

The Masons Mark

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In the ceremonial of the Mark Degree much emphasis is placed on the new brother having a "Mark" of his own, on having the Mark registered in the records of the Mark Lodge and the significance of the Mark in the work of the masons building the Temple.

In this paper I would like to cover three questions,

1. Did the Operative masons have marks as our ceremonial suggests and were they used as suggested i.e. to mark the individual masons work?
2. Did masons at the time of the building of the Temple have marks or was this just a medieval thing and
3. When did non Operative or Speculative masons start using marks?

Did the Operative masons have marks?

But first a bit of background info

Interest has always been aroused in the masons' practice, a very old one, of cutting personal marks on the stones that they have worked and in the purposes which the marks served. The study of Masons Marks has become a very important aspect of archeological research.

According to a paper presented by W Bro Millett to the Masters & Past Masters Lodge No 130, the oldest known example of stone masonry, or building in stone is the wall that surrounded Jericho. Archeologists have dug into the ground right down to the lowest foundations of those walls. These foundations were some 19 metres below present ground level the dating procedures gave the approximate date of construction as 7000 BCE, that is over 9,000 years ago.

The earliest recorded examples in Europe appear to date from around the tenth century and they were probably brought over at that time by the Greek artists who introduced the Byzantine style of architecture, for which the Operative Freemasons afterward substituted the Gothic.

It is also important to realise that very large buildings, employed many masons and so many different marks can be found on these constructions. One writer cited by Gould, is reported as having made a collection of 11,000 marks, and professed the ability to discriminate between the marks of the master masons, fellow-crafts, and apprentices, and the "blind marks", as he termed them, of those hired to work, but who were not members of the guild.

Another important fact to consider is that some 9000 parish churches, abbeys, monasteries and cathedrals were built in England during the Middle Ages. The "disease of building" as it was called began in Europe after AD 1000, out of relief that the world had not ended and continued until the decades after the Black Death in 1348.

So obviously there were a lot of masons working on a lot of buildings over a long period of time.

What were the marks used for?

It is generally agreed, that the operative mason's mark was used for purely practical purposes. During the period when most cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries were built, it is suggested that there were few who could read or write, maybe only the Master Mason and one or two Overseers, moreover, surnames were at that time by no means in general usage. Masons were free to devise their own marks, and this was often done by slightly differencing those used by their father and grandfather. If by any chance two men on the same project were found to be using the same mark, similar small changes or additions would be made.

Tradition tells us that when he became a fellowcraft or journey-man, a mason selected his mark or design, which was his for life, and was never to be changed. The mark thus served as a signature. He cut it into stones he prepared, so that he might be given credit and receive wages for his labour, and also be held responsible for the quality and proper execution of the work. The mason's mark has a similar objective to a trade mark by assigning responsibility for quality of work.

According to Alexander (2006) the marks on the stones found in buildings served three main purposes. The first were what Alexander terms “**Assembly**” marks. The role of this mark was to provide direction to the mason as to where a particular stone fitted in the overall plan e.g. where one stone fitted against another or the sequence of stones in a critical sections of stone work. These marks were often in the form of Roman numerals or a series of lines cutting across the faces of two stones.

The second type of mark Alexander describes as a “**Banker**” mark. This mark was a type of autograph and was used to associate each stone with the mason who worked it. This mark served two main purposes.

The first was to identify the mason who prepared the stone; the second was concerned with what would now be termed bonus payments to any craftsman who in the time stipulated did more than the agreed amount of work. The Master Mason or his assistant with the aid of the mark could quickly measure the amount of work accomplished by each man, without any grounds for dispute. This second purpose is closely related to the first, because the time spent on correcting errors would automatically reduce a craftsman’s output and remuneration and from the fifteenth century there is documentary evidence for this use of the mason’s marks.

The third usage was “**Quarry**” marks” these were added at the quarry and were used to identify where in the building the stone was to be placed. Quarry marks have been used since the times of ancient Greece and could also be used to identify the quality or grade of the stone.

In addition, on the rare occasions when masons had to sign a legal documents, those who were illiterate would do so by appending their marks or their “sign manual”, their names would have to be written by a scribe. This is probably the only way of bringing a name and a mark together, and unfortunately very few examples of such evidence survive.

