

**English Freemasonry prior to 1717 was speculative**  
**Vic Lodge of Research, 218**  
**Jean-Michel David, IPM**

prepared for as part of a fourfold sequential 'debate' presentation on the Master's Last night, October 2013:

English Freemasonry prior to 1717 was  
not speculative – Murray Treseder  
speculative – Jean-Michel David

Scottish Freemasonry prior to 1717 was  
not speculative – Joe Husidic  
speculative – Iain Taylor

**English Freemasonry prior to 1717 was speculative**

1717 can of course be considered a watershed in the history of freemasonry, and I am certain that it is not the precise date that is here important, as it would then be a rather simple task to point to the existence of four or more lodges in 1716 or even 1715 that would 'prove' freemasonry to be speculative prior to 1717. If I were to simply do this, a technicality in the title (ie, the date) would simply need to be pushed back a little and the question again asked. Similarly, and as presented by W. Bro. Tresemer, it is also evident that through the 1920s significant changes swept through the development of freemasonry, and the form that we now take for granted began its stabilisation (the trigradal system in the 'Blue'; the establishment of various 'side' orders; and the numerous additional degrees or grades in what has come to be known as the Ancient and Accepted or even the Memphis-Misraïm rites).

So the question is not whether post-1717 we see significant changes, nor even whether these changes become more easily understood given the unique event, albeit at the time quite small and relatively insignificant, of the formation of what much later on became the United Grand Lodge of England, but rather whether or not English freemasonry was speculative prior to the 18th century. We also need to be careful not to confuse or slippery-slide evidence that non-operatives were admitted into various lodges as equivalent evidence

that such lodges (especially if a significant number were non-operative masons) were speculative: other causes may be the reason for non-operative membership, much reminiscent of modern day unionism, including the need for specific skills internal to lodge workings (such as book-keeping in the known example of Scottish lodges); patronage (similar to the manner in which a former Australian prime minister was inducted into a local union for which he presumably had no operative skill-sets); and of course the 'friendly society' aspect that inevitably develops but does not, of its own, make it speculative: none of these indicate any speculative element - unless one of course *defines* 'speculative' as simply shorthand for 'non-operative'. If that were however the desire (and a relatively uninteresting one at that), then again sufficient evidence exists for the existence of non-operative masons.

If Desagulier is at times credited with a key role in the establishment or transformation of freemasonry into the form that manifests in post-1717 England, it would perhaps be useful to bear in mind that he worked (along with others, of course) not in a vacuum, but rather with established speculative practices, and it is to these to which I shall briefly return. As a last preliminary point, we do not exactly know what was meant by the 'Accept[i]on' referred to in the 17th century, for example (Cf Taylor's 'Sir Christopher Wren - Freemason?' in our own Transactions from 2010): what is evident is that irrespective as to what the *practices* of masonic lodges were at the time, *belief* was certainly circulating about its symbolic art, and that in a way that paved the way for the later developments of the early 18th century. For example, and reflecting the views of Sir Christopher Wren and Alias Ashmole - those two pre-eminent pre-1717 masons of the 17th century - John Aubrey writes in 1686 (in his unpublished *Natural History of Wiltshire* - quoted by Bro Gould in 'On the Antiquity of Masonic Symbolism', *AQC* vol III, p11, my underline):

"Sr William Dugdale told me many years since, that about Henry the third's time the Pope gave a Bull or diploma to a Company of Italian Architects to travell up and downe over all Europe to build Churches. From these are derived the *Fraternity of Free-Masons*. [...] They have Severall Lodges in severall Counties for their reception [...] The manner of their adoption is very formall, and with an Oath of Secrecy."

Admittedly, this is hearsay, yet it points to a key element that was to

not only possibly instruct the later development of freemasonry, but also, and centrally, hints at a major point I wish to make - that essentially the operatives were not simply and only operative, but rather and importantly simultaneously speculative with an 'adoption' or 'acceptance' of strict and, I would suggest, thereby *ritualistic* - and hence symbolic and speculative - formality. In fact, I would suggest that to presume that freemasonry was *not* speculative prior to 1717, and indeed from the earliest lodges, recoils from the evidence of social forms we have of those times: the distinctions we make in the 20th and 21st centuries were simply not delineated by the separation the modern mind seeks.

Rudolf Steiner, in an entirely different context and for different purposes, said that 'two layers of cultural fermentation [existed] side by side: the external, exoteric platitudes of public life, and in the secret societies the symbols' (from lecture two in the cycle 'The History & Actuality of Imperialism' given on 21/02/1920 ). It is this 'side-by-side' of the speculative and the operative that forms part and parcel of freemasonry prior to 1717, and that itself allows for the later development of exclusively speculative lodges.

