

## **Hermetic Influences in Masonic Ritual**

-or-

*“What’s earth, air, fire, and water got to do with it?”*

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### *Hints of Hermetic Connection*

The tradition that Freemasonry descends from a remote antiquity, perhaps from the time of the building of King Solomon's temple if not even earlier, can be directly traced to the oldest Masonic documents, the "old Charges" or "Gothic constitutions" of Freemasonry. All versions of these late medieval texts contain a legendary history of Freemasonry that explicitly points to an origin in earliest Biblical times and claims connections with various ancient sages. There is, however, no documentation of speculative Freemasonry prior to the mid 1600's. This absence of records in conjunction with the claim of antiquity and the tradition of secrecy have led many Masons and even non-Masons to propose all sorts of groups and movements as possible ancestors to Freemasonry. Moreover, various interpretations of Masonry's traditionally secret symbolism and ritual have led to suppositions that Masonic symbolism preserves secret ancient teachings and wisdom from these ancestral sources.

The legendary histories contained in Old Charges also provide some suggestions as to the supposed ancient sources of Masonry. Most of these legendary histories ascribe the discovery of Geometry to the Biblical character Jabal<sup>1</sup>, who with his brother Jubal, half-brother Tubalcain, and half sister Neema each founded their own particular art or science including music, metalworking, and weaving. The legend informs us that these four siblings were made aware that the world soon would be destroyed either by fire or by flood (in what turned out to be Noah's Flood) so they decided to preserve their knowledge, which otherwise might have been forever lost, by inscribing it on two stone pillars of different composition. In case of conflagration, one pillar would not burn. In case of inundation, the other pillar would not drown. After the flood, the pillars were said to have been discovered by someone called "Hermes the Philosopher" or "Hermes the Father of Knowledge". Some versions of the old charges say one pillar was discovered by Pythagoras, and the other by Hermes. But in either case, it is significant to note that our medieval forebears claimed Hermes as at least one of the preservers of that ancient, pre-flood knowledge of Masonry-Geometry.

At this point it might be tempting to launch into a discussion of the development of Masonic pillar symbolism. But my concern today is not with the pillars, so much as with one of their discoverers, namely “Hermes the Father of Knowledge.” It is easy to see why early Masons might claim Pythagoras as one of their ancient sources. Pythagoras, after all, invented the word “Philosopher” or “lover of wisdom”, and used his philosophy to illuminate the sciences of Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. But who was this Hermes that our forbears so honored by designating him as one of their inspirations? Of what knowledge was he the father? Did this Hermes and his knowledge contribute in any way to the development of speculative Freemasonry as the old charges seem to suggest? And can any trace of this influence be found in our ritual today?

Hermes was the legendary founder and namesake of a system of esoteric mysticism called “Hermeticism”, which includes the practices of Alchemy, Astrology, medieval Medicine, and also Magic. Hermeticism, moreover, was the Western world’s commonly understood explanation of the working of the physical universe, as believed from antiquity through the middle ages until the development of modern experimental sciences. In other words, during the middle ages, anyone who we might now call a scientist was a basically a Hermetic philosopher. Hermeticism finally gave way to the modern, rational and scientific view of the world during the enlightenment right about the same time that Freemasonry was assuming its current form. Freemasonry was present at the birth of the modern scientific age, and many individual Masons contributed to its development. But also, some of the more noted speculative Masons of the pre-Grand Lodge period, such as Elias Ashmole and Robert De Moray, were avid students of Hermeticism. They were in good company since many early scientists such as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and Johannes Kepler were also students of the Hermetic arts.

