

Symbolism Essentials

Ancient Egyptian Symbols

- Used hieroglyphs, pictographs and images to explain history, write about and depict sacred rituals, and give blessings to rulers.
 - Temples used natural light as an important element to illuminate their rituals and sacred writing/imagery.
 - Pharaohs usually supported the building a specific temple in their name to honor a god/goddess to which they were devoted.
- *Read [Ancient Egyptian Symbolism](#) for greater detail, symbolism in Ancient Egyptian religion can be complicated and even contradictory.

* Source: <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/symbolism1.htm>
and <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/symbolism2.htm> - Downloaded 10/1/2010

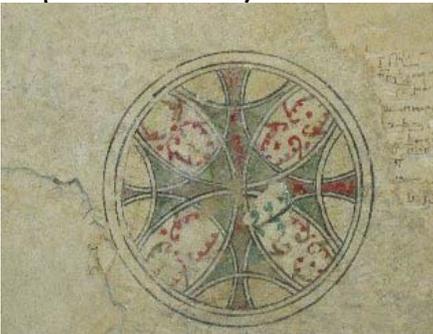
Coptic Christianity

- Early Copts would often vandalize pagan Egyptian temples by destroying the faces of pagan gods/goddesses and rulers. They would also carve in various Christian crosses, carve out niches and build stone altars to make the formerly pagan sacred space into a Christian sacred space.
- Coptic language was a cross between Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs, and remained the official language of Egypt until Arabic became dominant. The Coptic language is still used by high clergy in the Coptic Church.
- Coptic Churches are aligned with the East, the sunrise and where the return of Christ is expected. In the Upper Nile region, churches face the Nile – eternal life.
- Many Coptic symbols were taken from Greco-Roman and ancient Egyptian symbolism and the meaning was changed to reflect their cosmological/world views.
- Fish = Christ during the time of Roman persecution, and also the soul of those who needed to be saved by Christianity.
- Shell = eternity
- Floral garland = victory, usually placed upon head of martyrs in art as a reward
- The initials A W = Symbols of Jesus Christ
- Circular design = eternity, no beginning and no end
- Swastika (a.k.a. Indian cross) = ancient symbol that has been used for over 400 years and has been the symbol for the sun, the 4 cardinal directions, and world wheel (eternally changing world around a fixed, unchanging center or god)
- Carved out niches = rebirth and eternity
- Ankh = made into a Christian cross
- Peacock = resurrection
- Ram = Abraham, willingness sacrifice to his son
- Osiris (resurrection) and Anubis (death) and Isis shown as suckling her son Horus (Mary and Jesus)

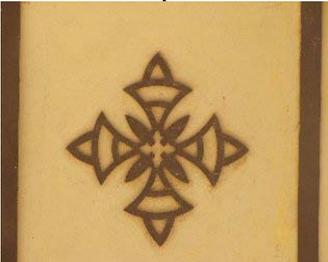
- Pulpit in Coptic Churches have 15 columns representing Jesus, his 12 apostles and 2 evangelists (Saints Mark & Luke) – one column is usually black to represent Judas
- Ankh cross with two palm leaves = peace and paradise
- Eagle = resurrection and Jesus Christ
- Placidia cross or crux humilis or crux sublimis = a cross tall off the ground, since crucified victim would be high off the ground. Usually painted in dark blue paint, four sides filled in the letter X – initials of Jesus Christ. X is defined by arrows at its upper endings as if spreading everywhere without reaching a definite end, eternal.



- Maltese cross = 4 points of the earth, symbolizing the spread and prevalence of Christianity. Sometimes represents the 4 evangelists or Gospel rights. Or each protruding part makes eight total spaces where it symbolizes the eight secrets of Coptic Christianity.



- Maltese cross with leaf shaped ends = 4 points of the earth, 3 petals (3 x 4 = 12) for the 12 apostles.



*Source: Hudson, Thomas. *Coptic Egypt: The Christians of the Nile*. 2000. Gallimard, NMA. London.

Islam

- The basic Islamic concepts that governed medieval Islamic society was the idea that God created mankind only to worship Him.
 - o Thus, not only direct worship (5 pillars)

- Also indirect worship, to see God everywhere and in every place (family life, commerce, morality, ethics, daily items and experiences)
- For modern man, we experience physical reality. For traditional man, including medieval Muslims, they see themselves as three parts (body – physical, soul – life, conscience/spirit – transcendent). With this cosmological/world view, they believed they could see the 7 heavens above them and experienced a cosmological reality. Symbolism was very much a part of creating and depicting that reality.
- Patterns
 - Since images were forbidden lest it lead to idolatry, patterns became the most important artistic expression. These patterns are not merely decorative, they re-create their view of the universe through geometric designs. In other words, these patterns hold meaning.
 - Medieval geometric design had spiritual meaning. Numbering significant (examples: 1 = unity, 8 = throne of the Lord above the seven heavens, circle = heavens).
- Architecture (elements of a Mosque):
 - Three main concepts in medieval Muslim architecture:
 - Centrality: represents the Ka'baa in Mecca, it is the navel of the earth above which are the gates of heaven.
 - Verticality: the vertical axis of the earth and heaven (minarets, etc.)
 - Horizontality: choose a point that makes a direct line to the center
 - Exterior of buildings were relatively unimportant (based on religion) – only aspect import was the verticality.
 - Inner facades of the courtyards were the heart.
 - Water fountain always in the center – the Qu'ran says all living things come from it.
 - Gateway always recessed, always brings in the worshipper to the sacred space (rather than the gateway being part of the unsacred street).
 - Always ascend to the entrance. After a worshipper enters the mosque, the *magaz* (bent or offset corridors so you do not see what is inside).
 - The worshipper enters the winding path that light and dark intentionally due to sun/shade (this is to wake you up – to prepare you for prayer).
 - Also has enclaves that are “cold suckers” to make you hot/cold as you walk through the *magaz* – the architect is bombarding your senses intentionally.
(Homes also had a *magaz* so unmarried women could go to a private space while the visitor walks through it).
 - In the courtyard there may be four small “rivers” representing the four Biblical rivers.

- The tri-foil at the top of buildings represents the three parts of the soul. Like the Star of David (also used), which represents the spiritual and physical aspects of humanity. Crenellations (three inverted triangles) at the top of buildings also represents the parts of a human.
- If courtyard cannot be constructed, then there is a dome in the center.
- The entrance of the prayer space also has stripes representing the radiating light of God.
- Two levels in a building; lower level less sacred, leave your shoes before you ascend to the more sacred level (Also used in homes, to separate the servants from the served).
- There is a dome above the prayers space to reach the heavens. Minarets used also to connect with God as well as call for prayer.
- Words (calligraphy) were believed to be the actual word of God, to include something sacred.

*Source: Dr. Aly Gabr, Lecture for Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar in Egypt, July 12, 2010.