

MORE ANCIENT THAN .....  
MORE HONOURABLE THAN.....by Brian Mardle

Brother... by command of the W.M. I invest you with the distinguishing badge of a Mason. It is more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, more honourable than the Garter, or any other order in existence, it being the badge of innocence and the bond of friendship; and I give it to you in the strongest terms of recommendation, ever to wear it and consider it as such, assuring you that if you never disgrace that badge it will never disgrace you.

Brethren, when we all started on this amazing journey that is called Freemasonry we were invested with a plain white skin apron to signify that we were innocent in the ways of masonry. There are many theories as to why an apron, but there are many early references to the wearing of ritual aprons. The Bible mentions that the High Priest wore a garment called the Ephod, described as an apron or skirt covering the body from the waist down, made of white linen, with shoulder straps, possibly a bib. It also had a "girdle" described in the Bible as "curious" with no other details. Elijah and John the Baptist wore aprons of leather. Isaiah wore an apron of hair cloth. Jeremiah wore an apron of linen. The ancient Druids wore a white apron for the sacred duty of cutting mistletoe. Priests of the Roman gods wore white when making sacrifices. All of these references indicate that the wearing of white was a way of stressing the importance of purity of heart when carrying out the work of God. So the selection of a white apron had a significant symbolic meaning to our predecessors in the craft.

However, it is not the wearing or design of the apron that I wish to explore today, but the references to other orders.

Firstly the Golden Fleece.

The Order of the Golden Fleece was founded on January 10<sup>th</sup> 1429 by Duke Philip 3<sup>rd</sup> of Burgundy, also known as Philip the Good, to celebrate his marriage to the Portuguese princess Isabel of Aviz. Some authorities have the date as 1430.

It is interesting to note that when I was reading an American article on this it referred to the order being set up in England. I thought at first that this may have been an error until I realized that at that time the Duchy of Burgundy stretching from Flanders to Switzerland about a quarter of present day France, was in the patronage of the English crown. So, I suppose, that technically it was founded in the England of that time.

The Order of the Golden Fleece was instituted for the glory of the Saints and the protection of the Church and was modeled on the Order of the Garter, comprising of the Sovereign and initially 24 knights. Phillip had been elected to membership of the Garter in 1422 but diplomatically declined to avoid offending the King of France. The number of knights was increased to 30 and later to 50 and formed an advisory council to the King. They had a lot of privileges in that they could only be tried by the other knights after a warrant signed by at least 6 and were held not in prison but in the gentle custody of the other knights. This in an age where life was not held with the same respect as it is today.

The order was denied to heretics and was thus to become an exclusively Catholic society. There has been much written as to why an exclusive Christian order selected the pagan golden fleece of Colchis as their symbol. The predominant opinion is that it represented the courage of Jason and the Argonauts, who were among the most illustrious men of Ancient Greece, and who had banded together to perform a brave and noble task. It is also thought that it was a parallel to the Arthurian legend associated with the Order of the Garter. As with the Arthurian legend there are many claims as to its authenticity but in 1984 Tim Severin and colleagues rowed a replica twenty oared boat the 1500 miles from Colchis in Greece to Georgia to prove it was possible. He also came to the conclusion that the Golden Fleece was not made of gold but was actually a fleece impregnated with gold and that the Argosy probably happened.

The badge of the order, rather than just a golden fleece, is a whole miniature sheep suspended at its middle from a chained collar of firesteels in the shape of the letter B, for Burgundy, linked by flints. The choice of a dead sheep hanging on a chain as an emblem is, to my eyes somewhat bizarre, but it appealed to Brook Brothers the prestigious American clothiers who chose it as their trademark in 1850. The emblem had long been a symbol of British wool merchants. If you want to see it, it is on the wall outside the Brook Brothers shop in London's Regent Street.

