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SPECIAL ISSUE

The Origins of Freemasonry and the Invention of Tradition

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- Any requests from their members for information on a research topic;
- Research papers of more than local interest that merit wider publication.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

ANZMRC is delighted to be able to bring *Harashim* readers an important paper by Professors Prescott and Sommers. This was presented at the third World Conference on Fraternalism, Social Capital and Civil Society held at the Bibliotheque nationale de France in Paris in June 2019.

This is the first publication of this significant paper. I thank the authors for their generosity in permitting ANZMRC to publish it.

THE ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY AND THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

Andrew Prescott and Susan Mitchell Sommers

'History is therefore never history, but history-for'.

Claude Lévi-Strauss[1]

Among the most famous and remarkable French historians was Marc Bloch, one of the founders of the *Annales* school which pioneered the use of sociological, anthropological and comparative techniques in the study of history. After the fall of Vichy France in 1942, Bloch joined the French resistance. He was captured in Lyon in 1944 and handed over to Klaus Barbie, the head of the Lyon Gestapo. During his imprisonment, Bloch was beaten and tortured. Following the D-day invasion, the Nazis were anxious to dispose of French prisoners and on 6 June 1944, 75 years ago, Bloch was executed by firing squad.[2]

Among the works by Bloch which were published after his death was *The Historian's Craft* (*Apologie pour l'histoire, ou Metier d'historien*), a series of reflections on the historian's method.[3] Ever since its appearance in 1949, *The Historian's Craft* has profoundly influenced the way historians think about what they do and how they approach both the past and the present. Among the most celebrated chapters in this short book is 'The Idol of Origins', in which Bloch suggests that the besetting sin of historians is an obsession with origins.[4] Bloch cites the historian of religion Ernest Renan as an exemplar of the preoccupation of historians with origins, summarising from memory Renan's views: 'In all human affairs, it is the origins which deserve study before everything else'.[5] Bloch reminds us how frequently books appear with titles like the Origins of Contemporary France, the Origins of the Reformation or the Origins of the French Revolution.

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[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 257. This paper was originally given as a keynote lecture at the 3rd World Conference on Fraternalism, Social Capital and Civil Society at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 14 June 2019. Thanks are due to Paul Rich and the Policy Studies Organisation for their support.

[2] For an English introduction to the work of Marc Bloch, see Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[3] The standard English translation is: Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam with an introduction by Peter Burke (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

[4] Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, pp. 24-9.

[5] Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, pp. 24-5.

There is often an ambiguity about the way historians use the term 'origins'. Sometimes they use it as a shorthand for the beginnings of a particular phenomenon. On other occasions, they use origins to mean causes. In Bloch's opinion, the danger occurs when the two become conflated – when we assume that we can understand historical events by tracing their beginnings. Simply identifying how something began does not explain how it developed. If we think about the history of Christianity, whether or not Christ was crucified and resurrected is not a very interesting question – what happened to Christ is almost an irrelevance to the history of Christianity. For the historian, the pressing question is rather what social, political and cultural conditions caused millions of people to believe that Christ came back from the dead, why these beliefs led to wholesale slaughter and invasion, and why they still persist.

For Bloch, the obsession with finding the point of origin bleeds the life from history and distracts us from exploring how society shifts and changes. Religious belief is an example of a historical phenomenon whose study is distorted by an obsession with origins. Religion is like a knot that ties together many different aspects of society. If we only look for the point of origin of religious institutions, we ignore the way they bind together many social and human interconnections. This applies not only to religion, but to all human institutions – including freemasonry.

Freemasonry is a vivid illustration of the debilitating effects of the idol of origins. Freemasons have been obsessed for centuries with establishing where freemasonry came from. The medieval charges have been continually classified and categorised to the point where it is sometimes not entirely clear what the different manuscripts say.[6] These stonemasons' documents are precious evidence of artisan organisation in the British Isles, but because of the mania for trying to reconstruct the earliest form of text, many of these charges have never been properly edited and such fundamental palaeographical and codicological characteristics as the date of handwriting and watermarks have not been adequately analysed. We are not even sure where some of the most important manuscripts actually are.[7] Instead of using these documents to

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[6] Andrew Prescott, 'Some Literary Contexts of the Cooke and Regius Manuscripts' in *Freemasonry in Music and Literature*, ed. Trevor Stewart, Canonbury Papers 2 (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2005), pp. 1-36.

[7] For example, Dowland MS. (early 17th cent.?), York No. 3 MS. (1630), Poole MS. (1665), Ramsey MS. (second half 17th cent.), Phillipps MS. 3 (18th cent), Crane MS. 2 (1780), Wren MS (1852 copy of an alleged Old Charge MS of 1600). For further details, see the relevant entries in W. P. Hughan, *The Old Charges of the British*

understand how stonemasons were organised and what beliefs bound them together, researchers have spent a century engaged in a fruitless and innervating search for the origin of the text in the hope this will help find the origin of freemasonry.

In our search for the smoking gun which might reveal the origin of freemasonry, we constantly ignore the wider picture. The National Archives in London contains over 200 wills of men from different parts of England who died in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and described themselves as freemasons. These are available for download via family history sites such as Ancestry. These wills offer all sorts of sidelights into the social and economic status, craft organisation and cultural milieu of freemasons from 1450 to 1700. Among the testators are such distinguished craftsmen as John Orgar, the chief mason of the Bridge House trust in London whose will was proved in 1546,[8] and John Bentley, the Yorkshire freemason recruited by Sir Henry Savile to work on the Bodleian Library in Oxford whose will was proved in 1616.[9] Many other wills of freemasons can be found in other archives.

