

ON A WING AND A PRAYER
The Royal Arch In Historical Perspective

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‘O Mores! O Tempora!’ Roughly translated the Latin suggests that because of the changes in belief and value in our society the time we live in is uncertain and yet, somehow exciting.

Companions it is no different for our Order. Declining membership in the Craft has its inevitable knock-on effect – amalgamation or dormancy, and sadly for some Chapters the inevitable slide into extinction. It is an uncertain time. For Union Chapter the roller coaster of Masonic life has been on a downward tilt despite the Herculean efforts of some stalwart Companions like Bob Galloway and Raymond Watt, to name but two.

However, this downturn has a certain excitement to it - the excitement of the challenge to survive. Union Chapter and the Province of Fife and Kinross, with the active support of S.G.R.A.C., have taken the opportunity to institute a Chapter of Research as a vehicle for survival.

It is also a vehicle for taking the Order in a new direction – education for the Companions, research into our origins and recording of who we are and what we have done and are about to do as Masons in our local communities, in Scotland herself and in the communities of the Caledonian Diaspora across the world.

It is exciting for this is a first for Fife – no other Province has a Chapter of Research. It is exciting for this is the first research Chapter in Scotland – Supreme are sufficiently aware of the problems and this can be seen as a proactive response to declining membership. It is exciting for me because I have been accorded the honour of being the first Companion to present a paper to Union Chapter. It is also exciting for me as a member of Lodge Hope to see the Province extend the idea of research, education and Instruction to the Companions of the Order in Fife.

However, to the topic of the paper - ‘On a Wing and a Prayer: the Royal Arch in historical perspective’.

Companions the Royal Arch Degree does not stand-alone. It comes in a series of degrees, which are administered under the aegis of Supreme. I would like to present them to you in the chronological order in which they occur and then look at whether there is a valid historical context for them.

The Order of the Royal Arch is responsible for a series of degrees that have emerged in the 3 constitutions operating in the United Kingdom. It is not just the Mark, EM and the Royal Arch but also those degrees worked within the Associated bodies of the Lodge and Council and the Cryptic Council.

To make any sense of the degrees and the history that they are purported to be based on we really need to put them into some proper chronology.

The first degree is the Royal Ark Mariners degree. It is based on the Flood legend and is dated around 2344 BC. The RAM is part of the Lodge and Council series.

Next up in the time line is the Mark Master degree which describes the preparations for the building of King Solomon's Temple. It is dated to 974 – 968 BC.

In some constitutions the next degree is the Secret Master. This tells of the progress of the Temple building and of the construction of the secret vault and covers events in the period 969 – 968 BC

968 BC seems to be a date of much significance as this date is accorded to the Royal Master and the Select Master degrees. These are part of the Cryptic Council series. The Royal Master deals with the revelation of the death of H.A.B. The Select Master tells of the deposits made in the secret vault and presents the revelation of the destruction of the Temple, and that it will be rebuilt by a Prince of Judah and that the Word will be recovered.

Outside of Scotland some constitutions work a Most Excellent Master degree describing the dedication of KST in the year 967 BC.

The next degree jumps nearly 400 years to 586 BC when the Super Excellent Master degree reveals the destruction of KST and the loss of the Word. This completes the Cryptic series. In some constitutions these degrees are not available under the RA but are governed by a separate Supreme body.

The Decree of Cyrus was made in 538 BC.

The 3 degrees of the Babylonish Pass are attributed to the period 508 – 505 BC. They describe the planning of the work to build the 2nd Temple and the journey out of Babylon to Jerusalem. They are knightly degrees and introduce the symbolism of the Trowel and the Sword.

For those of you who are only Excellent Masters and Royal Arch Masons you must be wondering where these fit in or whether you have come to the wrong meeting tonight. It might also explain to you why some of us are periodically confused as to the proper signs tokens and words. I can assure you that I am one of those most easily confused.

But at last here we are the Excellent Master degree, dated to 504 BC deals with the return from exile. The Royal Arch itself deals with the rebuild in 502 BC and the recovery of the Word as was prophesied. With this the Royal Arch series is complete.

