

An Encapsulated History of Cryptic Masonry in Europe and the United States

by Sir Knight Richard W. Van Doren

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Editor's Note

This series was originally entitled An Encapsulated History of Cryptic Masonry in Europe, the United States, and Concord, Massachusetts and is published by permission of The Grand Council of Royal and Select Master Masons of Massachusetts, Most Illustrious Charles R. Austin, Grand Master. In the interest of space, the material concerning Adoniram Council in Concord, Massachusetts has been omitted.

Preface

This work began as an effort at self-education for the author. A significant gap in his Masonic education was apparent as he approached the East to preside over a Council of Royal and Select Master Masons. To fill in the missing information, he applied to several sources and once acquired, decided to share the information with those members of his immediate Council and with others throughout the Jurisdiction of Massachusetts. The information was included as part of the monthly series of notices for Adoniram Council. It remains so segmented for use, if deemed appropriate, by future generations of Illustrious Masters.

The information contained herein is not complete. It is not meant to be for two reasons: first, that the history of any given council in any jurisdiction begins here, but it is contained in sources that go far beyond the author's reach. Instead, the author encourages the reader to delve into the musty drawers and closets and record books of his own Council and determine [and hopefully write] that history for himself. Second, the history of Cryptic Masonry is ongoing and still being written. This "history" is merely a snapshot taken in the year 2012. Further editions will have more to say about what our story continues to be as it unfolds. In that sense, a "history" is never completed until the last member of the last organizational body passes away. It is fervently hoped that, in the case of Cryptic Masonry, that sad day will never, never, come.

Acknowledgements

These selected installments of the "History of the Cryptic Rite" were facilitated from a number of sources. Primary among those sources were the official History of the Cryptic Rite in the USA, by Hinman, Denslow, and Hunt and published by

the General Grand Council of Cryptic Masonry of the USA. Also, Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia (both the original and the revised editions), published by Macoy Publishing, was most instructive in sorting through some of the intertwined and intricately interwoven legends and histories pertinent to this study.

The segments on the history of Adoniram Council are completed with the assistance of the Centennial History of Adoniram Council, prepared by Companion Robert A. Domingue under the direction of R.I. Charles F. Davis, Jr. Additionally, I am indebted to information provided by Companion S. Wesley Lindsey of the Massachusetts York Rite office in Boston.

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The History of Cryptic Masonry
Part One - Theoretical
The Legends

No one knows for certain where or by whom Cryptic Masonry originated. Like all of Freemasonry practiced today, there are prehistoric antecedents which we draw upon for the wisdom and teachings of the degrees. The term "Cryptic" is derived from the Latin Crypticus and the Greek Krupt meaning "an underground, hidden, vault beneath a temple, cathedral, or the chapel of a cemetery." The origin of the term "Cryptic Freemasonry" apparently lies with Rob Morris, Past Grand Master of Kentucky and influential Freemason of the 19th Century.

Prior to Jeremy Cross and John Barker, the degrees were separate and not connected in a body as they are now. The degrees' content is, for the most part, found in both the Scottish as well as the York Rites. To understand the history, we will relate information about three areas: legends and their origins; where, when, and by whom the legends turned into degrees; and early records leading up to the practice of the degrees in Adonairam Council today.

The legends all surround the loss of a great blessing which, in a future age, will be restored or recovered. This tradition is found in many parts of the ancient world including China, India, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Israel. Within the Judeo-Christian traditions, there is more than one telling of that legend, including more than one story of buried "treasure or wisdom."

Talmudic scholars relate that workmen preparing the foundations of King Solomon's Temple found a subterranean vault supported by arches and pillars which had been built to keep safe and hidden a "treasure" or "secret." Josephus

relates in "Antiquities of the Jews" that the descendants of Seth buried two pillars of "wisdom" in Syria from the time of Enoch. These multiple versions of the origins of the lost wisdom would be echoed in the Christian Era.

