

The sunstones of the Nauvoo Temple recall Mormonism's past, stand as symbols for intellectual freedom and open inquiry in the Church, and now appear once more in general Latter-day Saint consciousness as they adorn the newly built temple in Nauvoo. How did they come about? What do they mean? What significance do they hold for us today? A sculptor-scholar shares his reflections.

THE SUNSTONES OF NAUVOO

AN INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNT OF THE TEMPLE CAPITALS

By Benson Whittle

IN THE 1840s, FOLLOWING SEVERAL ATTEMPTS TO build and occupy a templed city in the North American interior, the Latter-day Saints regrouped, found land in southern Illinois along the Mississippi River, and embarked yet again on their millenarian project. This new enterprise was more successful than its predecessors, though it, too, ultimately collapsed. Between 1841 and 1846, aided by a growing influx of converts, by the presence nearby of an exceptional limestone, and by their own penchant for organization, the followers of Joseph Smith constructed amidst their burgeoning city the Nauvoo Temple, a religious edifice rather grand for its time and place. Its eccentric order of capitals, called sunstones, have become among modern Mormons a symbol of religio-intellectual inquiry, of the pursuit of truth, and of that unrepeatably conflux-maelstrom of enthusiasm and social experimentation that produced them.

Although the main body of early Saints left Nauvoo in 1846, the same year the temple was dedicated, and their temple was destroyed shortly after, the Nauvoo Temple, in a sense, still existed. It never really faded from Latter-day Saint memory. As a boy, I knew there was, or had been, a temple in Nauvoo. It was stranger than the others. Every Mormon had ample opportunity to see it, with pictures in every home in lesson manuals and histories, if not in a frame on the wall. It was the temple that wouldn't go away. Like other good elements in the semi-Platonic Mormon scheme of things, the Nauvoo temple had a spiritual existence that didn't end when matter fell apart.



BENSON WHITTLE is an artist specializing in sculpture and stone masonry. His formal education focused on modern languages and literatures and on art history and theory, and he's earned degrees in Russian and in comparative literature. This article is condensed and excerpted from a larger essay written in connection with Whittle's commission to restore an original Nauvoo sunstone.

A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

A commission to restore an original sunstone has a powerful effect

MY INTEREST IN the temple has grown in recent years, kindled by a commission to restore/reproduce one of the Nauvoo temple sunstones in limestone from original fragments. These were the severely damaged remains of a so-called "trumpet-piece." The piece itself was broken in half, and the hand and horn on either side were mostly missing. Having lain outside for many decades in a damp climate, they were also covered with moss and lichens. The remnants' chief virtue, then, consisted in their being original; and this, I came to understand, meant a great deal: the surviving pieces had been carved by the hands and chisels of first-generation believers, and together they constitute—for lack of a better term in a once anti-papist movement—a genuine religious relic. Also preserved was a "base-stone," or, the molded transition stone which lay between the pilaster and the main body of the capital. My task was to replace broken parts, reproduce the principal component (face and surrounding elements) and to assemble these parts, adding an abacus. (See *Figure 1 for a depiction of the various parts of the Nauvoo temple capitals.*) By the time I finished, I had been drawn to Nauvoo as never before.

In the thick of this project, an aunt arrived with news that my great-great-grandfather, Thomas Levi Whittle, had "hauled stone" from the quarry to the temple site, thus participating, with many hundreds of others, in the building of the temple. Conceivably, he had even transported the very block out of which had been hewn the trumpet-piece fragments that at that moment lay crated in my sculpture yard. I came to imagine my ancestor, with blocks of stone loaded on or slung under his wagon, driving his team towards what he most certainly regarded as the City of God.

As most Latter-day Saints are aware, had all gone well at that time, the Mormons should have been completing the great and ultimate temple in Missouri which would help

“usher in” the Last Days and the literal Second Coming of Jesus Christ. My late father was among the host of believing Saints whose patriarchal blessings assured them they would one day help to build that temple—a promise sure to be fulfilled, if ever, on the other side. Like many other fifth-generation Mormons, I grew up in an atmosphere of muted expectancy: one day, we would go back across the plains and do what we had failed to accomplish before. As the second millennium waned and I worked to restore a single component of that substitute temple on the Mississippi, I came to feel I was perhaps as close as I would get to this ideal—and closer than I ever, in a sober moment, had hoped to be.

I did not suppose then that the re-building of the Nauvoo Temple was contemplated, let alone that I would also later recreate what was, briefly, the only complete Nauvoo starstone-triglyph. Nor did I imagine that my client, who already possessed an original moonstone pedestal, would ultimately donate to the Church this now-complete set of stone sculptures from the temple’s exterior for use, among others, as models in the re-construction effort.

AS THIS ARTICLE goes to press, the Nauvoo Temple has been rebuilt and dedicated, and the euphoria occasioned by the reproduction project has rippled through the community, among faithful and lapsed Mormons alike. With regard to building projects, possibly only the Salt Lake Temple and an announcement concerning the unbuilt temple of Jackson County might have held more meaning for Latter-day Saints.