The freemasons who appear in these wills were not humble operative craftsmen but successful and well-to-do businessmen, like Thomas Jordan, a freemason of London whose will was proved in 1635,[10] who had lent Abraham Baker, a citizen and weaver of London, four hundred pounds, taking land in Kent as security. Jordan stipulated that three pounds should be given to 'such of the livery of the Company of Freemasons London as shalbe present in their liveryes at my funerall ... to be disposed of at the discretion of the Master Wardens and assistants of the said company'. Jordan also left three pounds to be divided among the 'most indigent members of the said company'. In 1488, Stephen Burton, a freemason of London, left 4d 'unto every pore woman of my Crafte within London'.[11] George Dallow, a freemason from Comley in Shropshire whose will was proved in 1611, listed over thirteen pounds of payments due to him at the time of his death for work at such nearby places as

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Freemasons 2nd edition (London: George Kenning, 1895) and Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones, *A Handlist of Masonic Documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1942).

[8] London, The National Archives, PROB 11/31/367; J. H. Harvey, *English Medieval Architects: a Biographical Dictionary down to 1550* (London: Batsford, 1954), p. 201.

[9] London, The National Archives, PROB 11/127/133; 'The Bodleian library', in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 3, the University of Oxford*, ed. H. E. Salter and Mary D. Lobel (London: Victoria History of the Counties of England, 1954), pp. 44-47: *British History Online* http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol3/pp44-47 (Accessed 8 December 2019).

[10] London, The National Archives, PROB 11/169/152.

[11] London, The National Archives, PROB 11/8/271.

Condover church, Montford bridge and Frodesley Hall.[12] Among the payments owing to Thomas Fells, a freemason of East Greenwich whose will was proved in 1609, was £6 15s from Sir William Cornwallis the elder, the essayist and friend of Ben Jonson, for transport of 300 feet of square stone, eighteen inches square, from Bishopsgate in London to Cornwallis's property at Brome in Northamptonshire.[13] Preoccupied with seeking the point of origin, there has been insufficient study of these wills which cast light on the economic and social conditions of stone masons in the period preceding the establishment of Grand Lodge and thereby help us understand the significance of its creation. The idol of origins saps our understanding of freemasonry.

Freemasonry is particularly prone to the worship of the idol of origins because it claims to preserve ancient landmarks of ritual and wisdom and sees itself as the incarnation of pure ancient masonry. Confronted with these claims, it is natural to ask where this pure ancient masonry comes from and what it represents. The rituals impart ancient secrets which purport to have been handed down through generations of stonemasons. We inevitably wonder where these ancient secrets come from and what their beginnings were. This search is made more febrile by the conviction that freemasonry hands down a hidden secret. Freemasons from James Anderson to Chevalier Ramsay, William Preston and George Oliver have fruitlessly used many different methods to try and discover this secret, and perhaps every masonic researcher is driven by the inner belief that, somehow, they will show what is all about. The idol of origins means masonic researchers too often prefer to speculate on the findings of previous researchers rather than go in search of new evidence. Pontification of the sort beloved of many freemasons feeds the appetite of the idol of origins and makes it more powerful, whereas the study of primary sources often denies the idol its sustenance.

The idol of origins is not only about a misplaced belief that finding the beginning will explain everything. It is also about power. Power of course permeates history, but expressions of power go beyond politics, diplomacy and war. Cultural power can be the most oppressive and destructive of all. Myths of origin are an important weapon of cultural power. They help keep nations together and monarchs on their thrones. Marc Bloch pointed out how history concerned with origins is frequently invoked to support value judgements. As he put it, whether the subject is the Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire

[12] London, The National Archives, PROB 11/117/198.
[13] London, The National Archives, PROB 11/113/312.

or the Norman Conquest of England, the past is used as an explanation of the present in order that the present might be better justified or condemned.[14] The search for origins is a means of developing histories which reinforce existing power structures in society.

Many things that we think of as age-old traditions are recent inventions, frequently intended to bolster nationalism. A famous collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Trevor Aston is called *The Invention of Tradition*.[15] The contributors to this book argue that many of the traditions thought to characterise the British nation are of very recent origin and were often deliberately manufactured. The British enthusiasm for royal ceremonial was an imperial creation of the early twentieth century,[16] while many aspects of the Scottish 'highland tradition' date back no further than the beginning of the nineteenth century.[17] The Welsh Druid ceremonies of the *Gorsedd* were invented by the opium addict Iolo Morgannwg in the early nineteenth century as a means of protecting the Welsh language in an increasingly industrialised society.[18]

In his introduction, Hobsbawm points out that this process of inventing tradition gained considerable momentum during the period between 1850 and the First World War, and suggests that it is linked to the growth of modern ideas of the nation. As Hobsbawm puts it, invented traditions 'are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the nation, with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest. All these depend on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative'.[19] The invention of tradition is a vital political weapon, and myths of national origin continue to be invented today by populist politicians across the world from Erdogan in Turkey and Victor Orban in Hungary to Narendra Modi in India. In a 1992 article for the

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[14] Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, p. 26.
[15] *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[16] David Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition"' in *Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Ranger, pp. 101-64.
[17] Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland' in *Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Ranger, pp. 15-42; Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History*, ed. Jeremy J. Cater (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
[18] Prys Morgan, 'From a Death to a View: the Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period' in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 62-6; *A Rattleskull Genius: The Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg*, ed. Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009); Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: the History of the Druids in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 146-347; Barry Cunliffe, *Druids: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 116-8.
[19] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' in *Invention of Tradition*, ed. Hobsbawm and Ranger, p. 13.

