A Spiritual Vision of the Seven Liberal Arts

Thomas D. Worrel

Wisdom buildded her house;
She has hewn out her seven pillars.

Proverbs 9:1

At your leisure hours you are required
to study the liberal arts and sciences,
and by that means, with a few private
instructions, you will soon attain a
competent knowledge of our mysteries.

William Preston
Illustrations of Masonry, 1775

ONE

The Winding Staircase & the Seven Liberal Arts

One of the most impressive ceremonies of American Craft Freemasonry is the section of the second degree known as the “staircase lecture” or the “Middle Chamber lecture.” This important part of our Masonic tradition covers many subjects pertinent to the mysteries of Freemasonry. These are presented through the explanations of the three, five and seven steps that compose the stairs. When the lecture arrives at the seven steps, the Fellow Craft is told little more than that they collectively represent the seven liberal arts and sciences. In some rituals, these are each briefly described. In many, however, the subjects are enumerated without detail, except for the art of geometry, which is always explained as the most important of the seven.
In this situation, we are left with more questions than answers. Why are these particular subjects mentioned? It is certainly debatable whether or not these are the most important academic disciplines. Why are there just seven? There are certainly more than just seven arts and sciences. Why are they in a staircase motif? If we took the staircase to represent levels of prerequisite education or understanding or of importance, there would be considerable disagreement regarding this order. So what we are really left with are implications derived from the comments on geometry. That is, that these are subjects worthy of study and geometry is the most important of the seven. We are then left with the broadest question of them all: Is this the real message to the candidate?

Many have assumed that this part of the Masonic tradition is simply a vestigial remnant of the obvious reliance of the operative craft upon the science of geometry. Others may be inclined to interpret the Fellow Craft teachings about the seven liberal arts only as a vague message in favor of education generally. Either way, it is common for Freemasons to conclude that the arts and sciences refer to mundane disciplines and skills — subjectively bearing only on the material well-being and capability of man.

The history of the seven liberal arts tells us a completely different story. Their origin lies in classical antiquity, and their role in the development of Western civilization has been immense. Their adoption among the Fraternity suggests far more than currently realized. And because its history and relevance to both our culture and our Craft was so central, it highlights a problem

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in our Lodges today: what was once a precious adornment of our tradition has now become perceived as little more than a footnote in our second degree. I believe that the neglect of the study of these arts drains the life-blood from our august body. The purpose of this paper is to look at something we have lost; to try and reestablish our connection with a part of our past; and, in a broader sense, issue a call to preserve one of the true beauties within our fraternity of Freemasonry.

There are already many commentaries on the winding staircase by various Masonic writers. Usually the explanations of the seven liberal arts are somewhat sketchy. It is common to find mere basic definitions of the seven subjects. Sometimes there is a little more elaboration but it never seems complete. But, as we combine the different views, the Masonic significance becomes clearer.

The Interpretations of Masonic Authors

There are many Masonic writers who have considered the question of the seven liberal arts. Space permits mention of only a few, but these will provide at least a survey of the differing views. There is a common thread: most Masonic writers at least sense that the winding staircase is something more than it at first appears. From that point, the opinions seem to diverge into several different directions. As H.L. Haywood states in his book, Symbolical Masonry: “The Three, Five and Seven Steps have long been a puzzle to the candidate and a problem to Masonic writers ...”.

While most writers correctly point out that the classification of the seven arts comes from the Medieval educational curriculum, the real question for Freemasons is not where it originated, but why is it included in our rites.

Haywood expresses a view that is widespread among Masonic writers:

I believe that Masonry is justified in retaining the Liberal Arts and Sciences in its Ritual just because they still have power to humanize us, to ‘improve us in social intercourse,’ to make us broader of mind, more tolerant in opinion, more humane in action, and more brotherly in conduct. Besides, knowledge of them...can make us more useful to the lodge.²

He goes on to explain how useful it is for a Lodge to have members who can write, play music, and speak. He seems to consider the seven arts as merely having useful educational purposes.

H.P.H. Bromwell (1823–1903) wrote in his massive tome Restorations of Masonic Geometry and Symbolry that “Although the number of recognized sciences far exceeds seven, yet, giving to that number the benefit of its symbolic meaning, it stands for the whole circle of sciences, whether specifically named among the seven or not.”³ Here is an example of someone who considers that the number seven is used in its symbolic sense of meaning “the whole picture” or “all encompassing”. We can speculate that his interpretation is that the seven liberal arts refers to all knowledge.

In Stellar Theology and Masonic Astronomy Robert Hewitt Brown interprets just about everything in the ritual in an astronomical way:

The wages of the faithful craftsmen, we are told, are ‘corn, oil and wine.’ The seven signs of the zodiac, from the vernal equinox to the first point of Scorpio, ‘winding’ in a glittering curve about the heavens, may in a like manner be said...
to be emblematic of seven winding steps... thus corresponding with the more ancient versions of the fellow-craft legend... 

While this is an interesting point of view, it seems to completely ignore both the specific subjects of the seven steps, and the history of the curriculum.

There are Masonic authors who interpret the seven liberal arts in ways that are not based upon historical knowledge but in terms of psychology, philosophy or spirituality. W. Kirk Mac-Nulty is a case in point:

In the most general terms the winding staircase defines seven ‘levels of consciousness’, from consciousness of the physical body at the bottom to consciousness of the Spirit and Divinity at the top. By summarizing a large body of ritual and lecture, we can say that the Stairs assign a step or level of consciousness to each of the seven Officers of the Lodge...  

His correspondences are the following: Tyler with Grammar, Inner Guard with Logic, Junior Deacon with Rhetoric, Senior Deacon with Arithmetic, Junior Warden with Geometry, Senior Warden with Music, and the Worshipful Master with Astronomy. This type of explanation deals more with how one might currently interpret the seven liberal arts but does not address the original intent of the founders of the Craft.

Another author in this survey is George H. Steinmetz. In his book Freemasonry: Its Hidden Meaning he also tackles the seven steps. He makes the cryptic statement: "...the seven steps have a deep occult meaning which we will merely mention here. They are the vibrations producing color and sound." He does not elaborate on this, but a few pages later he states: "There are actually seven interpretations of Masonic symbolism, or more correctly, seven means of interpretation." He goes on to explain how each discipline can individually be applied to the rites of Freemasonry to garner ever deeper interpretations. There may be some truth here, although it is a clumsy fit with some of the disciplines. Certainly there is much in Masonic tradition of an astronomical nature, and much is related to geometrical and number symbolism. One can make some case for the others, but it begins to get weaker and weaker.

In the Scottish Rite’s thirtieth degree, titled Knight Kadosh or Knight of the Holy Spirit, we again encounter the seven liberal arts. Here they are depicted on a double seven-runged ladder. Albert Pike’s explanation in the Liturgy is really based around the lessons of the Knight Kadosh degree, but we get hints of a deeper and more mystical significance when we consider the corresponding words on the other side of the ladder whose seven rungs are labeled in Hebrew. It may a loose allusion to the sefirot (or “spheres”) of kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, which themselves form a "ladder" of sorts known as the etz khaym or Tree of Life.

Pike states in the Legenda: "[...]In this Degree, the words on the seven steps of the Ladder mean something more and higher than the mere elementary Sciences of which they are the names." Pike’s commentary then explains these seven arts as steps to ever-larger vistas of God and Creation; and, with the corresponding rungs on the opposite side, develops a much more exalted role of these arts and sciences.

The last Masonic writer I wish to introduce is Walter Leslie Wilmshurst (1867–1939). He is the author of several books including The Meaning of Masonry, The Masonic Initiation and The Ceremony of Passing. Wilmshurst’s perspective was unabashedly mystical:
The perambulations are made on the level floor of the Lodge, which the candidate keeps on “squaring” visiting each of its four sides in turn. But at the end of the third circuit the moment comes when his forward motion on the level ceases, and he is directed to mount spirally, by a series of winding steps. Linear motion gives way to circular; he advances now not merely forward, but up. ... By this change of motion, this spiral ascent, is implied that the time has come when the Candidate must leave the level of the sense-world and rise to the supra-sensual; must divert his thoughts and desires from sensuous objects and concentrate them on the insensible and much more real things of the world of mind.9

Clearly, Wilmshurst is of the opinion that the winding staircase, which includes the seven steps, is considerably more than an exhortation on the merits of an extensive education. The winding stairs become the vehicle of his ascension into the spiritual realm.