Many, if not most, early Mormons, including the Church’s founders, were artisans, tradespeople, farmers, and laborers. They were young and, typically, not especially well off materially. Joseph Smith himself, from a dispossessed family of coopers, was thirty-six when work commenced on the Nauvoo Temple. William Weeks, the architect and master-builder, was twenty-eight. And Charles Lambert, the key sculptor in the cutting of the sunstones, arrived on the job at age twenty-four. Each was a participant in a charismatic movement, and they clearly felt inspired by, attended to, and visited from time to time by the power of the Almighty in every aspect of construction, from logistics to the design itself. Today’s aged leaders, corporate-bureaucratic architects, and big commercial contractors well-connected to centers of power contrast sharply with the early Nauvoo processes.

The early Saints did all of the work themselves, mostly

without financial or material compensation. Often, the temple committee lacked the resources to pay even the most highly skilled professionals. Wandle Mace, supervisor of the timbering, recalled, “We were . . . very diligent in our labors on the Temple; men were as thick as black-birds busily engaged upon the various portions, all intent upon its completion, although

we were . . . in constant expectation of a mob.”¹ The construction process was a highly creative act at many levels, involving, among all else, vast quantities of craftsmanly manual labor to quarry, cut, and set the stone. The interior, too, was praised for its high level of artistic execution. One hopes that something of the ethos of that early temple-building experience, and not just its outward form, has survived during the current re-creation, not only because of what temple rites still mean, but also through recollection of what the original act of construction meant to those involved.

THE CAPITALS

“Queer” yet “wonderful” and “indescribable”

THE SUNSTONES OF Nauvoo were integrated into a structure which is deeply fixed, with them, in the mind of a people. Time and oxidation have dimmed the surfaces of the surviving sculptured fragments. Yet the temple walls and pilasters, including their capitals, were originally polished so as to shine in the sun. The stone itself was not truly white nor simply gray. It was a light and creamy, semi-translucent gray-blond limestone verging on marble, allowing the sun’s rays to penetrate the polished surfaces, making them somewhat luminous in full daylight.² Towering more than forty-five feet above the ground and

standing out from the piers supporting the entablature and roof, the sunstones left a strong impression, particularly on viewers prepared to accept them on their own terms. Others regarded them, not inappropriately, as propaganda for the strange new faith—a sect, which was also the ultimate anti-sect, that desired to shine before the world and before itself.³

The *New York Spectator* published a review of the temple sunstones before the building was completed:

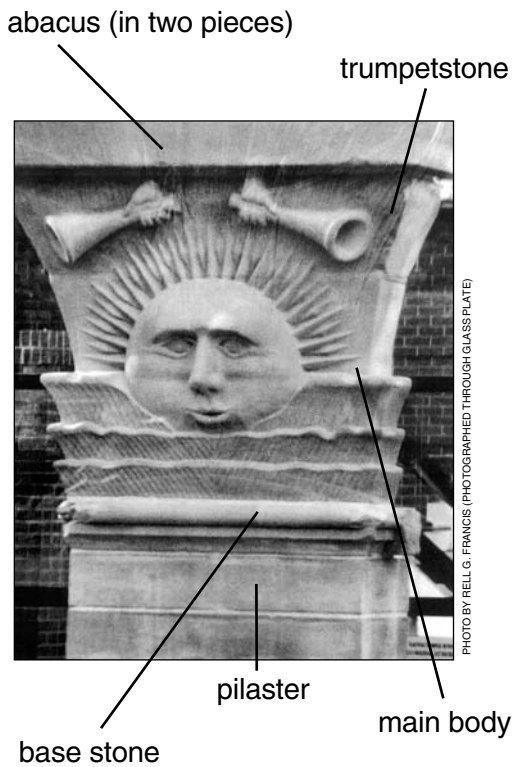
On the top, not far from fifty feet high, is an ideal representation of the rising sun, which is a monstrous prominent stone face, the features of which are colossal and singularly expressive. . . . These all stand out in the stone boldly. Their finish is admirable and . . . complete. . . .⁴

Like many others at this time, John Reynolds thought the

I grew up in an atmosphere of muted expectancy: one day, we would go back across the plains and build the great and ultimate temple in Missouri. . . . As I worked to restore a single component of that substitute temple on the Mississippi, I came to feel I was perhaps as close as I would get to this ideal—and closer than I ever, in a sober moment, had hoped to be.

Capitals: Large by Almost Any Standard

SUNSTONE capitals consisted of five components: the base stone; the main body of the capital—a face seeming to rise with its rays out of clouds or water; the trumpetstone—an extension of the rays surmounted by two hand-held horns; and an abacus or capstone in two pieces.



The weight of the capitals was reckoned variously at two or three tons. They were large capitals by almost any standard, though relatively shallow from front to back—about 22 inches maximum at the foremost point of projection (the forward edge of the horns) and perhaps 26 inches at the abacus. In all likelihood, they were cut in five pieces for two reasons: first, ease of quarrying, handling, and hoisting; and second, difficulty in obtaining a quarried block of sufficient mass to provide the full height of six feet. (Even if there had been stones of sufficient size, the stone masons probably would have resorted to this same method.) The blocks were hoisted individually, with cranes, to their respective positions in the walls. The cranes were made of wood and held in place by guy wires or ropes. At least one of them was of local manufacture, commissioned by the sisters of the Macedonia and La Harpe Branches, who raised funds to speed the work along.

