

THE ANTIQUITY OF MASONRY

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At the very outset, I want to make a confession. Thirty-two years ago, when I was first made a Mason in the old home town in Ontario, I had only the vaguest idea of what was meant by an "Ancient, Free and Accepted Mason". I knew something about "Freemasons" and had a general notion as to "Accepted Masons", but this matter of "Ancient" left me, I fear, in a mood of growing skepticism.

It may be that I had some grounds for that attitude. I turned to Josephus, that contemporary of the Apostle Paul who wrote a famous history of the Jews, and I found that Hiram Abif, the Masonic Master and Artificer, instead of dying a violent death, had lived to a ripe old age and died peacefully in his bed in the city of Tyre. I studied the Book of Ecclesiastes, so familiar in Blue Lodge ritual, and learned that the language and general character of the Original Hebrew text assign it to a period at least eight centuries after Solomon. I turned to books on the Craft itself, and found that most of its ritual lecture material was composed in England in the 18th century by Dr. James Anderson, Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers, George Payne, and William Preston. I have grave reasons for suspecting that Free and Accepted Masons were not much more "ancient" than the establishment of the Grand Lodge Masonry in London in 1717.

As the years went by, however, I saw something of the world. I visited

Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Cyprus, Crete, Asia Minor, and most of the countries of Europe. In the course of these travels, I found Masonic evidences that were puzzling, if not bewildering, in terms of their antiquity. I found, for instance, that in the island of Crete, in the ruins of the palace at Cnossus several centuries earlier than Solomon, there were hundreds of little clay figurines, whose various postures embodied both the Masonic sign of supplication and the other signs of the first three degrees of Masonry. What were these doing in the Minoan land, from which, hundreds of years later, the Philistines migrated by sea to vex the coasts of Israel?

The apparent answer I found in Egypt, the country from which the Cretans learned the craft of working in stone. As a matter of fact, prehistoric Egypt seems, by all evidence, to have been the country in which practical stone-masonry first originated, many thousands of years before both Solomon and Minos. As I stood before the vast pyramid of Cheops, built about 3,000 B.C., I could not help marvelling at the masonic skill of those who reared such mighty masses to the sky. The secrets of that skill were the possession of the priests of Ptah, the god who was himself the Creator or Great Architect of the Universe. The high priest of Ptah was "the chief of the artificers"; and in the inscriptions of the old monuments there is a frequent reference to the "three chiefs of the stone masons", a sort of adumbration of "the three who open a lodge".

The Egyptian temple shadowed forth much Masonic symbolism. It was square, or rectangular, because the Egyptians so envisaged the Earth. Its

orientation, in terms of sun- worship, was to the east and west. The square, the cube, the triangle, the circle and the cross were all full of sacred meaning. At the entry to the temple of Ptah, at Amenta, were two pillars, akin to those two brazen pillars, Boaz and Jachin, that Hiram the Master later set up in the porch of Solomon's temple. When an obelisk of the 15th century, B.C., misnamed "Cleopatra"s Needle" by phrase-hungry journalists, was taken down in 1879 to be transported to Central Park, New York, all of the emblems of its masonic builders were discovered in its Egyptian foundation: the rough cube, the polished cube, the plummet, the trowel, the square, the arc of a circle, even a stone trestle-board! These bear witness to the antiquity of a mystical faith.

Masonic experience in Ancient Egypt seems also to have been associated with religious ritual of a highly dramatic character. The greatest passion play of the ancient world was the liturgical presentation of the "mysterium magnum" of the Egyptian Trinity - Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Here the believers portrayed the murder of the beneficent Osiris, the search for his dismembered body by his faithful wife Isis, and his ultimate triumphant resurrection as Saviour and Redeemer in the glory of the spring season. Here was a quest for an answer to the spiritual problem of human death, and here was an ultimate shadowing forth of a doctrine of human immortality.

