

Pagans or Patriarchs? William Stukeley’s “On the Mysterys of the Antients”, the Bembine Tablet, and the Religious Culture of Early English Freemasonry¹

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1. Introduction

The law and life of our Saviour Jesus Christ shows itself to be such, being a renewal of the ancient pre-Mosaic religion, in which Abraham, the friend of God, and his forefathers are shown to have lived.²

If the ancient world before the coming of Christ was divided between pagans and Jews, what was the religious identity of those figures of the Old Testament such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job who had preceded Moses? Was it possible to see them as pagans? Certainly not: for as the scripture records, they were in direct conversation with God and were therefore monotheists not polytheists. What about Jews? This was also impossible because if Judaism was to be defined as the observation of the laws given to Moses, those who came before self-evidently could not be Jews. What were they then? The answer to this question supplied in *Demonstratio Evangelica* by Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea and historian of the early Christian Church, was that they practised “the most ancient and most venerable of all religions [...] which has been preached of late to all nations through our Saviour”: Christianity.³ In his usurpation of the Hebrew Bible, Eusebius aimed to confirm Christianity’s position as the first and

¹ Thanks to Daniel Orrells, James Vigus, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the draft of this article.

² William J. Ferrar, trans., *The Proof of the Gospel, being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), 25. On this argument see: Aaron P. Johnson, *Eusebius* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 65–7; and by the same author: *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 94–125. On the place of *Demonstratio Evangelica* in Eusebius’ wider thought see: James Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 42–3.

³ Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, 9.

therefore the true religion. This applied the principle of another early Church Father, Tertullian, who in *Adversus Praxean* had stated: “whatever is earliest is true and whatever is later is counterfeit.”⁴ Although this in fact referred to Christian heresy, it also summarised a more general point about the contest for historical priority in what has been described as the “market–place of religions” of late antiquity.⁵

In the seventeenth century, the status of the religion of the biblical patriarchs prior to Moses was a highly contested question. The Catholic Pierre–Daniel Huet, who later became Bishop of Avranches and then from 1701 also a Jesuit, adopted Eusebius’ title for his own *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679), which traced the pagan gods back to half-remembered stories of Moses and his wife Zipporah.⁶ Although their confessional differences necessitated a clandestine scholarly relationship, in this respect he followed the model of the Protestant Samuel Bochart’s *Geographia sacra* (1646), which sought to explain the similarity between features of the Judaic tradition and paganism through the agency of the sea–faring Phoenicians — and which opened with Tertullian’s maxim.⁷ Huet was

⁴ Ernest Evans, trans., *Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani adversus Praxean liber. Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxean* (London: SPCK, 1948), 132.

⁵ John North, “The Development of Religious Pluralism”, in Judith Lieu, John North, Tessa Rajak, eds., *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (Oxford and New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1992), 174–93. On Tertullian in this context see: Guy Stroumsa, “Tertullian on idolatry and the limits of tolerance”, in Graham N. Stanton and Guy Stroumsa, eds., *Tolerance and Intolerance in early Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 173–84. On the late antique contest for priority among religions see: Arnaldo Momigliano, “Time in Ancient Historiography”, *History and Theory* 6 (1966): 1–23; Martin Wallraff, ed., *Julius Africanus Chronographiae. The Extant Fragments* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), xx–xxxii; and William Adler, *Time Immemorial: Archaic History and its Sources in Christian Chronography from Julius Africanus to George Syncellus* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989), 1–35.

⁶ Pierre–Daniel Huet, *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Paris: Stephanum Michallet, 1679). On Huet’s work see: April G. Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre–Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007).

⁷ Samuel Bochart, *Geographia sacra* (Caen: Cardonelle, 1646), 1. On the relationship between the Catholic Huet and the Calvinist Bochart see: Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters*, 27–8; and: John Aikin, trans., *Memoirs of The Life of Peter Daniel Huet, Bishop of Avranches*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810), 1:36–7. On Bochart’s use of Tertullian see: Guy Stroumsa, “Noah’s sons and the religious

criticised for his approach by the Jansenist theologian Antoine Arnauld, who argued that his work provided dangerous ammunition to “the budding free-thinker [jeunes libertins]” in support of the view “that, although one ought to have a religion, it did not greatly matter which, seeing there was good in all of them, and that even Paganism could stand comparison with Christianity.”⁸ Considering his choice of title, it is perhaps slightly ironic that Huet exposed himself to an argument which was provided for in the scheme of Eusebius. This was outlined by another Jesuit in the following century, the missionary Joseph-François Lafitau in *Moeurs des sauvages Américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (1724): “For, if it is true that all religions have copied Moses, if he himself is the type of all their divinities and the subject of all the stories of mythology, it follows that, before Moses, all pagan peoples were without religion or gods.”⁹ The implications of this were extremely serious: religion could hardly be held as essential to human life if generations of humans had lived without it. Such a conclusion would support Pierre Bayle’s argument in *Pensées diverses sur la Comète* (1683) that a virtuous society of atheists was possible and that therefore religion was not necessary for the order of society.¹⁰

Lafitau’s *Moeurs des sauvages* redressed the problem of Huet’s work by tracing features of indigenous customs and beliefs that he encountered among the

conquest of the earth: Samuel Bochart and his followers”, in Martin Mulson and Jan Assmann, eds., *Siniflut und Gedächtnis: Erinnern und Vergessen des Ursprungs* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), 313–4; and on the role played by the Phoenicians in his thought: Zur Shalev, *Sacred Words and Worlds: Geography, Religion, and Scholarship, 1550–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 141–204.

⁸ Antoine Arnauld, *Lettres de messire Antoine Arnauld, Docteur de la Maison et Société de Sorbonne*, 4 vols (Paris: Sigismond D’Arnay & Compagnie, 1775), 3:400–1. The translated quotation is drawn from: Paul Hazard, *The Crisis of the European Mind: 1680–1715* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), 46.

⁹ Joseph-François Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages Américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (Paris: Saugrain & Charles Estienne Hochereau, 1724). Quotations are drawn from the English translation: W.N. Fenton and E.L. Moore, trans., *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1974), 32.

¹⁰ Pierre Bayle, *Pensées diverses. Écrites à un docteur de Sorbonne, à l’occasion de la Comète qui parut au mois de Décembre 1680*, 2 vols (Rotterdam: Renier Leers, 1683), 2:525–9. On this work see: Eric Jorink, “Comets in Context. Some Thoughts on Bayle’s *Pensées Diverses*”, in Wiep van Bunge & Hans Bots, eds., *Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), le philosophe de Rotterdam: Philosophy, Religion and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 51–67.

Iroquois (in what is now Canada) back “far beyond the time of Moses [...] to our first ancestors, Adam and Eve.”¹¹ This strategy followed that of yet another Jesuit, the polymathic Athanasius Kircher who in works such as *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652–54) had sought to identify prior traces of “Christianity” behind the material remains of the ancient Egyptians scattered across Rome.¹² From the similarity between the religion of contemporary indigenous peoples of the Americas with “the mysteries of Isis and Osiris”, Lafitau deduced that both ancient and contemporary paganism preserved traces of that “Christianity” pre-Christ which had first been revealed by God to Adam.¹³ Although Lafitau had risked life and limb in the New World to supply proof for this argument by proselytising to contemporary “pagans”, it was one for which evidence could also be found in the comfort and safety of one’s own country. In the case of the physician, antiquarian, and eventually Anglican priest William Stukeley this was England: once the home of pagan druids, now all that was left was the visible record of their presence in the form of megalithic monuments at sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury.¹⁴ But the gulf between antiquity and the eighteenth century was also bridged by a living monument in which Stukeley was deeply involved: freemasonry.¹⁵ On the basis of the narratives of its medieval “Old

¹¹ Lafitau, *Customs*, 33.

¹² Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, 3 vols (Rome: V. Mascardi, 1652–4). On Kircher’s use of the “plagiarism thesis” see: Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 65; and on his interpretation of hieroglyphs see: John Edward Fletcher, *A Study of the Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher, ‘Germanus Incredibilis’* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 68–87. Huet had a poor opinion of Kircher, see: Aikin, *Memoirs of Huet*, 1:224.

¹³ Lafitau, *Customs*, 30. On the pagan mysteries see: Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); and Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). On their reception see: Asaph Ben-Tov, “The Eleusinian Mysteries in the Age of Reason”, in Martin Mulso and Asaph Ben-Tov, eds., *Knowledge and Profanation: Transgressing the Boundaries of Religion in Premodern Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 197–227.

¹⁴ William Stukeley has received two modern biographical studies: David Boyd Haycock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion, and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002); which revised: Stuart Piggott, *William Stukeley: An Eighteenth-Century Antiquary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

¹⁵ I have followed Andreas Önnersfors in not capitalising “freemasonry” on the basis of his argument that “Freemasonry” gives a misleading impression of a monolithic institution with one set of values, relationship to politics, religion, etc. See: Andreas

Charges”, manuscripts which traced the origins of masonry through biblical as well as pagan figures, freemasonry had a remarkable claim to a connection with that ancient world, and with the pagan mysteries in particular.¹⁶

Stukeley’s ideas on the relationship of freemasonry to ancient history provide us with a platform to debate its religious character in the early English context, identified as a lacuna in eighteenth-century studies by Róbert Péter in the general introduction to the survey *British Freemasonry, 1717–1813* (2016), and lead to a revision of our understanding of the relationship of freemasonry to Enlightenment thought.¹⁷ In *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981), Margaret C. Jacob wrote of the English radical Whigs of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that they “formulated an entirely new religion of nature and gave it ritualistic expression within Freemasonry, not to mention a reworking of its traditional chronology.”¹⁸ This thesis received considerable scrutiny at the time, particularly in the masonic characterisation of a document discovered by her in the Irish freethinker John Toland’s papers relating to the “Knights of Jubilation”, claimed as significant for the interpretation of his *Pantheisticon*

Önnerfors, *Freemasonry: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1. Caution must be exercised with the large literature on freemasonry. Useful starting points are the introductions to: Róbert Péter, ed., *British Freemasonry, 1717–1813*, 5 vols (London & NY: Routledge, 2016); and: Henrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek, eds., *Handbook of Freemasonry* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). On the origins of the society see: David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and by the same author: *The First Freemasons: Scotland’s Early Lodges and Their Members* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ On the Old Charges see: Andrew Prescott, “The Old Charges”, in Bogdan and Snoek, *Handbook of Freemasonry*, 33–49. Earlier studies include: Douglas Knoop, G.P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer, eds., *The Two Earliest Masonic MSS* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1938); Wilhelm Begemann, *Vorgeschichte und Anfänge der Freimaurerei in England* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1909); and: William James Hughan, *The Old Charges of the British Freemasons* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1872).

¹⁷ Péter, *British Freemasonry*, 1:xviii.

¹⁸ Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 23. See also by the same author: *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and: *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fiction* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). For her more recent appraisal of the subject, see: “The Radical Enlightenment and Freemasonry: Where We Are Now”, *REHMLAC* 5.1 (2012): 11–24.

