

## **Neo-Platonism & The Royal Arch Triple Tau**

By

W. Kirk MacNulty, PM

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## Introduction

I should like to thank your Worshipful Master, W. Brother Walk, for being so kind to ask me to visit your Lodge and to speak to you today and W. Brother Schroeder for putting him up to it.

I received the Craft Degrees in 1961, and from very early on I have been interested in Masonic research. The primary concern of my research has been, "What does it really mean"?; that is to say, what is the ritual really telling me? That has lead to the question, "What did the Craft symbolism mean to the people who put it together?" That is not always an easy question, be-cause the origin of our rituals and symbolic structure is by no means well defined. It has, how-ever, lead to a lot reading in the field of philosophy and history. Based on this study I've come to the conclusion that the symbolic structure of Freemasonry is a representation of the philosophy which was at the core of the Renaissance. The good news is that I'm not going to lay all that on you this morning. Instead, I'm going to set out one example of how - to me, at least - some pretty sophisticated philosophical ideas are encoded into Masonic symbolism. In order to do that, I'm going to use an example from the English Royal Arch. There are a couple of reasons for doing this: (1) Most of the symbols don't appear in the American Royal Arch, so we won't have preconceived ideas about their meaning, and we won't be "giving anything away" to those of you are not yet in the Chapter. (2) The portions of the English workings to which we shall refer are published in plain text, so there will no question of compromising "secrets".

I would like to introduce the subject of today's talk by asking a question:

What limitations do any of you feel we can place on God?<sup>1</sup>

I am by no means the first person to ask that question. One of the earlier persons was a Greek philosopher named Plotinus who asked it in the 3d

century. He was not, I think, intending to be disrespectful to the Deity; he was simply commenting on what he perceived to be a real difficulty in the Old Testament. That difficulty is this: Assume that God creates the Universe. Then we have God, the Creator, and the Universe, Its<sup>2</sup> creation; and these are two separate things. Certainly, the Old Testament speaks of them as if they are. But if God and Its creation are separate, there is a place (creation) where God is not; and that means that God is limited. This may not seem a big thing today, but it is the sort of problem with which intelligent Greeks typically concerned themselves in the Classical World.<sup>3</sup> For Plotinus, the idea of a limited God was unthinkable. He set out an alternative to Creation; he suggested that there was a God, all right; but God did not "exist" in the sense that we understand the term. Plotinus suggested that by his very nature, God, who is "beyond existence", burst into existence *as* the Universe. This idea was called emanation (in contrast to creation) and the philosophy which grew up around it was called neo-Platonism.

Plotinus was a Pagan (a follower of the Classical Greek religion), but his ideas stuck a chord with some very influential Christians of the time. St. Augustine, for example, recognized that some neo-Platonic ideas echoed the teachings of Jesus;<sup>4</sup> and through his work, a good deal of neo-Platonic thought was incorporated into early Christian Doctrine. In 11th century Spain, a Kabbalist named Solomon ibn Gabirol wrote a book in Hebrew called *Mekor Hayyim* (means The Source of Life) which is a neo-Platonic Commentary on Genesis. Gabirol modifies Plotinus' original idea. He still envisions a God which is "beyond existence", but in this version God *wills* *Itself* *into* *existence* *as* the Universe. In this way Gabirol remains true to the fundamental Hebrew doctrine that the Universe exists as a result of an act of Divine Will. *Mekor Hayyim* was translated into Latin as *Fons Vitae*; and the Christian theologians of the time, taking the book for a Christian document, adopted many of its neo-Platonic ideas and incorporated them into their own

work.<sup>5</sup> In this way, neo-Platonism found its way into Christian Theology and into Europe where it was to become the intellectual core of the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

the top). Second, there is the World of Spirit, which is the World of Creation described in Genesis, Chap.1. Third, there is the World of the Soul (or Psychological World) which is the World of

