

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

650 Fisgard Street, Victoria, BC V8W 1R6

This paper was included with a notice of VLER in 1997. The Victoria Lodge of Education and Research acknowledges with thanks the author, W Bro. David Wray and the Western Australia Lodge of Research for the following presentation.

But were they Freemasons?

by W Bro. David Wray PAGDC

Presented to the Western Australia Lodge of Research at East Perth on Tuesday, 29 October 1996

ALL PAPERS HAVE to be started somewhere; and for a particular reason. Whatever the reason may be the object is to inflict one's own point of view on one's readers or an audience, probably captive, and hope that it is of sufficient interest to warrant discussion and questions at its conclusion. The genesis of this paper is the apparent lack of understanding to be found within our ranks concerning the origin of Speculative Freemasonry.

It could be said "Here comes a know-it-all who thinks he is going to give us all the answers". This is not so. The answers to many questions which exist within the annals of Freemasonry, are sometimes non-existent insofar as a positive conclusion may be required.

The student of Freemasonry must be able to differentiate between what is allegorical and that which is legendary; to test the numerous theories of our origin against one's own beliefs and thereby formulate a personal thesis. There is no excuse, whatsoever, for masonic ignorance; our libraries are crammed with books just waiting for someone to read them. Invariably, there is someone available to assist in avenues of research.

Knowledge like a brick wall, can be built upon once one has a sound foundation and as the bricklayer would not normally put a brick of a different colour or texture into a wall so the seeker of knowledge must be able to differentiate between various building blocks. From the study of facts one constructs a theory. As you are aware, a theory is a supposition put forward to explain something or speculate.

It may be necessary to qualify the observations that will be made throughout this paper by stating quite definitely and unequivocally, that there is no intention to denigrate in any way whatsoever the genuine tenets, precepts, examples, rules and regulations of Freemasonry. The search for the authentic sometimes takes unexpected directions.

Let us start our search for meaning and understanding with 'legendary history'. You may consider this statement to be a conflation of terms. The period which will be referred to, is a time before we had learned to record events; a time when man needed an explanation for the unknowable. Nature moved in mysterious ways and there had to be answers to these mysteries.

Most of us would have heard of Nimrod, Moses and Noah being referred to as 'Our Ancient Grand Masters'. This statement is neither fact nor theory at its best. It is only legend.

Mythology has always been of prime importance to mankind, for without the myths of the past there would be no romance, no tales of heroes, no fighting dragons, no Prince searching for the unattainable, no knight in shining armor rescuing damsels in distress. Homer would not have written Iliad or Odyssey, they being poems retold by minstrels and dating back a further six centuries or so. It is in the fertile mind alive with imagination, endeavouring to put dreams into reality that the greatest stories originate.

Prior to recorded history there is no certainty, only wonderful legends from which we are able to build those moral and ethical standards, which are of paramount importance to us all in today's society. Even in recorded history, consideration should be given to the possible bias of the individual recording the events. One need only watch today's television news to observe how 'facts' change from channel to channel.

Freemasonry is a character building organization imbued with a unique method of teaching morality or probity. It has no equal. But is that all it is? Is it an organization making men exemplary? Or is it an exemplary organization maintained by exemplary men?

There have been 'masons' from when man first learned to place one shaped stone on top of another. Colloquially, he could and would have been called anything other than 'mason'. He may have been identified by a symbol, as in ancient Egypt or maybe China, but by whatever means he was identified.¹

It would have been his trade as a builder for which he would have been categorized, not the fact that he may have been an honest man who treated his mate and offspring with gentleness and consideration. He was not however a Freemason; only a builder or block layer.

As time passed he found that chipping one stone with another to get a required shape and size was long and labourious. The man in the next valley had discovered quite by accident, that if he put certain rocks in the fire they melted becoming fluid. When they cooled they hardened and if the edges were rubbed on another stone, could be fashioned into a tool that had a sharp edge which could be used in many ways even to shape soft rocks.

Our man had discovered that he now possessed a 'chisel' and this enabled him to work much faster and to be far more accurate. He was not however a Freemason, only a builder who had found an easier way to prepare his materials of trade. We could continue this subject of the evolution of tools for the building trade ad infinitum, but always with the same conclusion, 'There were no Freemasons, only builders or stone cutters.'

