

To Better Understand the Origins of Freemasonry

History of the Guild System

The basic difference between fact, legend and myth is the ability to gather evidence to support a fact. Generally, a legend or myth cannot be disproved, just as it cannot be proven. Facts, however, are details, while legends and myths are often merely stories. Such stories can offer lessons, allegories, and points, but distinguishing the difference is part of knowledge. Knowing how to apply such knowledge comes wisdom.

It is not the goal of Masonic education to only establish facts that dispels legends or myths, but to put them into perspective and context so one can identify, speculative if he wishes, about truth in all forms.



Understanding the origins of Freemasonry cannot be legitimately understood with context without awareness of the influence the guild system in Europe had on the thinking of men who later established organized Freemasonry.

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Freemasonry & The Guild System

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Builder Magazine, November 1923 -
Volume IX - Number 11**

THE GILD or GUILD SYSTEM IN GENERAL

When the Angles and Saxons settled in ancient England (Britain it was then called) they at first maintained their military form of organization, so that each settlement was a kind of camp; but as time went on and villages became permanent, a civil form of social order began slowly to evolve. The first step in this was the institution of the kin-bond, wherein blood relatives stood together for support and protection, the individual and his family being mutually responsible. This gave way in the

course of time to voluntary associations founded not on blood relationship but on community ties, existing to protect the individual against the group, to preserve order in the settlement, and for a variety of similar purposes. These associations, described as "artificial" in contrast to the "natural" bond of blood, were the first guilds in England, in virtue of which fact it cannot be said that anybody ever "discovered" or "invented" guilds; they grew out of natural conditions in response to social necessity, just as they had come into existence among the Greeks and Romans centuries before, the former calling them "thiassoï", etc., the latter, "collegia".

It is generally believed by the more dependable authorities that it is very possible that there may have been some historical continuity between the guilds of early England and the Roman collegia, but the historical remains of the period are too scanty to enable us to make sure on that point. If such a continuity ever existed it was more probable in Italy, where the collegia longest endured, and which, like most other European countries, had a guild system of its own. The word "guild" (sometimes spelled "guild") continues to be a puzzle so far as its etymology is concerned. The North Germans had "geld", meaning money; the Danish, "gilde", a religious feast in honour of the god Odin; the Anglo-Saxons, "gild", from same root as "yield", and meaning a fixed payment of money; the Bretons "gouil", a feast or holiday; the Welsh "gmylad", a festival. In later times, when guilds became everywhere common, the North Germans used the word "gild"; the South Germans, "zunft"; the French, "metier"; and the Italians, "arte". In the sixteenth century England the word was generally superseded by "company", "corporation" or "mystery", the last name derived from the Latin "ministerium", or

trade, and having no reference to anything mysterious, being preserved in our usage to this day, as when we speak of the arts, parts and mysteries of Freemasonry.

The first guilds, as it is believed, were organized in Italy. In France they were very common before Charlemagne and are first mentioned in the Carolingian Capitularies of 779 and 789. Commercial and craft guilds began to become common in France, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and Sweden in the eleventh century. The oldest known ordinances, as the written laws for the government of a guild were called, occur in England in the eleventh century. The guild principle proved so successful and was applied to so many uses that by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it became the outstanding feature of the social and economic life of Europe. One of the commonest early uses of that principle was in the "frith", or peace, guilds, which became very popular in North Europe in the sixth century - the Vikings organized then to suppress piracy - and in England the century later, where they were referred to in the Laws of Ine.

These were voluntary associations of men organized for mutual defense, to supplement defective laws, and to police the community in a period when national governments were not known and when the authority of the town was very weak. We saw this system at work in our own land under pioneer conditions, as in the case of the Vigilantes, and even today, in spite of our elaborate machinery for the enforcement of law and the protection of citizens, impatient men in some communities strive to make or enforce law by similar methods. In the course of time guilds multiplied until they came to be used for every conceivable purpose, for good-fellowship, for drinking, for insuring a decent

burial, for worship, for hunting, travel, art and for banking; priests and friars organized, sailors, travelers, woodsmen and shepherds; there were guilds for men, women, children, for rich and for poor, in the country and in the town. Functions now performed by government, armies, schools, stores, factories, hospitals, trade unions, and most of the other innumerable forms into which social organization has differentiated itself, were then held in keeping by guilds.