This close association between Hermeticism and certain noted early scientists and Freemasons, along with the previously mentioned references in the legendary history of the craft, has made Hermeticism one of the more frequently mentioned suspects as an ancestor of speculative Freemasonry, and a possible basis for Masonic symbolism and ritual. I became intrigued by this possible connection, but since Hermeticism is such an

obscure and little studied topic in the modern age, I realized that I did not know enough about Hermetecism to assess for myself whether there was any real merit to that claim. So I set about educating myself about Hermeticism. I found it to be a fascinating topic and a valuable window into the minds of men in classical antiquity whether or not it had anything to do with Masonic ritual. Before I can discuss my findings regarding a Masonic connection with Hermeticism, however, I need to explain Hermeticism itself. Accordingly, I will begin with a discussion of this legendary character, Hermes, from his origins in ancient Egypt to the late middle ages before proceeding to a description and explanation of the actual teachings and beliefs of Hermetic knowledge. Finally, armed with this historical knowledge, I will examine our Masonic ritual for evidence of hermetic influences.

### *The Person of Hermes*

To begin with, who was this Hermes? Hermeticism derives its name from the god or demigod Hermes Trismagestus, or the “thrice-great Hermes” who first became known as such in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and over time came to be regarded as a human who achieved divinity, then eventually as a legendary wise man and teacher of knowledge. The divinity called Hermes Trismagestus was a blend of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. He was, as it were, the “Egyptian Hermes.” Both Hermes and Thoth were gods of learning and wisdom. Just as the Greeks and Romans reconciled their pantheons of gods by identifying the Roman Jupiter with the Greek Zeus, Minerva with Athena, etc. so the same attempt was made to reconcile the Greek and Egyptian Gods. This attempt did not meet with much success since the Egyptian gods were so very different from the Greek in their various attributes. But the one congruence that did seem to fit was between Hermes and Thoth. Both were gods of wisdom and science (literally “knowledge”), as well as being the messengers of the gods and the conductors of souls. Also, interestingly enough, they were the gods of tricksters, con-men and thieves because knowledge was not something that the gods gave easily, but often had to be tricked or stolen from them.

The ancient Greeks and Romans regarded Egypt as a land of mystery and legend. They highly esteemed the wisdom of the Egyptian temple priests, perhaps as much for its remoteness and inaccessibility as for its antiquity, even in that ancient age. Egyptian wisdom and teaching excited the interest of the ever-curious Greeks from well before the time of Alexander the Great, who conquered Egypt and founded the city that bears his name, Alexandria. Pythagoras himself spent many years studying among the Egyptian temple priests before founding a philosophical community at Croton in southern Italy.

The conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC brought Greek and Egyptian culture into closer contact and afforded the Greeks greater opportunity for the study of the Egyptian temple teachings. But even so, the continuing language barrier led to the popularity of numerous Greek writings attempting to explain Egyptian teachings to their new masters. These usually took the form of dialogues or lectures where the Egyptian Hermes (alias Thoth) imparted his knowledge to the student, or another teacher imparted the knowledge he himself had received from that source. These writings could cover anything from potions, treatments, spells, and chemical formulations – all of which are classed as the “Technical Hermetica” – up to matters of cosmology, the human soul, and the nature of the divine – which are classed as the “Spiritual Hermetica”. The authorship of these numerous tracts was largely anonymous, which was common among sacred writings in the ancient world. Authors presented their various interpretations as divine knowledge coming from a more authoritative source, and may have believed that their interpretations were divinely inspired. This interpretation of traditional Egyptian beliefs for Greek audiences naturally resulted in an entirely new blend of Greek and Egyptian thought, which came to be called Hermeticism<sup>2</sup>.

Hermes Trismagestus existed primarily as a literary figure without the typical cultic trappings of temples, worshipers, festivals, priests, and offerings usually associated with pagan divinities. This had two important consequences. For one thing, it was relatively easy to reinterpret him as a human rather than divine figure. This change was already well underway at the beginning of the Common Era as the monotheist leanings of Greek philosophy became more widespread in common thought. The change was complete by

the time Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire. The church even adopted the human figure of Hermes as one of the so-called “Good Pagans” – along with Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras. Hermes’ inclusion in this group was largely based on a passage in one of the accepted canon of the Spiritual Hermetica that prophesied the decline of the old pagan gods and the coming of a new god who would be worshiped in their place throughout the world<sup>3</sup>.