There have been many names that have come down to us over the centuries associated with the building trade, whether it be the Pyramids, the Parthenon, the Coliseum or any other of the many ancient structures that needed at some time, the skills of men expert in design and construction and able to shape blocks of stone and maneuver them into place: but still no Freemasons.

THE TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM

If the Bible is to be taken as the only source of historical information - and bear in mind, there is a school of thought propounding the theory that this great book was probably not written until somewhere in the region of the fourth or even the second century BCE, the various books again being lost for many years more until collated by Flavious Josephus and published in 73 CE - we may deduce that the temple was built not for altruistic considerations, but for political expediency.

Solomon, who had dichotomized the nation with his sentence of death on Adonijah his brother, had then to attempt to repair the rift within his kingdom: and what better way than to build a house to the Lord. The fact that his palace was much more lavish than the Temple appears to have gone unnoticed by the people. One can speculate as to why there appears to be no trace of this magnificent palace.

One may speculate on the circumstances which surrounded the building of the Temple, the story however is a good one. It has many illustrations of wisdom, also the lack of it, and could be considered a record of the many problems assailing the people of the time. How they overcame them and how they compounded them is also important.

One may further speculate whether the Hiramic legend is a carry-on from the morality plays, which immediately preceded the Shakespearean era. The virtues were personalized by actors, where presumably good always outsmarted evil because Mother Church decreed this to be a fact.

One may speculate even further as to whether the Temple was situated in Jerusalem or indeed at Megiddo, where modern archaeologists have made, and continue to make, many important discoveries.

But was King Solomon a Freemason? He was not. He was a visionary who wanted his people to prosper under one God and he put into practice the ideas he had inherited from his father David. The same can be said of Hiram of Tyre. His was a commercial enterprise. He had the timber required for the Palace and the Temple. Jerusalem stood at the cross-roads of the caravan routes and whatever friendly relationship that could be fostered was worth more than gold. He also was not a Freemason.

We must now consider the other Hiram. There has been so much research into the identity of this man who is the central figure of our ritual. Without Hiram or Hiram Abif, Aviv or Avi, we would have no ceremony. But was he a Freemason? I think not, but he was the centre of the allegory about the man who made the supreme sacrifice for his principles, and as such, he must be the most important part of our teaching.

‘THE FOUR CROWNED ONES’

The ‘Quatuor Coronati’: This is a part of the ‘Masonic Legend’ that one does not hear very much of in the Western Australian Constitution. They are nevertheless part of the ethical history of Freemasonry who as did Hiram, sacrifice everything for a principle.

They were Craftsmen, or ‘stone-squarers’ by trade and were named Claudius, Castorius, Simphorianus and Nicostratus. They defied the Emperor Diocletian when he ordered them to make an image a statue of Aesculapius. By now another had been added to the dissenters, one Simplicius. On Diocletian’s order, they were stripped and beaten with scorpions - leather thongs with pieces of lead or metal at the ends a number of which were attached to a handle - then they were placed in lead coffins and thrown into the Tiber. It is difficult to understand the antipathy of these individuals to making a statue of one who, as a doctor and healer, had been a great asset to the society of his time and was in fact a ‘good god’.

There is more to the legend which the enthusiastic student may wish to research, but for the purpose of this paper, the event took place on 8 November 302 CE and was celebrated as the Festival of the Quatuor Coronati into the seventeenth century, during which time they were considered the Patron Saints of masons. Ironically, four soldiers were also put to death two years later for taking the same stance. I do not believe, however, that they became the Patron Saints of soldiers.

But they were not Freemasons. They were builders and soldiers, who would not be coerced away from their principles and eventually paid the ultimate price. ²

You will have observed that we have been advancing through the ages, and with that advance there was of necessity, a continual improvement in the technology of tools and implements of the trade. We now proceed to the late eighth, early ninth century.