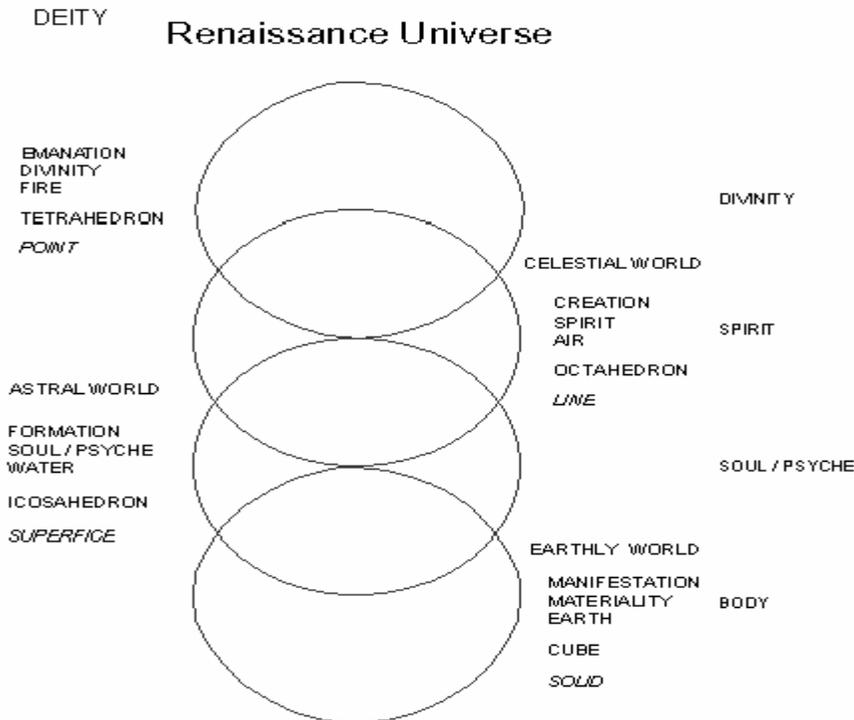


Figure 1

This is a picture of a "neo-Platonic" universe as it was understood during the Renaissance. It is "out of date" in the sense that in those days it was thought that the Earth was the center of the Universe and that Divinity was "up there beyond the stars". The Celestial World (fixed stars) was the residence of arch-angles, the Astral World was the residence of angles, and the physical world is where we live. It may very well be that folk in those days did not think of stars and planets as physical objects, but rather as arch-angelic and angelic beings. The whole notion of astrology was that the planets were the "agencies" through which the Divine will was projected down to earth. Divinity is slightly different from Deity; it is the image of the Deity which *exists* after the Deity has willed Itself into existence.

Although we know today that the notion of the geocentric universe is incorrect, the rest of the diagram is still an accurate representation of the metaphysics upon which all of the world's religions, particularly the Western religions, are based. The four circles represent the four levels which are traditional in Western religious thought: First, there is Divinity (at

Formation described in Genesis, Chap. 2. Fourth, there is the Physical World at the bottom; this is the World which Adam entered when he was expelled from Eden.<sup>7</sup> The Greeks associated these four worlds with the Four Elements, Fire with Divinity; Air with Spirit; Water with Soul; and Earth with Physicality.

This evening, I am going to try to demonstrate that this basic idea of neo-Platonism is embedded in Masonic symbolism.

This diagram may not look familiar or "Masonic", but notice that for each World one of the descriptive worlds is in italics: Point, Line, Superfice, and Solid. You will remember that "regular progression of science"<sup>8</sup> from the definition of Geometry in the Lecture of the Second Degree. Now, I did not invent this association between the "four worlds" and those geometric figures. That association was made by Proclus, the last of the Classical Greek neo-Platonists, in the 5th century when he used the geometric progression to illustrate the neo-Platonic idea of emanation.<sup>9</sup>

