

The Origins Of Freemasonry

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When and where did Freemasonry originate? It is a tantalizing question. It has been a source of much misunderstanding and has generated a great deal of pompous nonsense by overly enthusiastic members with lively imaginations. There are many Masons who look upon our rituals as a lesson in history and will state with positive assurance that the Craft originated with the building of King Solomon's Temple. They fail to recognize that our ritualistic work is not a presentation of history but merely a vehicle to teach basic moral truths in an effective manner with the use of builders' tools as symbols.

At the outset we should recognize that we do not know when or where Freemasonry originated. The reason is that it did not start in one place at one time, by one man or group of men. We can assume that when one man walked the earth there was no Freemasonry because there was no need for it. But when two men appeared on the scene and recognized the need for associating with others and helping one another, Freemasonry in its most elementary form began. When we begin to consider the origin of the present day organization which we know as Freemasonry we have many serious problems. There are a number of theories that have been advanced on this subject and it is interesting to consider some of them.

Henry W. Coil, in his fine *Freemasonry Through Six Centuries*, volume one, states that there are twenty-four theories regarding the origin of Freemasonry. No useful purpose would be served in covering the list in detail one by one. He states (p. 7): "Evidently, most of these theories must be false. An hypothesis, in order to ripen into a valid conclusion must be supported not merely by some fact, but by sufficient fact to carry moral conviction and remove it from the realm of conjecture, and, moreover, it must with be consistent with all other known facts."

In "The Craft in the East", written by Christopher Haffner, there appears the follow "In 1908, Bro. Charles Bernadin reported on his study of over two hundred separate volumes dealing with the origins of Masonry. One affirmed that Masonry existed before the creation, fifteen merely

that it went back as far as the Garden of Eden. In this miasma of historical phantasy, one book traced the origin of the Craft to the Emperor of China, another to the Orient generally. Such legends are of value only as a study in the credulity of our fellow men."

Most of the theories are based on taking some similarities that exist between the Craft and some ancient organization, or object, and then concluding that the similarities prove that there has been found the start of the present day Craft. Too often there are a number of dissimilarities that are conveniently overlooked or ignored. The weakness of most of these theories is that there are plenty of missing links as one examines the matter down through the ages and the ancient group cannot be clearly and logically linked to the Craft step by step. The reason for not being able to answer the question is clearly set forth in the sixth edition of Pick & Knight, *The Pocket History of Freemasonry* as follows: (p. 13) "In a system, fundamentally ethical, which makes a wide use of symbolism in its manner of imparting instruction, it would be surprising if there were not many points of contact with a variety of religions, old and new, in addition to the classical 'Mysteries', and even ancient Chinese philosophy, in which, for example, the square is known to have been employed as an illustration or emblem of morality." And it is further stated in the same book: "Many of the doctrines or tenets inculcated in Freemasonry belong to the vast traditions of humanity of all ages and all parts of the world. Nevertheless, not only has no convincing evidence yet been brought forth to prove the lineal descent of our Craft from any ancient organization which is known to have, or even suspected of having, taught any similar system of morality, but also, from what we know of the Craft in the few centuries prior to the formation of the first Grand Lodge in 1717, it is excessively unlikely that there was any such parentage."

And the following is stated in the same book regarding the various theories: "An immense amount of ingenuity has been expended on the exploration of possible origins of Freemasonry, a good deal of which is now fairly generally admitted to have been wasted."

It is the considered judgment of most Masonic scholars who have examined the subject that the present day organization known as Freemasonry evolved from the operative guilds of the middle ages. The period of transition covered several hundred years and was gradual, but that can be traced with some degree of certainty. The Pick & Knight book, from which the above quotations were taken, is a good one to get the basic picture generally. For one who wants more details of the various theories the Coil book mentioned above is a good start.

Let us examine briefly a few of the attractive theories which have been advanced on this subject.

George Oliver stated that Freemasonry originated before the creation of the world. He has been much misunderstood in this statement. What he probably meant was that the system or order in the universe was originated before the present world was created. We can pass up this theory quickly.

The theory has been advanced that Freemasonry originated in the Garden of Eden. It is stated that since Adam was the first man and he wore a fig leaf apron, and today Masons wear aprons, that he must have been the one to originate the Craft. How many of you are willing to accept this theory on such "evidence"? And if you do, where are the connecting links that bring the subject down through the ages to the present day?