In 1477 there being no Burgundian male heir, the Grand Mastership passed to the House of Hapsburg on the marriage of Mary, daughter of Charles the Bold, the last Duke of Burgundy, to Archduke (later Emperor) Maximilian of Austria. Their son, Archduke Phillip later married Joanna the Mad, Queen of Castille and Aragon and control of the order passed in 1516 to the Spanish branch of the Hapsburgs. Although professing honorable motives the rulers of that era only married to expand or consolidate their empires and the women once married were treated very poorly. Historians have said that Joanna was schizophrenic or a manic depressive but these illnesses may have been political inspired to keep her subdued. This strategy seemed to have worked as although she reigned for over 50 years and died at the age of 75 it was only jointly with her husband, father or son and very much as the junior partner. She had six children, two of whom became Emperors and four who became Queens, quite an influential family. She was also the elder sister of Catherine of Aragon the first, and in the eyes of the Roman Church the only, wife of Henry the Eighth.

All royal marriages at that time, and even now, were political and as there were a limited number of acceptable royal houses there was a very limited choice of partners. The House of Hapsburg was particularly renowned for inter-breeding with the consequent genetic disorders. Apart from producing many simpletons, it also produced congenital defects such as the Hapsburg jaw (or lip). This was reputedly introduced into the Hapsburg line by Cymburgis of Masovia who in 1412 became the wife of Duke Ernest the Iron. These Mediaeval women were quite something, Cymburgis was renowned for her strength and was reputed to pull iron nails from the walls with her bare hands. It is reported that

Ernest was called the Iron after his death so perhaps he was the one hammering in the iron nails for his wife to pull out. The Hapsburg jaw was shown in many contemporary portraits as a very, very long lower jaw and although not so pronounced may still be observed in the current King of Spain.

During the period from its formation in 1429 to 1700 most of the crowned heads of Europe were members. The Kings of Spain naturally, kings of France, Portugal, Hungary, Scandinavia and James the Fifth of Scotland. English members were Edward the Fourth, Henry the Seventh and Henry the Eighth was elected in 1505 when he was still Prince of Wales. I have not been able to determine what happened to his membership after he renounced the Church of Rome but can only guess that he was no longer welcome in the strictly Catholic order.

In 1700 the order was passed to the King of Spain as the last of the Spanish Hapsburgs died. This was disputed in 1712 by the Head of the Hapsburgs in Austria and from then there have been two orders of the Golden Fleece, the one being conferred by the Austrian monarch and the other being conferred by the Spanish monarch.

The Austrian order has remained an award for Catholic male royals and nobles. The Archduke Otto von Hapsburg is the current head of the Austrian Hapsburgs and therefore titular head of the order although he has transferred the sovereignty to his son Karl. There are currently 47 members of this branch of the order comprising mostly of the historic Germanic ruling houses of Europe. A former memorable member was Archduke Franz Ferdinand whose assassination triggered the start of the First World War.

The Spanish branch has had a much more chequered history than the Austrian. During the 18<sup>th</sup> Century its members included three kings of France and two kings of Portugal and in 1801 the future Emperor Peter 1 of Brazil was elected.

In 1802 Sir John sixth Baronet Acton of Aldenham in Shropshire was elected. Now this was an interesting character. He was a frigate Captain in the Tuscan navy who rose to prominence because of his courage and resource in the joint Spanish and Tuscan expedition to Algiers. He was commissioned to re-organise the Neapolitan navy and did this with such efficiency that he was promoted to Commander in Chief of the Neapolitan Forces. He later became Finance Minister and then Prime Minister of Naples. His policy was devised in concert with Sir William Hamilton, the English Ambassador, in an attempt to re-align Naples to the British and Austrian influence. This is the same William Hamilton whose second wife was the Emma of Lord Nelson fame.

In 1805 Emperor Napoleon of France and two of his brothers Joseph and Louis became members. They appointed a number of members but all their memberships were cancelled when Ferdinand was restored to the throne of Spain. The Duke of Wellington became a member in 1812 following his success in the Peninsular War. He was the first non-catholic member of the order.