(1720).¹⁹ In more recent years, the idea of eighteenth-century freemasonry as an institution associated with pantheism and deism was developed in Jan Assmann's *Religio Duplex* (2010) in the context of the Viennese freemasonry of the mid-1780s and the programme of research into the pagan mysteries established by the head of the Illuminati Ignaz von Born.²⁰ This interest is positioned within the tradition of the "double-doctrine", the opposition between natural and revealed religion, or "the philosopher's" god and "the God of the Fathers", with freemasonry firmly connected to the former.²¹ If combined with Reinhart Koselleck's interpretation of the masonic lodge as "a space in which, protected by secrecy, civil freedom was [...] realized", or Jürgen Habermas' view of the society as one which promoted social equality "outside the state", the impression is reinforced that freemasonry combined interest in a pagan religious heritage identified broadly as pantheistic, naturalistic, or materialistic with a commitment to political or social equality in the eighteenth century.²² By contrast, Jonathan Israel has claimed on the basis of the aristocratic organisational structure of many of the lodges that the language of equality employed within them is just so much empty rhetoric, and that consequently with regard to the Enlightenment "the less said about Freemasonry the better."²³

¹⁹ John Toland, *Pantheisticon* (London, 1720). For the discussion of the significance of the Knights of Jubilation text, see: W. Fielding and Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, "Les Chevaliers de la Jubilation: Maçonnerie ou libertinage? A propos de quelques publications de Margaret C. Jacob", *Quaerendo* 13, no. 1 (1983): 50–73; and the response: Margaret C. Jacob, "The Knights of Jubilation: Masonic and Libertine", *Quaerendo* 14, no. 1 (1984): 63–75.

²⁰ Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: Ägyptische Mysterien und europäische Aufklärung* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010). Quotations are drawn from the English translation: *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

²¹ Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 3.

²² Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1988), 75; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 35. On the social role of freemasonry in the eighteenth century see also: James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 252–72.

²³ Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 865. See also: Israel, "The Radical Enlightenment's Critique of Freemasonry: Lessing to Mirabeau", *Lumières* 22, no. 2 (2013): 23–31.

Tracing the masonic debate on the pagan mysteries back from the *Illuminatenorden* of 1780s Vienna to its roots in early English freemasonry raises questions about the validity of an extrapolation of radical commitments from an interest in paganism in the eighteenth century. These may be explored in William Stukeley's little-known manuscript titled *A Dissertation on the Mysterys of the Antients in an explication of that famous piece of antiquity, the table of Isis* (c. 1735–1744), which shines a much more religiously orthodox (and by implication politically conservative) light on freemasonry in the crucial period of its formalisation after the founding of the Premier Grand Lodge.²⁴ Long thought to have occurred in 1717, this date has in recent years been contested by Andrew Prescott and Susan Mitchell Sommers, who question the verity of the narrative provided of its foundation in James Anderson's *The New Book of Constitutions of the Antient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (1738), absent in the first edition *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (1723).²⁵ Stukeley is relevant in this debate as he was present at the proposed alternative beginning point, the inauguration of the

²⁴ William Stukeley, “Palaeographica Sacra, or Discourses on Monuments of Antiquity that relate to Sacred History. Number II. A Dissertation on the Mysterys of the Antients in an explication of that famous piece of antiquity, the table of Isis” (ca. 1735–40), MS 4722, Wellcome Library, London; Stukeley, “Palaeographia Sacra or Discourses on Monuments of Antiquity that relate to Sacred History. Number II. A Dissertation on the Mysterys of the Antients, being an explanation of the Table of Isis, or Bembine Table” (1744), MS 4725, Wellcome Library, London. Hereinafter referred to as *On the Mysterys*. Stukeley's diaries make it clear that the majority of the work on the subject was done in 1738, see: Stukeley, “Interleaved copy of printed almanacs, with diary entries, personal accounts and antiquarian notes” (1730), Bod. MS. Eng. Misc. d. 719/8, 19v, 23v, 25v, 27v, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Two shorter manuscripts on the subject of the mysteries also exist: Stukeley, “Explication of the Table of ISIS; to the right hon. The Countess of Pomfret” (1761), MS. Eng. Misc. d. 454, Bodleian Library, Oxford; and “On the Mysterys of the Antients” (n.d.), MS. Eng. Misc. e. 553, Bodleian Library, Oxford. I am grateful to Matthew Leigh for not writing further on the text in: Leigh, *The Masons and the Mysteries in 18th Century Drama* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) on account of his awareness of my work.

²⁵ Andrew Prescott and Susan Mitchell Sommers, “Searching for the Apple Tree: Revisiting the Earliest Years of Organized Freemasonry”, in John S. Wade, ed., *Reflections on 300 Hundred Years of Freemasonry: Papers Delivered to the Quatuor Coronati Lodge Tercentenary Conference on the History of Freemasonry* (London: Lewis Masonic, 2017), 681–704. James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London: John Senex & John Hooke, 1723); Anderson, *The New Book of Constitutions of the Antient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (London: Caesar Ward & Richard Chandler, 1738).

first aristocratic Grand Master the Duke of Montagu at Stationer’s Hall on June 24th 1721.²⁶ Although the resolution of such chronological questions is important, the intention here is to take a longer view on the religious, intellectual, and social character of early English freemasonry in the 1717–1721 period and the two decades which followed it, foregrounding a decidedly non–radical set of associations with secrecy and the pagan mysteries. As opposed to Assmann’s use of the concept of the *religio duplex*, in which an esoteric “pantheistically conceived primordial religion” is derived from the reception of ancient Egyptian religion, here the language of secrecy and symbolism is connected to the branch of biblical interpretation known as “typology”, which involved the reinterpretation of stories and prophecies from the Old Testament as “types” pointing to “antitypes” in the New.²⁷ This connects freemasonry to the concerns of the early Church Fathers and those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who shared them. Integrating the study of freemasonry with the expanding field of the history of the historiography of religion, a recent landmark of which in the seventeenth–century context is Dmitri Levitin’s *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science* (2015) and in the following century is Colin Kidd’s *The World of Mr Casaubon* (2016), presents opportunities for both: ideas about the history of religion can serve as a measure for masonic studies, and an understanding of the impact of ideas about the history of religion on masonic thought presents a means of investigating the cultural transformation caused by shifting attitudes towards the biblical chronology in the early modern period.²⁸

²⁶ On Montagu’s life and masonic involvement see: Barry Hoffbrand, “A Portrait of the First Noble Grand Master: Images of John, 2nd Duke of Montagu”, in Wade, *300 Years of Freemasonry*, 369–82.

²⁷ Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 3. Typology is particularly associated with the early Church Father Origen, see: Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 1998), 32–5. On the influence of typology on the thought of the Renaissance see: Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); and in the early modern period: Paul J. Korshin, *Typologies in England, 1650–1820* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).

²⁸ Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Colin Kidd, *The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain’s Wars of Mythography, 1700–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge

The masonic relevance of Stukeley's *On the Mysteries* was correctly identified by his second modern biographer, David Boyd Haycock, but he did not provide a full account of the text or mention a crucial piece of evidence: its description of the ancient initiations may be verified with catechism from the first "exposure" of masonic ritual, Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* (1730).²⁹ This represents an important discovery for the understanding of freemasonry in this period, demonstrating the reliability of the ritual contents of this genre of texts and providing a means of investigating its historical and religious self-conception. In turn, with this new information in hand the place of freemasonry in Stukeley's wider antiquarian work on the "Druidical Temples" in *Stonebenge* (1740) and *Abury* (1743) may be better elucidated.³⁰ The text reveals that Stukeley's conception of the mysteries, that they partially preserved vestiges of a prior revelation of Christianity, extended to freemasonry, which he likewise believed to contain traces of that patriarchal religion in its ritual. A version of Stukeley's views on the mysteries was presented to the Egyptian Society, which included many significant noble freemasons, and contemporary masonic literature shows that many shared this identification, whether literally as he did, or as more of an emblematic association. Although terms such as "prisca theologia" or "philosophia perennis" could be used to describe this idea, the phrases "patriarchal religion" and "patriarchal Christianity" are preferable in the context of the eighteenth century because they emphasise the historical origins of that pristine theology, which as Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann points out are

University Press, 2016). See also Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Renaud Gagné, Simon Goldhill, and Geoffrey E.R. Lloyd, eds., *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

²⁹ David Boyd Haycock, "Stukeley and the Mysteries", *Freemasonry Today* 6 (1998): 22–25. See also the discussion of Stukeley's involvement with freemasonry in: Haycock, *William Stukeley*, 174–80. Samuel Prichard, *Masonry Dissected* (London: J. Wilford, 1730). On Prichard's text see: Harry Carr, "An introduction to Prichard's *Masonry Dissected*", *AQC* 94 (1981): 107–37. Although texts such as this were long believed to be genuine exposures of the inner workings of the order, it is now thought they were published by freemasons as an aid for memorising the sequence of ritual, see: Péter, *British Freemasonry*, 2: ix.

³⁰ William Stukeley, *Stonebenge* (London: W. Innys & R. Manby, 1740); Stukeley, *Abury, a Temple of the British Druids, With Some Others, Described*. (London: W. Innys & R. Manby, 1743).

ultimately rooted in a prior revelation to Adam.³¹ On the face of it this de-radicalisation of early English freemasonry appears to side with Jonathan Israel's outright rejection of the masonic influence on the Enlightenment. But that would be going too far. By associating freemasonry with an underlying Christian unity derived from a revelation pre-Christ, there was (perhaps counter-intuitively) a forward-facing aspect to the movement. Through this historical perspective which reached towards the universal foundations of religion, a qualified form of religious tolerance may be identified, as well as a precursor to the deist universalism which came to supplant its Christian counterpart later in the century, particularly in the context of continental freemasonry.³²

³¹ Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), xviii. See also the classic study of the idea of the *prisca theologia*: Daniel Pickering Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1972); Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 4 (1966): 505–32; and Martin Mulrow, "Ambiguities of the Prisca Sapientia in Late Renaissance Humanism", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 1 (2004): 1–13. For a valuable discussion of the term in the context of the Jesuit mission to China see: J.G.A Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999-2015), 4:104–5.

³² On the masonic shift from Christianity to deism in the eighteenth century see: Charles Porset and Cécile Révauger, *Franc-maçonnerie et religions dans l'Europe des Lumières* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1998), 29.

2. William Stukeley: The Antiquarian Freemason

On the 11th May 1738, the rector of the village of Brant Broughton William Warburton paid a call on his fellow cleric and county neighbour William Stukeley at his home in Stamford, Lincolnshire. First acquainted in 1718 they had soon “enter’d into the most intimate friendship”, one that played out in letters as well as in periodic personal visits.³³ On this particular occasion, Stukeley’s diary records that he observed to the future Bishop of Gloucester “that our modern Free–Masonry ceremonies are derivd from the antient initiations of the Mysterys, or descent into hell.”³⁴ The timing of Stukeley’s remark was significant in that it coincided with the year of the publication of the first volume of William Warburton’s *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738–41), a book claimed by Colin Kidd as having caused the greatest controversy in eighteenth-century English letters.³⁵ Stukeley was well aware of its contents, having been entrusted with its idiosyncratic argument some seven years before it was published “under great injunction of secrecy, for fear somebody should steal his notion & publish it for their own.”³⁶ In the book, Warburton attempted to beat the deists and freethinkers at their own game: by conceding that the Jews had not had the doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments, he hoped to prove God’s direct theocratic rule of his chosen people, since he argued (against Bayle) that it was essential for the functioning of society. To emphasise the cultural uniqueness of the Jews he also turned to the pagan mysteries as evidence that an afterlife had otherwise been universally taught in the ancient world. Warburton’s literary aspirations were displayed in his interpretation of the descent to the underworld in the sixth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid* as an allegorical description of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries.³⁷ *On the Mysterys* is identified as a

³³ William Stukeley, *The Commentaries, Diary & Common-Place Book of William Stukeley & Selected Letters* (London: Doppler Press, 1980), 116.

