

# The Origins of Freemasonry

Asking a Mason to explain the origins of Freemasonry is likely to result in not much of an answer at all for several reasons. One of the primary reasons is too many just accept the more popular fanciful explanations or soon realize they have not read or pursued much of the factual information available today to answer that question to others or themselves.

Explaining what Freemasonry is has been likened to explaining the space shuttle as a thing that flies – an explanation that hardly clarifies much at all about the space shuttle. Explaining the origins of Freemasonry without being armed with knowledge can result in the same insufficient answer.

There's multiple thousands of books, articles, essays, and other writings about Freemasonry. Knowing where to start a search for valid and legitimate information about the institution is a widespread problem for Masons who are serious in their pursuit of knowledge about the fraternity. Many of these writings explore the origins and many offers little but opinion, evident-troubled theories or information that has long been discredited.



**John Hamill**, author, former Communications Director, Director of Special Projects, Librarian and Curator of the United Grand Lodge of England, prepared the following paper, *Whence Come We?* His paper is often referred to as the best factual overview about the origins of Freemasonry.

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## Whence Came We?

### Introduction

The honest answers to the questions when, where and why did Freemasonry originate are that we do not know. A great deal of time, effort, ink, and paper have been expended in producing answers to those questions, but these answers are simply theories and, like Darwin's Theory of Evolution they have missing links which would need to be found before those theories became realities. The purpose of this paper is to look at the various theories of origin and to suggest an alternative view as to why Freemasonry.

### Ritual as History

So persuasive is the ritual that we all pass through from our entry into the Craft to our becoming Master Masons that candidates can be forgiven for initially believing that Freemasonry existed in the time of King

Solomon, that there was a Grand Lodge at Jerusalem and that the Masons who built the Temple were divided into lodges of Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts, and that only the three Grand Masters (Solomon, Hiram of Tyre and Hiram Abif) possessed the Master's secrets. In this high-tech age and very practical, material world in which we live we have almost lost the use of allegory and symbolism and it is easy to forget that that is exactly what our ritual is made up of - allegory and symbolism used to point moral lessons and firmly impress them upon our minds. The content of the ritual, then, is not a source of Masonic history.

### Early Official Histories

The first 'histories' of Masonry - and I deliberately say Masonry and not Freemasonry - are found in a series of documents stretching from the late 1300s to the

mid-18th century which are now collectively known as the Old Charges. Some 120 versions have been traced of which over 100 are still in existence. Although the versions have differences they have a common form: a history of Masonry followed by a series of charges giving the relationship between the duties of Masters, Fellows and Apprentices. The history, in the fashion of the times, is a combination of fact, Biblical stories and pure legends. It traces Masonry back to Adam in the garden of Eden and follows it through ancient times to Egypt, Greece and Rome, its spread throughout Europe and its introduction into England where the Gothic style was master until it was eclipsed by the revival of classicism. It is essentially a history of building and architecture and makes no mention of Freemasonry as we know it.

In 1723 the Rev. Dr. James Anderson, a Scots Presbyterian Minister in London, at the request of the premier Grand Lodge "digested" the Old Charges and produced the first Masonic Constitutions. He prefaced the rules and regulations with the history from the Old Charges bringing it down to the formation of Grand Lodge in 1717. That would have been fine but in 1738 he produced a second edition of the Constitutions in which he greatly expanded the historical introduction, introducing all manner of legendary, biblical and historical figures as Grand masters, Patrons or, simply, lovers of Masonry. He continued the history by describing the formation of Grand Lodge in 1717, which he stated was a revival, and listing the principle activities of the Grand Lodge from 1717 to 1738. He made no distinction between operative and speculative and that, combined with his claim that the events of 1717 were a revival caused by Sir Christopher Wren having neglected his duties as Grand master, gave birth to the idea that speculative Masonry was a natural outgrowth from the operative craft.

The two editions of Anderson's Constitutions were the most influential Masonic works published in their time. They were circulated throughout the English-speaking world wherever lodges were set up, were translated into French, Dutch and German and the 1723 edition was plagiarized by Spratt for the first Irish Constitutions in 1731. Anderson's history was

given even more currency when William Preston included it in the second and subsequent editions of his Illustrations of Masonry which were to have the widest circulation of any Masonic book until the appearance of Gould's History of Freemasonry in 1882. As the Constitutions were official publications and Preston's work had been sanctioned by Grand Lodge it is not surprising that the idea of Freemasonry naturally growing out of operative Masonry took hold and was never really questioned until the late 19th century. As we shall see it certainly needed questioning.

