

THE ANTIQUITY OF FREEMASONRY

When the newly initiated Freemason is told that "Freemasonry has subsisted from time immemorial" it is but natural, should he have an enquiring mind, that he should wish to know something of its early history, inasmuch as antiquity and the traditions associated with it have ever been esteemed by members of well ordered society.

It must, however, be freely admitted that evidence, which can be substantiated, will not take us further back than the fourteenth century. Prior to this date the student of Masonic history has little but ancient legends to assist him in the search for light.

In the early days of the story of man the knowledge of the liberal arts and sciences was confined to the priesthood and magi, who concealed their discoveries under the cloak of mysteries. Admission to their cults was obtained only by trial and ordeal, when their knowledge, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, was communicated to the novitiates. Many of these cults bear a close affinity to the usages and customs among Freemasons, and it is in the careful examination of such ancient records as have been preserved, the linking up of the apparent disparities between history and legend, and the patient search for new sources of information that hope for further knowledge must rest.

The field of "modern" research has been so thoroughly explored and tabulated that it can be stated with confidence that Speculative Freemasonry, as we know it to-day, has been built up on the lines of the Operative Lodges which flourished in the Middle Ages on the continent of Europe. There is little doubt that these Lodges were in turn founded on a more primitive form of organised Masons or workers in stone extending back to the dawn of civilisation. Actual evidence is, however, very slender, consisting mainly of the legends inscribed in the "ancient charges", the oldest extant being dated the late fourteenth century.

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According to the Cooke H.S. the Operative Masons came to England in the reign of the Saxon King, Athelstone, but little is known of their subsequent history beyond the additions to later issues of the "charges" until the formation of the Masons Company of London in 1400.

Much reliable information is found in Scottish history about this time. An Act of Parliament dated 1484 provides for the nomination of deacons and wardens for each of the trades of which the Masons formed an integral part. In 1593 the direct control of the Masons by the King is evidenced by the confirmation by James VI. of the election of Patrick Copland, laird of Dalrymple, as "wardens and justice" for three Scottish counties. A still older appointment was held by the St. Clairs of Roslin, who are credited in the charter of 1601 - 2 to have "ever been patrons and protectors of us deacons, maisteris and frie men of the masones vnder the heale of Scotland".

The signatories to the charter of 1601 - 2 belonged to Lodges in Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Stonehaven, Haddington and Dunfermline. Those of a later charter of 1628 were deacons and wardens of the lodges of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Ayr, Stirling, Dundee and St. Andrews, including in some instances "wrights and squaremen". These letters of jurisdiction gave rise to the fiction of the office of Grand Master being hereditary in the Barons of Roslin, but they only refer to honorary duties as patrons and judges, that of Grand Master being unknown until the 18th century.

Still more important are the ordinances promulgated by William Schaw, "maister of work warden of ye masons" of the years 1598 - 9. The statutes of 1598 issued by the King's head mason concerned all "the maister masonnis within the realme, with the consent of the maisteris efter specifeit" and provided for the entry and service of apprentices, the reception of masters or fellowcrafts (in the presence of six masters and two apprentices), masonic marks to be chosen, and the Masons were prohibited from working with covens (i.e. irregular masons as distinguished from "sneakdroppers", non-masons). A copy is inserted in the oldest book of records of the

Lodge of Edinburgh, but the supplementary code of the following year was long overlooked, though known to the ancient Lodge of Kilwinning in 1734.

There were three head lodges - those of Edinburgh, Kilwinning and Stirling - the relative position of the trio being officially fixed by the Lord Warden General. That of the Lodge of Edinburgh was the senior of Scotland, as it still is, and so throughout the world, though "Mother Lodge Kilwinning" has yet many who believe in its greater antiquity as it has been placed at the head of the Scottish roll, due, however, to good fortune rather than actual evidence. The preserved minutes of the Lodge of Edinburgh commence in 1599 whereas the existing Kilwinning records do not begin until 1842.

The first minute of the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) concerns an infraction of the regulation against the employment of cowans in 1599, another in the following year being the earliest instance known of a non-operative mason being present at a Lodge as a member - viz. the laird of Auchinleck (John Boswell), who attended and attested the minutes by signing his name and mark.

