

2016 Kellerman Lecture for Queensland KING ÆTHELSTAN AND THE CRAFT

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Introduction:

Much has been written about the origins of our ancient fraternity but there has been little said about where our 'Old Charges' came from. My aim is to approach this subject from a new perspective, to highlight that these 'Old Charges' are not just historical documents relating to the Craft, they were living, working, administrative documents, essential to the very existence of operative masonry from the tenth century onwards.

I shall start by examining the content and providence of our two most ancient documents, namely the Regius and Cooke manuscripts; and look critically at whether the references to King Æthelstan in the Old Charges could indeed be factual as stated. The assertion by many researchers, that this is part of the Masonic legend, needs to be questioned.

Then I will examine the life and times of King Æthelstan. What was his background? What were his known achievements? Was his court capable of drafting and putting into practice the ordinances contained in the Old Charges? Did he have the opportunity? And did he have the need to make this project a priority during his governance of England?

Next, I will take a critical look at the essential components of control and administration of any sustainable construction industry. We will compare modern codes, regulations and legislation with the 'Articles of Governance' and 'Points of Constitution' as written in our Old Charges. In the final analysis of whether King Æthelstan was the original architect of these ancient Masonic Laws, or whether this is just another Masonic legend, I will concentrate on the facts that can be established, rather than the writings and opinions of recent researchers. My hope that this paper will at least awaken some curiosity in the reader's mind, and open up this topic for future research.

The Old Charges

General Contents:

The usages and customs of Freemasonry, as well as some of our ritual and legend, can be traced back through a collection of about eighty ancient manuscripts collectively known as 'The Old Charges'⁶. These documents date from late 14th century to late 17th century and have a common theme of ancient providence, morality, and manners. They also have a section on the responsibilities of masons working on building sites.

The two oldest surviving manuscripts are the Regius Manuscript (c1390) and the Cooke Manuscript (c1450), but there is evidence that their contents came from older sources. There is a reference to old books⁷ in the Regius Manuscript and researchers have noted⁸ that the poem 'Urbanitatus' (author and date unknown) and parts of John Mirk's 'Instructions for Parish Priests' (c1380-1400) have been incorporated into this document.

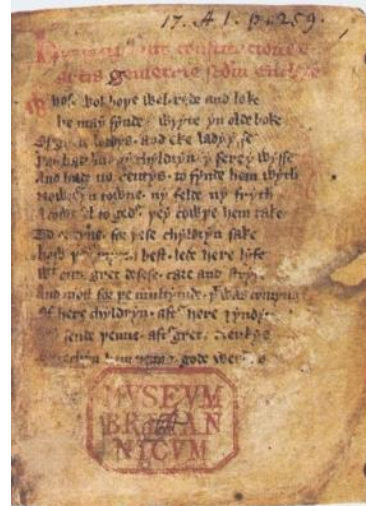
⁶ Thomas Carr – a paper *The Ritual of the Operative Free Masons* (1911) pp. 1-2

⁷ Regius MS, line 2

⁸ Richard Sims and Rev. AFA Woodford – Dept. of Manuscripts, British Museum (1874).
Also Albert Mackey *The History of Freemasonry* (1881)

The Regius Manuscript can be broken up into distinct sections thus:

1. The ancient origins of the masonic craft including the legend of Euclid.
(Page 1 of Regius Manuscript at right)
2. King Æthelstan and the formation of his statutes for masons
 - Fifteen 'Articles of Governance' addressed to master masons
 - Fifteen 'Points of Constitution' addressed to the apprentices and craftsmen
 - The formation of the annual (or tri-annual) assembly of lords and master masons
3. The legend of 'the four crowned ones'
4. The 'seven sciences'
5. Instructions on conduct in church
6. Instructions on manners in public



The Cooke Manuscript has similar content with nine 'Articles of Governance' and nine 'Points of Constitution' but these essentially cover the same ground as before.

In this paper, I shall examine section 2 above; King Æthelstan and his governance of the masons.