### **The Templar Origin Theory**

In fact the operative origin was to be challenged in Europe shortly after Anderson's Constitutions appeared. In France in 1737 the Chevalier Ramsay gave an oration in the Grand Lodge of France in which he made reference to Orders of Chivalry. He was followed in Germany by the Baron von Hund who set up the Strict Observance, a curious amalgam of Freemasonry, Chivalry and what today we would call occultism. The Strict Observance claimed that Freemasonry had its origins in the medieval Knights Templar. The story ran that after the destruction of the Templar Order and the execution of Jaques de Molay, its Grand Master, a number of Knights Templar escaped, came together on the mysterious Mount Heredom near Kilwinning where, to avoid persecution, they turned themselves into Freemasons and transferred the Templar secrets into the secrets of Freemasonry. It is always a pity to spoil a good story but there are a number of factual errors in this one.

First, the Templars were never persecuted in Scotland. Indeed, the senior Scottish Templar, the Prior of Torpichen, was by virtue of that office a senior member of the Scottish government, ranking as a Baron, until the Protestant Reformation in Scotland when the then Prior swapped his religious chivalric position for a Barony and the Torpichen lands! Thus, had any Knights indeed escaped to Scotland there would have been no need for them to translate themselves into anything else. Secondly, the mysterious Mount Heredom never existed, although

Heredom was to be a popular name in many degrees invented in Europe in the 18th century. Thirdly, the Templars had no "secrets" and the only "secrets" in Freemasonry have always been our modes of recognition. It seems hardly likely that a group of desperate men would go to the extent of changing themselves into a new organization and to risk their lives simply to protect a series of signs, tokens and words. Despite the frequent debunking of the Templar origin theory it continues to attract attention, mainly from romantics. In recent years two books, by non-Masons, have appeared claiming to have proved the Templars origin and to have discovered the true Templar, and thus Masonic secret. To anyone wishing to follow this line of research I would recommend a recent book by Peter Partner which sweeps away the legends which have surrounded the medieval Templars and examines the many groups who have claimed to be their successors.

### **The Rosicrucian Theory**

Whether or not the Rosicrucian Brotherhood ever existed is a question too large to be dealt with in this paper. That the idea of Rosicrucianism caught hold after the publication of the anonymous Manifestos in 1614 and 1615 is beyond doubt. That some of the early gentlemen Masons (e.g. Sir Robert Moray and Elias Ashmole) were considered to be Rosicrucians is put forward as some sort of proof that Freemasonry was the public face of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. If we look, however, at the complex philosophical and spiritual ideas put forward in the Manifestos and compare them with the simple practicality of the early Masonic ritual and catechisms it quickly becomes apparent that there was no connection between the two.

### **Ancient Mysteries**

In the 19th and early 20th centuries a number of writers attempted to trace Freemasonry back to the ancient mysteries of Egypt and the classical Greece and Rome. They took what they thought were similarities between Masonic ritual and the

symbolism and those of ancient times and immediately assumed a link between the two. What they appear to have forgotten is that none of the symbolism employed in Freemasonry is peculiar to Freemasonry. It has all been borrowed; what makes it Masonic is the interpretation we put on it. The height of absurdity was reached when it was suggested that because in some Egyptian temple paintings male figures were wearing apron-like loincloths and had their arms in certain positions a two-degree system of Freemasonry must have existed in ancient Egypt! What was also forgotten was that the ancient mysteries all claimed to impart secret knowledge to their adherents. Freemasonry has never done this. The only secrets that have ever existed in Freemasonry are the traditional modes of recognition which we use as proofs of membership.

### **Workable theories**

Having dismissed the fanciful theories, what does the "authentic" school of Masonic history have to put in their place? There is a general consensus that Freemasonry links back in one way or another to the medieval operative masons who built the great cathedrals and castles. But there is also a fierce argument as to whether or not that linking back is, in fact, a direct descent from operative masonry or if those who evolved Freemasonry had no actual links with operative masonry but deliberately adopted forms and tools of the operative craft for their own ends. The 19th century was a great age of discovery and exploration and that spirit of exploration and the intellectual curiosity spilled over into Freemasonry. In the 1860s and 1870s in Great Britain amongst Freemasons there was a sudden interest in collecting old records and artefacts and a desire to seek out the development of Freemasonry. That desire led in 1886 to the consecration of Quatuor Lodge No. 2076, the premier lodge of Masonic research, and the birth of what its founders called the authentic or scientific school of Masonic research. Like scientists these Masonic researchers searched everywhere for evidence and minutely examined and tested it and sought to fix it in the grand design. Unlike scientists, however, they began with a belief and searched for