## NEO-PLATONIC PROGRESSION (after Proclus)

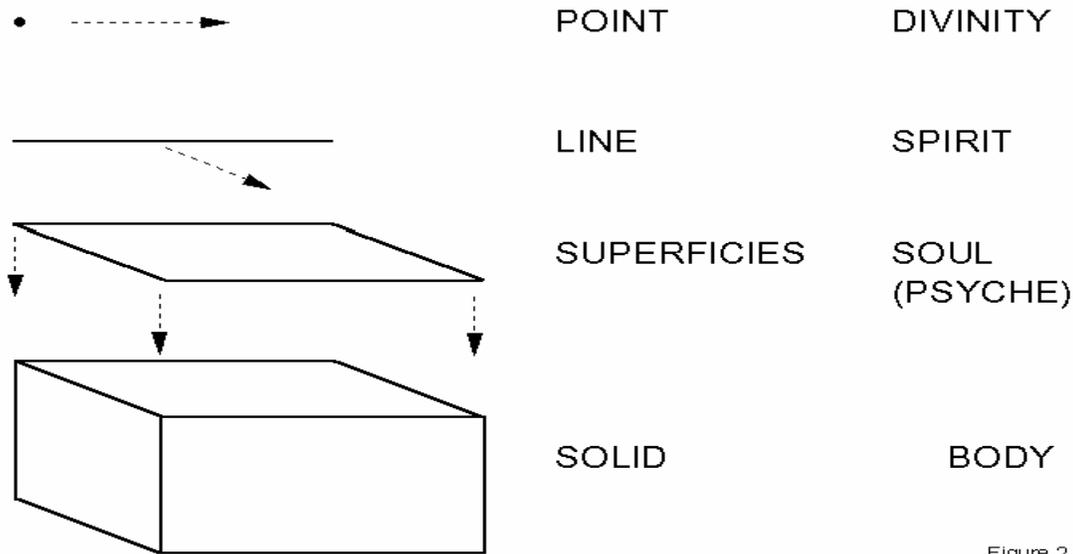


Figure 2

The process starts with a Point (which, unlike the point in the picture) has position only - no dimensions - and which represents Divinity. The Point moves and it generates a Line which represents the Spirit. Notice that there is no new *material* here; only the material of the Point. The material of the Point (Divinity) is fabric of the Line (Spirit). Now, if the Line moves (in a direction not parallel to itself) it generates the Superfice which represents the Psyche. Again, the material of the Point (Divinity) is all that is present, and that material (Divinity) is the fabric of the Superfice (Psyche). Lastly, if the Superfice moves (in a similar way) it generates the Solid (Physical World / Body); and once again, there is no new material. The material of the Point is the fabric of the Solid. This "regular progression of science" was Proclus' device to illustrate, by analogy, the process of the Deity "willing Itself" into existence.

While I think that this reference to Proclus' geometric explanation of emanation is important, it would be a weak argument to suggest that the Masonic Order has a neo-Platonic foundation simply of the basis on a "four-word-one-liner" tucked away in the Second Degree Lecture. A stronger argument for neo-Platonism is to be found in the Royal Arch. I must use the English (Domestic) working, since it is published; and I can develop this argument without compromising secrets.

A brief overview between the differences between the Royal Arch in America and England will be a good start. Then we will look at that portion of the Symbolical Lecture which deals with the Triple Tau.

### Differences

Freemasonry in England went through a profound change in the second decade of the 19th century. Those changes were the result of the negotiations between the Premier Grand Lodge (the Moderns) and the Antient Grand Lodge which resulted in the formation of the United Grand Lodge of England in 1816. Among the results of those negotiations was an agreement that Freemasonry consists of only "...Three Degrees including the Holy Royal Arch". During the process of this union, a "Lodge of Reconciliation" was established with the task of formulating a ritual and symbolic structure to be used by the United Grand Lodge. Although 1816 is the year in which the union of the rival Grand Lodges was consummated, the rituals of the Royal Arch were not completed until about the 1830's. One of the really sad things about Masonic history is that we do not have any real knowledge about the rituals that were being used in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, so we cannot assess the source of the English Royal Arch rituals. The situation is a little different with American workings. We know that Webb abstracted them from Preston in the

1770's; but Preston seems to have thought up his rituals himself, and he continued to modify and develop them until 1813.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Preston's was only one of many different rituals that were in use in England in the late 1700's — and it may not have been the most common. The result of all this is that we cannot say with authority where any of our present workings really originated or how old they are.