³⁴ William Stukeley, “Memoirs” (n.d.), Bod. MS. Eng. misc. d. 719/8, fol. 17v, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

³⁵ William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, 2 vols (London: Fletcher Gyles, 1738–1741). Kidd, *Mr Casaubon*, 102.

³⁶ Stukeley, *Commentaries*, 116.

³⁷ Edward Gibbon’s first (though anonymous) English publication criticised this argument on the basis of Virgil’s Epicureanism, which would have banned him from the Eleusinian mysteries, see: Gibbon, “Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid”, in *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, 5 vols. (London: John

companion piece to this “noble illustration” by his “learned & most valuable friend” though where the *Divine Legation* was a “picture in words”, his is “strictly a picture.”³⁸ However, Warburton’s chosen confidant thoroughly disagreed with him on what the implications of this picture were for the history of religion.

The differences between the two on the subject of the mysteries are evident in the somewhat backhanded retrospective comments they made about each other’s character and thought; friends of nearly fifty years can evidently know each other a little too well. The first passage, drawn from Stukeley’s commonplace book, casts a retrospective glance on their friendship and contains a number of valuable clues that help delineate the disagreement that brought about the waning of their once very close relations:

We had very many & warm disputes about his notions of the Egyptian antiquitys, that he heighthend [sic] ‘em too much, that they were borrowed from the hebrew. In short we never could agree in our notions about them, about the hieroglyphics, the mysterys, or of antiquitys in general. Tho’ this difference had not the least influence upon my friendship towards him, for I admir’d him as a fine genius, yet I found evidently he coold toward me on that account. He wrote a treatise against Mr. Popes essay on man, to prove it to be atheism, spinosaism, deism, hobbism, fatalism, materialism, & what not. In that my sentiments fully coincided. On a sudden he alter’d his style, & wrote a comment to prove the sublimity of that work. This did his business effectually [...] He certainly has great parts & equal industry, & a pride equal to both. But the greatest men, Camden & Selden, Boyle, Newton, Usher, &c., were as remarkable for candor & modesty as for their incomparable genius’s. Warburton got his legation notion from lord Shaftsbury’s characteristics; his mysterys from Sir Jo. Marsham, many more notions from Spencer, & other such kind of writers. We may thence gather his internal principles.³⁹

In the second, taken from a letter of March 1765 following Stukeley’s death and addressed to one of his supporters, the Bishop of Worcester Richard Hurd,

Murray, 1814), 4:467–514. Gibbon’s argument had in fact already been made by the Church historian John Jortin, see: Jortin, *Six Dissertations upon Different Subjects* (London: J. Whiston & B. White, 1755), 310.

³⁸ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 3r.

³⁹ Stukeley, *Commentarys*, 116–7.

Warburton has the last word. He condescendingly dismisses his ideas and — for good measure — also throws in a jibe about opportunism:

You say true, I have a tenderness in my temper which will make me miss poor Stukeley; for, not to say that he was one of my oldest acquaintance, there was in him such a mixture of simplicity, drollery, absurdity, ingenuity, superstition, and antiquarianism, that he often afforded me that kind of well-seasoned repast, which the French call an *Ambigu*, I suppose, from a compound of things never meant to meet together. I have often heard him laughed at by fools, who had neither his sense, his knowledge, nor his honesty; though it must be confessed, that in him they were all strangely travestied. Not a week before his death he walked from Bloomsbury to Grosvenor-Square, to pay me a visit: was cheerful as usual, and as full of literary projects. But his business was (as he heard Geekie was not likely to continue long) to desire I would give him the earliest notice of his death, for that he intended to solicit for his Prebend of Canterbury, by Lord Chancellor and Lord Cardigan. “For,” added he, “one never dies the sooner, you know, for seeking preferment.”⁴⁰

The first passage makes clear that the intellectual discord between the two men essentially turned upon a problem of chronology: specifically, that of the origins of Jewish law and ritual. For Warburton, following the seventeenth-century works of the chronologist John Marsham and the Hebraist John Spencer, their customs had been shaped during the captivity in Egypt (“he heighthend ’em too much”).⁴¹ But for Stukeley the reverse was the case: the Hebrew patriarchs were

⁴⁰ William Warburton, *Letters from a Late Eminent Prelate to One of his Friends*, 2nd ed. (London: T Cadell & W. Davies, 1809), 358–9.

⁴¹ John Marsham, *Chronicus canon Aegyptiacus, Ebraicus, Graecus, et disquisitiones* (London: Tho. Roycroft, 1672); John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus, et earum rationibus* (Cambridge: John Hayes, 1683–1685). There were ancient precedents to this argument: Diodorus Siculus, for example, writes that the practice of circumcision was carried over from Egypt to the Jews, see: C.H. Oldfather, trans., *Diodorus Siculus: The Library of History*, 12 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), 1:193. On Spencer’s influence on Warburton see: Dmitri Levitin, “John Spencer’s *De Legibus Hebraeorum* (1683–5) and ‘Enlightened’ Sacred History: A New Interpretation”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 76 (2013): 49. On Spencer’s use of the theory of “divine accommodation”, which also influenced Warburton, see: Daniel Stolzenberg, “John Spencer and the Perils of Sacred Philology”, *Past & Present* 214, no. 1 (2012): 129–63; and: Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993), xix–xx.

the ultimate source for the religion of Egypt and, for that matter, all other nations (“they were borrowed from the Hebrew”). To him it seemed absurd that Moses, who was sent to draw the Jews away from Egypt, could have at the same time copied their idolatrous customs. The true reason that Egypt had been credited with the birth of idolatry and the mysteries was the imbalance of material testimony, as their monuments remained standing. This chronological perspective deeply shaped Stukeley’s view of the history and religious character of freemasonry.

William Stukeley had been “made a Free Mason at the Salutation Tav., Tavistock Street” on the 6th of January 1721.⁴² Freemasonry represented a new arena of sociability for the young Lincolnshire doctor bent on establishing himself in the capital and it followed his membership of the newly founded Society of Antiquaries in January 1718, for which he was appointed secretary, and his becoming a fellow of the Royal Society a few months after. In a short biography of Stukeley in *The History of Corpus Christi* (1753), his *alma mater*, written by Robert Masters though with the evident input of its subject, it is recorded that “his Curiosity led him to be initiated into the Mysteries of *Masonry*; imagining them to be the Remains of the famous Mysteries of the Antients.” Immediately after, in a reference to *On the Mysterys*, Masters writes that it was this “he tells us” which “enabled him to write more fully thereupon than had been hitherto done, although this Work hath not yet been published.”⁴³ This evidence helpfully indicates that freemasonry primarily appealed to Stukeley the antiquarian, though his diary also proves that his desire to seek favour with the nobility — the trait ridiculed by Warburton — would have been handsomely fulfilled by the association. Both aspects are evident in the next entry relating to freemasonry in Stukeley’s diary, which records the inauguration of the first aristocratic Grand Master on June 24th:

The Masons had a dinner at Stationers Hall, present, Duke of Montague, Lord Herbert, Lord Stanhope, Sir And. Fountain, &c. Dr. Desaguliers pronounc’d an oration. The Gd. Mr. [Grand Master]. Mr. Pain produc’d an old MS of the Constitutions which he got in the West of England, 500 years old. He read over

⁴² Stukeley, *Commentarys*, 54.

⁴³ Robert Masters, *The History of the College of Corpus Christi and the B. Virgin Mary* (Cambridge: J. Bentham, 1753), 382.

a new sett of articles to be observ'd. The Duke of Montague chose Gd. Mr. next year. Dr. Beal, Deputy.⁴⁴

The manuscript produced on this occasion by George Payne is thought to have been the Cooke, which along with the Regius is one of the two oldest of the Old Charges.⁴⁵ That it was shown on this occasion points to the simple conclusion that one of the main attractions of freemasonry at the time was freemasonry — that is, its striking history. Although this may have the ring of a tautology, it is a premise that helpfully ties the development of the society to textual foundations and provides a neutral ground upon which more particularised views of, for example, the political alignments of masonic lodges can be built.⁴⁶

James Anderson's *New Book of Constitutions* puts some flesh on the diary entry, stating that the dinner was preceded by a meeting of the Grand Lodge at the King's Arms tavern in the churchyard of St. Paul's that brought together "the *Masters* and *Wardens* of 12 Lodges" and at which, among others, Philip Stanhope the fourth Earl of Chesterfield was made a new brother.⁴⁷ From there the assembled freemasons "marched on Foot" the short distance to Stationer's Hall, where they were "joyfully receiv'd by about 150 *true* and *faithful*, all clothed" and sat down "in the antient Manner of *Masons* to a very elegant Feast." Following this refreshment, the former Grand Master George Payne invested Montagu "with the Ensigns and Badges of his Office and Authority, install'd him in *Solomon's* Chair and sat down on his Right Hand"; Montagu then proclaimed Dr. John Beal as his deputy and Payne invested him and "install'd him in *Hiram Abbiff's* Chair on the *Grand Master's Left Hand*." The mood of the occasion is described as celebratory, in light of the "Revival of the *Prosperity of Masonry*", a phrase which illustrates the balance between the novelty of the eighteenth-century coinage of the society and the recognition of its deep history. Alongside the Duke of Montagu (on whose relationship with Stukeley more below) and

⁴⁴ Stukeley, *Commentarys*, 56.

⁴⁵ Prescott and Sommers, "Apple Tree", 694. See also: Prescott, "Some literary contexts of the Regius and Cooke manuscripts", in Trevor Stewart, ed., *Freemasonry in Music and Literature* (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2005), 44; and G. P. Speth, "The Stukeley-Payne-Cooke MS", *AQC* 4 (1891): 171–2.

⁴⁶ On the political affiliations of the early English lodges see: Ric Berman, *Foundations of Modern Freemasonry* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2014).

⁴⁷ Anderson, *New Book of Constitutions*, 112–3.

