

## **“A PECULIAR SYSTEM OF MORALITY”** (MASONRY AND THE MIDDLE AGES)

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First a disclaimer:- I speak not as specialist Masonic historian but as a historian who happens to be a Mason, applying general historical technique to see what can be deduced from the content of our ritual and the context of the time during which speculative Freemasonry was developing. Next, a caution:- most of the evidence is secondary not primary<sup>1</sup> as rituals were not fixed till C19, although there were several “exposures,” usually written by disgruntled ex-Masons or opponents, and invariably incomplete, during the century beforehand. It is certain that much was discarded and much added during the centuries leading up to the Union of 1813 and possible that what was omitted is primarily the sort of mystical/philosophical material which might have seemed to have conflicted with orthodox Anglican Christianity or even to have been regarded as revolutionary. However, the changes which are known about for certain are relatively minor; for instance, although we still keep the phrase “the perfect points of my entrance,” the early 18<sup>th</sup> century explanation disappeared in about 1750, a new explanation was invented a generation later, and it is nowadays generally ignored.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there is no record of so basic a part of our ritual as the opening of a Lodge much before 1760, while the Hiram Legend, too, is not original - it can be dated to a year or two before 1730 (previous to this a somewhat similar legend featuring the corpse of Noah being raised on the fpof by his sons is known).<sup>3</sup>

It is not really known precisely how speculative Freemasonry emerged from medieval operative masonry between about 1600 and 1700 - the evidence is almost completely lacking - though many plausible theories have been advanced; it may well be, indeed, that the hard-and-fast distinction customarily made between “operative” and “speculative” may be to overstate the case. The fullest account is given in “World of Freemasonry” by Harry Carr (pub. 1984 by Lewis Masonic). It should be pointed out that, in England at any rate, the recruitment of non-operative men into lodges seems to have preceded the speculative or philosophical element by about a century. What we do know is that there were probably a few non-operatives in Scottish Lodges by 1600 (as is suggested by the Schaw Statutes, included in the 1599 minutes of the Lodge of St. Mary’s Chapel, Edinburgh, while King James VI & I is said to have been a member of a lodge in Scone) and that Robert Moray was initiated into the St. Mary’s Chapel Lodge while serving with the Scottish army in England in 1641. In England it is suggested that the design of a remarkable chair dated 1595 and owned by a certain Edward Minshull may be evidence that he was a Freemason, and certainly non-operative<sup>4</sup>: it is known that there was at least one lodge in England in 1646 (at Warrington, where Elias Ashmole was “made a Mason”) which is believed to have been almost entirely non-operative: that Masonry spread quite rapidly from that point on, but that as late as the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century operative masons and architects (for

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<sup>1</sup> “Primary” sources consist of original documents of the period being studied; “secondary” those which, while not original are (or should be!) based on the study of primary sources.

<sup>2</sup> See “The Freemason at Work,” pp. 74-81, H. Carr rev. F. Smyth, Lewis Masonic (1992).

<sup>3</sup> Id. Ib. p.8

<sup>4</sup> “Freemasonry - The Reality,” Tobias Churton (Lewis Masonic, 2007), pp. 63-70. The chair is now in the possession of the Pro Grand Master, the Marquess of Northampton.

instance Sir Christopher Wren<sup>5</sup>) predominated in London lodges at least. However, according to Dr. Robert Plot, writing in 1686,<sup>6</sup> Freemasonry was becoming quite fashionable among country gentlemen. It seems at that point to have been a largely social, convivial and charitable society, at least as far as non-operative members were concerned,<sup>7</sup> while the trade guild element had become almost irrelevant, although operatives were still admitted in numbers, often on advantageous terms.

While the practice of building and carving in stone of course goes back millennia, that is hardly true of modern Freemasonry. Many early accounts were pretty preposterous in attributing vast antiquity to the Craft (consider the explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Degree badge & the charge to Initiate, based on the Ancient Charges, which, while reflecting the beliefs of their own age, are not by any means reliable as historical writings), but no more so than many recent books concerned with the medieval origins of Freemasonry and Masonic thought. Some are sounder than others but all have an obsession with the Knights Templar, that mysterious order of warrior knights brutally suppressed in C14.