Provisions of the Statutes: -

The Old Charges are quite specific when depicting the events leading to the drafting of King Æthelstan's statutes. The King is described as a ruler who took an interest in the building industry and he oversaw the construction of great halls, dwellings, and temples. He recognised the need to address the problems involved, '*the divers faults that in the craft he found*',⁹ and decided to regulate the industry. This he did by calling an assembly of leading master masons, along with the landholders and administrators (i.e. the aristocracy) to work with the King's court, to thrash out a set of rules for the masons to abide by.¹⁰ It needs to be recognised here that the Master Mason on a medieval building site was the superintendent of works. He controlled labour hire including carpenters and other tradesmen, he was responsible for accommodating and feeding his workforce, he was responsible for sourcing and transporting materials, and he controlled the client's money for the payments made. He was the equivalent of today's Site Project Manager.

The outcome from this royal assembly was a set of statutes regulating the building industry, which were ordained by King Æthelstan and passed into law.¹¹ Thus, the first English building code came into effect; a comprehensive set of rules that listed the duties, responsibilities and moral behaviour for the masonic craftsmen of the day.

These statutes covered many of the issues facing the construction industry today. Among them were:

- **Conditions of employment.** e.g. Apprentices must be free men and sound of body. Masons must be law-abiding and able to prove their identity. Masters are required to give half a day's notice when terminating employment.

⁹ Regius MS, line 69

¹⁰ Regius MS, lines 61-84

¹¹ Regius MS, lines 485-486

- **Provision of fair wages** and the acceptance of those wages without argument by the craftsmen.
- **Training of apprentices.** e.g. Masters are required to take on each apprentice for seven years and in that time teach all skills of the Craft to the best of their ability.
- **Examination, accreditation, and means of recognition for qualifying craftsmen**
- **Health and safety.** e.g. No building work is to be done by night.
- **Maintenance of high levels of workmanship.** e.g. Masters may replace a craftsman if he is lacking in the necessary skills for the work at hand.
- **Anti-corruption measures.** e.g. No bribes are to be taken. No workman with a criminal past is to be clothed, fed, or harboured by masons. Masters are to charge the lords the correct fees for work done and materials used. All masons are required to ‘love well God and holy church’.¹²
- **Contractual relationships with clients.** e.g. A master is not to accept work that he cannot complete competently.
- **Dispute mediation between masons**
- **Moral and ethical provisions** e.g. No master mason can supplant another in his work, and masons are required to respect and support each other and in no way slander or denigrate a fellow workman.
- **Mandatory attendance is required of masons to any convened masonic assembly**

All masons were required to swear an oath of allegiance to the King and swear to abide by his statutes.¹³ Taking this oath or obligation was the *only* key which opened the door to membership in the Craft.¹⁴

A general assembly of the King’s councillors, lords of the land, and masons was held on a yearly (or tri-annual) basis to examine masons on their knowledge and skill in the craft prior to being made masters.¹⁵ This assembly was also convened to hear charges laid against craftsmen, and to make a judgement. If found guilty, a mason was banned from practising his trade; and if he made no amends for his infringement he could have his assets confiscated by the King, and possibly face a prison sentence.¹⁶

The Regius Manuscript states that the King was to be invited to attend every assembly held¹⁷, which makes sense as the second purpose of this assembly was to ‘mend the faults’ in the industry; in other words, review and amend or add to the statutes.

Providence of the Statutes: -

This ancient building code is a powerful administrative document with enforcement and review provisions. It is extensive in scope and covers most of the issues that have plagued large construction projects right up to modern times. It should be realised that this section of the Old Charges is not just ancient masonic text, it is ancient law based on accumulated wisdom and experience of builders and kings.

The alternative view that these provisions have been penned in isolation by some unknown scribe or cleric does not hold water as such a document would have survived only as a literary composition, interesting for its place in history. This is not the case here. We know these provisions have been the basis for the masonic code of conduct on building sites for five hundred

¹² Regius MS, line 264

¹³ Regius MS, lines 427-439

¹⁴ Harry Carr – a paper *Six Hundred Years of Craft Ritual* (1976)

