

THE BLACK & THE WHITE

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The Masonic symbol of the 'mosaic pavement' (tessellated pavement) is among those that are often insufficiently understood or poorly interpreted. This pavement is formed of small alternating black and white squares, arranged in exactly the same way as the squares of a chess or checker board. And let us immediately that the symbolism is obviously the same in both cases, for as we have said on various occasions, games were originally something quite different from the mere profane amusements which they have become today; and chess, moreover, is certainly one of those games in which traces of the original 'sacred' character have remained most apparent in spite of this degeneration.

In the most immediate sense, the juxtaposition of white and black naturally represents light and darkness, day and night, and consequently all pairs of opposites or of complementarities (it is hardly necessary to recall that what is opposition at a certain level becomes complementary at another, so that the same symbolism is equally applicable to both); we therefore have here, in this respect, an exact equivalent of the Far-Eastern symbol of the *yin-yang*¹. It can even be noted that the interpenetration and inseparability of the two aspects *yin* and *yang*, in this last instance represented by the fact that the two halves of the figure are bounded by a sinuous line, are also represented here by the intermingling of the two kinds of squares, whereas another arrangement, as for example alternately white and black rectilinear bounds, would not bring out the same idea as clearly, and even might rather convey the idea of a pure and simple juxtaposition.²

It would be useless to repeat here all that we have already said elsewhere concerning the *yin-yang*; we will simply recall, in particular, that we should not see in this symbolism (any more than in the recognition of the cosmic dualities of which it is the expression) the affirmation of any 'dualism', for if these dualities really do exist in their own order, their terms are nonetheless derived from the unity of a single principle (the *Tai-chi* of the Far-Eastern tradition). This is indeed one of the most important points, for it is this above all that gives rise to false interpretations. Some have believed that they could speak of 'dualism' in connection with the *yin-yang*, probably through misunderstanding but sometimes also perhaps with more or less dubious intentions; in any case, as far as the 'mosaic pavement' is concerned, such an interpretation is most often the work of the adversaries of Masonry, who like to make it the basis of an accusation of 'Manicheism'.³ It is assuredly quite possible that some 'dualists' themselves may have diverted this symbolism from its true meaning in order to interpret it in conformity with their own doctrines, just as for the same reason they have been able to alter symbols expressing a unity and an immutability inconceivable to them; but these are in any case no more than heterodox deviations that in no way affect the symbolism in itself, and from the properly initiatic point of view deviations of this kind are not worth considering.⁴

Now, besides the meaning we have spoken of so far, there is another of a more profound order resulting directly from the double meaning of the colour black, which we have explained on other occasions; we were just now considering only its lower and cosmological meaning. We find a particularly clear example of this in the Hindu tradition, where the one being initiated must be seated on a hide of black and white hair, symbolizing the unmanifested and the manifested respectively.⁵ The fact that here it is a case of an essentially initiatic rite sufficiently justifies the comparison with the example of the 'mosaic pavement' and the express attribution of the same meaning to the latter, even if in the present state of things this meaning has been completely forgotten. Thus, we have a symbolism equivalent

to that of *Arjuna*, the 'white' and of *Krishna*, the 'black', who, in the being itself, are the mortal and the immortal, the 'me' and the 'Self';⁶ and since these are also the 'two birds inseparably united' of the *Upanishads*, this evokes still another symbol, that of the two-headed white and black eagle that figures in certain high Masonic grades, a further example, after so many others, showing once again that symbolic language has a truly universal character.

¹ See *The Great Triad*, chap. 4. – We had occasion to read an article whose author related the white part to *yin* and the black part to *yang*, whereas the contrary is true, and he claimed to base this erroneous opinion on 'radiesthetic' experiments. What conclusion is to be drawn from this, if not that the result so obtained is quite simply due to the influence of the experimenter's preconceived ideas?

² This last arrangement has nevertheless also been used in certain cases; we know that it was found notably in the *Beaucéant* of the Templars (one of their standard, on which was depicted a black horse with white feet) where the meaning is again the same.

³ According to what we have just said, such people, were they logical, should scrupulously refrain from playing chess as not to risk falling under the accusation themselves. Should not this simple observation suffice to point up the inanity of their argument?

⁴ In this connection, we will also recall what we have said elsewhere on the question of the 'reversal of symbols', and more especially the remark we then made on the truly diabolic character of attributing to orthodox symbolism, and particularly to the symbolism of initiatic organizations, interpretations in reverse, such reversals being in reality the work of the counter-initiation. (*The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, chap. 30).

⁵ *Satapatha Brāhmana* III.2.1.5-7 – On another level, these two colours also represent heaven and earth, but attention must be paid to the fact that by reason of their correspondence with the unmanifested and the manifested, it is then black that is linked to heaven and white to earth, so that the relations existing in the case of *yin-yang* are inverted; moreover, this is only an application of the inverse sense of analogy. The initiate must touch the junction of the black and white hairs, thus uniting the complementary principles from which he is to be born as 'Son of Heaven and of Earth'. (cf. *The Great Triad*, chap.9)

⁶ This is also the symbolism of the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux; the relation of these with the two hemispheres or the two halves of the 'World Egg' brings us back moreover to the consideration of heaven and earth, which we indicated in the previous note (cf. *The Great Triad*, chap. 5).