

The Orders of the Golden Fleece and the Garter



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Within all of Freemasonry, there are a large number of orders, cults, and institutions mentioned; however, within the blue degrees, as conferred in Tennessee, there are only two orders mentioned specifically by name. These two orders can be found within the apron lecture of the Entered Apprentice Degree and reemerge in the Masonic Funeral rites. The wording in both is verbatim. “The Lambskin is an emblem of innocence, and is esteemed the peculiar badge of a Mason. When worthily worn, it is more honorable than the order of the Garter, the Golden Fleece, or any other order that could be conferred, and every Mason ought to wear it with equal pleasure to himself and honor to the Fraternity.” These two orders are mentioned at the first and the last ceremonies of a Tennessee Mason’s Masonic career; yet, how much does the average Mason know about these two orders? Very little, if anything.

The wording in the Tennessee ritual is common; however, it is abbreviated compared to the lecture provided in many rituals. *Duncan’s Ritual* seems to contain the standard verbiage used in the Entered Apprentice apron lecture. It reads, “*Brother, I now present you with a lambskin or white apron, which is an emblem of innocence and the badge of a Mason, more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, and, when worthily worn, more honorable than the Star and Garter, or any other order that can be conferred on you at this time, or any future period, by kings, princes, and potentates, or any other persons, except it be by Masons. I trust that you will wear it with equal pleasure to yourself and honor to the fraternity.*” Pirtle’s *Kentucky Monitor, Ancient Craft Masonry* (The Grand Lodge of New York’s monitor), and *The Official Monitor of the Grand Lodge of Texas* all state that the apron is more ancient than the Order of the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle and more honorable than the Star and Garter. It may be of interest here to mention that in the 1883 edition of *The Masonic Text-Book of Tennessee*, the apron lecture read differently than it does currently. “When worthily worn, it is

more honorable than the Star and Garter, the Golden Fleece, or Roman Eagle, or any other order that could be conferred, and which every Mason ought to wear with equal pleasure to himself and honor to the Fraternity” (p. 28). This presents the questions: What are these orders, and why are they mentioned within the ritual of Freemasonry? The most logical place to begin this brief exploration is with the histories of the orders mentioned.

Order of the Garter

Both the Order of the Garter and the Order of the Golden Fleece are orders of chivalry. The Order of the Garter is the oldest order of knighthood in existence, and, as such, it will provide an appropriate place to begin this examination. The order was founded by King Edward III of England, sometime between 1344 and 1351 (Belts, 1841; Coil, 1961; Woodward, 1896). There are, according to Coil, two prominent legends that account for the formation of the order. The first is that Richard I, in the 12th century, “ordered his officers to tie a leather thong around the leg for better identification,” and King Edward III, while instituting the order, recalled this event and established an order of chivalry after its remembrance. The other, and most prominent legend, involves the Countess of Salisbury. According to the tale, the Countess was exposed to jest and laughter from the court when she lost her garter while dancing. King Edward III, being a man of honor, came to her defense by picking the garter up and placing it on his own leg stating, “*Honi soit qui mal y pense*”. A phrase that is literally translated “shamed be he who thinks it evil” (Belts). The phrase was appointed the motto of the order

The Order of the Garter is the highest honor within the British honor system, and its exclusive membership is limited to 25 regular members. Additional members include individuals from the Royal family. The British monarch, known as “Sovereign of the Garter”, is the head of the order and holds sole responsibility for appointing its members (Belts, 1841).

It is most reasonable that the star mentioned in the apron lecture of other jurisdictions is in reference to an investiture of the Order of the Garter. According to Coil (1961), the star in the ritual “evidently meant the 8-pointed silver star, which is one of the insignia, having the Cross of St. George in the center, encircled by the garter and is worn by the knight on his left side. There is also a *George* or pendent representing St. George slaying a dragon” (Coil, p. 271). Brewer (1909) concurs with Coil on this assertion. Through the years there have been other propositions as to what the star represents, one of which will be referred to later.

The collar of the order is made of gold knots embellished with enameled medallions depicting a red rose encircled by a grater (Belts, 1841; Woodward, 1896). The jewel is worn suspended from the collar and is a colorful three-dimensional figure of Saint George slaying the dragon. The garter is dark-blue bearing the motto of the order in gold lettering. It is worn on the left calf by knights of the order and the left arm of the ladies.

Order of the Golden Fleece

Philip III, Duke of Burgundy founded the Order of the Golden Fleece on January 10, 1429 to commemorate his marriage to Isabelle of Aviz, daughter of the King of Portugal (Coil, 1961; Woodward, 1896). The order was fashioned after the Order of the Garter. It was dedicated to Saint Andrew and initially limited to 24 members, later increased to 51 (Dawson-Marsh, 2004). Although its primary symbol was reminiscent of the pagan golden fleece stolen by Jason and the Argonauts of Greek mythology, Catholicism was a prerequisite for membership. Due to this paradox, the symbol was often the source of controversy. In attempts to distance the Christian order from its pagan imagery, the fleece was publically proclaimed to refer to Burgundy’s primary source of income as well as the biblical account of Gideon. According to

Woodward, one legend claims that the order received its name in reference to the golden hair of one of the Duke's mistresses.

Philip's intent in the creation of the order was to help unite the minor nobles within his realm in loyalty to himself. According to Dawson-Marsh (2004), petty infighting had erupted throughout all of Europe, and "Philip needed to create a brotherhood that would forge a common bond between he himself and those who served him" (p. 7). Philip later had aspiration to call for a crusade to invade and conquer the east following the fall of Constantinople in 1453. During this period the connection between the chivalric order and the crusading efforts of Jason and the Argonauts was again strengthen (Dawson-Marsh).

