Circumambulation: The Rite We Walk But Rarely Read

A Paper on the Symbolism of Circumambulation in Freemasonry

Abstract

Circumambulation — the formal procession of the candidate around the altar — is performed in each of the three degrees of Freemasonry, yet it receives remarkably little attention in Masonic education. This paper examines the rite's ancient origins across multiple religious traditions, its geometric symbolism as expressed through the circumpunct, and its layered meanings within the Masonic degrees. Particular attention is given to the roles of all participants in the Masonic circumambulation and to the two explanations given to the candidate in the First Degree — explanations that, on close reading, are directed not at the candidate but at the Master Masons of the lodge.

I. Introduction

Every candidate who has sat in the Northeast Corner has walked around the altar of his lodge. Most were never told, in any depth, why. Circumambulation is present in each of the three degrees of the Pennsylvania working, yet it does not appear in the Exemplar program, the Grand Lodge's formal mentoring curriculum, or most Masonic education materials encountered in lodge. Given the symbolic weight this rite carries — and given that it is one of the few ritual acts whose meaning is explicitly addressed in the degree itself — this silence represents a significant gap in Masonic education.

The purpose of this paper is to fill part of that gap: to trace the rite's origins across human religious history, to examine the geometry it inscribes, and to draw out the Masonic lessons that lie within it — including lessons that are not for the candidate at all.

II. What Is Circumambulation?

The word is derived from the Latin *circum* (around) and *ambulare* (to walk). Albert G. Mackey, in his *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, defines it as "that religious rite in the ancient initiations which consisted in a formal procession around the altar, or other holy and consecrated object."[1] The purposes of this walking vary across traditions. It can be

an act of reverence — honoring the sacredness of what lies at the center. It can be a blessing conferred upon a person or object. It can be a meditative practice, the movement itself becoming prayer. And in some traditions, performed in the opposite direction, it is understood to convey a curse.

The direction matters. The intention matters. And, as will become clear, the center matters most of all.

III. Ancient and Cross-Cultural Origins

The Sun-Worship Hypothesis

Mackey traces the origins of ritual circumambulation to the ancient worship of the sun. In his *Symbolism of Freemasonry* (1869), he writes that the rite "originally alluded to the apparent course of the sun in the firmament, which is from east to west by the way of the south."[2] The logic is geographic: in the northern hemisphere, an observer tracking the sun from sunrise in the east, through its noon position in the south, to its setting in the west, perceives a clockwise arc. This motion was understood by ancient peoples as the correct direction — the direction of light, order, and blessing. Its inversion, counterclockwise movement, was associated with darkness and ill omen.

Apollo at Delos

The most direct literary evidence Mackey cites is a hymn attributed to the priests of Apollo at Delos. In ancient Greek ritual, when priests performed sacrifices, they and the people walked three times around the altar while chanting a sacred ode. Of this ceremony, Mackey records that a hymn of Callimachus was preserved, "said to have been chanted by the priests of Apollo at Delos, while performing this ceremony of circumambulation, the substance of which is, 'We imitate the example of the sun, and follow his benevolent course.'"[3]

Apollo was the god of many things — music, healing, prophecy — but most relevant to Masonic symbolism, he was the god of knowledge and of light. His priests walked in a clockwise direction as an act of alignment with the sun's path, and by extension, with the light and knowledge the sun represented. In Freemasonry, where the sun is the symbol of light and light is the symbol of knowledge, the parallel is not incidental.

Circumambulation in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Book of Joshua provides one of the most dramatic examples of circumambulation in the Hebrew Bible. Following divine instruction, the Israelites marched around the walls

of Jericho once each day for six days. On the seventh day, after a final circuit of the city, they sounded their horns and the walls collapsed (Joshua 6:1–20). This represents the ritual used as an instrument directed against an object — the counterexample that proves the rule about the power associated with circumambulatory rites.

Jewish Wedding Practice

In the Ashkenazic Jewish wedding ceremony, the bride circles the groom three or seven times under the chuppah (wedding canopy). This practice — known in Hebrew as *hakafot* — is traditionally understood as a blessing: the bride creates a sacred circle around the groom as an act of consecration and protection. One interpretation, drawing on the Talmud (Yevamot 62b), is that she is demonstrating that his spiritual accomplishments depend upon her presence; another is that the seven circuits correspond to the seven blessings of the marriage service.[4] Whatever the precise interpretation, the common thread is circumambulation as a conferral of blessing upon the person at the center.

Catholic and Christian Practice

In the Roman Catholic Mass, a priest circumambulates the altar with a thurible of incense, an act of purification and sanctification. In the Tridentine Rite, the elements of bread and wine were incensed before the Consecration through a prescribed pattern of circles, accompanied by Latin prayer.[5] In Romanian Orthodox practice, the priest and congregation process around the church three times on Easter night, symbolizing the burial procession of Christ before the proclamation of the Resurrection.