evidence to prove it rather than taking the evidence and seeing what came out of it. They did not question the idea that Freemasonry grew out of operative masonry, and simply looked for the evidence to fill in what they believed were the gaps in the line of descent. We should, perhaps, start by looking at the theory of a direct descent from operative to speculative.

### **A Direct Link?**

Put simply the theory of a direct descent states that as the medieval stone masons began to organize themselves they gathered in lodges as a means of protecting the craft. In the lodges they were divided into apprentices and fellows; developed simple entrance ceremonies; and had secret modes of recognition so that when stone masons moved from one building site to another they could prove that they were of the "fellowship" and were worthy to be set to work. In the late 1500s and the early 1600s these operative lodges began to admit no-operative or gentleman masons who gradually began to outnumber the operative members and took control of the lodges and turned them into lodges of Free and Accepted or Speculative Masons. Thus, you had operative lodges, transitional lodges, and speculative lodges. The founders of the authentic school of Masonic history found a great deal of evidence which, at first sight, appears to prove that that was the early development of Freemasonry. When we come to examine evidence, however, and place it in its geographical and time contexts it does not hang together quite so well.

### **Operative Lodges**

The lodge was originally a lean-to on the building site where the masons kept their tools, took their refreshments and spent their leisure. It soon became the name for the group who used the lean-to and the lodge became a unit for controlling the trade. In English medieval building accounts there are many references to the lodge but by the end of the 1400s they had disappeared leaving only the Masons' Guilds in some of the principal towns and cities. No evidence

has come to light of the English operative lodges having any ceremonies or secret modes of recognition. In Scotland matters were much more organized. The operative lodges became geographically defined units whose authority in craft matters was governed by statute, in particular the Schaw Statutes of 1598 and 1599. It is clear that the purpose of the lodge was to govern the mason craft in its location. In the 1600s we find evidence of these operative lodges admitting men who had no connection with the operative masonic craft - gentlemen masons or accepted masons. This is claimed as the beginnings of speculative Freemasonry - the gentlemen masons, so it was claimed, gradually took over the lodges and transformed them from operative to speculative lodges. This claim has simply been accepted without qualification but, to my mind, a number of questions have not been asked or researched. How did the acceptance of non-operatives affect the lodges? How often did they attend after their acceptance and what part did they play in the lodge? Did they come in under the same ceremony as operative apprentices? Why did they come in and why did they take over the lodges? None of these questions have been answered and until further research is carried out I am of the mind that these gentlemen masons were no more than honorary members of a trade guild who joined for reasons of curiosity and patronage. There is no evidence for similar lodges existing in England which would have been capable of admitting gentlemen masons, with the possible exception of the London Masons' Company. Yet there is evidence for speculative Freemasonry in the 1600s.

### **The English evidence**

From the early 1620s there is evidence in the account books of the London Masons Company of non-operatives and operatives being accepted into an inner circle, known today as the Acception. It has been claimed that this is evidence of a transitional lodge in England, but the accounts appear to show that both sorts were joining a separate group, not gentlemen joining the London Masons Company. The evidence is, to say the least, confusing. In 1646 we

come onto safer ground. Elias Ashmole, the antiquary and founder of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, records in his diary that on 6 October 1646 he was made a Freemason at his father-in-law's house at Warrington. Happily, he recorded those present, none of whom had any connection with the operative craft. So here we have the first definite evidence of the making of a speculative Freemason, at the same time that Scottish operative lodges were admitting gentlemen as operatives. It is clear that the lodge at Warrington was not a standing lodge but a group of Freemasons who met simply for the purpose of making new Masons, the lodge then breaking up. From the little evidence we have it would seem that this was the English practice throughout the 1600s. Randle Holme in his *Academy of Armourie* (1688) and Dr. Robert Plot in his *Natural History of Staffordshire* (1686) make a very firm distinction between the Fellowship of Freemasons (the operatives) and the Society of Freemasons (the accepted). Holme stated that he had the honor to be of the Society and Plot stated that it was well known over the country and gives the indications of what the ceremony of making a Mason was. Thus, we have in Scotland operative lodges admitting gentlemen and in England no evidence for operative lodges but evidence of a non-operative Society of Freemasons. In my estimation Freemasonry began in England and was taken to Scotland and grafted on to the operative/gentlemen system. It was not until after accepted Masonry had appeared in England that the gentlemen Masons began to take over the Scottish operative lodges. If we look at the Old Charges, which appear to have been essential to a speculative "making" in England, the few copies known to have been used in Scotland are all late 17th century and are derived from English originals. The whole question of a Scottish or English origin, however, becomes academic if we reject the idea of a direct link between operative and speculative masonry and consider the theory of an indirect link to operative masonry.