To get down to details. There is no "York Rite" in England. There is a Grand Chapter which is very closely parallel to the United Grand Lodge of England; so closely parallel that the Grand Master is the First Grand Principal and the Grand Secretary is the Grand Scribe E. Chapters, which are constituents of the Grand Chapter, are formed by constituent Lodges of the United Grand Lodge. For example, my English Chapter is Letchworth Chapter, No 3505, and it has been formed by the Brethren of Letchworth Lodge, No. 3505. There are no intermediate Degrees between the Lodge and the Chapter; a Brother may petition a Chapter after being "...raised to the Sublime Degree of a M.M. in which capacity he has exercised himself for four weeks or upwards"<sup>11</sup>. The Royal Arch is not considered to be a separate Degree; it is, rather, the

"Master Mason's completed". That seems appropriate for a Royal Arch that is so intimately associated with the Craft.

Although there are many similarities, the layout of the English Chapter is somewhat different from that of ours in the United States. Here is a diagram which I have taken from the book of the Domastic Working. One of the most obvious differences is that there are no veils; and in fact, the "Passing of the Veils" is not part of the English Ceremony of Exaltation. I believe, however; that the lessons which are communicated by the "Passing of the Veils" are communicated in the English Royal Arch by the Historical Lecture. The Officers of the Chapter are: ...; the various objects depicted here are as follows:..., and the Five Platonic Bodies.

**The Symbolical Lecture**

One of the differences we have noted is that the English Chapter has Six Lights, three greater, and three lesser; and they are placed in an equilateral triangular formation around the Pedestal and the Plate of Gold. The Plate contains equilateral triangle and represents ... The triangle of Lights repeats this image on the Plate.

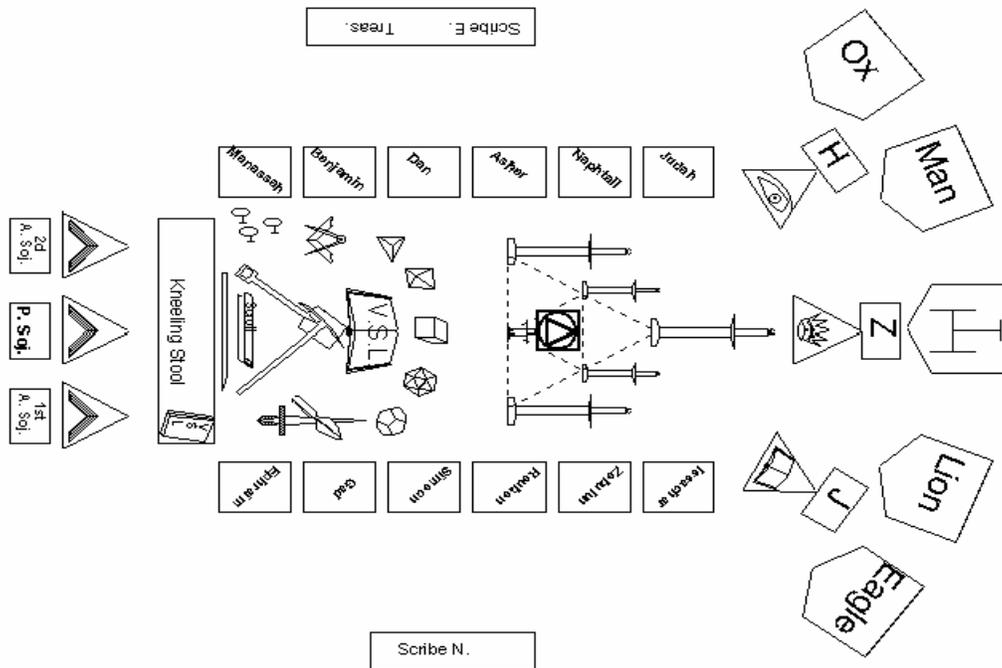


Figure 3

The Symbolical Lecture has the purpose of interpreting the Chapter's symbols to the candidate, and with respect to the Six Lights it says:

for the three angles of every triangle are together equal to two right angles."