The Symbolism

"In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." John 1:1. For the Christian era, the Lost Word is the Christ and all that He represents, love and the healing of the relationship with God. The search for the Lost Word becomes the search for the Holy Graal or the quest of the Knights for the Ark of the Covenant. For the Stuarts of Scotland and England, the Word represented the divine truth of the right of the Stuart dynasty. (More of that later). For the Masonic thinker of today, the Word is much more than that. As Hinman, Denslow, and Hunt note, "We have been told that the Word could only be communicated in the presence of Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty, and in the absence of one of these, the Word was lost. Here we have a symbol of one of the greatest truths of human life, namely that a partial development of a man is a one sided development and produces a deformed, imperfect character. The pillars of Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty represent the three phases of a man's character: his intellect, his will, and his feeling or sensibilities."

The Word which symbolizes the perfection of the man and of his soul cannot be achieved if there is not balance among the three. If a man has developed his will and accompanies it with finely developed sensibilities yet lacks proper judgment of his intellect, it will lead him down a pathway of potential destruction. Should he have the proverbial wisdom of Solomon, yet not be able to heed the call of mercy of the human heart, he may be capable of the most hideous of human cruelties, and should he have wisdom and human kindness, but be unable to stand up to the forces of life's tumult, where does that leave him in the end but a weak reed blowing in the wind? We are not, therefore, to lose sight of the end of our quest. We are told to persevere toward development of all three attributes, and we shall arrive, eventually, at that state of perfection which the Christian Mason would call a state of grace. Non-Christian Masons could call that state of "grace" efficiency of being, of maximum personal potential, etc. Because the loss of the Word is only temporary, it can and it will be recovered, and with the recovery comes all the attributes which were thought to be lost, the productivity and efficacy of work, the beauty and the constancy of fraternal affection, and the mutual support of the community of the Brethren.

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The Stuart Theory

The known history of the Cryptic Rite begins to emerge in the 18th Century. Some have contended that it is Scottish in origin, having a definite connection to the Stuart dynasty with the ritual having a hidden meaning associated with Bonnie Prince Charlie and his attempts to restore the crown to his family. For example, the "widow's son" is tantamount

to the heir of King Charles I who was executed; the "lost word" is related to be the "lost cause"; the "raising" of a Mason to reference the restoration of the Stuart Crown.

Further, the Stuart claim of origin theory relates that these "meanings" had to be kept secret for the very reason that they were "treason" in the eyes of the current monarchy. That led to the need for "higher" degrees where the membership could be carefully and scrupulously maintained with a view to using the meeting places as planning sites and the doctrine of Stuart succession discreetly perpetuated. This, it is claimed, is the reason for the legend of the "Secret Vault."

The Stuart claim for origin goes further: It maintains that the nine arches specifically is a Stuart invention and alludes to their adaptation of the Legend of Enoch. According to Hinman, et al, "It appeared in two French degrees called respectively, the "Scottish Master of the Secret Vault of James VI" and the "Grand Scottish Mason of the Sacred Vault of James VI." The old Jewish and Masonic legends either have three arches, one under the other, or seven arches on a level. The candidate seeking admission to the secret vault was called Adoniram, who in some of the degrees is the manufacturer of the Holy Vessels of the Temple and not Hiram Abif. As the tax gatherer of the Kings of Israel and Judah, he represented the Stuarts."

This is a wonderfully thought out theory. Unfortunately, there is not one shred of documentary proof that the theory is correct. There is no question that the Stuarts in exile used the Masonic higher degrees originating in France for their own purposes, but to assert that they also invented them is not credible from what we know today.

The Baltimore Theory

Baltimore was an important city, both commercially and Masonically in the early 19th Century. One of the theories of the origins of Cryptic Masonry then comes as no surprise to be linked to Maryland. In 1810, the Select Master Degree of Philip Eckel and Hezekiah Niles had already been conferred at a "Grand Council" in Baltimore. Jeremy Cross, well known and widely traveled Masonic lecturer, received the degree from Eckel and spread it far and wide. So far, so good.

