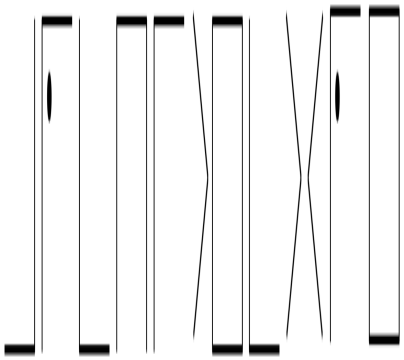


Seven secrets

Description

default watermark

Architecture has even more in common with the theory and practice of secret-keeping than do secret societies. I would add the offer of crypts, basements, darkened rooms and cupboards to the reasons secret societies gravitate towards architecture: its histories and theories, functions, types and symbols.

Iâ??ve started reading (listening to) Dan Brownâ??s novel *The Lost Symbol,* in part as John Dickie mentions it as an example of the popularisation and sensationalisation of secret societies. The unlikely story takes place in Washington DC under the Capitol Building, drawing on the mythos surrounding its founding in a Masonic ceremony by the most famous Freemason, George Washington. The latter is true of course as indicated in many paintings of the time.

I look at architecture and cryptography in other posts. How do the tenets of cryptography intersect with the rules and practices of secret societies? I think cryptography exhibits 7 characteristics that render it attractive to the idea of a secret society.

1. Concealment. Cryptography deploys ciphers for concealing messages, communicated via text, symbols or other devices, such as knots in string, abstract markings, or binary signals as in morse code in sound, light, or other media. You can search the The Early Masonic Catechism on line. There you will find occasional reference to cryptography, such as this account in a dialogue between novice and master:

> â??I could not avoid immediately thinking of the old Egyptians, who concealed the chief Mysteries of their Religion under Signs and Symbols, called Hieroglyphicksâ?• (216).

The most commonly used coding method that appears on Masonic inscriptions (in particular on tombstones) is the inelegantly named *pigpen* substitution cipher. There are many explanations on the web, including a site by Johan Ã hlÃ©n that translates clear text to pigpen. Ciphers based on straight lines are easier to chisel into stone than curves. They are also easier to draw with a drawing app.



2. Access. As well as messages, cryptography provides access to something, or the message that it reveals offers access, as if a key to a door, file, information. Access and its denial is a crucial aspect of any secret society. Whether cryptography is used in earnest in such organisations, the idea of access concealed via codes provides a leitmotif. Cryptography serves as a meta-symbol for the organisation.

3. Combinatorics. Cryptography works with combinatorics: combinations of symbols as in a combination lock or other abstruse sequence of symbols. The sheer number of combinations provides the main impediment to accessing the message or the content â?? unless you have the cryptographic key.

Whenever theories, myths and lores speak of the arrangement of elements then they participate in the workings of combinatorics: the plethora of possibilities for variation offered by alternative arrangements. In the case of secret societies such combination pertains to the ordering of components in ritual. In the *Handbook of Freemasonry,* Arturo de Hoyos amplifies this ritualistic focus as the basis of regional differences between rites.

> â??A Rite may be compared with a staircase, which is comprised of individual steps. The steps represent individual masonic degrees, whereas the staircase as a whole is analogous to a Rite. The degrees of a Rite will usually, although not always, have a numerical designation or fixed position on a calendar or schedule. The Rite may be further divided into sub-organizations (â??lodgesâ??, â??chaptersâ??, â??councilsâ??, and so on), just as a staircase may be divided by a number of â??landingsâ?? which connect the stairs between floorsâ?• (355).

default watermark

De Hoyos offers a number of explanations for this ritual profligacy.

> â??The degrees which comprise a Rite may be arranged in a particular sequence for any number of reasons, including mythology, chronology and/or tradition, or they may appear to be unrelated to each other, having been derived from various sources, or having been aggregated at different timesâ?• (355-356).

Freemasonry includes mathematicians such as Leibniz, Newton, PoincareÌ•, amongst its adherents and by appropriation the workings of mathematics and numerology.

4. Path. A code breaker (cryptanalyst) searches through a sequence with many branching paths to explore options, one of which leads to the message. One common characterisation of this search is as if through a branching maze, a network of paths, loops and dead ends. Branching paths are part of the toolkit of mathematics and algorithms.

Secret societies also enjoy the labyrinth as a metaphor of process, hiddenness and obfuscation. Snoek describes ritual perambulations in Freemason initiation rituals following the pattern of a labyrinth:

> â??The candidate now perambulates the lodge-room three times. Traditionally, the first and third perambulations were clock-wise while the second one went anti-clock-wise, as in the traditional form of the labyrinth (the â??Troja-castleâ??). The perambulations go round the â??tableauâ??, in English referred to as the â??tracing boardâ??, a drawing of symbols on the floor in the centre of the lodgeâ?• (323).

The Troja-castle and its garden labyrinth are in Prague. W.H. Matthews 1922 book *Mazes and Labyrinths* mentions the significance of the maze for Masons, as symbol as well as in processional rituals.

5. Origins. Cryptography helps preserve the concept of an original, a plain text message, an original meaning. The sense of an original applies to the immediate instrumentality of codings and decoding messages, but it also invokes appeal to a long term legacy of messages remaining to be discovered and decoded. Remnants of past communications take on the aura of secrecy.