From the moment of ascending the winding staircase, then, the Candidate is mentally leaving the outer world more and more behind him and rising into an inner invisible world. He is making what has often been called *Itinerarium mentis in Deo*, the ascent of the mind to the Source of Light…10

This short survey of Masonic writers’ views shows the great diversity of opinion that exists on the topic of the winding staircase.

While some see the symbol in its most mundane interpretation, others consider it a vehicle to mystical heights. Exploring the seven liberal arts in a wider historical context will help us to develop our own view.

The Seven Liberal Arts Through the Centuries

The history of the seven liberal arts is the history of the development of education up until the end of the Middle Ages. Its origins are in classical Athens. The different disciplines were developing at different times and it was not until later that they crystallized into a set of seven. The term “liberal” has lead to some confusion because we use the term somewhat differently now. Today, we tend to connect it to a broad and eclectic education in contrast to a highly specialized technical or professional education. But “liberal,” in the context of the seven liberal arts, means “suitable for free men.” And the term “arts” has to be thought of in the sense of “skills.”

The term *liberal arts* is used as early as Plato (428–348 BCE). Both Plato and his pupil Aristotle had a model curriculum, in which different subjects were stressed at different times. In the *Republic*, the quadrivium are treated as subjects to prepare for the highest type of knowledge. By the third century BCE, the curriculum often consisted of gymnastics, grammar, music, drawing, arithmetic and geometry. Other subjects often taught were medicine and architecture.

Later, the Romans adopted the Greek ideas of education. By the fourth century CE the pagan schools had fixed their curriculum to seven arts, an arrangement soon adopted by Christian thinkers. The first Christian to use the term “seven liberal arts” was Cassiodorus (480–575 CE).11 This curriculum remained fixed throughout the Middle Ages. Its full flowering was exemplified by the Cathedral School at Chartres in the twelfth century.

These seven subjects—grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astron-
omy — were considered a unity. They were divided into two parts: the trivium of grammar, rhetoric and logic; and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. All seven made an integrated whole which also made all seven necessary. And it must be remembered who put these subjects together. William Stahl explains that "the people who were most interested in the full span of subjects were philosophers; and the seven liberal arts were in essence, and always remained, a philosophers' curriculum."\textsuperscript{12}

The study of grammar encompassed not only parts of speech and rules but also literature, reading, exposition, etymologies and what we now call linguistics. All instruction was in Latin; therefore, mastery of the Latin language was preliminary to everything else. Rhetoric is the training of the orator or developing the practice of speaking to the level of an art. But in the Latin West it took the forms of learning how to produce proper letters and documents. How to make appropriate addresses and petitions and so on. Logic was not so much as a preparation for philosophy but the study of formal logical methods. Arithmetic was basically the art of computation, but there was strong interest in its mystical and symbolic implications due to influence from the Pythagorean traditions. Geometry was not anything like we now conceive until the tenth century. It was not until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that complete translations of Euclid from the Arabic were available. Music was completely theoretical: a mathematical and speculative science (a perspective traditionally traced to the Pythagoreans). Astronomy was very popular, as there was a great interest in all things pertaining to the heavens, including astrology.

It is well to keep in mind the intention of the schoolmasters in using this curriculum. This is best illustrated by the activities going on at the magnificent Gothic cathedral at Chartres in France in the twelfth century.

The Cathedral and School of Chartres

There is some evidence that, as early as the sixth century, Chartres was a center of learning. But it was not until the twelfth century that it became the center of Latin Platonism and a school where students flocked to learn the highest philosophy of the land.

The geographic area itself is interesting. There is a legend that it was once used by the Celtic druids as a sacred site. The cathedral also sits on a granite promontory that cuts through the limestone plain. This fact corresponds to the structure of Stonehenge where the concentric circles were hewn out of granite and set on the limestone of Salisbury Plain.\textsuperscript{13}

The cathedral and school are important to us here because the seven liberal arts reached not only a high degree of perfection as taught but it seems that the architecture also gave witness to this same spirit. The seven liberal arts "as a means to the knowledge of God finds visible expression in the cathedral at Chartres."\textsuperscript{14} Adolf Katzenellenbogen states in his work that:

If one studies the representations of the seven liberal arts in the twelfth century one realizes that they are only a link in the whole chain of representations of this subject, and that a long tradition of ideas and forms lies behind their images. [...] It is generally agreed that the first façade on which the seven arts were represented was that of the Royal Portal of Chartres Cathedral. [...] These systems of decoration indicate in different ways the relation of secular learning to theological truths."\textsuperscript{15}
Thierry was chancellor of the School when the figures were carved. He was also in charge of supervising various parts of building the cathedral. One may readily perceive a tangible correlation between the final form of the architectural design and the philosophical conceptions of the designer. In Thierry’s own handbook on the seven liberal arts, he defined the specific role of the Quadrivium as illuminating the mind and that of the Trivium as making its expression. Raymond Klibansky explains how Thierry’s influence spread throughout Europe:

Under him Chartres became the center of the liberal arts to which students came from all over Europe. In search of new sources of knowledge, his pupils crossed the Pyrenees and the Alps. They brought back mathematical and astronomical works in translations made from the Arabic, and new texts of Aristotle in versions made from the Greek. From Chartres this new learning was handed on to the Latin world.6

It is true that the School laid emphasis on the Quadrivium, but Klibansky informs us that the purpose behind this was to attain, through knowledge of the structure of the created world, knowledge of the Creator. As the world … is ordered according to number,
measure, and weight, the sciences of the quadrivium—arithmetic and geometry, music and astronomy—are the instruments which the human mind has at its disposal for recognizing the art of the Creator.\(^7\)

It was a grand school with grand designs, fully engaged in all of the classic liberal arts and sciences as part of a spiritual imperative to create a holy structure that would truly reflect the divine world, beautifully linking heaven and earth. As David Luscombe states:

 [...] the Chartrains attempted to establish the existence of God by numerical speculations, to synthesize Platonic cosmology and biblical revelation, and to compare the Platonic world soul with the Holy Spirit...[and] God was considered to be the form of all being.\(^8\)

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**TWO**

The Art of Memory and a Spiritual Vision of the Liberal Arts

The Winding Staircase as a Symbol of Ascension

A full understanding of the seven liberal arts in a Masonic context must take into account its use as symbolism. The seven are actually contained within another symbol: the winding staircase. It is interesting and informative to look at how the symbol has been interpreted in psychological ways and also how it has been portrayed in religious art, story and legends.

The winding staircase is an image that refers to upward movement—of moving from one level to a higher level. Related images include ladders, mountains, towers, and the act of flight. We can also include the image of climbing a rope or a cosmic pillar—or in this modern time, taking an elevator. Jungian psychologist Edward F. Edinger classifies this type of image under the term *Sublimatio*. It is an alchemical term, and it may be that he retains the Latin spelling in order to distinguish the idea from the Freudian term "sublimation," which is not the same psychological mechanism. Freud uses "sublimation" to refer to the way we channel our animal instincts into socially acceptable behavior.

In alchemical tradition, *sublimatio* is the basic chemical operation of turning material into air by volatilizing it, it then turns into air and reformulates in a higher place. In a lab it works like this: take a certain solid; apply heat; it turns into gas; it ascend, then cools; then it resolidifies. Distillation is related, but is applied to liquids, such as when we heat water to boil, capture the steam, and it recondenses to water as it cools—leaving the heavy contaminants behind in the original vessel. According to Edinger:

...the crucial feature of *sublimatio* is an elevating process whereby a low substance is translated into a higher form by an ascending movement. [...] *Sublimatio* is an ascent that raises us above the confining entanglements of immedi-
ate earthly existence and its concrete, personal particulars.19

From the Jungian point of view, this process can take different forms. It can manifest as seeing a problem from a broader perspective: maybe something has troubled an individual to where his functioning in some area of his life is restricted, and then by some event or change his view of the situation completely alters and he sees it from a higher perspective which lessens its original hold upon him. Or even to the extreme event of some mystical experience which usually overturns one’s life and washes away many of the petty things we once felt were so important; and consequently frees us—or volatizes our consciousness—where we can view things “from on high.”