KING ATHELSTAN

He was also known as Athelstone. This ‘worthy Kyng’, occupies a unique position in English history. His name appears in the Regius, Cooke and G.L. 1 MSS. He was the son of Edward the Elder and grandson of Alfred the Great and lived during a time - [c. 895 - 939] when the land

was in a turmoil. There was nothing unusual about this, because the Norsemen and others had for centuries raided the countryside. Some had settled and interbred with the resident Engles, Saxon, Jutes, Celts *et cetera*, the outcome being obvious. Athelstan succeeded to the thrones of Wessex and Mercia in 924 and not without opposition. He annexed the kingdom of Northumbria and then made tributary to himself the kings of Wales, Cumbria and Scotland.

Constantine of Scotland later conspired with the Norsemen against him and in the subsequent battle of Brunnanburh [937], in which five kings and seven earls were slain, Athelstan emerged the victor. Athelstan, unlike warrior kings before him, did not put the leaders of the defeated army to the sword, but sent them back whence they had come after having entered into a compact of mutual defense. Athelstan, was the first king to unite England under one ruler. ²

His wisdom was more than equal to that of Solomon. He was a leader of men and the pity is that he did not live beyond 939, aged 44 years: Perhaps his second greatest claim to fame was his policy of holding parliament in different cities in his domain and, so far as we are concerned, he was 'the friend of masons' because he promulgated many buildings.

In the 'Regius Poem', reference to which will be made later - the MS from which our antient charges are taken, we have the following references:

- i. The Craft came to England in his day. (*i.e.* Athelstan's day)
- ii. He built halls and bowers [*i.e.* dwellings] and churches.
- iii. He called an assembly of divers lords [dukes, earls and barons], knights, squires and the great burghers 'of that city'.
- iv. He gave them statutes which are to be confirmed by the king [his successor] at every assembly.

There are twelve other references in the Cooke and G.L. 1 MSS, once again, possibly only of interest to the student of Freemasonry. ³ It is evident from the history of the day that Athelstan or Athelstone as he was also known, promoted the building of many churches, Cathedrals, castles and numerous other structures around his kingdom.

But was he a Freemason? He was not. He was primarily a soldier, an astute politician, possibly an economist, but essentially, an instigator of buildings.

The Norman conquest was a great period of change for conquered and conquerors alike; armies were leaving for the crusades and possibly the most important event was the signing of 'Magna Charta', which is still the corner stone of British law. It was also a period of continued building in the Norman style of architecture, of which there are many examples still to be seen. There are many theorists who believe this to be the soil from which Freemasonry sprang; the several orders of knighthood originating in the Crusades.

Can we say they were Freemasons? I think not.

THE REGIUS POEM, C. 1390

The Antient Landmarks of Freemasonry have always been very tenuous. However, this MS, written at the end of the fourteenth century, author unknown, is synonymous with Masonry, whether 'Operative' or 'Speculative'. The question of whether indeed it had any connection with Speculative Masonry, is highly improbable and in the main, academic.

It is from this period of English history, that the theories on our origins began to emerge. Historically, England was emerging from a period of economic growth after having been victorious in the battles of Crecy, [1346] and Pointiers [1356] almost bringing the conquest of the whole of France. These triumphs were to be the last pageantry of 'Merrie England' and the 'Age of Chivalry, and were soon followed by a quite astonishing reversal of fortune.⁴

The Church however was far wealthier than the Crown and it was at this time that the fire damage to the monastic buildings of Westminster Abbey [1298] was rebuilt, a hundred years or more after the event.

At York, there are, apart from the Abbey, sixteen mediaeval churches still in use and one can well understand why York holds such an important place in masonic legend. Ely is another example of the work in progress at this time, along with many other examples still in existence.

But was there any evidence of Freemasonry?

Perhaps not, only Craftsmen and Masters. The Craftsmen were those who prepared the material, assisted by labourers and prentices, and they were overseen by Masters employed by the Church and others, acting as 'general foremen'.

It is also from this mediaeval period, that the theory of Freemasonry originating from European Trade Guilds began to circulate. This theory would need a lot of hard evidence for the writer to be convinced, particularly as the records of 'The London Masons Company', go back as far back as 1356, and have never shown any connection, other than by chance, with Freemasonry. I understand, this situation persists to this day.

