

Capitular Masonry

By: Margret S

Unravel the mystic origins of Capitular Masonry, a secretive Freemasonry branch. Explore its evolution, symbolic degrees, and the Royal Arch's mysteries. Discover the Keystone's significance in this enlightening journey through Masonic wisdom, culminating in the ethereal Holy Royal Arch.

Shrouded in secrecy, the origins of Capitular Masonry remain a mystery to this day. Like searching for hidden treasure, uncovering clues about how this branch of Freemasonry came to be requires some myth-busting and connecting the dots between fragments of history.

The Mysterious Origins of Capitular Masonry

Some claim Capitular Masonry was originally part of the Third Degree, later split into the Master's Part and the Royal Arch. Others insist it was invented in France or England around 1740. With no definitive proof either way, the early days of Capitular Masonry are open to speculation and debate.

What we do know is that the first documented reference appears in 1740, describing a Masonic procession led by the Royal Arch. Four years later, a book refers to "Royal Arch Masons", suggesting the term was already in common use.

Then, in 1753, minutes from the Fredericksburg Lodge in Virginia show three brethren being raised to the Royal Arch degree – the earliest known record of the ritual being performed.

While not officially sanctioned, it's clear lodges were conferring the Royal Arch degree long before the formation of governing Grand Chapters. Like a captain steering his ship by the stars, early Masons followed their inner compasses to develop Capitular Masonry.

From Lodges to Chapters: Organising the Royal Arch

Like a sprout growing into a sapling, the disorganised beginnings of Capitular Masonry developed into more structured Chapters. Lodges conferred Royal Arch degrees with little regulation, leading to inconsistent rituals and unqualified members.

In 1797, a convention of Chapters resolved to prune these wild branches, forming a governing body for the Royal Arch in northeast America. Grand

Chapters sprouted up across states, uniting under the umbrella of the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons in 1798.

Bound by shared rules, the Capitular branch could now grow uniformly towards greater light. As more states joined, what began as a seed of ritual in Virginian lodges matured into the forest of Chapters standing tall today.

Through careful cultivation, the pioneers of Capitular Masonry ensured future generations could enjoy the same rich fruits of meaning and brotherhood.

Journey to the Royal Arch: Taking the Next Step

Progressing through Masonry is like hiking up a mountain; every elevation reveals a new vista, but you must complete each step before climbing higher. The Royal Arch stands atop the summit of Ancient Craft Masonry, but can only be reached after traversing the lower slopes.

The first leg of the journey starts by becoming an Entered Apprentice, gaining basic Masonic knowledge. Next is ascending to Fellowcraft, with further light through the liberal arts and sciences. Master Masons reach the peak of Symbolic Masonry, privileged with secrets unravelled through allegory and ritual. But there remains a higher elevation, fairy tale towers atop the mountain.

To access the Royal Arch, three additional steps must be climbed. Mark Master reveals the wages of a mason, honed as finely as the Keystone itself. In Past Master, the winding journey upwards continues, teaching lessons of leadership. And in Most Excellent Master, the summit finally comes into view.

These steps cannot be rushed or skipped, as climbing too fast risks stumbling into darkness. With diligence and care, the Supreme Degree shines like a blazing star, illuminating all that lies below. Only through the completion of this sacred journey is the Word restored in all its buried glory.

The Royal Secret: What the Royal Arch Hides

Like a cryptogram whose code has been lost, deciphering the Royal Arch's origins and meaning requires piecing together subtle clues. At its heart, it harbours the genuine secrets of a Master Mason, Jamie eyed mislaid with time and faulty memory.

Through exalted ceremony, these long-forgotten truths are raised from their burial place and the lost Word revealed.

In form, the Royal Arch resembles a rescue mission. Upon returning from Babylon, the people toil to rebuild Jerusalem's temple from scattered ruins, buried treasures and imperfect plans.

Beneath the temple foundations, a secret vault is uncovered housing lost relics. The three keystone treasures – the Ark, the Book of the Law, and the Ineffable Name – hold the key to recovering what was lost.

By following in the footsteps of our ancient predecessors, modern Masons undergo a ritual restoration of knowledge. Piece by piece, the Supreme Degree reconstructs the Master's Word until the True Name of God brilliantly illuminates every Masonic lesson that came before.

The discovery of the Ineffable Word represents the recovered mysteries that complete a Master Mason, restoring the vrai (true) language of Light.

In essence, the Royal Arch fulfils a quest for original truth, rebuilding the temple within ourselves. Lost meanings, like rubble-filled vaults, are cleared away to reveal the Divine Name – the Rosetta Stone we need to decode all mortal and Masonic languages. Without this capstone of wisdom, our metaphysical vocabularies remain incomplete.

The Wisdom of the Royal Arch Chapter

Entering a Royal Arch Chapter is like slipping into a Masonic time machine, transporting us back to Jerusalem's foundations. But it also represents a state of mind, an elevated perspective on Life's purpose and Nature's mysteries. Here, the Mystic Temple is exalted to its highest pinnacle.