Edinger points out that many of the alchemical processes overlap. Overlapping with sublimation is the process of separation or separatio. They are both extraction processes. The “spirit” is extracted from “matter.” Therefore, the ultimate sublimation is death which would remind us of the degree following the Fellow Craft. The alchemists sometimes referred to the spirit of man as quicksilver.

Edinger states that: “This ‘expulsion of the quicksilver’ is done by sublimatio, which releases the spirit hidden in matter [my emphasis]. In the largest sense, this refers psychologically to the redemption of the Self from its original unconscious state.”20

This statement is also interesting in a kabalistic sense in Freemasonry. The words or ganuz (גָּנְז) meaning “hidden light” have the same numerical value as Hiram Abiff: that is, 273.21

The situation as the alchemists saw it was that matter and spirit was intermixed in a basic state of contamination. Thus, the need for the alchemical procedures of extraction. The procedures produced a purified state by separation. The seven liberal arts were thought of as achieving the same ends. It was considered a way of purifying the soul so that it could ascend to the spiritual realms. Another aspect of sublimation that Edinger mentions is the theme of translation to eternity. As examples, he relates the stories of ancient heroes being taken to the realms of the gods such as Heracles, Elijah, Christ and the Virgin Mary. We find this theme in ancient Egypt as well:

...the model of a ladder was often placed on or near the dead body in the tomb, and a special composition was prepared which had the effect of making the ladder become the means of the ascent of the deceased into heaven. Thus in the text written for Pepi the deceased is made to address the ladder in these words: “Homage to thee, O divine Ladder! Homage to thee, O Ladder of Set! Stand thou upright, O divine Ladder! Stand thou upright, O Ladder of Set! Stand thou upright, O Ladder of Horus, whereby Osiris came forth into heaven.”22

The resurrected Osiris is sometimes pictured in Egyptian art as a ladder with arms holding the Crook and Scourge.

We find ladder and stair symbolism in many myths which are clear symbols of ascending and descending. The phenomenon is prevalent throughout the world. The historian of world religions Mircea Eliade comments in his book on shamanism that:

The pre-eminently shamanic technique is the passage from one cosmic region to another—from earth to the sky or from earth to the underworld. The shaman knows the mystery of the break-through in plane. This communica-
tion among the cosmic zones is made possible by the very structure of the universe […] which is conceived as having three levels — sky, earth, underworld — connected by the central axis.\(^{21}\)

Eliade mentions a few ancient mysteries and religious traditions seem to parallel our Masonic tradition:

A ladder with seven rungs is documented in the Mithraic mysteries…. An ascent to heaven by ceremonially climbing a ladder probably formed part of the Orphic initiation…. the symbolism of ascension by means of stairs was known in Greece. […] Jacob dreams of a ladder whose top reaches heaven…. Mohammed sees a ladder rising from the temple in Jerusalem to heaven…. in Islamic mysticism to ascend to God, the soul must mount seven successive steps…. In the heaven of Saturn Dante sees a golden ladder rising dizzyingly to the last celestial sphere and trodden by the souls of the blessed.\(^{24}\)

These are only a few examples that could be given. A study of world mythology reveals this same motif all over the planet from the most “primitive” tribes to the most sophisticated cosmologies.

We can now see the powerful use that Freemasonry developed in the Fellow Craft degree as regards the seven liberal arts and the winding staircase. There is symbolism nested within symbolism. Not only do we have a symbol of ascending in that of the winding staircase, but also that of steps divided into three, five, and seven — all mystical numbers with their own significance. Corresponding with these seven steps are the seven liberal arts, and the mythic context of this ascent as a launching point of the mind to scale the realms of the Spirit.

It is my contention that the seven liberal arts were included in the Masonic ritual for a far greater purpose than secular educational

\(^{21}\) A section from the Regius Poem, as preserved in the Halliwell Manuscript, circa 1400 CE. See the translation on page 45.

\(^{24}\) An early printing of Martianus Capella’s treatise On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury, which was the first appearance of the seven liberal arts as they are known in Freemasonry.
reasons. After all, their original purpose in classical antiquity was philosophical: their high purpose in the Latin West was as a preliminary study for theology. As such, they are featured prominently on the façade of the West portal of the Chartres Cathedral, a structure where the seven arts might be said to have reached their highest expression. In the same spirit, they are incorporated into the poetry of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and into the practices we call the “art of memory,” including the use of the image of King Solomon’s temple.

The formulation of the seven liberal arts began in classical antiquity. The quadrivium was taught as early as Plato. In the Republic, they are treated as subjects to prepare for the highest type of knowledge. It was not until later that the subjects crystallized into the seven we call familiar. The curriculum of the seven liberal arts evolved from earlier Greek and then Roman systems of education. Scholars hold that the fourth century was when the seven arts became the standard curriculum of the pagan schools. It wasn’t until later that it was modified to exhibit Christian ideals.

This was a century of transition. The nominally Christian Constantine the First became sole emperor in 324 CE. Sometime before 330, Martianus Capella, a pagan writer, wrote his book De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii (On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury), which preserved the basic structure of the ancient educational system based on the seven liberal arts. Later in that century, the imperial decree of Theodosius in 392 prohibited all pagan teachings. As a result, the sanctuaries were destroyed and the initiatic lines began to disappear. Rome was sacked by Alaric in 410. About nineteen years later the Vandals conquered North Africa. By 450, all the remaining pagan temples were being destroyed and non-Christians were banned from holding public office.

While Christian leaders were originally suspicious of the pagan philosophies, eventually...
they began to incorporate elements of them. This curriculum was adopted and basically remained fixed throughout the Middle Ages—its ultimate expression taking form at the Cathedral School at Chartres in twelfth century France.

The Old Tales

Martianus Capella’s treatise *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* is the earliest depiction of the seven liberal arts as a unified course of study. Besides offering a description of the seven arts, it also tells an allegorical legend:

Mercury, after some unsuccessful attempts to secure a suitable wife, consults Apollo, who advises him to marry Philology, an astonishingly erudite young lady. The suggestion meets with the approval of both parties, and Philology, after considerable preparation and instruction, is wafted to the upper heavens, where her marriage is to take place before a “Senate” consisting of gods, demigods, and philosophers. The connection between the setting and the seven liberal arts becomes clear when an elderly but attractive lady named Grammar, one of the seven learned sisters, is introduced to present her discipline first to the assembled wedding guests. The seven sisters, personifications of the seven disciplines, have commonly been referred to as bridesmaids. They are bridesmaids only in the broadest sense of the word, however. Martianus calls them *feminæ dotales* and, if we consider his fondness for legal vocabulary, the term should be translated as “ladies constituting a dowry.” That is what they actually are: handmaids presented by Mercury to his bride. The marriage of Mercury and Philology has been taken, both early and late, to symbolize the union of eloquence and learning, the arts of the trivium and the quadrivium.26

About a thousand years later, Dante refers to the seven liberal arts in both his *Divine Comedy* (started in 1302) and in the *Convivio* (written in 1304). In the *Comedy*, we encounter the seven arts in the first section, the *Inferno*:

We came to the foot of a noble castle, encircled seven times by towering walls, defended round about by a fair stream. Over this stream we moved as on dry land. Through seven gates I entered with these sages until we came to a fresh, green meadow.27

One scholar interprets this as follows:

The fire that enveloped the castle of pagan learning was unique because within, though there had been separation from God, there had been no opposition. Entering the castle of seven walls by the gates of the seven liberal arts, Dante found himself among the representatives of the greatest thought of the past.28

In the *Convivio* or “Banquet,” a later work, Dante associates the seven planetary heavens with the seven liberal arts:

To the first seven [planetary spheres] correspond the seven sciences of the Trivium and the Quadrivium, namely Grammar, Dialectics, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astrology. To the eighth sphere, namely the Starry Heaven, corresponds natural science, which is called Physics, and the first science, which is called Metaphysics; to the ninth sphere corresponds Moral Science; and to the still heaven corresponds Divine Science, which is called Theology.29

There are a few old Masonic legends beginning about 1350 regarding the seven arts that, in
When they passed the columns, where did they arrive?  
Having passed through the porch, at the entrance of which the two sacred columns were reared, the skilled craftsmen came to a winding staircase, that led to the middle chamber, where Solomon had ordered all the gifts of merit to be conferred. On every step of that staircase was stamped the name of a different art, and over each art was appointed a superintendent, to try the merit of the claimants in that art.

