

## **THE THREE GREAT PILLARS**

### **HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION**

In another Lodge Talk, "The Noble Orders of Architecture", it is pointed out that Pillars and columns have always held an important place in Freemasonry and a brief summary of the characteristics and Symbolism of the Ionic, Doric and Corinthian Orders are given. In this Talk the historical and traditional development of pillars in Freemasonry will be discussed.

The two earliest pillars in the literature of the Craft are those described in the legendary history which forms part of the Cooke MS of about 1410, one of the oldest versions of the "Old Charges". The story goes on to say that they were made by the children of Lamech, in readiness for the destruction of the world by fire or flood. One of the pillars was made of marble, the other of lacerus, because the first would not burn and the other would not sink in water. The pillars were intended as a means of preserving all the sciences that they have found. This legend dates back to early apocryphal writings, and in the course of centuries there arose a number of variations in which the story of the indestructibility of the pillars remained fairly constant.

The first appearance of King Solomon's pillars in the Craft is in the Edinburgh Register House MS. of 1696. Here we find the first faint hints of Masonic symbolism. A question in the catechism runs:

Q. Where was the first Lodge?

A. In the porch of Solomon's Temple.

It seems likely that as the ceremonies in Lodges came to be reshaped to contain their allegorical link with Solomon's Temple, the Temple pillars were adopted in place of the earlier pair, and the latter were never restored. There is, in fact, no proof that the earlier indestructible pillars had ever formed any part of the admission ceremonies, but we know very little about ceremonies in their earliest forms. It seems fairly certain, however, that Solomon's pillars achieved a really important part in the Craft ritual sometime between about 1500 and 1630.

Soon after their first mention in the early ritual texts these two pillars became a regular part of the furnishings of the Lodge. They were drawn on the floor of the Lodge forming part of the earliest versions of our modern tracing boards. The earliest descriptions of the lay-out of the Lodge in the early 1700s show both Wardens seated in the West facing the Master. The Master and Wardens were seated at the three points of a triangle with the Master at the point in the East. The replicas of King Solomon's pillars, in some cases handsome pieces of furniture, were placed in the West near the Wardens. They formed a kind of portal so that candidates passed between them on their admission, a custom which exists in many Lodges to this day.

In exposures of 1760-62 we find evidence of the two Wardens each carrying in his hand one of the two pillars B and J. Also at the same time we find that the Wardens raised or lowered their columns, as the case may be, to denote the opening and closing of the Lodge. It has been suggested that as the pillars B and J were close to the Wardens in the early Lodges, they carried small replicas of them when they came to be placed in the West and South.

Speculative Masons, in the 18th Century, proceeded to develop the symbolism, of the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian Orders, as the traditional supports of the Lodge, and there is some evidence that the five Noble Orders were applied in numerous ways to different purposes. The five Noble Orders of Architecture appear in an irregular catechism issued in 1723 in the form of question and answer:

Q. How many Orders are there in Architecture?

A. Five, Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian Composite or Roman.

In Dr James Anderson's first Book of Constitutions in 1723 the frontispiece shows a pavement or arcade with the Five Orders coupled on each side, the Composite Order in the foreground, receding to the Tuscan in the background.

As early as 1710 a set of three pillars makes its entrance in the catechisms and exposures. In the early ceremonies, apart from brief forms of oath, entrusting and greeting, the body of the ritual work was made up of questions and answers, including those, which exhibit the first simple attempts at speculative interpretation. Among these arose a whole series of questions which brought the answer "three". The earliest and most consistent of these were:

Q. Are there any lights in your Lodge?

A. Yes, Three.

Q. Are there any jewels in your Lodge?

A. Yes, Three.

These two questions and answers appear in the earliest version of the catechisms, the Edinburgh Register House MS. of 1696 (which has already been mentioned) and, with variations, in almost every version of the exposures throughout the 18th Century. The three pillars appear for the first time in the Dumfries No 4 MS, which is dated about 1710:

Q. How many pillars is in your Lodge?

A. Three.

Q. What are these?

A. Ye square and compasses and ye Bible.

The three pillars do not appear again in the eleven versions of catechisms between 1710 and 1730, but the question arises with a new answer in Prichard's famous exposure of 1730, "Masonry Dissected".