Arrayed in regalia of old, the Chapter officers symbolise figures of history and mythology. The Principal Sojourner, guide and guardian of candidates, represents Moses. The Chief Prince of the Chapter embodies Zerubbabel, leading the Jews back from Babylon.

Revered for his wisdom, King Solomon is embodied in the High Priest. And for presiding authority, the Excellent King represents Cyrus of Persia.

Like a living history, the officers evoke the spirit of sages and rulers who helped reconstruct the Second Temple. Through their ritual drama, a portal opens to the past teachings of Israel. The winding stairs of the Chapter signify

inner steps on the path of transformation. By ascending the Mystic Mountain toward Divine Light, Masonry's symbolic quest for wholeness is fulfilled.

The Triple Veils: Inner Obstacles on the Ascent

Advancing upward through the Chapter involves passing veiled barriers that represents stages of insight. The Sojourners must traverse three concealed passageways, each named for a precious element – Earth, Sea, and Air. As metaphors, these signify incarnation in matter, flowing time and space, and intellect.

By lifting these veils, candidates move closer toward full illumination. The veil of Earth represents base desires and egoistic attachments. Lifting this brings mastery over our temptations.

Passing the second veil of Water involves purifying emotions of turbulence and clinging. Tranquillity, wisdom and discernment emerge. The third veil of Air sublimates the intellect, liberating consciousness from conditioned thought.

Piercing these shrouds awakens our inner divinity, elevating the mind above all illusions. But before the final Light can flood in, the gateway of the Sanctum Sanctorum remains. Through this door, the Shekinah Glory is revealed, and the Divine Presence known absolutely in consciousness. Each veil thus depicts stations on the mystic journey of awakening. By lifting all earthly veils, the soul uncovers its true Home beyond all extremes.

The Symbol of the Keystone

The Supreme Degree revolves around a central symbol – the Keystone. This distinctive wedge-shaped stone crowns and locks an arch in place, bonding the separate pieces into an enduring structure.

In the Chapter rituals, the Keystone represents the dormant secrets concealed since the murder of Hiram. Lost beneath layers of rubble, it takes the noble work of excavation to rediscover the cornerstone of meaning.

Esoterically, the Keystone embodies enlightened wisdom at the apex of the Egyptian Royal Arch. Joined with the foundation cornerstone, it forms the portal whereby the Divine enters into our world.

The Royal Arch is thus the bridge between Heaven and Earth, grounded in matter yet aspirant toward the stars. By spanning these twin poles, the bridge creates the Rainbow of promise and stable growth.

For Masons, the Keystone's concealed treasures hold the wages of Light and the True Master's Word. Psychologically, it represents the stage of peak integration, where all facets of being are united in alignment with the Divine Plan.

When the Keystone is installed, the light of Being radiates through us, sealing the Mystic Temple against all profane influences. We become living bridges, anchored in Earth yet open to Heaven's streaming splendour.

The Masonic Mosaic: Uniting the Degrees

Imagine assembling a giant jigsaw puzzle without knowing what the complete picture looks like. Slotting each piece together, we gradually decipher parts of the image – a section of sky here, a bit of landscape there.

The Royal Arch provides the final clues that illuminate the whole picture in a sudden revelation of meaning.

Like a fragmented mosaic, each Masonic degree supplies essential tiles in the overall design. Colours and shapes unfold as we position the sections, hinting at a larger reality waiting to emerge.

The Symbolic Lodge gives the outline and frame, while the Royal Arch provides the keystone piece to lock it together. The True Word is the interlocking mortar that cements all into a unified picture.

Every degree supplies pivotal clues to construct this mosaic. Entered Apprentices lay down the cornerstone on which to build. Fellowcrafts add scientific principles that God wrote into Nature's code.

As Master Masons, the ethical teachings become clear, engraved on the tablets of the heart. By baptism, purification and anointing, the Mark Master makes each living stone "well-qualified, true and trusty."

Past Masters learn leadership and governance in the Spirit's temple. In Most Excellent Master, the signs and sacraments become unified in meaning. Then, the Royal Arch restores the Lost Word, God's name resounding through the whole design, connecting every tile in the mosaic. All now reflects the Original Beauty, understanding flowing through the Vision Splendid.

The Supreme Degree completes the circuit, but the journey continues ever onward toward the Light. Each increment of growth lays another row, the Masonic life ever building toward a sublime unity.

The Holy Royal Arch: Apex of the Masonic Journey

At the apex of the Symbolic Degrees stands an ethereal tower, rising into realms beyond mortal sight. This is the stellar domain of the Holy Royal Arch, illuminated guide star for those seeking wisdom. Through ritual and symbol, it re-enacts the recovery of lost arcane knowledge, restoring the living Centre to conscious awareness.