### **The indirect link**

Those who support the indirect link theory have looked at the subject from a slightly different

viewpoint. In addition to looking for evidence for early Freemasonry they have addressed the question of why Freemasonry should have developed. The principal figure in the development of the indirect link theory was the late Brother Colin Dyer who in a paper to Quatuor Coronati Lodge examined the differences between the oldest and the third oldest versions of the manuscript Old Charges, the Regius MS of c. 1390 and the Grand Lodge No. 1 MS of 1583. The Regius MS definitely has a purely operative content but the Grand Lodge MS contains much that had no relevance to operative masonry but a great deal of relevance to Freemasonry. He then looked at the basic idea behind Freemasonry and the period in which the later versions of the Old Charges began to appear.

The period in which these altered versions of the Old Charges began to appear and in which supporters of the indirect link theory believe that Freemasonry originated, the late 1500s and early 1600s, was one of great intolerance in matters of politics and religion in England. Men of differing views of religion and politics were unable to meet in harmony. Indeed, so divisive were those subjects that families and friendships were broken because of different views and eventually England was torn by bloody civil war fought over those differences. As far as can be established the ban on the discussion of religion and politics has always existed in Freemasonry. Similarly, brother love, or as we might express it today tolerance, has always been one of the three great principles which are the foundation of Freemasonry. Thus those who formulated the theory of an indirect link between operative and speculative masonry believe that those who formed Freemasonry were men of peace who wished to bring an end to religious and political strife, to achieve which they founded a brotherhood in which politics and religion had no part and dedicated themselves to a belief in God and the three great principles of Brotherly Love, relief and Truth. In practical terms they wished to form a society which would enable men of differing views to meet in harmony and to work for the betterment of mankind.

In the period in which they were working, the late 1500s and early 1600s the method of teaching and passing on of philosophical ideas was by means of allegory and symbolism. As the central message of

Freemasonry was the building of a better man in a better world, what better way to arrange the society than to take over the form of the old operative lodges and to use the working tools of the operative craft as symbols upon which to moralize. Again, to match the central message what better allegory than an actual building. Despite high levels of illiteracy, the one book with which the great majority of the population was intimately familiar was the Bible, which was a central source of allegory. The only building described in any detail in the Bible is King Solomon's Temple, of which there are slightly conflicting detailed descriptions in the Book of Kings and the Book of Chronicles. Additionally, the idea of King Solomon's Temple as a cosmic symbol had long fascinated artists and philosophers. In an intolerant world any attempt to promote toleration would have to be done quietly to avoid the suspicion that those of differing views were meeting together for subversive reasons. By clothing themselves in the guise of a philosophical and charitable organization which also indulged in conviviality, so the indirect theory runs, the originators of Freemasonry hoped to achieve by means of example their aim of promoting tolerance.

The initiation of Elias Ashmole in 1646 is significant in the indirect link theory. It should be remembered that it took place in the heat of the English Civil War. Ashmole was a Royalist who had been captured by the Parliamentarians and was on parole at the house of his father-in-law, a leading supporter of the Parliamentarians in the North West of England. Those who formed the lodge to initiate Ashmole were a mixed group of Royalists and Parliamentarians. The theory of an indirect link is very new and needs much work to give it equal force of argument with the theory of a direct link with operative masonry. Despite its highly speculative nature the theory of an indirect link has an importance because it is the first to ask not how and where Freemasonry originated but why. In all the work that has been done to try and prove the direct link theory no one has asked the questions why did the non-operatives wish to become accepted Masons and why did they turn a trade-orientated organization into a speculative art?

