Chapter 19

Masonic Rites and Systems

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Introduction

The word ‘rite’, from the Latin *ritus*, is cognate with the Greek ἀριθμός *[arithmos]*, meaning ‘number’. In masonic as in liturgical use, the word ‘rite’ refers to an event, or sequence of events, which govern(s) the prescribed actions or practices of a ceremony or organized group. There are two main types of rites in Freemasonry: (1) a procedure with a symbolic or defining nature, such as the rites of circumambulation, discalceation, or investiture, which may be grouped to form a larger ceremony (or degree), and (2) the linking of masonic degrees, for initiation or instruction, under administrative or governmental authority. This chapter focuses on the latter application. The words ‘system’ and ‘order’ also have similar meanings and use in Freemasonry. Throughout this chapter the terms may be used interchangeably, unless other terms are mandated by circumstance, as when they form part of an official title or indicate a specific masonic organization (e.g. ‘Swedish System’). It is not possible to describe, or even list, every group which deserves mention in this article. Attempts to do so have resulted in full-length books, such as Ray V. Denslow’s *Masonic Rites and Degrees* (1955). Rather, this chapter will of necessity focus on those which are/were the most notable, or may most likely be encountered.

As Freemasonry spread throughout the world modifications were gradually introduced to its rituals at local levels. The basic themes of the three primary degrees have remained relatively uniform, as have the modes of recognition (although ‘significant words’ may be reordered). However, different locales retained or eliminated some practices and procedures while developing new ones. Just as the evolution of language and customs creates new cultures among peoples, so have masonic practices evolved unique characteristics, or expressions of ritual, which allow them to be classified as separate Rites. In a general sense a Rite is any number of degrees grouped together. A Rite may be compared with a staircase, which is comprised of individual steps. The steps represent individual masonic degrees, whereas the staircase *as a whole* is analogous to a Rite. The degrees of a Rite will usually, although not always, have a numerical designation or fixed position on a calendar or schedule. The Rite may be further divided into sub-organizations (‘lodges’, ‘chapters’, ‘councils’,

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and so on), just as a staircase may be divided by a number of ‘landings’ which connect the stairs between floors. The degrees which comprise a Rite may be arranged in a particular sequence for any number of reasons, including mythology, chronology and/or tradition, or they may appear to be unrelated to each other, having been derived from various sources, or having been aggregated at different times. Even within the same Rite, the degrees may also be grouped or divided differently throughout the world or in different times, as e.g. in the case of the Rite Ecossais philosophique. The names and number of degrees conferred and/or included may also vary from country to country, as is the case, for example, with the Allied Masonic Degrees and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

The Grand Lodge System

The appointment of William Schaw as ‘Maister of Wark’ by James VI of Scotland in 1583 played a significant role in the development of organized Freemasonry. His issue of the first and second ‘Schaw Statutes’ in 1598 and 1599 introduced many concepts which continue today (see the chapter on “The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland” by David Stevenson in this volume). His statutes were founded on the Old Charges, and together they formed the basis of government for modern masonic Grand Lodges. The Schaw Statutes defined a hierarchy of “wardenis, dekynis, and maisteris in all thingis concerning thair craft”. Lodges were to be presided over by a “generall Wardene”, while William Schaw himself presided over all the masonic lodges in his country, as grand masters do throughout most of the world today. A careful reading of the Schaw Statutes reveals that “prenteissis” (apprentices) were first “buikit” (booked), when their names were added to lodge records. Thereafter, followed two classes of Masons: (1) “enterit prenteiss” and (2) “fellowe of craft” or “maister”. Within the lodge a fellow and a master were equal, but outside the lodge the master was the employer. “The distinction that they indicate between the Master and the Fellow is one purely of Gild standing; the Master is the Gild Master, entitled to take contracts, and employ the Craft, fellows and apprentices, on the work he is in charge of” (Vibert 1926: 54).

In 1717 four London lodges met and elected a ‘Grand Master’, an act which would later be interpreted as the formalization of non-operative Freemasonry, although research by J.A.M. Snoek suggests that the meeting, called a ‘Grand Lodge’, more accurately represented a ‘Quarterly Communication’, and was but the continuation of practices which had lapsed (Snoek 2010). Hence, no specific date can now be claimed for the institutionalization of gentlemen's