

Ancient Rituals

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There is nothing more intriguing than to read about ancient rituals. These rituals had deep meaning for societies at that time. Why is there so little known about them? The answer would seem to be that records were oral for hundreds of years. Until recently few people could read or write, writing materials were expensive, all recording was by hand, the subject material was secret and there did not seem to be an importance in recording it for historical purposes.

The oldest Masonic document is the Regius Poem which according to the Masonic Service Association existed as early as A.D. 926. The association goes on to say "Freemasonry probably began among the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages---tenth or eleventh century." They also suggest that "Speculative Masonry, reaching back through Operative Masonry, touches hands with those who followed unknown religions in which, however, many of the Speculative principles must have been taught by the use of symbols as old as mankind and therefore universal, and not the product of any one person or time."

Due to the lack of accurate records a great deal of Masonic misinformation has been presented over the years in connection with the claimed origin of Masonry and its rituals. We do know that the Craft and its rituals evolved from the operative craft of the Middle Ages and became a formal Masonic organization as we know it today when the Grand Lodge was formed in London in 1717.

Now that I have established these qualifiers let me share with you some interesting information that I have come across.

Bryson in his book Sunburned Country refers to the explorer John McDouall Stuart who died in 1860 while trying to cross Australia's outback. In his journal Stuart indicates that in the middle of nowhere they met 3 Aboriginal men who greeted them "by making a secret sign of the Freemasons." This statement leaves us with many questions.

According to the Masonic Service Association "Egyptian carvings show a figure standing behind the altar, observing the raising of the dead, with its left arm raised forming the angle of a square."

While visiting in China I heard the guide refer to an ancient square that had been found near the Great Wall. The inscription on the square sounded very Masonic.

Does Masonry have any connection with the various Ancient Mysteries? With all of the studies there has never been any conclusive evidence to make a direct connection.

Information like this leaves us wondering so many things.

I have been intrigued with the coming of age story for a boy in an Aboriginal Society. The story goes that the father would take his son just prior to sunset into the forest where the boy would be blindfolded and told to sit on a stump. Regardless of the dangers that he might hear he was to remain

brave and was not to remove the blindfold until he felt the warmth of the sun on his face in the morning. In the morning when he removed the blindfold he would see that his father was sitting on another nearby stump. His father had remained to protect him and to ensure that the boy was brave enough to sit on the stump in the face of danger.

As Master Masons we are familiar with having represented that celebrated artist Hiram Abif in the third degree. This dramatized experience usually leaves a Mason with a lasting memory of the significance of that ceremony. In many ways throughout history, cultures have practiced a symbolic death and restoration of life in various ways. We in Masonry have the opportunity to experience the exemplary death of Hiram Abif and then be raised or restored to life. This experience is not unique to Masonry.

The ascension ceremony toward coronation of a new King in Egypt was very elaborate. It was believed that the old king and the new king would journey to the constellation of Orion. Here the new king would be admitted a member of the society of gods and there to be made the Horus. The old king would remain and the new king would return to rule the land of men. For this to happen, the new king underwent death by means of a potion administered in the evening by the high priest. The potion was believed to be hallucinogenic and that it would induce a catatonic state. The effect would wear off by morning when it was believed that the new king would return from his sojourn with the gods and previous kings of Egypt. The new king would regain consciousness as the morning star rose. From this moment on no mortal would consider usurping him of his power, divinely given in the council of the gods in the heavens above.

Helms, draws to our attention the many similarities in the various mysteries – a) – all were funereal in nature; b) – there was a death and resurrection theme; c) – candidates for admission passed through a series of degrees before reaching full membership; d) – initiation rites were conducted in the dark and e) – the candidate was brought to enlightenment and the Mysteries required an oath of secrecy that was enforced by the severest of penalties.

Ancient cultures have carried out similar exemplary deaths and resurrections for 1,000s of years in North America, Europe, Africa, Australia, Europe, Fiji and New Guinea to name but a few. Symbolic death and resurrection has been practiced by many societies and cultures such as the Druids, Essenes, Cistercians, Knight Templars and Egyptians.

There are a lot of similarities in the rites carried out by different societies, even though the cultures at that time were far apart and to our knowledge had no way of communicating to each other their rituals. From this you can see the importance that various cultures have placed on starting a new life from a specific milestone in their lives. We may say that today is the first day of the rest of our lives. We often make New Year's Resolutions, however it may take a real jolt in our everyday lives to change our actions. Hopefully the third degree has that effect on our lives.

The readings of ancient rituals both Masonic and non-Masonic may not be totally accurate however I have found it is interesting, intriguing and it has given me appreciation of life at that time.

Freemasonry and its Ancient Mystic Rites – C. W. Leadbeater
The Book of Hiram – Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas
The Builders – Joseph Fort Newton
The Hiram Key – Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas
The Meaning of Masonry – W.L. Wilmshurst
The Second Messiah – Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas
The Work
Uriel's Machine – Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas
What? When? Where? Why? Who? – The Masonic Service Association - 1956

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