Three Master Masons quest to rebuild the temple, its mystical design obscured by the dust of ages. They labour amidst scattered ruins, guided only by partial blueprints barely discernible.

Delving beneath the temple's foundations, they unearth buried relics that hold the key to resurrecting the lost Master's Word. It lies not in external form alone, but encoded in the living Spirit that consecrates the temple.

In the Royal Arch mystery, new names for Deity reflect new facets of the Infinite One. The Secret Master embodies divine love in the heart, pure of motive. In Perfect Master, compassion flows forth as healing hands to mend the world.

The Intimate Secretary awakens our interior vision to read Nature's mysteries. As Provost and Judge, we become arbiters of justice and mercy.

The word grows louder now – the Master sounding the Lost Chord of Truth. In Superintendent, that chord amplifies to cosmic harmony, all Creation singing one Song.

As Royal Architect, the Mason wields wisdom's sword to shape reality, aligned to the Great Architect's plan. Through Royal Arch, they approach the threshold of Unity, winged Heart waiting to merge with Divine Light.

Yet it cannot end here, for the work is never done. In Knight of the Temple, the sword becomes a Cross – compass of ascension, balance point between extremes. As Knight of Malta, we shield the Light within from all who would profane its sanctity.

Guardian of the sacred, we heal divisions to restore humanity to union with Spirit. At peak there is plateau, where Builder becomes Pathfinder, waymarking the next stage of eternal Journey.

So much now falls into place – mysteries solved, veils lifted, true Name discovered in every atom's essence. But new vistas unfold, new mountains to climb, riches within without limit or end. The Royal Arch fully reveals what it means to be Master, yet now the Real Initiation begins...

About the author: Margaret S. is a retired lecturer and devotes much of her time to theological and philosophical writing. She was made a Freemason in the International Order of Freemasonry for Men and Women - Le Droit Humain.

(Margaret S. is her pen name for all her masonic papers)

Q&A

I received a question from Companion Ryan Nathaniel who asked:

“Elemental systems have changed lots over the years, and there are some that have 3 elements, some with 4, some with 5, and they vary from Greece to Israel to Egypt to India to China. Even within Greece, Empedocles suggested 4 elements, and that was quickly changed to 5 to include Spirit or Quintessence. The Egyptians had 3 originally, and so did the Hebrews, but the Egyptians and Hebrews mentioned Fire, Air and Water, not Earth.

I thought it was curious that the author John mentioned in his paper associated Earth, Water and Air, as that progression upward seems more to mimic the general alchemical order of the elements instead of anything historically related to the origins of Masonry in Pythagoras and Plato, or even in Jewish Kabbalah or Christian Cabala. I wanted to understand what the author was thinking and why.”

The author, Margret S., answered:

Thank you so much for your thoughtful email and for engaging so deeply with my writing on Capitular Masonry. Your question regarding the elemental progression of the Triple Veils is an excellent and deeply perceptive one. You are absolutely correct in your observation that the sequence of Earth, Water, and Air does not strictly align with some of the earliest known elemental systems, such as those of the ancient Hebrews or Egyptians.

Your intuition about it being more akin to an alchemical or Western esoteric order is precisely what I was aiming for. My choice was intentionally symbolic rather than strictly historical.

When describing the journey through the Chapter, my goal was to illustrate the inner, psychological process of ascent and purification that the ritual represents. I view the veils not just as historical symbols, but as metaphors for the internal obstacles we must overcome on our own mystic journey toward Light. In that context, the progression is hierarchical:

The Veil of Earth: This represents our starting point, the physical, material world and our own "base desires and egoistic attachments." It is the densest and most foundational part of our being that must be mastered first.

The Veil of Water (Sea): Once we have a handle on the material, the next ascent is through the emotional realm. Like water, our emotions can be turbulent and clinging. Passing this veil signifies the purification of our emotional nature to achieve the "tranquillity, wisdom and discernment" necessary to climb higher.

The Veil of Air: Higher still is the realm of the intellect. This veil represents the liberation of our consciousness from the limits of rigid, conditioned thought, allowing for a more subtle and intuitive understanding to emerge.

This progression, from matter, through emotion, to intellect, is a powerful metaphor for the sublimation of the self. As you noted, it mirrors the alchemical quest to refine the base self into spiritual gold. The final element, which you might think of as Fire or Spirit (Quintessence), is not a veil to be passed but the goal itself: the "final Light" and "Shekinah Glory" that is revealed only after the three lower aspects of our being have been purified and transcended.

So, while the historical origins of Masonry are indeed rooted in the rich soil of various ancient traditions, the living symbolism within the rituals often speaks a more universal language of inner transformation. I chose the elemental sequence that I felt best illuminated that personal, upward path.

Thank you again for your keen insight. It is a pleasure to correspond with someone who reads with such an attentive and thoughtful eye.

Margret

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IMAGE: The Square Magazine Digital Collection



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