

# THE SACRED GEOMETRY OF THE POINT WITHIN A CIRCLE

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## INTRODUCTION

*“A point which in the circle goes, which in the square and three angles stands, gives you the whole science and you cannot go wrong.” – “The Stone Mason’s Speech,” ca. 1500 A.D.*

The first and only *abstract* symbol the Entered Apprentice encounters in his Masonic lectures is a “certain point within a circle.” The stereoptic lecture in the First Degree gives a very brief explanation of the moral significance of this strange symbol, and quickly moves on. Nowhere else in all of Craft Masonry is this symbol encountered or even mentioned.

The symbol consists of a point within a circle (circumpunct), with two parallel lines tangent to the circle (perpendicular to the radius), with a book perched atop the circle. We know that the circumpunct is an ancient symbol of the sun and a religious symbol for the old sun god worship of western and southern Asia. However, like most other ancient symbols adopted for use in Freemasonry, this one has evolved to have several other meanings. For a number of reasons which follow, I believe this is the single most important symbol in all of Craft Masonry. From this symbol, all other geometric figures can be constructed in more ways than one; from it, also in more ways than one, the Entered Apprentice begins his Masonic journey.

Much has been written in the past two centuries about this symbol. Dr. Tom Driber offered a very enlightening essay entitled “Why the Holy Saints John?” published in *Traveling East, Selected Essays from the Tennessee Lodge of Research 1985-2005*. Albert Pike devoted an entire book to it. My contribution here will attempt to add to theirs, my hope being that the *importance* of this symbol will come forth and be more widely known and understood.



## THE CIRCUMPUNCT

The circumpunct is, of course, a geometric construction and a literal translation of geometry is *earth-measure*, which today we call *surveying*. During my 30-plus years as a surveyor and mapmaker and throughout the ages in those professions, we practitioners have noted the symbol © being drawn on maps and plats to represent a boundary point, or a *point of beginning*. Its Operative meaning, “Point of Beginning,” may have a source in one or more of the many mystic meanings attached to the symbol. The circle itself is a symbol of boundary (as implied in Masonic ritual), enclosure, completion, and of returning cycles.

In ancient religions, the symbol was used to represent the Sun, the point representing the Earth and the circle the ecliptic. The Sun itself, in turn, was a representation of God. Even the Holy Bible, in numerous places, uses the Sun as an illustration of the unfathomable awesomeness of God. (Numb. 24:17; Psalm 19; 84:11; Mal. 4:2; Matt. 2:2; 17:2; Judges 5:20; Job 25:5; 38:7; Dan 12:3;

Jude 13; Rev. 1:16; 10:1, etc.) This was logical; because people could see and feel the Sun and knew that it was necessary to life itself, it was the most perfect representation of the glory and power of God. In all those old religions, however, almost without exception, over time the object of worship shifted from the Deity to the Sun itself. (Brown, p. 48)

In ancient Indian spiritualism, the symbol represented the reproductive aspects of the humanity, with the point representing the phallus and the circle the womb. To the Pythagoreans, it was the “Monad” and represented God, whose “center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.” (Voltaire, p. 116). For the Kabbalist, a circumpunct is the beginning and the end, a Supernal Zero Point or the First Manifestation, and as such is viewed as an egg at the instant of fertilization, representing the primordial point from which all creation springs. The circle is called *Ayin*, which means “No-thing” and represents Absolute Nothingness, while the point, *En sof*, means the “Endless” and represents Absolute All. Tradition states that “God willed to see God and so God’s will, symbolized by light, shone everywhere and nowhere.” The Point in this context is known as *En Sof Aur*, the Endless Light of Will, and represents the instant when light first penetrated the Absolute Nothingness. (Halevi, pp. 7-8) (Scholem, pp. 102-103)

Another Kabbalistic view (which rings of an Operative origin) is that the single point is called the *omphalos* in Sacred Architecture, representing the sharp point of a plumb bob, which marks the vector connecting the zenith to the center of the earth.