There is an obvious attraction in attributing esoteric thought to the Templars, for little is known of their actual beliefs and practices except what was published after their fall by their enemies. Templars, like Masons, were much concerned with KST and its successors and seem to have made a thorough search of what they fondly believed to be their remains. It is also fairly certain that they did not simply disappear, especially in Scotland, where the survival of some Templar tradition is well attested, possibly lasting into the Masonic era.<sup>8</sup> It should be said at this point that there seem to have been substantial differences in the history of early Masonry between Scotland and England - and Templar influence, to whatever extent it existed, was much less important in England.

It seems reasonable to assume that the accession of James VI & I to the throne of England, bringing a good many Scots and his own wish for unification with him, began to assimilate the traditions of Scottish freemasonry with the already developing ideas current within operative masonry in England. James is said to have already been a Mason (perhaps one should rather think of him as the patron of Scone Lodge) and therefore, presumably, a benevolent influence.

Without entirely denying the possible importance of Templar influences on Freemasonry, my purpose here is to bring in a sense of balance by drawing a rather wider picture. It should also be said that there is absolutely no evidence of any institutional heritage in Freemasonry derived from the Knights Templar.

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<sup>5</sup> There is strong evidence that he was “adopted a brother of the Fraternity of adopted Masons” in 1691 but it is less clear what exactly that means.

<sup>6</sup> His book was called “Natural History of Staffordshire” and is quoted in e.g. “The Freemason’s Pocket Reference Book,” F.L.Pick & G.N.Knight, Frederick Muller (1955).

<sup>7</sup> “World of Freemasonry,” H. Carr, pp. 67-8.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. “The Temple and the Lodge,” M. Baigent & R. Leigh, Cape (1989), esp. chap. 7 “The Templar legacy in Scotland.”

Let me remind you of the three elements of Masonry from the Qs before passing:-  
Physical artefacts & images - "illustrated by symbols:"  
Legends and parables - "veiled in allegory:"  
A distinctive philosophy - "a peculiar system of morality."

There can be little surprise, considering the name of the order, that the artefacts used as symbols are almost invariably connected with building trade (although the emphasis on KST seems to have been developed only after the formation of Grand Lodge). Moreover, imagery of the construction of a building is also central to Christianity in general (as a cursory reading of New Testament demonstrates; the idea of man as a building created by & dedicated to God is a constantly recurring theme). Some of our other symbols are not so obvious, but can be found in e.g. Arab, Jewish & Classical Greek literature. (Cf. Pythagoras's theorem illustrated on the IPM's jewel - Pythagoras was a major mystic philosopher, not just a mathematician). Arab and Jewish elements might perhaps suggest Templar influence but contact with both Jewish & Arab scholarship was more frequent in Middle Ages than is often assumed, mainly through an active cross-fertilisation of ideas in Spain, where Jewish and Moorish influences came into relatively peaceful contact with Christian philosophers throughout much of the Middle Ages; while Greek thought became more readily available as part of the Renaissance after the sack of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453.

Our legends, though connected with biblical stories, are not in Scripture (apart from the story of Jephtha) & much about them, especially the story familiar to those of us who are members of the Holy Royal Arch, might to some suggest a Templar origin. This is possible enough, especially in Scotland; one may remember that for 200 yrs. before their suppression they were a highly respected & influential order with plenty of time for the development & dissemination of their ideas, e.g. through the mediaeval guilds. The Middle Ages loved sacred stories (e.g. Mystery Plays) & the origin of e.g. Hiram Abiff's murder is very likely no more mysterious than that of intelligent minds playing with & dramatising the existing bible stories - a version of it appears to have been current among the operatives, though our adoption of it, as said above, is relatively late. Indeed, study of the ancient charges shows that our ancient brethren were pretty good at inventing their own history, including that version of the Hiram legend (in which the hero is named Aynon - a son of King Hiram of Tyre). The form and hierarchy of our Lodges is almost entirely medieval, drawn from the organisation of the guilds, especially of course the masons - c.f. modern livery companies, which still have Masters and Wardens (our deacons & IG are late additions). The terms Craftsman and Entered Apprentice, too, were well known to medieval guildsmen. The masons were of course a guild, though a rather unusual one, since masons were peripatetic rather than settled within a particular town.

