

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE PINECONE

By Jaime Paul Lamb

Lodge Organist, Ascension Lodge no. 89, F.&A.M.

Phoenix, AZ

The pinecone (*strobilus*, or conifer cone) is the reproductive organ of coniferous plant life. The male cone, which is typically more herbaceous, is sometimes referred to as a pollen cone, or *microstrobilus*; the female cone, which is of the more classically recognizable conical shape with woody scales, is sometimes referred to as an ovulate cone, or *megastrobilus*. Due largely to its shape being similar to that of the human pineal gland [Patton, *Anatomy and Physiology*, 1987] and to its function in botanical reproduction, the pinecone has frequently been utilized as a physical symbol for various entheogenic and eschatological phenomena as well as metaphysical abstractions, throughout civilization's recorded history.

Spanning the globe and over the course of several millennia, the presence of the pinecone may be observed in the theological and mythological systems of many cultures, with conspicuous appearances in Assyro-Babylonian, Egyptian, Aztec and Greco-Roman bas-relief and statuary. One of the more notable and developed examples of pinecone symbolism is to be found in the mythological cycle and subsequent Mystery Cult centered on the Greek god of the grape harvest, Dionysus (or Bacchus), who was frequently depicted carrying the *thyrsus* - a fennel staff or spear, tipped with a pinecone. The *thyrsus*, which is said to denote prosperity, fertility and hedonistic pleasure [Kakridis, *Ελληνική μυθολογία Εκδοτική Αθηνών*, 1987], was also carried by the votaries of Dionysus in their ecstatic religious processions. This staff, an obvious phallic symbol, was often displayed with the *kantharos* (wine cup), a correspondingly yonic symbol, as together they formed a part of the Dionysian *sacra*.

The tragedian, Euripides (480-406 BCE), had written that the *thyrsus* would drip honey [Euripides, *Bacchae*, 405 BCE] which was said to have inspired madness [Ovid, *Amores*, 1st century BCE]. This may be an allusion to the pinecone's entheogenic significance, which is further corroborated by the *thyrsus-narthex* being symbolic of the (potentially psychoactive) herb and mushroom foraging by the female Dionysian devotees, the maenads and bacchantes, which is said to have coincided with their viticultural pursuits [Ruck, *History of Toxicology and Environmental Health*, 2015]. Also supporting the entheogenic interpretation, Rick Strassman (1952-), Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, had recently posited that the pineal gland was the center of N,N-dimethyltryptamine (also known as 'DMT' - a very powerful, endogenously occurring hallucinogen) production in human beings - a hypothesis that has been partially corroborated by the discovery of the molecule in the pineal glands of rodents (*rattus rattus*, *rattus norvegicus*)[Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, 2001].

The pineal gland, also known as the *conarium*, is a melatonin producing gland present in the endocrine systems of nearly all vertebrates and is believed to be instrumental in the regulation of circadian and seasonal cycles. This gland, which is said to resemble a pinecone or pine nut, is located in the epithalamus and is tucked between the two cerebral hemispheres, near the center of the brain. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) famously declared the pineal gland to be the "principle seat of the soul and the place in which all our thoughts are formed" [Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 1649]. Descartes believed that the body and the soul were tethered in the pineal gland (see: *Cartesian Dualism*). In his *Passions*, he referred to the pineal gland as "a certain very small gland situated in the middle of the brain's substance and suspended above the passage through which the spirits in the brain's anterior cavities communicate with those in its posterior cavities." [*ibid.*]

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), 19th century occultist and founder of the Theosophical Society in 1875, is thought to be the first to associate the pineal gland with the Hindu concept of the *ajna chakra*, which is sometimes referred to as the 'third eye' [Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1888], with which it is still popularly identified. Additionally, due to its central location deep within the brain and its mysterious secretory activity, this gland has been seen as holding an exalted status in the esoteric philosophies and metaphysical traditions of many cultures.

Like the disc florets of a sunflower, romanesco broccoli and several other examples found in the organic structures of the vegetable kingdom, the pinecone has been noted to display the Fibonacci sequence in two opposing directions [Knott, *Fibonacci Numbers in Nature*, 1996]; a pattern that may be likened to the two intertwining serpents on the caduceus of Hermes. This is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the yogic concept of the raising of *kundalini* energy - a process which is often pictographically depicted as two serpents (*ida & pingala*) intertwining around a central staff (*sushumna*, the spine) which is typically surmounted by a pinecone representing the third eye, or *ajna chakra*. Interestingly, the *ajna chakra* is said to inhabit the vicinity of the pineal gland.

In order to formulate the significance of this potent symbol vis-à-vis Freemasonry, we must consider the pinecone's popularity as a motif in religious and secular architecture in nearly every culture, on nearly every continent. Thus, if the symbolic interpretation of certain aspects of the operative trade (viz. raising, dressing and setting worked stone in accordance with an architectural design while often taking esoteric notions such as astrological orientation into account) is within the purview of Freemasonry, then we may appreciate the pinecone as a common device in the symbolic vernacular of the craft. It is also Masonically notable that the fraternity of Dionysian Artificers were said to have been a prominent tributary to the medieval craft guilds [Mackey, *The Symbolism of Freemasonry*, 1882]. There is ample reason to suspect that the pinecone's inclusion in the symbolic corpus of Freemasonry may be due to this lineal transmission from the ancient operative craft who were invariably initiates of the Dionysian Mysteries [*ibid.*].

Also significant to our subject, particularly as it pertains to the central allegory in the Third Degree ceremony of Blue Lodge Freemasonry, coniferous trees, such as the Cedar of Lebanon (*cedrus libani*), which were said to have been brought from the ancient Lebanese city of Tyre and used in the construction of King Solomon's Temple, have long been utilized as a symbol of the immortality of the human soul. The association of coniferous trees and their pinecones with immortality is largely due to the perennial nature of these evergreens. In this sense, coniferous trees and their pinecones share some of the same symbolism with that of the acacia tree, which may be either evergreen or deciduous and is a popular Masonic symbol of the immortality of the human soul [*ibid.*].