There is a further suggestion that the marks had a religious or symbolic meaning. Gould commenting on this view states “our medieval ancestors were superstitious and fond of alchemy, believing in certain signs etc, and that workmen may have occasionally chosen such figures for their marks, partly from superstition and partly from caprice”, but what he asks could be more absurd than to suppose that poor and illiterate masons would copy the magical lore on stones under the very eyes of their employers – the clergy - on the chance of their being discovered by some remote generation which would have lost all sense of their symbolism?

Bernard Jones in his book “The Freemasons Guide and Compendium”, comments that the marks themselves are relatively easy to execute, curves being comparatively rare, neither the tools of the mason or the material on which he worked favouring the natural production of a curved mark. He estimates that there are probably 100 straight marks for every curved one.

Another writer notes that Masons’ marks do not usually appear on the exposed surface of a building, and when they do there is some uncertainty about the reason. There are several possible explanations. One is that it was the established practice in that particular region as we know it was in parts of Scotland. Or it could be simply from inadvertence. The usual place was the top bed (i.e. surface) of the stone; but if the width and height of the block were the same, the fixer mason might not be sure which way round to lay it, the mark would tell him. Or again the intention might sometimes have been to add final coat of stucco, so that the marks would be concealed. The most likely explanation is that surface marks might have been added by the fixer masons to denote the extent of one man’s work, in order to enable measurements to be taken for assessment of output and remuneration. For what is certain is that masons marks had a working connotation.

Alexander makes an interesting comment on the use of Marks when she notes that when masons were paid regular wages they had no need to mark their work.

Jones sums it all up when he states “We may reasonably assume then, that the masons mark in ancient and medieval stonework was a guide to the identity of the mason who prepared the stone, and was either itself a tally, or another mark was added as tally to ensure that the man who laid the stones correctly interpreted the Master Masons wishes. The overwhelming opinion of architects and technical building men, as well as that of the best known students of speculative masonry, is that the marks were entirely practical in their intention”.

The answer then to our first question is **Yes** the Operative masons did have marks as our ceremonial suggests and they were used as our ceremonial suggests i.e. to mark the individual masons work.

It is interesting to note that despite all the evidence of the use of Masons Marks over the centuries there appears to be only two countries that have some form of organisation and registration of Masons Marks, Germany and Scotland and then only in recent centuries.

An early reference to the Masons Mark can be found in the German “Torgau Statutes” of 1462. They note that on becoming a journeyman (equivalent of the Fellowcraft), the mason “took his mark at a solemn admission feast”. The German Steinmetzen were required to register their marks and swear that they would not vary them. The German word for Masons Mark used in the Statutes “Ehrenzeichen” means a “distinction or honour”.

Later in Scotland, in 1598, the so-called “Schaw Statutes” were placed in effect. They were a set of rules governing the operative mason’s trade issued by William Schaw who was appointed Master of the Work by King James VI of Scotland. These statutes contain the first known reference to the mason’s mark in the English/Scottish area from whence our present day Freemasonry has descended. These Statutes say; “That no master or fellow of craft be received or admitted without their being six masters and two entered apprentices present, the Warden of that lodge being one of the six, and that the day of the receiving of the said Fellow of Craft or master be properly booked and his name and mark inserted in the said book”.

The newly passed fellow craft had to pay the lodge “one Scots merk” for such registration. The fellowcraft was a journeyman, fully qualified to do mason’s work, and the master was a contractor, or employer of fellowcrafts, and who could take apprentices for training.

Every mason on his admission to the fraternity was required to enter his name and mark in the Register in the presence of 6 Masters, 2 Entered Apprentices and an Intender (which is taken to mean the candidates guide or instructor).

The second question asked “Did masons at the time of the building of the Temple have marks”. The answer to this question is not quite so clear. It would appear that the stone structures of that timeframe are found to have “marks” but their meaning or intent is open to debate.

Mackay comments “Thus it has been said by one writer that “Masonic Marks have been discovered on the Pyramids of Egypt, on the ruined buildings in Herculaneum, Pompeii, Greece, and Rome, and on the ancient cathedrals, castles, etc., that are to be found in almost every country of Europe”. But the fact is that the inscriptions and devices found on stones in buildings of antiquity were most probably mythological, symbolical, or historical, being a brief record of or allusion to some important event that had occurred. If any of them were proprietary — that is, intended to identify the work or the ownership of some particular person — there is no evidence that any well-organized system of proprietary marks existed in that very early period”.

