

Our house, our clothes and our Banners

You've all heard some of my talks about what we have in our Knights Templar ceremonies – the Temple, the Officers, the Ornaments etc. Well this time it's all about our Malta degree, the one in which this Priory is now opened. As you all know I try to help each of us to understand a bit more about what is around us now, rather than what was happening a century ago.

So, as we are in the Malta degree it seems that a sensible place to start is our Priory.

Why a Priory?

It is a very common belief that monks live in a monastery. However, the more accurate words to describe their community dwelling places would either be an abbey or a priory. From the earliest times of monastic life, the custom was to describe the principal house of an Order as an abbey, and all the daughter houses that were founded were called its priories.

This practice did not continue.

Even though the founding house of the Cistercian Order was called the Abbey of Citeaux, as the order grew and developed, the great daughter Cistercian houses such as Rievaulx, Jervaulx and Fountains were so large that they were also referred to as abbeys.

What is interesting is that smaller units attached to such buildings were called priories. Also interesting is the fact that the head of the house in an abbey was an Abbot and his second-in-command a Prior.

If you are familiar with the Cadfael stories of Ellis Peters, you might also remember that at the Abbey in Shrewsbury a similar arrangement existed.

All of this reflects some of the rich history of the original Knights Templar. As that special Order of warrior monks was created as an offshoot of the Cistercians, it was hardly surprising that their main bases be called priories and not abbeys.

With regard to their main bases, we need to remember that the knights, like those of St John, were divided by 'nations' and it was in each 'nation' that they had their main base. Therefore, there were the knights of England, France, Scotland, Aragon and Castile. Hence their main or central administrative house in England had the title of Grand Priory of Clerkenwell.

There was another probable reason why they decided to adopt the lesser title of priory in their system. Whereas an abbey was a place of prayer and meditation, the priories tended to be the centres of activity and production. Farms certainly existed, or they were the control centres of several farms, and contact with the world around them was normal and necessary.

Such a way of life was akin to the knightly cause of the Hospitallers as they dedicated themselves to providing medical attention for pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land, or the Templars in supplying arms and fighting men for their protection.

Even though they named their main centres as priories, other Templar houses, such as remote castles, were known as preceptories. From what I've previously told you about preceptories (ok it was a few years ago now...), by choosing another title for the basic units of their order, the Templars were seeking to distance their role from other monastic systems.

When the original knights held a large or important gathering, especially for the election of a new Grand Master, or 'national' leader, it was always called a priory meeting. This is why we do the same by holding a Provincial Priory once a year.

What is worth noting in the history of our Masonic Knight Templar Order is that from the time of the initial, vigorous promotion of this Order by Thomas Dunckerley in the latter years of the 18th century, the governing body was called the Grand Conclave.

Indeed, in 1872, when the name of our governing body was changed, it was known as the Convent General, and only in 1895 was the more ancient title of Great Priory finally adopted.

These titles should remind us that whilst we may take an interest in the medieval Knight Templar Order, we really are, and were intended to be, an organisation quite separate from those warriors of old. Anyone who harbours romantic but rather unsubstantiated notions of Freemasons as some kind of re-established successors of the original order must read *The Rosslyn Hoax?* by Scots Masonic scholar Robert D Cooper.

Having a Great Priory, wearing similar regalia and even claiming the same precepts may be tempting signs of continuity. Whilst being proud of who we are now, we must not be led astray by false ideas of our antiquity!

But having said all that....going back to what we have in front of us now....

What does the Patte Cross of the Degrees mean?

It is a fascinating fact of 18th century Freemasonry that its most intriguing and varied developments relating to knightly activity were often given the title of the Red or Black Cross.

As those who were here last year may remember from when we demonstrated the degree of a Knight of St Paul, and I explained the significance of the Mediterranean Pass, we had amongst others the orders of Patmos, Palestine and Rhodes all bearing crosses of different styles.

What we now call the Patte Cross belongs to an ancient line. In all our various ceremonies can the relationship of the Templar and Malta degrees be clearly demonstrated in the octagonal cross that forms such a striking feature on the clothing we wear.

In the Templar order, the cross is blood red, whereas the Malta degree is of pure white (well, at least for those who've washed their regalia!). However, the shape is of more significance than its colour.

The form of the patte cross has splayed ends to its four arms. It was termed patte as the four arms resemble the extended paws of an animal and the French word for paw is patte. Each arm has two sharp ends giving the cross a total of eight points.

The most common explanation for the eight-pointed star is that each point represents the eight Beatitudes or blessings that form part of the sermon on the mount as described in chapter five of St Matthews Gospel. These are as follows;

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted
Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied
Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

These 'blessings' are symbolically bound as one by the centre of the cross that represents the Lord God himself, he being the point from which a Mason cannot err. Certainly no Malta knight can go far wrong in being reminded of this symbolic message as he sees and wears this special star.