The order was divided into two branches due to a sovereignty dispute resulting from the death of Charles II, of the Spanish Habsburgs, in 1700. The sovereignty of the order passed to a Bourbon, and resulted in the order being divided into a Spanish and an Austrian branch. Both the Spanish and the Austrian orders are still in existence today (Dawson-Marsh, 2004),

The collar of the order is composed of separate links that are hooked with each other to form a union of support. The fundamental ideas of the order is "the equality and brotherhood of its members, who are bound together by their membership". The jewel of the order is composed of a golden fleece inclusive with head and feet, resembling a whole sheep¹ (Coil, 1961).

This covers the two orders from the Tennessee ritual, but what about the Roman Eagle and the Star? These two references are not as clearly or easily understood. It could be suggested by the abbreviation of the Tennessee Ritual, that the Roman Eagle and the Star do not reference orders at all. Since the Tennessee Ritual specifically states the "orders of" it would be improper to include the Roman Eagle and Star if they referred to a standard and badge, respectfully.

¹ A graphic of the jewel may be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Golden_Fleece_dsc02934.jpg

Roman Eagle

The Roman Eagle clearly is not referring to an order of chivalry. Coil (1961) defines the Roman Eagle thusly, “The standard representing an eagle, carried at the head of each Roman legion” (p.215). The Roman Eagle was a symbol of Rome’s overpowering existence and flaunting greatness. The Roman Eagle has a long legacy within Masonry. According to Mackey, it is from the single headed standard that was carried before the Roman Empire’s soldiers that the Scottish Rite’s double headed eagle originated. According to Mackey, after the split of the Roman Empire into two dominions the Roman Eagle generated a second head. One head looked west to Rome and the other east to Byzantium. It was probably not until 1758 that the double-headed eagle was introduced into Freemasonry, and according to Mackey (1927) it was not until 1802 that it really appeared pictorial, associated with the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

Order of the Star/Order of the Eagle

The most probable explanation for the star was afore discussed, as the star referring to an emblem of the Order of the Garter; however, there are those Masonic writers who take the position that the Roman Eagle and Star refer to two chivalric orders. Worrel (1997), in *The Spiritual Vision of the Seven Liberal Arts*, asserts that the star refers to the Order of the Star, not an insignia of the Order of the Garter. The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania’s website explains the star in like manner (www.pagrandlodge.org/programs/masedu/qa/51-67.html). The Order of the Star originated in France in 1352 and was short lived (Brewer, 1909). The order was founded by John the Good of France to unite the lesser nobles of his lands. The order was made up of 500 companions, and it was the Order of the Star’s own vows that lead to its demise. Each Companion of the order took two vows, one to meet once a year for an annual feast and the other

to never retreat more than a mile from battle, preferring rather to be either killed or taken captive (Brewer). These two vows would prove out to be the orders undoing. At the first banquet, one Companion's castle was captured by the English in his absence, and over the course of a few years, other companions were ambushed and slaughtered en route to the banquet. Due to the companions' obligation not to flee battle, the knights of the order were repeatedly slain as sheep for the slaughter during intense engagements. A great number of companions of the Order of the Star were killed at the Battle of Mauron, and the remaining companions fell with a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. The order never lived past the reign of its progenitor. In effect, the Order of the Star faltered in existence after around a decade (Brewer).

The Order of the Eagle was founded in 1433 by Albrecht von Habsburg, Duke of Austria, who later became the Holy Roman Emperor (Brewer, 1909). It is of little historical importance, and it is extremely difficult to find information about the order other than its founder and date of institution.

Why the inclusion of these Orders in the Ritual?

Cameron (2006) proposed that the inclusion of these orders present an allusion to Freemasonry's date of origin. He stated that obviously, in the lecture as presented by Duncan there is a hint of time. It directly states that Freemasonry was in existence before 1430, when the Order of the Golden Fleece was formed. Cameron extends this reference to time by assuming that since the ritual states it is more honorable and not more ancient than the Order of the Garter that Freemasonry is its junior. That would mean that Freemasonry was formed between 1344 and 1430. The premise of Cameron's assertion is that Freemasonry began during the development of the Medieval Craft Guilds. This is an interesting assertion; however, it is probably more romantic than practical.

It is most probable that the inclusion of the Order of the Garter and the Order of the Golden Fleece within the rituals of Freemasonry is merely an attempt to represent Freemasonry's general antiquity and honor. There is little debate that these two orders are the most successful and diligent orders of all knighthood. If this was the purpose of the originators of the ritual, it is very unlikely that the Star mentioned is in reference to the Order of the Star, since that order ended in disgrace. It is most likely that Coil (1961) had the right idea in his *Masonic Encyclopedia*, and it is the vestment of the Order of the Garter to which the ritual refers. The Roman Eagle is most probably referring the standard of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was the largest and most powerful civilization in the ancient world. Its standard is an image of power and prestige. By connecting it to the Fraternity of Freemasonry, a great deal of dignity is transposed upon the Craft.

The statement that Freemasonry is more honorable than the order of the Garter and Golden Fleece is a self-imposed proclamation of importance and greatness. As afore explained, the Garter is the most noble and prestigious class of knighthood and honors in all the United Kingdom and the Order of the Golden Fleece is one of the most widely recognized chivalric organization in the world. The original writers of the ritual are obviously attempting to reflect an ambiance of ancient and regal importance upon Freemasonry.

Regardless of the intent of the progenitors of the Craft rituals, there is an importance to knowing the background of these orders named within the Masonic ritual of the First Degree. It is hoped that the Masonic reader has gained a little insight in this exploration of history and romanticism.

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