

Introduction

Legends and Myths

The difference between legends and myths involves two dimensions: the degree to which the narratives in question are sacred, that is, emotionally important and intensely real to the tellers; the degree to which they are grounded in historical, geographical, and scientifically plausible (at least at the moment when the assessment is made) reality. What separates these two genres is the extent to which the tellers themselves assess the tales in question as real beyond any question and culturally important, not whether they are any more or less objectively real. That is why myths tend to emphasize the actions and include narratives about how the human society and other important phenomena began and their interactions with mortals. Legends by definition focus primarily on an historical ambiance. Not that every important character in a legend is a real historical figure whose objective existence can be documented; far from it. But the folks that populate legends operate for the most part in a recognizable historical and temporal framework rather than in the realm of once upon a time or the dream-like world inhabited by gods and goddesses and, with some major exceptions, are generally subject to the same constraints that affect all life forms on this planet. In short, the Craft narratives clearly belong to the genre of legend, regardless of whether there are any objectively documented, historical prototypes of Freemasons.

The legend of Lamech's Sons and the Pillars

The traditional history of Masonry now begins, in the legend of the Craft, with an account of the three sons of Lamech, to whom is credited the discovery of all sciences. But the most interesting part of the legend is that in which the story is told of two pillars erected by these sons, and on which they had inscribed the discoveries they had made, so that after the threatened destruction of the world of knowledge which they had gained might be handed on to the human race after the Flood. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, B. I., II, Whiston's translation).

The legend of Hermes

The next part of the legend of the Craft which claims our attention is that which relates to Hermes, who is said to have found one of the pillars erected by the sons of Lamech, and to have given to mankind the sciences written on it. This story may, for distinction, be called The legend of Hermes. As to Hermes, the legend is not altogether without some historical support, although the story is in the legend mythical, but of that kind which belongs to historical myth. He was said to be the son of Taut or Thoth, whom the Egyptians made a God and placed his image beside those of Osiris and Isis. To him they credited the invention of letters, as well as of all the sciences, and they esteemed him as the founder of their religious rites.

The Tower of Babel

Unlike the legend of Hermes, the story of the Tower of Babel appears in the Halliwell poem, which shows that the legend was the common property of the various writers of these old manuscripts. In the second of the two poems, which as we have seen are united in one manuscript, the legend of Babel, or Babylon, is given.

The legend of Nimrod

The universal sentiment of the Freemasons of the present day is to confer upon Solomon, the King of Israel, the honor of being their first Grand Master. But the legend of the Craft had long before, though there was a tradition of the Temple in existence, given, at least by suggestion, that title to Nimrod, the King of Babylonia and Assyria. It had credited the first organization of the fraternity of craftsmen to him, in saying that he gave a charge to the workmen whom he sent to assist the King of Nineveh in building his cities.

That is to say, he framed for them a Constitution, and, in the words of the legend, this was the first time that ever Masons had any charge of his science. It was the first time that the Craft was organized into a fraternity working under a Constitution of body of laws. As Nimrod was the autocratic maker of these laws, it necessarily resulted that their first legislator, creating laws with his unlimited and absolute governing power, was also their first Grand Master.

The legend of Euclid

Having settled the foundation of Freemasonry in Babylon, the legend of the Craft next proceeds by a quick change to tell the history of its movement into Egypt. This Egyptian account, which in reference to the principal action in it has been called the legend of Euclid, is found in all the old manuscripts. This legend is the opening feature of the Halliwell poem, being in that document the beginning of the history of Masonry; it is told with very much detail in the Cooke MS., and is apparently copied from that into all the later manuscripts, where the important particulars are about the same, although we find a few things told in some which are left out of others.

The legend of the Temple

From this account of the exploits of Abraham and his pupil Euclid, and of the invention of Geometry, or Freemasonry in Egypt, the legend of the Craft proceeds, by a rapid stride, to the story of the introduction of the art into Judea, or as it is called in all of them, the land of the behest, or the land of promise. Here it is said to have been principally used by King Solomon in the construction of the Temple at Jerusalem. The general details connected with the building of this edifice, and the help given to the King of Israel, by Hiram, King of Tyre, are told either directly or at second hand, through the Polychronicon, from the first Book of Kings, which, in fact, is referred to in all the manuscripts as a source of information. (As it is said in the Bible, in the third book of Kings, are the words of the Cooke MS. In the arrangement of Scripture as then

used, the two books of Samuel were called the first and second of Kings. The third book of Kings was then our first, according to the present practice.)

The extension of the Craft into other Countries

The legend of the Craft next proceeds to tell us how Freemasonry went into divers countries, some of the Masons traveling to increase their own knowledge of their art, and others to use elsewhere abroad that which they already possessed. But this subject is very briefly treated in the different manuscripts.

