

## THE MYSTERY OF ROSSLYN CHAPEL

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In a long and chequered history Rosslyn Chapel is no stranger to controversy, but in recent times its fame has reached an international audience, even being dubbed Scotland's answer to the Pyramids. If ever a church could audition for Hollywood, Rosslyn Chapel would get the part. On the 2 April 1998, H.R.H. Prince Charles officially opened a new visitors centre, which will not only house an exhibition on the chapel, but will have a section reserved for masonic and Templar enthusiasts, complete a new purpose built car park. Yet amid all the hype and speculation, many will wonder just what exactly is the truth behind this mysterious edifice? Was this really the final resting place for a hunted order of medieval warrior monks escaping from the east? Did the Knights Templar really place secret heretical scrolls pertaining to the true identity of Christ in its subterranean vaults? And what lies behind the Chapel's famous 'Prentice Pillar' and the tale of the murdered apprentice mason?

Roslin is a small old mining village south of Edinburgh, lying half-way between Penicuik and Lasswade. The Chapel stands at the end of a small lane, built on the edge of a steep gorge, where the land rises to greet Pentland Hills. The foundation stone of this collegiate church of St. Matthew was laid in 1446 by William Sinclair, the third and last Prince of Orkney, and the construction work continued for forty years. It is thought the village of Roslin was actually started by craftsmen working on the project, though sadly the names of individual masons have been lost to us. Rather significantly, William Sinclair appears to have acted as the Master of Works himself, as it was recorded how he caused the draughts to be drawn upon East-land boards, so the carpenters could make templates from them, before the masons could reproduce the tracings in stone. (Tracings can still be seen in the crypt or sacristy.) It is widely believed the Chapel was intended to be a part of a much larger edifice, but most probably for financial reasons, it was never completed. As a contemporary of King's College Chapel Cambridge, where the English perpendicular style was in full flight, it has to be said, structurally the chapel's architecture is not so remarkable. Yet what redeems the chapel is its highly elaborate and unique interior.

Once inside, the viewer cannot avoid being struck by the profusion of carved symbolism. The layout consists of a choir and sacristy but lacks a nave, and from its barrel vaulted ceiling, to every roof rib, capital, corbel, boss or arch, the chapel is encrusted with sculptured freestone. One's eye is constantly drawn to yet another biblical allegory, strange shaped star or leering green man. Incredibly there are over one hundred and twenty representations of the green man in the church, which also can boast one of the earliest depictions of the Dance of Death. The surrounding air is damp and helps to conjure a strange atmosphere.

The eastern end is adorned with three highly unusual pillars, reminiscent of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, although lunar symbolism may have been intended, as arrangements such as this can be found in Phoenicia, particularly at Carthage representing the great mother goddess and the three phases of the moon. Graded in complexity, it is the strikingly ornate pillar standing in the south that immediately captures the eye, spiralling upwards from the eight dragons adorning its base. According to legend, the master mason who intended to carve it, travelled to Rome with plans of its proposed design, only to discover upon his return, that his apprentice had completed the work in exquisite fashion. In a furious rage of jealousy, the master picked up a nearby mallet and slew the apprentice, from whence, the 'Prentice Pillar' is alleged to have earned its name. Yet, once one breaks free of the romantic charms of this tale, the true origins of the name are far from clear. For example there is good evidence of 'alabastermen' working in the north of England in the fifteenth century, who were attached to various workshops. Few ateliers produced this highly specialised form of sculpture, but one of the best known schools that did, was the firm of 'Prentys and Sutton' of Chellaston, who possessed their own quarry and workshop.

In the recent work 'The Hiram Key', the authors postulated that the pillar, together with a head carved in the chapel, which displays a gash on the forehead, is related to Freemasonry's legendary figure, Hiram Abiff, the martyred architect of King Solomon's Temple. Indeed, on the face of it this theory does appear plausible, as a great deal of medieval imagery was drawn from biblical source. Yet it is fatally flawed, because the Phoenician craftsman featured in the Bible clearly does not die, nor has this legend been traced in any apocryphal tradition, and the earliest known appearance of the Hiram legend is in 1730. Moreover, the idea itself was not uncommon, and was most probably employed to express a classic archetype of sacrifice and rebirth, such as with the green man motif. One has only to consider the famous rose window at Rouen Cathedral, which according to legend, is said to have been executed by an apprentice, whose master out of jealousy knocked his brains out with a hammer. Other tales include an apprentice bracket at Gloucester Cathedral, an apprentice minaret at the Mosque in Damietta, and I was told of another version during a recent visit to the great Mosque in Damascus.

The key to Rosslyn's pillar appears to be in its rich symbolism. It has long been known that it depicts the world tree of Nordic legend, Yggdrasil, the fountain of eternal life and immortality, and whose boughs rested the eagle and serpent, as forces of light and darkness, in perpetual conflict. Odin sacrificed himself and hung for nine nights from Yggdrasil, which represented a regenerative and sacrificial tree, thus forming an obvious parallel with Christ upon the cross, and both were pierced with a spear. The capital above the pillar echoes with this message, being carved with the figure of Isaac. The serpents depicted at its base, represent Nidhogger the 'Dread Biter', who was supposed to have resided at the root

of Yggdrasil, continually gnawing at it, symbolising the malevolent forces of the universe. For the Sinclair family with their Norman and Scandanavian roots, the parallels would have been obvious. Adjacent to the capital is a lintel in the south aisle, of particular relevance to various side degrees in Freemasonry. It is carved with an inscription from the Book of Ezra, which tells of the rebuilding of the second Temple under Zerubbabel, and comes from his speech to King Darius for which he won the right to rebuild the Temple; 'Wine is strong, women are stronger, but truth conquers all.'

Despite much recent speculation, there is no evidence of any kind to suggest a Templar connection with the modern chapel or Sinclair family, although there was a much older chapel once on this site, of which very little is known. The St. Clairs, came from Normandy, and it is proven that they held land on the Pentland Hills since the middle of the twelfth century. From the end of the fifteenth century, the family were viewed by craft organisations in Scotland as their hereditary patrons and protectors, a job that at various times presented certain difficulties, especially during the reformation. Thirty years after the acrimonious split with Rome, the Catholic owner of Rosslyn was resisting pressure to tear down his altars, a move eventually forced upon him in 1592. Yet despite his vociferous opposition to the power of the Presbytery, William was still claiming patronage of the masons craft many years later, as can be gauged from two seventeenth century charters, and by the 1690s, the bond between the Sinclairs and the masons was commented in a celebrated letter.

They are obliged to receive the masons' word and which is a secret signal masons have throughout the world to know one another by.

When in November 1736, the Grand Lodge of Scotland was formed in Edinburgh, Sir William Sinclair became the first Scottish Grand Master, as head of the family at Roslin. Upon his installation as the first Grand Master Mason of Scotland he was obliged to sign a declaration resigning the family's hereditary claim to act as patrons of the Scottish craft in perpetuity.

Today the chapel is undergoing a major programme of conservation, which as Stewart Beattie, the Director of the Rosslyn Trust relayed to me, will continue for the next five years. Currently sheltering beneath a giant galvanised steel canopy, the 68 foot chapel with its porous stone is being slowly dried, and layers of damaging lead and asphalt are being stripped from its roof. Yet despite the scaffolding and work outside, the chapel's interior remains serene, and for masons and non-masons alike Rosslyn Chapel offers a fascinating journey into the minds of the craftsmen who created it.