



The Foundation Stone

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THE FOUNDATION STONE

It has been said that the best-established fact in the whole range of the study of man is that customs remain, though the motives for them change; but this statement, I feel, needs company. Sometimes the present custom is essentially the same, and so is the reason for it, although the latter is no longer valid; as in a survival of the Roman Festival of the Terminalia in the Beating of the Bounds in some towns in England and elsewhere, whose boundaries had been accurately defined many years previously. Sometimes, again, the barbaric features of a custom may have been eliminated or moulded into a ceremony pleasing to civilised society, and one or more original reasons for it may also have been modified or abandoned.

Such a custom is the laying of a Foundation Stone, or Corner Stone, one reason for which was certainly operative about 6,000 years ago and still is, though the earliest primitive motive no longer applies. It is hardly correct to say that the ceremony of laying a Foundation Stone is the only remaining link between operative and speculative Masonry, for there are others, such as the Manuscript Constitutions or Old Charges of Masonry embodying the legends and the regulations of the Craft; and the Mason Word also, and the ceremonies associated with its communication. The Foundation Stone ceremony recalls beliefs as old as man himself, and stems from at least two roots; firstly it is a lineal descendant of the Foundation Sacrifice performed by primitive man, by the very early primitive man as well as by the more recent one.

Sacrifice itself has been defined as essentially a prayer, an appeal by man to a superior power: being the destruction or surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having a more compelling claim: a propitiation of or bribe to such a power, whether the altar be for good or evil. Foundation Sacrifices, known also as Stability Rites, have varied in form from place to place and from time to time but their primary

object has always been the same, namely to supply the structure with a soul and so to ensure its stability. Well into the nineteenth century, the Milanau Dayaks of Borneo, at the erection of a house, first dug a deep hole to receive the first post which was then suspended over it; a slave girl was placed in the hole and at a signal the lashings were cut and the enormous timber descended crushing the girl to death. The Palace at Mandalay in Burma was literally reared over dead men's bones. Such ancient rite is known to have been universal from the earliest times, throughout Europe including the British Isles as well as throughout Asia and Africa. It is an expression of animism, or cloud, to be, like him and the beasts, a living thing, consisting of a body or form and a soul. This conception changed so that he considered that the stone or cloud was simple the abode of a soul or a spirit, and that everything must have a soul of its own; and in the Foundation Sacrifice the primitive believed that the soul of the victim was rendered homeless when he or she was slaughtered, and readily entered the new dwelling provided for it by the foundation post or stone, thus endowing it with protection and durability. On one of the Orkney Islands is the hamlet of Scara Brae, probably some 3,500 years old, and in the foundations of one dwelling were found the crouched bodies of two old women, buried that their spirits might hold up the walls of the house.

These pagan horrors died hard, for Columba the Irish saint is said to have buried another saint alive under the foundations of a Monastery to propitiate the spirits of the soil who were said to be demolishing by night what Columba was building by day; and it is interesting to contemplate the oscillations enforced by paganism on the one hand, and Christianity on the other, within the mind of this holy man who ruthlessly performed a pagan barbarity for the furtherance of the Christian faith. Bathing the Foundation Stones with human blood was a variant of the Foundation Sacrifice practiced among others by the Picts, who believed that the large un-cemented stones of their bell shaped towers would endure, being limed together with the souls of their

human victims, whose blood had wetted the foundation stone. Occasionally the sacrifice was in vain, and Shakespeare's King John was proved right in fact as well as in principle in saying:

"There is no sure foundation set in blood, no certain life achieved by other's death."

At some point in man's time there also developed the Completion Sacrifice. Illustrating this it is said that the architect of the Cathedral of St. Basil in Moscow was killed when his work was finished to prevent him building a better church elsewhere. And there is the story of the prentice Pillar at Roslyn Chapel near Edinburgh, where the master mason is said to have murdered his apprentice, who had eclipsed him in working a beautiful and intricate pillar. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when a workman fell from a beam and was killed at the building of a house at Hindhead, England, his mates said that the accident was "luck for the house and would ensure its stability." Many similar stories illustrate a double victim as the Completion Sacrifice.