The second result of Hermes’ non-cultic existence was that he never had a wide populist following. Rather, the Hermetica were studied by those of the educated, literate minority who were concerned with acquiring deeper knowledge, and perhaps power, accessible only to the few. The nature of the wisdom of Hermes was esoteric and occult (which means “hidden”). The church publicly excoriated the so-called technical hermetic writings as being unhealthy influences, and rightly so, but privately tolerated the study of Hermetic writings, especially the Spiritual Hermetica, by monks, scholars, and physicians throughout the middle ages.

### *Hermetic Teachings*

The principal tenet of Hermetic thought is the notion that everything in the universe is connected to, and influenced by everything else in the universe by way of a system of correspondences or *affinities* and *antipathies*. Everything in this case refers not only to the physical, material world, but also to the mental, emotional, and spiritual world; the human body, colors, sounds, smells, flavors, sensations, and even symbols.

Let me see if I can explain. To the modern mind, the force of gravity is a property of all matter. Mass attracts mass. This attraction is called gravity. It is impersonal. It means nothing. It has no bearing on our emotions or spiritual state. It simply is. In Hermetic thought, however, there are many different “gravities”, as it were, each of which corresponds with or attracts a different group of physical materials, colors, sounds, emotions, spiritual entities or principles, planets, bodily organs, or whatever while at the same time possibly repelling others. In Hermetic thought, the varieties displayed in the

landscapes of nature and in the works of man are a blend of all these corresponding aspects, each attracting, repelling, or otherwise affecting and modifying all the others.

While this notion of affinities may seem ridiculous to our modern minds, consider some everyday turns of speech. We are blue with sorrow, green with envy, yellow with cowardice, and see red when we are angry. We speak as if the heart actually had something to do with love, the intestines (or guts) to do with fortitude, and the testicles (or balls) with audacity. We still recognize the power of symbols as well. The sign of the cross repels vampires, the pentagram invokes the devil, holy water or oil confers spiritual benefits, and incense wafts our prayers on high. I do not suggest that we ought to believe or disbelieve any of these correspondences. But the notions underlying them serve to illustrate what is meant by the Hermetic theory of affinities and antipathies.

### *Magic*

Based on this genuinely ancient Egyptian notion of affinities and antipathies, it should therefore be possible for a person to affect the universe around him, including other people, by bringing together materials, symbols, sounds, etc. that might selectively affect, either by attraction or repulsion, the intended object of the manipulation. If this sounds like some sort of magic, let me assure you that it is indeed the theory behind western magic.

In fact, the person of Hermes as typically depicted in the middle ages is the archetype of our image of a magician. He is frequently depicted wearing the long robes of a scholar but with a conical hat typically decorated with astronomical symbols. His wand or staff, moreover, derives from the rod or caduceus with intertwined snakes carried by the Greco-Roman representation of Hermes-Mercury. This aloof seeker of knowledge and power is the basis of our modern icon, the “mad scientist”. The staff or cadecus, by the way, is the inspiration for the Rods or Wands carried by Deacons in Freemasonry. The figure of Mercury or Hermes was sometimes used as the Deacon’s jewel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These connections between Freemasonry and Hermes have nothing to do with hermeticism,

however. They were inspired by the original Greco-Roman understanding of the god as a messenger and conductor, which is exactly the Deacon's role in the lodge.

### Alchemy

The second, and more familiar fundamental aspect of Hermetic thought is the nature of the physical universe. In Hermetic thought, the material world was understood to be composed of four principle elements, namely Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Differing amounts of these elements combined in different ways was thought to compose every physical material. And under the theory of correspondences, each such combination had its own affinities and antipathies with everything else. The study of physical materials and the transformation of them in their various forms constituted the Hermetic science of Alchemy, which was the forerunner of the modern science of Chemistry.

The notion that earth, air, fire, and water are the elemental components of nature may seem quaint to us today with our knowledge of the chemical elements, and even sub-atomic physics. But I must admit, there was a certain sense to the ancients' notions. All matter in our ordinary experience exists in one of three states, solid, liquid, or gas<sup>4</sup>. These correspond to earth, water, and air in the Hermetic scheme. So there does seem to be something universally elemental about solidness, liquidness, and gaseousness as qualities of matter. The addition of fire, that ancient tool of human civilization, which appears to govern the transformations of solids, liquids, and gasses, made the physical world safely explainable to the ancients. Even to this day certain groups of chemical elements in the periodic chart of the elements are called "earth" and "rare earth" elements. And the term "Hermetically sealed" meaning "airtight" refers to a favorite Alchemists' technique of heating materials in a sealed glass tube to prevent interaction with atmospheric contaminants.