New York Review of Books, Hobsbawm trenchantly described the political importance of the creation and manipulation of traditions:

> History is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element, perhaps the essential element in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented. Indeed, in the nature of things there is usually no entirely suitable past, because the phenomenon these ideologies claim to justify is not ancient or eternal but historically novel.[20]

In his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm cites freemasonry as an example of an invented tradition 'of great symbolic force' and notes that it has been one of those 'well-supplied warehouses of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation' providing the raw materials for the construction of new traditions.[21] As elsewhere, the creation and manipulation of traditions in freemasonry reflects wider social, cultural and political movements. Despite its cosmopolitan veneer, freemasonry is particularly prone to the crack cocaine of nationalism, whether it is promoting the myth of George Washington in the United States, seeking to preserve the spirit of the French Revolution in Paris, or toasting the Queen in London, and freemasonry has both generated and been shaped by national cultures.

In reading our title today, you may have thought that we were going to prostrate ourselves before the idol of origins and reveal sensational new evidence about where freemasonry came from. We will not be doing that. Instead, we want to discuss how myths of the origin of freemasonry have been manipulated as a means of power play in freemasonry. We will illustrate how master narratives have been invented by different masonic bodies and individuals in an attempt to bolster their own power and influence. We will try to convince you, as researchers into freemasonry, that you should think less about where freemasonry came from and more about the way it has been constantly reinvented and reimagined to suit different social, cultural and political agendas.

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[20] Eric Hobsbawm, 'The New Threat to History', *New York Review of Books*, 16 December 1993, pp. 62-5, afterwards reprinted as Chapter 1 of Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997).
[21] Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', p. 6.

Modern freemasonry is the result of a complex process of historical change which began at least in the middle of the fourteenth century. In each century, freemasonry changed profoundly and was used for different social and cultural ends. As freemasonry developed, different stories were invented to justify its appropriation by a variety of elite groups in different countries. Our job is not to use these to try and trace a false pure point of origin for freemasonry but rather to look at the way these master narratives were invented and how they were used. We cannot as historians ever know what actually happened, and that generally is not an interesting question. We can however find out what people said about what they thought happened and that is a far more interesting subject.

The most striking illustration of the invention of masonic tradition are the stories around the creation of a Grand Lodge in London in the early eighteenth century. The Grand Lodge in London has consistently over three hundred years manipulated and reinvented historical tradition to bolster its own prestige and power. Its authority depends on historical inventions. But of course the United Grand Lodge of England is not unusual in the way it manipulates history for political ends. A foundation myth is one of the distinguishing features of a fraternal organisation. The website of the Oddfellows traces the origin of the order to 587 BC and states that 'the earliest legend of an Oddfellows fraternity is linked to the exile of the Israelites in Babylon, when many banded together into a brotherhood for mutual support'.[22] Similarly, the Druid friendly societies claim to be directly descended from the Druids of pre-Roman Britain.[23] We should not simply ignore such stories as rubbish. One of the most important roles of the historian is to examine how these stories were invented and the ways in which they are used for political purposes.

The United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE) has recently celebrated 300 years of freemasonry.[24] The way in which these celebrations were marketed is an example of the type of slippery terminology that, as Marc Bloch noticed, often muddies discussions of origins. The implication of the UGLE strapline is that freemasonry began in 1717. But even UGLE couldn't claim that. The

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[22] https://www.oddfellows.co.uk/about/history/ (Accessed 7 December 2019).
[23] Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, pp. 132-45; Cunliffe, *Druids*, pp. 125-7. *The Ancient Order of Druids Introductory Book* (London: Bro. Coningham, 1889) states that the Ancient Order of Druids was founded in time immemorial, but revived in 1781.
[24] 'Celebrating 300 Years. It's three hundred years since four London lodges met to establish the world's first Grand Lodge for Freemasons. Today there are over 6.5 million freemasons world-wide': https://www.ugle.org.uk/celebrating-300-years (Accessed 7 December 2019).

strange dramatization that was included in the Royal Albert Hall celebrations refers to the initiation of Elias Ashmole in 1646 and Sir Robert Moray at Newcastle in 1641, without mentioning that Moray's initiation was by members of the Lodge of Edinburgh.[25] The implication is that the Grand Lodge is equivalent to freemasonry, and that 300 years of Grand Lodge is 300 years of freemasonry.

But is a grand lodge all that freemasonry consists of? The creation of a grand lodge was after all simply an administrative device whereby the London lodges gave up their rights in trust to a representative assembly comprising Masters and Wardens and governed by Grand Officers.[26] Although the creation of the London Grand Lodge certainly marked a profound change and upsurge in freemasonry, is it right to suggest that a grand lodge is the essential feature of freemasonry? The claim to 300 years of freemasonry may also be seen as a veiled allusion to the emergence of a three degree system, but most authorities place the appearance of a third degree as a later development, perhaps during the 1720s.[27] Most of the other distinctive features of freemasonry – lodges on a territorial basis, the admission of members who were not working stonemasons, use of ritual, the mason word – can be found much earlier than 1717, particularly in Scotland.[28]

It is not clear why the Enlightenment form of freemasonry which developed in the eighteenth century is considered a purer form of masonry than that practiced in Scotland, Ireland and England in the seventeenth century. Why were we not celebrating 400 or even 700 years of freemasonry in 2017? The answer is simple: the United Grand Lodge of England was invoking and manipulating the past to bolster its claims to masonic primacy and to be an arbiter of regularity across the world.

Freemasonry has invoked the past since its inception. The two oldest surviving manuscripts describing the legendary masonic history, the Cooke

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[25] Masonic Charitable Foundation, Tercentenary Celebrations at Royal Albert Hall, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciNkEPBGc-o (Accessed 7 December 2019). On Moray, see David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century 1590-1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 166-89.