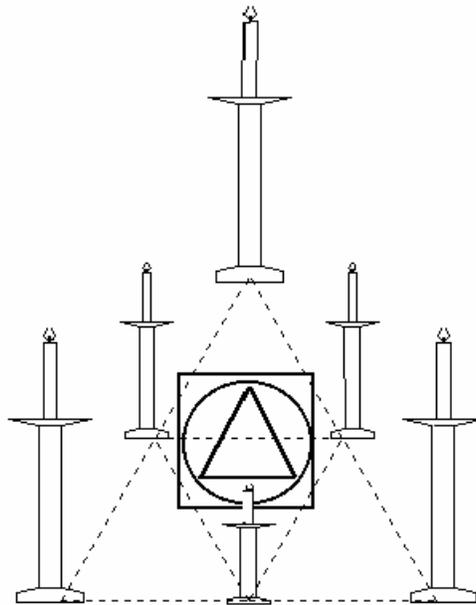


Figure 4

"In R. A. Masonry we acknowledge six lights - three lesser and three greater. The three lesser represent the Light, the Law and the Prophets, and by their number allude to the Patriarchal, Mosaical and Prophetical dispensations. The three greater lights represent the sacred Name itself and the triune essence of the Deity, and are emblematical of His creative, preservative, and annihilative powers.

These lights are arranged in equilateral triangles, each of the lesser bisecting a line formed by two of the greater, thus geometrically dividing the greater triangle into three lesser triangles at its extremities and forming a fourth in the centre, all equal and equilateral.

This symbolical arrangement corresponds to the mysterious triple tau, which has two right angles at each of its exterior lines, and two at their union in the centre; in all eight right angles corresponding in number to the four triangles;

In other words, the Triple Tau is a cryptic representation for the pattern of the Six Lights; both figures contain the same lines and the same number of angular degrees; the components are simply assembled differently in each. This sort of concealed reference was not at all uncommon in the 17th and 18th centuries; and to the extent that this symbolism emulates that period, finding it here is not surprising. The shape of this Triple Tau is not quite like to ones we use today; but if you look at early prints (I'm sorry to say I did not have one to hand to copy), you will find that this tall, slender shape is commonly used. The Symbolical Lecture goes on to say:

"It also serves to illustrate the jewel worn by the Comps which, by its intersections, forms a given number of angles; these may be taken in five several combinations, and, when reduced to their amount in right angles, will be found equal to the five regular platonic bodies, which represent the four elements and the universe.

The five platonic bodies do not figure in our Chapters, so let's look again at the layout of the Chapter and see where they are located immediately below the Six Lights. (See Figure 1)

The five platonic bodies are interesting. They are the only possible regular polyhedra; and in the classical world one was associated with the four "Elements", Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and the last with the Universe itself. Here we need to remind ourselves of