Early esoteric Christianity viewed the symbol as a Point within a *Sphere*, the circle representing the outer limits of the sphere. The Point was the First Person in the Trinity, the area within the circle represented the vast sphere of the field of His work, limited only by His Will and His Power, represented by the Circle. (Besant, p. 94)

One interesting concept that this construct symbolizes is described in the Vedic *Upanishads*. Again, it has a connotation of duality and quite possibly contains a very profound truth. The point, *Bindu*, represents the infinitesimally small point into which the sphere of the universe, *Satkona* (represented by the circle) collapses into itself in the “Great Dissolution” (Woodruff, pp. 34-35). This echoes the Kabbalistic view of the “beginning and end,” and again very profoundly illustrates the duality of “As above, so below” and “As within, so without.” *Could this be extrapolated to “As the beginning, so the ending”?*

## HOW MANY ALLEGORIES?

Pike viewed the point as the Creative Energy of the Deity and the circle as “immensity.” To him it was also a symbol of duality with the fixed limb of the compass remaining ever stationary on the point, while the other revolves around it, describing the circle.

Mackey explained it as a relic of phallic worship that originally represented the hermaphroditic nature of the Supreme Deity, but in Masonry symbolically represented the Master and Wardens of a lodge. According to Mackey, the Master and Wardens are symbols of the sun and the lodge is a symbol of the universe. Thus, in the ritual, the Master is said to rule the lodge as the sun rules the day. The two parallel lines he explains as the greatest northern and southern declination of the sun, which the sun reaches on the solstices, which are near the dates on which the Church set the Feasts of the Saints John. (*Symbolism of Freemasonry*, pp. 111-116) More on this below. . . .

Dr. Oliver believed the parallel lines represented the upright members of Jacobs Ladder, which he further allegorized as a symbol of the duality of Christ: one pillar represented his divine, eternal nature, the other his earthly and temporal nature. He viewed the point within a circle as “the most perfect figure possible” and acknowledges that all other perfect figures emanated from this one.

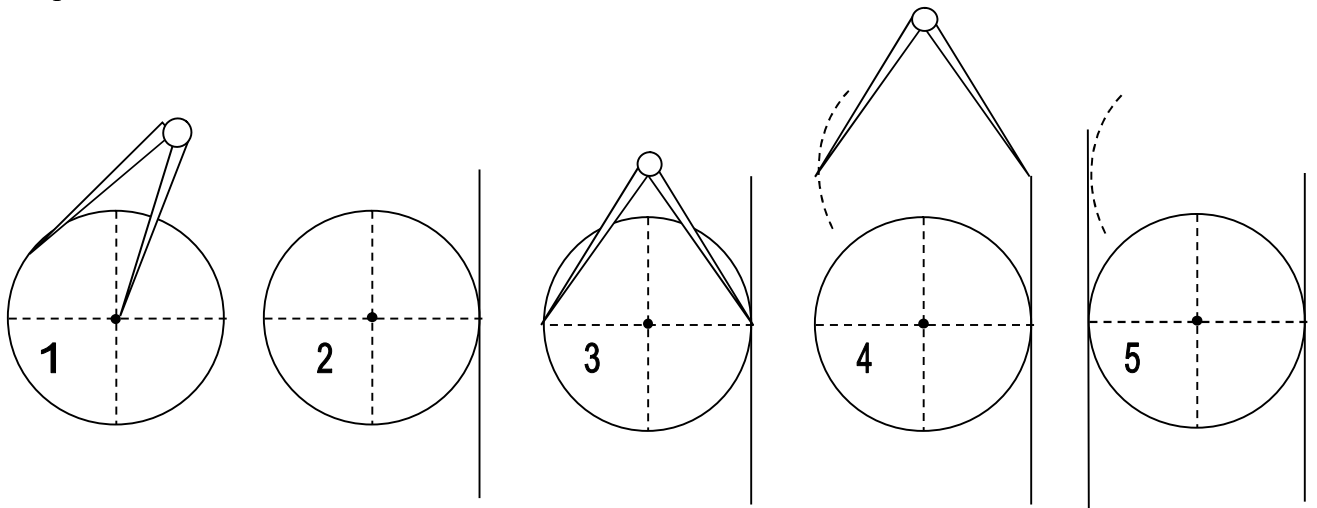
(Oliver, p. 133) To Duncan, the Point within a Circle was the symbol of an Entered Apprentice Mason.