THE REFORMATION - A THEORY

That Freemasonry originated from cells of catholic monks forced to hide alter the persecution of Roman Catholics by Henry VIII. This theory has been propounded by a very learned Freemason, Cyril Batham, and is as valid as any other theory.⁵

17TH CENTURY ROYALISTS - A THEORY

There is yet another theory that Speculative Freemasonry had its beginnings in the early seventeenth century and sprung from covert groups of Royalists who had to have a reason to meet together in Cromwell's England. This is a period from which very little in MS form emerges.

We know that Elias Ashmole was a Freemason, that he was initiated in 1646 together with Colonel Henry Mainwaring, possibly a close relative because his wife was also a Mainwaring. The ceremony took place in the Warrington Lodge on 16 October 1646. This information is contained in his diary where the term Free Mason is used for the first time on record.

There is not another mention of 'Free Masonry' in his diary for 36 years, when he records receiving a summons to attend lodge at Masons' Hall, London and an entry the following day recording those members in attendance and how well they had dined.

But was he a Freemason? This would appear to be the first positive evidence we have. What happened to Colonel Mainwaring and the members of the lodge we do not know, but what we do know is that Ashmole was a Royalist, that he had been a soldier and that in 1645 he had moved to Oxford, which was later a Royalist stronghold. There he became one of the gentlemen of the ordnance, later entering Brasenose College, studying natural philosophy, mathematics and astronomy. He died in 1692. ⁶

This was also a period during which many changes were made in England. The 'Mother of Parliaments' was created. The 'Dutch war' depleted the Royal Exchequer. The 'Black Death' struck. It did not choose between prince or pauper. All were at risk. This was followed by the 'Great Fire' of 1666, which, whilst finishing the last remnants of the plague, must also have destroyed very many small personal libraries.

The moral turpitude of this period may also have had a great influence on those who deplored the standards that had become the norm. Perhaps the middle level of society cried, enough! We must have a society that recognizes a level of integrity and moral standards that will benefit all. Perhaps they were the leaders we were born to follow and in some way propel their standards before us.

There are many more theories on the origin of Freemasonry, all are equally valid and if one was proved beyond any shadow of doubt to be the only explanation, Freemasonry would be the loser; we would then be devoid of anything on which to speculate. ⁶

We have now reached that point in our history when we can say, why? I cannot believe as my friend RW Bro. Carver would have us, that it was because society was going through a period of deprivation and depredation. Are we not told "The poor always ye have with you"? This fact is shown very clearly in some inner suburbs of our city of Perth today, and indeed in every other city one can name, where the poor join in mutual support. These are, whether one likes them or not, the facts of life

I am sure that the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth heralded an age of enlightenment. The Royal Society was flourishing, and we have ample evidence of this; the sciences were being opened into new fields of research; literature was reaching new heights as printing and printers became more proficient and people more literate; navigators were traveling far and wide in search of new discoveries and the medical sciences were stirring. The new 'Man About Town' was looking to clubs and male societies for his relaxation; and what better place to be than at one's lodge, where one could enact a moral teaching and afterwards join with one's friends in a glass of ale and a meal.

This may appear simplistic, but are not all the best ideas simple ones? I would inquire of each and every Freemason, is that not the formula you follow when going to lodge? Are you not seeking the companionship of others with a similar moral outlook after, hopefully, having passed on to a candidate the fruits of your studies?

Finally I have to state, quite emphatically; it is my firm belief that to plan for the future, one should have a thorough knowledge of the past. We must be able to reconcile masonic events of a bygone era with the social changes occurring at that time.

So I say to you, let us enrich our minds with the events of the past that we may, hopefully, make the future something that we can be proud of.

Bibliography

1. Dr. Chetwode Crawly, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*. vol. XXVII part 3.
2. C. Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings*. 1967.
3. RW Bro. S.C Aston, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*. vol. 99.
4. W Bro. A.C.F. Jackson, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*. vol. 89.
5. R.W.Bro. Cyril Batham. *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*. vol. 106.
6. *New Age Encyclopedia*. 1933.

Authors note: My appreciation goes to W Bro. Erg Drown, who persuaded me to write something, W Bro. Peter Verbal for his comments, and VW Bro. Couch for his time and interest in correcting my draft and also his encouragement.