Q. What supports a Lodge?

A. Three great Pillars.

Q. What are they called?

A. Wisdom, Strength and Beauty.

Q. Why so?

A. Wisdom to contrive, Strength to support, and Beauty to adorn.

The same questions appear in the Wilkinson MS., a version of which may be dated about 1727, and in a whole series of English and Continental exposures throughout the 18th Century, invariably with the same answer, "Three, Wisdom, Strength and Beauty". In the 1760s an exposure added several further questions, which allocated the pillars respectively to the Master, Senior Warden and Junior Warden. But the descriptions of Lodge furnishings at this date do not include such pillars and it must be emphasised that these pillar questions belong to a period long before there was any idea of turning them into actual pieces of furniture in the Lodge room.

Whilst it is fairly certain that the early Lodges were only sparsely furnished, the records show that after the 1730s there were already a number of Lodges reasonably well-equipped. Never-the-less early references to sets of three pillars in Lodge records are extremely rare. To this day the ancient Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel), No 1., now over 260 years old, uses a set of three pillars each about three feet tall. The Master's pillar stands on the Altar, almost in the centre of the Lodge; the other two stand on the floor at the right of the Senior Warden and Junior Warden respectively, (the principal officers there do not have pedestals).

It seems likely that the earliest special furnishings used in a Lodge room were a set of three candlesticks. These are perhaps the most constant items in the 18th Century inventories. Perhaps the first hint of a combination between the two sets of equipment, three candlesticks and three pillars, appears in the records of the Old Dundee Lodge, which purchased in 1739, a set of three candlesticks of elaborate design in Doric, Ionic and Corinthian styles, (they are still in use today). The connection is perhaps not immediately obvious, but these were the architectural styles associated with the attributes of the three pillars belonging to the Master and Wardens, "Wisdom, Strength and

Beauty". The Masonic symbolism of the three pillars had been explained by Prichard in 1730, and it is almost certain that the Old Dundee Lodge was putting the words into practical shape when it ordered its set of candlesticks to be made up in these styles.

The Old Dundee candlesticks may serve as a pointer to what was happening, but it was by no means general practice, and sets of three pillars are usually absent from early inventories and lists of Lodge equipment. And so we can trace the three pillars from their first introduction as a purely symbolical question in the catechisms, throughout the period when their symbolism was expanded, until they were equated with three specific architectural styles. It is fairly safe to assume that the pillars were already appearing in the drawings, floorcloths or tracing boards in the early 1700s.

In the 1750s and 1760s we have definite evidence that sets of three pillars were already in use as furniture in several Lodges, and this adds strong support to the view that they had formerly appeared in the tracing boards. When towards the end of the 18th Century, the Lodge rooms and Masonic halls were being furnished for frequent or continuous use, the three pillars became a regular part of the furnishings, occasionally in their own right, but more often as ornamental bases for the three "lesser lights", thus combining the two separate features into the one frequently seen today.

In his confession to the Inquisition in 1742, John Coustos is reported to have said: "In addition they also teach that the complete and perfect Lodge should have three columns to support it, denominated Wisdom, Strength and Beauty in adornment". When pillars of the three Orders came to be attributed to the three principal officers, it should be noted that the pillars were allotted in their historical order, namely, Doric to the Master, Ionic to the Senior Warden and Corinthian to the Junior Warden.

In 1791 it was decided to provide a throne for the Grand Master of the English Premier Grand Lodge and chairs for the Wardens more in keeping with the dignity of their offices. This decision was made soon after the election of the Prince of Wales (later George IV) as Grand Master. The maker of these chairs was instructed to "make the Columns or Pillars on the Chairs strictly conformable to the Order and Usage of the Society, viz., the Grand Master's to be of the Doric Order, the Senior Warden's the Ionic Order and the Junior Warden's the Corinthian Order".

With the revision and standardisation of the working by the Lodge of Reconciliation (1813-16), the Ionic pillar was allotted to the Master, the Doric to the Senior Warden and the Corinthian to the Junior Warden. With one exception the certificates issued to Master Masons by the two English Grand Lodges and the United Grand Lodge of England, have one feature in common; the pillars of the three principal Orders of Architecture. When our Grand Lodge was established in 1888 the "Pillars" certificate was adopted and it is still in use.

#### Bibliography:

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