

Graphic Symbols in Magical Tradition

What often draws newcomers to magic are the outward symbols, usually in the form of apparently weird graphic figures which are not understood but create an awesome attitude in the outsider and somehow magnetize him. Unfortunately, these figures /at least most of them/ are usually left as they are and sometimes even advanced students of magic have little or no idea on how to approach them. It is also a pity that so few modern occult artists try to create artistic designs of this kind following the genius of A.O. Spare.

The figures used in traditional magic fall into three more or less clearly cut groups, while the subgroups within these are not so easily definable as far as the graphic patterns on them are concerned /they differ rather in application than in design/. These divisions are as follows:

I. "Designators", which include:

1. Sigils or signs representing single objects, actions or concepts, similar in use to the symbols of modern science /chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, etc./. They are simply substitutes for a word or sentence for the sake of abbreviation or secrecy. It must be noted that this is the meaning of the word sigil as used by Fred Gettings in his dictionary and not as used by A.O. Spare.
2. Magical alphabets using different signs for the letters of either Hebrew or Latin alphabets. The aim of their use is either secrecy or the magical connection of some of these scripts with a certain order of higher entities /angels, archangels, etc./, who respond to inscriptions in such signs better than to those in ordinary letters.

II. "Controls" or the signs giving control over magical forces /spirits, demons, etc./:

1. Characters which are usually strings of signs inscribed or engraved on magical weapons and other instruments. They are visible signs of their consecration and, together with names of power, change them from ordinary objects into magical ones. The term character is also sometimes used to denote what I call signature /see below/.
2. Signatures in the most orthodox tradition are actual signatures of spirits, demons, etc. made by them in the magician's Book of Spirits after they had been evoked to visible appearance. However, it is generally accepted that if they are copied by other persons they possess the same power to control the spirit

in question, and that is how signatures found their way to grimoires.

3. Seals are also signs of spirits and demons but in a more symbolic sense: they are something like their coats-of-arms. Sometimes /in fact quite often/ grimoires refer to seals as pantacles /see below/.

III. "Tools" or more complicated designs /all of the above are rather simple/ used in operations of magic. They are usually composed of several of the above plus other elements.

1. Pantacles defined by Crowley as "a Minutum Mundum /.../, a map of all that exists, arranged in the Order of Nature", which means, in other words, that pantacles are mandala-like designs. They represent the Universe in its different aspects necessary for different magical operations.
2. Lamens again in Crowley's definition "a sort of Coat of Arms. It expresses the character and powers of the wearer". So lamens should reflect the magician's aims, needs, attitudes, etc.
3. Talismans are the active tools. Crowley says that a talisman is "a storehouse of some particular kind of energy, the kind that is needed to accomplish the task for which you have constructed it".
4. Amulets which are the opposite of talismans. They are sort of screens protecting the magician against a particular kind of energy.

The above classification is, of course, not the only one possible. The criterion I used is that of practical application. The first and the second groups are comparatively closed and not intended for creative expansion. Those signs are passed down to us by tradition and we accept them as a part of it /you cannot just invent new symbols of the planets or signs of the Zodiac/. The third group, however, is open for the magician's own creativity. Actually, a magical operation in which the magician uses invocations/evocations written by himself and pantacles, talismans, etc. of his own design, works better because they reflect his psychic and mental reality.

Graphic elements of pantacles, talismans, lamens and amulets vary considerably. Most of them are inscribed within a circle, often surrounded by a ring containing inscriptions. The figures themselves are usually composed of several elements which can be roughly classified as follows:

1. Regular geometric pattern such as a pentagram, hexagram, heptagram, and other "stars"; also triangle, square, pentagon, hexagon, heptagon /John Dee's Sigillum Dei Aemeth/, circle,

- crescent, etc. All kinds of crosses also figure prominently, especially in the mandala-like designs which contain a fourfold division with a clearly marked center by definition.
2. Irregular geometric pattern of any imaginable shape and degree of complexity. The simplest one is arrived at by placing a sigil, a seal, or a signature in a circle. However, the most effective and artistically appealing designs are composed of several such elements joined together in a skillful way. Quite often the ends of lines are surmounted by small thick crosses or circles.
 3. Picture of a human figure or its part /the head, the hand, etc./, an animal, sometimes a flower or an inanimate object.
 4. Letters of a magical or ordinary alphabet, arranged in various ways /e.g. around the inside of the outer circle and joined by the lines going through the center of the circle/. A special but frequent case of using letters is a magic square with either letters or corresponding numbers. Another special case is the way in which A.O. Spare arranged letters in order to generate what he called "sigils".
 5. Inscriptions both inside the circle and in the outer ring. These are often quotations from Psalms or other scriptural texts, in Latin or Hebrew, but may also be expressions of the magician's desires and aspirations or names of power for additional force and/or protection against unexpected results.

Many "rational" theories may be presented in order to justify the traditional beliefs about magical figures. For example, some radiesthetists state that there exists what they call "shape radiation" and that every shape /both two- and three-dimensional/ exerts an influence on persons who are in close and long lasting contact with them. This theory may find some justification in Buckminster Fuller's system of "synergetics" which explains the Universe in terms of geometry. However, this and other theories of similar kind have one thing in common: they try to apply scientific terms and concepts to the field of magic, with which they have nothing to do. The result is that their proponents are justly described as "pseudo-scientists".

Although I believe that the only kind of theory which can be applied to explain the working of magic is a magical theory, I am also of the opinion that the problem of magical figures can be approached from the artistic standpoint, i.e. from the opposite of the scientific view. Actually a good talisman or pantacle has much in common with a good work of art and may be judged by the same criteria: any work of art in order to be good must convey some meaning /though not necessarily a meaning that can be verbalized/ and must be esthetically appealing.

I want to argue that a magical figure in order to be effective must also fulfill these two requirements. It is not enough that the magical symbols used for the construction of, say, a talisman are meaningful to the magician and carefully chosen for the specific operation; I think it is equally /or even more/ important that the final figure stirs something inside you and makes you say: "Oh, it's quite nice" or "It's really beautiful", or even "It's so weird". You may just compare any "sigil" of A.O. Spare with any of the numerous figures given by Franz Bardon at the end of his book on evocation, or some pantacles etc. from the best Medieval and Renaissance grimoires with most of those given in second-rate 18th century magical handbooks. The difference is obvious even if you do not care to investigate the meaning of the symbols used.

If, therefore, you want your magic to bring about the results you desire, be sure the designs you are using are good graphic art and really appeal to you not only as intellectual constructs /we are not working with mathematics !/. It is not enough, of course, as the invocation/evocation has to be good poetry, the setting of the temple has to be good architecture, etc., etc., but it will certainly help a great deal.

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