Overall, the capitals were 6 feet 6 inches wide at the top by 6 feet high. The abacus in two pieces was 78 inches wide and 9½ inches high, with a depth from front to back of approximately 24–26 inches. (The abacus dimensions are educated estimates in the absence of any surviving component from which to take measurements. And, indeed, present-day Church architects settled upon a component smaller than this.) Trumpetstones had a maximum width of 72 inches, with a height of 17 inches and maximum depth of 22 inches. The main component had a maximum width of approximately 60 inches, height of 36 inches, and maximum depth of 18–20 inches. Base stones were approximately 66 inches wide, with a height of 8½ inches and depth of 22 inches overall but only 16½ inches from inside edge of front cove-mold to rear.

entire edifice was “built on the Egyptian style of architecture.”⁵ The incised and modeled parallel lines, the parabolic planes, and the enigmatic face of the sunstones, which struck yet another writer decades later as “sedate, austere, and dignified as the Sphinx of Egypt,”⁶ might have contributed to this intuition. There are, however, no antecedents in Egypt for the temple or its capitals, although it is possible the sunstones might have reminded an uncritical viewer of the broad Hathoric capitals at Dendera.⁷ The view of Increase Van Deusen that the temple “is after no particular style of architecture,”⁸ is closer than some estimates to the truth. George A. Smith claimed the Nauvoo Temple was the first specimen of a new order of architecture introduced by Joseph Smith.⁹

Others were unable to decipher the sunstones in any way, or even to discern their constituent elements, mistaking sunrays for thorns, or trumpets for festoons.¹⁰ While some extolled the temple’s “beauty, grandeur, and magnificence,” in his history of Illinois, Thomas Ford dismissed it as “a piece of patchwork, variable, strange, and incongruous” and, as such, illustrative of the spirit and character of Mormonism.¹¹ Leaving aside for now the issue Ford raises about Mormonism’s syncretic character and its tendency to blend

many sources in its teachings, we may surmise that the sunstones were a factor in Ford’s assessment. Like others, he may well have questioned, even resented, the intrusion of those bold faces, together with hands, horns, and clouds, in positions which Greek or Romanized Greek capitals might have occupied. In the face of originality ably displayed without the permission of received tradition, Ford’s silent query might have been, “How dare they?” Josiah Quincy, visiting the temple when its walls were incomplete and the carving of its sunstones in progress on the ground, thought the pedestals and capitals “queer” and the overall structure ungainly, though at the same time “wonderful” and “indescribable.”¹²

IMMIGRANT STONECUTTERS

“I would stick to the Temple pay or no pay until it was finished . . .”

These capitals were an event in their own right, quite apart from the consummate role they played in the new theology. They are a crucial moment in the construction of the temple itself and in the lives of many. One of these, Charles Lambert of Kirk Deighton, Yorkshire, England, appears to have been a major force in the cutting of the capi-

**Stone mason
Charles Lambert
brought his
considerable talents
to Nauvoo just
when he was most
needed, responding
to the revelation
inviting “all who
have knowledge of
antiquities . . .”
to come build “a
house to my name”**



Charles Lambert, circa 1875

tals. After a long apprenticeship and years on the road under various masters, he converted and then, following a spell of private contracting, moved to Illinois, met the Prophet, and was taken into an inner circle of Smith's acquaintances just at the time he was most needed. At the peak both of preparedness and enthusiasm, Lambert cut the first sunstone and parts of eleven others.¹³ He went to work immediately, though without a pay arrangement. There can be no doubt this work was a “peak experience” for him. Probably, it was of similar importance to the Prophet. Lambert, who may not have been a physically large specimen, tells of a visit by Smith to the work site in the spring of 1844:

I think it was on or about the 6th of May . . . the Prophet Joseph came up to the Temple and clasping his hands around me and lifted me of [sic] my feet then said the Lord bless thee and I bless thee and I bless thee in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It went through my whole sistem [sic] like fire. Then he turned to those around and said the Lord bless the whole of you and peace be with you. . . .¹⁴

Like much else in Nauvoo, work on the temple went at a feverish pace. Lambert, by his own account, never flagged. Apparently blending his memories of 1844 with those of 1845, he recollects,

I worked on the temple by day at night was guarding the City our living was poor . . . I conented [possibly covenanted] with Br. Wm Player that I would stick to the Temple pay or no pay until finished and did I quried [sic] and worked the last Stone called the Capstone.¹⁵

The revelation commanding construction of the temple embodies a passage unusually archaic and mock-biblical in tone

even by Mormon standards, inviting “all who have knowledge of antiquities,” among others, to come and build “a house to my name” and to bring their money and building materials with them (D&C 124:26–27). Lambert, like many others, came to Nauvoo in response to that very passage of new scripture and put his manifold “knowledge of antiquities” at the disposal of the Temple Committee, stating specifically that he had “come to help build that house.”¹⁵

The first capital was installed on 23 September 1844. When, in early December, the capitals all had been set in place (except for twelve “trumpet-pieces” to be set the following spring), the structure suddenly acquired a major dimension of its intended ultimate character, as the now-dead Prophet might have foreseen while hugging Lambert. The final week of the setting was favored by propitious weather. And the task's completion may well have been the occasion when Brigham Young finally realized the building

could in fact be completed and the recently revealed rites of endowment given before the Saints would have to leave this new home.¹⁶