My main concern, however, is with Masonic thought rather than the robes within which it was clothed; this is a great deal more tricky and very differently sourced - though the operatives certainly emphasised brotherly love and relief.. What is, after all, the essential nature of Masonic thought?

One may well point to the fact that at the time when Freemasonry emerged (C16/17) Christianity, though still universal in Europe, was profoundly divided as a result of the Reformation. Spanish governments were also driving out both Jewish and

Moorish cultures. Where could there be common ground? Also, scientific enquiry, though stimulated by Renaissance ideas, was still dangerous; consider Galileo's case, the fear of science as witchcraft and the effect of this on Puritanism in England; but intelligent men recognised the need for a synthesis to accommodate the new spirit of research. The Masonic (operative) organisation & ethic was well suited to accommodate this spirit - "modern man" could be both pious & speculative under its umbrella. It was, too, secretive in protection of the mysteries of its craft - indeed; at this time the general name for the skilled crafts was "mistry."

However, this kind of esoteric thinking - that to be perfect man must seek beyond orthodox teaching - has a very long history indeed and it is in this sense, perhaps that our Institution can be said to go back to "time immemorial," however little real continuity there may have been. We can trace it in the Mystery cults of the Greeks, the Essene sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Gnostic and Manichaeic thought of the Christian era, the Jewish Cabbala and, probably, the practices of the Knights Templar. Reading between the lines, it seems that the Templars were condemned as much for being unorthodox - "ahead of their time" - as for the Satanic practices which were urged unconvincingly against them (even more of course for the crime of being wealthy & having caught the attention of a predatory king of France!).

The stimulus for the development of specifically Masonic thought was the emergence of humanist philosophy at the period of the Renaissance (14-16 centuries), which borrowed left- and right-handed from many traditions both classical and mediaeval, such as those mentioned above, as well as injecting a more "modern" and scientific approach. Perhaps the most interesting of the revived philosophies was the so-called Hermetic tradition, supposedly deriving from Hermes Trismegistus, a legendary figure thought to have been contemporary with Moses, but in fact a development of a sort of marriage between classical Greek and early Christian philosophy which appeared in Alexandria in the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Century A.D. Another source of Masonic philosophy seems to have been the "Oration on the Dignity of Man" of Pico della Mirandola (1486), sometimes known as "The Manifesto of the Renaissance," which in many respects foreshadows the philosophy of Freemasonry.<sup>9</sup> The immediate influence was perhaps that of the Rosicrucians, a rather shadowy movement which emerged in the early C17, at roughly same time as speculative Freemasonry. Their philosophy (without going into their beliefs in any detail)<sup>10</sup> derived in part from a combination of the Jewish Cabbalistic and Hermetic traditions and included a future Paradise in which men believed in a God or Supreme Being who attached no importance to the subtleties of the religious controversies of the time and whom people of differing religions could worship in an atmosphere of universal tolerance - sound familiar? Robert Fludd was the leading influence in England on behalf of a teaching which appealed to Royalists and aristocrats; he was certainly an acquaintance of Elias Ashmole, our first recorded initiate, whose writings suggest that he was thoroughly familiar with Renaissance philosophy in general and Rosicrucian thought in particular.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Churton, op. cit. pp. 20-1.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of Rosicrucianism see Churton, op. cit., chap. 8.

<sup>11</sup> This paragraph owes much to "Freemasonry - Symbols, Secrets, Significance" pp 43-5, W. Kirk MacNulty, Thames & Hudson (2006). See also "The Freemasons," pp 13-14, Jasper Ridley, Constable (1999).

The "Mason's Word" & "Rosie Cross" were associated in a 1638 Scottish poem "For we be brethren of the Rosie Cross;/ We have the Mason Word and second sight;/ Things for to come we can foretell aright." It was not, of course, written by masons but shows the connection in popular thinking. The use of symbols & allegories is reminiscent of them. But in fact there is little obvious evidence in the Craft teaching as we have it today of much esotericism of thought<sup>12</sup> - it is more of practical/ethical than mystical import - though there is some slight reason to believe that some of the more mystical elements in early Freemasonry were excised in order to make it less suspect to the Anglican temper of the 18/19 centuries.