[26] 'The Grand-Lodge consists of, and is form'd by the Masters and Wardens of all the regular particular Lodges upon Record, with the Grand-Master at their head and the Grand-Wardens in their proper place': *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London: John Senex and John Hooke, 1723), p. 61; Andrew Prescott and Susan Mitchell Sommers, 'Did Anything Happen in 1717?', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 131 (2018), pp. 43-5.

[27] Jan A. M. Snoek and Henrik Bogdan, 'The History of Freemasonry: An Overview' in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Jan A. M. Snoek and Henrik Bogdan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 17-18.

[28] Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, p. 7.

manuscript and the Regius manuscript, both in the British Library in London, date from the early fifteenth century. Comparison of the texts show how they are independent compositions and are not derived from earlier lost histories.[29] The claim that the tenth-century King Æthelstan granted a charter to the stonemasons to hold an assembly is chronologically impossible and a characteristic medieval fabrication.[30] The legends in the Cooke and Regius manuscripts were created by junior stonemasons in order to justify meetings to protest against the controls over wages and prices imposed by legislation following labour shortages after the Black Death.[31] It was not enough for these journeymen masons to claim that a pre-conquest king had given them privileges. They invented a fabulous history claiming to show how kings and emperors had recognised the craft of masonry as special since the time of Noah. As the English government attempted to further control the wages of stonemasons and their rights to meet, the stonemasons in return elaborated their legendary history, fabricating stories of further charters and privileges.

The kind of process we see at work in the Cooke and Regius manuscripts also occurs in many other medieval institutions, ranging from guilds to monasteries.[32] The myths and fabrications of the stonemasons' documents are particularly valuable for the insights they provide into the outlook and mentality of the medieval artisan, as Lisa Cooper has shown in her book on *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Later Medieval England*.[33] Yet they have rarely been studied from that point of view. The other remarkable feature of these medieval legends of the stonemasons is their persistence. Although we do not have any other extant manuscripts until the end of the sixteenth century, manuscripts of these medieval legends proliferated during the seventeenth century. This may partly be related to continued disputes about the wage levels of masons – the levels of wages mentioned in sixteenth and seventeenth century

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[29] On Cooke, Regius and the Old Charges, see Prescott, 'Literary Contexts'; 'The Old Charges' in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, pp. 33-49; 'Inventing Symbols: the Case of the Stonemasons' in *Signs and Symbols: Proceedings of the 2006 Harlaxton Conference in Memory of Janet Backhouse* ed. A. Payne and J. Cherry (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2009), pp. 100-118.

[30] The York legend claims that Æthelstan sanctioned a meeting of masons under the auspices of his youngest son Edwin at York in 926. In 926, York was still under the rule of the Danish king Sihtric. It was not conquered by Æthelstan until 927: Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 18-19. There is no evidence that Æthelstan had a son called Edwin. In an attempt to rescue the legend, James Anderson suggested in the eighteenth century that the Edwin in question could have been Æthelstan's brother who drowned in 933: Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 235-7; Andrew Prescott, '"King Athelston That Was a Worthy Kinge of England"': Anglo-Saxon Myths of the Freemasons' in *The Power of Words: Anglo-Saxon Studies presented to Donald G. Scragg on his Seventieth Birthday* (Morgantown: University of West Virginia Press, 2006), pp. 397-434.

[31] Prescott, 'Old Charges', pp. 40-1.

[32] See, for example, Gervase Rosser, 'Myth, Image and Social Process in the English Medieval Town', *Urban History* 23:1 (1996), pp. 5-25.

[33] Lisa H. Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 56-82.

Old Charge manuscripts are manipulated in line with contemporary wage claims.

The spread of Old Charge manuscripts is also probably related to the major developments in the organisation of freemasonry in Scotland. The first surviving manuscript of the Old Charges after Cooke and Regius, Grand Lodge Manuscript 1, is dated 25 December 1583, just four days after the appointment of William Schaw as Master of the King's Works in Scotland.[34] This requires further investigation, but it is unlikely to be a coincidence. It seems possible that Schaw began his work by seeking evidence of masonic legends and that Grand Lodge Manuscript 1 may be a result of this . We cannot be completely certain of what happened, but Old Charge manuscripts were extensively in use in Scotland in the late seventeenth century,[35] and this illustrates how we should regard the process of the development of freemasonry from medieval times as a complex and varied continuum.

Much of the organisational structure of Freemasonry bears the impress of medieval guilds, such as quarterly meetings, the names of officers such as master and wardens, and the use of oaths. Another major element in the development of freemasonry were the organisational reforms instituted by William Schaw in Scotland, succinctly summarised by David Stevenson as including the earliest use of the word lodge in the modern masonic sense; the earliest lodge minute books; earliest examples of non-operatives joining lodges; earliest evidence of the use of symbols to communicate ethical ideas; and earliest references to the mason word.[36] The way in which the discussion of the origins of freemasonry has been distorted by masonic anxieties about national precedence is evident from the fact that this sixteenth and seventeenth century freemasonry in Scotland is consistently downplayed and disregarded, apparently out of concern that England's precedence may be undermined. Yet the people involved in the creation of the Grand Lodge in London knew that they needed to learn about Scotland. One of the first actions of Desaguliers after the creation of Grand Lodge in 1721 was to visit the Lodge of Edinburgh, where as David Stevenson observes there is the earliest evidence for the emergence of a third degree.[37]

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[34] Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, p. 26.
[35] Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, p. 211.
[36] Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, p. 7.
[37] Stevenson, *Origins of Freemasonry*, p. 152; Audrey T. Carpenter, *John Theophilus Desaguliers: A Natural Philosopher, Engineer and Freemason in Newtonian England* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 100-102

Masonic scholars have generated an extraordinary number of theories about the origin of freemasonry, which have been given imposing names like transitional, original birth, religious base, Rosicrucian, Enlightenment, Royal Society, and so on. The striking thing about all these theories is their difficulty in dealing with mixed and complex developments. They all assume linear lines of development, with key people or institutions portrayed as the originators of freemasonry. But history does not work like this. It is complex and full of the kind of knots of interconnections that Marc Bloch described. We can see this in the way that William Schaw took medieval traditions and fused them with Renaissance ideas. The fascination of Freemasonry is in trying to trace these interconnections and not in seeking to promote one theory above another – freemasonry is about transitions, Rosicrucians, monasticism, Enlightenment and the Royal Society, all together.

