

## **A brief History of Cryptic Councils in Freemasonry**

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### **Introduction**

Freemasonry is one of the oldest and largest fraternal organizations in the world, with its roots tracing back to the late 16th to early 17th centuries. Its enigmatic symbolism and rituals have long intrigued scholars and enthusiasts alike. Among the many branches of Freemasonry lies the Council of Royal and Select Masters, often referred to as the Cryptic Council. This paper explores the history, significance, and rituals of the Cryptic Council within the framework of Freemasonry.

### **Origins of Freemasonry**

To understand the Cryptic Council, one must first delve into the origins of Freemasonry itself. Modern Freemasonry emerged from the guilds of stonemasons and medieval cathedral builders in Europe, particularly in Britain. As society shifted from agrarian to urban, the need for mutual support and social networking gave rise to fraternal associations.

The formation of the first Grand Lodge in London in 1717 marked the beginning of speculative Freemasonry, where moral and philosophical teachings became a central focus, replacing the manual labor of operative stonemasonry. In the years that followed, various degrees and bodies within Freemasonry emerged, expanding the organization's reach and depth.

### **The Development of Cryptic Masonry**

Cryptic Masonry emerged during the 18th century as a response to the growing complexity of Masonic rites and the desire for a deeper exploration of Masonic symbolism. The origins of Cryptic Masonry can be traced back to several Masonic degrees and the introduction of "secret" materials surrounding the story of King Solomon's Temple.

### **Early Influences**

The earliest references to Cryptic Masonry can be found in documents from the American Masonic tradition in the late 18th century. The Royal Master's degree can be seen as the precursor to the Cryptic degrees. These early degrees emphasized the moral and spiritual

lessons one could derive from the construction and destruction of Solomon's Temple, with themes of resurrection and hidden knowledge woven throughout the teachings.

The first Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters was formed in the early 19th century, with its roots firmly planted in the American Masonic landscape. The first recorded Grand Council was established in 1813 in New York, but various councils had already started emerging across the United States as early as the 1780s.

### **Creation of the Cryptic Council**

The Cryptic degrees were officially recognized and organized as part of the York Rite of Freemasonry, which includes three primary bodies: the Blue Lodge (Craft Masonry), the Royal Arch, and the Cryptic Council. As Masonic thought evolved, the Council became an integral part of the York Rite, emphasizing the narrative of hidden knowledge and divine secrets.

The formal structure of Cryptic Councils became more widespread throughout the early 19th century, particularly in the United States. The establishment of the General Conference of Cryptic Masons in 1873 marked a significant step toward organizing the Cryptic degrees on a national level.

### **The Degrees of Cryptic Masonry**

Cryptic Masonry consists mainly of three degrees:

1. **Royal Master:** This degree represents the continued narrative of the building of King Solomon's Temple, emphasizing themes of sacrifice and divine wisdom. The legend concerns the completion of the Temple and the lessons learned in seeking truth and enlightenment.
2. **Select Master:** This degree centers around the discovery of the secrets and hidden knowledge that were buried when the Temple was destroyed. It often involves a symbolic journey and the moral implications of knowledge and secrecy.
3. **Super Excellent Master:** This degree is considered optional by some jurisdictions and often serves to enhance the themes found in the earlier degrees. It dramatizes events surrounding the downfall of Jerusalem and the lessons learned through adversity and despair.

These degrees are not just ritualistic performances but carry profound moral and ethical teachings meant to guide members in their Masonic journey.

## **The Role and Significance of Cryptic Councils**

The significance of Cryptic Councils within Freemasonry cannot be overstated. They serve as a continuation of the moral, ethical, and philosophical lessons learned in earlier degrees. Their teachings offer deeper insights into the nature of knowledge, the weight of secrecy, and the journey toward enlightenment.

## **A Bridge Between the Blue Lodge and Higher Degrees**

Cryptic Masonry acts as a vital link between the foundational degrees of the Blue Lodge and the higher degrees, such as those found in the Scottish Rite. While the Blue Lodge imparts fundamental Masonic principles, the Cryptic degrees enrich a Mason's understanding of those principles, encouraging reflection on one's spiritual path.

## **Commitment to Brotherhood and Charity**

Like other Masonic bodies, Cryptic Councils promote brotherhood, charity, and community service. Members are encouraged to foster deep connections with one another, supporting each other in both personal and communal endeavors. The teachings of the Cryptic degrees inspire members to lead