¹⁵ Cooke MS, lines 694-719

¹⁶ Regius MS, lines 455-470

¹⁷ Regius MS, lines 491-496

years, from 1400 to 1900. A study of masonic texts, from the Regius Manuscript (c1390) to the Ritual of Operative Freemasons (1911),¹⁸ shows continuity with surprisingly little change. The fact that the Regius Manuscript was written in rhyming couplets does not qualify this text as poetry, nor its author as a poet. It has been suggested that Latin documents of the 14th century were frequently written in verse,¹⁹ but I believe that this section of the manuscript has always been written in Old English for reasons that I shall explain. It was a living, working document, intended for dissemination to all masons so that ignorance could be no excuse for misconduct. Also, masons of the day were required to swear obedience to the Statutes and few if any masons would have understood Latin. Rather than the Regius Manuscript being the *only* Charge to have been written in verse, it could well have been the *last surviving* Charge to be in verse. It is most likely that the Statutes were intended to be memorised by masons and that the oath ceremonies were recited, as they are today; in which case it makes a good reason for the manuscript to be in rhyming couplets for the ease of memorising. In considering the evidence and alternatives, my conclusion is that the providence of this remarkable set of working codes originates with a gathering of ancient builders who would of necessity have required the patronage, if not the guidance, of the ruler of the day.

The Life and Times of King Æthelstan

It is strange that masonic researchers make so little reference to King Æthelstan in the search for the origins of Freemasonry. The range and quality of surviving documents from Æthelstan's period in history are astonishing and give perceptive insight into the character of one of England's greatest kings. These documents include the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, writings by King Alfred's biographer Asser, numerous royal charters, ordinances, and grants, as well as many manuscripts found on the continent which refer to King Æthelstan's reign. In addition William of Malmesbury (1095 -1143CE) wrote extensively of King Athelstan in his 'Deeds of the English Kings' and he states he had access to an ancient volume which has since been lost.²⁰ In more recent times Sarah Foot, an English scholar of early medieval history has written an excellent work on King Æthelstan and she lists over fifty sources that trace King Æthelstan's movements and activities.²¹



Æthelstan was born in 894CE, first son of King Edward the Elder. While still a child, he was marked as a future ruler by his Grandfather, King Alfred, who formally invested him with a scarlet cloak, a belt set with gems, and Saxon sword with a gold hilt and scabbard as symbols of future dignity,²² and then arranged for him to be raised by his aunt, Æthelflaed in Mercia.²³ This was a period of consolidation of the Saxon kingdoms of Wessex, Sussex, and Mercia. On his father's death in 924, Æthelstan succeeded as the last the Saxon king. At his coronation on 4th September, 925CE Æthelstan was crowned king of the Saxons and Angles, and in 927CE, after the death of the Danish King Sihtric, he annexed Northumbria and so became the first King of a united England.

¹⁸ Thomas Carr *The Ritual of the Operative Free Masons* (1911)

¹⁹ G Hammond – a paper *An Introduction to the Study of the Regius Manuscript* (1964)

²⁰ William of Malmesbury – *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (c1135)

²¹ Sarah Foot – *Æthelstan The First King of England* (2011)

²² Frank M Stenton – *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943)

²³ Sarah Foot – *Æthelstan The First King of England* (2011) pp. 31-33

So what do we know about this King? William of Malmesbury set the scene well when he recorded 200 years after King Æthelstan's death: *'The firm opinion is still current among the English that no one more just or learned administered the State'*.

He was a strong leader - Upon taking Northumbria from the Danes, he brought all the kings in the British Isles under his rule.²⁴ After decades of war with the Danes, this heralded a period of peace and prosperity for the English who were able to fortify their towns and build up their wealth and military strength. In 934CE, the Scots broke their treaty and Æthelstan with combined naval and land forces trapped the Scottish army between the Forth River and Stonehaven and then laid waste to a large part of Scotland.²⁵ In 937CE, a combined force of Scots and Norsemen invaded England near the Mersey Estuary.

The fight that ensued, known as *The Battle of Brunanburh*,²⁶ was one of the bloodiest in English history. Five Norse Kings were killed along with the son of the Scottish King Constantine II, and the victory for Æthelstan was known and recorded throughout Scandinavia and Europe.



