

A Ram, an Eagle, and Two Orders

From time immemorial, those in power to acknowledge outstanding individuals and to create orders of honor and chivalry created symbolic emblems, medals, and high orders of recognition.

“More ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle”, it sounds like something we may have learned about back in our high school days. Do you recall your Greek Mythology; “Homer and the Iliad” with Jason and the Argonauts performing a heroic deed in rescuing the Golden Fleece in 939 BC. Mythology holds that the Golden Fleece was supposed by the Greeks to be hidden in a remote land far across the sea. This precious fleece grew upon the back of a ram, the gift of one of their gods.



The Golden Fleece

The ram was constantly guarded by bulls that breathed fire and by a dragon that never slept. The promise to the Greeks was (or so the fable went) that if they could find and recover the Golden Fleece and bring it to Greece, wealth and prosperity would abound in that country. The hope of redeeming that promise led to the formation of an order which embraced in its membership many of the most illustrious men of that period, who were called Argonauts from the name of the ship, Argo, on which they sailed. Tradition is replete with the daring deeds and suffering of those men for the cause in which they were then engaged.

Somewhat later, in England, Philip, the Duke of Burgundy, founded the Order of the Golden Fleece in 1429 as an Order equal to the British “Star and Garter” as a means to keep alive chivalry, to honor old knights, and as a means to tie this Order to his title, which would in turn extend his heritage. The name of the Order and its badge, a pendant of sheep’s fleece made of gold, was a new device for the House of Burgundy and was certainly intended to represent the fleece sought by Jason and the Argonauts.

The adoption of a pagan image as the badge of a Christian Order led to a loud protest by the Order’s first Chancellor, the Bishop of Nevers, who preferred that it should recall Gideon’s fleece (which was neither made of gold nor was it a prize awarded for courage). Later in the century, Chancellor Guillame Filastes added the fleeces of Jacob, Job and David to be associated with this image, supposedly corresponding to the virtues of justice, prudence, fidelity, patience and clemency. The badge was designed to be suspended from a collar worn around the neck.

There is a much more practical explanation of the legend of the Golden Fleece. From the earliest days, it was known that a sheepskin, placed in the bed of a stream where there was alluvial gold, would catch and entangle the fine particles of gold and small nuggets as they rolled down the streambed. The fleece was then carefully removed from the stream, dried, and the gold dust shaken out into a suitable container.



The Roman Eagle

The Roman Eagle became the symbol of imperial power about a century before Christ. It was the most prominent fixture or symbol throughout the Roman Empire, and was intended to remind everyone as to who was in power. It preceded all Roman armies when marching to and from battle.

But, the ritual use of an apron has a much earlier history than any of these. The Bible mentions a garment worn by the High Priest, called the Ephod, described as an apron or skirt covering the body from the waist down, made of white linen with shoulder straps, possibly a bib. Elijah and John the Baptist wore aprons of leather. Isaiah wore an apron of haircloth. Jeremiah wore an apron of Linen. The ancient Druids wore a white apron for the sacred duty of cutting mistletoe. Priests of the Roman gods wore white when making sacrifices. It is obvious that these various faiths chose a white garment to symbolize the importance of purity of heart when going about the work of God. To us, as Speculative Masons, it is a reminder of our very ancient and divine heritage.



The order of the Garter

Our ritual goes on to describe our apron as having more honor than the Star and Garter or any other order that can be conferred. The Star and Garter are actually two separate Orders. The Order of the Star originated in France, and was founded by John II in 1350 solely to imitate the recently instituted Order of the Garter in England. The name of the Order has allusion to the Star of Bethlehem, or the Star of the Magi.

King Edward III founded the Order of the Garter in 1348 as a noble fraternity consisting of the King, the Prince of Wales and 24 Knights Companion. One rather picturesque version of the founding of this order tells of the King attending a grand ball where a lady lost one of her garters. Bending down to pick it up, the lady blushing of embarrassment and those present laughing, the King quickly remarked, “dishonor to him who thinks evil of it.” He tied the garter around his own leg and vowed to turn it into the most honored garter ever worn. Since its inception, it remains to this day as the highest Order of English Chivalry.

These Old Orders really don't have much meaning to our present day society, however, during those time periods; non-masons considered these orders to be the ultimate honor that could be bestowed upon an individual. High honors that we can all identify with today, range from the Medal of Honor, the Nobel Peace Prize, and the Medal of Freedom.

In European Masonry, the practice is that upon initiation you are given an unblemished white leather apron (just as we do), but as you progress in the Lodge you are allowed to sew Masonic emblems and symbols of offices you held upon it. Also each lodge has chosen specific colors for the border of the apron to identify their lodge from others. Essentially, your apron becomes your own personal visual Masonic record.

It may be much too easy for us to attach symbols to our lapels, come to lodge, and tie an apron about our waist without pausing to give these emblems even the slightest passing thought. Over many centuries of Masonic history we see evidence of varied and ornate aprons.



But I hasten to remind you that there is nothing; I repeat *nothing* that confers a greater honor than the plain white lambskin that you were presented upon your initiation as an Entered Apprentice, which you will wear on one final journey to that undiscovered country, from whose borne no traveler returns.



.....Another 'nugget from the quarry of Freemasonry'. TM

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Source: adapted from *Veritatem Petite* (Seek the Truth) June 1998, bulletin of the Research Lodge of New South Wales, Australia.