

Ancient York Masons

Unknown

The abbreviation, A.Y.M. is frequently met in Masonic history and nomenclature. It points to a legend, a persistent tradition: and it raises an almost unanswerable question.

Did or did not a form of Freemasonry exist in the City of York, England, in the year A.D. 926?

The answers to that question have created one of the most interesting problems for Masonic research. Eminent Masonic students scholars and investigators have for a great many years discussed, analyzed, examined, taken apart and put together all the direct evidence all the indirect evidence and evidence which is not even remotely indirect. concerning Ancient York Masonry.

The better to visualize the difficulties consider that the "direct evidence" is contained in a manuscript the probable date of which is A.D. 1390 which is 464 years after the events chronicled in this manuscript are supposed to have occurred. We, now, examine this manuscript 1030 years after the event described and try to reach a conclusion.

It is just 467 years since Columbus voyaged to the New World. Suppose that some present day story teller should write an account of the voyages of Christopher Columbus, saying that he came to this continent, liked the Indians, admired their tepees, called them into a meeting and gave them a charter to build more and better tepees?

What would the historians and the researchers a thousand years from now make of this? About all they can do is to consider the probability of the unknown writer of 1390 having and writing accurate information.

The story in the Regius Manuscript is repeated in other and later manuscripts constitutions. The first question which the researcher has to answer is "Were all these manuscript constitutions copies made, one from the other, and added to and changed by each copyist's whim, imagination, or ignorance? Were they all copies of an unknown and now lost document which was the source of all the manuscripts we have?"

The same sort of problem is the Synoptic Problem of the first three Gospels of the New Testament Here the writers lived (probably) within a hundred years of the events which they chronicled, but the thousands of theologians, ministers, scholars, and historians who have for

hundreds of years considered this problem are not yet agreed that one copied from another, or that all three had access to "Q" (from Quelle, German for spring, or source) an unknown, long-lost original, telling the story of the Carpenter of Nazareth

Not the thousandth part of the effort put on the Synoptic Problem has been devoted to "the York Problem"; after all, ancient York Masonry is of interest chiefly to Freemasons and, really, to only a small per cent of them Yet to those to whom it does matter, it is really important

The evidence is not great in amount, nor difficult (except in the old spellings and ancient words) to interpret.

The Regius Poem, Freemasonry's oldest document, tells the story. Here is the pertinent paragraph, with modern spelling and words to make it easier to read "This craft came into England, as I tell you, in the time of good King Athelstan's reign; he made them both hall, and also bower and lofty temples of great honor, to take his recreation in both day and night, and to worship his God with all his might This good lord loved this craft full well, and purposed to strengthen it in every way on account of various defects that he discovered in the craft. He sent about into all the land, after all the masons of the craft, to come straight to him- to amend all these defects by good counsel, if it might so happen. He then permitted an assembly to be made of divers Lords in their rank, dukes, earls, and barons, also knights, squires, and many more and the great burgesses of that city, they were all there in their degree; these were there, Each one in every way make laws for the estate of these masons There they sought by their wisdom how they might govern it; there they found out fifteen articles, and there they made fifteen points.

Our next oldest document in which this legend is recited is the Cooke Manuscript whose date is probably in the first half of the 1400's. The details are here much more copious than those contained in the regius Manuscript. The passage referring to the legend is as follows:

"and after that was a worthy kynge in England, That was called Athelstone, and his youngest sone lovyd well the sciens of Gemetry, and he wyst well that hand craft had the practyke of the sciens of Gemetry so well as masons; Wherefore he drewe him to consell and lernyd (the) practyke of that sciens to spectulatyf. For of the speculatyfe he was a master, and he lovyd welle masonry and masons. And he bicom a mason hymselfe. and he yaf hem (gave them) charges and names as (h)it is now usyd in Englond and in other countries. And he ordeyned that they schulde have resonabulle pay. and purchesed (obtained) a fre patent of the kyung that they schulde make a sembly when thei sawe resonably tyme a (to) cum togedir to here (their) counselle of the whiche charges, amnors & semble as is write and taught in the boke of oure charges wherefor I leve hit at this tyme.

In later lines. which appear to have been taken from what is called the BOKE OF CHARGES, the legend is repeated in these words:

"In this manner was the forsayde art begunne in the lond of Egypt bi the forsayd maister Euglat (Euclid), & so, it went fro lond to londe and fro kyngdome to kyndgome. After that, many yeris,

in the tyme of Kyng Adelstone, wiche was sum tyme kyngze of Englonde, bi his counsell and other gret lordys of the lond bi comin (common) assent for grete default y-fennde amongys hem (them). On (one) tyme of the yere or in iii yere, as nede were to the kyngze and gret lordys of the provynce and fro countre to countre congregacions they that be made masters schold be examined of the articuls after written, & be ransacked (thoroughly examined) whether thei be abull and kunnyng (able and skillful) to the profyte of the lordys hem to serve (to serve them), and to the honor of the forsayd art."