Also cited in Mackay “Thus Mr. Ainsworth tells us that in the ruins of Al-Hadhr, in Mesopotamia, “every stone, not only in the chief building, but in the walls and bastions and other public monuments when not defaced by time, is marked with a character, which is for the most part either a Chaldean letter or numeral. Some of the letters resemble the Roman and others were apparently astronomical signs, among which the ancient mirror and handle were very common”.

Mackay comments Ainsworth's description is “too meagre to supply the foundation for a hypothesis, but we are hardly warranted in ascribing to the Chaldean letters and astronomical signs the character of proprietary marks, such as those practiced by the Freemasons of the Middle Ages”.

One website I found provides a number of illustrations on masons marks found on structures and other items from the Pheasean and Minoa cultures.

Another site covering the excavations at Megiddo which according to VSL I Kings (9:15), was built by King Solomon together with Hazor and Gezer provides some photos of masons marks from Megiddo and Samaria.

Without delving to deeply into the debate it seems obvious that wherever and whenever stone has been used as a building material the people who worked carved on it various marks either to indicate their own relationship with the stone, or to mark its place in the building or in recognition of some symbolic or religious meaning.

It must also be remembered that stonemasons were not the only trades to have marks.

With the introduction of printing, both monograms and merchant's marks were generally adopted. These were placed by artists on the corners of paintings and engravings and by printers and publishers on the first or last page of the books they issued. Tradesmen in general used them, not only as signs or distinguishing marks over the door ways to their shops, but as stamps or labels on the cloth or other goods in which they dealt.

Some early statutes enacted, what presume to be in some cases an existing custom, compelling tradesmen to affix a mark to their goods for identification purposes. For example, since approximately the year 1266, each baker was required to have a mark ("signum") of his own, for each sort of bread that he baked, while since 1286, a statute enacted by Edward I provided that "on a deficiency of freemen the best and most discrete bondsmen" be allowed to serve on an inquest, stipulating that "each shall have a seal" (e ke checun eyt seal). In 1363, it was enacted that every master goldsmith "shall have a mark by himself (un merche a par lui) and set it to his work", and in 1389 "the workers, weavers and fullers shall put their seal (lour signes) to every cloth that they shall work". In 1444 the law stated that no worsted weaver shall make any worsted "except he put upon the same his mark" and a similar duty was imposed on workers in precious metals by the statutes of Edward IV and Henry VII respectively.

In 1477, it was enacted "that things wrought of silver were to be marked with the Leopard's Head and the workman's mark or sign and in 1488, "every fyner of gold and sylver put his severall merke upon such, to bere witness the same be true".

Weights and measures were subject of scrutiny in 1491, "the chief officer for the tyme beyng in every cite, towne or borough" was required to have "a speciall marke or seal to marke every weight and mesure to be reformed". By a statutory provision in the year 1513, brewers were restrained from "occupying the mystery of a cooper" or making any vessels for the sale of beer, which in all cases, were to be made "by the common artificers of coopers", it being further enacted "that every couper mark his vessell with his own marke". In the City of London, the Civic Authorities confirmed by various Ordinances, in the year 1372 the Blacksmiths, in the year 1408 the Bladesmiths and in the year 1416 the Brasiers, severally, were required "to use and put their own mark upon their own work" (From Barker S C. 1996).

Speculative Masons and their Marks.

Before we go down this track what exactly does Speculative mean?

According to Bernard Jones the accepted mason became to be known as a speculative mason about the middle of the 18th century. The word "speculative" came by easy transition and originally there was nothing to suggest symbolism. Jones comments that there are many words in freemasonry that derive from the scholars of the 17th and 18th century "speculative" is the most marked of them.

Speculative is one of those words that have a number of meanings. To speculate is to take a view of anything with the mind, to consider anything mentally. It comes from *specio* meaning "I see" or "I look" and is the basis of many words (e.g. spectator, spectacle, speculum etc). In the 17th century anyone who was given to contemplation, to thoughtfulness was indulging in speculation. The speculative man was an idealist not a man of fact and practice.