Lord Stanhope, the third noble in attendance was Lord Henry Herbert, the ninth Earl of Pembroke and sixth Earl of Montgomery, a keen Palladian and antiquarian who commissioned the also-mentioned Sir Andrew Fountain to catalogue his collection of antiquities. A few months after this grand affair on the 27th of December the Deputy Grand Master Dr. Beal consented to a new lodge at the Fountain Tavern on the Strand, for which Stukeley was chosen as master; a lodge which was graced the following year with the presence of a number of other aristocratic freemasons. Stukeley's active commitment to freemasonry also survived his self-imposed exile to Grantham in 1726, where he founded a lodge. *On the Mysterys* and the reference in *The History of Corpus Christi* likewise proves that his engagement with the subject continued long into his life. Stukeley has long been recognised as a valuable eyewitness to the events of the early years of the Grand Lodge, but the role freemasonry played in his antiquarian thought also provides a window into its intellectual and religious culture, a subject which has all too often remained opaque.

3. *On the Mysterys*

William Warburton's above-cited comment that the aged Stukeley was "as usual [...] full of literary projects" is testified in abundance by the richly illustrated manuscript collection he left behind, now distributed across a large number of libraries. These varied writings demonstrate that his most well-known publications on the "Temples of the Druids" were very much the tip of an iceberg. Fortunately, Stukeley left a map by which to navigate these disparate texts in the preface to *Stonebenge*, making it possible to piece together an outline of his lifetime's project: a history in seven discourses reaching back from the visible antiquities of Britain to the biblical origins of the world. The first part was to set out a system of chronology that used astronomical proofs to support the narrative of the Old Testament. In this respect he followed Isaac Newton's *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (1728), a book which though widely derided upon its posthumous publication remained important for Stukeley, Newton's first biographer, in its attestation of the primacy of the Hebrews.⁴⁸ The second, "Melchisedec", was an attempt to determine the features of the "first and patriarchal religion" from the evidence of the Bible and "ancient heathen customs" which were seen as the "remains of that religion."⁴⁹ One of the central motivations of this was to establish the Trinity as numbering among the beliefs of the patriarchs, which places Stukeley in the tradition of figures such as the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth.⁵⁰ The third part was to be *On the Mysterys*, in which they are conceived of in a paradoxical manner: both negatively as the first "deviation" from patriarchal Christianity, but also positively in their proximity to the "true religion" of which they offer the best

⁴⁸ Isaac Newton, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (London: J. Tonson, J. Osborn, & T. Longman, 1728). For Stukeley's brief account of his discussion with Newton on Hebrew primacy and the Temple of Solomon, see: Stukeley, *Commentarys*, 69. On Newton's ideas of ancient history see: Jed Z. Buchwald and Mordechai Feingold, *Newton and the Origin of Civilization* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013). This updates the earlier study: Frank Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

⁴⁹ Stukeley, *Stonebenge*, i.

⁵⁰ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Richard Royston, 1678). See also: Jan Rohls, "Cudworth and the English Debate on the Trinity", in Douglas Hedley and David Leech, eds., *Revisioning Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy* (Cham: Springer, 2019), 101–15.

hope of reconstructing.⁵¹ In the introductory pages of one of the manuscripts, Stukeley clarifies this point by remarking that the books of Moses which treat of the “jewish polity & religion” are deficient in providing “any regular account of the first & patriarchal religion”, and therefore the seeker after religion’s “purest streams” must necessarily search through the “dross” and “corruption” of “heathen antiquity.”⁵² The next was a “A discourse on the hieroglyphic learning of the ancients, and of the origin of the alphabet of letters”, affirming Hebrew letters as the “primitive idea” from which “all others are deriv’d”; this was another point of contrast with Warburton, who advocated a progressive development from pictorial hieroglyphs to abstract characters in his own account of the origin of written language.⁵³ Part five then marks the shift from the study of antiquity in general towards a specific connection with Britain, relating the druids to the patriarchal religion of Abraham via Bochart’s Phoenicians, who had set up a colony in England whilst trading in Cornish tin. Finally, this ambitious endeavour concluded with the only two parts that were actually published: *Abury* and *Stonebenge*.

As well as influencing Lafitau, Athanasius Kircher was also an important model for Stukeley, both in his broader religious concerns and in his specific programme of works on the temples of the druids.⁵⁴ Kircher is particularly present in *On the Mysterys*, which follows the attempt in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* to divine the meaning of hieroglyphics from the Bembine tablet.⁵⁵ At the time of writing Stukeley believed this singular antiquity to be in “a lumber room over the King of Sardinias library” in Turin, where it had been seen “a good while ago” by the physician and freemason Richard Mead, under whom Stukeley had studied “the practical part” of medicine and on whose recommendation he was

⁵¹ Stukeley, *Stonebenge*, i.

⁵² Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 5r; fol. 1r.

⁵³ Stukeley, *Stonebenge*, ii. On Warburton’s interpretation of hieroglyphs see: Annette Graczyk, *Die Hieroglyphe im 18. Jahrhundert: Theorien zwischen Aufklärung und Esoterik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 45–70.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Kircher’s influence on Stukeley’s Trinitarian interpretation of the ground-plan of Avebury: Stukeley, *Abury*, 9.

⁵⁵ Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, 3:79–160. On Kircher’s interpretation of the Bembine Tablet see: Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus*, 143–6. For a useful summary of other works on the object, see: Enrica Leospo, *La Mensa Isiaca di Torino* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 1–28.

elected a fellow of the Royal Society.⁵⁶ However, confusingly he writes elsewhere that it was first discovered there in 1696 by the above-mentioned Sir Andrew Fountain.⁵⁷ In this latter respect he seems to have misremembered, since the discovery was indeed made by Mead and not Fountain, though in 1695.⁵⁸ Today, this remarkable object is unattractively displayed in the basement of the Egyptian Museum in Turin and is understood to originate from the first century A.D. rather than ancient Egypt, with its “hieroglyphs” serving decorative rather than textual purposes. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though, long before Champollion’s decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, no such distinction was possible and its meaning was widely speculated upon. In his own speculations Stukeley claims to have gone beyond Kircher in the comprehension of “the whole & main design of it” and even chastises him for his “too great confidence” in delivering judgement “on matters so abstruse.”⁵⁹ As will be seen, Stukeley is lacking self-awareness when he makes this criticism.

The interest in the Bembine tablet in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries illustrates the increasing attention paid to material culture as a body of evidence that could anchor textually based interpretations of antiquity. One of the most useful publications in this context was Bernard de Montfaucon’s *L’Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures* (1719–1724) which addresses the tablet, describing it as a “most significant [plus considerable] monument” which in its representation of a “large number of religious acts” can be taken as a “general table” of the “religion and superstitions” of the ancient Egyptians, specifically the “mysteries of Isis.”⁶⁰ Montfaucon’s own exposition of its various compartments is largely descriptive, though he does make reference to both the guarded views of Lorenzo Pignoria and those of the “more daring [plus hardi]”

⁵⁶ Masters, *Corpus Christi*, 382.

⁵⁷ Stukeley conferred with Fountain on the subject of Roman antiquities, see: William Stukeley, *The Family Memoirs of the Rev. William Stukeley, M.D. And the Antiquarian and other Correspondence of William Stukeley, Roger & Samuel Gale, etc.*, 3 vols (Durham: Andrews & Co. 1882-1887), 3:28.

⁵⁸ Richard Mead, *The Medical Works of Richard Mead* (London: C. Hitch & L. Hawes, 1762), iv. Fountain was also on a Grand Tour around the turn of the century.

⁵⁹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 14r.

⁶⁰ Bernard de Montfaucon, *L’Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, 5 vols (Paris: Florentin Delaulne, etc., 1719), 2:331.

Kircher.⁶¹ For Stukeley, one of whose manuscripts includes an engraving of the tablet removed from Montfaucon's text, the tripartite plan has two primary meanings (fig. 1). First, he sees it as a representation of ancient Egyptian cosmography, showing the universe to be "an expansion from the first cause"; second, it relates to the mysteries by depicting a temple "in plano" with the "whole doctrin of initiation delineated therein."⁶² In terms of this second aspect, Stukeley's chronological outlook must be remembered, which followed Newton in affirming that the "Mosaic tabernacle was not made from imitation of any Egyptian temple", but that all Egyptian temples were "built in imitation of Solomons."⁶³ The cosmographic aspect is linked to the initiatory insofar as each of the three areas of the temple are representative of stages in a Neo-Platonically ordered universe (fig. 2). The "court or vestibule" represents "the sublunary world", the "sanctum or holy part in the south" with "the golden candlestick, wherein were seven lamps always burning" is "a fit resemblance of the sun & planets", and finally the "adytum or sancti sanctorum" is a "representation of divine things & invisible, by material."⁶⁴ On the tablet itself the bottom portion represents the "terrestrial" or the "earthly globe", the upper "the sidereal" or "planetary", and the central the "archetypal" world and "the residence of the deity."⁶⁵ Finally, its border "composd of a great variety of symbolical & sacred figures" is labelled the "ideal world", or "the chain of the exemplars of things", which proceeds from the mind of the deity to bind the whole together.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Montfaucon, *Antiquité expliquée*, 2:340. Laurentii Pignorii, *Mensa Isiaca* (Amsterdam: Andreae Frisii, 1669).

⁶² Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 15r.

⁶³ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 5v.

⁶⁴ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 28r.

⁶⁵ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 29r.

⁶⁶ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 95r. On Stukeley's metaphysical ideas see also: Stukeley, "Disquisitio de Deo, Or an Enquiry into the Nature of the Deity" (1732) Bod. MS. Eng. misc. e. 650, Bodleian Library, Oxford.



Fig. 1: Engraving of the Bembine Tablet folded and pasted at the end of MS 4725 and removed from: Montfaucon, *Antiquité expliquée*, 2:332–3. Reproduced by permission of the Wellcome Library

In the associations Stukeley draws between the sections of the temple and these symbolic realms, he is likely to have been influenced by Clement of Alexandria's interpretation of the Temple of Solomon in book five of his *Stromata*:

In the midst of the covering and veil, where the priests were allowed to enter, was situated the altar of incense, the symbol of the earth placed in the middle of this universe [...] and that place intermediate between the inner veil, where the high priest alone, on prescribed days, was permitted to enter, and the external court which surrounded it — free to all the Hebrews — was, they say, the middlemost point of heaven and earth. But others say it was the symbol of the intellectual world, and that of sense.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ William Wilson, trans., *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 2:240. Another possible contemporary influence is Newton, who used the analogy between temple and universe in his own history of religion, see: Buchwald and Feingold, *Newton and Civilisation*, 152–5.

