

HISTORICAL SURVEY

I. Origin

Dealing with the origin of freemasonry is not an easy task. Owing to the Masonic discretion and the oral conveyance of the tradition, the reliable historical sources are rather few. On the other hand the fundamental attachment to the tradition led to a large number of legends which gave rise to a rather mythical history. Thus, according to some texts, Adam is said to have been the first freemason and the history of the Order should be identified with the history of the universe itself, using the Biblical chronology which situates the Creation 4,000 years before Christ. This state of mind has induced many people to confuse history and legends.

If the freemasons rightly maintain the symbolic character of the rituals, which, to a large extent, are based on myths and legends, the history itself of these myths, some of which have interwoven its origin and growth, must be liberated. All the same the filiations indicated by freemasonry itself, maintain, in spite of their dubious historical value, an undeniable spiritual value. Indeed, they express the will to stick to a tradition, which is embedded in the heart of man.

The prehistory of the Order is all too misty to speak about it in scientific earnestness, but the history of the Order of the past three centuries is doubtlessly up to historical criticism.

Modern freemasonry stems undeniably from the mediaeval guilds of bricklayers and stonemasons, the builders of religious and civil buildings. Thus it is known, among other things, that the mediaeval cathedral builders were grouped in Lodges. They are called operative masons. Their patron saint was Saint John.

The origin and development of the Masonic Order are to be found in Great Britain. The modern or speculative freemasonry came about in London at the end of the XVIIth century.

The term free mason (franc-maçon in French) has been found in documents ever since 1376, but there is no certainty as to its exact meaning.

According to some, a craftsman is meant who was exempted from taxes and other feudal obligations, thanks to a privilege granted to him, as existed also elsewhere in those days (a.o. the franc métiers in France).

According to others, the free mason simply meant the free stone mason, so the bricklayer who was able to work the free stone, a sort of stone in the building, as opposed to the rough stone mason or bricklayer who works the rough stone, used for the structural work.

These British operative masons were, like their fellows on the Continent, travelling labourers who moved from one workshop to the other. Thus they differed from the construction workers in the towns and new communities, and consequently their professional organisation had a history different from the urban guilds. At the work the masons met in a Lodge, which was at the same time a workplace and a dwelling place. The first mention dates back to 1277. The builders worked under the guidance of a building-master or master of the Lodge. The apprenticeship was long and difficult. It took seven years before the apprentice was registered in the lodge and equally long before he was accepted as a fellow of the craft (full-fledged professional fellow). Then he became a master of the craft and he was free, after his initiation in the professional and other secrets - a.o. around the theme of Salomon's temple -, to travel through the country in search of work.

The English lodges possessed a manuscript with the rules of the craft, the Old Charges, which were read out during solemn occasions and festivities. These old charges are preceded by an invocation of the Trinity.

Furthermore they contained a legendary history of freemasonry and an enumeration of moral and professional prescriptions. So the old charges were in fact a real deontological professional code.

This legendary history describes the origin and the development of the building-art from the prehistory, and very special attention is devoted to the Temple of Salomon.

The only traces of ritual activity in these old lodges are found in documents, which are the foundations of the present-day rituals, the communication of the mason's word in Scotland and the lecture of the Old Charges in England. Hence it was rightly deduced that in these closed societies of men who were associated with each other through the daily professional practice and common secrets, the typical feeling came about, which is characteristic of all initiatic groups, namely a fraternal affection and the double duty to strive after perfection as a human being and to help the fellows fulfil this duty. Otherwise the later transition to the speculative freemasonry, especially after the acceptance in the lodges of accepted masons, cannot be explained.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the professional practice was thoroughly changed. The traditional workshops near cathedrals, abbeys and castles disappeared and the development of the towns contributed to the settlement of the labourers in the communities themselves.

This urbanisation gave rise to powerful and well-organised guilds, which soon took part even in the community-management. This was the case a.o. in London. The old operative lodges were gradually surpassed by the social and economic revolution. They lost their importance and would even have died out completely, had no outsiders - people who had nothing to do with the building-trade - enlisted as accepted masons. They were mostly intellectuals, well-to-do middle class men, aristocrats and clergymen.

Their names are found in the registers of the lodges from the former half of the seventeenth century onwards. Their number increased steadily until the first years of the eighteenth century. Little is known of their motives.

If the lodges appealed to these men, it was probably because they offered a spiritual enrichment, and certainly not because these people hoped to acquire any technical or other professional skill there.

Anyhow, this state of affairs accounts for the survival and growth of modern freemasonry. Whereas the lodges were originally occasional structures which aimed exclusively at the supervision over the work, the professional training and the mutual assistance, in the course of the eighteenth century they became a fraternity which, also thanks to the symbolism and certain legends, radiated spirituality and a number of ethical values. The tools of the mason and the stone he worked thus became the symbolic basis of moral and metaphysical reflection.

The mutation from operative to speculative freemasonry meant in fact a break, the consequences of which are visible up to this day. These new accepted masons have indeed added to the age-old institution a system of moral, religious and philosophical elements.

This concurrence of circumstances resulted in modern freemasonry, which came about officially when four London lodges amalgamated on June 17, 1717. They founded the most respectable fraternity of accepted freemasons, which soon came also to be called the Grand Lodge of England. Its constitution was published in 1723. It was the work of Dr. James Anderson, a Presbyterian minister. In fact he compiled mainly the operative old charges. Nevertheless this Constitution points at an evolution : whereas the old documents testified to a purely Christian inspiration, the Constitution of Anderson clearly affirms the principle of religious openness and respect of all confessional denominations.

In the eighteenth century freemasonry had a strikingly quick development and spread throughout Great Britain, Europe and America. In the course of that century the customs and rituals came about, that are respected up to now in the Anglo-Saxon countries and elsewhere.

The Regular freemasonry has maintained the fundamental principles of 1723 : the belief in God, the brotherhood of men through respect of the convictions and the faith of everyone, respect of the civic legal authorities, the refusal of women in the Order, the abstention of any interference in political and religious affairs. From the start these principles were considered of the utmost importance. Later on they were neglected in some countries and even abandoned, which gave rise to the irregular freemasonry as a fundamental deviation from the original institution.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the freemasons were well aware of the political and religious oppositions in their ranks, even though they had a same spiritual aspiration and a warm fraternal affection for each other. In the Lodges of 1723 there was rather a great diversity of religions. The masonic workshops had anglicans, catholics, dissenters and even churchless deists among their members. The new principal foundations also laid the basis of a widening to other faiths, namely jews, muslims, hindus, etc.

In this period the conservative and the liberal political options took shape and the successive domination of catholics and protestants caused political problems. Consequently, from the start it was considered essential that the Brethren should be able to meet in peace and that whatever could divide them on the social plane should definitely be kept outside the Lodges.

In the course of the centuries the rigid application of this principle has guaranteed the harmonious and peaceful development of freemasonry. A few exceptions in the Latin countries have ex absurdo demonstrated how useful and beneficial this rule is for the good functioning of the Lodges.