

THE ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY

Hilton Kaufman, P.M.

It should be understood that no one is really sure of the history of Freemasonry prior to the formation of the first grand lodge in 1717. There are records of some individual lodges as early as 1599.¹ There are a number of theories as to the origins of Freemasonry that may or may not have some basis in fact. It is likely that modern speculative Freemasonry comes from various origins, not just one.² It probably traces to the period of construction of Churches starting in 325.³

Legends grew out of the operative lodges or the fertile pens of later writers who did not care about historical facts. There are at least 60 versions of the Old Charges that contain many of these legends.⁴ These were apparently read in operative lodges when masons were initiated as apprentices.⁵

This paper attempts to explore a few of the theories regarding the origins of Freemasonry. It is up to each individual to decide what makes sense to him and what he chooses to believe.

The difference between what can be documented and what cannot has been described as being two periods — historic and prehistoric.⁶ The prehistoric period contains descriptions with much traditional lore that was often mingled with what was historically accurate. This caused many people to doubt or reject any claims by Freemasons to an historical existence.⁷

The most widely accepted theory as to where modern speculative Freemasonry originated is that it somehow came directly or indirectly from the medieval guilds of operative stonemasons or actual builders of churches and similar structures from massive stones.⁸

The oldest lodge record still around is from a clearly operative lodge in Edinburgh, Scotland for July 31, 1599 and describes a reprimand for using a non-member to repair a chimney. Elias Ashmole recorded in his diary that he was made a Mason in an English Lodge on October 16, 1646.⁹ Thus there is evidence of some transition from operative to speculative Masonry during the 1600s.

As with many works of history of the time, the early published works on Masonic history were quite fanciful. The legendary histories were codified in Anderson's *Constitutions of the Freemasons* in 1723. It claimed that famous men going all the way back to Adam were Masons.¹⁰ About 100 years later, Barthold Georg Niebuhr started scientific historical scholarship with the publication of *Römanische Geschichte*.¹¹ This led to later historians, Masonic included, doing serious research for facts.

Masonic ritual tells the story of a murder that took place by three workmen during the construction of Temple of King Solomon about 3,000 years ago. This might just be for traditional ritual that was written for allegorical teaching rather than historical fact. If this is just ritual, it is the expansion of a philosophical idea, but not historical so as to explain the origin of Freemasonry.¹² Some say that Masonic history does go back to this event.¹³ However any possible evidence that this might be true would have been lost in the destruction of the Temple in 597 B.C.¹⁴

There are legends that Freemasonry comes from the Knights Templar. In short, while they were headquartered near the site of the Temple in Jerusalem, they are reputed to have acquired secret or mystic knowledge from records that were found there. After the order was disbanded in 1312, some are said to have escaped and joined the forces of Robert de Bruce at Bannockburn in 1314. Afterwards they eventually settled in Aberdeen and called themselves Freemasons.¹⁵ Another view is that Freemasons just believed it was more romantic to be descended from a persecuted religious order than a trade union of stone cutters.¹⁶

Another reputed source for modern speculative Freemasonry is Rosicrucianism.¹⁷ There is no question of its influence on some of the higher degrees, which were developed after modern speculative Masonry was set;¹⁸ an example is the 18th degree of the Scottish Rite. It is another question as to whether there was an influence on Masonry during the 17th and early 18th centuries.¹⁹ We can document that there were individuals who were members of both organizations.²⁰ There was at least one attempt by such a brother to bring Masons over to the Rosicrucian way of thinking.²¹ While the two systems might use a common symbol, such as a stone, they impart a different philosophical meaning to it; they might at first seem similar but are different ways of thinking. Thus one could not have come historically from the other.²²

There are individuals who believe that Masonic ideas and concepts come from something known as the Ancient Mysteries. The basic idea is that Masonry is teaching a Divine Wisdom that has been expressed in various ways over untold ages and is basically an esoteric organization.²³ The theory is that the most important parts of Masonic ritual comes from the initiation into ancient religious organizations.²⁴ While it cannot be proven whether or not there was a linear succession from the Ancient Mysteries to Speculative Masonry, there does appear to be a likelihood that the authors of the third degree borrowed ideas from initiations into the Ancient Mysteries.²⁵

An extensive list of legends regarding the origins of Freemasonry can be found in *The History of Freemasonry* by Mackey.²⁶ A couple of the more fanciful include a Jesuit plot, and a philosophical discussion club formed by a group of astrologers.

¹ S. Brent Morris, Ph.D., 33°, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry* (New York: Alpha, A member

² H. Paul Jeffers, *Freemasons: A History and Explanation of the World's Oldest Secret Society* (New York: Citadel Press, Kensington Publishing Corp, 2005) 8; Quoting H. L. Haywood & James E. Craig, *The History of Masonry* (edition unknown), 3.

³ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁴ Wor. Bro. Lonel Vibert, I.C.S., *Freemasonry Before the Existence of Grand Lodges* (London: Spencer & Co., n.d.), 30-33. [From Masonic Research Network, <http://www.Researchmasonry.com>, accessed December 22, 2013.]

⁵ *Ibid*., 23.

⁶ Albert Gallatin Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry: Its Legendary Origins* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2008; Reprint of the first part of *The History of Freemasonry*, New York: Masonic History Co., 1898), 2.

⁷ *Ibid*, 1 & 2.

⁸ Christopher Hodapp, *Freemasons for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2005) 22-24.

⁹ Morris, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 9.

¹¹ *Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, Publishers, 1995) 765.

¹² Mackey, I.

-
- ¹³ Jeffers, xi.
¹⁴ Ibid., 4.
¹⁵ Ibid., 16-17.
¹⁶ Ibid., 17.
¹⁷ Hodapp, 166.
¹⁸ Mackey, 329.
¹⁹ Ibid., 329-330.
²⁰ Ibid., 339-340.
²¹ Ibid., 340-343.
²² Ibid., 345.
²³ Manly P. Hall, *The Lost Keys of Masonry or the Secret of Hiram Abif*, 11th Ed., Revised (Richmond, VA: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company, Inc., 1976) 11-21.
²⁴ Mackey, 174.
²⁵ Ibid., 197-198.
²⁶ Ibid., entire book.