More Ancient; More Honorable

A Look at the Apron Presentation in the Entered Apprentice Degree

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During the Entered Apprentice degree in Freemasonry, the presentation of the apron includes a memorable phrase describing it as "more ancient than the golden fleece, or Roman eagle, more honorable than the star and garter."

This is a line that every Master Mason has memorized at some point in his journey, but it is rarely discussed for its significance and hardly mentioned in Masonic Education, and thus is a proper object for an esoteric evaluation, even though it might not have as much meat on the bone as other topics in contemporary esoterica. The comparison to the Golden Fleece, Roman Eagle, and Star and Garter draws upon significant historical orders and symbols of power, each carrying its own rich history and prestigious significance. Understanding it will add value to the esoteric journey of each Blue Lodge Mason.

The Origins of Referenced Honors

The Order of the Golden Fleece, established in 1430 by Philip III “the Good”, Duke of Burgundy, represents one of the most prestigious orders of chivalry in European history. Founded in Bruges, Flanders, to commemorate Philip's wedding to Isabella of Portugal, the order was initially limited to 23 knights, though membership would later expand to 53 members. The order's purpose extended beyond mere ceremonial functions; it was established to defend the Roman Catholic religion, uphold chivalric traditions, and enhance the prestige of the Burgundian dukes. Knights of the order enjoyed significant privileges, including exclusive jurisdiction over crimes committed by members, as granted by Emperor Charles V.[1]

But is 1430 really that “ancient?” It seems there may be additional context available here with a bit of a deeper dive. Moving beyond the Chivalric history of Europe and back to ancient Greece, we identify another established usage of the term.

The mythological origins of the Golden Fleece stem from a tale of Greek royal intrigue, where Thessaly's King Pelias sought to eliminate his nephew Jason by sending him on what seemed an impossible quest. The young hero was tasked with retrieving the legendary Golden Fleece, a mystical artifact suspended from an oak tree in Colchis at the shrine of Ares, where a fearsome dragon stood guard. Jason's subsequent journey with his crew of fifty heroes became one of Greek mythology's most celebrated narratives. The fleece itself had a storied history, having come from a supernatural ram that carried Phrixus and Helle to safety from certain death. Only Phrixus survived this aerial escape, and upon reaching safety, he placed the fleece in Ares' sacred grove.[2]

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[1] The Order of the Golden Fleece | European Knighthood Order.” n.d. Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed November 17, 2020. https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Order-of-the-Golden-Fleece.

[2] Johnston, John K. 2011. Review of *It Is More Ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, More Honourable That the Star or Garter. Buchanan Lodge*, December (December), 2.

The Order of the Golden Fleece's establishment in Europe came centuries later, when Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy created it seemingly in lieu of a good bachelor party, and whose father was King John I of Portugal, in January of 1429. The choice of the fleece as the order's symbol reflected the economic importance of wool production in the Low Countries where the order held influence.[3] The order's leadership transferred to Hapsburg control in 1477 through the marriage of Mary of Burgundy to Duke Maximilian. The order's final unified chapter convened under Philip II of Spain in Ghent's cathedral. A significant split occurred when the Spanish Netherlands transferred to Austrian control in 1713-14, leading to competing Austrian and Spanish branches of the order.[4]

The Roman Eagle's history extends even further back, representing one of the most ancient symbols of power referenced in the ritual. Initially adopted from the Greeks[5], the Romans utilized the eagle as their highest emblem of dignity, honor, and power. Typically crafted in bronze, though sometimes in precious metals like gold and silver, the eagle was displayed with outstretched wings atop a staff, serving as a standard bearer for Roman legions. The symbol's influence continued well beyond the Roman era, with Napoleon adopting metal eagles for his army in 1804, and both Austria and Russia employing double eagles as imperial symbols.[6]

The Order of the Garter, established around 1344 by Edward III, stands as the highest order of English knighthood. The term "stars and garters" emerged in the early eighteenth century as a collective reference to the various medals, honors, and decorations associated with knighthood, along with their recipients.[7] This usage is notably documented in Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" circa 1712, which references "Peers, and Dukes, and all their sweeping train, And Garters, Stars, and Coronets."[8]

The Masonic Apron in Context

The Masonic apron itself carries practical origins rooted in operative masonry. Originally, the Entered Apprentice wore an apron with a protective bib secured around the neck, designed to shield the upper body when handling heavy stones. As apprentices advanced to become artisans, focusing on smoothing and preparing stones, the upper portion became less necessary and was allowed to fold down, creating the distinctive triangular overlay that characterizes the modern Masonic apron.[9]

Historical Significance

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[3] Johnston, 2

[4] Johnston, 3

[5] Greet, Benjamin James Robert. 2015. Review of *The Roman Eagle: A Symbol and Its Evolution*. PDF, The University of Leeds.

