

The Antiquity of Freemasonry. (Conclusion)

In submitting the foregoing papers the present writer has endeavoured to set out as briefly and concisely as possible the principal data in support of the claim that Freemasonry has "subsisted from time immemorial".

There are, it must be admitted, a large number of people who dissent from many of the opinions expressed, and who hold that the question of "time immemorial" can only be interpreted as meaning that the origin of the Fraternity cannot be traced.

On the other hand enthusiasts of the "time immemorial school have sometimes put forward assumptions which the most credulous would hesitate to accept. One may fairly ask therefore what is a reasonable view to take on this important matter? It would, perhaps, be difficult to find a more appropriate answer than the following extract from an article by W. Bro. Rolph A. Williamson, which appeared in "The Freemason" on 17th June, 1935.

Despite the fact that Modern Freemasonry can be shown almost conclusively to have originated with the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages, there is a school of Masonic thought - and a very widely accepted one, too - which persists in claiming for the Craft a still more ancient parentage. Freemasonry is for them the spiritual descendant and heir of those secret, mystic bodies which, in all ages and despite their esoteric nature, have been prominent in the social fabric of their times. The question is: Has this school of thought any real foundation in fact for its claims?

To me, it seems that this school of Masonic thought not only has a real foundation in fact for its claim, but that the birth of modern Freemasonry in the Middle Ages has a distinct philosophic cause behind it.

I believe it was in obedience to law and not a mere coincidence that Freemasonry was founded by those engaged in architectural pursuits; that it was law, not blind chance, which gave Freemasonry a symbology derived from architecture; that it was law, not hazard, which determined and fixed the birth of Freemasonry in the Middle Ages, neither before nor after.

That law which by its operation produced these things is, in my opinion, the Law of Evolution. The evolution of which I speak is that evolution dual in form and compensative in nature; degenerative, perhaps, as to life forms but generative as to mind, intelligence, the spirit; an evolution which has already proceeded beyond man and produced the social organism, whereas physical evolution halts at man, who marks its definite end.

This evolution was, I am persuaded, known to Moses, at least in principle. It was suspected by Wallace and desired by Huxley. Towards it Darwin was being slowly forced when he died. It will yet take its way in the world, for it is the evolution of hope, not pessimism. It is the key to history and to life, true of life and of all men at all times in all places, both in general and in detail.

Victor Hugo in the second chapter of Book V. of his historical novel, "Notre Dame de Paris" has portrayed and described with a master hand the simultaneous development of architecture and society. Seen through Hugo's eyes, architecture becomes a graphic record of human progress. From the earliest times, from prehistoric ages, man has builded these mighty works. All over the world they are to be found. - The earth is covered with them and so ancient is Operative Masonry that ruins exist of whose builders not even a legend is known. The peoples are gone but the buildings remain. And no age, no great people, but has added to their number, even down to the present day. Age on age, people after people, literally city upon city - all builders.

Now, as Hugo showed, there is a characteristic common to all this construction, a characteristic to be found running through all of it. It is that the civilisations which produced these buildings found expression in them and impressed their character upon them. The indestructible granite was stamped with the spiritual signature of those peoples who designed and built them. The minds of peoples are thus written in great books of stone, which are their architectural monuments. And nowhere is this more plainly evident than in those buildings which we either know or conclude to have been consecrated to religion. Nor is this to be wondered at; for nothing so truly expresses the spirit, the soul, of a people as does its religion.

There are those who decry religion, who see in it nothing good whatever. And certainly religion - or what has passed for religion - has furnished history many of its most dark and bloody pages. Yet, when all that is said, it would still be difficult to deny that religion nevertheless remains a striving after better, higher, nobler things; a reaching up to wisdom and understanding; a straining after truth.

Hence we may not be far from the fact if we conclude that the great architectural works of the ages have been produced by the yearnings of peoples after truth.

In past ages that yearning was controlled and directed by a priestly hierarchy. Too often that hierarchy was the real ruler of the nation; too often it betrayed its trust; too often it used its sacred office for worldly ends; too often it imposed a tyrannical and stern, restricting freedom, obstructing progress.