Building also had an element of "speculation" what we would now refer to as theory or building science. The use of geometry was in its real sense speculative, such work was practical but if it did not involve the use of workmen's tools it could not be practical it was just "speculative".

Jones goes on to suggest that the learned men who came into freemasonry would meet men who were skilled with the stone masons tools i.e. the masons or operative freemasons, in turn the operative mason would meet with men who were educated and worked with theories, they would dub them speculatives. Over time the word acquired a new meaning. As the Accepted masons built up a knowledge of their symbolic masonry they fell back on their favourite word one that served when there was no other to distinguish between the two groups.

Back to the "Masonic" marks

In 1634 an event took place which was to profoundly affect the future of the Craft. The minutes of the Scottish Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) for July 1, 1634 notes that Lord Alexander, Viscount Canada;

Sir Anthony Alexander; and Sir Alexander Strachan, Bart were admitted members of the Lodge. This is the earliest record of the admission of non-operatives into a lodge in Scotland or England, and it turned out to be the opening wedge in the transition from operative to speculative Masonry.

The earliest minutes of this Lodge are dated July 31st 1599, and show the mason's mark used in conjunction with the signature of one of the members present. By the following year, many marks appear in the minutes, sometimes unaccompanied by a signature. Minutes of other Scottish Lodges also show the use of the mark, undoubtedly in conformance with the Schaw Statutes requirement.

Following the admission of the three non-operatives noted above, the practice spread rapidly. In a period of decline for operatives, more and more non-operatives came to be accepted as members by most lodges, and the character of Masonry underwent increasingly rapid change. By 1670, for example, the Lodge at Aberdeen shows minutes signed by some 49 members, about three quarters of whom were non-operatives. Noteworthy was the fact that all but two had marks shown beside their names indicating that the practice of choosing a mark was not restricted to the operatives.

Millett comments that by the early 1700's Speculative Freemasonry on the William Schaw model was well established all over the country, it had long penetrated Scotland, it was into England and Wales and was doing well in Ireland. Naturally there were variations present. The creation of the Grand Lodge in 1717 put the seal of approval on Speculative Freemasonry.

During this period when activities are well documented in Scotland, English records are scarce regarding acceptance of non-operatives, and make no reference at all to use of the mason's mark. This dearth of records makes it difficult to do more than guess at the chain of events which immediately preceded the most important event of all, formation of the first Grand Lodge by four old lodges in London in 1717, generally accepted as the historical dividing line between operative and speculative Masonry. It established the basis of organizational pattern followed by all regular Masonic jurisdictions everywhere. Ireland followed suit, forming its own Grand Lodge in 1725, and Scotland likewise in 1736.

By this time, English lodges were almost entirely made up of non-operatives, while in Scotland the operatives were still strong, but waning rapidly.

The Operative Masons from early times and particularly in the seventeenth century admitted into their Lodges Speculative Masons-men not themselves stonemasons by trade-gentlemen, professional men, merchants and tradesmen. By the beginning of the Eighteenth Century the non-operative or Speculative element appears to have gained control of the Lodges but the operatives were still an important element in the membership of the Craft. Of the ten different men who were Grand Wardens during the first six years of Grand Lodge, two were carpenters, two stone cutters, one a mason, and one a blacksmith. It is thus quite likely that the four Old Lodges which formed Grand Lodge contained a fair sprinkling of operative masons".

What about the Mark in the Ritual?

Ritual played a relatively minor part in operative Masonry, but with the transition to speculative, it developed and expanded, and soon came to play an important role. We know little of it until the publication of the first of many "exposures" in 1724. None of them had anything to say about the mason's mark, and the first indication we have of a ceremony or degree being connected with it is in the September 1st 1769 minutes of Phoenix Royal Arch Chapter of Plymouth, England, where it states that six members were made "Mark Masons and Mark Master Masons," and each "chose their mark".

While the mark had been used in Scotland for many years, the first time we hear of its ceremonial aspect is in the records of St. John Operative Lodge, Banff, on July 7, 1778. There is strong evidence that the Mark degree was worked in America as early as 1782, although documentary proof is lacking.

The development of the Mark Master Mason degree to its present day status is a story in itself. At various times, it has been conferred in Craft lodges, by the Scottish Rite, by Royal Arch Chapters, by Templar Encampments and by independent Mark lodges. In America, the degree was gradually absorbed by the Royal Arch early in the 19th century.