It is sometimes stated that in all primitive societies there was a structure that was known as the "Men's House" in which the leaders of the community met in secret and had initiatory ceremonies in admitting young men into the select group when they arrived at maturity. These new members were taught lessons on the manual arts and sometimes symbols were used to teach moral lessons. But here again we have merely some similarities and the links are missing.

The large number of organizations that existed in the ancient world under the designation of "Ancient Mysteries" are sometimes stated to be the Craft. Select membership, secret ceremonies, the use of symbols, a death and a rising are some of the items pointed to as being "proof" of the origin. Here again we are merely talking about similarities.

There is the theory of the Roman Collegia, the stone Masons attached to each legion which followed the army into conquered territory to build roads and structures familiar to the Romans. These groups were banded together in a foreign area of mutual aid and assistance; the chief executive officer was called the Master; and his two assistants were called Wardens. They used the tools of their operative trade as symbols. They aided and assisted the widow and orphans of the members. Here again we are examining similarities and the links are missing. Then we have the story of the Cathedral Builders of the middle ages. To the limited extent that these organizations of operative workmen were the foundation stones of the Craft, in a general way the view can be accepted. But when a story is woven with such embellishment that the operative workmen over a period of five hundred years retreated to the island of Como and there preserved the skills and ideals of the group for transmission to future generations, we must state that this is a bit far-fetched. This theory was discarded many years ago.

What evidence is advanced to support the theory that is accepted today by Masonic scholars who have studied the matter in depth?

The oldest extant document associated with Freemasonry is the Regius Poem which is believed to have been written around the year 1390 and purports to be a copy of an older book. It describes the moral duties of the operative workman and has a remote connection with Freemasonry as that term is used today. But we must have a starting point and this is as good as any. The next oldest document is the Cooke Manuscript and is supposed to have been prepared around the year 1410. There are many similar manuscripts that have been discovered over the years which related to this subject and have points of similarities in their language and general content. The oldest minutebook extant relating to a lodge that had non-operative members is the

one belonging to Mary's Chapel for the year 1598; and the next oldest one is that of Kilwinning Lodge; both of these Lodges existed in Scotland.

The first records of non-operative members joining a lodge should be noted here. Elias Ashmole, a famous antiquarian of his day, recorded in his diary that on October 16, 1646, he was made a Freemason at Warrington in Lancashire; thirty six years later, in 1682, he noted that he had visited a lodge in London. In 1686 there was published the Natural History of Starfordshire, by Dr. Robert Plot. It contains a brief description of the customs and workings of a lodge. About this time Random Holme described the existence of Masonic lodges in England. In 1686 there was published The Natural History of Wiltshire, by John Aubrey, in which he mentions the Fraternity of FreeMasons .

During the period when there was extensive activity in the construction of large buildings and cathedrals in England, Scotland and parts of Europe, it was common for the workmen to travel from place to place in connection with their work. As far as proving their operative skills these workmen could demonstrate their abilities by actually doing the work allotted to them. But each workman was also bound by certain ethical standards in the general conduct of his life and as a workman. As a result, there was developed a sign, or a word, or both which enabled these travelling workmen to assure their employers that they were, in fact, bound by these ethical standards. This developed an air of secrecy which enabled workmen to prove themselves to a prospective employer. This was probably the only element of secrecy in the group except for some operative matters. Possibly later this element of secrecy lent itself to the development of future esoteric elements in this group.

The transition from the operative to the symbolic Craft was gradual and covered several hundred years. During this period the lodges at first consisted primarily of the operative workmen with a few honorary or "accepted" members. These non-operative members joined the lodges for their social benefits as the workmen did observe many feast days and holidays with entertainments and other observances. With the decline of the building trade resulting from many catastrophes such as the Black Death, the Great Fire of London, and other events, the needed number of workmen declined and eventually these members left the lodges as they sought other employment. Eventually the lodges had members who were entirely non-operative.

By the year 1716 most of the lodges had only non-operative members. In December of that year, on St. John's Day, a number of members met in London and had an informal meeting. As a result of this meeting the members of four lodges met in London on June 24, 1717, and formed the Grand Lodge. This became one of the most important dates in Masonic history because it marked in an elementary way the start of the present day organizational charters to groups that work as lodges. This date is sometimes described as the starting point of modern Freemasonry.

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