

THE ROYAL ARK MARINER DEGREE

The ultimate background of this Degree is more interesting than that of any other in Freemasonry. How could it be otherwise when we consider that its Ritual is based upon a Historical occurrence which happened 6000 years ago.

As far as Noah's Flood is concerned, the spade of the Archaeologist was to prove that it was a historical occurrence. Between 1923-1929 from the digs of this period it was proved that the flood covered the entire area of what we call Mesopotamia, reaching almost to the source of the Euphrates, an area estimated by Woolley to have been 4,000 square miles.

Having shown that a great flood occurred in Mesopotamia in 400 B.C. Is there any corresponding proof that the story of Noah is also historically true. The answer is 'No', competent surveyors have estimated that the displacement of the Ark or such a vessel would have been 36,000 tons displacement.

50 years following the Norman Conquest, the system of Craft Guilds representing the principal trades was becoming highly organised. They eventually took over the Mystery Plays, which were to be a notable feature of Gild life for many years. They started early in the 13th century and lasted into the 16th Century. The Mystery Plays concerned with Noah were performed annually at several towns throughout the Country.

In the first known M.S. Constitution, there occurred on line 537 a passing reference to Noah and the flood. From the Cooke M.S. every Masonic Constitution contains allusions to Noah, not however to the flood and the Ark, but to finding two great Pillars inscribed with the Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Coming to Andersons 1723 B. of C., page 3, we find "Noah the 9th from Seth was commanded and directed by God to build the Great Ark which, though of wood, was certainly fabricated by Geometry according to the Rules of Masonry". Again, "Noah and his three sons, Japhet, Ham

and Shem all Masons true brought with them over the Flood the Traditions and Arts of the Anté-Diluvians and amply communicated them to their growing Offsprings.

It is interesting that all Masonic Constitutions agree that the Pillars were discovered by Noah after the flood. In Andersons' second B. of C. 1738, we read "Noachida or Sons of Noah - the first name of Masons according to the old tradition.

In the first Ancient Charge we find "A Man is obliged by his teniere to observe the moral Law as a true Noahxhida and later in the same charge is a reference to "The Three Great Articles of Noah" which are believed to be 1. to abstain from Idolatry. 2. to honour Gods Holly Name. 3. To commit no murder.

As in neither the 1723 B. of C., nor in the Bible is there the slightest indication that Hrams death was of the least interest, it seems that in the earliest days of G.L. the Noah story was more important than the Hiramic Legend.

The Royal Arch Mariners.

At the time of the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge in London in 1717, the Ritual was very different to what it is now. No official record is in existence and we owe such knowledge as we have to the various exposures.

A Third Degree was not in existence and it was some years before our tri-gredal system had become sufficiently stabilised to be the basis for many different workings throughout the Country. By the time this had come about and the Ritual of the R.A. had been similarly dealt with we arrive somewhere about the year 1730.

During the next fifty years a number of new degrees made their appearance. It would seem that certain brethren - keen ritualists and symbolists - become imbued with this pastime and bent their energies and their creative abilities to fabricating new rituals. Unhappily in every case these men remained anonymous. Moreover, they left no record of their labours, which must have been considerable, for the

degrees, when introduced, were beautifully finished productions; again they left no indication of their own interpretation of the symbols they had used.

One of these was that of the Royal Ark Mariner.

In the statutes of the self styled Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners produced in 1871, there occurs a long story of the Origin of the Degree. In it we read "It has been discovered that in 1772, a Grand Lodge was re-constituted; again "This Grand Lodge has been in existence down to last year 1870 and the Warrant has been transmitted from one to another" and yet again "In London, it has been worked from the year 1772 and long previously to the present time".

These statements are unsupported by any evidence and one is constrained to ask certain questions:-

1. When and whom was it discovered that a Grand Lodge had been re-constituted?
2. From what source or body did this re-constitution come.
3. Would it not have been more convincing if the names of the "one and another" to whom the Warrant had been transmitted, had been given.

In the 1871 Statutes great stress is laid upon the importance of this Warrant by the so called Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners. The story in the Statutes says "This Warrant of Charter sanctioned by the Grand Lodge of England under the old Constitutions before the Union in 1813 is dated November 1793, and informs us that H.R.H. the Duke of Clarence had been pleased to accept the Office of Grand Commander of the Order and is signed by several distinguished masons of the period. Seals are appended to it and it is considered by those who have seen it to be a curious and valuable document.

Curious it certainly is, but valuable only as evidence of the vivid imagination of the compiler. Close scrutiny reveals, that it has been tampered with, amended or mutilated in at least five places.