Alchemy was far more than the effort to transform base metals into gold, as it is frequently remembered in the modern day. Albeit, attempting this transformation was one of the favorite get rich quick schemes of late Roman times. One of the later Roman Emperors complained of so many people wasting their time and resources trying to make

alchemical gold. Later Christian theologians debated whether gold made by alchemy could be considered real gold for monetary purposes. They sensibly determined that if there was no way to tell it apart from naturally occurring gold, then it had to be considered real gold for all purposes. It is interesting to note that they completely accepted the idea that such transformation was a real concern. But alchemy also considered the nature and manipulation of materials of all sorts. By medieval times alchemy had extended to include herbalist formulations, and was always closely associated with medicine. As a side note, in England druggists are called chemists, which speaks to their origins as alchemists.

Despite whatever practical applications alchemists had developed as a byproduct of their pursuits, the Holy Grail, as it were, of Alchemical undertakings remained the pursuit of either Alchemical Gold or the Elixir of Life. Indeed, by late medieval times these supposed substances came increasingly to be considered as metaphorical pursuits that, like the holy grail and by the rules of correspondences, could only be achieved by those internally pure enough to be worthy of those rewards. Thus Hermeticism, like Speculative Freemasonry, came to include the notion of self-improvement as a necessary concern for its practitioners.

### Astrology

The next of the Hermetic arts, and the one probably most familiar to us today is astrology. While the ancient Greeks first learned astrology from the Chaldeans of Mesopotamia about the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the form of astrology commonly known today was developed in Alexandria Egypt and attributed to our Hermes<sup>5</sup>. Most of us are vaguely aware that our solar system is basically flat, with the orbits of all the planets moving in roughly the same plane around the sun. This means that the sun, moon, and the planets all appear, when viewed from the Earth, to move in a narrow band across the heavens with the fixed stars as a background. This band through which the planets appear to move is called the zodiac, and the twelve constellations of stars that lie along the zodiac are the so called signs of the zodiac.

In the Hermetic world view each of these constellations in the zodiac corresponded with certain physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual properties. The sun, moon, and each of the planets also had their own set of corresponding attributes. As each planet moved through the zodiac, its corresponding properties would be affected by the properties of the constellation of the zodiac and vice versa as each proceeded across the sky and on the horizon. The constellations were grouped to correspond with the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, and each individually was associated with various parts of the body from head to feet. Various parts of the sky called “houses” were associated with various aspects of life – wealth, health, etc. The planets were more active influences and tended to be associated with the properties of the divinities for which they were named, and of which they were supposed to be manifestations. All of these affected everyone and everything on earth by their properties. Each individual person was uniquely affected based on their own correspondences with these celestial bodies based on the arrangement of the sky at the moment of their birth.

The particular method of calculating planetary and zodiacal influenced was exceedingly complex, and subject to much interpretation depending on which of the many corresponding attributes of each celestial feature the interpreter chose as his focus. Despite this complexity, the heavenly bodies moved with regularity and predictable precision. So it was considered theoretically, if not actually possible not only to infer current effects and influences, but also to calculate future influences. This system of Hermetic Astrology was highly developed in Alexandria. Beyond its use in fortune telling, it was even used to diagnose illnesses and prescribe treatments!

I myself used to wonder how anyone could take such notions seriously until I considered how the world must have seemed for the ancients. The world seemed more full of spiritual entities, be they called gods or angels, heroes or saints. All these beings desired the devotion and offerings of living humans in exchange for which they were willing to dispense favors of protection, health, and fortune. These beings must have impelled disasters such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, and storms for reasons of their own, since there seemed to be no other explanation. The heavens were close by rather than infinite.