I am being superficial here, of course: it is also true that many thinkers have found in our symbolism much on which to ponder and enrich their philosophy within our ceremonies. Important contributors to Masonic philosophy include W. Kirk MacNulty for America and Julian Rees in this country. Their books can be found in the bookshop in Great Queen Street and I thoroughly recommend Julian's articles in "Freemasonry Today" and the proceedings of the Cornerstone Society, which exists to promote deeper thought among Freemasons of an enquiring turn of mind. I was fortunate enough to attend W.Bro. MacNulty's lecture "A philosophical background for Masonic symbolism" at a meeting of the Society some years ago - it is still available on the Society's website. Nevertheless, the lessons impressed on our candidates as a matter of course during their initiation, passing and raising are those which a rather high-minded 18<sup>th</sup> century gentleman might be expected to absorb without concerning himself too much with abstruse matters of philosophy.

It is clear that Freemasonry operates on several distinct levels; however, routine Craft teaching appears to marry three distinct strands, none of them particularly mysterious:-

1. Ordinary Catholic<sup>13</sup> teaching on morality & the adoration of God, without the specifically "redemptive" or "Pauline" element - i.e. the "common ground" of piety (very much as exemplified in the Ancient Charges).
2. A strong fraternal solidarity element, which one might well expect from an institution with origins in the medieval Craft Guilds (much of this is also to be found in the Ancient Charges).
3. A humanist influence from the spirit of the Renaissance, particularly directed towards the importance of science & education (including in particular philosophical and ethical). Note that HA's devotion is humanist in character rather than religious. In England this was exemplified by the foundation of the Royal Society in 1662, of which Robert Moray and Elias Ashmole, the first recorded initiates in England, Moray Scottish, Ashmole English, were founding members.

It is uncertain that this was all there was before the Union of the Grand Lodges in 1813 (as I said earlier, it is possible that much was either deliberately or accidentally lost, and certainly the "masonry" of the Scottish Jacobites<sup>14</sup> seems to have leaned

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<sup>12</sup> What there is appears mainly in the magnificent middle section of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree.

<sup>13</sup> In the sense of the teaching of the Universal Christian Church, both Roman and mainstream Protestant.

<sup>14</sup> Here the Lodges formed by Jacobite exiles in France are meant - mainstream Scottish Freemasonry in that Presbyterian country was from the start strongly Christian.

rather more towards the occult; indeed, this is virtually certain - the Third Degree breathes a sense of loss throughout); but this is what modern Craft Masonry appears to have preserved from its pre-history. I should stress that this combination was pretty explosive throughout Europe, whatever the religious preference of each nation, for all societies were intolerant at the time. Remember that the childhood of Freemasonry in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a time of religious war; the 30 Years War split Roman Catholic and Protestant Europe in disastrous conflict, while England and Scotland were just as seriously rent by the Civil Wars of 1640-60. In Roman Catholic eyes our teaching was seriously heretical (and remains suspect), both in its insistence on toleration and its enquiring attitude towards science. It was scarcely less objectionable to strict Puritans such as the Calvinists. By the time of the foundation of Grand Lodge unorthodoxy, in England at least, was much less dangerous - and English masons took care to keep it "respectable;" one may remember the rather obsequious injunction to civic loyalty contained in the Charge after Initiation. Not all continental Lodges, however, were equally restrained, and Freemasonry was often regarded as at least potentially revolutionary.

To sum up:- There are many ancient elements in the trappings of the Craft; it is certainly possible that some came from Templar activities, as well as other "underground" movements - and a devotion to secrecy is characteristic both of much esoteric thought and the practical needs of early Freemasons. But the teaching itself, as it has come down to us, doesn't seem to need any very occult analysis, at least on the surface. That all brethren are equal in the Lodge and before God and that all brethren should unite in the spirit of fraternity and charity is an excellent but in these days hardly a revolutionary ethic, but let us not forget that it has not always been so; two of the watchwords of the French Revolution were "Equality" and "Fraternity" and they plunged Europe into twenty years of war. Maybe it is not so surprising after all that some regimes, from the Holy Roman Empire,<sup>15</sup> through the French "Ancien Regime" to the Nazis, have suppressed Freemasonry as subversive!

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<sup>15</sup> "The Freemasons", J. Ridley, (Constable, 1999), p. 133. Earlier, in spite of occasional government hostility, Freemasonry had flourished, especially among musicians such as Mozart.