He was pious – He was generous with alms and gave many land grants to the church. Laws made during his reign included the *Tithe Ordinance* for payments to be made to the Church, and the *Ordinance on Charities* which required the King's reeves (managers and revenue raisers) to feed the poor, and also to free one slave per year. King Æthelstan was an avid collector of religious relics and books, many of which he gifted to churches and abbeys in his realm. He also required the Bible to be translated from Latin into Old English so that it could be read more widely by his people, thus spreading the Christian message.²⁷ He took neither wife nor concubine thus limiting the potential heirs to the throne to his younger brothers which ensured a

²⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronical* (926)

²⁵ *The Chronical of John Worcester II* (934)

²⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronical* (937) – consisted of seventy three lines of verse called 'The Battle of Brunanburh'

²⁷ Rev. T M Merriman – *The Trail of History* (1868) p. 220

smooth succession to Edmund on his death.²⁸ This deliberate decision to remain celibate may have come from his deep religious convictions, but there is little evidence to support this claim.

He was a statesman - King Æthelstan came from a large family. He had one sister, four half-brothers and eight half-sisters, four of whom he arranged marriages of a political alliance with Kings in Brittany, France, Burgundy and Saxony.²⁹ He also arranged for the marriage of his full sister, Eadgyth, to the Danish King Sihtric of Northumbria, which led to his claim over Northumbria on the death of Sihtric. He had close connections on the continent and travelled widely. His court was cosmopolitan with Welsh and Scottish kings and Danish ealdormen participating. Foreigners and churchmen from across Europe and Scandinavia frequently visited to share culture and knowledge. He reformed the English property laws and legal system, centralising all edicts to his Court's control. Social order was high on the list of the King's priorities and three of his ordinances were aimed at curbing theft. These targeted not only thieves but also their accessories and those who harboured them. The codes tackled other problems as well; in particular non-attendance at assemblies, and swearing false oaths.³⁰

He was well educated – Not only could Æthelstan read and write in Latin and Old English, but he had an extensive collection of ancient books, many of which he gifted to the church for safe-keeping. His desire for learning and his support of the monasteries and abbeys was a hallmark of his reign.

He was an innovator – King Æthelstan laid the foundations for creating one of the wealthiest and most sophisticated kingdoms in tenth-century Europe. To do this he made great changes to the culture and governance of England.

- Breaking tradition, Æthelstan chose Kingston on the River Thames for his coronation. He crafted a new liturgical ceremony which contained a message of unity for his subjects and proclaimed the King's power and responsibilities. He was anointed with new symbols of office; a ring, a sword, a sceptre and a rod, and a radiant crown replaced the traditional war helmet.³¹ So began the English coronation ceremony of today.
- He redesigned the English longboats for use in the shallow estuaries, and his increased naval power put a halt to Viking raids.
- He initiated a new kind of royal council, better described as a national assembly, which surrounded him with a huge retinue of followers, consisting of not only his bishops, ealdormen (high-ranking royal officials and prior magistrates of an Anglo-Saxon shire or group of shires from about the ninth century to the time of King Cnut.) and thegns (knights), but independent rulers and learned men from other parts of Britain and the continent.³² This gave him access to the best advice of the day for his prolific law-making and centralised the production of charters and ordinances which were written in a standard format by appointed scribes.
- His ordinances reshaped land tenure, social order, and the taxation system, and enabled an effective network of law enforcement, local government, and tax collection in England.

²⁸ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* p. 59

²⁹ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* pp. 48-52

³⁰ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* pp. 141-145

³¹ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* pp. 74-76, 217

³² Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* pp. 63,64

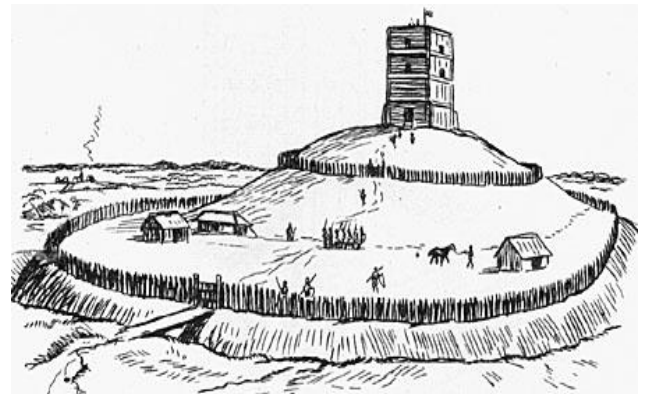
- He introduced a new style of coinage and exercised royal control over the minting and distribution so that there was only one coinage accepted as legal tender throughout the realm.