Royal Ark Mason to Royal Arch Companion in 1802 years. But does it fit with known history?

How historically accurate are the events and the characters portrayed in the degrees of our Order?

If we start with the Royal Ark Mariner and the revelation of the `Deluge` we know from the bible that this event is recorded in Jewish texts but there is other evidence. The story of the Flood is common in early History. In Sumer – Southern Mesopotamia – in a text called `The Sumerian King List` written in the 2nd millennium BC the first written evidence of the flood occurs. Five pre-diluvial cities with their kings are named. The first is given as Eridu - “In Eridu, Alulim was king and reigned for 28,800 years. Alalgar reigned for 36,000.” Not bad for primitive societies!

However, the text goes on to describe the Divine Dimuzi, a shepherd, king of Bad-Tebira, who reigned for 36,000 years. The Flood brought this to a halt.

“Five cities were they.

Eight kings reigned for 241,000 years.

The flood swept there over.”

The date ascribed in Sumer to the Deluge is between 3000 and 2900 BC.

Does any of this ring bells. Shepherd kings who are divine or at least in close contact with God. Their kingdoms to be destroyed thereafter.

Dimuzi was also the name of the Sumerian fertility god, known in the Bible as Tammuz. The relevance of this being those Jewish writers were well aware of the history, legends and myths of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Egyptians, Medes and Babylonians.

Further Babylonian evidence repeats the legend. 'The Epic of Gilgamesh' reveals that the god Utara-pishtim discloses to Gilgamesh the 'celebrated story of the Deluge`:

`I will reveal to you O Gilgamesh a secret matter,

Yes, I will tell you a secret of the Gods.

Shuruppak, a city that you know yourself

That was set upon the bank of the Euphrates,

That city was ancient and within it were the gods.

The Great Gods felt driven to make a deluge.`

There is even a reference to a proto-Noah – a son of Ubar-tutu. His Ark was 7 decks high and was square in shape. Some scholars have concluded it was a perfect cube. But Companions this may just be so much co-incidence.

The son of Ubar-tutu took gold and silver, livestock, wild creatures and craftsmen on his Ark. After 7 days the Ark was washed up on Mount Nisir. A dove was released but it returned as no dry land was in sight. A swallow was then released but it too could find no dry land. Lastly a raven was loosed. When it failed to return it was clear that the land was emerging from water and that the Ark could release its precious cargo.

The main contribution of Babylonian history and culture is its effect on the Bible and Christo-judaic philosophy and morality. The main message is that evil may befall an individual, which is not a punishment for what that person has done. This classic message which Jewish writers amended from the Gilgamesh epic has nothing to do with the Christian message of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It is instead a message of re-assurance to a threatened world.

The Royal Ark Mariners degree founded on the basis of the Noah story in reality dates back much further. The first written texts are Sumerian but work being currently done in Northern Turkey is also revealing pictorial evidence of earlier civilisations that record this `flood legend`. Exactly how does this degree contribute to the overall philosophy of the Royal Arch? I really don't know. That it is a beautiful piece of ritual is not in question. Its relevance undoubtedly is.

The rest of the degree system is based on Jerusalem and Israel – the kingdom of David.

David defeated the Philistines following his conquest of the Jebusites and constructed a formidable small kingdom in what is now known as Palestine. He was able to hand over this unit to Solomon who strengthened it even further. Walls were constructed and the Temple, with all its significance was completed.

He worked with Hiram of Tyre and it was craftsman from Tyre and Gebal (Byblos, North of Beirut) who `built his palace and temple. ` I Kings 5:18 VII 13 – 14. Craftsmen from Tyre were `filled with wisdom and understanding and cunning to work all works in brass (bronze). I Kings VII 14.

But with the death of Solomon the Kingdom of Israel became factionalised under the rule of Rehoboam (931 – 910BC). The kingdom split in two – Judah and Israel. Two tribes – Judah and Benjamin – became the kingdom of Judah led by Rehoboam whilst the other 10 remained as Israel under Jeroboam.

