



Internet Lodge 9659
United Grand Lodge of England
Province of East Lancashire
<http://internet.lodge.org.uk>

Short Papers Competition 2007

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Paper 27/2007

Title
Author

“Ancient No Doubt It Is”
Bro Roger Marjoribanks - England

When the new-made mason receives his apron the Senior Warden tells him, “It is more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle,” while the Master, in giving the Charge to the Initiate says of the institution, “Ancient no doubt it is, as having subsisted since time immemorial.” Both of these claims, to the serious historian, are blatant untruths, although when the ceremony was first formulated they were believed, as early Masonic histories show. No doubt operative masons have for centuries worn some sort of protective clothing, and we know that mediaeval masons wore a stout leather apron at times (though not for every job they did). However these were nothing like the modern Entered Apprentice apron, and even those worn by our brethren in the eighteenth century did not much resemble the aprons we wear today. However, there can be no doubt that the idea of the apron as “the badge of innocence and bond of friendship” was developed from the medieval mason’s apron.

Nor does the claim of antiquity for the institution itself hold water. Early Masonic historians traced it back to ancient Egypt through the undoubted practice of the craft of masonry throughout the centuries, for instance in classical Greece and Rome. In England, it was through a fictitious association with King Athelstan in the tenth century, and so down to the Middle Ages and the most recent of the Ancient Charges, which just about overlap in time with the dawn of emerging speculative Freemasonry in the early seventeenth century. In truth, there is no definite line of ancestry from earlier to later. Speculative Freemasonry emerged slowly during the seventeenth century, certainly in association with operative masonry and borrowing a good many images and ideas from our medieval brethren, but any philosophical connection is doubtful, to say the least.

Where Freemasonry is indeed ancient is in its principal tenets and beliefs. If we sum these up as, first, a belief in a supreme being or beings, second, the certainty that spiritual enlightenment can be attained through study and meditation, and, third, a belief in the value of ritual to inculcate the path to enlightenment, these can certainly be traced in various guises from the Book of the Dead in ancient Egypt. Through the practice of the mysteries in classical Greece and Rome, the Gnostic and other variants of Christianity to the Rosicrucians in the seventeenth century, these are perhaps our true philosophical forebears. None of these have much obvious connection with operative masonry but many make use of symbolism drawn from various sources, as of course do we.

Perhaps, then, we are mistaken to strain after parallels with the practice of the mason’s craft, except as a vital source of our images and symbols, but should accept our Order as a part of the long and ancient tradition of speculative philosophy and mysticism which has characterised every civilisation that can truly call itself a civilisation and be supremely proud of it in those honourable terms.

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