As Sarah Foot so aptly records: ‘*Æthelstan’s fifteen-year reign (924-939) constitutes one of the most significant periods in the history of England before the Norman Conquest. ---Tributes on his death show him far from unknown, but held in high regard not just in England but in the Celtic world and on the continent.*’³³

Anglo-Saxon Buildings in England

There came a time in English history when Saxon ‘long halls’ of timber poles and thatched rooves, and fortified ‘burhs’ with ditches, earthen embankments, and timber palisades, gave way to large masonry structures. This was a gradual transformation that is now difficult to trace as very few of the early medieval buildings have survived. What we do know from records is that timber halls were still in use in 978 when a mezzanine floor in a long hall at Calne collapsed, depositing King Edwards and his councillors on the ground beneath.³⁴

Also Æthelflaed, King Æthelstan’s aunt, ‘timbered the burh’ (*below right*), when she built a fortified base near the Welsh border in 915.³⁵ (*Below left reconstructed Long House*)



That the early Saxons were capable of building in stone, is clearly evident in the early churches still in existence today. A fine example is St. Mary’s Priory Church, at Deerhurst in

Gloucestershire which was founded in 804 and consists almost entirely of Saxon architecture. In the ninth and tenth centuries, new styles of masonry building were imported from the continent, especially from France and Normandy.³⁶ An early innovation were the masonry towers built near the coast to counter Viking raids. Interestingly, many of the Saxon buildings were constructed from stone taken from the remains of Roman buildings.

³³ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* p. 1

³⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronical* (978)

³⁵ Eric Fernie - *The Architecture of the Anglo-Saxons* () p. 21

³⁶ Peter Hill & John David - *Practical Stone Masonry* (2014) p. 9

From my research, the only evidence I can find that King Æthelstan personally commissioned or supervised any masonry edifices was a report by William of Malmesbury where he states that the King built a church at Milton in memory of his brother Edwin's soul.³⁷



(Left Milton Church)



(Right St Nicholas Worth)

To assess building activity in the first half of the tenth century, we need to consider what was happening in the Kingdom during the time of King Æthelstan's reign.

- Repairs were made to the ravages caused by the fierce fighting which took place between the Saxons, the Danes, and the Vikings. during the century leading up to his reign. In particular, the monasteries were hard hit by the Vikings, being easy targets for the plundering of wealth.
- Fortifications were built to protect England from the marauding sea-faring neighbours; some of these could well have been the first masonry towers built. *(Photo right)*
- King Æthelstan made numerous grants of land to the church, some of which were for the founding of new monasteries such as the Abbey of St John at Beverly,³⁸ and Milton Abbey in Dorset.³⁹ (photo below right)
- He generously gifted many valuable items, including rare religious relics, some allegedly to have formerly belonged to Charlemagne of France, to churches such as Exeter Cathedral, and the Abingdon Monastery⁴⁰ and it is likely that rebuilds and extensions would have been undertaken to house these treasures.



³⁷ Sarah Foot- *Æthelstan The First King of England* p. 86

³⁸ The Æthelstan Museum in Malmesbury

³⁹ Sarah Foot- *Æthelstan The First King of England* pp. 190,192

⁴⁰ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* pp. 198,199

- The Saxon system of governance was altered to include a large entourage which travelled with the King in the administration of the Kingdom. It is likely that some of the centres where the Court assembled would have been newly built, especially when considering King Æthelstan's aspirations for England be the leading nation in Europe.



In reviewing my findings to date, it is reasonable to suggest that with a stable government, a long and mainly peaceful reign, full coffers, and the King's drive to leave a lasting legacy in Europe, building construction would have been in the ascendancy during this period in England's history.

The History of Building Codes

Now we will look at the introduction of building codes into the building industry. To understand building regulations, it is necessary to appreciate that there are two basic requirements to regulating any building industry.

The first are the **Building Standards**. These are aspects of the building which can be measured or described. For example, the quality and type of materials used, the physical sizes and constraints of buildings, testing procedures, foundation conditions, etc. In the early days, this knowledge would have been gained by experience and passed down through a system of mentoring, similar to the apprenticeships referred to in the Old Charges. One can see why it took seven years to train a craftsman, and why master masons were held in such high regard in the community.