As a result of Stukeley's chronological outlook, when he interprets the Egyptian figures there is always a Hebrew referent: the central representation of the seated Isis is an imitation of the mercy seat of Jehovah above the Ark of the Covenant and the adjacent figure of Mercury is likewise viewed as an "imitation" of the "sacred cherubim" that flanked the ark.⁶⁸ So too are the three sections of the table linked to a doctrine of rather less certain presence in the Old Testament, the Trinity, showing us that behind the Hebrew referent lies an ultimately patriarchal Christian source. The Trinitarian theme also plays out in the interpretation of the Egyptian pantheon: in the empyrean world Osiris is a person of the deity, in the planetary world he is the "genius of the sun", and then in the terrestrial world "he is Horus the delegated Osiris, the genius that acts by his power."⁶⁹

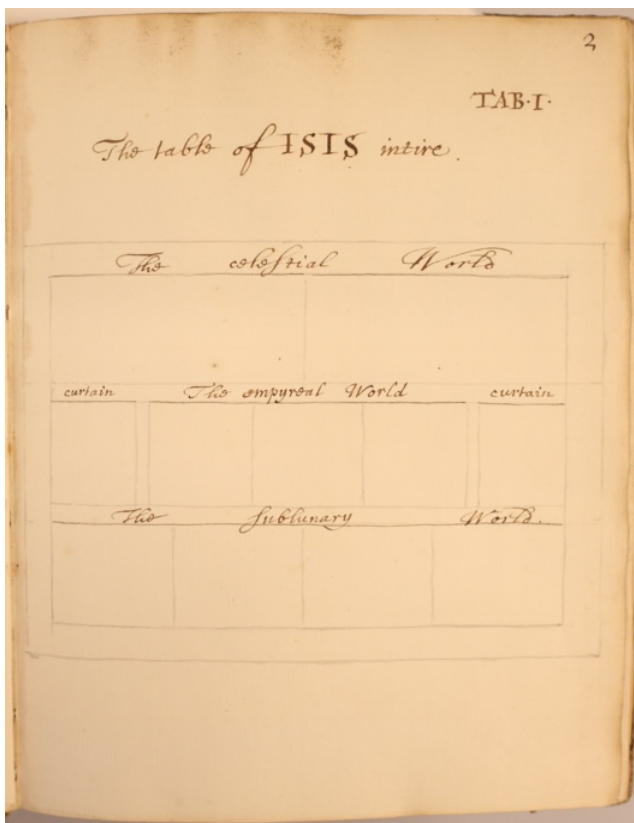


Fig. 2: William Stukeley's Neo-Platonic interpretation of the plan of the Bembine Tablet. Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 2r. Reproduced by permission of the Wellcome Library

⁶⁸ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 36r.

⁶⁹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 66r.

With the broader context of Stukeley's interpretation of the Bembine tablet and how it relates pagan and Jewish traditions and theology to Christianity having been outlined, the initiate may now be followed into the temple to experience some of the proceedings of the mysteries. It is at this point that the masonic theme begins to emerge more clearly. The following account will weave together a narrative from Stukeley's manuscripts with corresponding sections of catechism from Prichard's *Masonry Dissected*. It will attempt to both impose a sequential order on somewhat disorderly pieces of writing and to define Stukeley's view of the separate identities of the roles of the hierophants and the gods they represent, since so many confusingly coincide in their meanings. It is helpful to begin not at the beginning of either of the manuscripts, but with Stukeley's informing the reader that the mysteries had "three degrees, or different stages": both "mystae" and "epoptae", though with the latter category split into lesser and higher orders.⁷⁰ He uses masonic terminology in naming these three degrees those of "learners, brothers, the other masters."⁷¹ Each is related to a specific area of the temple, with that of the learner — in Prichard the "Enter'd Prentice" — being the porch. In MS 4725 Stukeley writes that the door to the temple had a knocker on it in the form of a dog's head, "3 knocks of which gave the mythologists the notion of cerberus the three headed dog of hell."⁷² In Prichard we find this reflected by the exchange:

Q. How got you Admittance?

A. By three great Knocks.⁷³

Having announced himself, the high-priest of the temple representing Horus or the "rex sacrorum" greets the initiate at the entrance where he "regarded with a full face, the sun rising, but then he himself stood in the western end of the temple."⁷⁴ Stukeley continues by saying that, therefore, if an initiated person was "askd, by any of his brethren, where stood the rex sacrorum or king, he would answer, in the east, or regarding the sun rising"; this identifies the high priest as

⁷⁰ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 100r.

⁷¹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 100r.

⁷² Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 30v.

⁷³ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 10.

⁷⁴ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 16r.

a symbol of the sun, a motif that will develop as the mysteries progress.⁷⁵ Turning to the evidence from the near contemporary *Masonry Dissected*, this corresponds to the following section of catechism:

Q. Where stands your Master?

A. In the East.

Q. Why so?

A. As the Sun rises in the East and opens the Day, so the Master stands in the East [...] to open the Lodge and to set his Men at Work.⁷⁶

The role of Horus, played by the hierophant, is to “admit descending souls into the world”, in which capacity he represents the “parent of the human race” and the “genius who presides over [...] renaissance.”⁷⁷ In the mysteries the association with birth is evident in the initiate’s being clothed in a garment “somewhat like Horus’s, or someway resembling the clothing of an infant”; a link between the skirt-like ancient Egyptian “shendyt” and the masonic apron.⁷⁸ Like a masonic apron this was an item “they were to keep all their life after, as a memorial of this their regeneration.”⁷⁹ The hierophant then introduces the initiate into the temple “one at a time” and “with a certain number of steps, to intimate their descent into this new world.”⁸⁰ In *Masonry Dissected* this corresponds with the “Enter’d Prentice’s Degree”:

Q. What did the Senior Warden do with you?

A. He presented me, and shew’d me how to walk up (by three Steps) to the Master.⁸¹

As for other matters of their appearance, the Egyptian figures on the Bembine tablet demonstrate that the “initiated had their legs & feet bare”, so if “asked in

⁷⁵ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 68r. The same question comes up in: Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 14v.

⁷⁶ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 15.

⁷⁷ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 66r; fol. 77r.

⁷⁸ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 86r.

⁷⁹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 86r.

⁸⁰ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 86r.

⁸¹ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 11.

what habit he enterd? he would answer neither cloathd nor naked.”⁸² In Prichard there is a similar formulation in the following section of catechism:

Q. How did he bring you?

A. Neither naked nor clothed, bare-foot nor shod, deprived of all Metal and in a right moving Posture.⁸³

With these contextual details established, Stukeley elsewhere elaborates on what exactly transpired in this first part of the mysteries, treated in the following passage:

here they were introduced & prepared for the greater solemnity of proper initiation. they were made acquainted with somewhat of the nature & perfection of the institution, which they were going to be admitted into. their passions were raised to a high degree, & the sense of an extraordinary event, presented its self, with a good deal of surprize: their minds were astonishd, with the symbolical furniture of the place, which was explained to 'em, in some such manner as we have already handled. that they were to look upon themselves as in a state of regeneration, toward a new life, a life of greater perfection. they were ordered to have pure minds, pure hands as people ready to approach the divinity.⁸⁴

Before entering the temple proper, the initiate crosses the threshold of the porch “pav'd with squares” which “were chequered black & white” (just as the carpets of masonic lodges are today) to represent the “material world”, referred to by Prichard as the “*Mosaick Pavement*” (fig. 3).⁸⁵ Also on the floor were found “mathematical & symbolical figures” relating “to the oath the initiated were to take, as well as the matter of instruction”; a feature that points to the devices known as tracing boards, the illustrations used as prompts for the various symbols and the order of masonic rituals.⁸⁶ Then behind the initiate “a guard was set before the door with a sword drawn in his hand, to hinder all profane persons from approaching”; this corresponds to the role of the “tyler”, who

⁸² Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 87r.

⁸³ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 10.

⁸⁴ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 101r.

⁸⁵ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 13.

⁸⁶ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 105r.

stood guard at the door of the lodge room in the early years of eighteenth-century freemasonry when lodges were held in taverns.⁸⁷

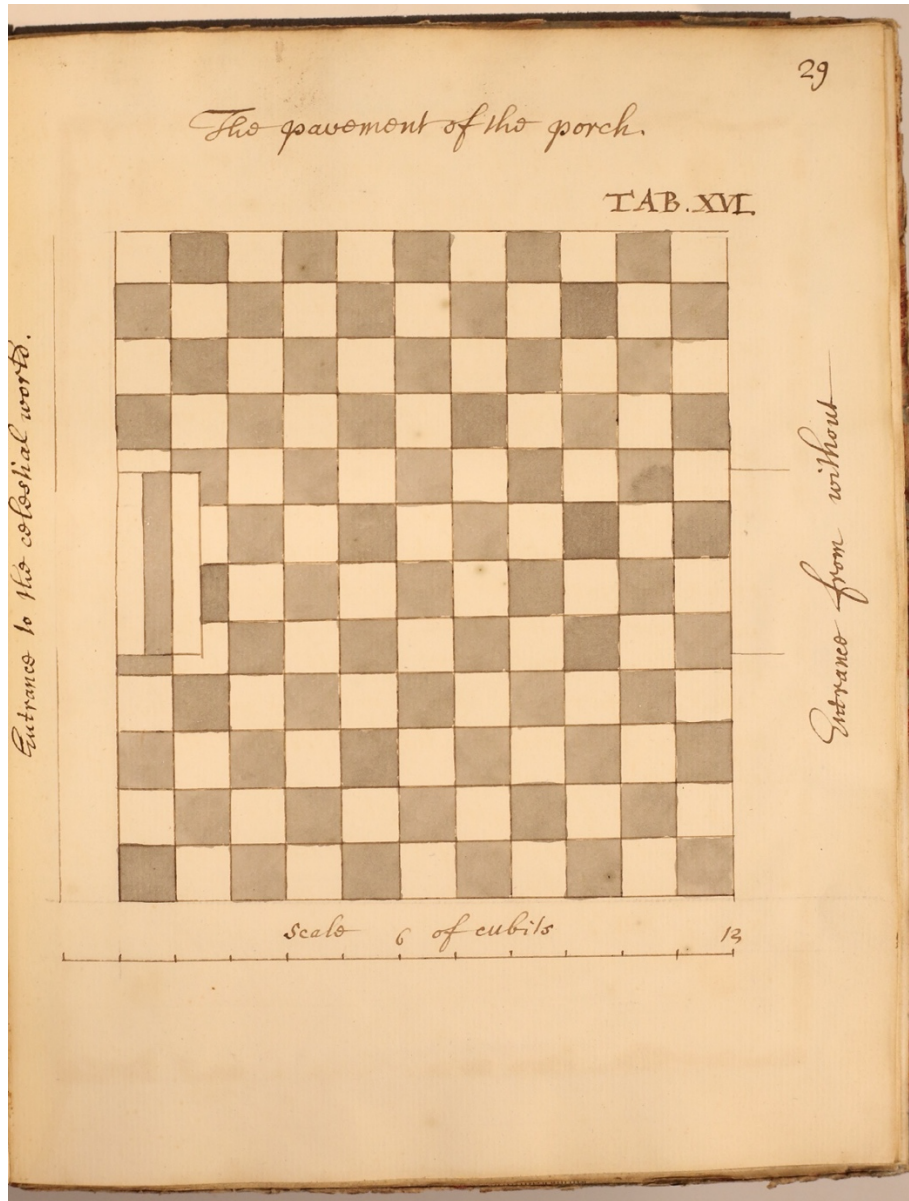


Fig. 3: Stukeley's design of the porch of the temple which represents the material world; Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 29r. Reproduced by permission of the Wellcome Library

⁸⁷ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 10r.

