

WHENCE CAME THE ROYAL ARCH

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Whence came the Royal Arch? Surely everything that can be said about that problem has already been said; surely everything that can be written has already been written, yet in spite of that, no one can say when, where, how or why Royal Arch Masonry came into existence.

I cannot pretend to supply the answers to these questions but I suggest that it may be of value to summarise the theories that have been put forward and it is possible that I may be able to throw just a little light into some dark corners.

At one time it was thought that the original third Craft degree was deprived of part of its content in order to provide the basic material for the Royal Arch but modern research has shown this to be quite impossible.

Another theory was that in the days of operative masonry there was a volume of masonic folklore that provided the legend of Hiram Abif for the third degree and provided also the material for the Royal Arch. In other words, that the two came from a common source.

I doubt if there is any masonic scholar who would support such a theory today but if there is, I would ask him to show me just one, only one, indication in the Royal Arch ritual that shows it to be of operative origin.

Personally, I do not know of any legend or tradition that contains elements common to both degrees, nor do I see the remotest possibility that Royal Arch has any connection whatsoever with operative masonry.

We are left, then, with the probability that the Royal Arch degree was invented or created in the early part of the 18th century and the countries that have been suggested as its possible birthplace are Ireland, England and France. My investigations have led me to reject Ireland completely and England regretfully for reasons that I feel are adequate but which I cannot possibly explain in the time available to me today. I will therefore concentrate on my reasons for thinking that it was born in France.

Freemasonry was introduced into that country in 1725 and, during the next 60-odd years, there was a most remarkable explosion of masonic degrees, more than 1,100 being invented during that period.

It would not be surprising therefore if the Royal Arch were one of these. To the logical French mind, there must have been something unsatisfactory about a system of three degrees that ended with the loss of a secret and it would be natural for a Frenchman to seek a means of repairing that loss. But are there any indications that this actually happened? Yes, there are.

In December 1736, eight years before the first undisputed reference to the Royal Arch degree in any other country, Chevalier Ramsay, in a speech to a Paris Lodge, referred to '... the Israelites when they built the Second Temple, whilst some handled the trowel and the compasses, others defended them with the sword and buckler'.

Surely there is no one who will deny that that has reference to the Royal Arch legend?

What is intriguing about this, however, is that a few weeks later, Ramsay revised this speech for delivery in Grand Lodge the following March. No doubt he felt, as anyone would feel on such an occasion, that his speech must be as accurate and as perfect as he could make it, and it is interesting therefore to note that one of his revisions was to this sentence.

The Jews knew that some of the neighbouring tribes were hostile to the idea of rebuilding the Temple and that they might well be attacked whilst engaged on the work. It would therefore be natural and logical for them to post sentries to warn them of such a threat.

Nevertheless, Ramsay altered this sentence from '. . . whilst some handled the trowel and compasses others defended them with the sword and buckler' to '. . . whilst they handled the trowel and mortar with one hand, in the other held the sword and buckler'.

What a perfectly ridiculous alteration to make! Gone is the reference to the compasses, gone are the sentries, and Ramsay has so burdened the workmen with tools and weapons that it would be virtually impossible for them to do any work whatsoever.

Obviously he must have had a reason for making what was a minor and apparently senseless alteration. Surely it is obvious that the revised version is more accurate masonically and more in accordance with the Royal Arch ritual?

Had he witnessed a ceremony in the meantime and realised that his wording was not quite correct? Had someone conversant with the ceremony pointed out his mistake? Had he, in making certain that his Grand Lodge speech was factually correct, checked the wording with a ritual?

Surely it could only have been for some reason such as this that an otherwise stupid alteration would have been made?

Later the same year, a French Advocate, Barbier, who was not a Freemason, referred in his diary to a recently invented masonic order, saying that the members met in Chapters. Certainly we know that Royal Arch ceremonies were performed in lodges in the early days, but we also know that the word 'Chapter' was sometimes used.

Eight years later, but still only in 1745, a masonic exposure, *Le Sceau Rompu* made reference to 'a superior grade of Masons' whose ritual stated that they 'worked with trowel in hand and sword by their side'. Now that is most interesting for it is identical with the wording of our present day ritual and remember that it was in a French masonic exposure of 1745, yet there was still no reference whatsoever to the Royal Arch in any English masonic exposure!

Two years prior to this, that is to say in 1743, John Coustos had been arrested by the Portuguese Inquisition and charged with practising Freemasonry in Lisbon. In his interrogation he showed quite clearly not only that he was familiar with incidents relating only to the Royal Arch, but also that he was familiar with French masonic practice, for his evidence at the first session is largely in accord with details in the French exposures of that time. He had been initiated in a London lodge but we have no evidence that he had occupied the chair. However, he moved to Paris and for five years prior to going to Lisbon he was Master of the Coustos-Villeroy Lodge so that this, coupled with the fact that it was a French lodge in Lisbon of which he was Master, adds weight to the suggestion that it was French ceremonies he had in mind during his interrogation, in other words, a French Royal Arch ritual, or at least a ritual containing Royal Arch matter and that was prior to 1743 at the very latest.

I could enlarge on this theory of a French origin but time will not permit and I will content myself with pointing out that Bernard Jones in his *Freemasons' Book of the Royal Arch*, refers to some interesting French Tracing Boards (or Cloths) of the 1740s containing Royal Arch emblems and to a plan of a French lodge, dated 1745, that suggests a combination at the Third Degree and the Royal Arch.

Additionally, I am pleased to think that I am supported by the most famous masonic historian of all time, R. F. Gould, who, in his *History of Freemasonry*, gave it as his opinion that the Royal Arch had its inception in the 'Scots' Degrees which sprang up in France about 1740.

In conclusion, therefore, I realise that I have not provided proof, but proof I did not promise, only circumstantial evidence. I suggest this circumstantial evidence indicates that the idea of a Royal Arch degree originated in France, probably in the 1730s; that the masonic version of the Royal Arch legend had its birth there.

What I am most anxious to emphasise, however, is I think it likely that English Freemasons visiting France brought back to this country the idea of a degree that restored what was lost in the Craft and remember we have evidence that English Freemasons did go abroad at this time and did bring back details of masonic ceremonies previously unknown in this country.

What I feel certain is that English Freemasons created, out of the French idea, the Royal Arch degree that developed into what we know today so let us not fail in our gratitude to those unknown French brethren who began it all, even though it is so obvious that our present ritual is essentially an English creation.

Let me, then, leave you with this thought. It was undoubtedly in England that this new concept of masonry was moulded into the beautiful degree in which we all delight and of which Companion Chetwote Crawley wrote: 'All the so-called high degrees might be swept away and the fabric of Masonry would be untouched, none the less perfect for their removal. But if the Royal Arch fell into desuetude, the copestone would be removed and the building be obviously incomplete.'