But it gets more murky and tangled when one tries to include or connect the Royal Master Degree with that of the Select Master. It is true that Eckel received the Royal Master Degree in 1819 - nine years after conferring the Select Master on Cross, but that was conferred in a Royal Arch Lodge. Folger has said that it was actually Jeremy Cross who put them together in either 1818 or 1823. It would seem that, if that were true, it would be in the latter time frame as that was after he had inherited the Masonic publishing mantle from Thomas Smith Webb in 1819. Those that still adhere to the Baltimore Theory, however, have one troublesome detail that has come to light. That stubborn fact is that we now know that Eckels received the Select Master Degree from a man named Henry Wilmans, a Past Master of a Lodge in Charleston, South Carolina (later to be founding Master of a Lodge in Baltimore). Wilmans it seems was a Scottish Rite Inspector General from Europe, and it was this power which permitted him to

bestow the Select Master Degree on Eckels in Baltimore in March of 1792. This leads us to the Scottish Rite Theory.

Without going into a great deal of detail about the origins of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (AASR), suffice it to say that it was founded in France and that it emigrated to the United States by way of several individuals, the most prominent being Stephen Morin, ca. 1761 in the Caribbean and thence to Charleston, South Carolina, etc. Part of the early Rite of Perfection (25 Degrees) was the 5th Degree, termed the "Knight of the Eagle or Select Master." Morin and his successors, Francken (Charleston, 1762 and Albany, New York 1767) and Moses Hayes of Boston (1768) were early proponents of not only the AASR but also of the "Cryptic Degrees." According to Hinman, et al, shortly after the organization of the Supreme Council AASR in Charleston, in 1802, they issued a manifesto outlining the degrees to which they claimed jurisdiction. It stated:

"Most of the Inspectors are in possession of a number of detached degrees given in different parts of the world and which they generally communicate free of expense to those brethren who are high enough to understand them such as Select Mason of "27." Such in brief is the Scottish Rite claim to the origin and control over the Cryptic degrees. It is supported by the fact that their members, some of whom were inspectors (e.g. Cohen, Jacobs, and Lownds), actually did confer the degrees and in every instance the first record of conferring of either the Royal Master or the Select Master Degrees indicates that it was conferred by a member of the Rite of Perfection."

So what happened that they are not so associated today? According to Hinman, it was because of a falling out within the ranks of the AASR, Northern Jurisdiction between J.J.J. Gourgas and Joseph Cerneau which saw that Lownds, most influential over both York Rite and the Cryptic degrees, sided with Cerneau, and the Degrees were actually permanently exported into the York Rite, ca. 1818.

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European Beginnings

As we have seen from the previous segments of this history, there are a multiplicity of theories about the pre-historic, pre-organized genesis of the Cryptic Rite. One that has not been discussed before, and which we will treat here, will be the last of the speculations about where it came from originally. The difference and why it is placed here, is that this story has actual records which support it in some detail and therefore, constitute "history" as academically recognized.

The birthplace of so many rites and degrees is seated in southeastern France, specifically the area surrounding Bordeaux. This is the homeland of various degrees of both French and ultimately English and Scottish derivation. One such notion is that it also gave rise to the Cryptic degrees. However, they did not remain there long. Instead, like those prompted by Ramsey's famous oration, they were associated with and travelled with the "Eccosais" tradition from Bordeaux to Berlin.

It was in Berlin that the Scottish Rite and the Cryptic Rite found an enthusiastic patron, no less a personage than King Fredrick the Great. It was he who saw to it that there was a Scottish Rite Constitution (dates differ from 1761, to a lesser agreed upon 1751) and as the theory goes, also a rite for Cryptic Masons. The former went back to Bordeaux and thence by Morin et al. to Jamaica and thence to South Carolina, Albany, New York, etc. The Cryptic Rite degree(s) went to the United States of America directly via Wilmans and Cohen. Certainly, this is the theoretic tradition of the Royal Master Degree.