With its deeply set eyes, contented and sensuous mouth, and broad nose, the sun image was a bold conception.¹⁷ For a relief atop a flat pilaster, it had great presence, possibly too great for some, and had to have given the viewer pause—more so because there were thirty of them. It was elevated and to the Saints must have been elevating in the extreme. Installed, it gave hope to the community as only a striking communal achievement could have done less than six months after the shocking death of their prophet and his brother, the patriarch. It must have stiffened their resolve and greatly repaid their efforts. In boldness, complexity, and centrality to Mormon doctrine, it has yet to be equalled by the Nauvoo saints or their descendants. The sunstones had become symbols of the Saints' spiritual striving.

INTERPRETATIONS

The Nauvoo sculptors revived the headed capital as a symbol of divinely inspired intellect.

IN WAYS NOT yet addressed, the disengaging of the sunstones and sunstone components from the dismantled building to which they belonged has impoverished their significance for modern viewers. For instance, we might overlook that the head, acting as subject matter of a capital, has intrinsic significance in architectural syntax, at the head of a column or pilaster, since “capital” derives from the Latin word for head. That the superior kingdom of the Mormon hereafter was represented by a head, which was simultaneously head of its column, allowed, and perhaps led, the designers to violate

spatial sequence in placing the symbols of their eschatology and cosmology on the temple walls. Had they followed strict spatial ordering, the stars would have been at the bottom, the moons in the capital position, and the suns in the temple's triglyphs since that is how the kingdoms are arrayed from bottom to top in Smith and Rigdon's vision of the heavens (D&C 76). The violation of sequence has to have been intentional, given that otherwise it is an unthinkable gaffe, readily noticeable and correctable.

Wandle Mace provides another way of accounting for the placement of these symbols:

The order of architecture was unlike anything in existence; it was purely original, being a representation of the Church, the Bride, the Lamb's Wife. John the "Revelator" in the 12th Chapter, first verse says, "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." This is portrayed in the beautifully cut stone of this grand temple.¹⁸

This interesting and ingenious interpretation, though uncorroborated by other sources, enjoys the dual benefit of explaining the altered sequence and the head as capital. It would perhaps be more compelling, however, had the pilasters embodied Caryatides and had the stars on the entablature numbered twelve rather than thirty.

Further implications are of equal if not greater significance. By the 1840s, the history of the headed capital was long and varied, but solar heads as capitals are otherwise unknown in Western architecture, and their importance in the Greek Revival, such as it was in Nauvoo, has yet to be understood. Joseph Smith, William Weeks, and the Nauvoo sculptors revived the headed capital as a symbol of divinely inspired intellect whose seat is the head. Among Smith's teachings at that time was the doctrine that the human intellect is, in its own right, potentially divine. A dimension of this significance would be lost if the sunstone were not a capital. It would not then be seen, for example, as the mainstay of the eschatological symbology of which the moonstone and starstone are other, and lesser, components. Attendant theological speculations would be lost along with its architectural purpose of supporting the entablature and roof.

Sun, moon, and star stones on the walls of Latter-day Saint temples must refer to the three heavens or "degrees of glory" revealed to Smith and Rigdon. But if this is the sunstone's prime meaning, it is by no means its only one. Considerable complexity was built into this symbol both by the addition of

the horns (or trumpets), perhaps signifying either spiritual abundance or promulgation of the new gospel by divine agency, and by the presence of the lower tiers, commonly regarded as stylized clouds.¹⁹ The trumpet interpretation is supported not only by the shape of the best-preserved trumpet-

stone specimen, virtually complete at the temple site in Nauvoo, but also by the terminology employed by early Church leaders. The clouds of the lower tiers have been interpreted as the "clouds of error" which, in Parley P. Pratt's early Mormon hymn, "The Morning Breaks, the Shadows Flee," "disappear before the rays of truth divine."

On the other hand, William W. Phelps, an early Mormon leader, regarded the lower tiers as waves.²⁰ The "wave" interpretation opens up new possible readings—for instance, the Spirit of God upon the face of the waters at the dawn of creation, in which event the entire symbol could be interpretable as, among yet other things, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Other interpretative possibilities are the emergence of the glorified soul from the waters of life; a soul born both of the water and of the spirit; and, if one wants to push it toward Ptolemy's ancient formulation, life (in this case, life eternal) born of the conjunction of water and fire.

In view of such ambivalence in symbolic art, any, many, or all of the above suggestions, and others, are viable no matter what the presiding brethren or builders thought was happening on the capitals. And that is

just one reason why this first Mormon venture into architectural iconography has to be classed a success. With their shallow relief and slighted positions, the moonstones and starstones are perhaps less successful, but they still serve to enhance the primacy of the "celestial" order.