With Mackey's explanation, Charles T. McClenachen suggests the symbol refers to the circumambulation of Masonic candidates around the altar, and that the two lines represent the parallel lines in which the brethren stand or sit on either side of the altar. (*Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*) This is an interesting and probably the most correct blend of several of the allegories here presented. The Masonic lodge is an astronomic map, tracing the path of the Sun from rising in the East through the meridian in the South to setting in the West. And even though we cannot see it, the Sun travels in darkness through the North from West to East (from our perspective on the opposite side of the Earth) to complete the circle.

Modern Masonic ritual describes the point within the symbol as an individual brother, and the circle as the boundary line of his duties to God and man, beyond which he should never let his passions betray him. In other words, it is a symbol of *controlling personal conduct*. The two parallel lines are said to represent St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, with no explanation offered. Similarly, there is no explanation given for the book of Holy Scriptures. The only mention of it is, ". . . we necessarily touch upon these two lines as well as the Holy Scriptures . . ." (*Tennessee Craftsman*, p. 30)

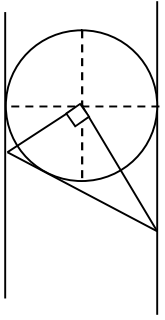
## SACRED GEOMETRY

Let us first look at how the symbol is constructed. In geometry, all figures are constructed from one or more of three basic elements: a point, a line (which connects two or more points) and a plane (which is composed of any number of points and/or lines). All of these are drawn using only the compasses and a straightedge. A circle is unique among all the geometric plane figures in that it is constructed of a single line from a single point. A fundamental truth about the circle is that the distance from the center to any point along the circumference is equal to that from the center to any other point on the circumference.



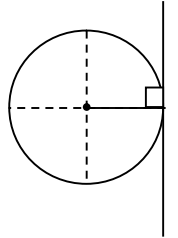
The point within a circle is constructed using only the compasses (1). The parallel perpendicular tangent lines are constructed with the straightedge and the compasses in this manner: one line is drawn tangent to the circle, the ends extending beyond the limits of the circle (2); using the compasses set to the diameter of the circle (3) and placed anywhere along the line, an arc is struck on the other side of the circle from the line (4); finally, using the straightedge, a line is then drawn

tangent to the circle and tangent to the struck arc (5).

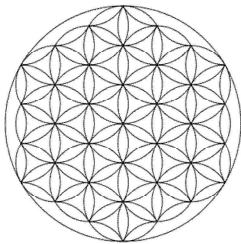


When *any random* line connecting the two parallel lines is drawn tangent to the circle, lines connecting the ends of that line to the center of the circle form a right angle at the center of the circle.

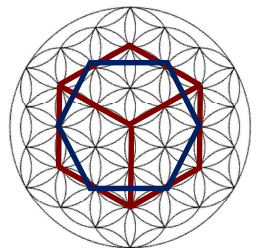
Another method of constructing a square using this construction as a foundation invokes a Euclidian Proposition: “*At every point on a circle, the tangent is perpendicular to the radius and to the diameter.*” (Euclid, *Elements III.XVI*)



The “Secret of the Square” was a closely guarded secret and was another of primary methods of *proving a square* in the days of Operative Masonry. Thales’ Theorem, “*An angle inscribed in a semicircle is a right angle*” was proven by Euclid (*Elements, III.XXXI*). But since Euclid’s proof relied upon a simple radius connecting the center of the circle to the circumferential vertex of the angle, it is doubtful that it has any relation to the Masonic symbol of the Point Within a Circle.



Using only the compasses, it is possible to use the Point within a Circle (minus the parallels) to construct the figure known to ancient cultures in all corners of the world as the “Flower of Life.” By connecting the points of intersection of the circles, every regular geometric figure can be developed from this construction, such, as in this case, a hexagon and a cube.