Who guarded the staircase?  
At the bottom of the staircase was posted an ingenious craftsman to whom all who approached must submit their claims.

What was the duty of this craftsman?  
The duty of this guard was not only to receive, examine, and arrange the claims, but to refer the candidates, who delivered them, to the superintendent, who was appointed to enquire into the abilities of each claimant. By this arrangement all attempts at imposition were prevented, and the merits of the industrious were duly honoured and rewarded.

Of how many steps is it said, did this staircase consist?  
This staircase is said to have consisted of seven steps.

To what do those steps refer?  
In reference to the seven liberal arts, one or other of which was considered as an essential qualification for preferment: every candidate was tried, and approved, in the art, in which he excelled, by the superintendent of that art; who was pledged to display his powers, and illustrate his excellence on the step, which was allotted to his profession.

How were these arts used?  
These seven arts, which were marked as objects of merit, were thus named and arranged: Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy, and in these arts the professors were appointed under Royal commission, to exemplify at stated periods their skill and talents.  
Grammar, the First step. On the first step, there the Grammariian usually displayed, the excellence of his art. He taught the proper
arrangement of words, according to idiom or dialect; and how to speak or
write a language, with justice and accuracy, according to reason and
correct usage.

On the Second step, the Rhetorician displayed the powers of his art. He taught the mode of speaking copiously, and fluently, on any
subject; not merely with propriety alone, but with all the advantages of force, and elegance; wisely contriving to captivate the hearer by the
strength of argument, and beauty of expression.

On the Third step, the Logician exerted his talents, he taught the art of guiding reason discretionarily, in the general knowledge of things; and how we were to direct our enquiries at the truth: instructing his disciples to infer, deduce, and conclude, on a regular train of argument, according to certain premises laid down, or granted; and to employ their faculties of conceiving, reasoning, judging, and disposing in true gradation, till the point in question should be finally determined.

On the Fourth step, the Arithmetician distinguished his skill: he taught the powers and properties of numbers, by letters, tables, figures, and instruments, giving reasons and demonstrations, to find any certain number whose relation to another number was already known. To every mechanical branch or profession he recommended the virtues of his art.

On the Fifth step, the Geometrician displayed the superiority of his science: he treated on the powers and properties of magnitude in general, where length, breadth, and thickness were considered. He taught the architect to construct his plans; the general to arrange his troops, the engineer to mark out ground for encampments the geographer to give us the dimensions of the world, delineate the extent of seas, and specify the divisions of Empires, kingdoms and provinces; and the astronomer to make his observations, and fix the duration of times, and seasons. In short he proved Geometry to be the foundation of architecture, and the root of mathematics.

On the Sixth step, the Musician displayed his eminence, he taught the art of forming concords, and to compose delightful harmony by a proportion and arrangement of acute, grave, and mixed sounds. By a series of experiments he evinced the power of his art, with respect to tunes, and the intervals of sound only; and in his enquiry into the nature of the concords and discords he fixed the proportion between them by numbers.

On the Seventh step, the Astronomer vies to excel, he taught the art of reading the wonderful works of the Creator in the sacred pages, the celestial hemispheres; by observing the motion, measuring the distances, comprehending the magnitudes and calculating the periods, and eclipses of the heavenly bodies. The use of the globes, the system of the world, and the primary law of nature, were the subjects of his theme, and in the unparalleled instances of wisdom and goodness that were displayed through the whole of the creation, he traced the omnipotent Author by his works.

What were the effects that were derived from this establishment?
The effects of this establishment were at that time sensibly felt, under the sanction of the wisest Prince that ever reigned; the most eminent artificers were collected, instructed, and improved; talents and ingenuity were encouraged and protected; knowledge was spread and disseminated, and works of eminence were produced, which stand unrivalled, in the annals of history and fame.
my opinion, provide hints as to their more spiritual purpose. Older but similar legends occur in the surviving literature of the ancient Near East—even back to Babylonia. The apocryphal Life of Adam and Eve, which survives in a Christian Latin version ultimately derived from a Hebrew original circa 100 BCE–200 CE, relates that just before Eve’s death, she called Seth and all of her other children and gave them a peculiar order:

[...I]isten to me, my children! Make now tablets of stone and other tablets of clay and write in them all my life and your father’s which you have heard and seen from us. If [God] should judge our race by water, the tablets of earth will dissolve and the tablets of stone will remain; but if he should judge our race by fire, the tablets of stone will break up and those of clay will be thoroughly baked.

The book then relates that while many saw the tablets after the flood, only Solomon read them and understood them, as a result of which he established his Temple upon the site at which they were found.

Other ancient accounts transform the tablets into pillars; the details of who creates the pillars and what knowledge is written upon them varies. The oldest text that ties the seven liberal arts to the pillars is the Chronicles of Jerahmeel, a medieval text that compiled many ancient traditions. After noting that Zoroaster discovered “the art of Nagirâ (نزירות) or necromancy,” the account relates that he had written down the seven sciences (or arts) on fourteen pillars, seven of brass and seven of brick, so that they should be proof against the water—of the flood—and against the fire of the day of judgment.

The early Masonic manuscripts known as the Old Charges generally retain the concept of the liberal arts inscribed upon the two antediluvian pillars, and sometimes claim that “both pillars were found, one by Pythagoras and one by Hermes, who each taught the secrets they found written thereon.”

Another early version of the story of the transmission of the arts and sciences comes from the Regius Poem (dated about 1390). Following the segment about the Quatuor Coronati (“Four Crowned Artisans”) and the Tower of Babel—which was said to be built seven miles high—is the reference to the seven arts:

Many years after the good scholar Euclidean
Taught the craft of Geometry wonderfully wide.
So he did at that time introduce
Many other divers crafts
Through the grace of Christ in Heaven.
He established the Seven Sciences.

In the Dowland MS. (c. 1550) we find basically the same story: It tells of how the worthy sciences were preserved through the Deluge. Simply, Lamech’s children (one was Tubal-cain) knew God was going to destroy the world but did not know in what fashion—fire or water—so they chiseled their knowledge on two pillars of stone.

Another tale is told in a seventeenth century copy of an earlier work called a Commentary by Toz Graecus, philosopher of great renown, on the books given by Solomon to Rehoboam concerning the Secret of Secrets. We are told that:

The preface reveals that Solomon gathered his vast learning into a book intended for his son Rehoboam, which he locked up in an ivory coffer concealed in his tomb. Later Toz (Thoth) discovered it, and as he was weeping for his
incapacity to understand its contents, an angel of the Lord came to reveal its meaning to him, but enjoined him not to disclose it to any but those who were worthy of it. We also learn, thanks to the *Liber de secretissimo philosophorum opere chemico* (fifteenth century) that Hermes traveled to the Valley of Hebron, where Adam was buried, and there found seven tablets of stone written before the Deluge, containing the doctrine of the seven liberal arts.39

In an article about the Royal Ark Mariner degree, the author R.M. Handfield-Jones, in speaking about the association of Noah with Freemasonry makes the following observation:

In the first known MS Constitution, the Regius Poem, there occurred on line 537 a passing reference to Noah and the Flood. From then onwards from the Cooke MS every Masonic Constitution contains allusions to Noah, not however to the Flood and the Ark but to his finding the two great pillars inscribed with the seven liberal arts and sciences. The date of the Regius poem is about 1390 but like the Cooke it bears evidence of being derived from an earlier document written in 1350. Here therefore as early as the middle of the 14th century we have the Noah story appearing in association with Masonry, but the flood and the Ark take a secondary place to the two pillars found by Noah *after* the Flood.40

In fact, representations of the seven liberal arts were emerging in many places during the Middle Ages. Some believe that the twelfth century stone carvings on Chartres Cathedral were the first personifications of the seven in the visual arts (they had, of course, been personified in literature since Martianus Capella’s *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* in the fourth
century). We find many examples in painting, such as a fourteenth-century fresco of Thomas Aquinas. It pictures Aquinas in the midst of a very crowded scene with figures representing saints, the virtues, the patriarchs, and at last the seven liberal arts. This fresco can be found on the walls of a Dominican convent in Florence, and there exist many similar artistic representations in manuscripts of the era.