[6] Taggart, Jon. 2023. “Bronze Eagles: A Guide to Their History and Significance - Bronzeman.” Bronzeman. August 2, 2023. https://bronzeman.com/blog-post/bronze-garden-statues/bronze-eagles-a-guide-to-their-history-and-significance.

[7] “Stars and Garters.” 2025. Worldwidewords.org. 2025. https://www.worldwidewords.org/qa-sta5.html.

[8] “The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems, by Pope.” 2011. Gutenberg.org. 2011. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9800/9800-h/9800-h.htm.

[9] Johnston, 1

The comparison of the Masonic apron to these ancient and honorable orders and symbols serves multiple purposes. First, it establishes the apron's significance by associating it with widely recognized symbols of power and prestige. Second, it places Masonic traditions within a broader historical context of honor and dignity. The reference to both ancient symbols (the Roman eagle) and medieval orders (the Golden Fleece and Order of the Garter) creates a bridge across historical periods, emphasizing the timeless nature of Masonic teachings and symbols.

The Golden Fleece's exclusive membership requirements, limiting it to Roman Catholics of the highest nobility,[10] and the Order of the Garter's status as the pinnacle of English knighthood, provide a stark contrast to the more egalitarian nature of Freemasonry, where moral character rather than social status determines one's worthiness to wear the apron.

Thoughts on Esoteric Significance

The evolution of the Masonic apron from a functional garment to a symbolic badge of honor carries deeper significance when examined through an esoteric lens. The physical transformation of the apron's form—from a full bib-style protective garment to one where the upper portion folds down to create a triangular overlay on a square—presents a compelling geometric symbolism. The triangle superimposed on the square can be interpreted as representing the relationship between the spiritual (represented by the triangle) and the material (represented by the square) realms.[11]

This geometric symbolism gains additional meaning when considered alongside the ancient honors referenced in the ritual. The Golden Fleece's mythological origins—involving Jason's heroic quest to retrieve a divine artifact guarded by a dragon—parallel the Masonic journey of self-discovery and enlightenment. Just as Jason had to prove himself worthy of claiming the fleece, the Masonic candidate must demonstrate their worthiness to wear the apron. The transformative nature of both journeys suggests a deeper connection between the physical symbol and the spiritual development it represents.

The apron's evolution from a practical craftsman's tool to a badge of honor mirrors the very journey referenced in the Golden Fleece mythology. Just as the mythical fleece transcended its origins as the pelt of a divine ram to become both a quest object and later a symbol of one of Europe's most prestigious orders of knighthood, the Masonic apron transcends its operative masonry origins to become a symbol of spiritual and moral achievement. This transformation emphasizes the fundamental Masonic principle of using the practical tools and methods of operative masonry to convey moral and philosophical teachings.

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10 “Order of the Golden Fleece - HRE.” 2022. Holyromanempireassociation.com. 2022. https://holyromanempireassociation.com/distinguished-order-of-the-golden-fleece.html.

11 Lund, Rob. n.d. Review of *Mystic Masonry: In Symbol, Ritual, and Allegory Symbolism of the 1st Degree*. *Killwinning Lodge No. 565*, 18. Accessed January 15, 2025.

Conclusion

The Masonic apron presentation ritual's comparison to the Golden Fleece, Roman Eagle, and Star and Garter demonstrates a carefully crafted symbolic framework that operates on multiple levels. On the historical level, these references connect Freemasonry to some of Western civilization's most prestigious orders and emblems of authority. The Roman Eagle's military might, the Golden Fleece's chivalric exclusivity, and the Star and Garter's noble dignity all serve to elevate the significance of the simple craftsman's apron. Yet, paradoxically, this comparison also highlights Freemasonry's more egalitarian nature, suggesting that true honor derives not from social status but from moral character and personal development.

The deeper esoteric significance of the apron, particularly in its geometric transformation from a practical garment to a symbolic badge, reveals Freemasonry's philosophical sophistication. The triangle overlaying the square in the modern apron's design creates a visual representation of the intersection between spiritual and material realms, mirroring the candidate's own journey toward enlightenment. Through this lens, the apron becomes more than just a badge of membership; it serves as a constant reminder of the Mason's commitment to personal transformation and moral development, making it truly "more ancient" and "more honorable" than the prestigious orders referenced in its presentation.