

Seal of Pas

The Urth list — 10 messages, 5 voices, 28 Oct 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6092>

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Lee Berman — 28 Oct 2011, 13:04

Gerry Quinn: >Gerry Quinn: Bah, it's just a credit card type number. The only point is it has low entropy,

but it doesn't encode anything. Stop thinking everything is overloaded with significance

Ack!!! now I am issuing orders to myself! I think you forgot to add "Humbug!" Gerry.

Marc Aramini: After messing with it for a while, it very well might be something of that sort.

I don't think failure to solve is good enough evidence to dismiss this mystery. Not this one. The numbers are given to us right in the text in a unique arrangement and Silk makes the sign of addition

over them. Where else does Wolfe do something like this? How could it not be significant? I've messed

with it quite a bit over the past few years myself with no success though some of my attempts were

interesting. For a long while I was trying the cryptograph puzzle technique that Wolfe introduced

in 5HoC. No success.

Now, my best guess is that there is an association to the connection that Revelation makes between the Seventh Seal and the 12 Tribes of Israel. When that Seal is broken, at the second coming of Christ, representatives from the 12 Tribes who have been long sealed away, will appear in two groups of 144,000 to repopulate the earth after the Armageddon. (slight variant interpretations exist)

The Pas seal being broken and stored Urth bodies being released to the Whorl seems awfully similar

to the Bible story. But so far I haven't been able to add the numbers grouped in a way that produces

the significant number. I've even used the warped math that Maytera Rose gives us in the first chapter

of Nightside but no success yet. Perhaps someone else can do it.

Gerry Quinn — 28 Oct 2011, 15:07 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: Lee Berman

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Marc Aramini: After messing with it for a while, it very well might be something of that sort.

I don't think failure to solve is good enough evidence to dismiss this mystery. Not this one. The numbers are given to us right in the text in a unique arrangement and Silk makes the sign of addition

over them. Where else does Wolfe do something like this? How could it not be significant?

How could they *not* be in a unique arrangement? And Silk would have done the same regardless of the numbers.

From a naturalistic perspective, the numbers shouldn't have any significance that we would understand in the story: they should encode the contents and/or date of storage, serial numbers etc. Random numbers would not look realistic in such a context, so Wolfe doesn't use them — he uses numbers that look compatible with such a meaning.

If they have a deeper significance, it is a game that Wolfe is playing with his readers, and he hasn't set it up very well.

- Gerry Quinn

James Wynn — 28 Oct 2011, 15:35 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 10/28/2011 10:07 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:
How could they *not* be in a unique arrangement?

Horn and Nettle could have related that Silk saw a seal with a series of numbers. The fact that they related those precise numbers could imply that Silk told them what the numbers were, and that he could precisely recall them.

Gerry Quinn — 28 Oct 2011, 15:43 · in reply to James Wynn

From: James Wynn

On 10/28/2011 10:07 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:
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Horn and Nettle could have related that Silk saw a seal with a series of numbers. The fact that they related those precise numbers could imply that Silk told them what the numbers were, and that he could precisely recall them.

Or that Horn and Nettle made them up. They can't know every detail that is related anyway. I agree that Wolfe had the option of not citing specific numbers, and that the citing of numbers opens the possibility that they have some secret extra-narrative significance. But they don't have to be significant.

- Gerry Quinn

Gwern Branwen — 28 Oct 2011, 16:06 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On Fri, Oct 28, 2011 at 11:07 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:
From a naturalistic perspective, the numbers shouldn't have any significance that we would understand in the story: they should encode the contents and/or date of storage, serial numbers etc.

It has been a while, but wasn't there just one sequence of numbers which made up a Seal of Pas? If the sequence doesn't change, then none of those 3 suggestions would work (serial numbers which don't change are not useful; it's unlikely that every single chamber would have been sealed at the same time (especially since a datestamp that big ought to be accurate down to really small units like nanoseconds) or would have the same contents).

The Seal is a little frustrating; I had tried looking at it as ASCII and, I think, an EBCDIC, but nothing popped out.

Lee Berman — 28 Oct 2011, 17:03 · follows Gwern Branwen

Gerry Quinn: How could they *not* be in a unique arrangement?

Gerry Quinn: I agree that Wolfe had the option of not citing specific numbers

Yes, you have answered your own question. And Wolfe most often takes that route relying on a description of "gnostic" or "teratoid" symbols non-specific adjectives to convey to his readers that the protagonist is seeing symbols he (and we) are not expected to understand the specifics of, only the nature of.

the citing of numbers opens the possibility that they have some secret extra-narrative significance. But they don't have to be significant.

Well, this is literature. Nothing *has* to be anything. But Wolfe's departure from his usual way of describing alien symbols seems pretty significant to me.

