

The Many Stones of York Rite Masonry

© 1 March 2008 by Jeff Day, King of Reames Chapter No. 28, in Grants Pass, Oregon

Masons are builders in stone. So what does our craft of speculative Masonry teach us concerning stones?

In the symbolic degrees, there are really only three stones brought prominently to our attention: the cornerstone, the rough ashlar, and the perfect ashlar. In fact, the latter two are not even particular stones but, rather, whole classes of stones.



The Cornerstone

As Entered Apprentice Masons, we are taught that the first cornerstone is placed in the northeast corner of the building whereupon to erect the future superstructure, and this idea is extended to the erection of our own inner temple, it being a spiritual building.

The Rough Ashlar & The Perfect Ashlar

We are also told that each one of us is a living stone, and that the tools of Masonry, when properly applied to a rough ashlar, can turn it into a perfect ashlar and make it fit (suitable) for the builder's use. In the Mark Master degree, the overseers are charged to receive these perfect ashlars (square stones) only. Being the first step taken into the York Rite, perhaps this is a subtle indicator that only those who have taken the time to apply those lessons learned in the symbolic lodge upon their lives are fit for reception into the Mark lodge and Holy Royal Arch chapter.

As each Freemason is represented as a stone, it is significant that Master Masons are taught to use the trowel to cement the building into one common mass.

The capitular degrees introduce us to several other more specific stones:

The "First" Keystone



The first of these particular stones which we encounter is the keystone of the Mark Master. In reference to this stone, the degree cites the scripture about the "white stone" in the Book of Revelation.

Elsewhere in the degree, reference is made to another scripture, of which various readings may be found throughout the Bible.

While this scripture is presumably used to refer to the same stone, it speaks of "the chief stone of the corner" and "the head stone of the corner". According to the representation of this stone in Masonic legend, it is certainly not a cornerstone, as those are the first stones to be laid in the erection of a building, and this stone is the last to be fitted into a piece of architecture.

Our ritual says it belonged to one of the principal arches of the Temple. The Latin Vulgate, in the original reference to this verse in Psalms 118:22, calls the stone the "caput anguli" which means head corner or top corner, and the freshest translation from the Hebrew on which I could get my hands (NJPS) also says "chief cornerstone". One way or the other, the idea is that it is an important stone without which the building could not be complete.

The Cope-Stone (a/k/a "capstone", "coping stone")

The next stone we encounter is used in the Most Excellent Master degree, and it is, perhaps mistakenly, referred to or depicted as a keystone. There is some argument to be made that this is indeed the same stone which was depicted in the Mark Master degree, however, there are enough differences about its treatment that I will keep them distinct to avoid adding any further confusion to an already confusing subject.

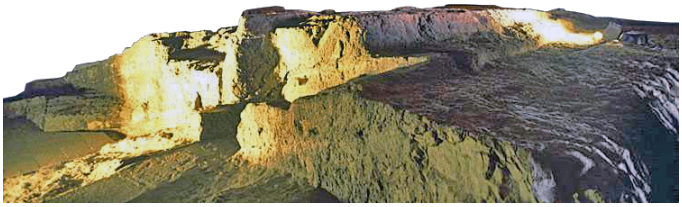
The ritual refers to it as a cope stone, which is a more accurate name for it than a keystone, as it is the stone which completes the building of the entire Temple structure, not merely one of its arches.

The Cryptic Keystone

The supreme degree of Holy Royal Arch Mason introduces us to a keystone that is often mistaken for the cope-stone in the Most Excellent Master degree, but is in fact found at the entrance to the arched vault beneath Solomon's Temple.

The cryptic degrees explore the subject of the vault more fully; but, in the treatment of this subject, we are interested only in the stone itself, which is introduced in the Holy Royal Arch Mason degree.

The Foundation Stone (Both of Them?)



According to Jewish legend, the Stone of Foundation is the stone upon which the Ark of the Covenant rested in the Holy of Holies.

The cryptic degree of Select Master and, by extension, the Holy Royal Arch degree, imply that there is, however, another Foundation Stone within the secret vault secret vault of Solomon's Temple. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33°, MEPGHP, wrote in his *Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences* that "It makes its first appearance in the Royal Arch, and forms indeed the most important symbol of that Degree." It is not evident from the context of this statement whether he speaks of the York Rite's Holy Royal Arch Degree or the Scottish Rite's Thirteenth Degree, but the Foundation Stone itself certainly features more prominently in the Scottish Rite ritual.

This Foundation Stone has been described as a cubical stone of white porphyry, buried in the earth except for three inches protruding from the ground. Albert Mackey warns us not to confound this with the perfect ashlar, which is sometimes also called the "cubical stone" in continental Freemasonry. While the Scottish Rite's 13th Degree has the Ineffable Name of Deity inscribed upon the stone itself, the Select Master degree in the Cryptic Rite has the Word placed upon the Ark which is itself deposited on the Stone of Foundation. The Rabbinical writings of the Talmud concur that the Stone (speaking now of the one in the Holy of Holies, not the one in the vault) was the receptacle of the Ineffable Name, and go further to state that the Stone was in the centre of the earth, being the Foundation Stone of the Earth itself, and that Jacob used the Stone as a pillow upon which to rest his head, and dreamt of the ladder to Heaven.

Conclusion

All these stones are fascinating, but what do they mean to you? Do they all represent character traits within us, or individual Freemasons, as do the stones in the craft degrees? Or do they represent concepts, ideas, or some deeper spiritual truth?