In the Middle Ages, for the first time in history, the priestly hierarchy was dethroned, its tyranny was brought to an end, its dominion over the minds of men was challenged, and man became free. Not free by rebellion, as sometimes has happened in the past, but free by revolution, a revolution unique in history. And that revolution is duly recorded by architecture. No longer does architecture reflect the spirit of the age in buildings consecrated to religion. The style of these remains that of the Middle Ages. Yet progress has been made since that revolution, and progress in architecture. But it is not found in buildings of a religious nature. It is found in the great modern buildings dedicated to commerce and industry, the sky-scraper. Thus is the major premise Hugo set forth confirmed.

The period of history known as that of the Renaissance was great for many things. Every field of human endeavour seemed regenerated, impregnated with new life. But, underneath it all, as the rich soil from which sprang the new fruits of the mind, was the rebirth of nationalism, the rousing of peoples to consciousness of themselves, a renaissance indeed. It was a step, and a long step, upon the road of self-government, to democracy, that form of government and mode of expression of the spirit of the social organism destined to conquer the world through the power of economic laws because it, and it alone, brings continuous

prosperity to meet and overcome the sporadic prosperity (varying with the character of the Sovereign) on the monarchical form.

The Middle Ages witnessed the commencement of a complete revolution of thought. Prior thereto, power was held to reside in the Sovereign, who ruled by Divine right, an idea fostered for a price by the dictators of the religious concepts of the times, the priestly hierarchy. After that period, power was known to reside in the people and in the people alone.

Prior to the Middle Ages, the Secret Doctrine or the true Theory of Evolution was guarded and preserved by the mystic societies, though they hardly understood the real nature of their treasure.

After the Middle Ages, that Secret Doctrine - still secret and undefined - passed into the guardianship of the people.

It was then, at that time, in the Middle Ages, when the commencement of that transfer began, that Freemasonry was born. That was the psychological moment of history; that was the time for it to be born. Unto the peoples power descended; unto the peoples the guardianship of their destinies was given the guardianship of the Secret Doctrine, so the spreading its leaven through the whole mass, understanding might come upon them when they were ready at last; so that it might come to them through channels already prepared and by means already at work. The greatest of these is symbolic Masonry.

Who better fitted to bring to the masses that Secret Doctrine - even though still veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols only - than those free operative Masons who built the last of the great ecclesiastical structures, and thus wrote in stone the last page of a closing chapter of history? They were free, and they recorded their freedom in the buildings they erected, where it may be read to-day. They were operative, and able themselves to read that which was written in the ancient pages of this monumental history of man. They were banded together for mutual aid, support, and protection, and knew the value of organisation. They were speculative, sensing that change which was already beginning. And when they founded Freemasonry, they used symbolically the tools and implements and the terminology of their art; that art which - in contrast to the merely representative arts, the so-called

"fine arts" - is real.

Yet they were but instruments of a mightier thing than they; they were but the tools of a great law which, in the circumstances of the times, found its opportunity.

It is considerations such as these which have brought me to believe, with the followers of the theoretic school of Masonic history, that our Craft has a genealogy antedating the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages, a spiritual genealogy tracing back to the first days when men formed social groups, a parentage derived from the laws of the Great Architect of the Universe, those laws which, becoming more perceptible, are seen to include even us. If we see in the origination of Freemasonry in the Middle Ages by those who wrote the great stone book the manifestation of law far-reaching and profound, may we not be nearer to essential truth than are our brethren whose views are bounded by the event? For what is an event but the product of a cause?

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## ST. JOHN AND FREEMASONRY

The Feast of St. John the Baptist, which falls annually on 24th June, and that of St. John the Evangelist on 27th December, were literally "red letter days" in the old Masonic Calendar, and were long held, with much veneration, in years past.

Their significance, alas, has gradually been lost sight of; it may, however, be of interest to recall that, like other Christian Festivals (which are held on days approximating to pre-Christian Feasts), these two days correspond to the periods when the ancient feasts in adoration of the sun were held to celebrate the Summer and Winter Solstices.

