

The Order of the Golden Fleece
by RW R.L. Boettner GO, WM Madison Lodge
presented at Madison Lodge 1/14/2004. Used with permission

“My brother, I have now the pleasure of presenting you with a lambskin or white leathern apron. It is an emblem of innocence, and the badge of a Mason, more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle; more honorable than the Star & Garter, or any other order that can be conferred upon you at this or any future period by king, prince, potentate, or any other person except he be a Mason.”

Upon hearing these words do we ever wonder just what all these named honors betoken? The Star & Garter is an honor bestowed by the English Crown. The Roman Eagle remains a mystery to this writer. The Golden Fleece reference brings to mind three different experiences.

The first is Biblical. In the Book of Judges (6:28-40) it is recorded that Gideon has been directed to enter into battle with the Midianites, Amalekites, and the people of the East. While Gideon is faithful to sound the trumpet and call together various tribes of Israel to engage the enemy, he has some reservations about the forthcoming battle. So, in effect, he puts God to the test about God's promise that Gideon will prevail. And the scripture text is an account of a miracle of sheep's fleece, consisting in the dew having fallen at one time on the fleece laid out by Gideon with out any dew on the ground about, and at another time with the fleece remaining dry while the ground was wet with the morning dew. Since this is an account of doubt and failure to trust in God's word, it is doubtful that the writers of our Masonic ritual were thinking of Gideon's fleece as they composed this particular piece of ritual related to our pristine aprons, emblems of innocence and badges of great honor.

The second is mythological. Surely, many of us have heard and/or read of the valiant efforts of Jason and the Argonauts to reclaim Jason's throne stolen from him by a wicked cousin. The entire epic poem tells of the many dangers and trials encountered by these brave men pledged one to the other. In reading this great poem, the treacherous intrigues entered into by the pagan gods, the deceit of humans, the lying of one to another, the dishonor brought upon families because of lust, murder and mayhem, it is hard to conceive that the great ritual writers had this ancient account of Golden Fleece as the basis for the bestowal of aprons upon newly initiated brothers.

Therefore, our inquiry leads us further to investigate an imperial Order of the Golden Fleece of the Holy Roman Emperor. Interestingly, the founder of this Order looked to both of the previously discussed references, however, lifting them both to a higher spiritual plane through contemporaneous interpretation to achieve acceptance by the Sovereign.

It was during the marriage celebration for Duke Philip the Good and his third wife, Princess Isabella of Portugal on January 1, 1430, that the Herald of Flanders announced to the assembled guests that his master, His Most Serene and Powerful Prince and Lord, the Duke of Burgundy, Count of Flanders and Artois, and Palgrave of Namur, had founded a new order, The Order of the Golden Fleece. The first ceremonial meeting of the new Order occurred on November 30, 1431, on the feast day of the Apostle Andrew,

patron saint of the House of Burgundy and now of the new Order. At that time, the regulations of the new Order were acknowledged in the presence of the Duke and the first 24 knights nominated by him. The Order of the Golden Fleece was intended as a knightly brotherhood and a friendly alliance of noblemen. Membership was originally intended to be limited to 31; although various subsequent emperors increased that number to 51 and eventually to 70. Requirements included that the nominees be noblemen "in name and arms" and 'truly devoted' to the sovereign of the Order, the respective bearer of the title Duke of Burgundy. The principal aims of the Order were to promote the glory of God and to defend the Christian faith.

At its inception, the use of the word "order" was carefully chosen to instill the deeply held respect for religious orders as was contemporaneously held by other knightly orders. Membership was thus experienced as a strong, holy bond by which one pledged loyalty to the sovereign of the Order. Probably one of the reasons that Duke Philip conceived the Order was political, creating a band of extremely faithful nobleman loyal to himself and his dynasty. In the beginning, those who received the honor of membership were the highest-ranking nobles of the realm. Thus the Order of the Golden Fleece outshone all other orders with its wealth, standing, and splendor of the Burgundian dukes. The Order of the Golden Fleece claimed pride of place among all the Christian orders, and later when the Hapsburgs of Austria acquired all the Spanish property and titles they consolidated this position with even grander accouterments to accompany the bestowal of membership in this extremely selective Order.

Philip the Good used the positive aspects of the Greek myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece as the springboard for the Order. And upon the Order's first meeting, the chancellor interpreted the Miracle of the Fleece demanded by Gideon in a "politically correct" manner so as to receive the Emperor's approval. Being extremely devout Christians, the Emperor laid a solid spiritual foundation for the Order and had the outstanding artisans of the day create elaborate and exquisite liturgical vestments for the celebrants to wear upon the occasion of chapter meetings. Additionally, these artists created outstanding robes and collars for the recipients to wear at all festive occasions.

<Pass post cards and books with pictures of capes, etc.>

Upon initiation into the Order, the newly -elected knight laid one hand on the Gospel, the other on the Cross of Allegiance, which contained a particle of the True Cross, and swore to abide by the statutes of the Order. He then received the neck chain of the Order around his neck. On festive occasion members of the Order were permitted to wear the magnificent robes of the Order which had been crafted in bright red, white or black, according to the event.

For a chapter to meet and conduct business, in addition to the Sovereign, four officers were appointed: a chancellor, a treasurer, a secretary and historian, and a king-at-arms. With the passage of time and the transfer of realms from house to house for variety of reasons, the Treasury of the Order was eventually evacuated from Brussels under pressure from the French Revolutionary army in 1797 along with the liturgical vestments.

Some of these treasures are in the Imperial Art treasure museum in Vienna, Austria. In viewing these beautifully crafted treasures today and having the eye of history, one can understand the pride and honor a recipient would have. And knowing the intrigue and

political machinations of that day, one can envision how a recipient would take great care to make his opponents aware of his stature with the Emperor.

Thus, speculative Masons should be all the more honored and humbled to have bestowed upon them by their peers the distinctive white lambskin apron denoting their membership in our humble craft.