Following this first degree, the mysteries progress in the following year with the initiate proceeding from the eastern end of the temple, associated with Horus, birth, and the terrestrial world, to the north, the first area that connects with the planetary, but through which “the sun never transgresses.”⁸⁸ In Prichard there is the same association with the northern section of the lodge:

Q. Why are there no Lights in the North?

A. Because the Sun darts no Rays from thence.⁸⁹

This northern area is presided over by a “triad” of figures among whom Isis is dominant and represents the Tropic of Cancer; the association with winter and the absence of light also connects her to the Greek goddess Persephone, in that she is “the watchful guardian of the seeds of things during that season.”⁹⁰ In this area the “probationers” gather together to listen to a lecture “concerning the punishments in a future state” and the “principles of the sublime & perfect religion they were now accepted in.”⁹¹ Next, on the opposite side in the southern area is the “hawk-headed deity” or “the genius of the sun”, who is representative of the Tropic of Capricorn.⁹² Here Stukeley interprets the seasonal associations with the theme of initiation as symbolising the life-cycle, which begins with birth in the east, then proceeds to the care of “our nurses & tutors” in the “northern trias”, before reaching the south which illustrates “the state of manhood.”⁹³

The initiate then comes to the symbolic end of life at the “great western gate of the world, which all must pass, as surely as they enter”, whose presiding figure is Hecate, “the keeper of the gate of Hades”, who stands behind “as it were” a “dead corpse.”⁹⁴ This “dead corpse” perhaps refers to the events of the third degree, with its narrative of the murder and resurrection of the legendary architect of the Temple of Solomon, Hiram Abiff. But as Stukeley does not explicitly make this connection, its discussion will be left to another text below

⁸⁸ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 87r.

⁸⁹ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 15.

⁹⁰ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 89r.

⁹¹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 102v; fol. 109r.

⁹² Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 88r.

⁹³ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 90r.

⁹⁴ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 91r; fol. 103r.

which does. Thus, the initiate, in accordance with the solar symbolism, undergoes birth in the east where the sun is at its lowest point in the sky, proceeds to the north where he grows through winter, reaches maturity in the summer of the south, before declining in the west, representative of the end of life. But as with the multi-layered meanings of mythology, the life-cycle theme can equally be conceived of as an afterlife-cycle, with Stukeley elsewhere describing the gate of Horus as “the verge of death.”⁹⁵ Finally, if they passed through the gate of Hecate, the initiate would enter into the “adytum” where they would be confronted by the other “three principal agents or hierophants” dressed “in order to represent the three persons of the deity [...] Isis, Osiris & Mercury”, and called “symbolically the three great lights” which illuminate the “mystic temple” or universe of which it was a representation.⁹⁶ In *Masonry Dissected* this is reflected in the catechism:

Q. Have you any Lights in your Lodge?

A. Yes, Three.

Q. What do they represent?

A. Sun, Moon and Master-Mason.⁹⁷

On the Mysteries may appear to have progressed in some decidedly non-Christian directions, but the conclusion of the initiation comes full circle to the theme of patriarchal Christianity. This becomes clear when Stukeley writes that the key part of the ceremony relating to this final section of the temple was the “bringing of a young infant out of it”, which occurred at the “winter solstice, our christmas time”; that is, in terms of the cyclical solar organisation of the temple, when the sun is at its lowest point before its rebirth.⁹⁸ This child was “the divine person, expected by all the world, who was to be born at that time”, and whose coming was revealed to the patriarchs.⁹⁹ In a section that links this aspect of *On the Mysteries* to his ideas on the druids, Stukeley runs through a logical chain which begins with the golden bough that helps Aeneas through the underworld in book six of the *Aeneid*, which he identifies as mistletoe, a plant that uniquely blossoms

⁹⁵ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 112r.

⁹⁶ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 118r.

⁹⁷ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 14.

⁹⁸ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 113r; fol. 113ar.

⁹⁹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 23r.

in midwinter and was held sacred in druidical religion.¹⁰⁰ Then with reference to the Venerable Bede he writes that the Saxons celebrated a great festivity on the 8th of the Kalends of January, which they called “madrenacht”, or the “night of the matrons.”¹⁰¹ But Stukeley argues that Bede missed the true significance of this word, which in his mind in fact refers to the god Mithras, who was born on the day “Invicti Natalis”, the 25th of December; a connection with Christ’s nativity only explicable in his view by the “antient notices of a divine infant at that time to be born.”¹⁰²

The classical author who shapes Stukeley’s stance on this aspect of the mysteries is Macrobius, whose *Saturnalia* provides the evidence of a child having been brought out of a temple in an ancient Egyptian religious ceremony, and which also helps our understanding of the motif of the sun’s ascent and descent as the birth and death of a god:

They observe the holy mystery in the rites by calling the sun Apollo when it is in the upper (that is, daytime) hemisphere; when it is in the lower (that is, night-time) hemisphere, it is considered Dionysus, who is Liber. Similarly, some images of father Liber are fashioned in the form of a boy, others of a young man, sometimes also bearded, or even elderly, like the image of the one the Greeks call Bassareus, and also the one they call Briseus, and like the one the people of Naples in Campania worship under the name Hêbôn. But the different ages are to be understood with reference to the sun. It is very small at the winter solstice, like the image the Egyptians bring out from its shrine on a fixed date, with the appearance of a small infant, since it’s the shortest day. Then, as the days become progressively longer, by the vernal equinox it resembles a vigorous young man and is given the form of a youth. Later, full maturity at the summer solstice is represented by a beard, by which point it has

¹⁰⁰ Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 31; and: Stukeley, MS 4722, fols. 20r–22r. The connection between mistletoe and the “golden branch” of Virgil’s *Aeneid* is also made by John Toland, see: Toland, *A Critical History of the Celtic Religion, and Learning: Containing an Account of the Druids* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, & Co., 1814), 108. On the 12th May 1729 Warburton shared his copy of Toland’s collected works with Stukeley, see: William Stukeley, “Memoirs” (n.d.), Bod. MS. Eng. misc. e. 121, fol. 77r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

¹⁰¹ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 22r.

¹⁰² Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 22r; 113ar.

grown as much as it will grow. Thereafter, as the days become ever shorter, the god is rendered in the fourth shape, like a man growing old.¹⁰³

This passage enables a better understanding of the conflation of identities and roles in the mysteries, with the hierophant or master mason first playing Horus, then the other deities as the initiate moves through the temple and the theme of the life-cycle or revolution of the sun develops. Furthermore, as with there being an aspect relating to the Christian nativity in the greatest ceremony of the mysteries, so too did they commemorate Christ's passion under the guise of a pagan deity:

In another part of their ceremonys, great grief & wailing was practisd for the god Atys, Adonis being dead: & Julius Firmicus tells us, once in the year they cut down a pine tree & the image of a man is fastened upon it, & carryd into the temple in a sacred procession, & the priests had mourning garments on. further this same god after death they bury'd in a grave or sepulcher, adds Julius Firmicus, & some time after they proclaimd, that he was arisen to life again, & then made extravagant rejoycings.¹⁰⁴

In Stukeley's scheme of the history of religion, therefore, whether proceeding from Egypt, Greece, Judea, or Britain, all the similarities between the varied pantheon of deities and the diverse ceremonies instituted to celebrate them are ultimately explained by reference to a prior revelation of Christianity. Although his Christianised masonic version of the pagan mysteries seems primarily to look backwards to the diffusionism of the seventeenth century, it is worth noting that well into the mid–nineteenth century the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling made the same claim that the highest object of the Eleusinian mysteries was none other than precisely this “*coming of God*” in the *Philosophie der Offenbarung* (lectures delivered in 1841–42).¹⁰⁵ But this would make

¹⁰³ Robert A. Kaster, trans., *Macrobius. Saturnalia*, 3 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1:249–51.

¹⁰⁴ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 113br.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Friedrich August Schelling, ed., *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings Sämmtliche Werke. Zweite Abtheilung. Dritter Band* (Stuttgart & Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1858), 519. On the context of this identification see: Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), 295.

use of a very different model of the history of religion to Stukeley, based not on diffusion from the Hebrew patriarchs, but evolution from the pagan mysteries.

4. The Egyptian Society

The shorter version of *On the Mysterys* contains a note which states that in the years 1741–1743, on December 11th (“the day of the winter solstice”) Stukeley was instrumental in having “the Festum Isiacum” celebrated at the Egyptian Society:

where this book was exhibited, & portions of my MS. treatise, explaining it, was read; likewise at the Duke of Montagues request, I harangued on the Egyptian Sistrum. this was the foundation of that great respect, the Duke, ever after, show'd to me.¹⁰⁶

This information presents a valuable means of considering the aristocratic social atmosphere in which Stukeley’s ideas circulated and raises the question of the wider currency of his Christian-masonic interpretation of the pagan mysteries. The relatively short-lived Egyptian Society was founded in the course of a dinner held on December 11th 1741 at the Lebeck’s Head Tavern, Chandos Street, Charing Cross, by a group of travellers and scholars who had either been to Egypt or had an interest in its antiquities, and a number of whom were prominent freemasons.¹⁰⁷ The first president was the fourth Earl of Sandwich who shared the name John Montagu with the first aristocratic Grand Master, the second Duke of Montagu, another member of the Egyptian society. In his memoirs Stukeley writes that he was first introduced to Sandwich in 1741 by James Torkington, the rector of Little Stukeley in Huntingdonshire, which meeting led to his becoming “one of the founders of the Egyptian Society.”¹⁰⁸ At their first encounter the Earl of Sandwich had dressed up in oriental clothing and at the Egyptian Society he was styled the “Sheikh”. Another founding

¹⁰⁶ Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 39v. See also: Stukeley, MS 454, fol. 3r.

¹⁰⁷ On The Egyptian Society see: Muhammad Anis, “The First Egyptian Society in London (1741–1743)”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archaeologie du Caire* 50 (1952): 99–105.

¹⁰⁸ William Stukeley, “Memoirs” (n.d.), Bod. MS. Eng. misc. e. 121, fol. 96r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

member was Richard Pococke, later bishop of Ossory, who travelled to Egypt and the Near East between 1737–1740 and whose account is referenced by Stukeley in *On the Mysteries* as evidence of the temple/universe symbolism: that “temples were design’d to represent heaven [...] those of Egypt, were painted in the ceilings with stars.”¹⁰⁹ Pococke had, without realising it, been passed by on the Nile by another founding member, Frederik Ludwig Norden, a captain of the Danish navy whose interest in ancient Egypt had been kindled in Florence by the Prussian antiquarian, spy, and freemason Baron von Stosch.¹¹⁰ Another noble freemason and member of the Egyptian Society was Charles Lennox the second Duke of Richmond, who served as Grand Master in 1724, and who occasionally visited Stukeley.¹¹¹ Lennox’s Deputy Grand Master was the antiquary Martin Folkes, another member of the Egyptian Society who was appointed President of the Royal Society in 1741, and whom Stukeley later wrote of as an “errant infidel.”¹¹² On the basis of this comment Folkes would seem to be evidence of the spectrum of religious views among freemasons; however, it did not stop Stukeley sharing his “MS of mystery with him” on the 15th November 1738.¹¹³ Folkes’ correspondence with Lennox provides further

¹⁰⁹ Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 3r. The account of his travels was subsequently published, see: Richard Pococke, *A Description of the East*, 2 vols (London: W. Bowyer, 1743–5). On this publication see: Rachel Finnegan, *Richard Pococke’s Letters from the East (1737–1740)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); and *English Explorers in the East (1738–1745): The Travels of Thomas Shaw, Charles Perry and Richard Pococke* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 181–269. On Pococke’s involvement in The Egyptian Society see: Rachel Finnegan, ed., *Letters from Abroad: The Grand Tour Correspondence of Richard Pococke & Jeremiah Milles. Volume. 3: Letters from the East (1737–41)* (Piltown: Pococke Press, 2013), 9–12.