In Freemasonry the three symbolic Degrees of the Craft have long been known, particularly in Scotland, as St. John's Masonry, and the members were at one time known as "John's Brothers". A hundred years ago Lodges were wont to hold their annual festival on one of the two Saints' Days, and this custom is still observed in a few Lodges to-day. Among these may be mentioned Quatuor Coronati No. 2076, The Scots Lodge No. 2319 and The Deutschland Lodge No. 2315. The Original Charter of the First Australian Lodge commences with the words "We, Chiefs of the Most Ancient and Right Worshipful Lodge of St. John".

In the Ritual of an earlier date the two parallels bounding the Circle, which we now take to represent Moses and King Solomon, referred to St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist.

There is also a Legend that after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem by Titus, Lodges were dedicated to St. John the Baptist; and that later St. John the Evangelist accepted the position of Grand Master.

It is also stated that mediæval masons dedicated all Lodges to St. John the Evangelist as patron Saint.

On the other hand, it is clear, from an inscription carved about the year 1136, in the building of Melrose Abbey,

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that John the Baptist was in the middle ages accepted as the patron Saint of the Builders' Fraternities; and it is maintained that for that reason his name was honoured by the speculative Masons when they revived the moral philosophy of the operative guilds.

Another surmise is that the original patron was the Byzantine St. John, the Almoner of the philanthropic Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the influence of which Order on our Craft will be known to Brethren of the higher degrees.

Yet there is no valid reason why either John should have been associated with Freemasonry, especially in the age when the patron Saint of Architecture was universally considered to be St. Thomas.

Bro. the Rev. Rabbi Cohen of the Sydney Lodge of Research, in an article in the "N.S.W. Freeman", mentions yet another identification, that of Johanan ben Zakai, or John the son of Zacchaeus, who flourished in the first century of the Christian era, and of whom much is related that can only be explained and understood in a masonic sense. These references are to be found in the many volumes of the Talmud and of the Midrash, both of which were put into their present form during the 5th century. All scholars are agreed that underlying the traditional and legendary details concerning this Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai, there is an accurate and reliable historical basis.

It is claimed that this John, even before the destruction of the third Temple A.D. 70, foresaw that, with its destruction, there would ensue a serious risk of the Gentile world lapsing back into the vice and immoral cruelty from which the teachings of that Temple were already rescuing it, and of which that sacred edifice was the tangible emblem and visible symbol. He, therefore, resolved to carry the ancient teachings (which we now call Masonry) from Temple to Lodge, and to convey the principles of the first and original Grand Lodge from the "Lishkahth Haggazith" or "Chamber of the Perfect Ashlar", the Hebrew title of the room in the Temple where the Great Sanhedrin regularly met, so as to

extend them to every duly constituted meeting of Masons throughout the Universe.

Even in their special ceremonies the Hebrews recognised the claims of the outside world; and, regarding the Temple of their own faith as the prototype of the universal Temple of Humanity when "God's House shall be called a House of Prayer for All the Peoples" (Isai LVI, 7) they offered up therein thank offerings for all the peoples at their own Harvest Festival, and provided, as the most spacious Court therein, the Court of the Gentiles. Here the Gentiles came in touch with Masonry, as our Constitution understands it; for not only the worship of the Most High, but also the inculcation of his moral law, centred round that stately edifice. Since such precepts bore reference to no particular religion, but to the fundamental truths of all Religion, both Jew and Gentile could be, and were, admitted to the fraternity which expounded them.

The natural ignorance of the Gentile world of John the son of Zacchaeus, particularly in the Middle Ages, when Freemasonry was so entirely Christian, may explain the attribution to his better known namesake, John the Baptist, of the great Masonic labour of the Hebrew teacher.

In any case it is fair to assume that all four Johns contributed in no small measure to the promulgation of the moral truths preserved by the Craft; and it would seem that John the Baptist was especially recognised in the early days of English Freemasonry.

The first Grand Lodge in this Country was held on St. John the Baptist's Day, 1717, when the first Grand Master (Anthony Sayer) was installed. This day was adhered to by Grand Lodge for the installation of his successors until 1728, after which it was spasmodically re-instated and eventually fell into obeyance.

The disappearance of the custom was possibly caused to some extent by the fact that English Freemasonry gradually became non-denominational in its religious character.

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