It has been suggested that the Completion Sacrifice forms a basis for the Hiramic Legend, and Bro. Speth gives eight instances sited in Europe and England in which the architect, the builder or his apprentice was, or very nearly was, the Completion Sacrifice. When the Foundation Sacrifice was performed to provide a soul for the structure, thus endowing it with stability, the Completion Sacrifice was intended to provide a protector, a guardian spirit. The distinction is slight but exists, and there came a time when every house or building had not only a skeleton and so a soul, but also its protective family ghost and this matter was often attended to very thoroughly. In the first century B.C. there was founding the roof of a Temple in Greece the body of a warrior which had been embalmed, after having been killed, and then clad in full armour.

The Completion Sacrifice can be said to have survived to day in the form of a Consecration or Dedication ceremony, and even perhaps in the display of a flag when the roofing timbers are complete in the building of a house, or even in the housewarming party. Every race in turn, however, has sooner or later rejected human sacrifice and has replaced it first with animal, then vegetable, and finally with more symbolic sacrifice, but always the incantations relative to the ceremony indicates the stability of the building. Thus, we find a lamb buried under Danish altars that the churches might stand; and there are many stories of allowing the blood of an animal to flow upon the foundation stone, the body being buried beneath it. There are stories also of a egg, or a burning lamp or candle, symbols of human life, being placed under the foundations, of an empty coffin similarly placed,; of human images being buried under the threshold in Egypt, or as in China, being made of paper and then burned or, as in the Balkans to the present day, of the shadow of a passing stranger being pinned down by the Foundation Stone, the owner of the shadow dying, it is believed, within forty days.

First then, the Foundation Sacrifice, later the Completion Sacrifice, and thirdly there is the expression of the desire to perpetuate the name, the language, the characteristics and achievements, and current environment of an individual or people. This was done by placing certain objects in or under the Foundation Stone itself, and later by placing them in a cavity fashioned between the Foundation Stone and what is known as Foot-Stone, which was tried and proved and well and truly laid and which then received the Ceremonial Stone; or the cavity between them may be closed by a plaque. Sometimes the Footstone is called the First Stone, but in this sense, it is the first stone in the laying ceremony, and not the first stone of the building to be laid. These objects, known as foundation deposits, (and no laying ceremony is Masonically correct with an inscription and foundation deposits) are often placed in a glass cylinder and sealed off against air and moisture, nowadays they commonly comprise newspapers, medals, coins and other

articles, such as a roll or descriptive statement. This practice has caused the Foundation Stone to be called by many the Memorial Stone, particularly in Scotland. It has been said that by including coins each bearing the image of a much-loved sovereign, we are unconsciously continuing the early human Foundation Sacrifice, and symbolically providing a soul for the structure. This may be so, but it is perhaps more likely that we wish thereby to provide historical data for our successors (if any).

Such a practice existed at least 5,000 years ago, for in the foundations of a Temple built about 3,000 B.C. by Gudea, ruler of Lagash in Southern Babylonia, were found terra-cotta cylinders, the inscription on which recited the acts leading to the inception of the Temple, and including the device of the Storm Bird, probably the oldest royal crest in the world, and which as the two-headed eagle, is a symbol well known in a certain division of our Order today; and this inscription has a marked resemblance to statements which is still the custom to include in foundation deposits.

Another feature of the age-old ceremony has endured, for ancient Assyrian Foundation Stones were first made firm and then anointed with beer, wine, oil and honey, a procedure similar to the anointing of the Foundation Stone in the present Masonic Ceremony. Sometimes the V.S.L. refers to the Foundation Stone as the Corner Stone, which it originally was and sometimes is, though it is not now invariably placed at the north east corner, a position sacred in Masonic history. It has been laid at the south west corner and that of the Church of St. Martin's in the Fields, London, was laid at the south east corner in 1721; in many cathedrals it was laid at the site of the altar. The term Corner Stone in the V.S.L. also means an essential stone, of great importance to the building, real or symbolic; thus in Psalm 118 v.22 the stone which the builders rejected ultimately became the Head Stone of the corner, as all R.A. Masons know.

