

The Fasces: Symbols of Unity and Power

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An examination of the history and symbolism of the Roman fasces, with special attention focused on (1) the Roman origins and contexts of the symbol, (2) the historical use of fasces as communicative symbols in a wide variety of media and cultural contexts, and (3) the symbolic importance of fasces in American Greek life.

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The Torch of Zeta Psi

Introduction

In any organization that is steeped in tradition and ritual, symbolism plays a significant part in representing the secret unity through which members affiliate. These symbols range from group to group; from corporate logos and slogans, to intricate combinations of hieroglyphics and pictures. For some, there is no meaning; it is simply an image that represents the brand, company, or broad affiliation. For others, each symbol represents something meaningful and important to membership in the group. Greek organizations fall into the latter category, and as such, the symbols found in a Greek organization - most notably the fraternal organizations - provide a wealth of opportunity to explore historical relevance and context for that which their membership holds dear and important.

This paper will examine one such opportunity within the Zeta Psi Fraternity. Zeta Psi uses the image of a Fasces in much of its literature and documentation. The fasces is seen throughout the history of the Fraternity, and thus becomes a worthy topic to explore in better understanding the organization. This paper will endeavour to explain what a Fasces is and where it came from, explore different symbolic meanings of the tool, examine modern-day uses of the symbol, and finally put into perspective how the Fasces is relevant to Zeta Psi.

The Origin of the Fasces

A Fasces, by definition, can be described as a bundle of wooden rods or sticks bound together, often found with an axe or blade attached, and wrapped with a leather ribbon. It's name comes from the Latin word *fascis*, meaning "bundle" (Fasces, Merriam-Webster), but scholars suggest the fasces was first used in the Etruscan civilization, rather than in Latin Rome (Fasces, livius.org).

The first recorded evidence of a fasces was found in Etruria in the Tomba del littore, in 1890 (Fasces, livius.org). This find was met with some criticism pertaining to legitimacy - the fasces found in the tomb was double bladed, and was significantly smaller than the better-known Roman fasces. Though this does not disprove the origin of the fasces, many scholars refute the Etruscan influence, as this archeological find was both an isolated discovery and bore only some similarity to what the Romans used. For this reason, it is more pertinent to review Roman literature for uses of the fasces and how it has been perpetuated as a symbol of power.

Prevalence of the Fasces in Historical Literature

Understanding that there is little evidence to verify the origin of the fasces, it becomes relevant to contextualize the fasces as it is known within historical record. This verification comes from a collaboration of various authors and texts, and serves to support the current understanding of how the fasces came to be known as a symbol of power and authority.

Titus Livius makes several references to the fasces as a tool of the lictors in *The History of Rome*, highlighting both the reverence of the populace, and the political hierarchy that existed in the Roman Republic. With respect to political hierarchy, “The first consuls enjoyed all their privileges, and all their ensigns of authority; in this respect, only, care was taken, not to double the objects of terror by giving the fasces to both the consuls” (bk. 2, ch. 1). Further, evidence of the fasces being used as a symbol of victory is found in Livy’s work. The fasces symbolized victory and honour through military success; “Brutus... was first honoured with the Fasces” after the death of Ceasar and the movement back to republic government in Rome (bk. 2, ch. 1).

Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus provides a discourse directly related to politics and early roman emperors, in which multiple references to the fasces being used for discipline and

ceremony are found. In his work *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, Tacitus follows the leadership of 3 Roman emperors. Within those efforts, Tacitus points to flaws found within different political systems, among which is the hierarchical power of lictors (and by extension, the ones entrusted to enact the law through the application of the fasces). Of note, Tacitus scorns the rule of kings, and the associated symbols of power that accompany them (bk. 1-16).

The Roman Fasces

Much of what is known of the history of the Fasces comes from Roman literature and historical record. While there was little evidence of Etruscan origin, there exists a wealth of evidence that early Roman culture used the fasces as both a symbolic representation of power, and as a practical tool of enforcing the law.

Livius explains the purpose and extent to which the Fasces is used in early Roman civilization. Roman court officials were known as lictors, and varying levels of political offices in early Rome commanded the corresponding number of lictors to attend them in court. Magistrates were allowed 24 lictors; consuls were allowed 12, the proconsul 11, praetors 6, and the curule aediles were allowed 2. Each of the lictors carried a fasces, thus the fasces came to represent the authority that corresponded with the level of political office amongst the populace. The number of lictors - or fasces- the stronger the political authority of the individual (Livius, bk 2, ch. 4).

Livy further identifies the importance of a blade attached to the fasces. Outside of the city, the fasces carried by the lictors were affixed with a blade, often an axehead. In Republican Rome, the magistrate was the highest level of political authority in a region. The magistrate had the power, within his jurisdiction, to enact all of the Roman laws as they saw fit, which included

administering capital punishment. The bladed fasces of the lictors, representing the political power of the magistrate, also became a practical and symbolic representation of the power over life and death that the magistrates possessed.

Symbolism Associated with the Roman Fasces

After examining how the fasces was used within the Roman context, it is relevant to explore how the fasces developed the symbolism by which it is now known. Most notably, the fasces is known as a symbol of unity and power.