Instead of numberless worlds rolling through the vast expanse, it was the abode of the divine, and populated by those same spiritual entities whose effects could be seen and felt on the earth. Each entity had its own unique characteristics and areas of dominion by which their presence could be known. And thus the cosmos seemed to make sense, and provided humans with at least the psychological impression of some sense of control and means of avoiding what would otherwise be random danger.

### Medicine

Our modern notion of the medieval doctor was famously lampooned in a Saturday Night Live skit featuring Steve Martin who, as Theodoric of York, cured every patient's ailment by opening their vein and taking two bowls of blood, followed by the advice "call me in the morning." Most people know that disease in those days was deemed to be caused by an imbalance of bodily fluids, which imbalance could be remedied by bleeding. Few people realize, however, that this was a hermetic notion.

The four bodily fluids were blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, which corresponded with the now familiar alchemical elements earth, air, fire, and water. An imbalance of fluids indicated an imbalance of elements which was the cause of ill-health. The four bodily fluids or humors were also associated with the four temperaments of man, from which they took their name. Sanguine, from the French for Blood, means ruddy in appearance and aggressive in temperament. Phlegmatic (from Phlegm) means clammy in appearance and unemotional or even sluggish in temperament. Bilious refers to bile, green in color, and peevish or irascible in temperament. Choleric relates to black bile, giving a jaundiced appearance, and an easily angered temperament.

Again, at a surface level this scheme of medical explanation makes some apparent sense. For instance, the element of fire was associated with phlegm. A person ill with a cold usually runs a temperature – which is heat or fire. He also produces excess phlegm, and exhibits the listlessness of the so-called phlegmatic personality. In a time without any knowledge of viruses – or even much knowledge of anatomy – such relationships could

be mistaken for being causative. There was nothing much else to go on and the minds of the educated were already trained to think in those directions.

As with other examples given, medicine also preserves some arcane Hermetic terms in its vocabulary. My favorite is the word “operation” referring to a surgical procedure. In medieval times the word “operation” referred to the working of a magical procedure to affect a certain outcome. Books of magic referred to the working of spells as operations, and the magician as the operator. Effecting medical cures by hermetic techniques was as much an operation in that sense of the word as any magic. And so the term stuck. In recent years, however, the medical profession has attempted to divest itself of long held associations with such superstitions as Hermeticism. Thus operations are now procedures. And the symbol of the medical profession is no longer the winged caduceus with intertwined snakes, the symbol of Mercury-Hermes – the god of thieves, but rather a caduceus without wings and a single snake.

### *The Demise of Hermeticism*

This elaborate system of Hermeticism, which attempted to account for the workings of the physical world and integrate it with the spiritual and emotional aspects of existence, eventually was replaced by the empirical, scientific world view that we hold today. This change took a period of some centuries during which the two world views existed side by side. This period of overlap, as it were, also coincided with the earliest development of Freemasonry as we know it today.

Hermeticism died with a bang, not with a whimper. The century of the 1600’s saw a great outpouring of interest in Hermeticism among the upper and middle classes where previously it had been the province of monks and scholars. This interest in Hermeticism was part of a general interest in the art and literature of antiquity that began during that period of rediscovery in the prior two centuries that we now call the Renaissance. Strangely enough the general popularity of Hermetic thought and writings in this period corresponds with a general loss of interest in it among scholars. As previously mentioned, the authority of the writings attributed to Hermes was based on the apparent prophecy

that Christianity would become the religion of the Roman Empire. But by the early 1600's Classical scholarship had reached such a level that it proved this key passage in the Corpus Hermeticum was actually written in the Greek used during the first century at the earliest<sup>6</sup>. At this point scholars began to lose interest in Hermeticism. Meanwhile other segments of society took up the study of Hermetic philosophy.