The Foundation Stone varies in its dimensions with the views of the architect, but the double cube is found very suitable. The inscription cut into its outer side nowadays gives little more than the date and the name and title of the dignitary laying the stone, though formerly it was often lengthy and sometimes in Latin. Sometimes there is more than one Ceremonial Stone, as at Truro Cathedral in 1880, when one stone was laid at the north east corner by Freemasons and another at the east end. In 1093, more than three were laid at Dundurn Cathedral; and there were more stones laid aplenty at Vale Abbey, where in 1277 the King laid a stone; the Queen laid one for herself and one for her son; three earls laid one apiece, and other gentlemen laid one each all on the site of the Great Altar. The Foundation Stone is not identical with the Stone of Foundation. Legends tell of one such wondrous stone found in a secret vault at the building of the second Temple. The Jewish Talmud has many legends referring to a Stone of Foundation, which was originally taken by God from His throne in Heaven and "Cast into the primeval abyss to form a foundation for the world." Noah is said to have found this Stone of Foundation and laced it in the ark as an altar, and so on.

And we are now brought to the second root from which the ceremony of laying a foundation stone is descended, that is the operative and architectural use of such a stone. The placing of a Foundation Stone must always have been influenced, in early times, by the type of structure to be erected. Thus, the position of the centre pole supporting the roof would determine the place of sacrifice for a circular hut; and it was a centre stone also for some types of rectangular buildings. A bridge would require a foundation at either end; a City Gateway would also have two, one for each gate post or tower. Though the site for the Foundation Stone is not today architecturally important, in early times a rectangular building could only grow from a point on a straight line from which a right angle could be marked out on levelled ground; and when the Foundation Stone was made to fill that right angle, it was then also numerically the first stone and the corner stone as well.

The placing of the Foundation Stone at the north east corner, and the veneration of this as the starting point of the building, arose not only from architectural and operative necessity but also from Solar worship and the utilization of the rising sun, as for example at Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain, a sacred site of worship and sacrifice dating from 2,000 and more years ago. Orientation was obtained when the sun's first rays cast a shadow from an upright rod, and the perpendicular was obtained by using a plumb rule, and an echo of this method is heard in one of the side degrees. The right angle was obtained by a line drawn to the south from this line of the shadow, in the belief that sunwise motions were laudable and anti-sunwise evil, or, as said in Scotland, wideershins. The First or Foundation Stone placed in this right angle had indeed to be proved as a right-angled stone, and to be well and truly laid, for it was the seed from which the rest of the structure would germinate; and this is a reason given by some for proving it after it had been laid in the Ceremony today, and not before. It is interesting to note that at the small Church at Rudston in East Yorkshire there is, about thirty feet distant from the north east corner, a monolith standing upright about nine feet high. This probably cast the shadow for the east-west line for the first structure to be built there. It is of different composition from the stones composing the Church, as were also the corner stones in certain Saxon churches known as Sarsens; these latter were said to be chosen as such because of their association with pagan worship: another pointer that paganism died very hard indeed, if it is yet dead. It is no modern secret that the sun does not rise due east and set due west throughout the year; but it is not an object of this paper to liberate or augment possibilities allied to variations of this simple statement.

Circumambulation has always been a feature of ceremonial worship. There was for instance, the procession of the Israelites at the siege of Jericho, the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary Ceremony in 1738, where the Grand Master and his Brethren surrounded the outline of the foundation hand-in-hand, and when the Grand

Master reached the N.E. corner the ceremony began. At the laying of the Foundation Stone of Freemasons' Hall in London in 1775 all the Grand Lodge Officers and Brethren marched in procession with music round the outline of the building; the Foundation Stone was then laid at the N.E. corner, and the same procession was then repeated.