The foundation of a Grand Lodge in London has been taken as a key watershed in masonic history. As we have exhaustively documented elsewhere, all the existing evidence suggests that the story of the foundation of the Grand Lodge by four lodges in London in 1717 first published by James Anderson in the 1738 *Book of Constitutions* is unreliable.[38] It contains many internal contradictions and, where we can trace sources of information that Anderson probably used, they are suspect. Other contemporary testimony, such as that of the antiquary William Stukeley, contradicts Anderson. Furthermore, a contemporary minute in the possession of the Lodge of Antiquity in London states that the London lodges gave up their powers in trust to a Grand Lodge comprising masters and wardens of the lodges and under the direction of a Grand Master at a feast in Stationers Hall in London on 24 June 1721. Such a transfer of powers can only by definition happen once and, given the lack of contemporary evidence for the existence of Grand Lodge before 1721, we contend that the Grand Lodge in London was founded in 1721, not 1717.

It might seem that by insisting on the date of 1721 for the foundation of Grand Lodge we are closing out evidence for the earlier development of Freemasonry, but this is by no means the case. Rather, disposing of the shibboleth of 1717 makes it easier to accommodate evidence of earlier freemasonry. This evidence is not only confined to Scotland. In York, non-working masons seem to have been admitted to stonemasons' lodges in the

[38] Andrew Prescott and Susan Mitchell Sommers, "Searching for the Apple Tree : Revisiting the Earliest Years of English Organised Freemasonry' and 'New Light on the Life of James Anderson' in *Reflections on 300 Years of Freemasonry*, ed. John S. Wade (London : Lewis Masonic, 2017), pp. 641-54, 681-704; 'Did Anything Happen in 1717?', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 131 (2018), pp. 43-60.

seventeenth century.[39] There are hints of other organisations in Staffordshire and Cheshire.[40] There are also suggestions of early masonic activity in Ireland[41] and it is likely that Jacobite regiments and exiles had taken some freemasonry with them from Scotland to the continent after 1688.[42] Moreover, it is evident that the London masons lodges were organised and conscious of their traditions. The lodge at the Goose and Gridiron jealously guarded manuscripts of the Old Charges, some associated with the London masons' company. Some of these manuscripts include additional charges said to have been made at a general assembly of masons in 1663 and, since these are mentioned in multiple manuscripts, it may be that there is more evidence for such an assembly in 1663 than in 1717.[43] In short, there are many landmarks in the history of freemasonry, but no starting points. 1721, 1813, 1583 in Scotland, these are all important dates, but none of them represents the birth of freemasonry.

The creation of the Grand Lodge in 1721 was driven by Whig nobles who saw in freemasonry the potential for a powerful instrument to support the Hanoverian monarchy. Nevertheless, the appeal to the past and the invention of tradition had a prominent role. The prestige of the Goose and Gridiron Lodge was due to its custody of the oldest London copies of the legendary history of Freemasonry. The possession of such old manuscripts was vital to masonic authority and power. However, George Payne, the civil servant who marshalled the creation of Grand Lodge on behalf of the Duke of Montagu, managed to get custody of the Cooke manuscript, which he claimed was nearly 800 years old and embodied the ancient secrets of freemasonry. It was the possession of the legendary history of the Cooke manuscript which gave Payne and his colleagues the authority to drive through the creation of Grand Lodge.

This process in turn gave rise to another wholesale reinvention of history. Montagu, Payne and others were convinced that the medieval monks who had transcribed the Cooke manuscript had mangled the text. They felt that these monkish errors hid the true secrets of architecture and the ancient

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[39] Neville Barker Cryer, *York Mysteries Revealed* (Hersham: Lewis Masonic, 2006), pp. 186-214; David Harrison, *The York Grand Lodge* (Bury St Edmunds: Arima, 2014), pp. 15-34.
[40] For example, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C.918 is an elaborate book to be used by the Provincial Grand Lodge of West Chester but it is undated and it is uncertain whether it might predate the appointment of the first Provincial Grand Master for North Wales in 1727.
[41] Sean Murphy, 'Irish Jacobitism and Freemasonry', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* 9 (1994), pp. 75-82.
[42] Allan McInnes, 'Jacobitism in Scotland: Episodic Cause or National Movement?', *Scottish Historical Review* 86 (2007), pp. 248-9.
[43] These 'Additional Charges' are listed in Grand Lodge MS 2, London, British Library Harleian MS 1942 and in the Constitutions published by James Roberts in 1722: Hughan, *Old Charges*, pp. 121-5.

knowledge of the masons. James Anderson was commissioned to rescue these secrets by revising the medieval texts. Anderson produced a history of masonry and architecture freed from gothic errors and kitted out in a new Palladian dress. But, like the medieval charges, Anderson traced masonry back to the beginnings of time, declaring that there was no doubt that Adam taught his sons geometry. Anderson's work in reworking the legendary history into something appropriate for the age of Newton was contentious. The London publisher James Roberts complained that Anderson had made the Constitutions unnecessarily lengthy at the expense and damage of the society, and had had them printed without authorisation.[44] Doubt was expressed as to whether Anderson's work had been properly authorised and the first motion recorded in the new minute book of the Grand Lodge pointedly declared that it is 'not in the Power of any person, or Body of men, to make any Alteration, or Innovation in the Body of Masonry without the Consent first obtained of the Annual Grand Lodge'.[45]