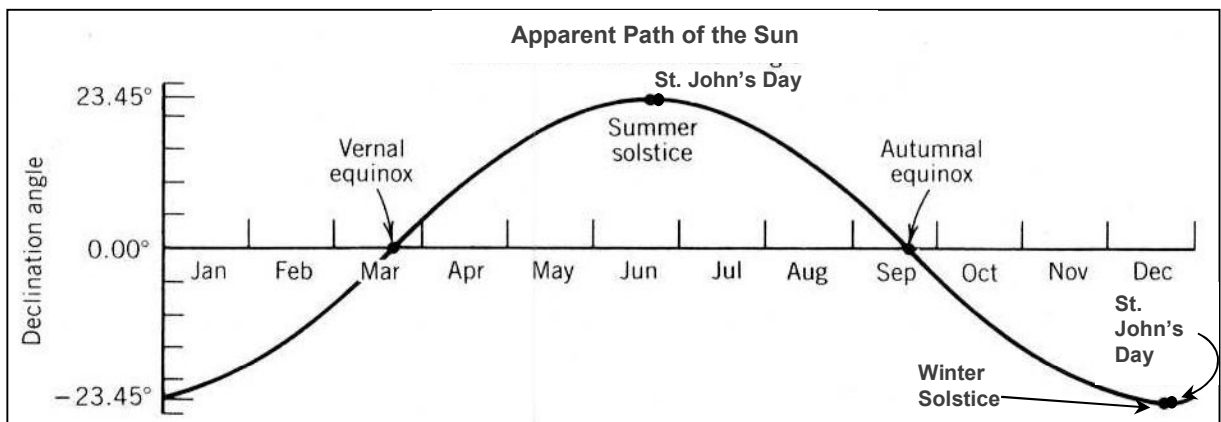
## THE PILLARS – THE SAINTS JOHN

The very first thing the new Entered Apprentice learns in the esoteric work deals with the Lodge of the Holy Saints John at Jerusalem. In the ritual, we are told that the two perpendicular parallels in the point-within-a-circle symbol represent the Saints John but is there perhaps another, more profound connection with this first abstract symbol the new initiate encounters and the first thing he memorizes? In the days of Operative Masonry, the different crafts and guilds had their patron saints, whose feast days they celebrated. The patron saints of masonry were St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. Scottish Masonic lodges were called “Saint Johns” lodges well into the Speculative period of masonry. Incidentally, it was the Saints John who were at Jerusalem, not the lodge . . . but more on Jerusalem later.

In the Second Degree, we are admonished to study astronomy, the importance of which, Masonically, eclipses even that of geometry. But what has that to do with our discussion?

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, the Romans, in an effort to save the crumbling empire, saw Christianity as a potentially unifying force. Under the Emperor Constantine’s influence, Roman church leaders codified church doctrine, established the canon of sacred law and created a religion from what up until that time had been merely a way of life. It superimposed Christianity over and smothered out the old pantheistic religions of Rome. Constantine’s mother Helena even made a two-year journey to the Holy Land to identify and make shrines of the places Jesus had supposedly visited. In just a few short years, the Romans created a universal (and ultimately, compulsory) State religion, replete with all the trappings. It had familiar elements of all the old religions, so it was an easy pill for the populace to swallow. The Romans also created feast days for saints that coincided with the high holy days of the old religions. The Feast of Ishtar became Easter. In a double-whammy, Mithra’s birthday became Christmas, smothering out that last vestige of Mithraism, together with the pagan Feast of Saturnalia, which was also around that time. The feast day for Saint John the Baptist was set near the summer solstice and that for Saint John the Evangelist, near the winter solstice, supplanting the old sun-worship celebrations that had always taken place at those times of year.

During the course of the year, the apparent path of the sun traces a sine wave, never going north of the Tropic of Cancer, which it approaches the closest at the summer solstice—near St. John the Baptist’s Day, nor south of the Tropic of Capricorn, which it approaches closest on the winter solstice—near St. John the Evangelist’s Day. (Mackey, Ch. 15) The Tropics are parallels of latitude running East and West on modern maps, yet the perpendiculars in the Masonic symbol seem to be oriented to the North and South. Or are they?



## THE POINT WITHIN THE CIRCLE—BACK TO JERUSALEM

A common modern myth is that during medieval times the world was thought to be flat. The reality is that at least from the time of Ptolemy, the earth was known to be round. Maps from about 200 A.D. on reflect this. Around 630 A.D., Isidore of Seville wrote,

*“The globe (orbis) derives its name from the roundness of the circle, because it resembles a wheel. . . . Indeed, the Ocean that flows around it on all sides encompasses its furthest reaches in a circle. It is divided into three parts, one of which is called Asia, the second Europe, the third Africa.”*(Barney, 2006).