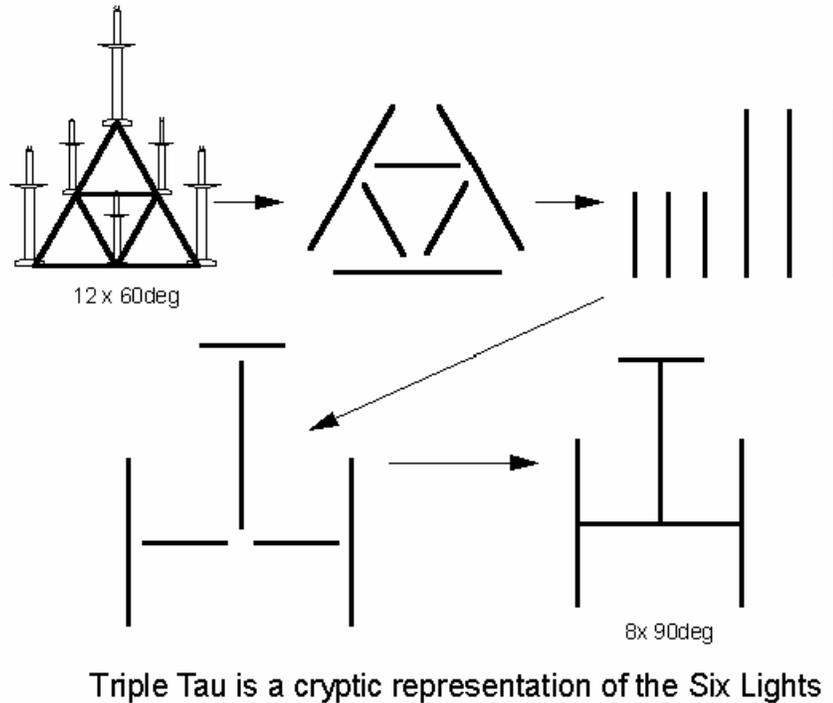


Figure 5

## PLATONIC BODIES

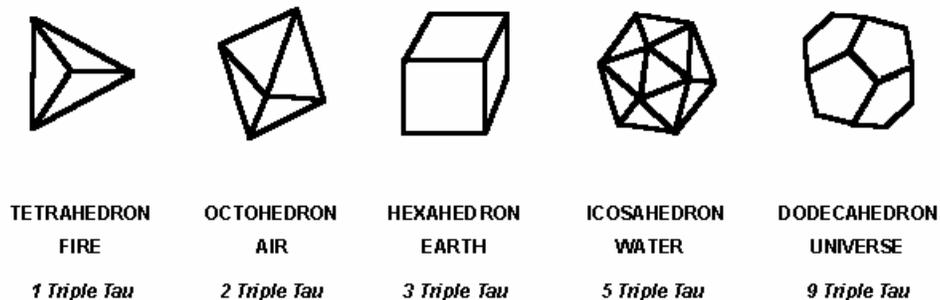


Figure 6

the philosophical implication of these four "Elements" in classical thought. As we have seen, to the classical philosophers Fire represented Divinity, Air represented the Spirit, Water represented the Soul or the Psyche, and Earth represented Materiality. Now in the Explanation of the Royal Arch Jewel, the ritual discusses the relationship between the Triple Tau and the platonic bodies in great detail. It says:

"...Platonic theory was this, that the Universe itself, as well as its subordinate parts, both animate and inanimate, were created by the Deity from the four elements - Fire, Air, Water, and Earth.....forming a regular and harmonious gradation from the lightest and most penetrating of the elements to the heaviest and most obtuse."

"...the Platonic theory assigned to each of the elements a solid bounded by plane surfaces..."<sup>12</sup> and the remaining one, the Dodecahedron, to the "sphere of the Universe".

Now let's look at something else about the Six Lights. We have seen that the triangular figure they form is represented cryptically by the Triple Tau. But this triangular figure is also a pattern for a Tetrahedron. So there seems to be some connection, some progression, between the Plate of Gold and the Six Lights and the Tetrahedron.

The Explanation of the Royal Arch Jewel develops this connection or progression further (I have abstracted the Lecture, because it gets really fiddly): See [Figure 6](#)

"...eight right angles, or a Triple Tau ... are equal in amount to those (angles) contained in the Tetrahedron. This body...was used by the Platonists to express the element *Fire*. ...two Triple Tau's, or 16 right angles ...are equal in amount to those contained in the Octahedron,...used by the Platonists to express the element *Air*, ... three Triple Tau's, or 24 right angles, ... are equal in amount to those contained in the Cube, ...to express the element *Earth*,..."