The early Grand Lodge was keen to encourage this process of invention of the past. Grand Lodge was anxious to demonstrate it was older than its rivals. The Grand Lodge established in York in 1725 claimed to date back to Edwin.[46] The Jacobite Andrew Michael Ramsey made a celebrated speech in 1730 which sketched out an alternative narrative of the origins of Freemasonry, looking to the Templars and the Crusades.[47] This provided an alternative Jacobite and Tory history to counterweigh the Whig narrative of Anderson. In 1736, a Grand Lodge was also formed in Edinburgh, which looked back to Kilwinning and beyond. The Grand Lodge in London urgently needed to recapture the initiative in the claims to ancient status. It ordered James Anderson in preparing the revision of the Book of Constitutions published in 1738 to document the succession of Grand Masters back to the beginning of time. Anderson accordingly declared that the first Grand Master of Freemasons in England was St Augustine, thereby trumping York, and that the very first Grand Master of Masons was Noah.[48]

In 1738, it was these earlier antecedents which were more important to Anderson and the Grand Lodge in London than the story of 1717. Anderson

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[44] Prescott and Sommers, 'Did Anything Happen in 1717?', p. 50.
[45] *Quatuor Coronatorum Antigrapha* X (1913), p. 50; Prescott and Sommers, 'Did Anything Happen in 1717?', p. 50
[46] Prescott and Sommers, 'Did Anything Happen in 1717?', p. 55.
[47] Lisa Kahler, 'Andrew Michael Ramsay and his Masonic Oration', *Heredom* 1 (1992), pp. 19-47.
[48] 1738 *Constitutions*, pp. 4, 140.

never claimed that Grand Lodge was begun in 1717; he presents it as a revival. It was a story pieced together from various claims and tales current in the 1730s to fill a gap in the links back to Noah. When the new *Book of Constitutions* was published in 1738, little notice was taken of the story of 1717. Contemporaries were more interested in the older fables. Laurence Dermott, the Grand Secretary of the Ancients, mocked this custom of prefacing masonic publications with 'a long and pleasing history of Masonry from the Creation'.[49] Dermott was determined to go one better by writing the history of masonry before the creation, including an account of the first Grand Lodge when Lucifer was expelled from heaven. Are such histories of any use in understanding the secret mysteries of the craft, Dermott wondered.[50]

The potency of historical narratives, invented and otherwise, in freemasonry was apparent in William Preston's defence of the privileges of the Lodge of Antiquity, the successor of the Goose and Gridiron Lodge.[51] Others continued to wonder what secrets lay behind freemasonry. Indeed, it seems that the search for an ur-religion, something that preoccupied such early eighteenth-century figures as Anderson and Stukeley, is a fundamental theme in the history of freemasonry.[52] At the end of the eighteenth century, writers like Thomas Paine used historical narratives of freemasonry to attack Christianity.[53] Paine suggested that Christianity was a blasphemous perversion of the sun religion, and that freemasonry preserved the secrets of the primeval religion. The Yorkshire radical and social activist Godfrey Higgins became a freemason in order to investigate these claims more deeply. With the backing of the Duke of Sussex, who was also deeply interested in the origins of religion, Higgins explored the records of the Grand Lodge in York and took away early copies of the Old Charges. In *Anacalypsis*, published posthumously in 1834, Higgins used these documents as evidence that freemasonry embodied rituals of the ancient sun religion of which the masons were the high priests. These claims were popularised by the radical writer and campaigner Richard Carlile,

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[49] Laurence Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon, or Help to a Brother...* (London: Printed for the Editor and sold by Bro James Bedford at the Crown in St Paul's Churchyard, 1756), p. v.
[50] *Ahiman Rezon*, pp. vi-vii.
[51] William Preston, *State of Facts: Being a Narrative of Some Late Proceedings in the Society of Free Masons, Respecting William Preston* (London: n.p., 1778), reprinted in *British Freemasonry 1717-1813*, vol. 1, Institutions, ed. Cecile Revauger (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 241-300.
[52] David Boyd Haycock, *William Stukeley : Science, Religion and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002).
[53] For all the following, see Andrew Prescott, '"The Cause of Humanity": Charles Bradlaugh and Freemasonry', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, 116 (2003), pp. 26-28, and Andrew Prescott, 'Godfrey Higgins and his *Anacalypsis*', *Library and Museum News for the Friends of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry*, 12 (Spring 2005), pp. 2-6.

who published a substantial collection of masonic rituals in his periodical *The Republican* in 1825.