Jerusalem was believed to be the center of the world (*“This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries about her.”* –Ezekiel 5:5) and most maps of the known world were drawn circular with Jerusalem at the center—a Point Within a Circle. (See attached maps below.) Distances depicted on maps, *iteneria*, which were measured in days, began at Jerusalem—a Point of Beginning—much in the same way that ancient Romans began all distances from Rome. (Glick et al., p. 117) Interestingly enough, maps of the time were very often drawn with East at the topmost part of the map and usually depicted the Garden of Eden at the top center. Maps did not change from this basic form until around 1450, when the discoveries of Marco Polo forced the move of the center from Jerusalem and the increasing use of the north-pointing compass rotated maps 90° to the right. (Della Dora, 2010) . . . which brings us to . . .

### THE BOOK

The Book atop the circle seems to be a relatively new addition to the symbol with no explanation for its presence offered in Masonic Ritual other than saying it represents the Holy Scriptures, and that being at the edge of the circle, the bounds of our passions must necessarily touch upon it. Yet, why is the book located at the top? Why not inside the circle? The evidence we have examined so far is instructive.

1. The circumpunct is a very ancient symbol of the sun.
2. A book is a universal symbol of Knowledge.
3. The path of the sun does not go north of the point it reaches near Saint John the Baptist’s Day, nor further south than the point it reaches near Saint John the Evangelist’s Day.
4. There is a reference to Jerusalem, which was typically depicted as the center point of medieval maps of the world, which were usually circular.
5. The circumpunct is also a very old Operative symbol of a Point of Beginning.



6. In the Middle Ages, distances on maps were measured from Jerusalem, a Point of Beginning.
7. In the old sun-worship, the symbol also represents the Deity—the point of origin of all things.
8. The symbol, though not named, is echoed in the answer to the very first question of the catechetical lecture of the First Degree.
9. The Point Within a Circle is the Point of Beginning in an Entered Apprentice's study of the symbols of Masonry.
10. Most maps of the Middle Ages were oriented with East at the top.
11. In Masonry, the East is the place of Light, or Knowledge.

### **RETURN TO THE EAST**

Using the stated symbolism (that of an individual brother) grafted onto the traditional symbolism (sun worship), we find that the path to enlightenment is toward the East. Since the sun follows a cyclical apparent path through the sky in the form of a sine wave, and as the sun returns to the East every morning to enlighten the day, so does the brother follow a path to truth and enlightenment that is neither straight nor linear, compelling him to return repeatedly to the East for further instruction and enlightenment.

