

## THE SOURCES OF MASONIC PRACTICE

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During the last few years I have been seeking to unravel the course by which the now commonly recognizable form of the English masonic lodge took the shape that it did. It has been a journey based not on a preconceived or formally determined theory but on the increasingly persuasive evidence of such records, artefacts and social circumstances as existed in, or from, the period of at least 1350 to 1730.

Whilst that story has been unfolding, and must stand or be amended by the data that has been assembled, I have been studying another strand in the same period. For what needs to be looked at and examined, as I once learnt in a cogent paper by Bro. Michael Baigent, is not simply the FORM of the emerging English Lodge but the CONTENT of its ritual and practice. Whereas we may now be able to see how the grades of the working stonemasons' craft developed into the 3 degrees of the Free and Accepted system there still remains the query, 'From whence did we get our Masonic history, our signs and symbols, our use of allegory, our forms and penalties of obligation, our passwords and types of recognition, our early types of catechism and instruction, our clothing and our titles for the various offices?' We take these matters for granted but what do we really know about where they originated and why? It is in an introductory attempt to answer this somewhat heavily laden enquiry that I proffer this paper for your consideration.

No one could be so foolish as to pretend that answers to some of the issues listed above have not been attempted previously. Anyone familiar with Harry Carr's *The Freemason at Work* or Bernard Jones' *Freemason's Guide and Compendium* will be only too well aware of how previous masonic instructors have sought to grapple with such matters. Foolish indeed would anyone be who ignored what they and others like them have suggested in days past.

Yet whilst it is essential to give due attention to such earlier suggestions, one overriding and as yet apparently unrecognized query fails to have been addressed. This is, 'Have we uncovered what was the overall and truly original source and means by which such material came to be adopted?' For the sake of clarity as to this enquiry let me put my proposition in another, and more specific, form.

By 1738 a form of official masonic history had become accepted by its being included in the Book of Constitutions compiled by Dr. James Anderson for the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster, hereafter referred to as either the Premier or Moderns Grand Lodge. This edition was a revised version of that which had first appeared in 1723, which was itself based on material drawn to Anderson's attention by those like Grand Master Payne. He had produced a copy of the Old Charges previously used in the latter's home city of Chester. Bro. Payne's familiarity with a copy of these Old Charges was almost certainly due to his father's encounter with them in the lodge that had emerged in the 17th century in that city. For many that is a quite sufficient answer to the query as to the provenance of a form of masonic traditional history. The question that I believe is still NOT answered is: from where did the Old Charges get THEIR form of the History?

It is here that we begin to enter what is new territory for many. Held in the library of the oldest lodge in York is a facsimile copy of the very version of the Old Charges which Bro. Payne drew to the attention of Anderson. Inserted in the text of the narrative there we come across a plain reference to its source. This compilation of ancient events comes, says the text, from the source called 'Sir Ranulph Higden's Polychronicon' which we know was compiled in the early fourteenth century because its author, Higden, died in 1346. Being not a knight, despite the Sir, but a learned monk of St. Werburgha's Abbey, Chester, his account of world history from ancient times up to his own day is still regarded as among the most notable of all medieval historical works. It is hardly surprising that it should be the quarry from which the stonemasons, no doubt guided by some ex-monastic adviser, should draw information to embody their claim to be of ancient foundation. What more authoritative source could there be for Chester Guild Masons to quote in their request to the Crown for a charter than this authoritative work created in their own locality? When, moreover, we learn that King Edward III invited Higden to his presence to learn more about this History its influence was enhanced, especially as it was that king who required of the Guilds, including the masons, that they produce a history to justify their traditional claims.

In this case it is therefore possible to trace in a direct manner the initial source of what might otherwise have just been imagined to be a masonic secular invention. Indeed it has sometimes been suggested that it was precisely because this historical narrative was devised by somewhat less educated craftsmen that it contained so many curious statements. This now proves not to be the case. The Chester stonemasons and, through their initiative, countless others of their day, were using the best and most reliable material that they had to hand. The monastery of St. Werburgha might eventually be destroyed: its heritage through the Polychronicon was to live on.

It is this kind of source-enquiry that I now intend to pursue in what follows. What similar routes can we uncover as we search for the original practice or knowledge that led to other aspects of the Craft? Might it even be that here was a more common source than we might otherwise have expected?