Islamic Tawaf

In Islam, the *Tawaf* — the ritual circumambulation of the Kaaba in Mecca — is one of the principal obligatory rites of the Hajj pilgrimage and the *'Umrah*. Pilgrims circle the Kaaba seven times in a counterclockwise direction, each circuit beginning and ending at the Black Stone. The practice is understood as an act of submission and devotion to Allah, with the circling representing the centrality of God in the life of the believer: as pilgrims move around the Kaaba, so all of existence moves around the divine.[6] The Tawaf is performed continuously, twenty-four hours a day throughout the Islamic year — one of the largest simultaneous circumambulations in human history.

Hindu Pradakshina

In Hinduism and related Indic religions, circumambulation is known as *pradakshina* or *parikrama*. The term *pradakshina* derives from Sanskrit roots meaning "moving

forward while keeping to the right," and the practice is an integral part of temple worship. Importantly for Masonic purposes, the design of many Hindu temples encodes the symbolic meaning into the architecture itself: the structure reflects the spiritual transition from daily life to spiritual perfection as a journey through stages, with worshipers moving clockwise from the outer doorway inward toward the inner sanctum where the deity is enshrined.[7]

This inward movement — from the ordinary world at the periphery to the sacred center, with the architecture of the temple representing stages of spiritual progress along the way — has an obvious parallel in the Masonic system of degrees and in the general Masonic metaphor of the journey toward perfection.

Summary

Across widely separated cultures and religious traditions, circumambulation carries a recognizable cluster of meanings: the honoring of a sacred center, the imitation of the sun's course, the conferral of blessing or consecration, the pursuit of spiritual transformation, and the representation of a journey through stages of development. These meanings are not identical to Masonic meanings, but they illuminate them. As Mackey writes, the prevalence of the rite in ancient traditions points to a "common source" that Freemasonry has preserved and transformed.[8]

IV. The Symbol Traced: The Circumpunct

Here is an observation that has received little attention in standard Masonic education: when a candidate circumambulates the altar, he is tracing a symbol. The act of walking in a circle around a central point draws the circumpunct — the point within the circle — the symbol that Mackey identifies, in the chapter of *The Symbolism of Freemasonry* bearing that name, as one of the most profound in the Craft.[9]

Mackey's treatment of the point within the circle connects it to circumambulation explicitly: he notes that the rite of circumambulation, the position of the lodge's officers, and the symbol of the point within a circle all share the same origin in the ancient symbolism of the sun.[10]

The circumpunct's meanings across traditions amplify this reading. In alchemy, it is the symbol for gold — the most perfected of metals — and by extension, in spiritual alchemy, the symbol of spiritual perfection and enlightenment.[11] Consider what this means when applied to circumambulation: if the walking of the circle is the journey, then the circumpunct is the relationship between that journey and its destination. The point at

the center is what the walker orbits — not spatially, but spiritually. Every time the candidate moves around the altar, he is inscribing in the lodge room the very image of what he is seeking to become.

The Masonic symbol of the point within the circle — bounded by the parallel lines of the Holy Saints John, with the Holy Scriptures resting on the altar as the central point — completes this picture. The candidate himself, in his circumambulation, is enacting the symbol he will later be taught.

V. The Masonic Circumambulation: A Multi-Role Rite

Here Freemasonry departs significantly from every other tradition examined above. In virtually all other uses of this rite — Greek, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu — the person circumambulating performs the act on his own behalf. The meaning is personal. In Freemasonry, the circumambulation of the degrees involves at least four distinct roles: the candidate, the guide who leads him, the officers stationed about the lodge, and the observing Master Masons. The principle that makes this significant is one that the Craft returns to repeatedly: you are represented by all of them.

The Candidate

The candidate represents the first stage of manhood: youth. This is the stage of obedience — of learning to follow before leading, of trusting the process before understanding it. The candidate walks without fully knowing why. That posture of trust is itself a lesson worth remembering at every stage of the Masonic journey.

The Guide

The guide represents the second stage: manhood. This is the stage of active practice — the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of virtue. The guide's conduct is instructive in itself: he does not command the candidate, lecture him, or force him. He walks alongside. He leads by example, and when the candidate loses his way, he offers a gentle correction. He is, in the truest sense, a mentor — a coach who helps the candidate make choices rather than a superior who dictates what those choices must be.

Every Master Mason in the lodge is, symbolically, the guide — and is called to lead by example rather than direction, in the lodge and beyond it.

The Officers

The officers stationed at their positions around the lodge represent the obstacles encountered on the path to perfection. They are not enemies. They are the refining challenges that build wisdom. There is value in learning from the experiences of others, and it should not be discounted. But there is a kind of wisdom that can only be built through the work of overcoming one's own obstacles. Knowledge tells you the shape of a challenge. Experience tells you what it costs and what it builds.

The Observing Master Masons

The Master Masons who observe the circumambulation represent the third stage: age. This is the stage of wisdom — the fruit of having walked the path, met the obstacles, and had sufficient time and experience to understand what it all means.

The significance of this fourfold participation is that a Mason holds all four roles at once. He is always, in some sense, still a candidate — still learning obedience to principles larger than himself. He is always, in some sense, a guide — someone whose conduct is visible to brothers at earlier stages. He is always an obstacle and a test to others, whether he intends to be or not. And he is always the watching elder — with the duty to see clearly and to act upon what he sees.