### Six Lights are a Pattern for a Tetrahedron

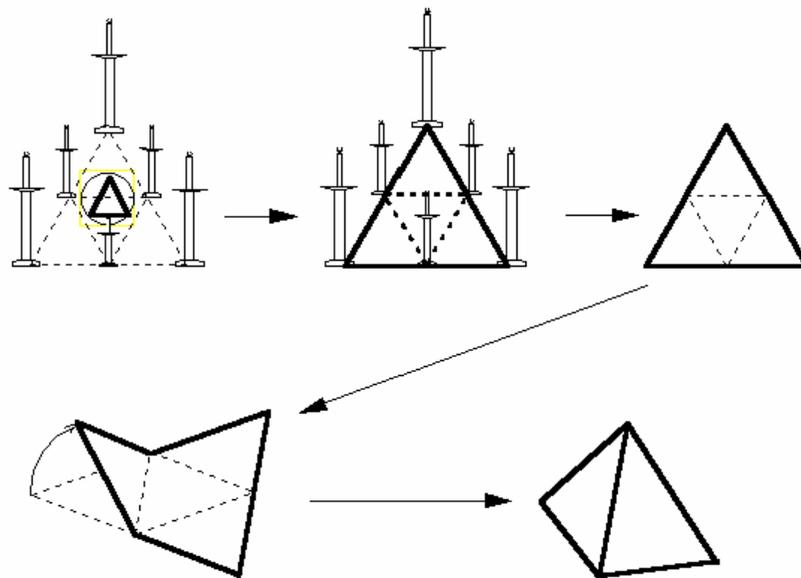


Figure 7

Notice again the Plate of Gold, representing ..., with the Six Lights in the triangular form around it. (See Figure 1)

This is, as I said, a little fiddly, but the Explanation of the Jewel goes on in this way pointing out that the Icosahedron (*Water*) contains the same number of angular degrees as five Triple Tau's; and the

Dodecahedron (the Sphere of the *Universe*) contains the same number of angular degrees as nine Triple Tau's<sup>13</sup>.

**Summary**

In summary, I interpret the meaning of these symbols to be as follows: (See Figure 1) The Triple Tau, which occupies the most prominent position in the East of the Chapter, is a cryptic representative of the Six Lights which are, themselves, a representative of the Plate of Gold which they surround. The Lights form the pattern for the Tetrahedron, the first of the Platonic Bodies. Then we are told that the Triple Tau is the key to the production of the succession of those bodies which, we are told, symbolize the idea, the form, and substance of the Universe. Now, as we have seen, the philosophy of neo-Platonism, which was central to the thinking of the Renaissance and of many early Masons, holds that the Deity wills *Itself* into existence *as* Divinity, Spirit, Soul, Materiality and the physical Universe. It seems to me that a careful interpretation of this symbolism in the context of the philosophical ideas which were prominent at the

time our Craft came into being suggests that this is a symbolic statement of neo-Platonism.

What do you think?