The first written building standards that I could find were English ordinances from the early thirteenth century which were passed into law in London after a disastrous fire; known as the Great Fire of Southwark, which in July 1212 destroyed a large section of the city, including the newly built London Bridge. These regulations set maximum wage levels and decreed that thatch was no longer to be used as roofing material in London. Also, bakeries, breweries, and cookhouses were to be whitewashed and plastered inside and out as protection against fire.⁴¹ This knee-jerk reaction to catastrophes has been the pattern of building standards development. The Great Fire of London in 1666 was followed by a comprehensive code regulating minimum street widths, building material restrictions, and maximum building heights; while the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 led to a total rewrite of the codes at that time. Closer to home, the rebuilding of Darwin was delayed twelve months while lessons from Cyclones Althea in 1971 and Tracy in 1974 were incorporated into a new national building code for cyclonic areas.⁴²

Building Standards as such are not specifically referred to in the Old Charges; accumulated knowledge of this kind was probably passed on orally by the masons. The codes in the Old Charges belong to the second group of requirements in modern building codes, namely the **Building Laws**. These are ordinances which affect relationships between the government of the day, the client, the builder and the workforce.

⁴¹ Corporation of London Records Office *Liber Custumarum* f.52 (1212)

⁴² <http://ntlapp.nt.gov.au/tracy/advanced/Reconstruction.html>

The oldest known building law is the Code of Hammurabi c1774BC (*photo of stele left*) which states *'If a builder builds a house for someone, and does not construct it properly, and the house*



which he built falls in and kills its owner, then the builder shall be put to death'. The Code then continues by stating that if the owner's son is killed, then the builder's son shall be put to death, and if a slave is killed or property destroyed then the builder shall pay full compensation.⁴³ This was very much an 'eye for an eye' law and very basic to say the least, although the concept of civil damages, whereby one must pay compensation for defective work, is still with us today.⁴⁴

The next reference to building laws that I can find are in fact the ordinances contained in the Old Charges. These laws were designed to be administered by the masons in partnership with the government, and it is astounding how comprehensive they are when comparing them with modern law.

Administration of building laws are now largely in the hands of builder associations, such as the **Master Builders' Association of Australia**.⁴⁵ This modern day guild of builders has a membership comprising 95% of the builders and building companies in Australia today and has a directorship of fourteen high profile leaders in the building industry. Its mandate is to –

- Advise government on setting building standards
- Advise government on drafting and reviewing legislation
- Assist builders in interpreting building laws such as conditions of employment and health and safety provisions
- Be instrumental in setting award wages and conditions of employment
- Formulate policies to improve health and safety provisions
- Mediate between builders and other parties in contractual disputes
- Provide training programs for technical and trade skills, and promote and advise on apprenticeship courses.
- Uphold high standards in the building industry. In cases of incompetence or criminal activity, a builder may be expelled from the association.

On comparing Æthelstan's ordinances with modern building laws, and the ancient Masonic General Assemblies with today's Master Builders' Associations, the similarity of building laws and administration is not a coincidence. Problems encountered in the building of major edifices are universal and timeless. One has only to consider the recent collapse of the Rana Plaza clothing factory in Bangladesh, or the destruction caused by the earthquake in Nepal, to understand the consequences of the absence, or lack of enforcement, of building codes. Common sense and hard-won experience dictate the solutions. With the increasing use of stone and mortar and the advent of great cathedrals, castles, and palaces, building codes became necessary and inevitable.

⁴³ Hammurabi, Sixth Babylonian King - *Hammurabi's Code of Laws, Section 229 - 233* translated by Jean-Vincent Scheil (1902)

⁴⁴ Smith, Currie & Hancock, paper - *Construction Law – The History is Ancient* (2012)

⁴⁵ (www.masterbuilders.com.au/portfolio)

Conclusions

In attempting to establish the providence of the ancient laws for masons contained in the Masonic Old Charges, I offer the following conclusions.