The typical guild had prayers for the dead; a common chest for incidental upkeep and for the relief of the widows and orphans of deceased members; periodical meetings, with banquets; admitted members on an oath, sometimes two; administered fines; adopted ordinances for the regulation of its own activities; punished members for improper conduct and co-operated in many ways with the town or national governments. Most of these societies were small, the largest on record being the Corpus Christi guild at York, which once boasted of 15,000 members. Sometimes many guilds in a community consolidated, but there was never a country-wide merger.

Of the city of London there is record of one guild in 1130; of eighteen in 1180, and of 110 in 1422. In the time of Edward III there were listed more than 40,000 religious and trade guilds in England; the census of 1389 showed 909 in Norfolk alone. This proliferation received its first serious set-back during the Reformation when Henry VIII despoiled all religious guilds; it died down rapidly with the advent of the capitalist system, and came to a dead stop, except in a few unimportant instances, in the last century. France prohibited them in 1789-91; Spain and Portugal, 1833-40; Austria and Germany, 1859-60; Italy, 1864; Scotland, where

the development had followed Continental lines, in 1846, and England in 1835.

In its heyday the guild system was very closely connected with the church, so closely that some writers credit the church with its origin; almost every guild had its patron saint, before whose image it kept a candle burning, and many set aside sums of money for the sustentation of a priest, the maintenance of a chapel and for masses, chantries, church charities and church schools. Oftentimes a guild had its own chaplain, and a very large number, as already noted, were devoted exclusively to religious purposes; these religious fraternities were suppressed in England in 1547, and other guilds were at the same time forbidden to give money to churches. A number of the Roman Catholic fraternities now existing are lineal descendants of the old religious guilds. Partly as a result of their alliance with the church many guilds, otherwise devoted to purely secular pursuits, participated in pageants and in mystery, morality and miracle plays, the forerunners of our modern drama. These plays were staged on wagons drawn in a "procession" from one exhibition point to another across the town, and always it was a day of excitement when they were shown, and vast crowds gathered. Expenses were divided among the guilds and parts allotted, as at Norwich, where the mercers, drapers and haberdashers presented the creation of the world; the grocers, Paradise; the smiths, the fight between David and Goliath; or as at Hereford, the glovers gave Adam and Eve; the carpenters, Noah's ship; the tailors, the three kings, etc. It is of record that on a few instances parts were taken by guilds of Masons.

I am of the opinion that the drama of our Third Degree may very probably have been originally

an old mystery play, which may have found its way to us through some Masons' gild that participated in it. It used to be the fashion to say that the gild corporation and the town corporation were identical, or that the former gradually metamorphosed into the latter, a view given a very wide circulation by Brentano; this idea has been abandoned.

There was always a close connection between town government and gild government, but the two were always distinct, except possibly in two or three negligible instances. In many cases a man had to be a gild member before he could become a citizen, but the gild ordinances were always subordinate to the town authority. The manner in which the gilds governed themselves will be described later. It is a remarkable fact, and one worthy of especial remark to us Masons, that many gilds accepted men not at all engaged in the craft as patrons or as a means of bestowing an honor or some special privilege. "Indeed," writes one of the best authorities, E. Lipson, "the members of many London companies frequently came to have only a very faint connection with the business of the company to which they were attached," a fact that makes it easier for us to understand how non-operatives came to be admitted into the old Masonic gilds, or lodges. "They included in their membership," writes another authority, "most of the wealthy men of the nation, and the great [gild] halls now standing in the city of London testify to the proud names with which they are so generously decorated that the men who made England what she was, the men who built her commerce, won her wealth and risked their lives and fortunes in extending England's commercial supremacy, were mighty in the gilds."

Henry IV, Henry VI and Henry VIII were gild members, so also Edward III, who belonged to a gild of armourers. There is therefore nothing extraordinary in the fact that Elias Ashmole and other worthies of his time sought membership among the operative masons.