Architectural historian Anthony Vidler refers to the stage setting of Freemason initiation rites as primitivist re-enactments of a return to the condition of Adam.

> â??This quasi-ritualistic and allegorical stage-set demonstrates the double character of the Masonic â??return to origins,â?? celebrating at once a rebirth founded on primary truths and the civilized â??route of progressâ?? (91).

6. Transaction. As with devices in written language in general, the purpose of cryptography is to preserve, but also to facilitate social interactions, albeit with a degree of secrecy and security. Thereâ??s the communication of a message and the actions that follow, such as access, transactions and exchanges.

default watermark

For secret societies the code might feature as part of a contract, or cryptography simply symbolises the commitment to secrecy of the participants. Cryptography is a further meta-symbol of the organisationâ??s secrecy.

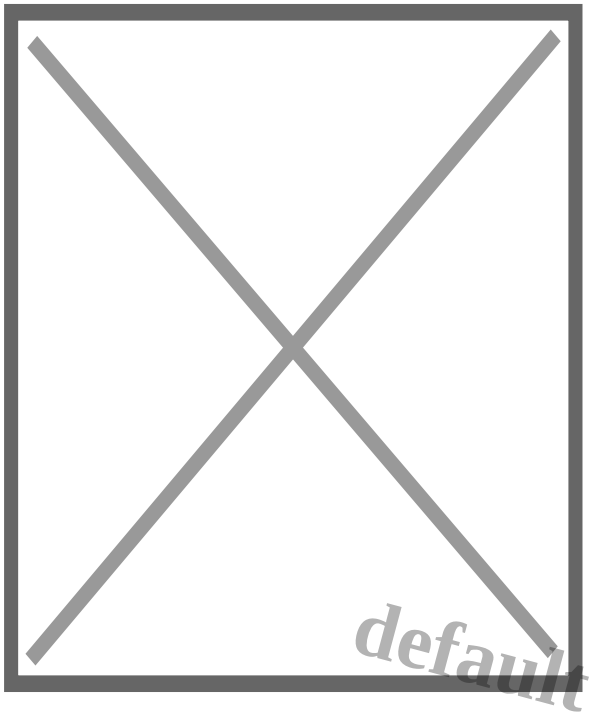
7. Risk. Cryptography plays on uncertainties. Cryptography may obfuscate the fact that it is concealing a hidden message. See steganography. You can never be sure if there is a hidden message, or if you are looking at a hoax, a sequence of random symbols designed to give the impression that thereâ??s something there, or to waste the time of a would-be cryptanalyst.

Freemasons are required not to reveal the secrets of the society, or even its secrecy. *The Catechism* asserts: â??never Reveal the Secrets or Secrecy of a Mason or Masonryâ?• (178). Donâ??t divulge the secret, but donâ??t let on that there is a secret. Thereâ??s a paradox here. How can a secret society conceal that it has secrets?

Secret societies have more to them than rituals and secrets: e.g. conviviality, education, social events, community projects, fundraising, charitable works. Historically, political causes, resistance and activism have also driven their activity profile, though thatâ??s now proscribed in most lodges, which see themselves as apolitical.

Golden Dawn

My recent pandemic excursion regime took me to Warriston Cemetery. There I found the memorial of Sir William and Lady Christina Peck. William was Director of the Edinburgh City Observatory in 1889-1925. He also belonged to a secret society known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as indicated in the Hermetic symbols on the obelisk.



References

- Ã hlÃ©n, Johan. 2021. Pigpen Cipher (decoder, translator, history). *Boxentriq*. Available online: https://www.boxentriq.com/code-breaking/pigpen-cipher (accessed 27 February 2021).
- Brown, Dan. 2010. *The Lost Symbol*. London: Corgie Books
- de Hoyos, Arturo 2014. Masonic ries and systems. In Henrik Bogdan, and Jan A. M. Snoek (eds.), *Handbook of Freemasonry*: 355-377. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Dickie, John. 2020. *The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World*. London: Hodder and Stoughton
- Handwerk, Brian. 2009. â??The Lost Symbolâ?• and the Freemasons: 8 Myths Decoded. *National Geographic*, 15 September. Available online: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pages/article/the-lost-symbol-and-the-freemasons-8-myths-decoded (accessed 28 February 2021).
- Knoop, Douglas, G.P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer. 1975. The Early Masonic Catechism. *QUATUOR CORONATI LODGE*. Available online: https://theeducator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/The-Early-Masonic-Catechisms-by-Harry-Carr.pdf (accessed 21 February 2021).
- Matthews, W.H. 2014. Mazes and Labyrinths: A General Account of their History and Development (1922). *Project Gutenberg EBook*, July. Available online: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46238/46238-h/46238-h.htm (accessed 27 February 2021).
- Rykwert, Joseph. 1984. *The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Vidler, Anthony. 1987. *The Writing of the Walls: Architectural Theory in the Late Enlightenment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press. In particular the chapter â??The architecture of the lodges: Rituals and symbols of Freemasonry,â?• pp.83-102.

Note

- I donâ??t yet see anything in secret society lore that speaks overtly to multitudes, an excess of combinations, other that its nascent presence in the organisation and ordering of elements in the interpretation of Solomonâ??s temple in 1 Kings:6.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cryptography
2. Freemasonry
3. labyrinth

Date Created
March 13, 2021
Author
rcoyne99

default watermark