

The Distinguishing Badge Of A Mason—Postscript

By W. Bro. Rob Lund

In a previous article entitled “The Distinguishing Badge of a Mason”, I covered the symbolism of the Apron. In this article, I want to try and answer the question that many Masons have regarding this part of the initiation ritual:

“More ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle; more honourable than the Star or Garter; or any other order in existence, being the badge of innocence and the bond of friendship”.

My question is: “what are the Golden Fleece, the Roman Eagle, Star and Garter? My research shows nothing definitive, but I would like to share the following with you.

I found a reference to **The Order of the Golden Fleece**, which is an order of chivalry founded in Bruges in 1430 by Duke Philip III of Burgundy to celebrate his marriage to the Portuguese princess Isabella of Avis.

The Order of the Golden Fleece was established January 10, 1430, by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in celebration of the prosperous and wealthy domains united in his person that ran from Flanders to Switzerland. It is restricted to a limited number of knights, initially 24, but increased to 30 in 1433, and 50 in 1516, plus the sovereign. It received further privileges unusual to any order of knighthood: the sovereign undertook to consult the order before going to war; all disputes between the knights were to be settled by the order; at each chapter the deeds of each knight were held in review, and punishments and admonitions were dealt out to offenders, and to this the sovereign was expressly subject; the knights could claim, as a right, to be tried by their fellows on charges of rebellion, heresy and treason, and Charles V conferred on the order exclusive jurisdiction over all crimes committed by the knights. The arrest of the offender had to be by warrant signed by at least six knights, and during the process of charge and trial he remained, not in prison, but in the gentle custody of his fellow knights. The order, conceived in an ecclesiastical spirit in which mass and obsequies were prominent, and the knights were seated in choir stalls like canons, was explicitly denied to "heretics", and so became an exclusively Catholic award during the Reformation.

The Order of the Golden Fleece was defended from possible accusations of prideful pomp by Guillaume Machaut, who asserted that it was instituted, not for amusement nor for recreation, but for the purpose that praise shall be given to God, and to the good: glory and high renown.

The choice of the Golden Fleece of Colchis as the symbol of a Christian order caused some controversy, not so much because of its pagan context, which could be incorporated in chivalric ideals, but because the feats of Jason and his Argonauts, were not without causes of reproach. The bishop of Châlons,

chancellor of the Order, rescued the fleece's reputation by identifying it instead with the fleece of the biblical Gideon that "received the dew of Heaven".

The badge of the Order, in the form of a sheepskin, was suspended from a jewelled collar of firesteels in the shape of the letter B, for Burgundy, linked by flints; with the motto "Pretium Laborum Non Vile" ("Not a bad reward for labour") engraved on the front of the central link, and Philip's motto "Non Aliud" ("I will have no other") on the back (non-royal knights of the Golden Fleece were forbidden to belong to any other order of knighthood).

Old, but not ancient. I could not find any other Golden Fleece. Perhaps it's a reference to the Golden fleece of Homer's Jason.

The **Roman Eagle**, or *Aquila*, was, in *ancient* times, the standard of a Roman legion formed in the shape of an eagle, which was carried by a special grade of legionary known as an Aquilifer (*considered a position of honour*). One eagle standard was carried by each legion.

The eagle standard was extremely important to the Roman military, beyond merely being a symbol of a legion. . It was made of silver, or bronze, with outstretched wings, but was probably of a relatively small size, since a standard-bearer under Julius Caesar is said, in circumstances of danger, to have wrenched the eagle from its staff and concealed it in the folds of his girdle. A lost standard was considered an extremely grave occurrence, and the Roman military often went to great lengths to both protect a standard and to recover it if lost. For example, after the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, the Romans spent decades attempting to recover the lost standards of three legions.

Even after the adoption of Christianity as the Roman Empire's religion, the Aquila eagle continued to be used as a symbol. During the reign of Eastern Roman Emperor Isaac I Komnenos, the single-headed eagle was modified to double-headed to symbolise the Empire's dominance over East and West.

This certainly is ancient.