Late in the historic narrative of the Foundation Stone comes the Biblical references to it; the most signal from the Freemason's view point, and contain clear indication for the tools to be used in testing the stone, is that in the 28th chapter of Isaiah: "Therefore thus saith the Lord God: Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation. Judgement also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet." And there is the symbolic reference in Hebrews: "He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." From the third chapter of Ezra we learn of the high ceremonial content of the laying ceremony of the Foundation Stone of the Second Temple, for "When the builders had laid the foundation they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets and the Levites with cymbals to praise the Lord after the ordinance of David, King of Israel . . . and all the people shouted a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid." Such tests form the basis of the symbolism of the Foundation Stone in the Masonic Ritual, the entered apprentice being made to represent that stone and exhorted to raise thereon a superstructure perfect in its parts and honourable to the builder.

Laying a Foundation Stone then, has been an important and colourful ceremony from many points of view, psychological, architectural, sociological, and religious, for many thousands of years, and it has flourished throughout the Christian era. In the medieval Roman Churches, there was a prescribed liturgy attached to the ceremony which pivoted on the idea of a Perfect Stone, one worthy of the benefit of consecration. In modern times, Pepys' Diary, as one example, under 23rd October 1667

records that His Majesty the King laid the Foundation Stone of the first of the pillars surrounding the new Royal Exchange in London. Records of the ceremony, which has never been denominational or sectarian, go back some 200 years in America and 900 years and more in England; the first stone of Gloucester Cathedral for instance was set by the Bishop of Hereford in 1089, 300 years before the writing of our oldest Masonic Charge, the Regius Poem.

The ceremony has been much practised in Scotland; indeed the earliest record of an official Masonic ceremony is that of the laying, on request, of the Foundation Stone of the new Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh by the Grand Master of Scottish Masons, the Earl of Cromarty, in 1738, there being 672 Brethren in attendance. In the modern Anglican Church, there is no liturgical formula for the ceremony, that used to be only of a generally uniform character with certain variations made by the authority concerned. Bro. David Flather considers it an error, both in ancient and modern practice, civil, ecclesiastic, and Masonic, that the tone should be laid and cemented before it has been proved, and suggests a sequence eliminating this alleged error.

The United Grand Lodge of England issued as a sort of appendage to the Book of Constitutions of 1815 a suggested form for the ceremony. Even this, however, was dropped in 1919 without discussion or report. There is no formula for the ceremony under the New Zealand Constitution. Many consider that a prescribed ritual should be laid down by the Grand Lodges and included in their Constitutions, which is the case in the U.S.A. At the laying of the Foundation Stone of the Masonic Memorial Freemasons' Hall, London, on the 14th July 1927 the procedure, differing from the 1815 suggestion, was as follows:

The Grand Master is requested to lay the stone.

The stone is raised.

The phial containing the roll and coins is placed in the cavity.

The inscription upon the stone is read.

The Grand Master receives the trowel and spreads the cement upon the lower stone.

The upper stone is lowered by three movements.

The maul is handed to the Grand Master who strikes the stone at corner, "Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice."

The plumb rule is handed to the Grand Master who proves the stone plumb.

The level is handed to the Grand Master who proves the stone level.

The square is handed to the Grand Master who proves the stone square.

The maul is handed to the Grand Master who strikes the stone three times and declares the stone well and truly laid.

The ceremony concludes with patriarchal Benediction and the Consecration Ceremony, the stone being consecrated with corn, wine, oil, and salt.

In the United States a Grand Lodge performs the ceremony with the Lodge opened in the First Degree, though in the United Kingdom the laying is considered to be essentially linked to the Second Degree. Down the centuries many eloquent compliments have been paid to Freemasons and Freemasonry, by those, from the highest to the humblest, not within our Order. In 1813 the Foundation Stone of the Roman Catholic Church of Port Louis in Mauritius was Masonically laid by the Pro Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England; and today and every day at present an elderly Roman Catholic lady in our Roskill Masonic Home thanks God for His having placed her there. The Foundation Stone ceremony is performed by the Masonic fraternity today, most often perhaps in America, and wherever it is so performed it is a compliment, not only to our speculative Brethren, in the acknowledgement that it will be well done, with the style that emanates from dignity, exactitude and restraint, but also as a graceful remembrance that when the Foundation Stone was more important architecturally and operatively, it was the lot and the right of our operative brethren to lay it.