THE EARLIEST USE OF THE WORD 'FREEMASON'

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It has hitherto been thought that the earliest appearance of the English word 'freemason' was in 1376. At the symposium organised by Lodge Hope of Kurrachee No. 337 at Kirkcaldy in May 2003, Professor Andrew Prescott, Director of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, University of Sheffield, drew attention to some earlier records of the word. This is the relevant section of his address at Kirkcaldy.

It is commonly assumed that the stonemasons of the middle ages are obscure, anonymous people who have escaped the historical record, but medieval administrative records, such as building accounts, contain an enormous amount of infomation about stonemasons and their craft. For example, the journal of the clerk of the works at Eton for 1444-5 records the name of every stonemason, carpenter, dauber, smith and labourer employed on the works, and gives details of the hours worked by each man. These records are usually in Latin or French. The general Latin terms used for stonemasons were *cementarius* or *lathomus*. The French word *masoun*, usually spelt *mazon*, first appears in the twelfth century. There were many different grades and specialisms among the stonemasons, and these were described either by qualifying the general word for stonemason, so that the Eton records refer to *lathomos vocati hardehewers* (the stonemasons known as hardhewers), or by the use of specialist words, such as the Latin *cubitores* for cutters or *imaginatores* for image makers.

The freemasons were such a specialist grade of stonemason, who specialised in the carving of freestone, which was, in the words of Douglas Knoop and Gwilym Jones, 'the name given to any fine-grained sandstone or limestone that can be freely worked in any direction and sawn with a toothed saw'. Freestone was used for the decoration of capitals and cornices, the cutting of tracery, and the carving of images and gargoyles. The London Assize of Wages of 1212 refers in Latin to *sculptores lapidum liberorum* (sculptors of freestone). The Statute of Labourers of 1351, which attempted to regulate wages and contracts in the wake of the labour shortage caused by the Black Death, uses an equivalent French term: *mestre meson de franche peer* (master mason of freestone). Freemasons as a distinct grade of stonemasons can thus be traced back to the early thirteenth century, but for today's Free and Accepted

Masons, there is naturally a particular interest in trying to locate the first appearance of the word 'freemason' in English.

In 1376, John of Northampton was elected Mayor of London. Northampton was determined to break the hold of the existing merchant oligarchy on London's government and to give less wealthy citizens a greater voice in the city's affairs. One means by which he sought to do this was by changing the method of electing the city's common council. It was ordained the councillors should henceforth be nominated by particular trades in the city rather than by wards. The nominations made by the various crafts to the common council in 1376 are recorded in two of the city's official records, the Plea and Memoranda Rolls and the London Letter Books (the relevant volume is the one designated by the letter 'H'). Four representatives of the stonemasons were nominated to the common council: Thomas Wrek, John Lesnes, John Artelburgh and Robert Henwick. In the Plea and Memoranda Roll, they are described as 'masons'. In the Letter Book they were at first described as 'freemasons', but this word has been struck through by the scribe and replaced with the word 'masons'. This has hitherto been the earliest identified appearance of the word in English. Probably the alteration was the result of scribal error, but in the politically charged atmosphere of Northampton's mayoralty the change may have been more significant, perhaps suggesting that the representatives were originally been drawn from a particular group of stonemasons.

However, the word 'freemason' also appears in the records of the Corporation of London much earlier in the fourteenth century. The coroners' rolls of the city contain an account of an escape from Newgate prison in 1325. This is summarised in the *Calendar of the Coroners' Rolls of the City of London, 1300-1378*, edited by Reginald Sharpe and published in 1913 (pp. 130-1). The coroner and sheriffs of the city held an inquiry into the gaol break. Jurors from the wards of Farringdon, Castle Baynard, Bread Street and Aldgate, stated that on 8 September 1325, at about midnight, Adam Nouneman of Hockcliffe in Bedfordshire, John Gommere, Robert de Molseleye, John de Elme, Alan Mariot and John de Parys, Stephen de Keleseye, William le Soutere, Walter, son of Beatrice Gomme, and John Bedewynde escaped through a hole in the western wall of Newgate prison. Some of the prisoners were recaptured, but others sought sanctuary in the churches of St Sepulchre's church near Newgate and St Bride's in Fleet Street. The jurors also declared that the escaped

prisoners were assisted by various men, presumably also at that prisoners in Newgate. Those who abetted the escape were said to have included one Nicholas le Freemason. Convicted criminals were at that time allowed to escape punishment provided they agreed to leave the kingdom and live abroad. Four of those involved in this prison escape duly left the country from Dover and Southampton, but there is no record of what happened to Nicholas le Freemason.