Let us, therefore, continue by looking next at what we might call signs and symbols. Their presence and indeed their necessity in our Masonry does not need underlining so let us go back beyond the 18th century and see what the situation was in the 17th. We are assisted here by one who, though he was not himself a Freemason, was a close associate of Bro. Elias Ashmole and one who made specific reference to the manner in which Freemasons in

Staffordshire, and indeed across the whole country, were able to communicate with one another. This is what Dr. Plot says: 'Into (this) Society when any are admitted they call a meeting (or Lodge as they term it in some places) which must consist of at least of 5 or 6 of the Ancients of the Lodge (and) they proceed to the admission of them, which chiefly consists in the communication of certain secret signs .... by which means they have maintenance whither ever they travel; for if any man appear though altogether unknown, that can shew any of these signes to a Fellow of the Society, whom they call an accepted mason, he is obliged presently to come to him ...' Elsewhere he explains that workers on a site can communicate from the top of a steeple or at a fair distance by using the appropriate signs.

It is of course true, as I pointed out in my *Arch and the Rainbow*, that there were Strasburg Steinmetzen in the 14th century who had a range of signs and symbolic acts that show us the earlier history of what we do. Yet, I again ask, where did they get their ideas from? And again I have to thank Bro. John Acaster for first pointing me in a direction that I have since steadily pursued: the use of signs as the means by which the monks of several Orders, and the Cistercians in particular, used in order to communicate with each other. I mention the Cistercians, or their even more mute descendants the Trappists, because in these communities of monks there were more extensive periods of complete silence, even at meals when the tongue was unused but life had to go on. I have here for you some examples of the signs that were not only used in the Middle Ages but are still used in their houses today. One or two of them may seem familiar. And if you might ask quite rightly what this has to do with stonemasons may I remind you that the Orders I have specially mentioned were occupants of houses in such remote locations that in order to have their own special work-force for extension, repair and maintenance they were the only monks to have their private, on the spot, band of stonemasons and carpenters. They were part of the lay brothers who are accommodated in their monasteries. Do you now wonder how they learnt sign-language and adapted it to their purposes?

We next turn to an early form of masonic practice called 'catechismal instruction'. We still retain this in some sense by what occurs after a candidate has been obligated and then entrusted by the W.M. The new member of the Craft is led to the two Wardens who proceed to question him about the events that he has just undergone. This is of course but a pale copy of what took place in much earlier times. As anyone who is a member of the Royal Order of Scotland will be aware the more ancient practice was to seat the candidate at the table after he was obligated and to begin a catechismal interchange that was conducted by the reigning Master or Past Masters of the Lodge with the two Wardens, seated as if at a table. Indeed, in that Order the places at which the Master and Wardens sit are as we are used to seeing them at the Festive Board in the south-west and the north-west.

What was there exchanged was at first a resumé of parts of that very history about which we were hearing earlier. We thus have in the one form of procedure not only an old type of material but also an old type of communication. When we go 40 years further back from the re-affirmed Royal Order ritual of the late 1730s to the Edinburgh House Ms. of 1696 not only do we find traces of the same instruction but we have exactly the same catechismal method. What we learn from evidence in York and Ireland at the same period is that this alternate questioning was done not just with the Wardens but involving all the members seated round the lodge table.

From whence, we must now again enquire, does this method of communicating knowledge derive? Some of us with memories still of earlier instruction in religious matters might at once respond, from the church catechism style. Is this really its ultimate source? Where did this type of instruction have its birth? One point of view is that it derives from the form of dual communication that was part of all monastic worship. The singing in their choirs was done by exchange. One side of the choir made a statement and the other side came back with a response. They even had special names. One side was called Cantoris and the other Decanus, Chanter and Deacon in English. This gave rise to the idea of so communicating knowledge with the professed novice Master asking the questions and the one or more novices supplying the correct replies. I surely do not need to spell out the similarity to the priest or school-master adopting the same method as that being the one with which the Accepted Freemasons who had attended the first Grammar Schools would have been very familiar. The catechism style of instruction seems to have had a monastic origin.

Yet it was not just this form of instruction which we inherited. There was something even more important for our lodge practice. I mean the exercise of Memory. To pursue this side of our culture could occupy us a very long time and time we do not have. Let me therefore give you four pointers to the way in which I believe that this aspect of our practice arose and if you want to enlarge on any particular point you must ask me in the question time afterwards.

When two years ago I asked the Grand Master of Pennsylvania if I might acquire a book of their ritual he fixed me with his eye, asked what kind of obligation I had once taken and then said that his men learnt all their ritual by word of mouth and face to face with their predecessors. Memory was, and always had been, their practice from the 18th century.

The Freemasons who came into the Guild Lodges in the post-Renaissance period of the 17th century would have recognised the cult of Memory, as Dr. Yates has made clear in her many books, as an essential requisite of any trained scholar at school or University.

