

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CORNERSTONE

If a monument or a building – or even, as we now can see, a whole city – can become like a living heart, a talisman charged with powerful ideologies and meaning, then the ‘pacemaker’ of such a talisman must be its cornerstone.

In ancient times, and in many different cultures, the dedication ceremony for a new temple or stately monument often called for elaborate rituals performed by the ruler. During such ceremonies the objective was to call upon a god or goddess to cast his or her benevolent and protective powers on the building – or even to beseech the deity to descend from the heavenly world and reside within the temple. A crucial element was the placing of a permanent marker to commemorate the ceremony, generally in the form of the ‘first stone’ or ‘cornerstone’.

In medieval Europe, in direct continuation of such ancient ideas, the laying of the cornerstone for a church or cathedral was understood to symbolise the ‘raising of the building into the light of day, into consciousness or towards the heavens.’ In this respect it was vital that the most propitious moment be selected when participants could be assured that the influences of the stellar and planetary deities were at their very best. To that end a ‘horoscope’ was cast.

To modern Freemasons the cornerstone ceremony remains one of paramount importance. It serves not only as a link to their ‘operative’ ancestors who built temples and cathedrals, but also as a potent symbol of renewal and ‘rebirth’. It expresses itself with particular force in the Masonic aspiration (whether taken literally or metaphorically) to ‘rebuild Solomon’s Temple’ in Jerusalem and to lay its cornerstone. Indeed, for Masons and non-Masons alike, there are few other talismans that can evoke so much fervour – benevolent or destructive. Think of the Crusades, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the on-going Palestinian intifada, and you begin to feel the energy that this talisman is capable of unleashing. The finding and re-placing of the cornerstone of a renewed Temple of Solomon would set off an intellectual and spiritual explosion that would have huge ramifications for the Middle

The ‘Raising’ of Washington

On 18 September 1793, a little more than a month after the ‘Isis’ ceremony was held at the Place de la Bastille in Paris, another ceremony laden heavily with specific symbolic

referents took place on a high point known as Jenkins Hill on the other side of the Atlantic. At the climax of this ceremony, America's first president, George Washington, wearing a Masonic apron which had been presented to him by the Marquis de Lafayette, laid the cornerstone of the US Capitol in the presence of a congregation of high-ranking Freemasons.

Surveyor, farmer, and Episcopalian, George Washington was born at Pope's Creek in Virginia. He grew up near the town of Fredericksburg on his father's plantation. As a young man he studied mathematics and surveying, and eventually joined the Virginia militia where he excelled. In 1775, at the age of 43, he was elected by the Continental Congress to serve as commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary army to fight the British. After the War of Independence was over, Washington retired from the army, and in 1789 the state of Virginia sent him to the Constitutional Convention where he was unanimously elected as president of the United States. He was re-elected without opposition in 1792, refused a third term in 1796 and died at Mount Vernon in 1799 from laryngitis at the age of 67.

George Washington became a Freemason in 1752 in Fredericksburg, and was 'raised' as a Master Mason the following year. In 1777, when the Freemasons in the American colonies sought to form a 'United' Grand Lodge independent from England, they offered the position of Grand Master to Washington, but he modestly declined, saying that he was not qualified for this high office. In 1788, however, he did become Master of the Alexandria lodge, today known as the Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, situated on the south side of the Potomac River near the city of Washington, DC. Since 1932 this famous lodge has been engulfed within a huge Masonic monument built around it. The monument is modelled on the ancient Lighthouse of Alexandria in Egypt, the Pharos, and bears the official name of the George Washington Masonic National Monument. According to Harvey Wiley Corbett of the New York firm Helmle & Corbett who designed this monument:

... the Pharos was erected to guide the ancient mariners safely to shore; what would be more appropriate than a facsimile of that Lighthouse in Alexandria, Virginia on top of the highest hill and overlooking the Potomac River?

Isis of the Suez Canal

Both H. W. Corbett and Louis A. Watres – the latter representing the 'client' – were themselves Freemasons, and as such would have known that the ancient Pharos of Alexandria had been dedicated to Isis and also to her star, Sothis-Sirius. Nor was this

the only time that Freemasons would evoke Isis and her star in a landmark monument in the United States. According to Bernard Weisberger, Isis was also in the mind of the designer of the Statue of Liberty that now stands in New York Harbor:

“The sculptor who made the great statue was Italian. His name was Auguste Bartholdi. His work was greatly influenced by the ancient sculptor Phidias who made gigantic statues of the ancient goddesses, particularly Athena, the ‘goddess of wisdom’ and Nemesis, a goddess who held a cup in her right hand. Before beginning the Statue of Liberty project, Bartholdi was seeking a commission to construct a giant statue of the goddess ‘Isis’, the Egyptian Queen of Heaven, to overlook the Suez Canal. The statue of Isis was to be of ‘a robed woman holding aloft a torch’.”

Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi was born in France, at the city of Colmar in Alsace. He had studied in Paris at the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and, in 1855, when he was only 21, he embarked on a voyage to Egypt with three friends, the orientalist Léon Gerôme, Léon-Auguste-Adolphe Belly and Narcisse Berchère. There, while visiting the ancient temples of Thebes and Abu Simbel, Bartholdi became enchanted by the gigantic works of the ancient Egyptian sculptors. He spent eight months documenting the Colossi of Memnon and returned to France with numerous sketches and photographs.

It was during that first voyage to Egypt that Bartholdi met the celebrated French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps, and thus began a friendship between the pair that was to last a lifetime. De Lesseps was negotiating funding with the authorities in France and Egypt for the construction of the Suez Canal to join the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. Bartholdi was deeply impressed with de Lesseps’s vision and began to think how he might complement it by creating a gigantic statue of a goddess holding a torch. Bartholdi imagined this statue positioned at the entrance to the canal and representing ‘Egypt Enlightening the East’ – a name, as most French Freemasons knew in those days, which was strangely reminiscent of Cagliostro’s famous saying that ‘All Enlightenment comes from the East, all initiation from Egypt’.

Khedive Isma’il of Egypt, another Freemason, was much enamoured with the beautiful French Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, and indeed with all things French. Eugénie was a cousin of Ferdinand de Lesseps, and it was she who put in a good word to the khedive to look favourably on the Suez Canal project. We saw in Chapter Eighteen that de Lesseps’s father, Mathieu, together with Muhammad Ali, Isma’il’s grandfather, had founded the Société Secrète Égyptienne which practiced a form of Scottish Rite Freemasonry merged with Cagliostro’s Egyptian Rite.

It seems that Bartholdi did manage to discuss his idea of a giant statue for the Suez Canal with Khedive Isma'il, but nothing came of it, probably because of the financial crisis that had then struck Egypt due to over-borrowing from European bankers. But, Bartholdi was not disheartened in the least and took his project elsewhere.

Isis of New York, a Talisman to 'Liberty'

The idea of a similar monument to commemorate the friendship between France and the United States for the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was first discussed by Bartholdi and others at the home, near Paris, of Édouard René de Laboulaye, an authority on North American culture. It seems that Bartholdi simply 'converted' his original project for Egypt and proposed it instead as a 'Statue of Liberty enlightening the world' for New York. To this end the so-called Union Franco-Américaine (Franco-American Union) was established in 1875 to raise the necessary funds.

Not unexpectedly, several members of the Franco-American Union turn out to have been Freemasons, including Bartholdi's own cousin, who was the French ambassador to the United States. Other Freemasons also actively involved were Henri Martin, the Count of Tocqueville and Oscar de Lafayette. Bartholdi himself had been initiated into Freemasonry in 1875 at the Paris lodge Alsace-Lorraine, and was raised as a Master Mason in 1880.

Although Bartholdi was to be the designer of the Statue of Liberty, the actual task of building it fell on Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, the celebrated French structural engineer who would also design and build the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Eiffel, too, was a Freemason – so let us note in passing that the first two levels of his famous steel tower, according to French engineer Jean Kerisel, are shaped like a pyramid. Eiffel would certainly have been aware that about a century before, in 1792, a pyramid had been erected on the very same spot on the Champs de Mars in Paris to commemorate the French Revolution.

Here's what the Reader's Companion to American History has to say about the inspiration behind the Statue of Liberty:

Sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi combined elements of the Egyptian pyramids he admired with his mother's face to serve as a model for the statue, which he finished early in 1884.

There has been much dispute about whether the face of the Statue of Liberty was modelled on that of Bartholdi's own mother, and the matter, though trivial, has not

been settled. What is more certain is that the statue was linked to the 'cult of Liberty' or the 'Cult of Reason' of the French Revolution, both of which, in the minds of Republicans, were intimately connected to Masonic ideals. It is certain, too, as we saw in Chapter One, that figures representing 'Liberty' and 'Reason' were often modelled on the Egyptian goddess Isis or her Greek and Roman counterparts.

Interestingly, according to French Egyptologist Bernard Mathieu, Bartholdi used to refer to the Statue of Liberty as the 'Pharos' before it was raised in New York, and he even designed a base for the statue just like the one believed to have been used for the ancient Pharos of Alexandria. Bartholdi, who had spent much time in Egypt and had studied the origins of this ancient 'wonder of the world', would certainly have known the association of the Pharos with the goddess Isis – and, by extension, her star, Sirius – that we explored in Chapter Ten. In this respect, it seems highly likely that his giant statue of 'a robed woman holding aloft a torch' to serve as a sort of lighthouse for the Suez Canal and, later, for New York Harbor, may well have been imagined by him as Isis-Pharia and the Lighthouse of Alexandria.

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