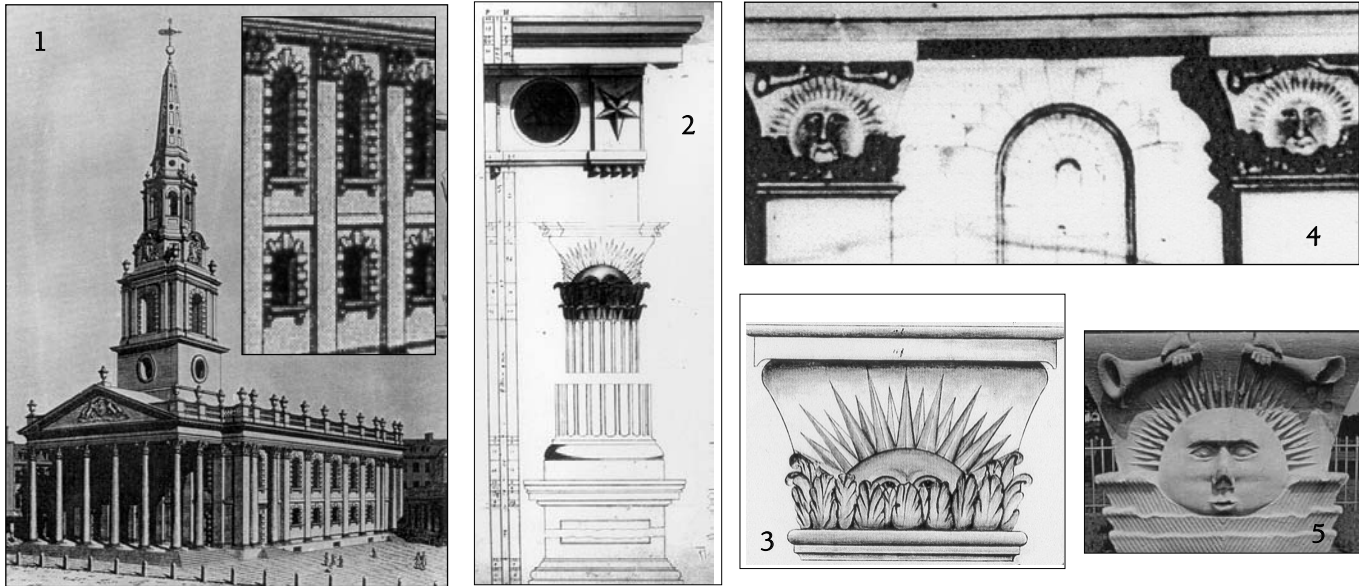
GENESIS OF THE NAUVOO ORDER

Joining Puritan gravestones to Neo-classical capitals

SUNSTONE CAPITALS, AS the conjunction of religious imagery with traditional building components, did not reach Nauvoo by a single line of descent. Headed capitals were undoubtedly known to William Weeks; and the sun-in-splendor, though never in the capital position, had occurred on the walls of stone structures through the ages. The most probable material source for the sun-in-splendor, as well as the trumpets in the Nauvoo composition, is the phenomenon of New England gravestone carving, which is thoroughly studied in Allan I. Ludwig's extraordinary work, *Graven Images*. In it, Ludwig regards suns, moons, and stars as "cosmological symbols," even linking them to a passage from Jonathan Edwards that is reminiscent of the Mormon vision of

Many interpretations of the sunstone's meaning are viable no matter what the presiding brethren or builders thought was happening on the capitals. And that is just one reason why this first Mormon venture into architectural iconography has to be classed a success.

Evolution of a Mormon Icon



LONDON'S St. Martin-in-the-Fields (1) is the principal known source for the architectural style of the Nauvoo temple. Designed in the early eighteenth century by James Gibbs, it features Roman Corinthian columns and pilasters (inset) which William Weeks and Joseph Smith altered, transformed, and recombined with New England gravestone imagery. Drawings by Weeks show parallel horizontal tiers of vertical acanthus leaves with sunrays and the upper portion of a human head peeping over them (2, 3). Later, presumably, Weeks opened a gap in the upper acanthus tier to reveal mouth, nose, and cheeks (4). Eventually, all acanthus leaves became further stylized into "clouds" or "waves," as seen in the original sunstone (5) displayed at Nauvoo (before its restoration).

heaven: "The different glory of the sun, the moon, and the stars represents the different glory of Christ and the glorified saints." The trumpet was employed by early gravestone carvers as a symbol of the resurrection.²¹ Elsewhere, it is identified as a symbol of the final judgement.²²

The principal known source for the architectural style of the temple is the widely influential London parish church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, designed in the early eighteenth century by James Gibbs utilizing Roman Corinthian capitals. The ways in which William Weeks and Joseph Smith altered, transformed, and recombined the Gibbs design (together with its capitals) and the gravestone imagery (with its counterparts in Freemasonry [see below]) appear to lie at the heart of early Mormon creativity: they reveal how the preexisting cultural stock was blended and adapted to particular Mormon needs and conceptions. Nauvoo drawings by Weeks preserved in Salt Lake City show parallel horizontal tiers of vertical acanthus leaves from a Corinthian capital and, peeping over them, the upper portions of a human head with stylized sunrays. Clearly these are early designs of sunstone capitals, in which is visible the genesis of the Nauvoo order. Next, Weeks opened a gap in the topmost acanthus tier, revealing mouth, nose, and cheeks. Finally, he converted all acanthus leaves into stylized water. From the standpoint of architectural history, the situating of a

sun-in-splendor together with trumpets in a Corinthian capital established the sunstones in the long and multifarious history of inhabited, figured, and historiated capitals, invented by Roman sculptors at the baths of Caracalla and elsewhere, and perpetuated through medieval ecclesiastical stone-carving down to later times.