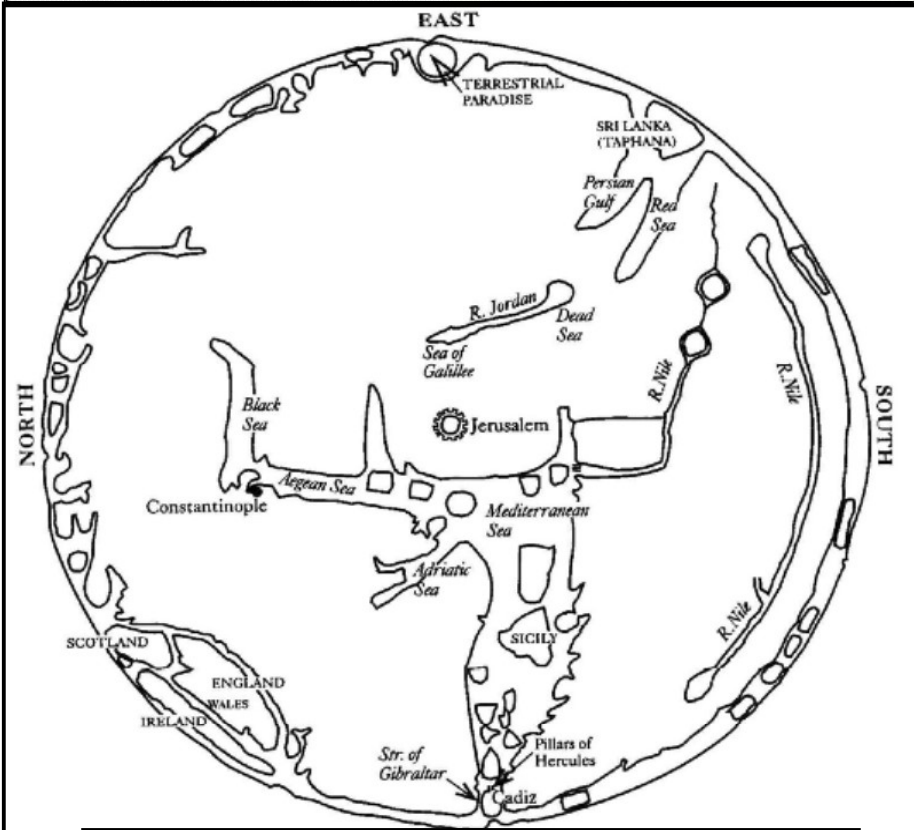
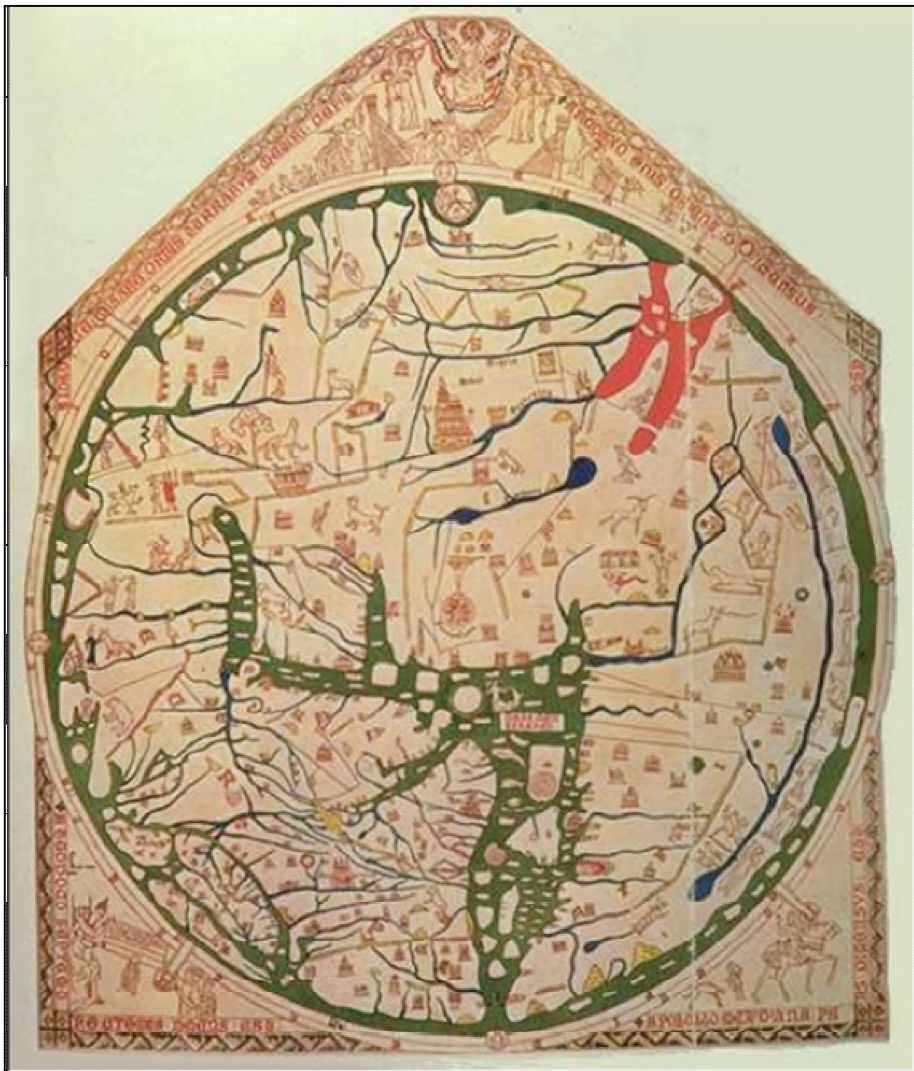
However, when undertaking a study of any Masonic symbol, the student must keep Pike's words in mind: "*Masonry . . . conceals its secrets from all except the Adepts and Sages, or the Elect, and uses false explanations and misinterpretations of its symbols to mislead those who deserve only to be misled; to conceal the Truth, which it calls Light, from them, and to draw them away from it.*" (Pike, p. 89-90) "*Each symbol is an enigma to be solved and not a lesson to be read.*"







Map of the World by Vesconte, printed in 1611



Hereford Mappa Mundi, ca. 1300



Psalter Map, ca. 1265, British Library



*Erbstorf Map, ca. 1235*

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