



Good day Worthy Knights,

In this part 79, The Appendant Orders of the Holy Sepulchre and of St John the Evangelist

From: Delving further Beyond the Craft

Revd Neville Barker Cryer (In extenso)

When such details are given of what was a comparatively simple proceeding being conducted within the chamber of the authentic site of Christ's burial, it is the more difficult to grasp why we are expressly told that 'historically and ritually there is no connection' with what we perform today.

Of course we do not hold our ceremonies on the original site, nor are we engaged in rescuing the Holy Land from infidel hands. We do not have spurs put upon our heels and we are not associated with St. George, but these are not the prime elements of either ceremony. Surely it is the recognition of Christ's death and resurrection by proximity to 'a sepulchre', our dedication as knights in Our Lord's service and our duties no less to both our companions and the community in which we live that are the abiding strands which link us with this recorded past.

This older form may not be our Masonic Order's point of origin, and the words of today's ritual were obviously devised much later, but is there not a rich spiritual thread that helps us to realise the honourable antiquity, if not direct continuity, of what we now do?

That having been said let us turn to another matter: the more mundane business of trying to discover just where the origins of our Holy Sepulchre and St. John the Evangelist degrees as Masonic practices might be found.

As previously mentioned, when the distinguished justice Right Worshipful Brother Waller Rodwell Wright became the Grand Master of the Red Cross of Palestine in 1804, he was also invested as the Grand Master of the Holy Sepulchre Orders. This confirms that there was some recognised connection between the two bodies at this time.

What is also clear, however, is that from at least 1809 there is mention of the Noviciate of St. John the Evangelist as forming part of the Order of the Red Cross of Palestine. This arrangement is confirmed by the fact that when Rodwell Wright was in Malta and instituted an Order of the Red Cross there he is described as practising the Noviciate as part of those ceremonies.

That evidence then shows that the Holy Sepulchre and St. John the Evangelist degrees must go back at least to the start of the 19th century and probably the closing years of the 18th.

We learn from Brother Wentworth Little that several very influential Craft Masons were admitted to the Red Cross degree in 1788 and he then added: 'About this period the Order of the Holy Sepulchre flourished, and in 1796 Lord Rancliffe, Grand Master of the Templars, was also the head of the Red Cross and other chivalric orders.'

This means that we are now nearly two whole decades earlier than the period involving Brother Rodwell Wright, though now the suggestion is that at this stage a Holy Sepulchre ceremony was attached to the Knights Templar and that implies that we probably have to start looking in other directions for the earlier whereabouts of the Holy Sepulchre and Saint John degrees.

Reference was also made earlier to the work of Brother George Draffen who pointed out how some Scottish Masons, having been to Cork to acquire other knightly degrees, became involved in setting up an Early Grand Encampment in Edinburgh, following the Irish model. That meant that for such an Early Grand Encampment to have assembled and authorised the degrees it promoted, those degrees must have been in existence and practised *before 1770*.

But dating the degree's origins is not quite so simple — we are looking for two degrees, not one.

This is made clear by the rubrics that now talk of admission to the Holy Sepulchre as merely a 'reception' whereas that of St. John is called the 'Introduction of a Novice and Conferment of Knighthood'.

Moreover, whilst they, are closely linked today, it is clear from what has been said previously that this was not always the case. It is therefore quite possible that in our search they might appear separately and under other titles. The fact that prior to 1790 I have not yet found the terms 'Holy Sepulchre' and 'Novitiate of St. John' need not deter us from looking further.

Secondly, what seems certain is that the Holy Sepulchre degree depended on there being an existent Templar or Hospitaller knighthood if it was to be bestowed on candidates and so this Sepulchre Order was naturally developed subsequently to those more well-known ones. What we may therefore have to look for are degrees that follow on from the sequence of the Templars and Hospitallers.

Thirdly, we also know that whilst those seeking admission to the Red Cross of Constantine had only to be Master Masons, the candidates for the Holy Sepulchre and St. John degrees had to be Holy Royal Arch Masons. This is where we begin to appreciate the other part of the Historical Note which states that whilst the authors of the ritual are unknown, that of St. John the Evangelist was obviously influenced by the Royal Arch system'. The present ritual leaves us in not the slightest doubt for not only are we reminded of what only Royal Arch Masons can know but we are made aware that in the St. John's degree we are completing the true secrets of that Order.

It is in the degree of St. John that the most telling clues begin to appear. Three sentences especially claim our attention. They are:

It is said that the Crusaders, finding themselves unable to expel the Saracens from the Holy Land, agreed with Godfrey de Bouillon to veil the mysteries of religion under emblems...

The pyramids, being built upon rock, shadow forth the durability of the Christian faith...

The words you have heard are traditionally the words of the Palestinian Order of St. John and not those of the Knights who remained in Europe during the Crusades, nor those adopted by the Knights who took possession of Rhodes and Malta.

Putting all these possible clues together we are surely led to only one conclusion.

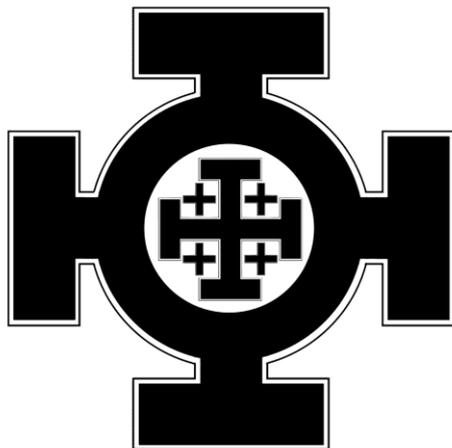
The origins of our present Holy Sepulchre and St. John ceremonies were two degrees that emerged from that extended Royal Arch panoply in Ireland which led to the Early Grand Encampment practices in the 1770s. Their names then were the Red Cross of Palestine, having a reference to the Holy Sepulchre Church there, and the Knight of Patmos, as related to St. John who was traditionally said to have dwelt on the island of that name.

Those degrees appear in the Grand Encampment as the third and fourth grades of the full Templar system. As such they fit in after the Mediterranean Pass and the Knight of Malta degree, and thus fit naturally into the sequence by which they were acquired and practised later in England.

Before the 1770s, their main themes will have existed as parts of the catechetical lectures that we know were part and parcel of the early and mid-18th century ceremonial in York and Ireland. They would not then, of course, have had a precise name or a separate identity.

Clearly at the heart of the Holy Sepulchre degree were the legendary events surrounding the finding of the Cross in Palestine and the political development of that land leading up to the Crusades.

That of St. John the Evangelist centres on the part played by the Apostle in the discovery of the true Word, and when you add to this the descent into a vault to discover the Gospel of John you even more appreciate how this degree fits into the whole, and true, Masonic panorama. We have found the origins and the purpose.



Order of the Holy Sepulchre



Order Saint John the Evangelist