As the art of architecture spread out from Egypt into the rest of the ancient world, there seems to have gone with it the same sort of union of masonry with a religious drama of faith. Thus in Asia Minor the so-called

"Dionysian Artificers", a craft-guild of temple-builders, had likewise their own religious "mystery". And when one crossed to European Greece, one found this same legend of Dionysos shadowed forth in annual ritual at Eleusis, about fourteen miles west of Athens. For every Greek who was able to follow the philosophical subtleties of a Plato or an Aristotle there were hundreds who could imbibe deep spiritual truth from the symbolism of these Eleusinian Mysteries. Masonry seems at a remote time to have drafted the unmurdered Hiram the Master for at least a partial role in a kindred drama of religious loss and quest for spiritual meaning in the face of death.

I visited Jerusalem, and found little except general geographic features to tell of Solomon's day. I journeyed north past the realm of Hiram of Tyre and further up the Lebanon coast to Beirut and Tripoli. Hereabouts I learned of the Lebanese tribe of the Druses, who today declare themselves to be the descendants of the Phoenician builders of Solomon's temple; who have temples like lodges, with three degrees of initiations; who have signs, grips, and passwords; and who use building tools as emblems of moral truth.

I returned by way of Cyprus, Smyrna, Istanbul, and Athens to Italy once more; and here I found the ancient record likewise significant. Masonry, and a secret cult initiated into the practical secrets of building, came early to ancient Rome. Even today in Rome you will find the great sewer, the Cloaca Maxims, built with Masonic skill about 500 B.C., still giving massive service to the region of the Forum. Throughout most of Rome's

history we find evidence of collegia or guilds of stone-masons which bore striking resemblances to a lodge of practising Masons. There was a Master and his two Stewards (Magister and Decuriones), as well as a secretary, a treasurer and a chaplain (Sacerdos), and numerous symbols of the Craft. If you go, as I have, to the ruins of Pompeii, you will find there, not far from the so-called Tragic Theatre, the lodge room of an old Roman operative lodge, duly dug out of the ashes of the great eruption of 79 A.D. There are two columns in front, interlaced triangles on the walls, and on a pedestal in the room an altar with a symbolic design of rare beauty.

During the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (284-305 A.D.) four Master Masons and one Entered Apprentice suffered atrocious deaths in the persecution of the Christians; and the "four crowned martyrs" (Quattour Coronati) became in far later centuries the patron saints of Masons in Germany, France, and England. In London, England, the supreme research lodge of the entire Craft bears their names today.

The link between the old collegia and the medieval guilds of Masons would seem to be the "Comacine Masters", whose retreat of an island in Lake Como I glimpsed in my travels. As early as 643 A.D. one encounters an edict of the Lombard king Lotharis recognizing them as "free masons"; and we learn from an inscription of 712 A.D. that they were organized as Masters (Magistri) and Apprentices (Discipuli), under a Gastaldo or Grand Master. They had oaths, tokens, grips, and passwords; they had masters and wardens; they wore white aprons and gloves; their emblems included the square, the

compasses, the level, the plum-line, the arch, King Solomon's Knot, and the Lion's Paw; and they gave special reverence to the Four Crowned Martyrs. >From this Comacine Order came the great cathedral builders of the Middle Ages. And from the rituals of the various English branches of these Masonic guilds came in due course those "Old Charges" that were duly studied by speculative Masonry in the early 18th century and made the corner-stone of the much more elaborate ritual that we know today.

This has been a somewhat rambling discourse. It covers what was for me a long period of practical re-education as I passed from my early skepticism over into a growing sense of the profound age of the Craft that we honour. We are compassed about with a very great cloud of witnesses, not merely Anglo-Saxon but Roman, Greek, Cretan, Syrian, Palestinian, and Egyptian. There are elements in Masonry that are as much older than Solomon as Solomon is older than Winston Churchill; but the long endurance of a secret fraternity, conveying deep religious truth from generation to generation, has not only left behind it a majestic record of monumental architecture but has grown increasingly in spirituality. We creatures of a brief span of time may well pause in a tribute of reverence to the long and illustrious history of our fellowship.