It is after inspection impossible to avoid the conclusion that this Warrant is a fabrication with two seals extracted from other sources and stuck on it. There is no evidence that the Duke of Clarence was ever associated with the Ark Mariner Degree, for in other reliable sources he is described as head of the R.A.

The first authentic record of the Royal Ark Mariner Degree is found in the reference in A.Q.C. Vol. XVII page 59. "1790 William Boyce took all the Degrees of Red Cross also the Royal Ark Mariner". This refers to the K.T. Camp of Antiquity No.1 at Bath and makes it virtually certain that the Degree was known before 1790.

From 1800 - 1871 when the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons assumed the protection and control of the Royal Ark Mariner Degree, meetings of Mariners were held under the sanction of Craft Lodges or more rarely K.T. Encampments and sporadic attempts were made to resuscitate the Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners. It seems proper at this stage to ask the question of when the Degree was first introduced. Various suggestions have been made and several periods have been put forward, but without evidence.

The 1790 reference to the K.T. Encampment of Antiquity No.1. in Bath giving William Boyce the degree of Ark Mariner suggests that it was well known in 1790.

Lastly Rev. Covey Crump's reference to Portsmouth in 1780 cannot be lightly discarded. It seems possible that the Mariner Degree could have been written by an unknown Author between 1760-1790. But we do not know the answer and in all probability never will.

1. 1802 The seal of a Lodge is described thus:- Royal Ark Mariners Lodge No. 258 Norwich. Lewis Engraver 1802.
2. The seal of Perserverance Lodge for the R.A.M. Degree 294 until 1814 ; 374 from 1814-1832 and 258 1832-1863.
3. Liverpool. Thomas Ashcroft R.W.M. of Mariners Lodge No.362.
4. 1801, eight brethren were elevated to the degree of R.A.M. in Chapter of Friendship 257 Portsmouth.

There are many examples to the year 1850 which serve to show that Ark Masonry was still alive, but for want of central direction it was practised sparadically and spread over the Country. There is no doubt it was active in the North and N.E. part of England.

In 1843 an attempt was made by a Bro. Dorrington to revive the Grand Lodge of Royal Ark Mariners, without success. Never the less many years later he was responsible for initiating the real revival of the Degree in 1870.

In May of that year St. Marks Lodge of M.M.M. originally of the Scottish Constitution, but now uner the English Constitution, held a meeting of a R.A.M. Lodge which was reported in the "freemason" of the 7th May, 1870.

In June 1871 the Grand Master announced in G.L. that he had taken the Royal Ark Mariner Degree under his protection. He was od the opinion that the Degree could be conferred in any regular Mark Lodge; but was later convinced that it would be in the best interests of both Degrees to be kept seperate. The necessary arrangements were made, and the administration of the Mariners Degree came under Mark Grand Lodge, its affairs being regulated by the Grand Masters Royal Ark Council composed of all members of the General Board who were Past Commanders.

Having come under the stable guidance of Mark Grand Lodge the Royal Ark Mariner Degree has made steady progress. Between 1871-1879 Twenty lodges received Warrants. Today there are ~~approx~~ ⁷⁷⁷ 746 Royal Ark Mariner Lodges.

In this country all Royal Ark Mariner Lodges are attached to a Mark and bear its number. In recent years it has been laid down that all Royal Ark Mariner Lodges should use the name of the parent Mark Lodge, except in exceptional circumstances. In the late 30s, certain brethren from the North of England expressed feelings that the degree was treated somewhat as a poor relation of the Mark, and suggested that some form of recognition should be accorded to Past Commanders who had given valuable service to the R.A.M. At the time nothing come of it.

Since the Centenary of Mark Grand Lodge in 1956, this feeling had gained strength. At the December Meeting of 1967, the Grand Master announced he was about to institute a new Grand Rank, somewhat on the lines of London Grand Rank in the Craft. Provinces and Districts would have power to award Prov. or District R.A.M.G.R. The first investitures took place at the December Meeting of Grand Lodge in 1968. Today London Grand Rank in Mark and Royal Ark Mariner Degrees is held in Grand Stewards Lodge in September.

Royal Ark Mariner Grand Rank which was instituted in 1968 is (the investiture takes place at the June Meeting of Grand Lodge. In his remarks the Grand Master said it was a beacon in the history of the Degree, hoping that it will be a guiding light to a greatly extended appreciation and enthusiasm for the Ark Mariner Degree.

Brethren only too often, brethren are apt to consider the Royal Ark Mariner Degree as a rather superficial and trivial, but it is nothing of the sort. Although the ceremony is short, yet it fulfills the corner of a genuine Initiatory Rite, and its symbolism is worthy of deep study. When fully understood it captures the hearts of its members as one of the jewels of Masonic Ritual.