The Halliwell poem says nothing of the progressive march of Freemasonry, except that it details almost as an actual event the ill-use of the Four Crowned Martyrs (Quatuor Coronati) as Christian Freemasons, in the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, and we should almost be led to believe from the course of the poem that Freemasonry went directly into England from Egypt. The Cooke MS. simply says that from Egypt, Freemasonry went from land to land and from kingdom to kingdom until it got to England.

We find the later manuscripts are a little more definite, although still brief. They merely tell us that many skilled craftsmen traveled into various countries, some that they might acquire more knowledge and skill, and others to teach those who had but little skill. Certainly there is nothing that is myth or fable in this account. Every authentic history of architecture agrees in the claim that at an early period the various countries of Europe were traveled by bodies of builders in search of work in the building of religious and other edifices. The name indeed of Traveling Freemasons, which was given to them, is familiar in architectural history books.

Sufficient for the present, for us to show that in this part, as elsewhere, the legend of the Craft is not a mere fiction, but that the general statement of the spread of Freemasonry through-out Europe at an early period is proved by historical evidence. When we examine the legend of the Craft, it will be found to trace the growth of Freemasonry through its several stages of progress from Babylon and Assyria to Egypt, from Egypt to Judea, from Judea to France, and from France to England. Accepting Freemasonry and the early art of building as meaning the same thing, this line of progress will not be very different, with some necessary variations, to that assumed to be correct by writers on architecture. But the study of this subject belongs not to that which went before, but to the historical period of the Society, that is based on the evidence of fully accredited records.

The legend of Charles Martel and Namus Grecus

The legend now gets near the field of authentic history, but still having its traditional character, goes on to tell, but in a very few words, of the entry of Masonry into France. We have this account given in the language of the Dowland MS. Now, this legend is repeated, almost word for word, in all the later manuscripts right up to recent times. But it is not even mentioned in the earliest of the manuscripts - the Halliwell poem - and this proves again that the two sets of recorded events and traditions are copied from quite different sources. This whole subject is so closely connected with the authentic history of Masonry, having really passed out of the pre-historic period, that it claims a future and more detailed study in its proper place.

The legend of St. Alban

The legend of the Craft now goes on to tell of the history of the bringing of Freemasonry into England, in the time of St. Alban, who lived in the 3rd century. The legend referring to the first martyr of England is not mentioned in the Halliwell poem, but it is first found in the Cooke MS., in the following words: And sone after that come seynt Adhabell into England, and he convertyd seynt Albon to cristendome. And seynt Albon lovyd well masons, and he gaf hem fyrst her charges and maners fyrst in Englund. And he ordeyned conveyent to pay for their travayle. Later manuscripts, for some time, say nothing of St. Adhabell. When we get to the Krause MS. in the beginning of the 18th century, we find mention of St. Amphibalus, who is said in that document to have been the teacher of St. Alban. But this St. Amphibalus, of which the Adhabell of the Cooke MS. is seemingly in error in spelling, is so doubtful a person, that we may rejoice that the later copyists have not as a rule thought proper to follow the Cooke document and give him a place in the legend. However, the name is not entirely mythical as we find it in the writings of Robert of Monmouth, 1140, as well as, for example, in the William Watson MS., 1687. A very interesting point of the legend of the Craft to which our attention may be directed, is that referring to the organization of Freemasonry at the city of York in the 10th century. This part of the legend is of much importance. The prehistorical here verges so closely upon the historical period, that the true account of the rise and progress of Freemasonry can not be justly understood until each of these elements has been carefully attached to the proper period. This subject will therefore get critical attention.

The legend of York

The decline and decay of all architectural art and enterprise having lasted for so long a period of time in Britain, the legend of the Craft proceeds to account for its revival in the 10th century and in the reign of Athelstan. His son Edwin called a meeting, or General Assembly, of the Freemasons of York in the year 926, and there revived the institution, giving to the Craft a new code of laws. Now it is impossible to attach to this portion of the legend, absolutely and without any reservation, the taint of fiction. The gathering of the Craft of England at the city of York, in the year 926, has been accepted by both the Operative Freemasons who preceded the Revival in 1717, and by the Speculatives who succeeded them, up to the present day, as a historical fact that did not admit of dispute. The two classes of the legends - the one represented by the Halliwell poem. and the other by the later manuscripts - agree in giving the same statement. The Cooke MS., which holds a middle place between the two, also contains it. But the Halliwell and the Cooke MSS., which are of older date, give more fully the details of what may be called this revival of English Freemasonry. Thoroughly to understand the subject, it will be necessary to compare the three accounts given in the several sets of manuscripts.

Source:

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