Instructive on this is a comment from Bro Ward in a lecture delivered in 1978 to Quatuor Coronati Lodge, in which he writes (my underlining):

In England an entirely and unprecedented situation developed in the 17th century when lodges began to appear which from their inception were independent of the mason trade. Because of this autonomy, which included independence as between lodges, the members were not inhibited from making changes in rites and customs as they saw fit. These lodges being the prototypes from which Freemasonry took shape, the term non-operative if applied to the membership infers the existence of operative members. This is misleading because the trades or professions of members of this kind of lodge were immaterial and a better description is still *accepted* or *adopted* masons as was current at the time.

One of the implication is that lodges of the time not only already had 'rites and customs', but that these must have inevitably included

speculative elements. But perhaps the clearest evidence lies within the early manuscripts, key ones of which are now relatively easily found in electronic form, though I refer to the ones reprinted in *Ars Quatuor Coronatum* in 1975 (vol 88), and shall here limit my comments to the *Inigo Jones MS* that purports to date from 1607 (though likely dates a little later), and the *Wood MS circa 1610*.

In both of these manuscripts, what we have is not only a 'traditional' history of the craft, but importantly mention of the seven liberal arts and sciences (using the latter manuscript's spelling: 'Gramer, Rethorick, Logicke, Arithmetick, Geometrye, Musick, and Astronomie') and that all of these are 'found by one Scyence, (that is to say) by Geometrie'. Geometry thus plays a part in the speculative education of the mason, not only and simply as what may have also been the case in nascent university education and monastaries.

The manuscripts mention, similarly, Hermes 'who was the father of the wise men'; Tubulkaine (as spelled in the *Wood MS*); Abraham – who 'taught the 7 Sciences to the Ægyptians'; Euclid; Kings David and Solomon; and of course Noah, a far more important reference figuring prominently in most early manuscripts.

With regards this last reference, a brief quote from the *Inigo MS* may assist in the key point I raise for our reflections in order to determine whether or not speculative freemasonry existed prior to 1717 (the whole first section of the manuscript would of course be better, but a brief snippet may here suffice) – the early fluctuations in spelling has been retained:

Tubal-Cain was the Instructor of Every Artificer in Brass and Iron, And the Daughter found out the Art of Weaving.

These Children knew well that God would take Vengeance for Sin either by Fire or Water; Wherefore they Wrote their Sciences that they had found in Two Pillars, that they might be found after Noah's Flood.

One of the Pillars was Marble, for that will not Burn with any Fire, And the other Stone was Laternes for that will not drown with any Water.

Our Intent next is to Tell you Truly, how and in What

manner these Stones were found whereon these Sciences were Written.

The Great Hermes (Surnamed Trismagistus, or three times Great) Being both King, Priest and Philosopher, (in Egypt) He found One of them [...]

the text goes on to mention the division of the day into twelve hours; mention is also made of the zodiac, of Osiris and Egypt (again), of Euclid and again of the seven 'Sciences' ... with Euclid made to say:

If Yea will Give me Your Children to Govern, I will Teach them One of the Seven Sciences, whereby they may live Honestly, as Gentlemen Should [...]

Perhaps it would be well to remember that former times – and certainly until the so-called enlightenment – the world was lived in a far more integrated way. Not only of importance were the stories that gave the world meaning, but the world as experienced was what Charles Taylor (amongst others) describes as 'enchanted' or 'porous': the delineation between not only the physical and the world of spiritual forces, but also between the 'operative' and its inevitable speculative elements, interweaved. We need to take care not to assume or impose our far more 'non-porous' and buffered world view onto our forebears.

I will finish this brief exploration with a quote (my emphasis) by Bernard Lonergan (Collected Works, vol 10, p57), followed by a brief comment

[...] when ancient man or the ancient higher civilizations used symbols, the meaning of the symbol could be just as profound as the thought of later great philosophers. [...] *Thus, when the primitive speaks about light, you must not assume that he means the light of the sun. He may mean much more the spiritual light, but he may not be able to distinguish between spiritual and physical light.* There is today, then, a genuine rediscovery of the symbol. Human development on the cultural level is from the compactness of the symbol to the differentiated, enucleated thought of philosophers, theologians, and human scientists.

Not that our masonic forebears were 'primitive', but rather that the symbolism, stories, allegories and myriad references used were not as yet enucleated to the extent that we at times divest them of speculative life. The question, then, is perhaps not whether freemasonry prior to 1717 was speculative, but rather indicative of a task to yet be explored at greater length: the historical unveilings of the ways in which such speculative participation manifested and was a living experience amongst our masonic forebears.

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