However, Israel continued down a path of instability in part due to internal divisions and also because of its strategic position. Israel lay directly on the path of both the Egyptian Empires and the emerging dynasties of the East, the Babylonians and the Persians. It was a land to be fought over. It was a place where the kings had to be skilled diplomats and politicians, backing the right horse, so to speak, at the right time – or being exceptionally lucky. Fortunately for both the historian and us many of the Israelite kings were neither and brought down the wrath of both the Egyptians and the Babylonians upon them.

The Egyptians implicated Hosea, king of Israel, an appointee of the Babylonians, in a plot. Shalmanesser destroyed him and his army and Samaria his capital was captured in 722BC and the population sent into exile in North Western Iran. Evidence from pots found at Nimrod shows clearly Jewish residents – the pots

belonged to one named Haggai. This event may be the basis for the legend of the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel.

The kingdom of Judah was to last longer and have more influence mainly because it was the home of Yahweh and the Temple. Certainly it had been conquered by the both the Babylonians and the Persians and formed part of the Empire known as Abarnahara – the land beyond the Euphrates.

J.M.Cook, in `The Persian Empire` describes the routes from Babylon to Israel of the time. “It could be traversed from Aleppo to Hamath in the Orontes valley and either by the Bequa or by Emesa (Homs) and Damascus to Megiddo and then down the coast to Gaza. For a desert crossing the route by Palmyra had waterholes.”

For those familiar with the recitative in the Knight of the Sword degree there is clear confirmation that both the historian and the knight mason are in agreement. So Brethren and Companions the land described in our degrees is a clear match with the history of the time.

The rule of Hezekiah 715BC – 686BC cemented the identity of Judah but the reigns of the next kings Manasseh and Amon were marked by a decline in religious worship and an increase in pagan worship. The Temple fell into disuse and it is only in the reign of Josiah 637BC – 608BC that the Temple was restored and the worship of Yahweh enforced. It is at this time that an` antique book of the Law` was discovered and a Deuteronomic religious code was brought into effect. It is this legend that informs Chapters working under the Irish Constitution who have Josiah as the High King in place of Zerubabel the Prince.

Josiah however was killed at the Battle of Megiddo whilst harassing Egyptian forces and Judah was to become temporarily an Egyptian vassal state. Three years later Nebuchadnesser defeated the Egyptians and Jehoiakim, the king of Judah appointed by them submitted both himself and the kingdom to the Babylonians. Despite being kept on as king, Jehoiakim betrayed the Babylonians and in 597BC Nebuchadnesser besieged Jerusalem. In the course of the siege Jehoiakim was killed and his son Jehoiachin was taken captive into Babylon 'together with the Nobility, craftsmen and troops`, according to H.W.F.Saggs in 'The Greatness that was Babylon'.

Conflict between Babylon and Egypt was to continue. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, again backed the wrong horse – the Egyptians – and following an 18-month siege; Jerusalem was starved into submission. Zedekiah was blinded and taken captive to Babylon. Jerusalem was sacked, looted and defortified (i.e. the walls were knocked down.) The pro-Egyptian faction was killed and a pro-Babylonian governor appointed. A section of the population was taken into captivity in Babylon. There we have it Brethren and Companions the Captivity of 586BC is a fact. The city of Jerusalem is sacked and the walls are knocked down. The temple is a ruin. All of this accord with the ritual expressed in the degrees of the order and sets up the conditions for some of the degrees that are to follow.

What happened to the captive kings is set out on cuneiform tablets found at Babylon. After the death of Nebuchadnesser in 562BC his son Amel-Marduk showed favour to Jechoiachin: 'For Yaukina of Yahuda, for the 5 sons of the king and 8 Yahudeans, each a half sila of corn'.