The fasces is a natural metaphor for the strength that comes from unity. Consolidating Roman provinces into a Republic provided the strength that individual states could not achieve. The fasces is similarly built from individual elements, combined to create a strength that cannot be achieved by each individual component. The representation of power that is associated with the fasces also comes from Roman origins. By only allowing the Roman judicial authorities to carry the fasces, an association between the fasces and administration of the law was created. The fasces became the notable distinction between judicial authority and other forms of authority amongst the population, thereby solidifying the fasces as a symbol of their power. Further, the leather wrap surrounding the fasces symbolized judicial restraint, and was often unwound from the fasces to indicate the subject was approaching the limits of the magistrates restraint.

Finally, the fasces could be used to symbolize different meanings by adding or removing components. There were two significant times that this occurred. The first was when a political official and his lictors (who carried bladed fasces as a symbol of judicial power) entered the inner city of Rome. Upon doing so, the lictors were all required to remove the blade from the fasces, thus symbolizing a forfeiting of their role in judicial matters. Within the inner city of

Rome, the authority rested in the assembly, rather than with the elected officials. The second instance related to military success. During a celebratory parade, the fasces symbolized power through triumph, and the fasces was ceremoniously wrapped in a laurel wreath (Briscoe, 1983, 14).

Modern Day Images and Uses of the Fasces

While the fasces has been used in numerous contexts since its rise to symbolic prominence, few are more historically significant than the development of the Fascist political party in Italy. Developing in the early 1900's under the rule of Mussolini, the Fascist party sought to expand Italian territory to establish superiority and strength. Italian Fascists believed modern Italy was the heir to the Roman empire, and thus, adopted the Roman symbol of the fasces. The Fascist party looked to generate collaboration between upper and lower classes, establishing unity for the greater good of the country. The fasces was a fitting symbol of unity for such a cause (Payne, 2005).

Another country with an extensive use of the fasces is the United States. The fasces appears in prominent political and military symbols, such as outside the Oval Office, the Senate, and the Supreme Court building. Further, renowned educational institution Harvard University's grand seal features a fasces, and several memorials and statues include the fasces as a symbol of American unity and strength. Further displaying the fasces as a symbol of power, the United States National Guard seal and insignia both include the fasces.

Furthering the concept of national pride and displaying the fasces as evidence of power and unity, several countries have incorporated the fasces into their flags and coat of arms. Some examples include the seal of the French Republic; the coat of arms of Ecuador, Cameroon, Cuba,

Lithuania, and Uruguay; and the military or police forces of countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Romania.

Finally, and of particular note for this essay, the fasces is a symbol often found in collegiate fraternity and sorority organizations within their crests and escutcheons. Having explored the history of the Fasces and its influence from the Roman empire to modern civilization, it is now relevant to examine how the Fasces contributes to fraternity life.

Relevance to Zeta Psi

As foreshadowed in the beginning of this essay, the essential argument of this work is to better understand how the symbol of the fasces developed and relate to the Zeta Psi Fraternity. Through examination of the history of the fasces, its use both during ancient Roman times and in modern society, and its symbolic meaning, it is easy to extrapolate why fraternal and sororal organizations relate strongly to the image.

The fasces represents strength through unity. Fraternal and sororal organizations depend on teamwork and communication to succeed - those that cannot work as a cohesive unit cannot be successful. From new member recruitment to event management, the organization can only be as strong as the group works together, and Zeta Psi is no different. Every member is expected to burden their share of the responsibility, be it financial, academically, or otherwise. The fasces is a fitting symbol to evidence the need for unity, as individual brothers cannot achieve the goals of the organization on their own.

Further, Zeta Psi respects tradition and authority. The fasces also symbolizes power, which within the organization, is centralized in the role of the president. As such, the fasces reflects the power that the president has over the respective chapter and members. The need for

hierarchy is understood by all brothers in Zeta Psi, and as such, the symbolic fasces, just as in the Roman Republic, serves to evidence where that authority lies. It is further representative of triumph - in Rome the triumph was military, but for Zeta Psi, that triumph is more holistic. From international expansion to abolishment of negative stereotypes and practices, the fasces holds true as a symbol for the fraternity's triumph over obstacles and challenges.

Additionally, the concept of the bundle is also a relevant symbol to Zeta Psi. With the banding together of individual units, which symbolically represents a combined effort amongst members of the organization. The president is only as strong as his officers - it requires a unified effort of the all the officers to effectively utilize the authority granted by their chapter. The symbolism is then twofold - the chapter as a whole is most united and successful when they band together to support the efforts of the president and his officers, as they were in turn the ones to grant the authority which they wield.

Aside from the internal uses of the fasces to represent strength through unity, so too does the fasces represent Zeta Psi's commitment to standing unified as a Greek organization. Within the greater societal and political landscape, Greek organizations experience a significant amount of criticism and ridicule for stereotypes perpetuated in the media. Many greek organizations highlight unity as a foundational value - so much so that the fasces is seen in many crests and logos - and it is with these organizations that Zeta Psi stands united with. Efforts to eliminate and prevent hazing activity, build effective membership development programs, and advocate for Greek activity on college campuses are all activities that cannot be done by one birch rod; it is an effort that requires the whole bundle.

Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of this paper was to provide a historical context of the fasces. Further, a second purpose was to validate how the fasces has come to prominence as a symbol for power. Having examined the earliest recorded evidence how it was constructed and used, a better understanding of how power and unity came to be synonymous with the fasces can be developed. By bundling rods together into a stronger unit, the metaphorical strength in unity is clearly highlighted. Within the context of Zeta Psi, power and unity are critical to organizational success, and thus, the fasces can be seen as a significant part of the Fraternity's identity.

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