

Blending the Legendary and Historical in Freemasonry

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In deciphering ancient history there is always the question as to how much is legendary and how much is historical. With an institution like Freemasonry, whose teachings reach back into thousands of years, such problems inevitably present themselves. There are indications of Masonic teaching as far back as twenty-two centuries before Christ. In one of the oldest classes of China will be found a directive that "Officers of Government apply the compasses."

Writing in *The Pentagram* (1949), the Official Masonic Gazette of the District Grand Lodge of the Eastern Archipelago (comprising the Malaysian area), C. L. Edwards calls attention, in an article "Legend or History - Which?", to the fact that in the Fifth Century B.C. a work entitled "Great Learning" says that a man should refrain from doing to others what he would not want done to himself. This the writer characterized as "acting on the square." In a similar manner Confucius and his disciple Mencius measured proper conduct with the Compasses and the Square, together with the Level and the Marking Line.

The historic stones of Ancient Egypt give further proof were any needed.

Mysterious rituals practiced at Memphis are described by Plutarch. There were two groups of these orders. The lesser one allowed a large membership and the greater one restricted its membership. The lesser embraced dialogues and ceremonies, and had signs and passwords. But the greater order confined its membership to the few who proved that they were capable of receiving the secrets of science, philosophy and religion. These had to undergo trial by ordeal before they were held eligible to receive by symbols the highest wisdom to which man had up to that time attained, namely, the fine arts and the laws of nature as well as of faith.

A central theme, that of the immortality of the soul, runs through many of these ancient mysteries and, spiritually at least, Masonry is held by many to be the descendant of the Great Ancient Mysteries. For instance, along about 1800 B.C., the Grecian Mysteries depicted the death of Dionysius. There was a stately ritual which led the neophyte from death to immortality. Similarly, the Druids, as far north as England, conducted candidates from bodily surcease to spiritual perpetuity. A considerable time prior to the coming of Christ the Mysteries preached the same general theme - birth, life, death, immortality.

Plato's interpretation of the Mysteries was that they were intended to teach purity, to lessen and, if possible, cure cruelty, improve morals and manners, and to instil a strong consciousness of human responsibility. There was clearly no mystery as to what was taught. The only secrecy was as to the rites and symbols used.

The fortified isle in Lake Como of northern Italy was the seat of a colony of architects known as the Comacines. They had fled from the ruin of Rome. In the Roman Empire special privileges were extended to the Colleges of Architects. They were presided over by a Master and Wardens. They used the simple tools of the builder as their emblems. The ruins of Pompeii have revealed much information about these architects who had settled on the fortified isle in Lake Como.

They are credited with having carried their knowledge of architecture to Germany, France, Spain and England. Masonic authorities have characterized them as Freemasons because they were builders of a privileged class, relieved of the duty of paying taxes, absolved from servitude and free to travel about in times of feudal bondage.

In England their descendants are credited with being responsible for many of England's most magnificent structures of the early centuries. And one fact stands out to show the camaraderie of these architects and builders. During the reign of Henry II and many years after the arrival of St. Augustine, there were built in England over 150 cathedrals, churches and monastic buildings, and, despite the ravages of World War II, many of these magnificent buildings exist today and reveal superb symmetry and exquisite beauty, yet the name of no one individual is associated with any of these buildings. The theory is that they were built by communities or lodges of operative Masons living in the precincts of each building during the process of its erection, which must have been a long and laborious undertaking. When the operative element and speculative Masonry gradually merged, there remained a system of morality "veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols."

A book setting forth a history of the Company of Masons of the City of London, published in 1375, shows that the word Freemasonry appears to have been used in England for the first time about the year 1350.

The initiatory ceremonies of our prehistoric ancestors were the true origin of Freemasonry according to some Masonic scholars. Masonry is an answer to those unexpressed yearnings for Light which are to be found in all religious systems and prove that the spiritual basis of Masonry is as old as the human race itself. As Mr. Edwards so aptly states: "On the floor of the Lodge men of all races and creeds are able to meet on common ground and make their devotions to a Creator who is neither God, nor Buddha, nor Allah, nor Brahma, nor Jehovah, but who is yet each and all of these." The symbols of Masonry, old and simple and universal, still have magnetic appeal to bring men together in a bond of integrity and brotherhood and humanity.