However, mention of the octagon should recall upon us that we have such a shaped table in our Malta ceremony. An octagonal table was originally occupied by the representatives of the eight 'langues' or 'language groups' who made up the Order of St John and whose premises in the islands of Rhodes and Malta are still in existence. Indeed I know many of us here have visited some or all of them.

These 'Tongues' were those of Provence, Auvergne, France, Italy, Aragon, England, Germany and Castile. At some future time I'll give you a talk about the officers who sat (and do now sit) at the table with the types of service that they provided.

If these explanations appear to be sufficient in providing a background to the white Malta star, there is another tradition concerning it. This principle suggests that there is a more complex connection between this symbol and other features in the Order.

Not only is it the Cross for the Knights of St John, it is suggested that its octagonal shape represents the layout of their chapels and churches. That said, there is more to this important star. The cross also consists of the necessary units that formed the basis for a cipher alphabet, such as was used by the clerks of the knights and their stonemasons.

This is both interesting and intriguing, as the medieval knightly orders preferred 'private' forms of communication, and in early Freemasonry, a cipher alphabet was often used. But this does not mean that one was derived from the other of course!!

In the case of the St John's knights, the process began by placing the squat, square-ended cross of the Templars over the centre of the Malta cruciform, thus dividing the resulting pattern into twenty four sections. Beyond that please consult a code breaking specialist, not me!

And finally for today....

The Malta Banners

Not an explanation as we hear at the installation of a new knight – birth, life, death etc..., but how they came about. Although not always present, their significance and importance should be understood by all who assemble beneath them.

To uncover their true meaning, we are required to appreciate their history.

In the address given in our ceremonies, we hear that in 1310, the island of Rhodes became the property of the Order. In 1307, the

Hospitallers had been strengthened in numbers and enriched by the possessions of the Templars who were at that time suppressed.

Although many Templar properties were handed over to the Order of St John, the truth is that in France, Auvergne and Provence, this was not the case because the king or rulers of these lands kept as much as possible for themselves or their noble subjects.

What is not often mentioned is that along with the lands and castles, the Knights of St John employed the stonemasons connected with the Templar constructions. This is plainly evident for when we visit the magnificent knightly fortifications and residences in Rhodes or Malta, we still marvel at the architectural talent and engineering ability of those who erected them.

The fortifications on these two islands were of immense importance as they were the principle 'bulwarks of Europe' when they were under constant attack by the Ottoman Turks. 1315 was a particularly severe and stressful year for Amadeus V, Count of Savoy, who rendered outstanding service to the Order for his efforts in repelling the enemy.

What made his contribution all the more meaningful – and especially for us – is that he had previously been a Knight Templar and his life was technically forfeit under the Papal ban. If one wonders as to what happened to the Templars outside of France who were not executed, then Amadeus V is an example as to what might have occurred in an individual's lifetime.

The Grand Master of the Order of St John was so impressed with the valour of this erstwhile Templar that in a sister Order's service, he bestowed a jewelled collar that bore the Latin words 'Fortitudo Ejus Rodinum Tenuit' upon him. A translation of these words is 'He held the fortress of Rhodes by reason of his resolute endurance'. Amadeus V was also granted the right to bear the emblem of the Order of St John for his personal use.

When this noble member of both Orders died, the collar was buried with him. However, the telltale letters F E R T were placed in the four quarters of the St John standard, which is where they can be seen to this day.

The flag was carried with pride when, as we are again told, the Turks finally defeated the defenders on Rhodes some 207 years after the Amadeus incident. The Turks allowed the knights to leave their island stronghold bearing all the honours of war with music played, the knights adorned in full armour and sergeants bearing their arms, banners held high.

Many years later, the knights surrendered their residence in Crete and sailed to Malta. Their brave exploits were again recognised with pride and we have the appropriate banners to commemorate those times.

We Templar knights take part in an interim ceremony as I've already mentioned called the 'Mediterranean Pass' which is connected to the period. It should be noted that the banner is graced with the much-honoured letters representing a one-time Templar's bravery. There could hardly be a more fitting reminder of the close ties between our two main degrees.

Passing alongside and dutifully acknowledging the symbols of knightly prowess in Palestine, Cyprus, Rhodes, Candia and Malta, what might have been thought to be the commemoration of an Order that was rudely, and some would certainly say unjustly terminated.

However, since the Knights of Malta are still a recognised and thriving institution in the Catholic Church, we in Masonic form can rejoice in the fact that the banners we honour have more a vital than romantic significance.