### **Another view**

A newer theory, seeing the origins of Freemasonry in its charitable aspect, is being examined by economic and social historians. In a sense it is not a new theory but an alternative theory of a direct link with operative masonry. In 17th century England there was no welfare state. Anyone who fell on hard times had to rely on the charity of friends or the harshly run state Poor Laws. There is much evidence that in the 17th century many trades and crafts would hold weekly social evenings in the local tavern. During the evening those present would put money into a box in the knowledge that if they fell ill, had an accident or fell on hard times they could apply for assistance from "the box". Hence the groups became known as box clubs. There is evidence that these social gatherings became more formalized. The collecting of money and its disbursement required some form of simple administration with officers to preside at the meetings, look after funds and keep records. There is also evidence that in some trades the box clubs began to use simple initiation ceremonies and that towards the end of the 17th century, like the operative lodges in Scotland, they began to admit members who were not of their trade or craft. The suggestion is that Freemasonry emerged from just such a series of box clubs limited originally to operative masons in the absence of an operative lodge system in England.

Some credence seems to be given to this theory in Henry Sadler's seminal work *Masonic Facts and Fictions* (1887). Although dealing mainly with the origins of the Ancients Grand Lodge (1751) in England, Sadler discusses the formation and early development of the premier Grand Lodge, formed in 1717. Sadler suggests that the founding lodges and early members of the Grand Lodge were basically trade orientated with the addition of a number of accepted masons. He suggests that a conflict arose in the early 1720s when members of the nobility, professions and landed gentry began to interest themselves in the lodges and to see them as vehicles for promoting a system of morality. Sadler saw the conflict between the two factions being resolved in 1722-23 when the non-operative members gained the ascendancy, began to formalize the organization of the society, produced formal Constitutions (1723)

and extended the simple entry rituals to a formal three-degree system with the introduction of the Hiram Legend.

At the beginning of this paper I commented that there were two principal factors which complicated our search for our origins. There is, in fact, a third; the tendency of Freemasons writing Masonic history as though it has existed in a vacuum, uninfluenced by the society in which exists. They have invested early Freemasonry with a mystique which suggests that the lodges and their practices were unique and without parallel. Brother Andy Durr, a professional Economic and Social Historian, in a recent paper, *Rituals of Association*, has shown that, far from being unique, Freemasonry was only one of many organizations with a tradition of ritual and morality. What is unique about Freemasonry is that it has survived.

#### **Future research**

As a professional Masonic historian, I should expect others to ask me what my view is on the genesis of Freemasonry. To that question I have to give an honest answer: I cannot make up my own mind. I have already stated in this paper that, on the basis of present evidence. I cannot accept the theory of a continuous, lineal descent from operative to speculative masonry. The indirect link theory has the most appeal to me, if only for the reason that it actually addresses the question of why Freemasonry originated rather than just looking for when and how it originated. Will we ever find the origins of Freemasonry? Again, there can be no positive answers.

The present Grand Secretary of England, RW Bro. Cdr. M.B.S. Higham, RN, gave a new answer to this question in an address to a public meeting in London. He queried if Masonic historians were looking for that which did not exist. Those who originated Freemasonry can have had no conception of what they were beginning. From the evidence we have already discovered it seems that early Freemasonry was very informal. We only know of Ashmole's initiation because he entered it in his diary, and later evidence is all from private papers and odd references in printed works. Did the originators of Freemasonry keep records, or did they even feel that

they should? There was, after all, no central organization to which they had to report.

Perhaps, we should just face the fact that Masons have, been looking in the wrong places for evidence of early Freemasonry. So simple and clean is the theory of a direct lineal descent from operative to speculative masonry that it is only in recent years that it has been challenged by serious Masonic historians.

I came under a certain amount of attack when, in my Inaugural Address to Quatuor Coronati Lodge, I accused the great historians of the authentic school of Masonic research of not being scientific in their approach to our origins. So much did they favor the direct link with operative Masonry that they searched for evidence to prove it, rather than searching for evidence of early Freemasonry and seeing what they could build from it. In doing so they scoured the archives of building and architecture but left great areas of other material in England untouched. Is it not time that we broadened the search to see what other evidence we can find?

Do we actually want to find out our origins? If we did the event would be greeted with boundless joy by Masonic historians. But it would be joy tinged with sadness for were our origins I and many other Masonic students would be deprived of the great fun and enjoyment of the search for, and the argument over, that great question - what was the origin of Freemasonry?

**Source:** *Masonic Perspectives*, by W/B John Hamill.