For the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the membership list read like a list of the crowned heads of Europe and their allies in Japan, Persia and Thailand. It is interesting to Freemasons that the Duke of Connaught who was Grand Master from 1902 to 1939 was also elected to the Order of the Golden Fleece in 1902.

Currently there are seventeen members of the Spanish order, headed by the Spanish King, that include our Queen, the Emperor of Japan, the King of Saudi Arabia and other crowned heads of Europe.

Now onto the “Roman Eagle”

The reference in the ritual to the “Golden Fleece” was very explicit but the “Roman Eagle” proved more difficult to track down. Obviously the Roman Eagle was the symbol of the Roman Empire of which some areas of Britain were once part. This existed from 27BC until 395AD when it was split into Eastern and Western parts. The Western part survived until 476 but the Eastern part, or Byzantine Empire existed until 1453. The Roman Eagle with the letters SPQR (meaning “The Senate and the People of Rome”) underneath is probably well known to everyone here, but I do not think that is the Roman eagle of the ritual. I could not alas, find a society that fitted the bill in these two Empires so I directed my searches elsewhere.

I found a reference to Society of the Eagle founded by Albrecht von Hapsburg (that family again) in 1433. This was of great interest as I had previously found a reference to this same Albrecht as assuming mastership of the order of The Sovereign Imperial Order of the Dragon.

The Order of the Dragon was founded by King Sigismund of Hungary in 1408. Once again it was based on the legendary exploits of a famous hero and an earlier order created by Milos Obilic and twelve knights which had the sole purpose of assassinating the Ottoman Sultan. This he achieved at the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389. Unfortunately only one Knight survived the disastrous battle so the Order ceased.

Hungary was part of the Holy Roman Empire, founded by Charlemagne at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. This give or take accounted for the bulk of Western Europe. Sigismund became Holy Roman Emperor and ruled until his death in 1437. One significant inductee to the order during his reign was Henry the Fifth of England, another political alliance. Sigimund’s successor as Grand Master of the Order of the Dragon was the aforementioned Albrecht. I believe that the Order of the Dragon and the Order of the Eagle was one and the same thing.

There are two signs for the Order, one is a dragon defeated by the Cross, the other a double headed eagle. There is also a second name for the Order of the Dragon that is the Sovereign Military Order of the Byzantine Eagle. Albrecht was Grand Master until his death in 1439. I find it difficult to believe that Albrecht was the Grand Master of two monarchical orders of chivalry at the same time it is too much of a coincidence. The time frame of 1408 also compares favourably with that of the Golden Fleece of 1429 in the context of this exploration.

There were approximately twenty monarchical orders of chivalry created between 1325 and 1469, it seemed that every King must have one. Of that twenty only two have continued to the present day the Order of the Garter and the Order of the Golden Fleece. This is probably due to the changing face of monarchy since then; the age of the absolute monarch in Europe is now over. Some like the order of the Elephant have been revived to act as an honorary title. Our Queen is a member of this Danish Order but this is hardly remarkable as she is also a member of seventy other foreign Orders without counting those of the Commonwealth countries.

The Order of the Garter fulfils a similar role today being an honorary title bestowed by the Monarch. The knights and ladies of the Garter are no longer expected to bear arms except in a symbolic manner. The Order was started in 1348 by Edward the Third, the founder knights, including the Black Prince having all fought at the battle of Crecy. Like all the other monarchical orders of that time it was used to ensure allegiance and to cement alliances.

Current membership includes seven members of the Royal family besides the Queen, twenty four knights and ladies including three former prime ministers, and eight extra knights and ladies including six reigning monarchs.