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Form follows function

ALTHOUGH INFORMATION ON sunstone production is scarce, Charles Lambert and Harvey Stanley appear to have been more important than some, although others may have been similarly influential.²³ Lambert and Stanley were once thought to be the principal, or even exclusive, carvers of the sunstones. However, this assumption may be on the strength of an entry in the Clayton history stating, "The first and last of the Capitols [sic] set were cut by Charles Lambert and Harvey Stanley."²⁴ It is far more likely that Lambert carved the first capital as a prototype and that, as one of the best-prepared of the stonecutters, he then supervised latecomers and crews of lesser artisans in the production of the rest, including the others on which he himself labored. It is possible, too, that Lambert collaborated in the final shape of the

prototype, virtually redesigning it as he carved, becoming a *de facto* and *ad hoc* designer, and that is perhaps the reason he got the Prophet's fiery embrace. Since, by his own reckoning, Lambert carved only one complete capital and parts of eleven others, we have more than one reason to conclude that not all thirty capitals were cut by only two men over a period of just nine months, as has been supposed.²⁵

The idea that Lambert might have influenced the final look of the sunstones is supported by considerations of style. In his study of New England gravestones, Ludwig notes a general movement "away from volume toward line and flatness" while provincial English gravestones tended to exhibit a "sense of nascent volume."²⁶ The moonstones of Nauvoo, carved in 1842 or earlier, before the English stonecutters made their

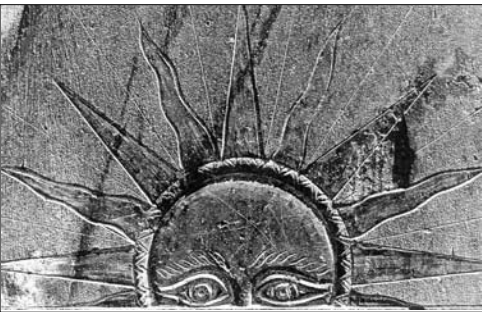
presence felt, are wholly describable in terms of line and flatness, whereas the sunstones, cut in 1844 after the arrival of Lambert, move well beyond "nascent volume" to high relief, suggesting a possible parallel in Nauvoo one hundred years later. William Weeks, the temple's main architect, was also apparently a sculptor and might have grasped the requirement of greatly increased corporeality in the capitals before the arrival of Lambert.²⁷ The radical change of style between pedestal and capital does suggest collaboration with Lambert and possibly others from outside the Puritan/Yankee New England tradition. Giving credence to the idea that Lambert and others may have had something to do with their look, Brigham Young referred to the capitals as "an evidence of great skill in the architect and ingenuity in the stone cutters."²⁸



*Sarah Allen stone, 1785
Bristol, Rhode Island*



*Susanna Jayne stone, 1776
Marblehead, Massachusetts*



*Chad Brown stone, 1792
Providence, Rhode Island*

A Confluence of Traditions

Nauvoo sunstones joined the traditions of New England gravestone carving, with their low reliefs of "suns-in-splendor" and other cosmological imagery, with the predominantly European tradition of headed and inhabited capitals carved in high relief, as needed to stand out atop large columns, pilasters, and piers.



*Inhabited capital, 13th century
Salamanca, Spain*



*Inhabited capital, 13th century
Salamanca, Spain*



*Headed capital, 6th century
Istanbul, Turkey*

Josiah Quincy's narration, published thirty-nine years after his 15 May 1844 visit with Smith at the temple site, is indispensable to the discussion of sunstone sources, although interpretations of it must vary considerably:

Near the entrance to the temple we passed a workman who was laboring upon a huge sun, which he had chiseled from the solid rock. The countenance was of the Negroid type, and it was surrounded by the conventional rays.

"General Smith," said the man, looking up from his task, "is this like the face you saw in vision?"

"Very near it," answered the Prophet, "except," (this was added with an air of careful connoisseurship that was quite overpowering) "except that the nose is just a thought too broad."²⁹

However we may like to regard the idea that Smith saw sunstone faces in a "vision" and that he might conceivably be credited with the idea to incorporate into the symbol for the "celestial degree of glory" a demi-sun with a semi-naturalistic face, the chief image was readily available to the Prophet through Freemasonry, either in his own lodge or through an early plural wife, Lucinda Morgan, widow of the murdered renegade Freemason, William Morgan.³⁰ The Masonic source is the heraldic sun-in-splendor which occurred, at least since the mid-eighteenth century, on jewels worn by lodge masters, as well as on aprons of grand masters and on those of provincial masters. These representations of the sun invariably had a human face. The meaning of these symbols for Masons is the imparting of light to others, e.g., of the Master to other members. Moon and star images, too, are Masonic symbols, often occurring together with the sun.³¹ They do not, however, refer to anything in particular, such as the Masonic degrees.³² Besides the Prophet's connection to Freemasonry, Weeks and Lambert were also Freemasons.³³

The question of Smith's participation in the design of the sunstones and of the entire temple is a fascinating one. Since a "vision," no matter how eidetic it is in the mind of the person experiencing it, can be made visual only by means of art, drawings (and possibly a maquette) were made—and none of them by Smith. The Prophet inspired and in some sense guided and approved the sunstones but certainly did not design them. And even if the vision anecdote be credited, and we should give it some status on the presumption of Smith's close participation in the entire temple process, the question of whether the face in the vision resembled the work would in all likelihood have been resolved before Quincy's visit.

