The CRYPTIC RITE of FREEMASONRY IN COUNCILS OF ROYAL & SELECT MASTERS

Summary by the Supreme Grand Council Eastern Jurisdiction of Canada
“BEAUTIFUL AND FASCINATING”

Councils of Royal and Select Masters draw their members from Royal Arch Chapters, present the degrees of

  **Royal Master** and
  **Select Master**

  and provide access to the degrees of

  **Super Excellent Master** and
  **Royal Ark Mariner**

four of the most beautiful and fascinating in Freemasonry.

The first two, Royal Master and Select Master, are the only ones required for Council membership. They are *Cryptic* in nature and content. They explain how the Lost Word of the Master Mason degree, rediscovered in the Royal Arch degree, was *preserved* in the first place - in the crypt or secret vault under Solomon’s Temple.

They focus on the core material of Ancient Craft Masonry, without Christian or military emphasis, and complete the explanation of our Fraternity’s most powerful legend.

To preserve and present these degrees, most Councils of Royal & Select Masters meet only 5 times a year, some more often, some less.

With 16 Councils in 4 Districts (Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick & PEI, and Quebec), the Supreme Grand Council of the Eastern Jurisdiction of
Canada held its 130th annual General Assembly in 1997. Other regular jurisdictions include Ontario, Western Canada, England, Germany, Israel, Philippines, Scotland, and 49 in the USA.

This introductory booklet explains the popularity of the Cryptic Rite and its appendant degrees. The enthusiasm of the Royal Arch Mason who seeks more light in Masonry - further enlightenment towards Truth - is welcomed and matched by Companions who wish to share with him something very special.

THE CRYPTIC RITE

Symbolic Freemasonry, in the Lodge, begins the powerful story of how the Word was lost, and another substituted. Capitular Masonry, in the Chapter, rediscovers the Word, through secrets found in a Crypt under an Arch.

The Cryptic Rite, in the Council, tells how and why those secrets were preserved there. Masonry’s great allegory becomes clear, complete, more powerful and effective. Those who experience that sense of completion want to share it, to help others complete “the Circle of Perfection of Ancient Craft Masonry”.

Councils of Royal and Select Masters are made up of Masons who recognize the inherent values of the Rite, and who join and remain active in their Councils because of those values - not because they need the degrees in order to gain admission to other bodies.

ORIGINS

Though the core material is earlier, the modern shape of the Royal Master and Select Master degrees probably originated in Ireland, passed to England and Scotland, thence to Sweden, and finally to Prussia and King Frederick’s Lodge of Perfection of the Ancient Accepted Rite, today known as the Scottish Rite.

The degrees were brought to America in 1761 as Scottish Rite “side degrees”, including Super Excellent Master. In 1807 they became popular in New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island thanks to Jeremy L. Cross, an associate of Thomas Smith Webb, “father of Royal Arch Masonry in America”.

It was Cross who described them as “the summit and perfection of Ancient Masonry, without which the history of the Royal Arch degree cannot be complete.”
Conferral was assigned to Royal Arch Masonry chapters for many years until 1870 when the Scottish Rite, and the General Grand Royal Arch Chapter, both divested themselves of the degrees. In 1880 the first General Grand Council was formed.

Today, some compare the York Rite Select Master degree to the Scottish Rite Secret Master degree. Both refer to guardians of secrets and signs of secrecy. The idea of a Mason entering the Sanctum Sanctorum by mistake appears in both the Select Master and Intimate Secretary degrees. And both the York Rite Council and Scottish Rite Lodge of Perfection are supposed to have only 27 working members, others being surplus spectators. The senior Officer in one is Thrice Illustrious Master, in the other Thrice Puissant Master.

**THE NAME – CRYPTIC**

The focus of the Royal Master and Select Master degrees is a secret vault beneath the Temple of Solomon. “Cryptic” means “hidden”, from the Latin *crypticus*, meaning “subterranean” or “concealed”. Vaults beneath many churches are called “crypts”. “Cryptic Masonry” means, therefore, “Masonry of the Secret Vault”.

**THE VAULT AND THE MYSTERIES**

All biblical students and archaeologists know of vaults beneath King Solomon’s Temple, the focus of Freemasonry’s cryptic mysteries. Philostorgius, Greek historian of 400 A.D., was one who wrote up the story.

But initiation into the Ancient Mysteries of pre-Christian times also involved underground caves, tunnels, or vaults. Much has been written to suggest that modern Freemasonry, especially in the group of degrees known as The Royal Mysteries, sustains some of the truths presented in the Ancient Mysteries.

The vault in the Ancient Mysteries was symbolic of the grave, for initiation was symbolic of the passage of death, where alone Divine Truth is to be found.