These esoteric views of the traditions of freemasonry profoundly influenced the development of freemasonry in the first half of the nineteenth century. One thread in the complex politics surrounding the Duke of Sussex's promotion of the union of the two Grand Lodges in England was his interest in reviving the ancient religion described by his associate Higgins.[54] Perhaps even more influential was the reaction to Higgins's work by George Oliver, an associate and supporter of Robert Crucefix. Crucefix and his party were thorns in the side of the Duke of Sussex as they campaigned to modernise freemasonry with the publication of masonic periodicals containing reports on the proceedings of Grand Lodge and the promotion of charitable campaigns such as home for elderly masons.[55] Oliver developed a Christian riposte to the deist theories of radicals such as Higgins and Carlile.[56] Oliver accepted their assumptions about the antiquity of religion, but sought to show that early religions were part of God's purpose and paved the way for Christianity, the highest expression of religious belief. For Oliver, freemasonry was the indispensable handmaid to the Christian religion and could only be fully appreciated by Christians. Oliver described his vast researches (reminiscent perhaps of the intellectual endeavours of Edward Casaubon) as a 'systematic attempt to identify Freemasonry with the religious institutions of ancient nations, *as typical of the universal religion of Christ*'.[57] Oliver's ultimate aim was to show that 'not only the legends, symbols and lectures of Freemasonry bear an undoubted reference to the Messiah promised at the fall of man; but also that the Order itself, in the earliest ages, was a legitimate branch of true religion'.[58] Oliver did not claim that freemasonry should be exclusively Christian, but argued that because Christianity was the highest form of ethics, the genius of freemasonry could only be fully appreciated by freemasons.

Oliver's teachings, constantly reiterated by masonic chaplains and popularised by masonic periodicals such as *The Freemasons' Quarterly Review* and *The Freemason*, had an enormous impact on Victorian freemasonry. Oliver invented historical materials on a vast scale to support his Christian

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[54] Prescott, 'Godfrey Higgins'.
[55] R. S. E. Sandbach, *Priest and Freemason: the Life of George Oliver* (Addlestone: Lewis Masonic, 1988); Susan Mitchell Sommers, 'Robert Thomas Crucefix, Redux', *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 3:1 (2012), pp. 73-97.
[56] For the following, see Sandbach, *Priest and Freemason*, pp. 32-42, 122-48.
[57] *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, 30 June 1844, p. 136.
[58] *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, 30 June 1844, p. 137.

view of freemasonry. One of his most popular publications, *The Revelations of a Square*, which appeared in 1855, told the story of English freemasonry from 1717 to 1813 through the voice of a square which had supposedly participated in key events.[59] Although the narrative was told through a fictional mouthpiece, Oliver claimed the facts were correct, and based on a diary by his father, who he alleged had known Desaguliers, Anderson, Preston and others.[60] Oliver inserts many footnotes into the narrative, but, while many refer to genuine books, others cite publications which do not exist.[61] According to Oliver, Desaguliers was entirely responsible for the events of 1717.[62] He had been initiated at the Goose and Gridiron and was encouraged by Christopher Wren to revive masonry and arranged the meetings which led to the formation of Grand Lodge. Oliver claimed that Desaguliers and Anderson insisted that the ritual at that time should be explicitly Christian. Oliver alleges that at that time 'the Book of Common Prayer, according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, was an established lodge book, as it was considered to contain all the moral principles of the order'.[63] What the Scottish presbyterian James Anderson would have made of such a claim, it is difficult to imagine – it is of course all complete invention by Oliver.

The myth of 1717 was a creation of the Victorian period and Oliver was one of the major contributors to its development. You will remember how Hobsbawm described the rise of nationalism and imperialism as the generator of invented traditions, and Oliver epitomises this. He was keen to stress the Christian dimension to freemasonry so that freemasonry could provide a social underpinning to the British Empire. On the occasion of a presentation of an engraved silver cup and service of plate as a masonic offering to Oliver at

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[59] George Oliver, *The Revelations of a Square; Exhibiting a Graphic Display of the Sayings and Doings of Eminent Free and Accepted Masons from the Revival in 1717 by Dr Desaguliers, to the Re-Union in 1813 by their R.H. the Dukes of Kent and Sussex* (London: Richard Spencer, 1855).

[60] *Revelations of a Square*, pp. vii-viii: 'the following pages must not be accounted fabulous and without authority ... for the author is in possession of authentic vouchers for every transaction'.

[61] Examples of fabricated references by Oliver are: p. 4 [Simeon Townsend, *Observations and Enquiries relating to the Brotherhood of Freemasons* (1712)]; p. 22 [J. T. Desaguliers, *An Eloquent Oration about Masons and Masonry, delivered 24 January 1721*]; p. 23 [James Anderson, *On the Rise and Progress of Freemasonry*]; p. 90 [*Manifesto and Mason's Creed* (London, 1755)]. On pp. 98-99, Oliver lists four sermons concerning freemasonry by John Entick. The first, *The Free and Accepted Mason Described* preached at St Stephen Walbrook 25 June 1750, is known only from the list of books published by Jonathan Scott at the end of the 1756 Book of Constitutions; the second and third, *The Free and Accepted Mason Truly Stated* and *A True Representation of Freemasonry*, a lecture delivered at the King's Lodge in the Poultry London, 20 March 1751, are not recorded elsewhere; the fourth sermon by Entick listed by Oliver, *A Caution to Free and Accepted Masons, in a sermon preached at St Mildred in the Poultry, London, on the 26th of October 1752* does however survive in a single copy in the British Library (ESTC T28946). Some of Oliver's other references may be wishful thinking. On p. 90 he cites *The Mason's Creed to which will be Subjoin'd a Curious Letter from Brother Locke...* The publication of a volume under this title was announced in the *Public Advertiser* of 26 June and 8 July 1754, but no copy has so far been traced.

[62] *Revelations of a Square*, pp. 1-20.

[63] *Revelations of a Square*, p. 16.

Lincoln in June 1844, Robert Goodacre junior, a journalist, prominent freemason and Oddfellow and member of the Lincoln Board of Guardians,[64] made the imperial and evangelical implications of Oliver's work explicit, noting that the contributors to the fund came from all over the British Empire and expressing enthusiasm that a lodge had recently been established for Indians in India. Goodacre saw 'the introduction of Freemasonry amongst our native fellow subjects of India as but the precursor to that better intercourse which shall terminate in their civilization, and, I trust I am not out of order when I add, their Christianization'.[65] For Oliver, 1717 was an act of Christian freemasonry, led by clergymen, and an expression of English moral primacy. While Oliver saw the roots of freemasonry reaching back millennia, it was England that had brought the light of masonry to the modern world.

