of their predecessors. By helping each other, and after many failed attempts, they rediscover the sacred treasure, which they bring back to the surface.

Origins

The AASR as we know it goes back to 18th-century France, where a masonry known as “scottish” developed. This masonry was characterized, in the first years, by an avalanche of degrees with bombastic titles flourishing in a happy enthusiastic confusion until they started to be consolidated and organized by the middle of the century. Structured around ten, then fourteen degrees, the AASR was taken to the West Indies by French merchant Étienne Morin in 1761, then came back with twenty-five degrees. It reached the symbolic number of thirty-three degrees at the beginning of the 19th century in a pretty definitive form.

As for the theme of the Royal Arch, found both in the British Holy Royal Arch and in our own *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, its first mention seems to be found in Virginia in 1753³.

Symbolism

First and foremost, this degree is concerned with the rediscovery of the GAOTU. As the prologue of the degree points out, “to communicate true and correct ideas in respect to the

² *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, p. 21

³ Saunier, p. 767.

Deity was the chief object of the Ancient Mysteries”⁴. “Nothing forbids you to consider the whole legend of this degree like that of the Master’s, an Allegory representing the perpetuation of the knowledge of the true God in the sanctuaries of Initiation”.⁵

The aspirants are warned from the start: the way to the top of the mountain is harsh and it might better if human intelligence did not see beyond the clouds that envelop it. “And still above the cloud there soars a glittering peak, far up beyond the reach of vision. It is not the destiny of man to surmount it. If that Titan, the intellect, could scale it, he would thence survey only a desolate and spiritless universe. May it never be given him to ascend the footsteps of the Throne itself and find it vacant; for the Ancient of Days is, in His Very Self, beyond the reach of human intellect; and it has for Him no Name.”⁶ We are led to understand that it not toward the peak of the mountain we shall strive, since everything there is beyond our reach. If this thirteenth degree teaches us one thing, it is that we should look for the entrance to our own lost vault in order to descend in the depths of ourselves, where what we comprehend of God, this infinite part which we cannot even name, resides, too long forgotten.

The aspirant descends in the depths of the earth, where, says our ritual, “Darkness and death and the grave are reserved for all men”, but “after death and the grave come the resurrection and light and life eternal” if we “adore the Great Ineffable Name of God.”⁷ Enoch’s vault, found in the depths of the Earth (one of the four elements), symbolizes the descent into oneself, where eternal life is set in mortal matter, as the vault is in solid

⁴ *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, p. 16.

⁵ *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, p. 17.

⁶ *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, p. 21.

⁷ *Knight of the Ninth Arch or Royal Arch of Solomon*, p. 23.

stone. One gets there in the dark to deserve one's advancement. Therefore, it is no coincidence if it only when their torch fail that the three aspirants see true light.

Looking at the thirteenth degree as an allegory of the initiatic process implies the acceptance of descending into oneself, the necessity of looking for the entrance of Enoch's vault, which the Ancients knew, but which we have forgotten. Once found, the mason must descend through nine arches – the cube of three, symbol of the divine, of trinity, of perfection. He must follow the path towards the divine which awaits for him at the bottom and summons him. He moves forward in the dark but towards the light he finds in the center, where he never went – where he had forgotten he could go.

Once there, the aspirant rediscovers what had been promised to him, which others had seen before: upon a marble altar, a cube of agate on which rested a golden triangle bearing the Great Word, the ineffable name of God.

This treasure takes a highly symbolic. The triangle rests a cube; the divine on matter. The delta, symbol of divinity and perfection in theological traditions, is often found in the East in French-tradition lodges, where it bears the four Hebraic letters or the divine eye⁸. Here, it is made of gold, the most precious of metals, considered perfect⁹. It rests on a cube of agate, square of a square, symbol of physical matter¹⁰, but also of tamed matter which, for us

⁸ Jules Boucher, *La symbolique maçonnique*, Paris, Dervy, pp. 116-117.

⁹ Chevalier et Gheerbrant, p. 705.

¹⁰ Chevalier et Gheerbrant, pp. 165, 328.

mason, represents the masterpiece which the apprentice undertakes with his mallet and chisel¹¹.

The GAOTU is therefore above that to which humans can aspire. The aspirant is faced with his human nature: at the deepest of his own matter resides the divine spark which transcends human understanding but which enlightens him. In order to find true light, he must greet darkness. In essence, this interior voyage reminds me of the French Masonic tradition encompassed in the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. (*Visita Interiora Terrae, Rectificandoque, Invenies Occultum Lapidem* – Visit the interior of Earth and,rectify and you will find the philosophal stone¹²).

Souverain Grand Commandeur,
Illustres frères Grands Inspecteurs Généraux du 33^e degré,
Illustres frères,
J'ai dit

Hervé Gagnon, Ph.D. 32^e

¹¹ Boucher, p. 187.

¹² Boucher, p. 52.