If they have a deeper significance, it is a game that Wolfe is playing with his readers, and he hasn't set it up very well.

This wouldn't be the first example of that. UotNS was not planned when Wolfe wrote BotNS. Therefore Wolfe expected all the mystery solutions revealed in UotNS to be soluble without that book. But they aren't. At least not by the readers who have published their interpretations in books or online. Plus we have the example of whether VRT replaced Dr. Marsch. Hotly debated until Gene Wolfe set the record straight in two separate interviews.

Gwern Branwen: It has been a while, but wasn't there just one sequence of numbers which made up a Seal of Pas?

Yes. But there was mention by Hammerstone of many other seals which had already been broken. A random serial number doesn't make sense for Wolfe to devote this much attention to. I think it has some sort of Earthly or perhaps Urthly significance that we are supposed to figure out. I still think the Bible and the Seventh Seal and the 12 x 12,000 Tribes of Israel is a likely suspect. Perhaps not to be ignored is that there are words also.

5553 8783 4223 9700 34
2221 0401 1101 7276 56
SEALED FOR THE MONARCH

Gerry Quinn — 28 Oct 2011, 17:18 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: Gwern Branwen

On Fri, Oct 28, 2011 at 11:07 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:
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We are only told the sequence on one such seal. I think we are to infer that all the seals are different. Silk later finds the dust from a broken seal of a cabinet that had contained human embryos, but he does not encounter, or at least doesn't notice, any other intact seals.

The seal had about 36 digits. I just interpret it as the equivalent of a barcode; we don't know what information was on it but we can guess what *kind* of information was there.

- Gerry Quinn

David Stockhoff — 28 Oct 2011, 17:40 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 10/28/2011 1:18 PM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: Gwern Branwen <mailto:gwern0 at gmail.com>

On Fri, Oct 28, 2011 at 11:07 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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that we would understand in the story: they should encode the contents and/or date of storage, serial numbers etc.

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- Gerry Quinn

It strikes me that a large part of the number's "significance" is that it is a sign of "our" era and of computer-generated IDs.

Gerry Quinn — 28 Oct 2011, 17:44 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: Lee Berman

Gerry Quinn: How could they *not* be in a unique arrangement?

Gerry Quinn: I agree that Wolfe had the option of not citing specific numbers

Yes, you have answered your own question. And Wolfe most often takes that route relying on a description of "gnostic" or "teratoid" symbols non-specific adjectives to convey to his readers that the protagonist is seeing symbols he (and we) are not expected to understand the specifics of, only the nature of.

And if he next turns his hand to rewriting BotNS as a graphic novel, what will he do then? He will draw appropriate symbols, I think.

In text, however, it is easy to cite numbers, while it is hard to describe such a teratoid symbol exactly. So it is not surprising that they do not.

If they have a deeper significance, it is a game that Wolfe is playing with his readers, and he hasn't set it up very well.

This wouldn't be the first example of that. UotNS was not planned when Wolfe wrote BotNS. Therefore Wolfe expected all the mystery solutions revealed in UotNS to be soluble without that book. But they aren't. At least not by the readers who have published their interpretations

in books or online. Plus we have the example of whether VRT replaced Dr. Marsch. Hotly debated until Gene Wolfe set the record straight in two separate interviews.

Those seem like a different kind of puzzle (if you want to use that term).

Gwern Branwen: It has been a while, but wasn't there just one sequence of numbers which made up a Seal of Pas?

Yes. But there was mention by Hammerstone of many other seals which had already been broken. A random serial number doesn't make sense for Wolfe to devote this much attention to.

He didn't devote all that much attention to it. He used three lines to illustrate the nature of the seal. A lot less than is devoted to Maytera Marble's lamb chops, or the technology of taluses.

I think it has some sort of Earthly or perhaps Urthly significance that we are supposed to figure out. I still think the Bible and the Seventh Seal and the 12 x 12,000 Tribes of Israel is a likely suspect. Perhaps not to be ignored is that there are words also.

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Words with a fairly obvious interpretation. (I suppose one could consider them as suggesting that Typhon will return, but the interpretation that the vaults were sealed under his orders works fine too.)

One could also argue that there is a hidden meaning attached to the numbers being meaningless, combined with Silk's reverent reaction to them. If the numbers were meaningful, Silk would be responding to a true deity, his author, and so his reverence would be appropriate.

- Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn — 28 Oct 2011, 18:20 · in reply to David Stockhoff

From: David Stockhoff

It strikes me that a large part of the number's "significance" is that it is a sign of "our" era and of computer-generated IDs.

Yes, that too: or at least it symbolises the technological society of Typhon's era, rather than the post-technological society of the Whorl in its current state.

- Gerry Quinn