Perhaps Freemasons adopted the same idea: We teach that death is “the gateway of life through which we all must pass, before entering into the beginning of a fuller and larger existence”.

Today, these degrees are not complex in basic story presentation, but they are profound in potential impact on those who study further the words and their history.
ROYAL MASTER

The Royal Master, the first Council degree, has two parts. First, Hiram Abif talks to Adoniram about death. Then, a day after Hiram Abif’s death, King Solomon and Hiram King of Tyre cannot communicate the Master’s Word without him - not as agreed. The dramas illuminate the Master Mason and Royal Arch degrees.

This is the only degree in Masonry where you can meet and converse face to face with Hiram Abif, our central character. It is an eloquent degree which beautifully symbolizes the idea of the labourer seeking his reward, and which discusses the subject of victory over death.

SELECT MASTER

This degree again is set before Hiram Abif’s death, and alludes to preparations to hide the Secret Treasures. And it provides a much deeper explanation for the meanings of the inscriptions found on the Masters’ jewels and the triangle on top of the Ark.

It also explains why King Solomon selected twenty-four true, tried and trusty Craftsmen, together with the three Grand Masters (making “twenty-seven and no more”), to complete an important part of the Temple.

The historical setting of this degree and its symbolism are intimately connected with the Royal Arch degree. It is the symbolic link that binds the Master’s degree to the Royal Arch. Without it the mystery of “The Recovery of That Which Was Lost” remains in darkness.

It is the historical and symbolic bridge that connects the Hebrew Nation with the sad days of its captivity - extending from the completion of the first Temple to the building of the second Temple. “Truth” seemed lost, yet was not lost, but only hidden until the generation should come which by its perfect and unselfish labours should restore “Truth”, and bring to light the Ineffable Secret.

The Select Master degree is said by some to be the most interesting degree in Masonry, perhaps because it rationally accounts for the concealment and preservation of those essential secrets which were buried in darkness for a period of four hundred and seventy years, and brought to light at the building of the second Temple.

In 1817, Samuel Cole said: “It is strange, and it is also unfortunate, that very few have received the useful knowledge made known in the Select ... we may, however, pronounce it the key to the Arch.”
SUPER EXCELLENT MASTER

The Super Excellent Master degree, not originally a part of the Cryptic system, is still not presented in all jurisdictions, yet is one of Masonry’s best written rituals. It is not a degree of the Crypt; it does not deal with Ancient Craft Masonry, but it has been described as “the best devised, most impressive and beautiful ritual in Masonry.” It is a spectacular presentation, conferred usually on large classes at special occasions, attended by Select Masters from throughout the Jurisdiction.

It deals with incidents in the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar when Zedekiah, last King of Judah, was conquered and carried captive to Babylon. It enlarges upon the section of the Royal Arch having to do with the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian King, and the final destruction of the first Temple. It teaches, dramatically, the lesson of fidelity. In a panorama of exciting events, biblical characters move across the stage, illustrating history. The great Chaldean Monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, lives again; the treacherous and faithless Zedekiah, the last of Judah’s Kings, proves the results of infidelity; the unswerving Ezekiel, and the melancholy but zealous Jeremiah, prophesy the promises of the Almighty. The great lesson is about fidelity to a trust.

ROYAL ARK MARINER

This degree is based upon the story of Noah and his ark. The presiding officer of a Royal Ark Mariner lodge, the Commander, represents Noah, and the Senior and Junior Warden his sons Shem and Japheth.

The ritual emphasises the cardinal virtues, using the triangle and the working tools with which Noah built the ark - axe, saw, and auger - to point the moral lesson. The principal emblems of the degree are the triangle, rainbow, and a dove with an olive branch in its beak.

The earliest record of the degree being worked comes in Bath in 1790. Today in our Jurisdiction, Royal Ark Mariner lodges are “moored” to a very few Councils - just one in some Districts - and the degree again is given only on special occasions.
SEEK MORE LIGHT NOW

Candidates are “received” as Royal Masters, and “greeted” as Select Masters, usually on separate occasions. Appropriate dress for both occasions, and also for every regular assembly, is a business suit.

After becoming a Companion of the Cryptic Rite, a Mason is deemed worthy of the appellation:

“The select of the Craft”.

As a Royal Arch Mason, you have the right to petition for Council membership. There are usually just a few openings.

Those who prepared this pamphlet, first for P. E. I., then for the whole Eastern Jurisdiction, offer grateful thanks to the authors of similar pamphlets and other publications in England, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, to the York Rite Sovereign College, and to Masonic writers everywhere.