

March 2018 Issue

Introduction

Whence We Came?

“Whence we came?” is an aged old question. We know the Grand Lodge of England was formed in 1717, but where did the four lodges that formed the Grand Lodge come from? How far back do our traditions go? Does our ancestry really date only so far back as the age of taverns and bars? Over the next series of articles, we will explore our history and in the process, travel through time to ancient lands and rediscover ancient wisdoms. This month we travel back to the Middle East and then to France and Scotland as we join the Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, otherwise known as the Templar Knights.

Whence We Came? Templar Knights

In 1095, Pope Urban II calls for a crusade to “liberate” Jerusalem from control of the “infidels”. The war would be to defend the Byzantine Empire under Alexis I from the advancing Turks. Politics of course played a key role in the war, as the Pope had also hoped with this crusade to reunite the Eastern and Western Churches after the schism of 1054, which among other issues included the question of the primacy of the Patriarch of Rome (i.e. the Pope) over the other Patriarchs.

In 1119 nine knights led by Hugh de Payens formed the military order of the Knights Templar. Their primary mission was to protect Christian pilgrims travelling from Europe to the Middle East. In the process the Knights created one of the first instances of international banking. If, for example, you were in London and wished to travel to Antioch, you would deposit your gold and silver at the Templar Bank in London in return for a “chit” (today we would call it an American Express Travelers Check). Upon your arrival in Antioch, you would present the chit at the Antioch Templar Bank, and minus a “handling and processing fee” you would have access to your funds. The Templars amassed an enormous wealth through banking.

While in Jerusalem, the Knights were headquartered at the Temple Mount, where myth suggests they discovered some buried treasure deep within the ruins. (I will allow my Royal Arch Companions to opine as to what may have been discovered). Interestingly, if one studies the history of the Crusades, there are periods where it seems the Knights had more in common with their “supposed Muslim enemies” than they did with their “Christian Allies”. Did the Templars learn some ancient eastern mysteries when at peace with their Sufi friends?

To join the Knights, one had to be financially stable, free born, of sound body without infirmity, and unanimously voted on by the current members. The candidate was then put through certain tests and tribulations, and admitted into the order after taking certain oaths and obligations.

Beginning in 1305, Philip IV of France, with his treasuries empty after long wars with England, began to covet the riches of the Templars, and with his puppet Pope, Clement V, had heresy charges lobbed against the Templars. These charges included (i) worshipping a goat headed devil (ii) worshipping the mummified head of John the Baptist (yes, the very same John that is one of our patron Saints and whose feast day we celebrate as masons) (iii) financial fraud (iv) secret ceremonies (v) denying Christ, and so on. I think their views of religious toleration, or at least acceptance of eastern religions may have been a contributing factor towards charges of denying Christ.

On Friday, October 13, 1307, Templars throughout Europe were arrested. However, many had been given advanced warning, and lore has it that many escaped with the Templar treasury to Scotland where they aided Robert the Bruce with his wars against Edward II, particularly at the Battle of Bannockburn June 24, 1314 (yes, the battle was fought on the Feast of St John the Baptist). The Templars then hid themselves among the stone mason guilds, and the rest is as they say, history.

The Templar Grand Master, Jacques De Molay, however was arrested, and after refusing to break his oaths, on March 18, 1314, was burned at the stake. Is our Hiram Abiff legend the story of De Molay?

Albert Pike defines the ruffians as representations of tyranny and intolerance. The first to strike is with the rule or "Canon" in Latin striking the throat representing the tyranny of the Pope who silences free speech. The second strikes with the rigidity of the square, where civil and religious authority combine in despotic tyranny to strike at any one who doesn't submit absolute obedience to the throne. It strikes at the heart, where love and affection for others resides. The third strikes with a setting maul with the blind anger of a mob striking the head where the intellect resides. Is this an allegory of Church and State (Clement V and Philip IV) forming despotic government to stamp out liberty?

So brethren, are we all Templar Knights defending freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly against despotic tyranny? Are we defenders of democracy hiding among stone mason guilds, working in the shadows to promote liberty? Or maybe this is all some silly story that makes for a great Nicolas Cage movie (National Treasurer, I highly recommend it for any mason).

Next month brethren we will explore the Stone Mason Guilds of Europe.