This tale of the fall of Judah is told with precision in the Super Excellent Master degree. The other 2 degrees, which form the Cryptic Council series in, form us of the loss of HAB and the construction of the secret vault. I have not yet found any direct historical evidence to support this. There is circumstantial evidence in the form of the discovery of the antique book of the law in the time of Josiah which would imply that the discovery made in the RA degree has even more substance but while it would be nice to speculate that this is the source for the Royal and Select Master degrees that is all we can do – speculate.

So far our analysis has shown the impact of the empires of Egypt and Babylon on Palestine but that was all to change.

Nebuchadnesser destroyed Jerusalem and took many of the population into captivity. He did the same to Tyre in 571BC. But the death of Nebuchadnesser heralded the summit of Babylonian power and it was to face a new challenge from the East – from Elam/Assyria – what we would call Persia.

Cyrus the Great 560BC – 530BC defeated the Babylonians and pushed the Egyptians back creating a great empire from Turkey to the Nile. His successor Darius would expand that even further to occupy all of Egypt and move into Northern India.

Records held in the Babylonian archive clearly show that the statements made in the book of Ezra that the decree of Cyrus given in 538BC is correct. Cyrus instructed that the Temple of Jerusalem be rebuilt and that the temple vessels seized by Nebuchadnesser 50 years before be returned. More importantly, contrary to Babylonian practice, Cyrus gave permission for the captives to return to Jerusalem. Cook in 'The Persian Empire' clearly states that few of the Jews availed themselves of this right. As a result little progress was made on the rebuilding. Cook further records that Cyrus sent Sheshbazzar as governor with 'a store of gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnesser had removed and instructions for rebuilding the Temple'.

Cook claims that Cyrus had a deliberate policy of embracing the religious practices of subject races in order to gain their trust and support. Further examples of this are his participation in the religions of Babylon, Lydia and Sardis.

It is worthwhile noting that Cyrus was acclaimed by the Jews who saw him more as Messiah than as a conqueror. However, the rebuilding went slowly because of opposition from other local governors.

In 520 BC Zerubbabel a grandson of King Jehoiachin was sent as governor. He too was faced with opposition from other local provincial officials and as Cook describes it 'the messianic rantings of fiery prophets'. Facing a challenge from the sub-governor of Abarnahara and an appeal was made to 'the Decree of Cyrus'. Unfortunately, it could not be found in the archive at Babylon and further search was made at Agbatana (the Ecbatana of the ritual book.) Some suggestions were made that the document was a forgery placed there by a Jewish clerk but such was the power of the name Cyrus that objections were quashed and the work of rebuilding restarted. The temple was consecrated in 515 BC. The sub-governor of Abarnahara who objected so strongly was none other than Tattenai. This again supports the historical accuracy of the ritual contained in the Knight of the East degree.

Shethar-bozenai who is also mentioned in the ritual would appear in Persian texts as Sathrabouzanes and is identified as one of the local governors.

Brethren it should be clear from this that much of the content of the Red Cross degrees can be confirmed as accurate by history.

However Masonic tradition informs us that Zerubbabel, in order to gain judgement returned to Babylon to plead his case. I again can find no independent

confirmation of this. Zerubbabel, in an article by MEC H. I. Halder in SGRAC Roll Book of 1998 was reported to be 70 years old at this time and it was in Babylon that the son of Shialtiel also known as Sheshbazzar was to die. There is some conflict between history and Masonic tradition. Cook clearly states that few Jews of the captivity sought the right to return. Holder tells us that tradition asserts that over 50000 retraced their steps over the desert with 8000 beasts of burden. Holder also reveals that after only one year the work stopped because of the attacks made on the workers. A further 15 years were to pass before the prophets Haggai and Zecharia came from Babylon to urge the work be restarted. It was a further 4 years later in 516BC the Temple was rebuilt – 70 years after the destruction of the first temple.

It is now time to tidy up some of the other main characters and institutions in our ritual.

Jeshua or Joshua – take your pick. Is this the same man? I don't know. And history doesn't help either. Holder in his article tells us that Jeshua is the son of Josedek the High Priest. Josedek had been imprisoned at the time of the Captivity, in other words at the same time as Zedekiah was blinded and taken to Babylon in 586 BC. Now I know that these Israelites were tough – remember the man who tied his ass to a tree and walked all the way to Jericho – but I am sceptical that Jeshua 70 years after being taken Captive is able to make the journey back to Jerusalem.