VI. The Two Reasons: A Reading for Master Masons

We come now to what this author regards as the most important — and most underread — teachings in the Masonic circumambulation: the two explanations given to the candidate in the First Degree for why he has walked around the altar.

The candidate is told two things. First, that he is traveling the same path that many good and worthy men have traveled before him. Second, that by walking the path, he gives the members of the lodge an opportunity to observe his preparation.

If these explanations are read as instructions to the candidate, most of their meaning is lost. They are directed, through the candidate, at the Master Masons in the room.

The First Reason: You Are an Example

The first reason reassures the candidate that others have walked this path and succeeded. That is true and worth saying. But the deeper message is aimed at you, the sitting Master Mason. Since you are further along this path, you are an example. Not sometimes. Not when you choose to be. Always. You are an example to the candidate, to every brother in this lodge, and to every person in the community who knows you as a

Freemason. You cannot opt out of that role. The only choice available to you is whether to be a good example or a poor one.

The guide, symbolically, represents you. You must be prepared at all times to fill that role — not as a superior who tells others what to do, but as someone whose conduct speaks before his words do.

The Second Reason: You Are a Guardian

The second reason tells the candidate that the brethren are watching to observe how he has been prepared. The surface-level reading focuses on the physical preparations of the degree: whether the cable-tow is properly placed, whether the hoodwink is correctly applied, whether the candidate is wearing jewelry. This reading is too shallow.

The true question being put to each Master Mason is this: Do you know this man? Have you met with him before tonight? Do you know his name, his motivations for seeking admission, his family, the reasons he is standing in this room? Do you know whether he understands what he is undertaking? If you cannot answer these questions, you have not fulfilled your obligation as an observer of this degree.

Guarding the east gate is not a metaphor for the work of the investigation committee. It is not a duty that can be delegated to the Secretary or the Senior Deacon. It is a personal obligation that falls on each Master Mason in the lodge every time a new candidate petitions for the degrees. A candidate should not stand before the altar of a lodge full of men who do not know him.

VII. On Symbols and Earned Knowledge

Mackey, in his chapter on symbolic instruction in *The Symbolism of Freemasonry*, argues that the use of symbols rather than direct verbal instruction is deliberate and essential: symbols endure where the meanings of words shift across time.[13] There is wisdom in this. But there is another reason symbols are the preferred medium of Masonic instruction: when an idea is given to you in words, it is a gift — received without labor. When an idea is embedded in a symbol, you must work to find it. You must think, observe, sit with uncertainty, return to the symbol later, and find that it has new things to offer. The knowledge you earn in this way is yours in a way that given knowledge never quite is.

The symbol of circumambulation is not exhausted by this paper. What is offered here is one circuit of it. Other circuits, made by other Masons at other stages of their journeys, will reveal other things. The rite is an obstacle in the productive sense — the kind of

obstacle the officers represent — and the work of overcoming it, of finding its meanings for yourself, is the work of the Craft.

That work is how the rough ashlar becomes, in time, the perfect one.

Notes

1. Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia: Moss & Co., 1874; rev. ed. Chicago: Masonic History Co., 1912), s.v. "Circumambulation, Rite of," pp. 152–153.

2. Albert G. Mackey, *The Symbolism of Freemasonry: Illustrating and Explaining Its Science and Philosophy, Its Legends, Myths and Symbols* (New York: Clark & Maynard, 1869; repr. 1882), ch. XXI, "The Rite of Circumambulation." Available at Wikisource: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Symbolism_of_Freemasonry/Chapter_XXI

3. Ibid. The hymn Mackey references is attributed to Callimachus (c. 305–240 BCE), the Alexandrian poet and librarian; it was chanted by priests of Apollo at Delos during circumambulatory sacrifice.

4. Yehuda Shurpin, "Why Does the Bride Circle the Groom Seven Times?" *Chabad.org*, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4191420. The practice draws on the Talmud, Yevamot 62b; additional interpretations reference Hosea 2:21–22 and Joshua 6.

5. "Circumambulation," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumambulation.

6. "Tawaf or Circumambulation around Ka'bah," *Fiqh-us-Sunnah*, Vol. 5, https://www.islamicstudies.info/subjects/fiqh/fiqh_us_sunnah/fus5_76.html; also "Kaaba," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaaba.

7. "Parikrama," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parikrama. See also "Pradakshina," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/pradakshina.

8. Mackey, *Symbolism*, ch. XXI.

9. Mackey, *Symbolism*, ch. XV, "The Point within a Circle."

10. Mackey, *Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Circumambulation, Rite of."

11. "Circles in Alchemy," *The Pulter Project*, Northwestern University, citing Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 41. Available at https://pulterproject.northwestern.edu/curations/c21-circles-in-alchemy.html

12. "Circumpunct," *Symbology Wiki*, https://symbology.wiki/symbol/circumpunct/.

13. Mackey, *Symbolism*, ch. X, "The System of Symbolic Instruction."

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