

The Golden Fleece and the Hiramic Legend

by Brother C. Bruce Hunter

What do the Golden Fleece and the Hiramic legend have in common? Nothing, really. But putting them together helps make a point. Most people think the story of the Golden Fleece is a myth, but it isn't. It's a legend. The difference, of course, is that one doesn't have an historic basis, while the other does.

The real golden fleece

In this case the historic basis is the fact that, according to many historians, the ancient people of the Caucasus (to the east of the Black Sea) had a secret process for extracting gold from their rivers. They placed a sheepskin in the river and weighted it down to keep it from floating away. Since river sand didn't stick to the fleece but gold did, the sheepskin eventually became laden with gold dust. It literally became a golden fleece, from which a significant amount of the valuable metal could be extracted.

The legend named for this technology recalls efforts by the ancient Greeks to learn the secret process for their own benefit. And since the Hiramic story is generally regarded as a legend, it may well have a similar historic basis. Indeed, apparently it does. It is set at the time of the building of King Solomon's Temple and tells of a Tyrian architect who came to Israel to build the temple and who brought with him a secret, which some of the local workmen tried to extract from him. The point to remember is that the architect was from Tyre, while his workers were presumably Israelites. This may seem a trivial distinction in the legend's history, it goes without saying that Masonic legends operate on more than one level, and one of the levels on which this legend operates is purely historical. By King Solomon's time, Tyre had become a world trading power. It had been in business for about two centuries and had acquired considerable wealth.

And along with its wealth, it had developed considerable skill in a variety of arts and crafts, not the least of which was architecture. Meanwhile, Israel was still a largely agricultural society. Its tribes had only recently united under a single king, and they were just beginning to turn their attention to acquiring the necessities and benefits that go along with being a nation.

At the time, Israel lacked many of the things a people need if they want to call themselves a nation. For example, it didn't have a national temple, and this is one thing its third king, Solomon, meant to rectify. The problem was that another thing Israel didn't have was anyone who knew how to build a temple large enough and grand enough to serve all the people. Fortunately, Tyre did.

This is why Solomon imported an architect from Tyre, and it may well be the "historic" reason some of the workers tried to extract his secret.

Hiram's historic secret

Undoubtedly a Tyrian architect would know a number of trade secrets stemming from his country's architectural heritage, which at the time was far ahead of Israel's. And it is quite reasonable to assume that some in Israel would pay a great deal to have those secrets-or more precisely, they believed they would be paid a great deal if they had them. Trade secrets are, after all, a valuable commodity, and Israel was on the move. It was developing rapidly, and its people must have been envious of-and eager to acquire-a share of their northern neighbor's relatively advanced culture.

We should have no trouble believing that the Israelites, like the Greeks with the golden fleece, were keen to ferret out a few of their neighbor's "tricks of the trade" for their own benefit. If so, the early Masonic ritualists probably knew the scenario they were creating was plausible on historic as well as symbolic grounds. In fact, it may well have been the "historic" grounds that suggested the legend to them in the first place.

Consequently, it seems the central Masonic legend, which operates on other levels as well, also contains more of an historic foundation than we might have thought.

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