In the first Book of Constitutions, published at the beginning of the era of organized Freemasonry in 1723, James Anderson wrote:

Adam, our first parent, created after the Image of God, the great Architect of the Universe, must have had the Liberal Sciences, particularly Geometry, written on his Heart; for ever since the Fall, we find the Principles of it in the Heart of his Offspring….  

William Preston’s 1775 lecture on the liberal arts and sciences [see pages 43–44] went into eloquent detail regarding each of the seven disciplines. These were directly adapted into the work taught by Thomas Smith Webb in North America in 1797, and retained by later editors such as Jeremy Ladd Cross in 1819 and Charles Whitlock Moore in 1843. In England, the English Emulation ritual that developed after the 1813 union of the Antients and Moderns taught:

Q: Why do seven or more make it [the Lodge] perfect?
A: Because King Solomon was seven years and upwards in building, completing, and dedicating the Temple at Jerusalem to God’s service.

Q: They have a further allusion?
A: To the seven liberal arts and sciences….  

The seven are then named individually and followed by a short definition of each, derived from Preston’s earlier lectures.

### Strange and Mixed Companies

This section introduces St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Knights of the Temple, and Dante Alighieri. There are more than a few interesting interconnections between the three — some actual, some inferred. By bringing these to light here, I hope to demonstrate the high esteem in which the seven arts were once held.

### ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)

Bernard was born into a family of some nobility in the Burgundy region of France. His father was a knight, as were his brothers. By the time Bernard had reached his twenty-fifth birthday he had become the abbot of a Cistercian monastery. The Cistercians, by the way, were known for their architectural skill.

Gothic appeared everywhere at the same time in the Christian west; always in the Benedictine or Cistercian abbeys, Cistercian above all…. Gothic appeared after the first Crusade and more particularly after the return in 1128 of the first nine Knights Templar.

Another scholar puts it simply that “[t]he influence of Cistercian upon the first Gothic architecture is beyond question.” Bernard went on to become one of the most influential men in twelfth century Europe. By the time he died, he had written at least 3,500 pages of religious work. Although there are many colorful aspects of his life, there are only a few pertinent here, namely, his special type of mysticism, his connection with the Chartres Cathedral and his
relation with the Knights Templar. Even after his death his influence was strong; we find him again portrayed in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Bernards’ mystical theology was based on love and knowledge. He taught that there were four consecutive degrees in the soul’s progress in experiencing God’s love. The soul becomes more immersed in Divine Love as it conforms to Divine Will. The disorder of human life is ultimately due to the separation and conflict of the human will from the Divine Will. Changing and redeeming can only come about through love, in Bernard’s view. It is only love that can unite the division of wills. That is why his mysticism has been labeled “affective mysticism” or “bride mysticism.” The mystical union with God comes about through a union of wills, not personalities or beingness, and spirituality becomes almost a courtship between two lovers. One of his masterpieces is his eighty-six sermon mystical commentary on the esoteric symbolism of the Song of Songs attributed to King Solomon.37 The mysticism of Bernard balanced contemplation and action. It was a process of bringing the will closer and closer to reflect the Divine Will through contemplation and bringing that Will into the world through action.

Another aspect of Bernard’s theology was his dedication to the Holy Virgin. “He gave impetus to two devotions that flourished in the later Middle Ages, becoming major forces in subsequent spirituality: devotion to Mary and to the humanity of Christ.”48 Titus Burckhardt speaks of the ambience of the times:

[...V]arious currents flowed together and formed a new and reawakened cult of the Holy Virgin: the longing for the Holy Land, the true home, the need to turn to the maternal mercy of God, and the chivalric cult of the celestial Lady as the epitome of nobility of soul, innocence and beauty. St. Bernard himself, who knew how to call forth the highest spiritual powers of his contemporaries, is said to have been the first to use the chivalric mode of address Notre Dame (Our Lady) for the Mother of God.49

Bernard had many connections with both the cathedral and school at Chartres.

There were many points of contact between Bernard and the Knights Templar. The Council of Troyes (1128) set the regulations (the so-called Rule) by which the Templars would act. It was Bernard’s cousin, Hugh of Payens, who became the first Grand Master of this Order that had been established in Jerusalem. And it was Hugh of Payens who requested Bernard to write his famous treatise *In Praise of the New Militia* (sometime between 1128–1136). Bernard was obviously torn in regards to the idea of monks (holy types) and knights (warrior types) and the problem of uniting them into one person. This was quite a struggle for Bernard but one he gradually resolved. Being that their duties lie in the Holy Land, Bernard wrote a collection of meditations for the Templars that were based upon the sacred sites of the area (such as the Temple, the cities of Bethlehem and Nazareth, on Calvary and the Holy Sepulcher) and events that occurred there. In this way, the knights could lead a contemplative life while “out in the field.” Yet, the main point here is that the Cistercians were the guiding force of the Templars who later built castles and churches themselves.

Finally, it is well to remember St. Bernard’s pivotal role in the *Divine Comedy*. The *Commedia* is a story about Dante’s journey through the three regions of hell, purgatory, and paradise. On this journey he describes what he experiences and who he meets at every level, and sometimes sublevels of these three zones. He
has three guides through this process. Initially, he is led through the underworld realms by the Roman poet Virgil. Then he is guided by his beloved Beatrice, an embodiment of all that is good and beautiful, who leads him to higher and higher realms — almost but just short of the highest sphere of Paradise. It is at this point that he meets St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who then guides his vision to the ultimate sphere.

THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR AND THEIR LEGACY

The Knights of the Temple were started by a few knights probably in 1119 about eighteen years after the first crusade. Their first Grand Master was Hugh of Payens. By 1128 they were officially established by the Council of Troyes, but consisted of only nine knights. They gradually grew in power and prestige to become a major power in Europe. Malcolm Barber, the leading scholarly historian of the subject, describes the pinnacle of their success:

During the thirteenth century the Order may have had as many as 7,000 knights, sergeants and serving brothers, and priests, while its associate members, pensioners, officials, and subjects numbered many times that figure. By about 1300 it had built a network of at least 870 castles, preceptories, and subsidiary houses, examples of which could be found in almost every country in Western Christendom. 50

This all ended with the mass arrests of the knights in France in October on Friday the thirteenth, 1307. The twenty-second and last Grand Master Jacques de Molay, after being held and tortured for almost seven years, was executed March 18, 1314. But not all of the Templars could be arrested. Despite the popular legend of their complete eradication, the fact is that some of those who were arrested were later released for various reasons. Again Barber explains that even after being arrested and later released: “Most of those... received pensions and some even continued to live in former Templar houses; others were sent to the houses of other orders like those of the Cistercians and Augustinians, especially in England...” 52 And then some just went back into society. Professor Antoine Faivre of the Sorbonne tells us that “the Knights Templar supported and considerably developed the freecrafts and, after the disappearance of the order, entered into the corporations of builders.” 53 Things were easier in Portugal for the Templars. In 1319, the Militia of Christ was formed and some former Templars were members. But at this time the religious military orders were going out of public favor and secular knighthood became increasingly popular. Some of the more interesting orders to Freemasons (because they are mentioned in our lecture on the apron) included the Order of the Garter (England, 1348), the Order of the Star (France, 1351), and the Order of the Golden Fleece (Belgium, 1429). Faivre notes the enduring influence of this last society upon later philosophical developments:

The year 1429 was marked by an event having a major influence on the esoteric thought of modern times; this was the creation of the Order of the Golden Fleece by Philippe the Good, duke of Burgundy. ... The Order possessed a beautiful symbolism in dress and ritual, over which generations of alchemists would ponder, at least up to the eighteenth century. 53

The Orders of chivalry were springing up all over Europe, often with the central theme of the idealized woman, who—much like
Dante’s — appears as the guide for man on his quest. The concept was also expressed by the troubadours, the lyric poets of the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries in France who sung of chivalry and courtly love.

