

What is the significance of the Mediterranean Pass?

The degree of a Knight of St Paul, or what we now call the Mediterranean Pass, is a fascinating remnant of practices that were common in the developing Freemasonry of the second half of the 18th century.

This development was the creation of several knightly degrees, all of which were available to those who were proper Master Masons through the Chair but gradually becoming accessible to any Freemason who was called a Master Mason.

Many of these degrees were quite brief but each illustrated an aspect of biblical or church history. Hence there are Knights of Patmos and of Palestine, Knights of Rhodes and Knights of St John of Jerusalem, to mention but a few.

Many of these have been lost, discarded or incorporated into what are called appendant degrees of which the Allied and Knights Templar Priests are particularly good examples.

We cannot enter into the details of these other practices here, but it was as part of this growing panoply of Orders that there emerged the ceremony of a Knight of St Paul or the Mediterranean Pass, with which we are now concerned here.

There was another aspect of 18th century Masonry that contributed to the idea behind the Mediterranean Pass. This was a feature that might be described as 'passage Freemasonry', and though most traces of this too have disappeared or been incorporated elsewhere, we might note two examples from previous practices that illustrate what I mean.

In the old Mark Man or Mark Mason degree as it is better known, the candidate was instructed to 'travel' or 'pass' from Babylon to Canaan along a ladder that was laid on the floor between the Junior and Senior Warden's chairs. Any member of the Royal and Select Masters degrees will recognise this practice and there is equally a faint connection with a journey made in the Holy Royal Arch or Rose Croix.

It is important for the Mark Mason to return to the correct place of work in order to complete the main purpose of the particular degree in which he was engaged.

In an older form of the Royal Arch, known as the ceremony of the Veils (which is normal in Scotland and Ireland, but is now only practised in England at Bristol), the candidate again makes a specific journey from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan where the full secrets of Masonry can at last be discovered.

It would not be fitting to expand on the details of that particular journey, but modern Knights Templar need to be aware that the first members of the Order would have passed that way before they could be considered for and admitted to knighthood.

It is against such a background of earlier and essential elements in progressive Freemasonry that we must set the present ceremony through which a knight is required to pass if he is to become not just a Knight Templar but a Knight of Palestine, Rhodes and Malta.

In a symbolic fashion, he makes the ancient journey of St Paul from east to west. It was a similar passage through the eastern Mediterranean which the Hospitaller Knights had to experience as they moved from the city of Tyre in the Levant to the city of Valletta in Malta.

The degree therefore performs a double purpose. On the one hand it incorporates the ancient idea of travelling to the destination where further knowledge can be revealed. On the other, it symbolically represents the turbulent up rooting and danger that the Knights of St John had to undergo before they reached the island where they were to complete their labours.

It is here, in the last but illustrious home of the Order, that knights of today receive those signs and words which permit a Knight Mason to become a Knight of St John of Jerusalem, Palestine, Rhodes and Malta. He has to pass this way and in this fashion so that he too can reach what is in this setting another 'promised land'.

Bearing in mind what was said at the outset of this talk, it can now be recognised that when you have acquired this distinction, you have also achieved many of those knightly titles and 'secrets' that our forebears had to pass through with several degrees.

What we should realise is that being a Knight of St Paul is not just an unusual and alternative experience, but a traditional and worthwhile step on our Masonic way.