What is clear is that the Temple was built in an atmosphere of consuming faith and credulity in which many participants felt they were acting according to a divine and recently re-

vealed order. Temple historian Richard Cowan summarized the role of the Prophet in the following manner: "Smith outlined the major features of the temple, and William Weeks drew up the working plans and saw that they were carried out."³⁴ And certainly the notion that Joseph was in control of the project may well reflect what many, not least the Prophet, thought was happening.³⁵ The Prophet without doubt thought himself in some sense an architect, referring as he does to "my designs."³⁶ Increase Van Deusen refers to "Weeks, under the superintendence of Joseph Smith."³⁷ J. Earl Arrington adds: "The editor of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* reported that the Prophet told him: 'I am not capacitated to build according to the world. I know nothing about architecture and all that, but it pleases me, that's the way I feel.'³⁸


Still, some facts suggest that these assessments of Smith's role may be overstated. At the project's outset, Smith solicited plans and accepted those of Weeks, which, with modifications, were implemented. A major change in the plans over which Smith seems to have had the controlling hand appears to be the supplanting of the west pediment (which had been pitched and quite conventional in early drawings) by the rectangular enlargement of the so-called "attic-story." This change increased the area available for endowment activities. And this sort of functional rather than aesthetic contribu-

tion would have been what Smith, as head "revelator," was best equipped for.³⁹ Nevertheless, the impress of Smith's genius and vision—and of his "visions"—on the mind of his followers, and thus his influence in the building of the temple, was obviously enormous. The substitution of the attic-story for the west end of the pitched roof and its pediment, for example, turned into an aesthetic statement, whether intentional or not, with repercussions in Mormon architecture, for good and for ill, down to the present. The resultant square façade, though a clear case of form following function, is doubtless a factor in the originality of the overall design.

The sunstone capitals too, with their strange and uncommon beauty, may have been influenced by the Prophet in a similar way—i.e., form following function; although in their case, the function was the joining of religious and mythographic symbols into a major specimen of new iconography. The attic-story façade, the sunstones, moonstones, and inverted starstones, must have been factors, too, in causing the temple, as Governor Ford opined, to reflect the "variable," "strange," and "incongruous" religion of its creators.⁴⁰ In truth, however, it is impossible to judge the building as a whole since we will never see anything but its replica. Still, one thing we do know of it is that the resultant sculptural ensembles remain a monument to this dimension of the new faith. And by creating in the sunstone what has become the most memorable, celebrated, and representative vestige of the millennialist/syncretist resurgence which "peaked" and exploded in Illinois (in

**"I am not
capacitated to
build according to
the world. I know
nothing about
architecture and
all that, but it
pleases me, that's
the way I feel."**

—JOSEPH SMITH

what one writer, commenting on the temple arson, has called a “pyrotechnic conclusion to the Nauvoo experiment”),⁴¹ Smith, Weeks, and others renewed, reshaped, repositied, and redefined, with uncommon corporeality, a universal ideal: reason, inspiration, clarity, and an abundance of them imparted from the other world. The hands holding the horns reach down from above like the hand of the unseen God in countless medieval paintings and sculptures; and the powerful face, if somewhat alien, is also genial and hauntingly familiar. This was accomplished without the loss of the capitals’ eschatological significance, nor of any other attendant meanings, theological or ontological. The sunstone thus perhaps surpassed allegory to become a mega-symbol. 



To comment on this essay, or to read comments by others, visit our website: <www.Sunstoneonline.com>.

NOTES

1. Wandle Mace, *Autobiography*, 3. Photocopy of Manuscript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
2. Don F. Colvin states, “It was reported to have resembled marble in appearance and hardness and was of a most excellent quality.” In Don F. Colvin, *A Historical Study of the Mormon Temple at Nauvoo, Illinois*, masters thesis (Brigham Young University, 1962), 80. Stone from more than one location may have been used in constructing the Temple. “Sonora limestone,” named for a neighboring township and mentioned in some sources, probably is not the same as that quarried in and near Nauvoo. Some surviving Temple components seem markedly different in composition from others.
3. Matthew 5:16; Joseph Smith, Epistle to the Twelve Apostles, in Laurel Andrew, *The Nineteenth-Century Temple Architecture of the Latter-day Saints*, doctoral thesis (University of Michigan, 1973), 84. See also W. W. Phelps letter to William Smith, in Cecil E. McGavin, *The Nauvoo Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1962), 52. The finish on the stone surfaces is an indication that D&C 124:2 was taken literally: “This stake . . . a cornerstone of Zion . . . shall be polished with the refinement . . . of a palace.”
4. *New York Spectator*, Nov. 9, 1844. Quoted in McGavin, 50–51.
5. McGavin, 88.
6. Thomas Rees, *Journal of Illinois State Historical Society*, 21 (Apr. 1928-Jan. 1929): 518–19.
7. Helen Whitehouse, Conversation at Ashmolean Museum, Oct. 1997. The term, “Hathoric,” pertains to architecture employing the figure of Hathor, the Egyptian cow goddess.
8. McGavin, 96.
9. Andrew, 111.
10. McGavin, 89.
11. McGavin, 90.
12. Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 389. Quincy regarded Mormonism, together with Nauvoo and Smith, as an anomaly.
13. Charles Lambert, *Autobiography*, MSS927 typescript, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 13. Lambert was prepared for his undertaking by his having recently helped “to cut ten capitals of the Ionic order” in Pocklington, Yorkshire. *Ibid.*, 8.
14. *Ibid.*, 16.
15. *Ibid.*, 14.
16. See Colvin, 35; Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 2* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1932), 7: 364; and William E. Berrett and Alma P. Burton, *Readings in LDS Church History from Original Manuscripts*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1953–58), 2:73; Andrew, 95.
17. Something of the expressiveness noted here seems lost in the new sunstone reproductions. The parted lips—slightly pouty and sensuous in the original (displayed at the Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution)—are closed. The eyebrows appear hairless.
18. Mace, 120.

