



LRS Newsletter

The Library of Renaissance Symbolism

www.libraryofsymbolism.com

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κυάμων ἀπέχου.
A fabis abstine.
Do not eat beans. (Pythagoras)

Whether or not we take to heart Pythagoras' famous admonition, it can form a starting point for a discussion of the origin of the word symbol and more particularly for a look at the Renaissance manifestation of the word, the "symbola" of Pythagoras.

The ancient Greeks seemed to be very fond of throwing things. To throw (or put) in Greek is *ballein* and many compound words are derived from it. There is (of course) *emballein* to throw together from which we get emblem originally something inlaid, either wood, precious metal, or glass (e.g. mosaics). It was common in Greek and Roman times to have removable pieces of gold or silver which could be fixed to other decorative objects – thus an emblem. Another such word is *antiballomenon* something put alongside or compared.

But here we are most concerned with *symbollein* or the noun *symbolon* – again something thrown or put together. The very first use of this word seems to have been in commercial contexts. A piece of bone was used to identify the two parties to a transaction. The bone was broken in two, each person taking his piece and when required the parties could be identified by fitting the broken pieces together. And so the use spread to any kind of identification: a hospitality token for instance. When a friend came to stay, they would expect to receive on their departure one half of a symbolon so that if you or any member of your family wished for return hospitality you could present your part at your friend's house for identification. Then it came to mean a password, ticket or something you brought for a common meal, anything where two parts of a whole were linked by something in common and so finally what we know today, an object that represents something else – a signifier and a signified. So when you present your expensive ticket as you go into the theater, you can take consolation that you are reenacting a very ancient tradition.

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The Symbola of Pythagoras

The Symbola of Pythagoras were a series of moral sayings which came down to the Renaissance from classical times and the origin of which and their history and interpretation were of endless fascination to scholars of the age. Pythagoras flourished in the latter part of the sixth century BCE. He was a philosopher, mathematician and religious leader about whom Arthur Koestler has said enthusiastically: "Pythagoras' ... influence on the ideas, and thereby, on the destiny of the human race was probably greater than that of any single man before or after him." In about 530 BCE, he established a school in Croton in Southern Italy which today we would disparagingly call a sect since he expected his students or disciples to lead upright and moral lives as well as to learn and it was to this end that the tradition of the *symbola* arose. Pythagoras supposedly committed nothing to writing and most of what we know about him comes from the biography written by Iamblichus (c. 240CE – 327CE) according to whom Pythagoras had two classes or levels of student, the mathematici, the learners and the akousmatici or listeners. Pythagoras' precepts for his students were initially termed akousmata or things heard, a word obviously associated with the akousmatici but over the centuries this word slowly became obsolete in favor of *symbola*. For Iamblichus at least the two words were synonymous.



Alciato: Emblemata no. 80 Avoid laziness.



La Perrière: Theatre, no. VII.
Do not stir a fire with a sword

The Symbola have a simple proverbial quality about them and it is very likely that some of them at least were in general circulation before the time of Pythagoras or were added to the canon afterwards. One is to be found in Hesiod who wrote about 150 years before Pythagoras and his *Works and Days* contains other maxims which if they were never actually attributed to Pythagoras have a similar quality. It is easy to believe that many such earlier proverbial phrases might have been attributed to the Pythagoreans in the same way as the eponymous theorem of the master which actually originated with the Babylonians some 1,000 years earlier.

The canonical list, order, number and text of the Symbola is usually taken to be that of Iamblichus in his *Protrepticus* which contains thirty nine entries although there are others given by the compilers of such lists over the centuries which together with those from Iamblichus total at least fifty-seven different symbola. Amongst the classical writers in addition to Iamblichus who provided lists and/or interpretations were Plutarch, Porphyry, Clement of Alexander, Androcydes, Diogenes Laertius, Hippolytus, Demetrius Byzantius and St. Cyril. From all these however, only dozen or so Symbola were common to all lists, i. e. "Do not poke a fire with a sword" (*Protrepticus* 8), "do not step over the beam of a balance" (13), "do not sit on a measure" (18); "do not eat a heart" (30), "Do not use the public ways but walk in unfrequented paths" (4) and "when you reach the boundary of your country, do not look back." (not in the *Protrepticus*).

The Renaissance provided just as large a list of writers on or publishers of the Symbola. Many of them are given in the section on Symbols in the Library here. We can single out Marsilio Ficino who made the first translations of manuscripts of the *Protrepticus* in the mid 1460s, Aldus who printed them in 1497, Erasmus who from his 1508 edition put them first of all the thousands of his *Adages* and Claude Mignault, who in his final version of his *Syntagma de Symbolis* or introduction to Alciato's *Emblemata* included a long exposition of the canonical Symbola. In spite of this emphasis by his commentator, Alciato did not make extensive use of the symbola as motifs although many other emblem writers did, including Corrozet, Bocchi, La Perrière, Symeone, Boissard and others.

The Symbola were ideal material for the age. Both by their name and by their



Coustau: Pegma, In symbolum Pythagorae In scaphio ne edita

brevity and obscurity they invited interpretation. Thus “do not poke fire with a sword” could mean “do not provoke an angry man”, “do not allow the fire of sedition to spread”, “do not save one who has not asked you”, “do not attempt the impossible”, “do not use the sword in favor of dialog.” These latter all seem to derive from the first and I like Boissard’s summation in his Emblem 27: “rage has no ears.”

Bibliography: Cornelis Hölk *De Acusmatis sive symbolis Pythagoricis* Kiel 1894; Walter Müri □Y□□□□□□ in *Beilage zum Jahresbericht über das Städtische Gymnasium in Bern* 1931 vol. 1, pp. 1-46; *Iamblichus Protrepticus* ed. E. Pistelli. Leipzig: Teubneri, 1888; Sebastiano Gentile *Sulle prime traduzioni dal greco di Marsilio Ficino* in *Rinascimento* n.s. 30 (1990) p. 57 gives Ficino’s Latin translations of the Protrepticus. Images by courtesy of the Glasgow University Library.

LIBRARY NEWS

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BOOK REVIEW

Sonia Maffei *Le Radice antiche dei Sumboli: studi sull’Iconologia di Cesare Ripa e I suoi rapporti con l’antico*. Naples: La Stanza delle Scritturen, 2009.

Maffei tells us at least two things about Ripa’s great book on Iconology. First that Ripa did not care much about the actual objects from which his allegories were derived or about the intricacies of their interpretation. What he did was provide an image of the allegory and a bald description of the personification which was accepted as authentic by him and his readers since it was based on actual classical examples. Secondly, Ripa got much if not most of his material from the great coin collections of the age. Coins and medals in view of their composition were accepted as the most reliable source of evidence of classical culture. Manuscripts deteriorated with age and frequent copying but coins seemed to offer the best access to what

Petrarch called the “pure radiance of the past.” An interesting and copiously illustrated book.

EVENTS

The British Library displays a medieval Bestiary http://tftpdownload.bl.uk/app_files/silverlight/default.html?id=32841B35-03D4-40D5-A218-0E9EFFF1843A

The BnF has an online exhibit on the Bestiary. <http://expositions.bnf.fr/bestiare/index.htm>

The National Library of Israel has an exhibit on the secrets of Isaac Newton : http://www.jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/newton/about_exhibition_eng.html



Future editions of the Newsletter will contain: Stories from the first English edition of Poggio's Facetiae; Fables and the Lives of Aesop; And much, much more.

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