

The GreenSpirit Logo

Michael Colebrook

We do not know what symbols are. They are mysterious entities which relate us to the world, to each other, and above all to the life of the spirit. In the existence of symbols there is contained part of the mystery of being human.

Henryk Skolimowski



In the parish church of the small town of Lostwithiel in Cornwall there is a medieval font. The bowl is a substantial hexagonal block of stone with each face carved in deep relief. On one of the faces is a man's head wearing what looks like a mitre and indeed the guidebook says that it is the head of a bishop. But he also has sprigs of leaves sprouting from the corners of the mouth and the eyes. He is obviously a Green Man, a figure found in many of the older churches in the South-West.



On the side of the font opposite to the Green Man there is a grotesque animal head with a snake draped over it. The tail of the snake extends round to the adjacent face of the font and on this panel are carved two lions. The animal's forehead is domed and carved into a clear spiral. There are too many references to the Goddess to be ignored. The spiral, the snake, the two lions and the animal itself could be a bull. What more do you need! But, this is not the real point of the story. The stone of the font is offwhite in colour with a matt finish, tinged with brown where it has been touched and

worn in use – except for the spiral on the animal's head. This has been browned and polished smooth where over the centuries people have touched and stroked it – maybe for luck? Who knows? Clearly there was something special about the spiral that spoke to them. Perhaps there was some folk memory of the time when the spiral was a meaningful and powerful symbol.

Among all the symbols and decorative motifs, the spiral can confidently be asserted to have been taken from nature, and it is of great antiquity. Perhaps surprisingly, it seems that it was the snake rather than the snail that is responsible. According to Marija Gimbutas, *'the snake and its abstracted derivative, the spiral, are the dominant motifs of the art of Old Europe [6500-4500 BCE], and their imaginative use in spiraliform design throughout the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods remained unsurpassed by any subsequent decorative style until the Minoan civilization'*. Nearer home, there is the spiral decoration of the massive threshold stone to the megalithic tomb at Newgrange in Ireland (c 3300 BCE). The continuity and breadth of distribution of the spiral both as a decorative and as a symbolic motif is very remarkable.

The snake, and by association the spiral, was associated with water (flowing and curling) and also with longevity and renewal through its apparent periodic rebirth by casting its skin. From the early Neolithic to ancient Greece the snake appears in anthropomorphic form as a Snake Goddess and subsequently the snake is commonly associated with representations of the Goddess, even making it to Eve and the Garden of Eden.

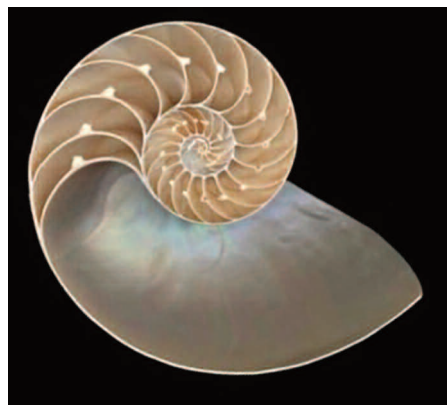
Apart from the snake, natural spirals are found in two major groups of living things: the ferns and the molluscs. Both are well represented by living forms but their main flourishing was in the distant past. The form and function of the spiral in the two groups is very different.



The unfolding fronds of ferns in the spring are my, and Erna's, favourite spirals. Buried and secure at the heart of the spiral is the growing tip of the frond. Here take place all the cell divisions that form the fully grown frond, all the subsequent unfolding and spreading is the result of the newly formed cells increasing in size.

However, it is amongst the shells of gastropod molluscs that one finds the spiral in an enormous variety of shapes and colours and patterns. The shells grow with the animals and the spiral form is caused by an asymmetry of the growth, faster on the outside than the inside, the results are beautiful creations of natural engineering.

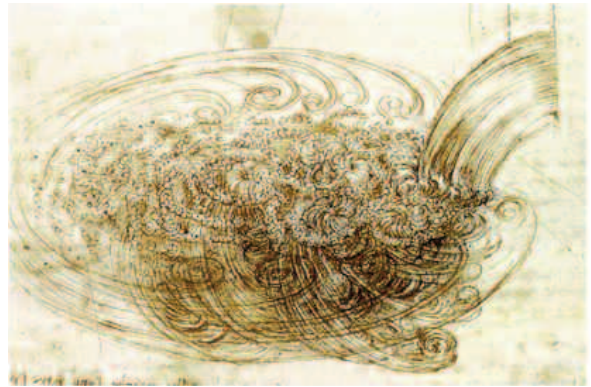
When it came to thinking about a new logo for GreenSpirit, the spiral seemed a good candidate. The inspiration was due to Victor Anderson and he originally proposed an ammonite. These are molluscs that flourished throughout much of the Mesozoic era and there are no living representatives. In spite of the spiral shell, they are not gastropods, they are members of a group which we don't think of having shells at all, the cephalopods — the squid and octopus group. On thinking it over, I chose a shell from a living relative of the ammonites — *Nautilus*.



There are just seven species which live in shallow waters in the South Pacific. Their shells are divided into a succession of chambers, the animal lives in the open chamber, into which it can withdraw for protection. Nautilus first appeared about 500 million years ago and despite having heavy impenetrable shells they were able to hang motionless in the water. Their secret was a shell lined with gas-filled chambers which gave them neutral buoyancy*.

Probably the most striking feature of the spiral as a pattern is its dynamism, especially when drawn by Leonardo da Vinci in his studies of flowing water. In water the flow is towards the centre, in ferns the flow is from the centre outwards in a unfolding motion. In *Nautilus* the flow takes the form of a continuous expansion round and round the spiral. This highlights the second feature of the spiral: it combines the cyclical and the expansive. In this it reflects the creative and evolutionary processes of the universe. At its heart everything tends to be cyclical — 'seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night' — but emerging from these

cycles is change and growth. Merged together they result in the unfolding stories of individual beings and of the universe as a whole. The interplay between the cyclical and the linear aspects of time, in intimate interdependence, plays a key role in the story of the universe. In her latest book *Green Space, Green Time*, Connie Barlow also sees this relationship expressed in the form of a spiral, *“The evolutionary epic is first and foremost a celebration of the arrow of time, an irreversible parade of bio-logical novelty upon novelty. More, it is a tale of enrichment. Unicellular life gives rise to multicellular life; life in the sea creeps out onto the land; prostrate land plants explore the vertical and forests are born . . . All these innovations yield an escalating torrent of creativity.*



“Gaia, in contrast, evokes the power of the cycle, the ceaseless spinning of nutrient cycles that keep this planet fit for life. A plant extracts carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and binds it in carbohydrate; a fungus or microbe or animal later feeds on that molecule and returns carbon dioxide to the sky. Photosynthesis, respiration; photosynthesis, respiration-eternal movement and eternal return.

“Gaia as the cycle of time, evolution as the arrow of time: these are the obvious pairings. . . I now understand why the spiral is such a powerful image. The circle represents the regulatory triumph of homeostasis. It also calls forth the spinning of the matter cycles. The spiral view, however, blends the circle of stability, of sameness, with the arrow of evolution, a developing biosphere. It’s the synthesis of the two that gives us an even more beautiful symbol of what Earth history is all about.”

What better symbol could there be for GreenSpirit, combining a very ancient and archetypal symbol associated with immanent divinity with a symbol which reflects the latest ideas about evolution and the unfolding universe.

Reference:

* Peter Ward. Chambers of secrets (*NewScientist*, 2650,5 April 2008), pp.40-43.