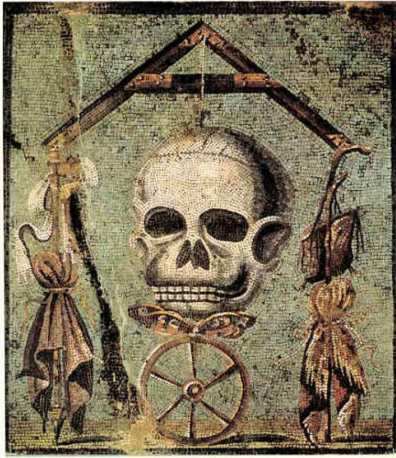


Tracing Board or Decorative Altar - Found at Pompeii in 1874



In the National Museum at Naples there is a remarkable mosaic table top, or altar top which was situated in the centre of a rectangular room exactly as Masonic Altars have ever been erected in Lodge rooms. The workmanship is excellent, and the colouring when the discovery was made was bright and fresh, but has in all probability faded, as all the Pompeii colours have done. Mural paintings, of which so many have been found in the ruins, have suffered the same fate.

It was excavated in 1874 and had remained buried for 1800 years. Pompeii was destroyed, and completely buried, during a long catastrophic eruption of the volcano Mount Vesuvius spanning two days in AD 79.

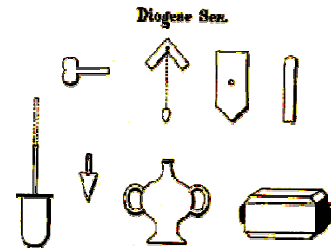
Pompeii was buried - although not, as we now know destroyed when the nearby, supposedly extinct, volcano Vesuvius erupted in AD 79, covering the town and its inhabitants in many tons of pumice and volcanic ash. The disaster remained in people's minds for many years but was eventually forgotten, until the exploration of the ancient site started in an area called 'Civita', in 1748. This was found to be a comparatively easy task, because the debris that had caused such chaos was light and not compacted.



Giuseppe Fiorelli (*pictured left*) 1823 -1896 directed the Pompeii excavation from 1863 to 1875 - introducing an entirely new system for the project. Instead of uncovering the streets first, in order to excavate the houses from the ground floor up, he imposed a system of uncovering the houses from the top down - a better way of preserving everything that was discovered.

This beautiful mosaic, which is believed to be the top of the *Altar*, shows a large square above death's head with a plumb line from the angle of the square to the middle point of the crown of the head. From each arm of the square there is a suspended a robe of which one was scarlet and the other purple which are distinctive colours used in the Royal Arch degree. Below the chin of the head is a beautifully coloured butterfly (or moth), and under the butterfly is a circle, that Masonic emblem of Divinity without beginning or end.

There was also found in the same room several articles inherent in Blue and in Royal Arch Masonry a little urn which is believed to be the pot of manna, a setting maul, a trowel, a spade, a small chest thought to be an imitation of the "Ark of the Covenant" and a small staff thought to be a phallus. This evidence, compelling as may be are confirmed by the inscription over the door of the house which is "*DIOGENE SEN*" which means "Diogenes the Mason".



From other articles, an interpretation of its meaning, but not necessarily as was originally intended but worthy of consideration as follows:- Beneath the skull is a six spoked wheel, on which is a moth with red wings edged with yellow, while its eyes are blue. On the left is an upright spear from which a scarlet and purple robe. The spear is surrounded by a braid of black and white squares. On the right is a thorn stick from which hangs a course piece of cloth in grey brown and yellow tied with cord over it a leather knapsack

Here we have the square and plumb line, the skull, the emblem of mortality, the Butterfly-moth-symbol of the Greeks to designate the soul, the wheel emblematic of the circle of life, the spokes are placed to represent the six points of the intersection and form triangles, the Point in the centre, the right side, the rugged staff, the robe and wallet of the wanderer, denote the passing transitory life of the world. The left, the spear, purple robe and golden cord of the conqueror, the reward of an upright and honourable life well spent. It is the kingdom of the duality, of the variety. In it, poverty and richness live together, probably the meaning of the royal purple and of the sceptre which are the symbols of royal power and of wealth, opposite to the sack and the stick symbols of poverty and weakness, all in perfect equilibrium.

The butterfly (or moth) symbolises the man's soul. In ancient Greece psyche means both the butterfly and soul. The man's task consists in living with wisdom and balance and above all with the consciousness that all that appears, the mundane reality with its contradictions is not the "true" reality, the metaphysic one "the truth in which every intellect eventually rests" (Dante's Divine Comedy, Paradiso XXVIII, 108). Here is the reason for which the butterfly (or moth) is over the wheel, the soul of the initiate is "superior" in respect of the profanity.



My own theory on the butterfly or moth, and I have stretched a picture (left) of the Silk Moth being the multicultural symbol of rebirth and reincarnation.

It is also connected with metamorphosis, as it changes from the caterpillar to the moth after a period of silky gestation. Admired more than many common moths for their symmetry of pattern and colour, and the preciousness of their fibres, they are also connected with the night and the flame, creatures of secrets and illumination. It seems appropriate to be placed between the spoked wheel and the skull.

The silk worm feeds on the mulberry, so ingests wisdom. However, the continuous fibre that they weave is ultimately to their own doom, as unravelling the thread will kill the insect. It seems worthy of consideration, but possibly lepidopterists may not.

The skull has one ear placed on the nearest the pilgrim's staff and is interpreted as "listening to the wants of a distressed brother". From another description of the Mosaic:

„On a ground of Grey Stone is a human skull, inlaid in grey, black and white, above it is a plumb line in coloured wood, the points being made of brass. From the Top is suspended a plumb line-beneath the skull is a six-spoked wheel, on the rim of which is a moth with red wings edged with yellow, while its eyes are blue. On the left there is an upright spear from which hangs a scarlet and purple robe. The spear is surrounded by a white braid of black and white squares. On the right is a thorn stick from which hangs a coarse piece of cloth in grey brown and yellow tied with cord and over it a leather knapsack. Here we have the Sq. and the plumb-line, the skull, emblem of Mortality, the Butterfly - Moth - symbol of the Greeks to designate the Soul - the wheel emblem of the circle of life - the spokes are placed to represent the six points of intersection and form the triangles - the Hub - the Point in the Centre - the right side - the rugged Staff, the robe and wallet of the Wanderer, denote the passing transitory life of the world - the left - the spear, purple robe and golden cord of the conqueror - the reward of an upright and honourable life well spent. The Skull has one ear placed on the side nearest the pilgrim's Staff and is interpreted as "Listening to the wants of a distressed Brother." The whole a symbol of Life - Death and Immortality. Probably the oldest Tracing Board in the world to-day".

Acknowledgements

- [1] The Builder – January 1915 – MasonicDictionary.com
- [2] Hainault Lodge – Newsletters 1969-1977 – original idea for the article