**Neo-Platonic Emanation**

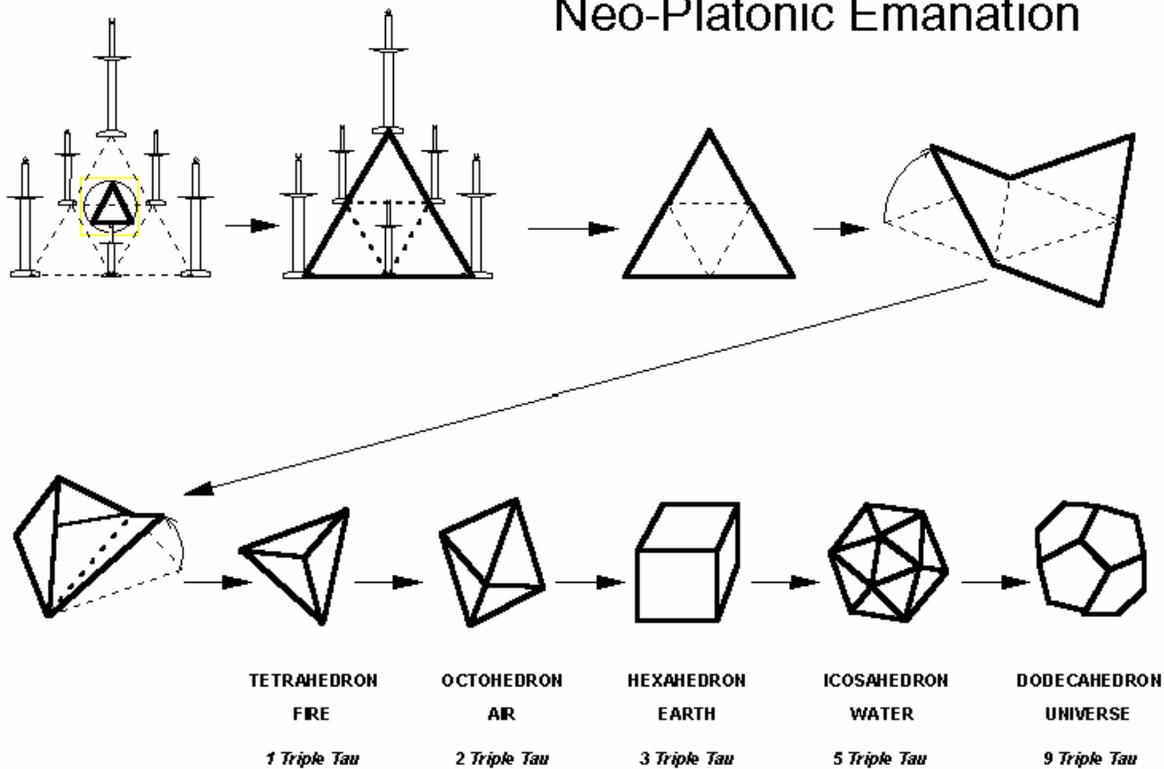


Figure 8

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>The answer I am expecting as I write this is a resounding, "NONE"; if that's what emerges, all will go as anticipated. If someone comes up with a convincing limitation on the Deity, I will be very surprised.

<sup>2</sup>I seek to avoid assigning attributes to the Deity, so I use the pronoun, It. Whatever God is, It seems to me to be too big to be included in the attributes of masculinity.

<sup>3</sup>As we shall see, it was a "big thing" for the philosophers of the Renaissance, too.

<sup>4</sup>e.g., Luke 17, 21, "...for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." or Matt 5, 44, "...Love your enemies..."

<sup>5</sup>Epstein, Isidore; *Judaism*, (Penguin, London, 1982) p.p. 201-3

<sup>6</sup>Yates, Francis A.; *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (RKP, London, 1979) p.p. 1-6

<sup>7</sup>This is a Kabalistic interpretation of Genesis. For a brief and comprehensible introduction to Kabbalah try: Halevi, Z'ev ben Shimon; *Kabbalah, Tradition of Hidden Knowledge*; (Thames and Hudson, London, 1979)

<sup>8</sup>Second Degree Lecture, Second Section, Emulation Working

<sup>9</sup>K. C. W. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy, Vol. I*, (Cambridge, 1971)

<sup>10</sup>Dyer, Colin; *William Preston and His Work*; (Lewis Masonic, Shepperton, 1987) passim

<sup>11</sup>Unless the footnotes indicate otherwise, the quotes from RA ritual are taken from the Domatic Working.

<sup>12</sup>Explanation of the Jewel, Complete Working

<sup>13</sup>A corollary to 32d Problem of Euclid says that the interior angles of every rectilinear figure are equal to twice as many right angles - 4 as the figure has sides. 5 sides  $\times 2 = 10 - 4 = 6$   $\times 12 = 72$ ; same as  $9 \times 8$ .

