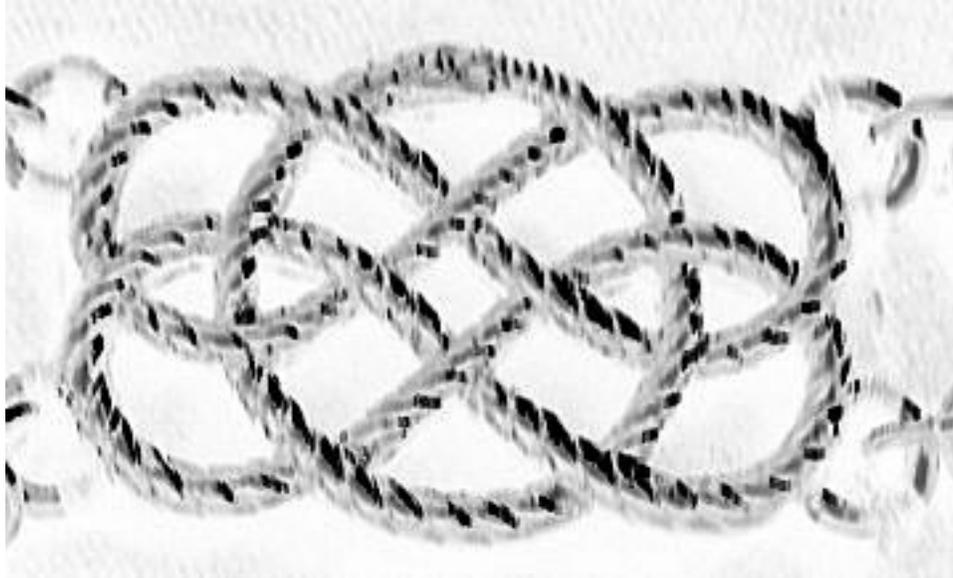


The Ouroboros



To
Nathan Hale Council #78
Allied Masonic Degrees
and
Connecticut College #17
Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis

7 February 2010

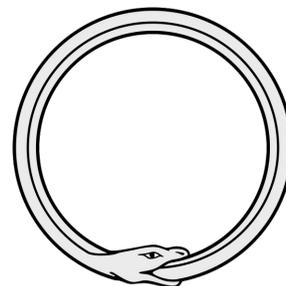
RW Robert J Knowles, IV^o

Introduction

This talk arose from a question put to me by a newly-raised Master Mason last spring. Shortly after being raised, he received an e-mail containing a symbol he did not recognize. Owing to the vague source of the e-mail, he sought advice from the Brother who had been mentoring him. That Brother also did not remember encountering the symbol, and suggested he ask me, as the District Deputy for the new Master Mason's Lodge. After showing the new Brother how the symbol is used in this Jurisdiction, I realized that a written explanation might be useful to have on hand.

Definition of symbol

Here is the Oxford English Dictionary's definition for **oroborou**: “*The symbol, usu. in the form of a circle, of a snake (or dragon) eating its tail.*”¹ It also points out that there are alternative spellings², the most common being “*uroborous*”. The word is Greek, not surprising because of the antiquity of the emblem. Moreover, in Greek, the prefix “*uro-*” alludes to “*tail*”. The symbol can also appear in a double form, either as two serpents in a tail-to-mouth ring or in two tangent circles.



The symbolic allusion involves the ideas of infinity, eternity, and recurrence as in the phrase “*throughout the endless cycles of eternity*” in the Charge for the Super Excellent Master degree³.

Masonic use in Connecticut

The symbol is used sparingly in Masonry, in specialized settings or on seals. In this Jurisdiction it makes one important appearance. Here is an excerpt from the script for the formal (and public) Presentation of a new District Deputy.⁴

*R.W. Sir. Your purple collar is adorned with several insignias of the fraternity consisting of eight rectangles with the letters "G. L." scrolled therein; four with the square and compasses and four with an entwined "cabletow", in the center of which is **the symbol of eternity; the serpent with tail in mouth**. In the center at your back ... will fall the Jeremy Cross five pointed star, surrounded by the symbolic sprig of acacia.*

It is my privilege to place this collar and emblems about your neck. Wear it all times as you travel as our district deputy and dishonor not its privileges nor its responsibilities.

Notice that, although the ritual writers, by describing it as “*the symbol of eternity*”, clearly intended to use the oroborou, they chose not to use the word. The picture on the title page of this work is, in fact, a photograph of one link in the collar of a Connecticut District Deputy.⁵

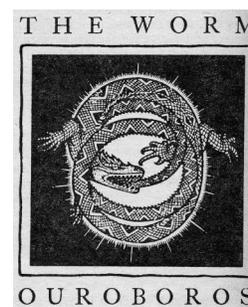
Historical examples

RECENT

The most recent visibility of the Oroboros is likely its use as the logo for a short-lived (1996-1999) television series named Millennium⁶. Created by Chris Carter, of *The X-Files* fame, one of its themes was the recurrence of events from the end of the First Millennium. This is probably how most people would recognize the symbol. However the darkness of the series may have tarnished the historical positive meaning of the symbol.

