

The Beehive
By C. Bruce Hunter, From The Square (England), March 1998

The beehive is a rather curious symbol, and it has always posed a problem for the Craft.

The problem doesn't lie in what the beehive symbolizes - industry and cooperation, two perfectly good Masonic virtues. The thing that sets it apart is actually its variance with the main categories of Craft Symbolology.

The first of these categories is a group of architectural objects: the square, compasses, level, etc. They come from the age of Gothic cathedrals, and illustrate man's place in the universe by the tools of operative Masons.

The other is a group of Biblical symbols: Jacob's ladder, King Solomon's Temple, etc. They tap more directly into the world's spiritual heritage and bring the fruits of ancient wisdom to the Craft.

Curiously, the beehive does not fit either category. Although it promotes co-operative labor, it is not really an architectural symbol; and while the Bible occasionally mentions milk and honey, that scarcely qualifies the beehive as a Biblical symbol.

This places it among a small group of Masonic icons that lie outside the mainstream. So, where did this peculiar item originate, and what does it have to do with Freemasonry?

An Obscure Origin

The answer may lie in an obscure piece of church symbology: the beehive has long been associated with St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Shortly after the start of the Twelfth Century, a French knight named Hugues de Payens approached Bernard – then serving as Abbot of Clairvaux - for help in promoting an order of knights he had just organized. The project grew from de Payen's grand vision of leading an armed force to patrol the road from Joppa to Jerusalem.

In those days, many pilgrims made a heroic effort traveling to the Holy Land; only to die of thirst or fall prey to bandits on the last 50 kilometers of their journey. De Payens saw the need for protection on that final, short leg of the pilgrimage; but he had only a handful of followers and no financial resources.

To make his plan work, he needed official recognition from the church, money for munitions and supplies, and new recruits. To secure all these, he needed help from high places.

That's where Abbot Bernard came in. He gave de Payens his complete support, using

his eloquence to its fullest in arguing the knight's case to the church hierarchy. Within two years, de Payens had a monastic Rule for his knightly order and that made it official. Bernard's support also gave him a leg up in his efforts to raise funds and attract recruits.

The new Order, now universally known as the Knights Templar, became one of the most famous organizations in the world. It held sway in both church and military circles for nearly 200 years. Even now, centuries after its demise, it remains a centerpiece in the romance of the Crusades.

A Lasting Legacy

The details of the Templars' story, their heroism and piety, depicts virtues to which everyone can aspire and lessons everyone should heed.

Surely it is no coincidence that the beehive, the emblem of Bernard's eloquence, the very key to the Templars' initial success, entered the symbology of a fraternity that, centuries later, would claim descent from the Order.

Not Exactly Proof

Of course this is far from proof that Freemasonry descended from the Templars. At most it shows that some long-forgotten Mason introduced the symbol to commemorate a legendary connection, which he himself might not have thought historically sound.

But as the beehive is neither architectural nor Biblical, we must look elsewhere for the basis of its association with the Craft.

In that regard, its subtle connection with St. Bernard provides a satisfying answer. It explains why the beehive belongs among the fraternity's symbols. And his connection with the Templars shows what this curious symbol has to do with virtues that Masons have always held dear.