Over the years, there have been other degrees based on the mark, such as the Mark Man, Mark and Link, Fugitive Mark, Black Mark and others, but these have disappeared, leaving only the Mark Master

Mason. Although the rituals vary somewhat in different jurisdictions, they are basically similar. As the ritual of the Mark Master Mason degree developed, the mason's mark came to take a somewhat subordinate role to the Keystone and the theme of the building of King Solomon's Temple.

The Mark degree now is a requirement for candidates for the Royal Arch degree in the United States, Ireland, Scotland and New Zealand. The United Grand Lodge of England at one time voted to recognize the Mark degree as a "graceful addition to the Fellowcraft degree", but soon reversed itself, which led to the formation of the "Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England, Wales and the Dominions and Dependencies of the British Crown" in 1856, which today has some 1200 Mark Lodges under its jurisdiction.

Only in Scotland is the Mark degree recognized as a part of Craft Masonry. It may be, and usually is, conferred on Master Masons in the Symbolic Lodge. It is also a requirement for the Royal Arch Degree, and the degree may be conferred in the Royal Arch Chapter if the candidate has not already received it in his lodge.

Our ritual for the three Craft degrees is clearly based on the practices of operative Masonry, with symbolic usage of the working tools, the ashlar, the trestle board, lessons in architecture and many others. Why the mason's mark, an operative practice from time immemorial should have been omitted is difficult to understand. A possible explanation may be that most of those who composed our early ritual were English and may well have been unaware of the mark in the operative scheme of things. Only in Scotland has it received recognition and been given its rightful place as a part of Craft Masonry.

In conclusion

The Masons Mark has been used by our Operative ancestors for a very long time its use by our Speculative ancestors while not being so ancient has however been a part of Speculative masonry since its inception being possibly the one thing that they both shared when they first started meeting together "the tradition of having your own mark".

One final thought to take away courtesy Wallace M Gage from the Maine Lodge of Research "In addition to our own Mason's Mark, we have a responsibility in regard to that best known Mason's Mark of them all, the Square and Compasses. Almost all of us wear it or otherwise display it thus identifying ourselves as Masons to all we come in contact with. In doing so, we cannot help but project an image of Masonry to the public. When we wear this Mason's Mark, the Square and Compasses, the world will judge the Craft by our words and actions. Should we feel unable to live up to the tenets and principles Freemasonry stands for, we would be well advised to leave the Masonic ring or pin in the dresser drawer, rather than damage the good name of the Fraternity.

It seems to be human nature for us to want to leave some sort of a memorial so that future generations will know we passed this way. We find this in the graffiti scrawled on the walls of Pompeii and in ancient Egypt, and on the sub-way cars in modern cities. It shows in the initials carved in old school desks and in the "John loves Mary" cut into tree trunks, and in the "Kilroy Was Here" of World War 11.

We sometimes hear it said of a person, that "he left his mark", meaning he made a lasting impression on some institution or field of endeavour. Yet there are varying kinds of marks left. George Washington and Thomas Edison most certainly left their marks on our society and civilization; so did Hitler and Stalin.

All of us can't be Washington's or Edison's, but we can contribute toward the building of a better world. Our ancient operative ancestor in cutting his mark on a stone for Salisbury cathedral left a memorial which says "I had a part in building this beautiful house of God". By being better citizens, better husbands, better fathers, we can leave our mark on society by discharging our responsibilities to God, to our country, to our neighbour and to ourselves.

In our vocations, in our daily lives and in our dealings with our fellow man, let's do our best to leave our marks only on "good work, true work, square work, just such work as is wanted for the building of the Temple".

As it says in the Charge after Investiture when referring to the jewel with which the candidate has just been invested that not only points out his rank as a MMM but is intended to remind him the he should ever

preserve his mark pure and unsullied so that he may appear to all the world in the truest and best sense a MMM.

We are reminded again of this vital task in the closing of the Mark Degree Lecture when it states we should so make our mark and perform our allotted task to the best of our skill and ability, that our work will prove fair and square and be approved by the G.O.O.T.U. even though it may be heaved among the rubbish here on earth through the ignorance of our fellow man.

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