Those who are familiar with the Harry Potter books and movies about the young apprentice magician already know that the dress and furnishings of the story's imaginary setting is borrowed from the period of the 1500 and 1600's. This is no accident. This time period was the golden age of Hermeticism. Astrologers and dabblers in Alchemy set up shop throughout Europe. More books on Alchemy, Astrology, and philosophical Hermeticism were written during the 1500's and especially the 1600's than at any time in the previous millennium or up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Two highly regarded works on Alchemy and Hermeticism, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* and *The Way of Bliss*, were written (or compiled) by Elias Ashmole who was one of the earliest Speculative Freemasons known to us today. Interest in Hermetic practice and philosophy was pervasive. Even the king of Bohemia was a serious patron of these arts.

However attractive Hermeticism may have been as a "Theory of Everything", as it were, the more solid and reliable results of the developing scientific and mathematical approach to knowledge contradicted the Hermetic understanding of the world and undermined the widely held confidence in the Hermetic world view. The sun-centered model of the solar system and the observation of planets as worlds on their own contradicted the notions that underpinned astrology. Further developments in physics and chemistry eventually undid the notion of affinities that were the basis of alchemy and even magic. Finally, the germ theory of disease and anatomical studies that revealed the body as a sort of machine completely changed the basis of medical practice. By the early 1700's there was no longer any rational basis for even a moderately educated person to give any credence to Hermeticism. It was accordingly banished to the realm of superstition.

### Hermetic Themes in Masonic Ritual?

Now we are aware of what to look for, it is finally appropriate to examine Masonic ritual for signs of Hermetic influences. There are a surprisingly few suspect passages and practices. To begin with, hermeticism was not a religious belief, a system of ritual, or a brotherhood or organization. It was simply a theory of knowledge. It was a theory of knowledge that sought to integrate the spiritual and the material worlds, but was equally at home in both Pagan and Christian theology. It could only be learned by study and discipline, perhaps under a teacher, although this was not necessary and consequently there were no initiation rites whatsoever.

While Hermeticism was so broad a system that almost anything could be included and interpreted within that system, hermeticists appeared unconcerned with Geometry or the tools and implements of architecture. Their favored written symbols were either alchemical or astronomical in nature. Masonry does possess two astronomical symbols in its ritual, namely the sun and the moon. But this similarity, while interesting, proves nothing. The sun and moon are used so universally by so many groups and cultures that no one could say that they must have come only from hermetic symbolism. Moreover, their depiction in Freemasonry is as pictures of the things themselves rather than as the stylized symbols used by astrologers. Finally, hermeticists were most usually concerned with the symbols of planets and constellations, none of which are used in Freemasonry.

The closest passage to a “smoking gun” linking hermeticism to Freemasonry is the concluding section of the typical American form of EA lecture where freedom, fervency, and zeal are discussed. These attitudes are symbolized by chalk, charcoal, and clay. In the extended soliloquy on clay or mother earth, a contrast is made between earth and the other elements air, water, and fire. This without doubt is a borrowing from hermetic thought, as is the use of material substances to represent the attitudes with which Masons serve their masters.

There are, however, two problems with these passages as proof of a connection between hermeticism and the earliest formation of Speculative Freemasonry. First, there is the

problem of age, and second is the problem of context. The age problem is that this allusion to earth, air, water and fire is a relatively modern addition to our ritual, dating only to the very late 1700's or even early 1800's. It is not found in Preston, Webb, or Cross or any earlier sources. The chalk, charcoal, and clay symbolism is of earlier vintage, being first documented in Pritchard in 1730. The official English Emulation EA lecture, largely based on Browne's lecture system, includes the chalk, charcoal, and clay in the usual place. It also includes an elaboration on a Mason's wind, which is based on a very old lecture question "which way blows a Mason's wind?" No mention whatever is made of fire or water, and wind is not connected with the element of air, but rather with biblical instances of wind blowing from certain directions. Thus it seems that the most clearly hermetic sounding passage in our ritual was a very late addition that picked up the ancient sounding hermetic elements as a literary device. Based on the dating of the passage, it is clearly not a legacy from medieval times.

There remains the alchemical sounding association of freedom, fervency, and zeal with chalk, charcoal and clay. This association between materials and attitudes first is found in Pritchard's *Masonry Dissected*<sup>7</sup> of 1730, although he uses "earthen pan" instead of clay. It is not found in any of our more ancient texts, indicating a possible innovation, although it could still have been of ancient origin. But now we have the problem of context. There was no particular alchemical significance to any of these materials. These physical materials, probably commonly used by builders, were selected because of their outward physical characteristics. Moreover, the clay is symbolic of mother earth, terra firma, not the alchemical element of earth.