THE MERCHANT GILDS

The gild system in general had two grand periods of development, the first of which culminated in the merchant gilds, as were called those associations formed in all the towns (save a few, among which was London) for the purpose of managing and controlling trading and commerce. Such a gild included all engaged in a given kind of commerce, including wage-earners as well as proprietors, and the object was to enable the merchants to maintain a monopoly of, and an efficient organization of, all the merchandising in a given community. These organizations grew apace and waxed powerful and became in time the foster parents of English commerce; more than 100 towns in England and seventy in Ireland and Wales had them. They reached their zenith in the twelfth century, began to disappear in the fourteenth century and were almost completely superseded by craft gilds in the fifteenth century. Merchant gilds engaged in so many activities, some private, some public, that it is impossible to describe them in full; among the most important of their functions was the control of import and export of wares; the limiting of the number permitted in any trade; the regulation of wages and prices, and the inspection and standardization of goods. Every member had to pay "scot" and "lot", as the general taxes were called, and take oath to obey the rules and ordinances, as well as contribute his annual dues. As a reward for his membership he was privileged to share in

business transactions and in bargains and was given a "status" in the community very much coveted. If he fell ill he was cared for; his family was looked after in case of his death; in unemployment he was helped to find a position, and he was protected against quarrels and unjust dealings. The guild was governed by an alderman ("elder man") and his associates, two or four in number; it had its own treasury; passed its own ordinances; could fine or otherwise punish its members; and in some instances, had its own court.

At periodical meetings - called "morning speeches" - the brethren passed or revised ordinances, admitted new members, feasted and elected officers. As industry developed in scope and complexity it became increasingly difficult for these guilds merchant to retain their monopolies; gradually there grew up a new system to supersede the old, known as craft guilds, in which not commerce but a handicraft was the unit; there was a struggle between the new system and the old, but the old at last gave way and in the fifteenth century ceased to be. Craft guilds were not, as has often been alleged, the offspring of the merchant guilds, for there was no organic connection between them; they were variously two similar but quite distinct and separate developments of the guild principle due to economic changes.

CRAFT GUILDS

"The primary purpose of the craft guild was to establish a complete system of industrial control over all who were associated together in the pursuit of a common calling." The merchant guild, working usually in the smaller towns, organized a whole industry; the craft guilds, springing up everywhere, from London to almost every hamlet, organized each separate part of every industry, or vocation, as an

independent entity. For example, where the merchant guild had organized the leather business as a whole, craft guilds broke it up into specialties, so that tanners, saddle makers, harness makers, bridle makers, shoe makers, slipper makers, boot makers, etc., had each their own fraternity. This high degree of specialization was extended to the arts, to social interests, amusements and education; it was even extended to religion, so that in one church might be a guild of priests, of musicians, of singers, of actors in the mystery play, and a guild to look after the altar besides to see that it was properly dressed with rich cloths and its candles always burning.

The guilds devoted wholly to someone handicraft performed an astonishing number of functions and became a little family world to each member in which he found his social fellowship, his school, his business, his hospital, his sick, health and life insurance, protection against enemies, employment bureau, a court to which to be responsible for his conduct and laws and ordinances for controlling his conduct. The old debate among Masonic writers as to whether the medieval operative Masonic guilds possessed any "speculative" elements would seem to be singularly beside the point; every guild was full of "speculative" elements, even the pig drivers and sheep herders, who, like the rest had their patron saints, their religious festivals and burned a candle at the altar. "Many free grammar schools were founded and maintained by the guilds," writes Lipson, in his excellent Economic History, "which formed one of the main sources of education in the Middle Ages; and one guild, that of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, perpetuated its memory by founding the famous college that still bears its name.

In this way the guilds contributed to the spread of learning, and the voluntary efforts of artisans helped to keep burning the lamp of knowledge." He could have added many more examples. Dean Colet turned over to a guild the management of his St. Paul's school. William Shakespeare secured his "little Latin and less Greek" at a guild school in Stratford-on-Avon. Many writers have described craft guilds as "the trade unions of the Middle Ages". This is most inaccurate.

As Sidney and Beatrice Webb have stated so clearly in their magnificent *History of Trade Unions* there was no connection whatever between the two, and only a superficial resemblance. The craft guild was a quasi-public body, often so interwoven with municipal government that learned writers have confused the two; it controlled trade not in the interests of workmen merely but of all, the public included; membership in it was compulsory, and so recognized by local and national laws; its ranks included employers as well as employed, and these two groups did not come into conflict until later, with the rise of journeymen's guilds; it accepted into membership only trained men, all others, servants, etc., being left outside and considered as "cowans"; it was a purely local institution, with a territory limited by the community boundaries; and in addition to the regulation of wages, hours and general trade conditions, it was also engaged, as described above, in many activities of a purely social character, and unrelated to the trade itself.