¹¹⁰ Frederik Ludwig Norden, *Travels in Egypt and Nubia*, 2 vols (London: L. Davis & C. Reymers, 1757). On Baron von Stosch see: Lesley Lewis, *Connoisseurs and Secret Agents in Eighteenth Century Rome* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

¹¹¹ William Stukeley, “Interleaved copy of printed almanacs, with diary entries, personal accounts and antiquarian notes” (1730), Bod. MS. Eng. misc. d. 719/1, fol. 26r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

¹¹² Stukeley, *Family Memoirs*, 1:100. Stukeley also notes that he dined with Sandwich on two occasions in the company of Martin Folkes: Stukeley, *Family Memoirs*, 3:235; 3:274.

¹¹³ William Stukeley, “Interleaved copy of printed almanacs, with diary entries, personal accounts and antiquarian notes” (1738), Bod. MS. Eng. misc. d. 719/8, fol. 29r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

evidence of the consistency of an interest in the history of freemasonry among early freemasons, specifically through the Old Charges.¹¹⁴

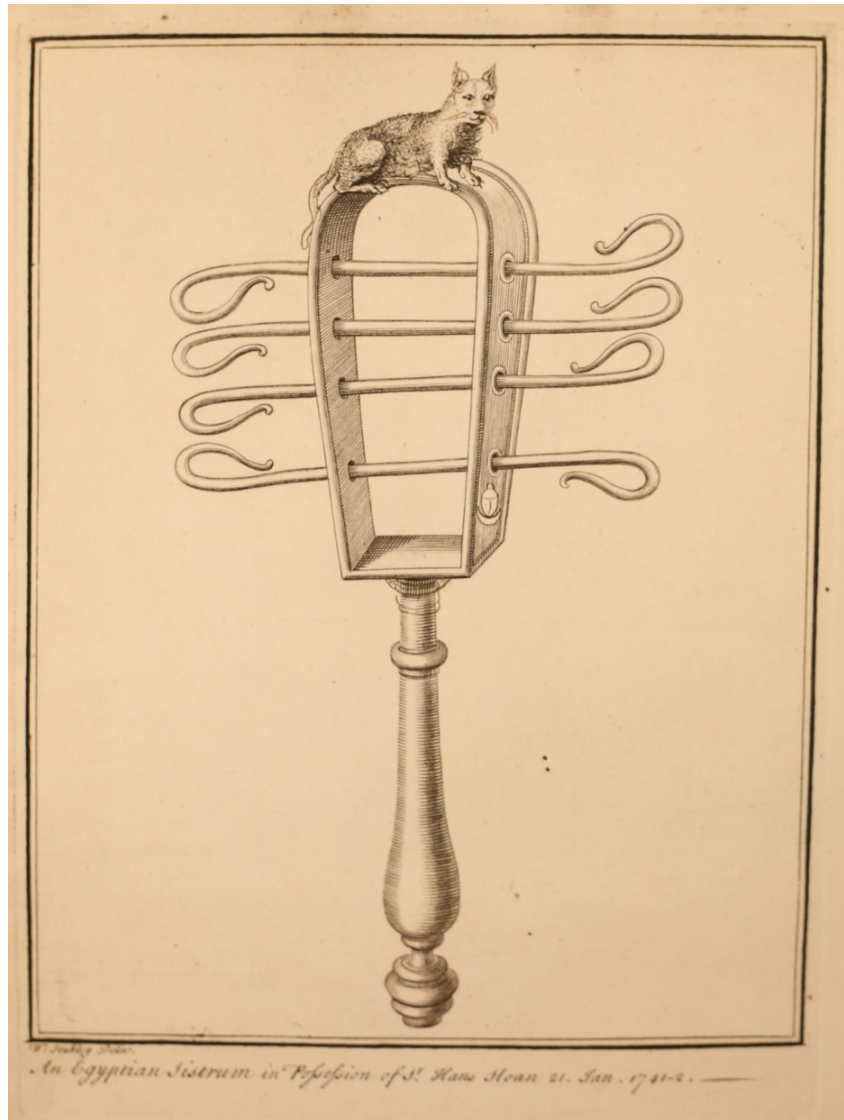


Fig. 4: An engraving of Stukeley's sketch of "An Egyptian Sistrum in Possession of Sr. Hans Sloan 21. Jan. 1741-2"; Stukeley, MS 4725, 0v. Reproduced by permission of the Wellcome Library

¹¹⁴ Anne Marie Roos, "Taking Newton on tour: the scientific travels of Martin Folkes, 1733-1735", *British Society for the History of Science* 50, no. 4 (2017): 575.

How should the Egyptian society be understood: a space in which antiquarians and freemasons, scholarship and amateur dramatics overlapped? On the one hand it seems compelling that Stukeley's ideas on the mysteries were shared in a context where they were met with approval by the first aristocratic Grand Master. Regarding the impression made on Montagu by his interpretation of the sistrum, a nineteenth-century commentator highlighted a letter from Stukeley to Maurice Johnson, the founder of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society and in 1718 of the Society of Antiquaries, which states that its purpose was to drive away scavenging birds during sacrifices in hot climates (fig. 4).¹¹⁵ Although this is indeed part of the explanation, *On the Mysteries* clarifies that he also believed it was an instrument similar to a child's rattle, which during the "nocturnal ceremonies" of the mysteries was sounded with "great vehemence" by the priests; in this he is probably influenced by Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, where one is used in connection with the mysteries of Isis.¹¹⁶ Yet, it might be countered that the fact these ideas needed explaining at all points towards the individuality of his perspective. Turning to the notes on the lecture, written in Stukeley's hand on a folded loose leaf of paper in the minute book of the Egyptian Society held at the British Library, it appears that the contents of *On the Mysteries* were adapted to their context and the masonic substratum was removed.¹¹⁷ So, although it is tempting to speculate on whether the annual "Festum Isiacum" celebrated in the Egyptian Society might also have involved an enactment of the masonic ritual described by Stukeley, there is insufficient evidence to prove it.

Nevertheless, it is certain that his interpretation of the sistrum was of considerable value to Stukeley in terms of social and actual capital, leading as it did first to invitations to Montagu's country house Boughton, then in 1747 the

¹¹⁵ The letter is transcribed in: T.J. Pettigrew, "Contributions towards a history of the Society of Antiquaries", *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 7 (1852): 143–295; 151. See also: Anis, "The First Egyptian Society", 103.

¹¹⁶ Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 94r. See J. Arthur Hanson, trans., *Apuleius: Metamorphoses*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 2:247. Stukeley's views are contained in an extended interpretation published in memory of Montagu, see: Stukeley, *The Medalllic History of Marcus Aurelius Valerius Carausius, Emperor in Brittain, Book 1* (London: Charles Corbet, 1757), vii–xviii.

¹¹⁷ Jeremiah Milles and Richard Pococke, "Minute-Book of the Egyptian Society", Add. MS.52362, fols. 7–8, The British Library, London.

offer of the living of St. George in Queen's Square.¹¹⁸ The circulation of Stukeley's text in the context of the Egyptian Society, which although not a masonic organisation included significant freemasons, is a reminder to balance the sincerity of the ideals evident in masonic literature with a more grounded appreciation of its features as a club. It demonstrates the difficulty of incorporating a social identity centred around the "pagan" pleasures of the table with a "patriarchal" religious one, both because these identities could remain quite separate and on account of their constantly being renegotiated in this period. Finally, it indicates that the leading figures of early English freemasonry were nobles and not radicals, who exerted their powers of patronage on those further down the social ladder. With these points in mind, consideration of Stukeley's text with reference to near contemporary masonic literature provides a more illuminating insight into its intellectual and religious context.

5. James Anderson's *Constitutions of the Free-Masons & New Book of Constitutions*

The two editions of the masonic constitutions by the Scottish Presbyterian minister James Anderson provide further evidence of the intellectual context of the dual concerns of the religion of the patriarchs and the pagan mysteries in Stukeley's text.¹¹⁹ Although other examples could be cited, such as the pseudonymous Eugene Philalethes' *Long Livers* (1722), which invokes the freemasons as "primitive Christian brethren" and was dedicated to Montagu, Anderson has the advantage of his official capacity.¹²⁰ But in the first edition of the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, although recognisably inhabiting the chronological tradition of the Old Charges, the gloss of Palladianism is far more prevalent than patriarchal religion. It is the technical building capabilities of characters from the Old Testament, first with the Ark, then the Tabernacle, and

¹¹⁸ Masters, *Corpus Christi*, 385.

¹¹⁹ On Anderson's life (which ended in Fleet debtors Prison) and works (which failed to provide the means to keep him out of it) see: Susan Mitchell Sommers and Andrew Prescott, "New Light on the Life of James Anderson", in Wade, *300 Years of Freemasonry*, 641–54.

¹²⁰ Eugenius Philalethes, *Long Livers: A Curious History of Such Persons of both Sexes who have liv'd several Ages, and grown Young again [...]* (London: J. Holland & L. Stokoe, 1722), iii.

finally the Temple of Solomon that are given the most visible attention. It is the section “*Concerning GOD and RELIGION*” that appears to set out the institutional position on the issue of freemasonry’s relationship to religion:

A *Mason* is oblig’d, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg’d in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet ’tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be *good Men and true*, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish’d; whereby Masonry becomes the *Center of Union*, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain’d at a perpetual Distance.¹²¹

This charge can be seen as pointing in two directions: on the one hand it makes clear that freemasonry is incompatible with atheism, therefore it must logically bear some relation to religion. But the latter part might seem to indicate that whatever that relation might be, it does not matter a great deal and that freemasons should be primarily focused on the evasion of sectarian quarrels and finding a unifying moral code independent of confessional identity. This is reinforced a few pages later with the entreaty to avoid “private Piques or Quarrels” particularly “about *Religion*, or *Nations*, or *State Policy*, we being only, as *Masons*, of the *Catholick Religion* above-mention’d”, a policy pursued since the time of the Reformation in Britain.¹²² Although the reference to “*Catholick Religion*” could be read as pointing towards the theme of the religion of the patriarchs, in this precise case it is ambiguous since “above-mention’d” seems to refer to the charge a few pages earlier “*Concerning GOD and RELIGION*” with its more religiously neutral aspects.

Fortunately, the ambiguity of the first edition is cleared up in the 1738 edition, which claims to provide the text “Approved by the Grand Lodge” that was “order’d to be printed in the first Edition of the *Book of Constitutions*”, but which

¹²¹ Anderson, *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, 50.