The influence of clergymen like Oliver on English freemasonry horrified those exiled French freemasons who arrived in Britain after 1848 and the coup of Louis Napoleon in 1851.[66] They loudly criticised English freemasonry through émigré publications like *La Chaîne d'Union*. Such criticisms encouraged a reaction against Oliver and earlier writers such as Preston, and the researchers associated with the creation of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge in London, such as Robert Freke Gould, pioneered work on the history of freemasonry using the latest antiquarian techniques of documentary criticism.

In clearing away such historical detritus as Oliver's *Revelations of a Square*, Gould was confronted by many problems. If later works by people like Oliver and Preston were put to one side, the only narrative of 1717 was in Anderson's 1738 Constitutions, compiled twenty years after the event by a man who wasn't involved in any of the events described. While some bits of Anderson are contemporary, and may be regarded as a primary source, others are fanciful. Where do we draw the dividing line which marks the division between Anderson the unreliable secondary source and Anderson the primary source? The best answer is probably the point at which Anderson was an eye witness for the events described, which would be free about 1722 onwards. However, Gould decided to draw the line earlier, at 1717, with fateful consequences. In his key discussion of the Four Old Lodges, published in 1879, Gould argues that Anderson is reliable as a source from about 1715 but

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[64] John T. Godfrey, *Manuscripts relating to the County of Nottingham in the Possession of Mr James Ward of Nottingham* (London: Henry Southeran, 1900), p. 91.
[65] *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, 30 June 1844, p. 129.
[66] Prescott, 'Cause of Humanity', pp. 28-39.

completely discounts all the earlier sections of Anderson's work.[67] The result is that 1717 emerges as the fundamental moment of masonic history and the creation of Grand Lodge the decisive act in the creation of modern freemasonry. Gould describes the London Grand Lodge as the 'premier grand lodge of the world' which has become a wonder and pattern to the craft.[68] Gould leaves his readers in no doubt of the primacy of the English Grand Lodge and its central role in the creation of modern freemasonry.

Gould was writing shortly after the French Grand Orient had revised the first article of its constitution to remove references to the Great Architect of the Universe. The Irish and Scottish Grand Lodges (and even Mother Kilwinning) quickly protested against this move, but the United Grand Lodge of England was anxious to demonstrate its claim to be the arbiter of regularity. It duly barred visitors from constitutions which did not require a belief in the Great Architect of the Universe. This bought accusations that the English Grand Lodge was excommunicating other freemasons.

Gould himself had been involved in the dispute which led to the English Grand Lodge withdrawing recognition from the Grand Orient of France. He had served on the committee of the English Grand Lodge which examined the actions of the Grand Orient of France and recommended that relations between the two Grand Lodges cease.[69] Gould's study of the events of 1717 was clearly designed to provide an exhaustive analysis of the available evidence supporting the claims of the English Grand Lodge to be the Premier Grand Lodge of the world. Gould's portrayal of 1717 as a pivotal moment in the history of Freemasonry was essential to maintain the prestige of the English Grand Lodge and to provide it with the authority to excommunicate other Grand Lodges in France and elsewhere.

Since the time of Gould, the conventional Anglophone view of masonic history has been what can be described as a 'big bang' theory, with freemasonry rapidly spreading across the world as a result of the creation of the Grand Lodge. Such a view of course again bolsters the self-image of the English Grand Lodge as the Premier Grand Lodge of the world. Does such a big bang model fit our understanding of the growth of freemasonry in the eighteenth century? From the point of view of Britain and its colonies, such a model

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[67] R. F. Gould, *The Four Old Lodges, Founders of Modern Freemasonry, and their Descendants* (London: Spencer, 1879)
[68] Gould, *Four Old Lodges*, p. 47.
[69] *Freemasons' Chronicle*, 8 December 1877.

underplays the vital role of Scottish and Irish freemasonry, particularly through regimental lodges. In thinking about British freemasonry, we need to think much more about the interplay between these jurisdictions, and less about which is the premier organisation. While English influence can be seen in the earliest lodge in the Netherlands, with two of the founding members having been initiated in England, it seems like that the early development of freemasonry was also strongly shaped by the sociable and fraternal forms which had already arisen in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, including bodies such as the Chevaliers de la Jubilation described by Margaret Jacob.[70] Likewise, in France, freemasonry did not simply spread from England in a linear fashion. The growth of freemasonry meshed together various groups and practices, including both Jacobite and Hanoverian lodges as well as other forms of sociability. We need to look less at spread and single points of origin, and more at interconnections and cross-fertilisation.

Marc Bloch was a pioneer of trans-national history. A major regret in preparing this lecture is that, because of my training and previous experience as primarily a historian of Britain, I haven't been able to open up sufficient trans-national perspectives. This is a pity, because it becomes increasingly clear that in studying the history of freemasonry we need to break out of national silos. Freemasonry is a cosmopolitan and international phenomenon, and needs to be studied in that way. Traditions are invented to bolster nationalism, and this is just as true in the history of freemasonry as elsewhere. We will not break free of these national blinkers by drilling further and further down towards imagined hidden origins. We will only develop a rounded trans-national view of freemasonry by looking at the way that different stories are told and imagined about it and seeing how these interconnect. Marc Bloch urged us to look at the interconnectedness of human institutions and cultures. Seeking this interconnectedness is the ultimate key to freemasonry.

[70] Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* 2nd ed. (New Orleans: Cornerstone Books, 2006).