At the head of the typical guild were the wardens, two or four, usually elected by the assembly but sometimes appointed by the mayor, holding office for one year, whose duty it was to supervise the work turned out by the craft and to see that certain standards were

maintained. The assembly usually met once a year, but sometimes four times, and at stated intervals. The guild often had its own court and members were admitted on oath. The general membership was divided into the three grades of masters, journeymen (fellow crafts) and apprentices, but any journeyman might become a master so that, so far as skill was concerned, there were only two classes. Women were admitted into many guilds and were permitted to take apprentices and to hire journeymen.

The most admirable feature in the whole guild system was the institution called apprenticeship, which was a method for training youths in their vocation never since surpassed and not often equaled. A boy was "indentured", or contracted, to some master for a term of years, which in earlier times might last from one to ten years, but in 1563 was everywhere (in England) fixed at seven years. The master furnished bed and board, technical training, sometimes a small salary, sometimes schooling, supervised his conduct, and generally stood to the boy in loco parentis; the boy in his turn was obliged to be no bondsman, of good physique, a faithful workman and alive to his master's welfare. The beginnings of this system have been traced to 1260; it became a vital part of the whole economic system in the thirteenth century. Apprentices were usually registered with the town authorities and otherwise given a recognized status in the community. The terms and experiences of his position passed into popular speech, remaining in use until the present day, colored all social thinking, and often was celebrated in literature, as in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

The apprentice custom, as the reader will already have discerned, remains imbedded in our own Masonic system to remind us that a

candidate for our "mystery" stands as much in need of training as the youth of old times who knocked at the door of a guild; if our statesmen and rulers ever come to understand Masonry as they should, and its possibilities in the world, the reconstitution of the apprentice system in our Fraternity, and a more thorough and intelligent use of it, will be one of their first concerns.

To expect a man to be able to understand or practice Freemasonry without adequate preparation is a ridiculous now as it was when Masonic guilds were devoted to architecture and the building crafts. We are not called on to raise fabrics of wood and stone into the sky, but ours is an even more difficult task, for it is our duty to build manhood and to reorganize the whole world into the forms of brotherhood, surely a high calling, and demanding skilled workmen.

The time of his indenture completed, the apprentice graduated into the ranks of the journeymen, becoming thereby a fellow of the craft, i.e., entitled to its liberties and privileges on equal terms with all others. This passing to a higher grade was signaled by some proof of his skill a "masterpiece" in many cases or an examination before the wardens. (Wardens were known as "deacons" in Scotland, whence some of our Masonic nomenclature was derived.)

In Europe the young journeyman went out on a "wander tour" in order to see something of the world and of the practices of his craft in other places, but this custom never secured a foothold in England; usually (in some cases compulsorily) a journeyman (sometimes called yoeman, "young man") hired himself out to some master for two or three years at wages and then, with a little money of his own, set up in his own shop, hired journeymen, indentured

apprentices and became a master. In the course of time the masters, being the moneyed class, tended to arrogate to themselves more and more power and to adopt legislation in their own interests, and the journeymen, as their numbers increased, learned to combine to secure their own interests, especially after a permanently wage-earning class was developed.

Upon this journeymen began to form guilds of their own, often in despite of the authorities, a thing that became quite common by the fifteenth century. On the continent, especially in the industrial centers and in Germany, this conflict between masters and men often broke out into pitched battles with much shedding of blood (the Medici family emerged from such a welter to the control of Florence), but in England the struggle was quieter.

By the sixteen seventeenth century journeymen guilds were quite subdued and content to remain subordinate to the masters who grew more and more oligarchical. In many of the large cities the masters secured all control in their own hands, and gradually, with the coming of modern capitalism and manufacturing and the whole gild system gradually rise of nationalism the whole gild system broke up and quietly passed away. Some of the craft societies still survived so late as the latter half of the eighteenth century, but their privileges were formally and finally abolished by parliament in 1835.

The study of the medieval Masonic guilds from which Freemasonry evolved, or at least with which it has at least a certain amount of historical continuity, must be reserved for another chapter, as demanding more space reserved than is here available. In the present connection it is not necessary to call a Masonic reader's attention to the fact that whatever

that historical connection may have been and to what extent our modern craft is indebted to the old gild system, Freemasonry was in its beginning of a piece with that system and inherited many things from it, so that it is quite impossible to understand our Fraternity today apart from the craft guilds of old in which apprentices, fellow crafts and masters united in the one hand, toiled and lived together in brotherhood to the end that the word might be served and themselves enabled to earn masters' wages and to perfect themselves in their mystery.

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