Some forms of the American ritual say more honourable than the Star and Garter.... The Star probably refers to the French Order of the Star (Ordre de l'Etoile) that was started in 1351 by the King of France to compete with the Garter. The Order only lasted until 1364

My research suggests therefore that Freemasonry was started somewhere before 1408 and probably after 1351 as no claim is made by the writers of our ritual to be older than the Garter (or Star). We do know that there was in England in 1356 The Masons Company in the City of London and this could be what is being referred to. However exactly who started it, when and where, I will leave to other researchers, but I would like to address the more honourable part.

The monarchical orders of chivalry were in the main inspired by the Crusades and the need to repulse the Saracens although only two orders, as far as I can determine, ever sent men to the Crusades. The orders were soon seen however in a turbulent world as a way of protecting and consolidating the power of the monarchy. This led to appointments not being made for honourable reasons but more for political or strategic reasons as for example Napoleon and later the Duke of Wellington.

These orders were only for the rich and privileged. I would like to read to you an extract from a biography of Hieronymus Bosch by Gary Schwartz:

*Den Bosch lay in the lands of the legendary Dukes of Burgundy. The reigning Duke at the time of Hieronymus van Aken's birth was Philip the Good. A Christian knight in the closing years of the age of chivalry, Philip founded a chivalric order like King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. He called it the Order of the Golden Fleece and invited only Kings and great Lords to be members.*

*At the court of Philip the Good, mythology, Christianity, chivalry and politics were combined in intricate ways. The great banquet of February 1453 provides a spectacular example. The year before, the Moslem Turks had captured Constantinople, the capital of the Christian Byzantine Empire. As a Christian knight, Philip wanted*

*the Princes of Western Europe to go on a crusade to drive the Turks back. Instead of calling a meeting of military leaders, Philip held a day of jousting and a night of feasting.*

*The written descriptions of the banquet would be hard to believe if they were not so well documented. On the centre table sat an enormous pie containing 48 live musicians. There was a dish made in the form of a church with ringing bells in its tower. Another had the shape of a vast model ship, complete with cargo and crew. Special fountains were designed for the occasion. One was a statue of a naked little boy on a rock, pissing rose-coloured water throughout the meal.*

*The banquet hall contained entire landscapes – lakes, rivers, forests, islands inhabited by fairies and monsters. There was a mechanical tiger in a desert, fighting a serpent. The lion, however, was a real living animal. Between courses the guests were treated to little surprises, such as a dragon flying through the hall and disappearing into thin air.*

*At the climax of the banquet, a giant entered the hall leading an elephant with a castle mounted on its back. In the castle was a lady in a white satin dress covered by a black cloak. In front of the table where the duke was seated, she recited a long lament. She was the Holy Church, she explained in a French rhyme, and she pleaded with the Christian knights at the banquet to come to her rescue. The master of arms of the Order of the Golden Fleece thereupon approached the duke with two young noblewomen, two knights and a live pheasant. The duke swore that he was prepared to fight the Turks. He made the oath “in the first place to God, my creator, to the glorious Virgin Mary, his mother, and then to the ladies and the pheasant”. The other knights followed his example.*

As they say Mission accomplished. But the duke never went on the crusades he just used this as a way of raising taxes and financing further splendid entertainment. This demonstrates to me that these orders are not honourable as they are based on title and expediency and not truth and brotherhood.

Freemasonry is not exclusive to the rich and privileged but has throughout its existence allowed ordinary men to join but only when elected by the existing brotherhood. But it is these ordinary men who proposed the new member. It was not by the whim or

machination of an all powerful leader, indeed, the master of the individual lodge is elected each year.

Furthermore, as the statutes of Freemasonry specifically forbid any pecuniary or political gain from its membership it can thus be proved to be more honourable than any other order in existence.

So my brothers I can with all honesty say that my research has proven to me the truth of the words in the ritual but as a mason of many years that is what I expected to find anyway. I however did not expect that the research would lead me where it did and would be the fun it has been.

Thank you Worshipful Master and brethren for the kind attention you have paid me.

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### **Sources (amongst many others)**

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