DANTE ALIGHIERI
AND HIS MASTERFUL VISION

Dante began work on the Commedia in 1302, and started the Convivio in 1304. These works offer a striking cosmological map of the three zones of the universe as understood in the Western tradition. Titus Burckhardt points out that:

The type of epic poem describing the path of the knower of God in symbolical form, is not rare in the Islamic world. It may be surmised that certain of these works were translated into the Provençal language, and we know that the community of the ‘Fedeli d’Amore’ to which Dante belonged, was in communication with the Order of the Temple, which was established in the East and open to the intellectual world of Islam.54

The philosopher René Guénon, who wrote a book specifically on the esoteric symbolism in Dante’s work, comments upon some artifacts bearing upon this last point:

In the Vienna Museum there are two medallions, one representing Dante...[O]n the reverse side both bear the letters F.S.K.I.P.F.T., which Aroux interprets as: Frater Sacroed Kadosch, Imperialis Principatus, Frater Templarius. [...W]e think it should read Fidei Sanctorae Kadosch. The Association of the Fede Santa, of which Dante seems to have been a leader, was a tertiary order of Templar filiation, justifying the name Frater Templarius; its dignitaries bore the title of Kadosch, a Hebrew word meaning ‘holy’ or ‘consecrated’, which has been preserved to our days in the high grades of Masonry. It is not without reason then that Dante takes St. Bernard, who established the rule of the Order of the Temple, as his guide for the completion of his own celestial journey.55

In trying to understand Dante’s work, Guénon considers the significance of the symbolic regions that Dante illustrates in the Divine Comedy. The hints Guénon says are in the later work, the Convivio or Banquet where Dante associates the seven liberal arts with the celestial realms. Dante says: “To see what is meant by this third heaven...I say that by heaven I mean ‘science,’ and by heavens, ‘the sciences.’”56 Guénon says that: “These regions are in reality so many different states, and the heavens are, literally, ‘spiritual hierarchies’, that is to say, degrees of initiation.”57 And he links them all:

But what exactly are these ‘sciences’ understood under the symbolic designation of the heavens, and must we see therein an allusion to the seven liberal arts so often mentioned elsewhere by Dante and his contemporaries? What leads us to think that this must be the case is that according to Aroux, ‘the Cathars had, as early as the twelfth century, some signs of recognition, passwords, and astrological doctrine (they conducted their initiations at the vernal equinox). Their scientific system was founded on the doctrine of correspondences: Grammar corresponded to the Moon, Dialectic to Mercury, Rhetoric to Venus, Music to Mars, Geometry to Jupiter, Astronomy to Saturn, and Arithmetic or Illumined Reason to the Sun.’ Accordingly, to the seven planetary spheres — the first seven of Dante’s nine heavens — corresponded the seven liberal arts respectively; and precisely
these same designations are depicted on the seven rungs of the left upright of the *Ladder of the Kadosch* (30th degree of Scottish Masonry).\(^8\)

We can conclude this section by pointing out the incredible tapestry interwoven in this period. We know of the connections between Bernard and the Cistercians with the Cathedral and School of Chartres (just to name one actually), and the Templars. We know their architectural influence upon both. We also know the importance the seven liberal arts were to architecture and theology. And we know that they were taught extensively at the school of Chartres; so much so, it is generally accepted that the seven liberal arts reached their zenith at this place. Later we see Dante represent them in a celestial and spiritual way. We also see a version of the Celestial Lady in Dante that we saw earlier with Bernard and as well in the stonework of Chartres where personifications of the seven arts surround the Virgin. It is natural that this leads us to a closer examination of the deeper meanings that may be associated with the seven liberal arts, and how these arts inform the spiritual dimension of architecture.

**The Vision of the Temple**

**MYSTICAL ARCHITECTURE**

One way of understanding our work as Freemasons is the idea that we are building “that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” We have our symbolic tools to build and design, our arts and sciences to inform and guide our work, and the prototype to emulate — King Solomon’s Temple.

Throughout history there have been many monuments that have sought to embody that very spirit in order to be a living icon for the world to see. The Cathedral of Chartres is considered by many to be one of the finest examples. Like many Gothic cathedrals, it was dedicated to the Holy Mother, herself a common symbol of the human soul. Titus Burckhardt explains:

According to the Medieval theologians the Virgin Mary, by virtue of the innate perfection of her soul, possessed all the wisdom of which man is capable. A direct reference to this wisdom is to be found in the allegories of the seven liberal arts which, just outside an inner circle of adoring angels, decorate the tympanum of the Door of the Virgin. In the Medieval context the seven sciences were not exclusively empirical sciences, as are those we know today. They were the expression of so many faculties of the soul, faculties demanding harmonious development. This is why they were also called arts…. The seven planets, on the other hand, govern, according to the ancient viewpoint, the world of the soul. And Mary is the human soul in all its perfection.\(^9\)

We can naturally come to the question of how do we express and develop these faculties and where does it lead us? Burckhardt answers that there is a “reciprocal relationship between knowledge and will,” and that “Knowledge of the eternal truths is potentially present in the human spirit or intellect, but its unfolding is directly conditioned by the will…”\(^6\) This very Platonic sentiment is echoed in the Masonic teaching that “a fund of science and industry is implanted in man.”\(^6\) So if we assume that knowledge of the eternal truths is available and within the human soul, the question then becomes how do we gain access into that interior Temple? Burckhardt has already answered by saying that the key is the *will*. To fully under-
stand the solution it is necessary to understand the mindset of the people who inhabited the medieval world. In their world-view, everyday life was lived in the presence of the supernatural, and under the notion that could behold at least part of sacred reality with the senses. Therefore, to approach the Cathedral was to be on the threshold of the spiritual dimension, for it was considered to actually be a representation of ultimate reality.

The seven arts guided the intellect to approach the hidden light behind the world. The invisible, underlying structure of Reality — the Truth — could be apprehended, and this apprehension had the senses as its foundation. So the temple of God demanded exact building codes — and the prototype for the House of God was Solomon’s Temple. The key to building the Temple was geometry. One author on the subject of sacred geometry explains that:

In the same way that the Logos is a mediator between unity and multiplicity, the temple is a mediator between heaven and earth, the timeless and the temporal. Therefore, ever since the earliest times, religious architecture has been rooted in the timeless principles of “sacred geometry.” By basing sacred architecture on the principles of transcendent form and harmony, temple architects expressed the harmony of heaven on earth. Not only do ancient temples express this harmony, but, through the use of gematria, they were designed to attract the spirit to which they were consecrated.62

Included in the concept of sacred geometry are all the liberal arts. If nature is the true temple of God’s dwelling, then cosmic and natural laws must be the trestle board. These laws are the laws discovered by the practice of the seven arts. These include such things as the interconnection between numbers, ratios and proportions in such areas as arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. It was thought that the same laws linked and even bound the microcosm to the macrocosm.

The masters of Chartres (and Dante after them) were inheritors of the tradition of Augustine, the Platonists and the Pythagoreans. Like these philosophers of old they considered geometry to have an anagogic function: “that is, its ability to lead the mind from the world of appearances to the contemplation of the divine order.”63 Or, in other words, “that number may guide the intellect from the perception of created things to the invisible truth in God.”64 It might be said that it was the combination of the Platonic cosmology and the spirituality of Clairvaux that produced Gothic art.