The Order of the Star

After King John ascended the French throne on 26 September 1350, he revived his youthful aspiration to create a new knightly order. Partly out of a general dissatisfaction with religious chivalric orders dating from the dissolution of the Knights Templar in 1311, partly out of a wish to emulate the fictive orders of the twelfth century, partly out of the hope of gaining political support, King John established the Order of the Star. This new institution was not primarily for common worship by noblemen, but for honor, camaraderie, and the glorification of French knighthood.

John's ploy met with little success since the Order did not elicit the intended response from the leading nobility of the kingdom. After the one, and only, sparsely attended meeting of the Order in January 1352, John redefined this institution as a religious retreat for the Order's members, thereby virtually eliminating any political purpose it had been designed to serve. In October 1352, the king published an *ordonnance* establishing a chapter of canons, chaplains and clerics to celebrate the Divine office in the Chapel of the Noble House at St.-Ouen. The chapter and clerics were to be funded by the proceeds of "all forfeitures and confiscations for crimes *oflèse-majesté*" committed in France. Despite the decision taken in October 1352 to endow the new religious-chivalric order, the proceeds of very few confiscations actually found their way to the clerics at St.-Ouen.

The Crown's abandonment of the policy of donating confiscated lands to the Order throughout the 1350s, a period in which a minimum of 92 confiscation orders were issued, can be attributed to the need to use confiscated properties as direct grants for the securing of loyalties.

Sadly, not perhaps very noble.

The Most Noble Order of the Garter, founded in 1348, is the highest order of chivalry existing in England. The order is dedicated to the image and arms of St. George as England's patron saint, and is presently bestowed on recipients from British and other Commonwealth realms; after peerages (and after the Victoria Cross and George Cross), it is the pinnacle of the honours system in the United Kingdom. Membership in the order is limited to the Sovereign, the Prince of Wales, and no more than twenty-four members, or Companions; the order also comprises *Supernumerary* knights and ladies (e.g., members of the British Royal Family and foreign monarchs). Bestowing the honour has been described as one of the Monarch's few remaining truly personal, executive prerogatives.

The Order of the Garter is the oldest and most prestigious order of chivalry in the United Kingdom.

The order's emblem, depicted on insignia, is a *garter* with the motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Middle French: "shame upon him who thinks evil upon it", or "evil to him who evil thinks") in gold lettering. Members of the order wear such a garter on ceremonial occasions.

King Edward III founded the Order of the Garter around the time of his claim to the French throne. The foundation year is usually presumed to be 1348, however, the *Complete Peerage*, under "The Founders of the Order of the Garter", states the order was first instituted on 23 April 1344, listing each founding member as knighted in 1344, including Sir Sanchet D'Abrichecourt who died on 20 October 1345. Other dates from 1344 to 1351 have also been proposed. The King's wardrobe account shows Garter habits first issued in the autumn of 1348; its original statutes required that each member already be a knight (what would now be referred to as a knight bachelor) and some of the initial members were only knighted that year.

Various legends account for the origin of the Order. The most popular legend involves the "Countess of Salisbury" (either Edward's future daughter-in-law Joan of Kent or her former mother-in-law, Catherine

Montacute, Countess of Salisbury). While she was dancing at a court ball at Calais, her garter is said to have slipped from her leg. When the surrounding courtiers sniggered, the king picked it up and returned it to her, exclaiming, "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*," ("Shamed be the person who thinks evil of it."), the phrase that has become the motto of the Order. According to another legend, King Richard I was inspired in the 12th century by St George the Martyr while fighting in the Crusades to tie garters around the legs of his knights, who subsequently won the battle. King Edward supposedly recalled the event in the 14th century when he founded the Order. Another explanation is that the motto refers to Edward's claim to the French throne, and the Order of the Garter was created to help pursue this claim. The use of the garter as an emblem may have derived from straps used to fasten armour.

Medieval scholars have pointed to a connection between the Order of the Garter and the Middle English poem, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight". In "Gawain", a girdle, very similar in its erotic undertones to the garter, plays a prominent role. A rough version of the Order's motto also appears in the text. It translates from Old French as "Accursed be a cowardly and covetous heart."

If anyone has other information relating to these honours and orders, I would be pleased to know.

References

- Wikipedia
- Wishing Upon A Star: King John, the Order of the Star, and Politics By David M. Bessen