- It is unlikely that the scribe who compiled the Regius Manuscript was the author of the section containing King Æthelstan's ordinances, especially when it has been shown that the writer incorporated other contemporary sources into the document as well. These building codes are the result of a school of thought, and not an individual's effort. They were drafted in a manner that could be administered and enforced by the masons of the day and was probably copied from masonic guild documents of the times. The Charges remained the guiding code for masons for five hundred years after the Regius Manuscript was written. There is no ownership of authority by the scribe, other than to attribute the ordinances to King Æthelstan.
- Given that the Regius Manuscript pre-dates the Cooke Manuscript by 30 to 60 years, it is interesting to note that the sections containing the mason's ordinances run in the same sequence of laws, but with quite a different phrasing. This points to the probability that the Cooke and Regius Manuscripts came from a common source now lost.
- A building code of this nature would have become necessary with the advent of large masonry buildings in the early tenth century. With reference to the building needs of the Anglo-Saxons and the rapid escalation of the building industry after the Norman Conquest, this places the origin of these ordinances between the tenth and twelfth centuries.
- Through many surviving written sources it can be shown that King Æthelstan had the opportunity, the assembled expertise, the drive, and the ability to cause such a document to be drafted; and with the era of massive masonry structures unfolding, he probably had the need.
- Although the ordinances in the Old Charges cover the same ground as modern building laws there is one striking difference. New building codes do not contain laws based on moral and social issues. I refer here to Articles of Governance No.7; *No master mason shall clothe, feed, or harbour a thief*,⁴⁶ and Points of Constitution Nos. 1-4, 6, 7 & 10 which address the ethics and morals of practicing Craftsmen. To me, this document has the fingerprints of King Æthelstan all over it. No less than three of the King's known charters addressed the problem of thieves disrupting social order, and, as Sarah Foot comments, '*His preoccupation with theft --- finds no direct parallel in other king's codes.*'⁴⁷ He considered crime and lack of morality to be an insult to the Crown. He also took personal offence when those summoned to his Court failed to attend, and this can be compared to the mandatory attendance by master masons to any convened General Assembly of Masons.⁴⁸ He was strong on oath taking, and the penalties for breaking an oath in King Æthelstan's reign were severe. Compare this with Points of Constitution Nos. 13-15, where every Craftsman must swear allegiance to the King,⁴⁹ swear never to be a thief⁵⁰ and swear to keep true to the statutes ordained by King Æthelstan.⁵¹ Lastly, many of the documents surviving from King Æthelstan's Court contain an invocation to God, and it is no surprise that the first Point of

⁴⁶ Regius MS, lines 177-184

⁴⁷ Sarah Foot - *Æthelstan The First King of England* p. 145

⁴⁸ Regius MS, lines 105-118

⁴⁹ Regius MS, lines 421-426

⁵⁰ Regius MS, lines 429-434

⁵¹ Regius MS, lines 483-486

Constitution in the Regius Manuscript is that every mason *must love well God and holy church always*.

Why is it that the providence of the Masonic codes in the Old Charges is not accepted as that stated in the documents? Quite simply, we have no corroborating evidence other than a reference in the Landsdowne Manuscript c1560 to the York Charter, an ancient document commissioned and granted during King Æthelstan's reign. This Charter, containing the masonic charges is said to have been drafted by his son, Edwin,⁵² but it should be noted that the Landsdowne document is incorrect in that Edwin was the younger half-brother of the King; not his son. The York Charter, if it existed, has not survived.

Lack of corroborating evidence in itself should not negate the detailed accounts of the origins of the Old Charges. Just as we have access to masonic documents dating back six hundred years, so too would the fourteenth century masonic guilds have had access to even more ancient material, and to suggest that there were no relevant written or oral records prior to the Regius Manuscript, is to suggest that the sophisticated masonic codes of the fourteenth century materialised out of nowhere.

If the Court of King Æthelstan did not draft these masonic charges, then where did they come from? To be effective, they needed, at very least, the blessing of the governing body of the day. A cursory look through the records of English Kings from tenth to the fourteenth century does not give an obvious alternative. It is possible that the Masonic Charges were imported from masons in Europe, but, as such an event would be unlikely to predate the tenth century, why wouldn't this source be acknowledged? Under what authority would it have been accepted?

I believe that it is a highly probable that the source of our ancient usages and established customs comes from the first building code of England, drafted during the reign of King Æthelstan c930. If evidence from other sources is uncovered to verify King Æthelstan's hand in the origin of these ordinances, Freemasons will be able to state with confidence that our fraternity is as old as England itself; and King Athelstan will indeed be worthy of his Saxon name, the translation of which is, *Noble-Stone*.

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⁵² British Museum – *Landsdowne Manuscript No.98 Art.48 f.276b* (c1560)