Another very pertinent concept we find at Chartres is that God is the architect of the universe. The teachers of the school of Chartres:

identify the Platonic world soul with the Holy Ghost in its creative and ordering effect upon matter; and thy conceive this effect as musical consonance. The harmony it establishes throughout the cosmos is represented, however, not only as a musical composition but also as an artistic one, more specifically, as a work of architecture. [...]or the theologians of Chartres, the notion of the cosmos as a work of architecture and of God as it architect has a special significance, since they assume a twofold act of creation: the creation of chaotic matter and the creation of cosmos out of chaos. Since the Greek word kosmos signified ornament as well as order, it was plausible to view matter as the building material, the creation proper as the ‘adorning’ of matter by the artful imposition of an architectural order. In the Platonic cosmology, moreover, the masters of Chartres
could detect the design and method according to which the divine architect had built the universe, the cosmic temple.  

This dominant view is also thought to have caused a sociological phenomenon. Here is another fact that should be of particular interest to Freemasons in search of their roots. It is interesting to realize that clerics were mostly responsible for building, and the term architect was not used very often. But:

the revival of the term in the mid-thirteenth century coincided exactly with the sociological change that transformed the humble master mason into the architect of the thirteenth century, no longer considered a mere craftsman but the ‘scientist’ or theoreticus of his art.

It was then considered that only he who had mastered the seven liberal arts was entitled to the title of “architect.”

[...] It was the School of Chartres that dramatized the image of the architect...by depicting God as a master builder, a theoreticus creating without toil or effort by means of an architectural science that is essentially mathematical. The Platonists of Chartres, moreover, also defined the laws according to which the cosmic edifice had been composed. ... And in submitting to geometry the medieval architect felt that he was imitating the work of his divine master.

We could, as well, characterize it as participating in the divine work.

Another aspect of the Gothic cathedral was its impressive advancement in the use of light. Gothic architecture provided opportunities for more light:

In the Cathedral of Chartres the architect has realized the cosmological order of luminosity and proportion to the exclusion of all other architectural motifs and with a perfection never achieved before. Light transfigures and orders the composition in the stained-glass windows. Numbers, the number of perfect proportion, harmonize all elements of the building. Light and harmony ... are not merely images of heaven, symbolic or aesthetic attributes. Medieval metaphysics conceived them as the formative and ordering principles of creation, principles, however, that only in the heavenly spheres are present with unadulterated clarity. Light and harmony have precisely this ordering function in the Gothic cathedral.

The Art of Memory

The practice of the art of memory developed to a very high level in the Medieval world. This practice was done by memorizing a series of places such as that found in a building. Within these rooms, one mentally establishes other images to serve as reminders of whatever is intended to be remembered or meditated upon. Mary Carruthers relates in her work, The Book of Memory, that records indicate that the art of memory was cultivated at Chartres. Its spiritual employment is illustrated by the reference to the word arca, which means a wooden chest or box used for storage.

But there is another meaning of arca which is associated from earliest times with the process of Scriptural lectio and study. As arca sapientiae, one’s memory is the ideal product of a medieval education, laid out in organized loci. One designs and builds one’s own memory according to one’s talent, opportunities, and energy. That makes it a construction, an edificatio.
thing to be built, the trained memory is an archa in the sense understood by the Biblical object called Noah’s Ark, the construction of which occupies some detail in Genesis, and the Ark of the Covenant, into which the books of the Law were placed. 71

The reason one might wish to practice the art of memory, apart from the ability to retain an extraordinary amount of “book knowledge,” is explained by the Persian philosopher Avicenna (980–1037 CE). He taught that there is a connection between memory and spiritual experience. As Carruthers summarizes:

The images produced during dreams and trances will disappear unless they are associated with images that are already in memory storage, already familiar and accessible to recollection. Thus even direct inspiration requires the immediate assistance of human memory, though in a way more mysterious than that of ordinary dreaming or consciously controlled recollection. 72

In Augustine’s Confessions we read that he finds God through the memory. 73 Augustine’s teaching is a direct adaptation of the Platonic concept that knowledge of the divine is a type of recollection or remembrance. The ancient Greeks called it anamnesis. According to this perspective, knowledge about the ultimate nature of things is buried deep in our minds, “lost” only to the extent that it is generally forgotten. This knowledge is regained piecemeal through the random lessons and experiences of life, or better yet more systematically through the pursuit of philosophical education. Gregory Shaw describes it as

a process of reawakening by means of contacts with the sensible world that functioned as mnemonic prods, reminding the soul of the Platonic Forms. Theurgy should be seen as the development and translation of this epistemological theory into a ritual praxis where the prods of sensate experience were carefully controlled in rites designed to awaken the soul to the Forms. 74

In this way, it was believed, externally performed ritual (properly designed and executed) is able to help us as we search the inner reaches of our souls for the “deep memory” or recollection of eternal truth.

There were many systems of training the memory. The development of these systems gradually became extremely elaborate. One example of this complexity is found in the treatise on memory by Johannes Romberch (1480–1532). Frances Yates explains Romberch’s system as using the “cosmos as a place system,” encompassing

the spheres of the elements, of the planets, of the fixed stars, and above them the celestial spheres and those of the nine orders of angels.... This type of artificial memory may be called the Dantesque type...because Dante was influenced by such an interpretation of artificial memory... 75

Giulio Camillo (1480–1544), who was one of the most famous men of the sixteenth century, constructed an elaborate wooden memory theater. Yates gives an account of its complexity:

The theater rises in seven grades or steps, which are divided by seven gangways representing
the seven planets. [...] The solitary spectator stands where the stage would be and looks towards the auditorium gazing at the images on the seven times seven gates on the seven rising grades. [...] The whole system of the Theatre rests basically upon seven pillars, the seven pillars of Solomon’s House of Wisdom. ... By these columns, signifying most stable eternity, we are to understand the seven Sephiroth of the supercelestial world, which are the seven measures of the fabric of the celestial and inferior worlds, in which are contained the ideas of all things both in the celestial and in the inferior worlds. ... As Sephiroth in the supercelestial world they are here equated with the Platonic ideas. Camillo is basing his memory system on first causes, on the Sephiroth, on the Ideas; these are to be the ‘eternal places’ of his memory.76

And his way of using it is illustrated by the following description:

Thus, following the custom in ancient theatres in which the most important people sat in the lowest seats, Camillo has placed in his lowest grade the seven essential measures on which, according to magico-mystical theory, all things here below depend, the seven planets. Once these have been organically grasped, imprinted on memory with their images and characters, the mind can move from this middle celestial world in either direction; up into the supercelestial world of the Ideas, the Sephiroth and the angels, entering Solomon’s Temple of Wisdom....77

The result of this practice is nothing short of profound:

In this atmosphere, the relationship between man, the microcosm, and the world, the macrocosm, takes on a new significance. The microcosm can fully understand and fully remember the macrocosm, can hold it within his divine mens or memory. ... That there is a strong Cabalist influence on the Theatre is obvious. ... For Camillo, it is the correspondence of the seven planetary measures of the celestial world with the supercelestial Sephiroth which gives the Theatre its prolongation up into the supercelestial world, into the abyss of the divine wisdom and the mysteries of the Temple of Solomon.78

In much of this work, the essential idea is to reproduce the celestial world within. Giordano Bruno’s (1548–1600) work continues the same theme:

In relation to the fundamental zodiacal images, the planet images, moon station images, houses of the horoscope images of Bruno’s list of magic images, move on the wheels of memory, forming and reforming the patterns of the universe from a celestial level. And the power to do this depends on the Hermetic philosophy, that man is in his origin divine, and organically related to the star-governors of the world. In ‘your primordial nature’ the archetypal images exist in a confused chaos; the magic memory draws them out of chaos and restores their order, gives back to man his divine powers.79

The development of the art of memory grew to encompass a mental representation of the entire cosmos as conceived in medieval times. Its use became as an object of contemplation through the use of will and imagination. Much of the structure of the process was inspired by the Hermetic sciences including kabbalah and astrology as well as Pythagorean number mysticism. As the building of this cosmic temple
proceeded, it provided the necessary link of the mind with the divine world. Our journey has taught us that it is the understanding of the Pythagorean and Platonic view of the universe as well as the knowledge of the Hermetic art that provides us with the key to uniting the microcosm with the macrocosm, heaven and earth, and rediscovering that which was lost.