19. Smith, *History of the Church*, 7:323.
20. McGavin, 52.
21. Allan I. Ludwig, *Graven Images* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 189ff.
22. See Allen D. Roberts, “Where Are the All-Seeing Eyes?: The Origin, Use and Decline of Early Mormon Symbolism,” *SUNSTONE* 4 (May/June 1979): 30.
23. William Clayton, “The Nauvoo Temple History Journal,” cited in *Doctrine of the Priesthood* 6, no.1 (Salt Lake City: Collier’s Publishing Co., 1989), 97–98. Varied sources name at least thirteen stone-sculptors who worked on the Nauvoo temple.
24. *Ibid.*, 63–64.
25. This would be a physical impossibility in the best of times, let alone in a period when Lambert, for one, was also engaged in marrying, establishing a home, and taking work on the side to secure grain due to lack of pay at the temple site. Lambert, 13.
26. Ludwig, 271.
27. Clayton, 11; see also J. Earl Arrington, “William Weeks, Architect of the Nauvoo Temple,” *BYU Studies* 19 (Spring 1979): 351. As an architect, Weeks, simply because of the volumes which the new imagery would have to supplant in the Corinthian order from which the sunstones were derived (i.e., acanthus leaves and volutes), would have likely understood the need for the sunstones to stand out in high relief.
28. *History of the Church*, 7: 324–34. Some have held the notion that early Mormonism was “Puritanism’s last gasp.” Certainly in the field of iconography in stone these capitals, together with the moon- and starstones, are construable as its last deep breath.
29. Quincy, 389.
30. See Michael W. Homer, “Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry: The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 27 (Fall 1994): 1–113, especially 13–24.
31. New England’s mystical religious tradition produced an original and rather primitive funerary art, in which carved stone “soul effigies” representing the spirits of the dead *en route* to glorification were a key invention. Neo-classicism had supplanted this phenomenon by approximately 1815. However, one version of the soul effigy innovation, the “sun-soul effigy,” has to have helped to inspire the emerging sun-in-splendor incorporated in the Nauvoo sunstones in 1844. The straight ray treatment employed in the sun-in-splendor of Freemasonry was grafted onto a peculiar visage, primitive in outlines though not in modeling. Another way of seeing this is that an image dear to the Freemasons and employed in their secret rites was greatly enlarged and turned outward (with complicating attendant imagery) while at the same time subjected to alterations of physiognomy which pulled it back toward the context of the myriad odd renderings of vernacular New England soul effigies carved during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
32. Conversations between Benson Whittle and John Ashby, Librarian, Grand Lodge, London, Oct., 1997.
33. Arrington, 359; Lambert, 2.
34. Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 50.
35. Arrington, 341.
36. *History of the Church*, 5:353.
37. McGavin, 96.
38. Arrington, 341.
39. Andrew, 91. The Prophet had undoubted visionary gifts, imagining/envisioning by native talent what he would like to see built, as does any creative artist. Still, Smith personally lacked the means to put his ideas into effect, leaving the impress of his ideas on the structure through the talents of others.
40. Ford may not have wanted to note eclecticism in architecture and doctrine as a Mormon virtue, any more than most Mormons would recognize it in themselves or their beliefs today. Nor perhaps was he able to grasp originality *per se*. But if the structure, for him, did not quite cohere, it is understandable. Perhaps even the powerful capitals, virtually starting from the walls, were part of his problem. They looked foreign and indigestible to one lacking the relevant ideological preparations, not to mention the requisite sympathy for the uncommon. Similarly, Quincy fastened on possibly mis-noted racial characteristics when he might have observed the deep eyes of a mystic in the faces of the capitals. The otherworldliness—otherorbliness—of the sunstones combines with their relative asexuality, their unmistakable high-seriousness, and their ethnic inspecificity, to give them an uncanny universality remarkable in an early attempt at iconography by a fledgling sect. But not everyone would see this, though sunstones did stand out—like one or two strange Mormon doctrines and practices.
41. *The Daily Tribune*, Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., Oct. 12, 1991, 11b.