Nehemia certainly is a character well recorded in the history of the time. He was a serious player in the administration of the Persian Empire. Nehemia was a eunuch, who rose to the high position of Kings cupbearer to Artaxerses I and was later appointed as Governor of Judah. We know that he was given this appointment at breakfast in the presence of the Queen and Artaxerses brothers. Nehemia took office in Jerusalem in 445BC and immediately offended and frightened his neighbours by starting to rebuild the fortifications of the city. The citizens of Jerusalem were not regarded highly by their neighbours – sort of the biblical neighbours from hell. Any attempt to strengthen the defences of Jerusalem was therefore seen as a serious threat to the stability of the region – hence the attacks on the builders – hence the defence by Sword and Trowel.

Nehemia also introduced religious reforms, abolished interest and cancelled debts. He also gave many Temple jobs to the Levites ensuring the support of the priestly tribe.

Ezra the Scribe was again a historic figure in the administration of the Persian Empire. Ezra too was given his instructions to “establish the law in Jerusalem” by the King and his Seven Councillors. This can be dated to 398 BC – 47 years after Nehemia rebuilt the walls.

MEC Rev J. K. Clark MBE in his article on Ezra in the 2003 Roll book tells us that Ezra was 'a priest, the Scribe of the Law of God and Heaven.' Ezra VII 7. Clark maintains that Ezra left Babylon in 458 BC with some 5000 followers but no military escort, unlike Nehemia. This tells us about their relative status. Nehemia is officially the Governor, whereas Clarks Ezra is not. As well as the discrepancy of the dates the historical Ezra was not a popular fellow. He introduced religious reforms regarding in particular marriage. Ezra tried to enforce ethnic purity through the Marriage laws. Jews according to the Law could only marry Jews. Ezra despite the deportations and the fact of intermarriage over the centuries now tried to enforce these laws and even insisted on the break-up of existing marriages between Jews and Gentiles. Needless to say Ezra of the Clark version was less than successful except in raising his unpopularity factor. I think it is fair to say that there is some confusion over exactly which Ezra is the man who is to become the Chapter Scribe. The names are the same. Both are scribes. One is a high Imperial official of the 5th century BC charged with restoring the law in Jerusalem – but this law is more likely to be Persian. The other is the Ezra of bible fame, recording the history of Palestine as he saw it and restoring Israelitish law with a somewhat heavy hand in the 4th century BC.

All of the central characters of our Order have the legitimacy of historical evidence behind them. To the historian there are some confusing details, which place them in a somewhat disparate chronology. To the Royal Arch Mason these are issues that do not really matter. As Holder so eloquently puts it the ceremonies associated with the Royal Arch degrees are written with the intent of teaching us allegorically and symbolically to build a spiritual house in our hearts which will generate “the most exalted worship of the most High and result in the practice of the highest principles of Morality, finally preparing us to pass that Mysterious Veil which the eye of human reason cannot penetrate”.

Brethren and Companions to be a Royal Arch Companion is to fly on a wing and a prayer. Historically, as perhaps Eric Morecombe so eloquently put it to Andre

Previn on playing concert piano for him badly, “all the notes are there but not necessarily in the right order.”

For some of our Brethren in the Craft we likewise fly on a wing and a prayer just a tad short of promoting some form of Masonic heresy. MEC the Rev. Brother Neville Barker Cryer in his book `I didn't know that about the Royal Arch` asserts that no mason is complete until he has become Z in his own Chapter. As an English mason he can afford to say that – they don't get all the secrets anyway – however I would prefer it if we were to follow the thinking of the Provincial Grand Superintendent of Fife and Kinross. The Royal Arch Mason is no better than any other mason – he has only chosen to take on additional commitments. Brethren and Companions I give you the Royal Arch Degrees in their historical context.