Conclusion

We now find that we have come full circle and have ended up back to the two pillars—the opening subject. From these old tales we remember that one pillar was found by Hermes and the other was found by Pythagoras. Remember also that within these two pillars the whole wisdom of the world was said to be inscribed. And this wisdom was divided into basically seven categories—the seven liberal arts. From these old tales we can receive some glimmer of the high esteem in which these arts and sciences were held. They were not only tales told among the public but were woven into the old Masonic legends.

We then considered the role of the Cistercians on Gothic architecture and the building crafts and that one special monk, St. Bernard, having influence all over Europe, promoted the devotion to the Blessed Virgin, developed a mysticism based on love and set down the Rule for the Knights Templar. The Templars increased in power and influence, built castles and churches all over Europe, had numerous contacts with the religious orders in the Holy Land, and after their suppression, many went into the building trades or back to the monasteries. We know that the School of Chartres studied deeply the Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Pythagorean philosophy and blended it with Christianity. The seven liberal arts were developed to their zenith at this time and place—scholars from every part of Europe went to study there. We examined how the Cathedral was a symbol of the Holy Virgin (that also represents the human soul in its perfection), and it was the study of the seven liberal arts that promoted this accomplishment. We then considered Dante's alleged involvement with the Fideli d'Amore and his masterpiece of the Commedia which represents the Idealized Woman and St. Bernard as his guides to the highest spiritual realms.

In the final section, the subject shifted to the human endeavor of building with the express purpose of representing the spiritual dimension. Understanding the nature of the spiritual dimension demanded extensive study of the seven liberal arts so that what was built was in harmony with and embodied the divine. We also discussed how at one point there developed the idea that only one who had mastered the seven arts could be designated an architect. From there this paper considered the development of the art of memory utilizing temple design to enhance its purpose. And, that some practitioners incorporated kabbalistic, hermetic, astrological and numerological symbolism to develop this art into a spiritual practice. It was considered that developing mental representations to mirror the eternal and unchanging divine world and processes would bring about spiritual revelations. In other words, the practices would aid the soul in its ascent to the divine world. It would, surely, give one the vision of the celestial temple.

A number of eminent scholars—including Frances Yates, David Stevenson, and Marsha Keith Schuchard—have theorized that the origins of the fraternity of Freemasonry can be found emerging from this background.60

Stevenson notes that the Second Schaw Statutes of 1599 command the leaders of lodges to
“tak tryall of the art of memorie and science thairof, of euerie fallowe of craft and euerie pr-
enteiss,” and this, with other evidence, led him to conclude that:

[...I]t is not implausible to think of William Schaw as seeing one aspect of the secret lodges he created as being a grafting of the ambitions that led to the founding of secret Hermetic societies onto a craft which already claimed that it had a connection with Hermes…. In this light, the core of ritual which lay at the heart of the new lodges can be seen as involving them in some sense in the Hermetic quest. ... One branch of the Hermetic quest centred attention on the art of memory...a technique which could harness mystical or magical powers in the pursuit of the lost wisdom of the ancients and of revelation of the divine. 

While it has been popular to regard the modern fraternity as merely a romantic continuation of the building guilds, it is generally overlooked that this does not necessarily translate into the humble and nonphilosophical origin so often imagined. The operative stonemasons—especially the masters and architects among them—were often pursuing lofty spiritual ambitions.

The central importance of the liberal arts and sciences in both operative and speculative Freemasonry may represent an important key to understanding our past, and brightening our future. Some are concerned that the fraternity appears to be diminishing in recent decades. But the tradition that Freemasonry perpetuates and is the foremost custodian of remains vibrant, and it is my conviction that this erosion is not inevitable if the fraternity will renew itself by a fresh look at its original purposes.

The key to this refreshment is a revival of the means by which a speculative Mason becomes an architect of the soul. And the means, my brothers, are the study and practice of the seven liberal arts.  

Notes

The first part of this paper was originally prepared by W.: Bro.: Worrel for the Northern California Research Lodge in March, 1997. It was later presented at a semiannual meeting of the Philalethes Society, in San Diego on September 27, 1997. The author made major revisions to the manuscript in January 2002 and August 2008. The second section of the paper was written in 2008–2009 for Ahiman, which is pleased to finally present the revised edition in its totality. A highly abridged version will be found in the Spring 2010 edition of Philalethes.


2. Ibid., 237. Haywood is here arguing that the liberal arts are useful enough to be “retained,” because Roscoe Pound, a prominent Freemason of the day who became Dean of the Harvard Law School, had published Lectures on the Philosophy of Freemasonry (Anamosa, Iowa: National Masonic Research Society, 1915), in which he argued strongly that the Prestonian lectures regarding the arts and sciences should be scrapped as outdated. They should be replaced, he said, with new ones “which set forth a regular system of modern knowledge demonstrated on the clearest principles and established in the firmest foundation.” (9) Pound particularly stressed the notion that then-current theories of “so-
cial science” should be taught in the Lodges. (Ibid.) Thankfully, this disastrous call for revision was never embraced.


7. Ibid., 124.


10. Ibid., 21.


16. Klibansky, “The School of Chartres;”

17. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 123.

21. The or ha-ganuz is a term used widely in medieval Jewish mystical texts to refer to the original light of Genesis, which was understood to be of a higher form than mere physical light, and which is hidden away except for the elect.


24. Ibid., 488–89.

25. Plato, Republic 522a–528e.


27. Inferno 1v, 106–111 (trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander).


31. The Life of Adam and Eve 50.1–2 (trans. by M.D. Johnson). Latin: Sed audite me, filii mei! facite ergo tabulas lapideas et alias tabulas lutea et scribite in his omnem vitam meam et patris vestri quae a nobis audistis et vidistis. Si per aquam iudicabit genus nostrum, tabulae de terra solventur et tabulae lapideae perma nebunt. si autem per ignem iudicabit genus nostrum, tabulae lapideae solventur et de terra luteae decouquunt.

32. The Life of Adam and Eve 51.3–8. Latin: Et post diluvium a multis videbantur hominibus tabulae illae scriptae et a nemine legebantur. Salomon autem sapiens vidit scripturam et deprecatus est dominum et apparuit ei angelus domini dicens: ego sum qui tenui manum Seth, ut scriberet cum dagit suo lapides istos, et eris sciens scripturam, ut cognoscas et in-
telligas quid contineant lapides isti omnes et ubi fuerit oratorium, ubi Adam et Eva adorabant dominum deum. et oportet te ibi aedificare templum domini id est domum orationis. Tunc Salomon supplevit templum domini dei et vocavit literas illas acliacicas hoc est sine verborum doctrina scriptas digito Seth, teneas manum eius angelus domini.

33. Knoop & Jones, Genesis of Freemasonry, 68.
35. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 304.
57. Guénon, Esoterism of Dante, 6.
58. Ibid., 6–7.
60. Ibid., 89.
61. This statement is commonly found in American Masonic ritual, and originated in William Preston’s May 21, 1772 address to the Grand Officers: “Operative masonry furnishes us with dwellings, and convenient shelters from the vicissitudes and the inclemencies of the seasons. It displays human wisdom in a proper arrangement of materials, and demonstrates that a fund of science and industry is implanted in the rational species for the most wise, salutary, and beneficent purposes.” William Preston, Illustrations of Masonry, 1st ed. (London: J. Williams, 1772), 13. This notion of innate knowledge is expressed in the opening sentences of Anderson’s Constitutions of 1723: “Adam, our first parent, created after the Image of God, the great Architect of the Universe,
must have had the Liberal Sciences, particularly Geometry, written on his Heart; for ever since the Fall, we find the Principles of it in the Heart of his Offspring. " Anderson, Constitutions, 1. The teaching itself is one of the core Masonic principles, implicit in the Old Charges that pre-date the Grand Lodge era.

63. Simson, Gothic Cathedral, 22.
64. Ibid., 25.
65. Ibid., 29.
66. Ibid., 30.
67. Ibid., 31.
68. Ibid., 31.35.
69. Ibid., 228.
70. Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 111.
71. Ibid., 51.
72. Ibid., 75.
76. Ibid., 136–37.
77. Ibid., 138–39.
78. Ibid., 148.
79. Ibid., 217.
81. Stevenson, Origins of Freemasonry, 45.
82. Stevenson, The First Freemasons, 6.