The similarities of degrees in Berlin, Bordeaux, and the United States of America are interesting. The engraved Word is placed on a triangular plate of pure gold. Fearing loss, it is worn around the neck of Hiram Abif with the name engraving on the inside. At the time of the death of the Grand Master, it is cast into a dry well in the southeast corner of the Temple. Eventually, over time, it is then found by three Masters who see the glint of the metal shining at just the right time of day. One of the Masters carries it to King Solomon. The current ritual is a variation and more in accord with the symbolism which permeates and surrounds this degree.

The Select Master is known to have been actively performed in France prior to 1751. It is considered to be older than the degrees of the Rite of Perfection of the Scottish Rite (ca. 1760) and was also apparently worked by the Chapter of Clermont in 1754. The Title of "Select Master of Clermont" (later shortened to Select Master) is thought not to relate to the Abbey of Clermont. The reason for that thinking is that the Abbey is operated and administered in the Jesuit tradition. The Jesuits are and were not fond of the Knights Templar, and all the degrees in the "Scots" system lead back, eventually to Ramsey's Oration and the Knights Templar. Instead, it is thought that the title of the degree is most likely a compliment to the Duke of Clermont, the French Grand Master of Masons (1743-1770).

The United States

The early years of the Cryptic degrees, first named such by Robert Morris of Kentucky, are marked by multiple theories of origin. All of them appear to have some truth, and all of them have some areas that are easily disputed by the trained historian. What we can conclude with some certainty is that, like many of the so-called "higher degrees," those of the Cryptic Rite originated in France. They were conveyed to the United States by one of two different routes and were first conferred in Lodges of Perfection administered by the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (AASR).

Between the years of 1817 and 1829, active Cryptic Degree work and Councils began to appear in a number of states such as Connecticut, Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. Massachusetts conferred their first Cryptic degrees in 1817 and formed a "Grand Council" in 1826. However, there was still a lot of push and shove with regard as to who would ultimately have authority over council activities. Who would ultimately have control, the AASR, the Royal Arch, or the Cryptic Rite itself?

An early historian named Moses Holbrook left the following comment in 1829: "I hereby certify that the degrees of Royal Master and Select Master or Select Master of 27 were

regularly given by the Sublime Grand Lodge of Perfection (No. 2 in the United States) by Brother Isaac DeCosta in Charleston in February 1783..." The committee, of which Holbrook was the chair, included three living members of the original four Supreme Council members associated with these degrees; Frederick Dalcho, Isaac Auld, James Moutrie, and Moses Levy. None of them contradicted the statement.

The Committee recommended that the supervisory Masonic authorities at the time surrender the custody of the Cryptic degrees. That would have included the AASR as well as the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masonry of South Carolina.

On January 28, 1828, a convention had been called in New York to decide the future. Following the lead of the South Carolinians, the New York companions formed a General Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters in 1829. Other Grand Councils formed and became subordinate. In the period 1847-53, the General Grand Council won the on-going struggle with Grand Chapters of Royal Arch Masons, but the AASR of both North and Southern Jurisdictions continued until the 1867 union of the Cerneau and Raymond Councils in the Northern Jurisdiction. The handwriting was on the wall, and the inevitable emergence of the General Grand Council as supreme authority of the degrees was finally acceded to in 1872.

In 1873, the order of the degrees was agreed to and finalized. The order would be the Royal Master, the Select Master, and the Super Excellent Master. The latter, according to such experts as Henry Coil, does not actually constitute a "degree" but rather is considered to be a "ceremony." The ironic part of that is that the Super Excellent Master contains a vibrant drama which originated with the Principal Sojourner's part in the Royal Arch Degree and which concludes the period of the First and Second Temples.

The final chapter in organizing the Cryptic Rite began in 1952 with the acceptance of New Mexico's Grand Council into the national organization. In 1881, at a meeting held in New York, the Grand Council of Massachusetts led the charge to establish a General Grand Council of the Cryptic Rite of the United States of America.

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