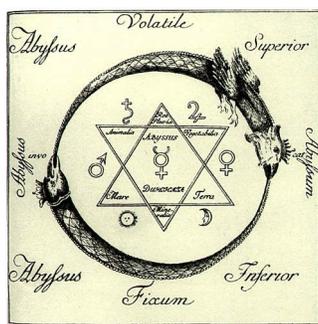


In 1926, E. R. Eddison wrote a fantasy-adventure trilogy. The first book carried the title "*The Worm Ouroboros*"⁷. The trilogy enjoyed a cult resurgence in the mid 1960s though the early 1970s. The themes are difficult to follow, but involve the possibility that the same events recur, possibly taking place on different planes of reality.



The most interesting modern instance of the symbol comes from Organic Chemistry. An often retold story has chemist August Kekulé telling how his dream of a serpent swallowing its tail led him to the idea now known as the Benzene Ring, a principle fundamental to the science of organic chemistry.

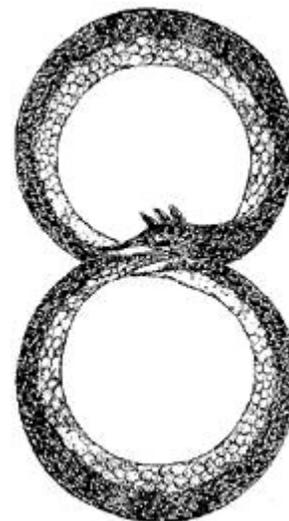
ALCHEMICAL



In today's schools, we are taught that alchemy is essentially a superstition, which Paracelsus, in (1493 - 1541), replaced with the foundations of modern chemistry. This ignores the documented fact the Paracelsus was both a Chemist (in the modern use of the term) and an Alchemist (in the medieval sense). We, as fraters of Connecticut College, know better: that while the transmutation of lead into gold may be a myth, it may also have been a metaphor for the subduing of one's

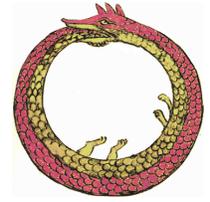
passions. How (and when) these ideas may have flowed between Alchemy and Masonry may be unknowable, but certainly the possibility existed. Observe the appearance, in an Alchemical work, of an Oroboros surrounding an instance of Solomon's Seal⁸.

Next to it is a vertical example⁹ representing the principle "*As Above, so Below*", a maxim also appearing in Masonry



ANCIENT

The earliest recorded use of the oroborous is found in ancient Egypt.¹⁰



Conclusion

It should be clear that this ancient symbol is benign and carries a fundamentally positive meaning, which may, unfortunately, have become weakened by misunderstood common use.

I thank RWB Charles A Buck for providing the one page needed; the Presentation script is not readily available (there are simply not that many copies). Thanks are also due the University of Connecticut Waterbury Campus Libraries and computer resources for making this project easier.

Any opinions expressed are my own and do not represent either the University of Connecticut or the Grand Lodge AF&AM of Connecticut.



- 1 Oxford English Dictionary Online (SECOND EDITION 1989), Copyright © Oxford University Press 2010
Image from <http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouroboros>
 - 2 I am quite aware that my own spelling varies from paragraph to paragraph, usually deliberately.
 - 3 Constituent Officers Manual; Grand Council of R&SM of Connecticut (1992), p9
 - 4 Personal communication, District Deputy Presentation script, Grand Lodge AF&AM CT, page 16 (emphasis added)
 - 5 Or more precisely, the negative of a photograph. The head of the serpent is at top center. It is curious to look at the two so-called cable-tows. Careful observation shows that, without the oroborous, they are NOT entwined. Moreover they cannot be used as cable-tows in any of our degrees and look more like two mathematical infinity symbols! Contemplation of the ramifications is left to the reader.
 - 6 Series logo from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Millennium_logo.jpg
 - 7 Ballantine Books, New York, 1967
 - 8 Medeival woodcut
 - 9 The Oroborous: Engine:that Drives Reality
[<http://web.archive.org/web/20071105185117/www.alchemylab.com/ouroboros.htm>]
 - 10 For example, see Spira Solaris and the Universal Ouroboros, first symbol.
[<http://web.archive.org/web/20080410033859/http://www.spirasolaris.ca/index.html#ARCHYTAS2>]
- Other items:
- Dragon image: Medieval engraving in *De Lapide Philisophico* by Lucas Jennis [<http://wikimedia.org/wiki/Ouroboros>]