In 1655 - 6 the prefix "free", which had been regularly used for many years before (and in England occasionally from the 14th century) was dropped, the Company of "Freemasons" being altered to "Masons". When the "acception" ceased to work is not apparent; but it was probably late in the 17th century owing to the activity of independent lodges, when the familiar title of "free and accepted masons" came into use to designate the speculative about this time.

The "old charges" gradually ceased to be used on the decline of the brotherhood as an operative institution, though some lodges kept to the old regime and objected to take part in the new system far on in the 18th century. One of the oldest and latest to keep aloof being the Melrose Lodge, (with records from 1374), which did not join the Grand Lodge of Scotland until 1861. Some never were absorbed such as the lodge at Alwick, Northumberland, whose preserved minutes commence in 1701 - 3 and run on for over 50 years. -

Even more remarkable proof of the speculative ascendancy has been discovered of late years in the oldest minutes of the Masonic Company of London. Therein was discovered the fact that a non-operative lodge assembled under the wing of that Company, the meetings of which were known as the "acception" so far back as 1620 - 1619 which year the preserved records begin.

In 1631 mention is made of "masons that were to be accepted" thus leading to the use of the title "accepted masons". This is the lodge that Ashmole visited in 1682 at which he was the senior fellow present. It appears that these initiations qualified for admission into the company those who possessed no claim to the freedom by reason of servitude or patrimony.

The "acception" had a copy of the "old charges" which has unhappily been lost, but its use by the accepted masons testifies to the survival of operative customs among the speculative lodges during the 17th century and inferentially much earlier.

There are other indications of masonic activity in England during the same period. (though the records have been lost), as in Staffordshire, on the testimony of Dr. Plot in his history of 1686; also in Cheshire, Harleian M.S. 2054 British Museum (circa 1680); Rendle House in his "Academie of Armory" (1688); and particularly the old lodge at York which developed into a Grand Lodge in 1725, but collapsed before the century ended.

In 1714 four lodges (two from the City of London and two from the City of Westminster) met at the Apple Tree Tavern in Covent Garden to "covent under a Grand Master as the Centre of Union and Harmony. Subsequently on St. John the Baptist Day 1717 the Premier Grand Lodge of England was formally inaugurated at the Goose and Gridiron in St. Paul's Churchyard, and Anthony Sayer was elected as the first Grand Master. Three of these lodges still survive, they are :-

- (1) - The Lodge of Antiquity No. 2
 - (2) - The Fortitude and Old Cumberland No. 18
 - (3) - The Royal Somerset House & Inverness No. 4.
- See Page 101 (1717)*

The example of England was soon followed by Ireland in 1725 and by Scotland in 1738.

From these three Grand Lodges, directly or indirectly, have originated all the other regular lodges and grand lodges throughout both hemispheres; so that modern Freemasonry through that tie, has descended from speculative and operative ancestors, whose forbears were cathedral builders of mediæval times and who in turn probably descended from the temple builders of Pagan days.

In many senses the question of "time immemorial" is well exemplified in the following quotation from Methuen's "Masonic Orations"

"Masonry was practised by the shepherds, astronomers and astrologers of Chaldea, by the Priest King of Egypt, by the Brahmins of India and by the philosophers of Greece. It reached its meridian splendour when Solomon, the third Grand Master of the Order, surrounded by his brethren, laid, with Masonic honours, the Foundation Stone of the Temple which he intended to dedicate to the service of God. We have the authority of a credible Roman historian for saying that when Julian (the Apostate) 1300 years after, cleared the foundations of the same Temple, the vaulted chamber was discovered in which our ancient brethren had assembled, with its most sacred and most secret symbols perfect and undisturbed. These symbols are to be traced among nations wide as the poles asunder, differing as much in their languages, creed colour and character as in the period at which, and the land in which, they lived. They are to be found in the Pyramids of Egypt, the caves of Elephanta, the temples of classic Greece, the round towers of Ireland, the courts of the Alhambra and the arches of our sublime Cathedrals. Whence then this universal presence and permanence? Because its foundations rest not on the sad and perishable circumstances of external life, but on sentiments which spring from, and appeal to, the most deep seated affections of our nature, and are founded on the purest principles of piety and virtue".

Refer

Goulds "History of Freemasonry"
Hugans "Old Charges of British Freemasons"
Lanes "Masonic Records"
Conders "Records of the Hole Crafts and Fellowship of Masons"
Lyons "History of the Lodge of Elphinstone and F..."