More than a hundred years later, about 1560, the Lansdowne Manuscript was inscribed; and in it we find the legend still further developed, and Prince Edwin for the first time introduced by name. That manuscript read thus:

"Soone after the Decease of St. Albones, there came Diverse Warrs into England out of Diverse Nations, so that the good rule of Masons was dishired (disturbed) and put down vntill the tyme of King Adilston. In his tyme there was a worthy King in England, that brought this Land into good rest, and he builded many great workes and buildings, therefore he loved well Masons, for he had a Sonne called Edwin, the which loved Masons much more then his father did, and he was soe practized in Geometry, that he delighted much to come and talke with Masons and to learne of them the Craft. And after, for the loue he had to Masons and to the Craft, he was made Mason at Windsor, and he gott of the King, his father, a Charter and Comission once every yeaere to have Assembly within the Realme where they would within England, and to correct within themselves ffaults & Trespasses that weere done as touching the Craft, and he held them an Assembly at Yorke and there he made Masons and gave them Charges, and taught them the Manners and Comands the same to be kept ever afterwards. And tooke them the Charter and Comission to keep their Assembly, and Ordained that it should be renewed from King to King, and when the Assembly were gathered together he made a Cry, that all old Masons or young, that had any Writeings or Vnderstanding of the Charges and manners that weere made before their Lands, wheresoever they were made Masons, that they should shew them forth, there were found some in ffrench, some in Greek, some in Hebrew, and some in English, and some in other languages, and when they were read and over seen well the intent of them was vnderstood to be all one. And then he caused a Booke be made thereof how this worthy Craft of Masonrie was first founded, and he himselfe comanded, and also then caused, that it should be read at any tyme when it should happen any Mason or Masons to be made to give him or them their Charges, and from that time vntill this Day Manners of Masons have been kept in this Manner and forme, as well as Men might Governe it, and ffurthermore at diverse Assemblies have been put and Ordained diverse Charges by the best advice of Masters and ffellows."

Subsequent manuscripts contain the legend substantially as it is above. Most of them appear to be mere copies of it, or most probably of some original manuscript from which both they and it are copies, – a Masonic "Q".

Revert for a moment to the Synoptic Problem; it has resolved itself into three theories, each of which is more or less credible. although all three together cannot be truth.

The first may be called the successive dependence theory; it presupposes that one of the three Gospels is the original and the other two were either copied from it, or one was copied from it, and the third is a copy of this copy.

The second theory is that which may be called the documentary or "Q" theory, – that there was a long lost original Gospel from which Matthew, Mark, and Luke copied, or one copied it and the third copied from this copy.

The third theory may be called the oral tradition theory; that all three writers took word of mouth, spoken tradition, the myth and legend of the day, and from them wrote their gospels.

It is certainly possible that three similar theories may contain the truth of the York legend; an original (Masonic "Q") from which the writer of the Regius copied; that the Reigus is the original from which Cooke and Lansdowne and other old, manuscript Constitutions were copied; that there was an oral tradition in England at a time when there were no books and when only few men could either read or write manuscripts, and that the Regius and its successors were but versions of this oral tradition.

The indirect evidence may be likened to the legend of the cherry tree, I cannot tell a lie. Parson Weems' story of George Washington. No historian today gives any credence to the old popular school-boy tale. Yet there is nothing in the character, parentage or surroundings of Washington to indicate that it could not be true. All our accounts of the great Father of His Country show a man of character, breeding, morality, and honesty. He came of gentle people. He lived in an environment where noblesse oblige was important. He was an educated lad. His childhood surroundings were such as to indicate a decent, God-fearing, truthful lad. There is nothing impossible, or even improbable in his confession of guilt and in his statement, "Father, I cannot tell a lie; I did it with my little hatchet. "

There is merely no evidence – except Parson Weems – that it ever happened! It must be remembered that the mere repetition of any document, no matter how many times, does not add to the authenticity of the original. If the three writers of the first three Gospels merely copied from one another, or from a lost "Q", the fact that there are three documents in place of one does not make any of the three more authentic than the first one. If the three followed, independently, oral tradition, their writings are much more evidential, taken in support each of the other.

If the Cooke and the Lansdowne and other manuscripts are either copies of the Regius, or all, including the Regius, are copies of a lost Masonic "Q", the number of such manuscripts adds no whit to the authenticity of any. If they are different redactions of an oral tradition, only the 464 years of such tradition is against their reinforcing each other with credibility.

The character of Washington is not incongruous with the cherry tree story. The character of Athelstane is not incongruous with the York story. He was a liberal; he was a good ruler; he was God-fearing; he is said to have built many churches and monasteries and to have revered the Scriptures.

There were stone churches in Athelstane's time; the Venerable Bede (most learned English historian of his time, 673-735 writes of churches built of stone in his life time.

The city of York has always been mason conscious, stone work conscious, and church and cathedral conscious. There were beginnings of a York Cathedral as far back as 627. It has been built, added to, destroyed, burned, wrecked, rebuilt, enlarged. All in all, York Cathedral and its forerunners and beginnings cover a period of nearly if not quite nine hundred years.

Oral tradition would be especially strong in a city in which a great ecclesiastical building was in construction.

Lionel Vibert, Masonic authority of England, concluded that in the character of Athelstane, in the traditions of the City, backed by the old Manuscript Constitutions, there was no positive evidence for the old York legend. but certainly no real evidence against it. He stated that, "if the phrase York Masonry be understood to imply not that the users of it belonged to York. but merely that in common with the brethren of that city they adhered to the ancient customs of the order and valued the old traditions in the craft, the legend can imply a high standard, a reverence for time immemorial customs, and the preservation of all that is the best in Freemasonry today.

Albert Gallatin Mackey wrote that he believed the manuscript evidence and that about the year 926 a General Assembly of Freemasons was held at York under the patronage of Edwin, brother of Athelstane, at which Assembly a code of laws was adopted, which became the basis by which all subsequent Masonic Constitutions were framed.

The pages make no pronouncement. They do earnestly commend this thought to all interested Masons: the York tradition is as much a part of our Freemasonry as is Santa Claus of childhood. Balaam's Ass speaking to his Master is a story which has helped many and hurt none. No learned astronomer has been injured in his science or his beliefs by the Star of Bethlehem which went before the Wise Men "till it came and stood over where the young child was."

The York story has been good for Freemasonry. That it is still a "York problem" is also good for Freemasonry.

But, true or fanciful, it has a sweet singing sound in the ears of brethren to whom the Freemasonry of long ago is at once an inspiration and a benediction.

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