Memory was part of the skill that any craftsman needed for his trade and when the Guild Masons put on their Mystery Plays it was required of them, without demur, that their parts had to be learnt by memory and had to be word-perfect, or they were fined.

But the ground of all this emphasis on memory as an art was culled from the Monks of old. In a recent book devoted to the subject of *Memory in Medieval Culture* Mary Carruthers has the following to say relevant to our thesis: 'It is my contention that medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the west is documentary. That is why the fact of books in themselves, which were much more available in the late Middle Ages than ever before, did not profoundly disturb the essential value of memory training until many centuries had passed. ... A book from the Cistercian library of St. Mary's, Holmcultram, makes a particularly interesting study ... of mnemonic technique (because being) in Anglo-Norman indicates that it was for the 'pueri', or novices, of the monastery, many from noble families, beginning their studies ... I think one will find the traditions of memorial art not in separate treatises but in the practices of monastic prayer. The way in which these practices were translated for the pious laity of the late Middle Ages, the same audience that read the medieval arts of memory addressed to lawyers, merchants and other gentlemen, may illustrate a neglected source of early humanism.' I must not give you more but I hope the indication is clear. Monastic custom and method again seems to have been the first basis for another part of our masonic practice.

As the last of the elements in the formation of our ritual which I have time to consider today we turn to that term which is part and parcel of our own definition of the Craft. We say that it is '... veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'. Where did these ideas come from? No one doubts that we have them from the earliest days of Accepted Masonry for the allegorical meaning of many things that we say or see in the rooms or on the tracing boards of our lodges appear at the earliest moment of recorded ritual. Yet again I must pose the question, 'But from where did those early ritual formers get these things?' Could it possibly be from a similar source to what which we have already seen being used? The answer is 'Yes, it can'.

I had occasion earlier this year to read again a book of the Revd. Dr. Oliver regarding the elements of masonry in his time, 1847. Merely to restrict myself to two of the items that he mentions, we read as follows regarding the candlestick in the Holy Place (which, incidentally, appears on many 2<sup>nd</sup> Tracing Boards to this day), 'The seven lamps are emblems of the gifts of the Spirit; the knops and flowers, the graces and ornaments of a Christian life. As the candlestick gave light to the tabernacle, so we must remain in darkness unless Christ shall enlighten his Church.' He then turns to the table of the shewbread which also figures on some of our Fellowcraft boards. 'Some understand by it the holy scriptures, and interpret the four rings by which it was carried, when removed from one place to another, as the four evangelists, by whom the gospel of Christ was carried, as it were, from nation to nation.'

From where did he get all this allegorical interpretation? Believe it or not but his words are a remarkably close repetition of what was written by the Venerable Bede, the Monk of Jarrow, just 1150 years before. In one of Bede's works, the one called 'On the Temple', we find the following: 'The seven lamps are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The cups, bowls and lilies are aptly ordered under the branches because the hearts of the elect are upheld by the Lord's gifts, commandments and promises ... It is a lampstand because it has shown the path of light to those who have gone astray.' And then later: 'For surely the four golden rings are the four books of the gospels of the evangelists, through faith in which it has come to pass that all Sacred Scripture is read and understood throughout the whole world.' (Book One Section 24)

When you consider that what Bede wrote and taught had made such an impression on the monastic curriculum that it was copied and communicated through the ages so that it was in time written as it were in stone is it any wonder that as the mason craft that served the monks, and then created the Guilds in which Accepted members could share in the new forms of teaching by ritual, that these by now well-worn and tried ideas continued to be employed? There was no need to create new allegorical meanings. They were already to hand. Nor was this the case only for symbols from Christian antiquity. In the age of the Counter-Reformation from the 1580s a new body of monks appear, the Soldiers of Christ, otherwise known as the Jesuits, and from them we take one of their most potent and treasured emblems, the All-Seeing Eye. The monastic source of masonic usage seems to be underlined in its most modern form.

What I have outlined here needs of course to be both tested for its widest possible application and examined still further in detail to ensure its reasonable acceptance. For myself this continuation of a tradition that in England looked as though it had been almost obliterated is both evident and natural. When I again consulted that fascinating book, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* by Geoffrey Baskerville, and was reminded that so many Abbots became Deans or Bishops, and the monks became parish priests or school-masters, why are we surprised that both they and the laity they served should have acquired the monastic wisdom of the ages and brought it into one of the social groupings, the new Guild lodges that begin around 1600? When you think about it the wonder is that it should have been so long before we have realised where our true ceremonial origins lay. This, I suggest could be the real masonic, not the Hiram, Key.

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