

THE FOUNDATION STONE

By Bro. N. Valley

While customs continue on, the original reasons behind them can and do evolve as society changes. The barbaric features of a custom may have been eliminated or moulded into a ceremony more pleasing to civilized society. As well, one or more original reasons for it, may also have been modified or completely abandoned. Such a custom is the laying of a Foundation or Corner Stone. The original or main reason was certainly an operative one and still is; today the earliest primitive motives no longer apply. The Foundation Stone ceremony recalls beliefs almost as old as man himself, and stems from the Foundation Sacrifice performed by primitive man.

Sacrifice itself has been defined essentially as a prayer, or an appeal by man, to a superior power. Man is willing to surrender something of value for the hopes of receiving something in return. Foundation Sacrifices, also known as Stability Rites, have varied in form from place to place and from time to time but their primary object has always been the same, namely to supply the structure with a soul to ensure its stability. Well into the 1800s, the primitive tribes of Borneo, when building a house, would first dig a deep hole to receive the first post. The post was then suspended over the hole and a slave girl was placed in the hole. The signal was given and the lashings were cut, the enormous timber fell crushing the girl to death.

The Mandalay Palace in Burma was literally built over dead men's bones. Such an ancient rite is known to have been used throughout Europe, the British Isles, as well as Asia and Africa. Man then had a strong belief that spirits resided in stones, trees or other objects. So, in the Foundation Sacrifice, the primitive believed that the soul of the victim was rendered homeless when he or she was slaughtered. The soul then readily entered the new dwelling provided for it by the foundation post or stone, thus giving it protection and stability.

These pagan horrors were slow to die out. St. Columba, the Irish saint, is said to have buried another saint alive under the foundations of a Monastery to appease the spirits of the soil. It was said that the spirits were demolishing at night what Columba was building in the daytime. It is interesting to contemplate the conflicting pagan influence on the one hand and Christianity on the other.

Bathing the Foundation Stones with human blood was a variant of the Foundation Sacrifice. Among those who did this were the Picts. They were a group of people who lived in Scotland and Ireland. They believed that the large stones of their bell shaped towers would endure, if the lime mixture contained the souls of their human victims, whose blood had wetted the foundation stone. At some point in time there developed also the Completion Sacrifice. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when at the building of a house in England, when a workman fell from a beam and was killed, his fellow workers said that the accident was "luck for the house and would ensure its stability." Many similar stories illustrate a second victim as the Completion Sacrifice.

It has been suggested that the Completion Sacrifice forms a basis for the Hiram Legend. When the Foundation Sacrifice was performed to provide a soul for the structure, thus endowing it with stability, the Completion Sacrifice was intended to provide a protector, or guardian spirit. There was a time when a house or building had not only a skeleton, and thereby a soul, but also its protective family ghost. In the first century B.C., there was found in the roof of a Temple in Greece, the body of a warrior that had been embalmed, after having been killed. He was then clad in full armour. The Completion Sacrifice can be said to have survived today in the form of a Consecration or Dedication ceremony. Every race, however, has sooner or later rejected human sacrifice and has replaced it first with animal, then vegetable offerings and finally with a more symbolic sacrifice. But the incantations relative to the ceremony indicate the stability of the building. Thus we find a lamb buried under Danish altars, so that the churches might stand solid. There are many stories of allowing the blood of an animal to flow upon the foundation stone.

First then, there was the Foundation Sacrifice; later, the Completion Sacrifice, and finally, there is the desire of people to preserve a period of time in their life by putting articles in a time capsule to be opened by future generations. This practice has caused many people to refer to the Foundation Stone, as the Memorial Stone, particularly in Scotland. What we call a "time capsule" is not new; such a practice existed at least 5,000 years ago. In the foundations of a Temple built around 3,000 B.C. in Babylonia, there were found terra-cotta cylinders. The inscription on them listed the acts leading to the building of the Temple and including the symbol of the Storm Bird.

There is another feature of the age-old ceremony that has endured: The ancient Assyrian Foundation Stones were first made firm and then anointed with beer, wine, oil and honey, a procedure similar to the anointing of the Foundation Stone in the present Masonic Ceremony. There is no set size for the Foundation Stone, and it varies with the views of the architect. The inscription cut into its outer side nowadays gives little more than the date, as well as the name and title of the dignitary laying the stone. Formerly, it was often lengthy and sometimes in Latin.

The placing of the Foundation Stone at the northeast corner, and the veneration of this as the starting point of the building, arose, not only from architectural and operative necessity, but also from Solar worship. Stonehenge, in England, was a sacred site of worship and sacrifice dating from over 2,000 years ago. Orientation was obtained when the sun's first rays cast a shadow from an upright rod. The perpendicular was obtained by using a plumb rule. Then the right angle was determined by a line drawn to the south from the line of the shadow. This was done in accordance with their belief that sun-wise or what we call clockwise motions were auspicious and anti-sunwise were evil. The First or Foundation Stone placed in this right angle had indeed to be proved, as a right-angled stone and to be well and truly laid, for it was the starting point from which the rest of the structure would be assembled.

In London England, on the 14th day of July, 1927, the Foundation Stone of Freemasons' Hall was laid. The procedure was as follows:

1. The Grand Master is requested to lay the stone;
2. The stone is raised;
3. The phial containing the roll of information and coins is placed in the cavity;
4. The inscription upon the stone is read;
5. The Grand Master receives the trowel and spreads the cement upon the lower stone;
6. The upper stone is lowered by three movements;
7. The maul is handed to the Grand Master who strikes the stone at four corners, marking, "Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice";
8. The plumb rule is handed to the Grand Master who proves the stone plumb;
9. The level is handed to the Grand Master who proves the stone level;
10. The square is handed to the Grand Master who proves the stone square;
11. The maul is handed to the Grand Master who strikes the stone three times and declares the stone well and truly laid;
12. The stone is consecrated with corn, wine, oil and salt;
13. The ceremony concludes with the Consecration Ceremony and a Benediction.

In the United States a Grand Lodge performs the ceremony with the Lodge opened in the First Degree. In the United Kingdom the laying is considered to be essentially linked to the Second Degree.

The Foundation Stone ceremony is still carried out by the Masonic fraternity today, perhaps most often in North America. But, wherever it is performed, it is considered a compliment, not only to our speculative Brethren, but also as a gentle reminder of when the Foundation Stone was more important architecturally. At that time it was part of our operative brethren's trade skills that gave them the right to place the stone in position.