Hermeticism was greatly concerned with Medicine. But there are no medical references or symbols in Masonic ritual. The closest we get is the association of the four cardinal virtues with various parts of the body by way of the points of entry. Both the age and context problems arise in this case as well. This is not an ancient reference either, but rather a more modern embellishment that appears only in American ritual. English ritual has the four cardinal virtues being symbolized by the four tassels at the corners of the EA tracing board depicting the form of the lodge. The reference to the virtues is not found in

any older material although the phrase “the signe and the postures and words of his entrie” (what we would call today the points of entry into the lodge) is found in the earliest ritual material dated to the late 1600’s<sup>8</sup>. And again, the context is off. The points of entry are reminders or symbols. The ritual does not suggest anything inherent about the parts of the body and virtues, but rather with the virtues and the signs.

To my mind, the problem with linking hermeticism to speculative Freemasonry is best illustrated by the use of symbols in Masonic ritual. In Masonic ritual, all symbols are merely representative. They are selected to impress upon the mind wise and serious truths, or to stand for something else. In hermeticism, however, symbols are effective. They produce effects by virtue of their own properties. In other words, they are magical. For instance, in Freemasonry the three great lights are displayed in order to remind us rather than compel us. Display of the three great lights does not focus some sort of cosmic attraction that will increase reverence, morality, and restraint as they would in a Hermetic sense. This difference in the use of symbols is to my mind the primary proof that speculative Freemasonry did not originate out of a group of hermeticists as a way to transmit secret teachings. Freemasonry does not teach a system of correspondences, nor does it practice magic. The effects of its ritual are intended to be entirely psychological to the extent they will have any effects at all. Indeed, the whole orientation of speculative Freemasonry has much more to do with the scientific world view that replaced hermeticism than with hermeticism itself.

My conclusion, simply stated, is that if Hermeticism had anything to do with the establishment of speculative Freemasonry, it did not leave any traces in our ritual or symbolism.

To bring the discussion full circle back to its starting point, I feel compelled to offer an explanation for why the old charges would give such prominence to “Hermes the Father of Knowledge” when nothing of Hermes’ knowledge is found in Freemasonry. It strikes me that this is once again a problem of age and authorship. The earliest of the Old Charges were written in the late medieval period (ca. early 1400’s) before the

development of modern science. As I mentioned earlier, during that time the figure of Hermes was the proverbial source of all “scientific” knowledge and was accepted as such by scholarly and clerical authority. The consensus of opinion today is that the original legendary history of Masonry in the old charges was written by a cleric, probably chaplain to a lodge of Masons. Such an author would undoubtedly be familiar with the figure of Hermes as well as the Biblical and non-Biblical sources of the legend (most notably Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*). Given such an author and time of authorship, it is not at all surprising to find Hermes’ name mentioned in connection with the science of Geometry.

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General Sources:

Fowden, Garth, *The Egyptian Hermes*, Princeton University Press, 1986, ISBN0-691-02498-7. This is an excellent, thorough, but also dense and difficult source. Nevertheless, a must read for all interested in the topic.

Faivre, Antoine, *The Eternal Hermes*, Phanes Press 1995, ISBN 0-933999-52-6. Another difficult but thorough historical study of the topic.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis, Chapter 4

<sup>2</sup> Fowden, p22-23, and indeed throughout his first chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Fowden, p 38

<sup>4</sup> Some might argue that the newly discovered superheated state of matter called plasma would correspond to the Hermetic element of fire, thus making four elements that correspond with the physical states of matter.

<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Encyclopedia article under Astrology (available on line) contains a concise the history of astrology from earliest times to the modern day with only a modicum of theological slant.

<sup>6</sup> Fowden, preface page xxii.

<sup>7</sup> EMC, page 164

<sup>8</sup> ERH quoted in EMC, p33