¹²² Anderson, *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, 54.

diverges from the above cited passage in a manner decisive for the present argument:

A MASON is obliged by his Tenure to observe the Moral Law, as a true *Noachida*; and if he rightly understands the *Craft*, he will never be a Stupid Atheist, nor an Irreligious Libertin, nor act against Conscience. In antient Times the *Christian Masons* were charged to comply with the *Christian Usages* of each Country where they travell'd or work'd: But *Masonry* being found in all Nations, even of divers Religions, they are now only charged to adhere to that Religion in which all Men agree (leaving each Brother to his own particular Opinions) that is, to be Good Men and True, Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Names, Religions or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd: For they all agree in the 3 great *Articles* of NOAH, enough to preserve the Cement of the Lodge. Thus *Masonry* is the Center of their Union and the happy Means of conciliating Persons that otherwise must have remain'd at perpetual Distance.¹²³

It may be reasonably wondered whether this rewriting of the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* in a manner that emphasised its patriarchal Christian character, with the references to “true *Noachida*”, “*Christian Masons*”, and the “3 great *Articles* of NOAH”, was provoked precisely by the ambiguity of the 1723 edition, which had made room for the claim that freemasons had an indifferent relationship towards Christianity.¹²⁴ It also suggests that the religiously tolerant sentiments expressed in the passage in the first edition, which might seem to be justified through secular or civic values, were anchored in a tradition of Christian universalism.

There are two more pieces of evidence in the 1738 edition which have a bearing on Stukeley's thought. The first is in the body of the text and connects to the aspect of the foretelling of Christ to the patriarchs, with Anderson writing that the progeny of Noah “in their own peculiar Family preserved the good old Religion of the promised *Messiah* pure, and also [the] *Royal Art* [freemasonry], till the *Flood*.”¹²⁵ This view expressed in a masonic context is also found in

¹²³ Anderson, *New Book of Constitutions*, 143–4.

¹²⁴ Charles Porset and Cécile Révauger raise the question as to whether this was a reaction to the first anti-masonic Papal Bull in 1738. See: Porset & Révauger, *Franc-maçonnerie et religions*, 31.

¹²⁵ Anderson, *New Book of Constitutions*, 4. The copy I consulted in the British Library had a typographical blank space before “*Royal Art*”.

Anderson's religious writings, in the Trinitarian apology *Unity in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity* (1733).¹²⁶ Here he questions how it was that the authors of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament had “far better Notions of the promised *Messiah* than the modern *Jews*?”, answering that it was because “they had adhered to the Accounts of the *Messiah* in the *Old Testament*, and to the Commentaries of their Forefathers [...]”¹²⁷ Similarly to Stukeley's interest in patriarchal religion, Anderson uses the argument that the apparent vestiges of the doctrine in the writings of the “Heathen Sages” were not arrived at through reason, but were accountable as “the Remains of the *Noachical Religion*.”¹²⁸

The second example is an anonymous text in the appendix titled *A Defence of Masonry*, first “publish'd A.D. 1730” and “Occasion'd by a Pamphlet call'd *Masonry Dissected*.”¹²⁹ This defence against Prichard's text is thought to have been written by Martin Clare, a member of the Old King's Arms lodge and founder of the Soho Academy, a commercial school for vocational training.¹³⁰ It contains further evidence of the connection made in Stukeley's *On the Mysterys* between freemasonry and the pagan mysteries:

The Accident, by which the Body of Master HIRAM was found after his Death, seems to allude, in some Circumstances, to a beautiful Passage in the 6th Book of Virgil's Aeneid [...] ANCHISES, the great Preserver of the Trojan Name, could not have been discover'd but by the Help of a Bough, which was pluck'd with great Ease from the Tree; nor, it seems, could HIRAM, the Grand MASTER

¹²⁶ James Anderson, *Unity in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, A Dissertation Shewing, Against Idolaters, modern Jews, and Anti-Trinitarians, How the Unity of God is evinc'd, with an account of Polytheism, Antient and Modern* (London: Richard Ford, 1733). For a brief summary of this text which comments on its relationship to the 1738 *New Book of Constitutions* see: Sommers & Prescott, “James Anderson”, 654.

¹²⁷ Anderson, *Unity in Trinity*, 27.

¹²⁸ Anderson, *Unity in Trinity*, 13.

¹²⁹ Anderson, *New Book of Constitutions*, 216–26. See also the facsimile reprint of the 1730 edition: John T. Thorp, ed., *Masonic Reprints. Reproductions of Masonic Manuscripts, Books and Pamphlets* (Leicester: J. Johnson, 1907), 33–55.

¹³⁰ Nicholas Hans, *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1951), 87–90. On Martin Clare see: Andrew Prescott, “Clare, Martin”, in Charles Porset and Cécile Revauger, *Le monde maçonnique des Lumières: Europe-Amériques & Colonies, Dictionnaire prosopographique*, 3 vols (Paris: Editions Champions, 2013), 1:808–16.

of MASONRY, have been found but by the Direction of a Shrub, which (says the Dissector) came easily up.¹³¹

Although Stukeley did not refer explicitly to Hiram Abiff and the ritual of the third degree in *On the Mysterys*, his text proves that it was entirely possible to subsume such “pagan” features within a patriarchal “Christian” framework. This is confirmed at the conclusion of *A Defence of Masonry*, where the author affirms that “*Masons* are true NOACHIDAE”, and that even if a “*Lodge* is not a School of Divinity, the Brethren are taught the great Lessons of their *old Religion*, *Morality*, *Humanity*, and *Friendship* [...]”¹³²

Finally, it is worth briefly observing that this theme is also in evidence in France in the work of the Scottish-born Catholic convert and freemason Andrew Michael Ramsay, who combined a near identical set of religious concerns as Stukeley and the wider culture of early English freemasonry in *The Travels of Cyrus* (1727) and *The Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1748–9): in the former case in Cyrus’ recognition that the discoveries made by “*Zoroaster*, *Hermes*, *Orpheus* and *Pythagoras*” were “but imperfect Traces and chance Rays of the Religion of the *Hebrews*”; and in the latter case that after God banished Adam from paradise he revealed to him the “sacrifice, sufferings, and triumphs of the Messiah”, the knowledge of which was passed down through Noah and the patriarchs.¹³³ These ideas are likewise evident in his masonic *Discours prononcé à la Reception des Francs Maçons*, where Ramsay references the famous “festivals” or “feasts” of Ceres at Eleusis as precedents of freemasonry, and in the version of the oration held at the Toulouse Municipal Library, which states that they “concealed many vestiges of the ancient religion of Noah and the Patriarchs.”¹³⁴

¹³¹ Anderson, *New Book of Constitutions*, 224–5.

¹³² Anderson, *New Book of Constitutions*, 227.

¹³³ Andrew Michael Ramsay, *The Travels of Cyrus*, 2 vols (London: T. Woodward, 1728), 2:193; *The Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 2 vols (Glasgow: Robert Foulis, 1749), 2:8. D. P. Walker made the connection between Ramsay’s intellectual and religious concerns and his interest in freemasonry, see: Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 239. For the wider context of Ramsay’s involvement with freemasonry see: Georg Eckert, “*True, Noble, Christian, Freethinking*”: *Leben und Werk Michael Ramsays (1686–1743)* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2009), 551–87.

¹³⁴ Georges Lamoine, “The Chevalier de Ramsay’s Oration, 1736–7: Early Masonry in France”, *AQC* 114 (2001): 231.

Stukeley's *On the Mysterys* provides a detailed insight into the chronological preconceptions upon which the identification of patriarchal religion with the pagan mysteries rested.

6. Conclusion

The ambiguity of William Stukeley's interpretation of masonic ritual in *On the Mysterys*, which saw a patriarchal Christian source behind the pagan deities of ancient Egyptian religion, helps to make sense of the conflicting pictures that have developed of freemasonry in the age of Enlightenment. The association of freemasonry with patriarchal Christianity appealed to Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Catholic converts: by placing the emphasis on the origins of Christianity pre-Christ, a space was created which allowed for a qualified form of religious toleration, one based not on secular or civic values, but on a universal Christian tradition. Although it was not exactly a "School of Divinity", it was a space that was deeply influenced by religious ideas, even if the values expressed in it have lent themselves to retrospectively secular interpretations by some modern commentators. If the institution of early English freemasonry is to be associated with a set of religious ideas, the theme of patriarchal Christianity has much stronger textual foundations than radical materialism based on the reception of pagan philosophy. Over subsequent decades, however, a "pagan" impulse within freemasonry gradually detached itself from these patriarchal Christian origins, and redefined the identity of the society in a consciously anti-Christian manner, particularly in continental freemasonry, but also on English thinkers influenced by it. This may be illustrated by a passage from the text "Origin of Freemasonry" by the revolutionary philosopher Thomas Paine:

The Christian religion and masonry have one and the same common origin, both are derived from the worship of the sun, the difference between their origins is, that the Christian religion is a parody on the worship of the sun, in which they put a man whom they call Christ, in the place of the sun, and pay him the same adoration which was originally paid to the sun [...]¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Thomas Paine, *An Essay on the Origin of Freemasonry* (London: R. Carlile, 1818), 5. On the publication history of the text see: Moncure Daniel Conway, ed., *The Writings of*

Where for Stukeley the deities and solar symbolism in the pagan mysteries were a “parody” of the patriarchs, for Paine the reverse was the case: the Christians parodied the pagans. In this respect he was influenced by the Comte de Volney and Charles-François Dupuis, both of whom like Stukeley used the example of Mithras to make their point, although for them the god proved that it was the movements of the sun which were described in the “myth” of Jesus Christ.¹³⁶ It would be easy to characterise these antithetical positions along the lines of unenlightened versus enlightened, but a more sympathetic reading of Stukeley and the culture of early English freemasonry might argue that by reaching towards a universal Christian tradition in ancient history they participated in the process of Enlightenment, even if ultimately they paved the way for the marginalisation of Christianity in the more combative works of the later radicals. Although the question of how that transformation occurred is beyond the scope of the present article, fundamental to the narrative is the reception of William Warburton’s account of the pagan mysteries in France and Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century, where certain of its features were repurposed in deist models of the history of religion. But even in these later decades there remained ways to Christianise the pagan mysteries: not through the model of corruption from a prior revelation, but by identifying a “Christian” essence within paganism that evolved into Christianity over time. Establishing just how these divergent movements could co-exist in freemasonry and asking whether the return to an ideal of ancient Christianity provoked the later deist identification with the tradition of the pagan mysteries, is essential to our comprehension of the relationship between freemasonry and Enlightenment.

Thomas Paine, 4 vols (London & New York, N.Y.: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894-1896), 4:290. On the Illuminist influence on it through Nicholas de Bonneville, see: Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994), 379–83.

¹³⁶ M. Volney, *Les ruines, ou méditation sur les revolutions des empires* (Paris: Desenne, etc., 1791), 199; Charles-François Dupuis, *Origine de tous les cultes. Ou, religion universelle* (Paris: H. Agasse, 1795), 4:589. Dupuis was also influenced by Macrobius, though in a very different manner to Stukeley, see: Dupuis, *Mémoire sur l’origine des constellations, et sur l’explication de la fable, par le moyen de l’astronomie* (Paris: Desaint, 1781), 6.