We cannot by any means be sure that this is the earliest appearance of the English word 'freemason'. The word almost certainly appears somewhere else, hidden away in the great mass of unpublished medieval administrative records which remain largely unexplored by masonic scholars. Moreover, Nicholas's name may represent a French form of the word 'freemason', and this illustrates the difficulty in firmly identifying the earliest English use of the word. We are on slightly firmer ground with literary texts, and at least one medieval English poem dating from before 1376 contains the word 'freemason'.

The romance *Floris and Blancheflour* is in Middle English, but was probably adapted from a French original sometime between 1250 and 1300. It is a good example of the kind of literary entertainment which was extremely popular among well-off people in medieval England. A Christian lady was captured by the Saracens in Spain who made her a lady-in-waiting to their queen. The Queen and the lady-in-waiting both have babies on the same day. The Saracen queen has a boy named Floris (flower) and the Christian lady a girl named Blancheflour (white flower). The children were brought up together, but the King, disturbed by their love for one another, decided that they should be separated. Blancheflour was sold as a slave, and was bought by an emir in Babylon who intended to marry her. Floris travels to Babylon to seek his love. Arriving at Babylon, Floris is told by Daris, the keeper of the bridge into the city, that Blauncheflour is kept in a high tower in the city, and that the emir would soon claim her as a wife. Daris describes the tower as follows (the following modern version of the text is by Professor Peter Baker of the University of Virginia):

> *It is a hundred fathoms high; whoever beholds it from far or near can see that it is a hundred fathoms altogether. Without an equal, it is made of limestone and marble; there's not another such place in all the world. The mortar is made so well that neither iron nor steel can break it. The finial*

placed above is made with such pride that one has no need to burn a torch or lantern in the tower: the finial that was set there shines at night like the sun. Now there are forty two noble bowers in that tower; the man who could dwell in one of them would be happy, for he would never need to long for greater bliss.

Floris is perplexed and distressed, and begs Daris for advice as to how he can reach Blauncheflour in the impentrable tower. Daris is ready with a plan:

Dear son, you have done well to place your trust in me. The best advice I know – and I know no other advice – is to go to the tower tomorrow as if you were a good craftsman. Take the square and measure in your hand as if you were a freemason ('Take on þy honde squyer and scantlon, As þow were a free mason'). Look up and down the tower. The porter is cruel and villainous; he'll come to you immediately and ask what kind of man you are and accuse you of some crime, claiming you to be a spy. And you will answer sweetly and mildly and say to him that you are a craftsman come to look at the beautiful tower, meaning to make one like it in your land.

The scheme works, and Floris and Blauncheflour are reunited. After many further trials and tribulations, in which the couple are threatened with beheading and death by fire, there is the inevitable happy ending, with the couple marrying and Blauncheflour becoming Floris's queen after the death of his father.

Thus *Floris and Blancheflour* contains an English reference to a freemason which apparently dates from the late thirteenth century. Inevitably, however, the textual situation is more complicated than it appears at first sight, and the word freemason may perhaps have been added to the poem sometime during the fourteenth century. One of the earliest surviving copies of this poem is in the Auchinleck manuscript, one of the great treasures of the National Library of Scotland (a digital facsimile and edition of which is now available on the National Library's website). The Auchinleck manuscript dates from the 1330s. In this copy of *Floris and Blancheflour*, the word mason is used rather than freemason:

And nim in þin hond squir and scantiloun

Als þai þou were a masoun;

The most complete copy of the poem is in British Library, Egerton MS. 2862, a manuscript which previously belonged to George Granville Leveson Gower, 2nd

Duke of Sutherland and dates from the late fourteenth century. Here the word 'free mason' is used, rather than mason. This suggests that the term freemason did not appear in the thirteenth century text of *Floris and Blauncheflour*, but was only inserted in the poem sometime after 1330. In order to establish the exact circumstances of the appearance of the word 'freemason' in *Floris and Blauncheflour*, further investigation of the textual and manuscript traditions of this poem is necessary.