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Paul J. Rich, George Mason University

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Narrowing the Gap Between Numismaticists and Masonic Jewel Enthusiasts

Paul Rich FRNS
Professor of International Relations and History, University of the Americas-Puebla, Mexico
Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University

The gap between numismaticists and Masonic jewel enthusiasts continues, although certainly *Diadem* has helped to narrow it. Over the years many numismatic scholars have had the occasion to come across what appear to be a country’s orders or decorations but which, finally, after considerable frustration encountered with inquiries, turn out to be distinctions awarded by a fraternal order. This is particularly true in the United States there are a bewildering number of these groups, ranging as they do from those which like the Moose and Elks and Eagles have animal names that at least might provide a clue in deciphering the medal’s significance, to those like the Pythians and the Red Men whose rituals are incomprehensible to the public and whose symbolism therefore defies easy interpretation. Of course, Great Britain has had many friendly societies whose jewels create similar problems and which have received some attention in the pages of *Diadem*.
The situation is one of long standing and the jewels of secret1 and ritualistic2 organizations have never received the attention in numismatic studies that the subject deserves.3 Considering how widespread they are, involving all kinds of people and in many countries,4 numismatists should give more attention to this aspect of medal scholarship.5

The problem is compounded by the fact which I have frequently bemoaned that few public or university libraries take seriously the collecting of material on the Masons, so the researcher must get permission to use Masonic archives and libraries. Perhaps the editor of Diadem can tell us whether any numismatic society or university library takes the publication? A number of the Masonic libraries, both in north America and Europe, date from the nineteenth century and have large holdings. An idea of what a variety of sources they might contain is indicated by the classifications of the Library of the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite in Washington, which dates back to 1888 and even then had more than eight thousand volumes. There are sections for Masonry in more than seventy countries, and categories include philosophy and symbolism, church and state, paraphernalia, glassware, benevolent and educational institutions, hospitals, cemeteries, architecture, poetry and drama, humor and satire, and women in Masonry.6 But many Masonic libraries, though certainly not all, are underfunded and not easily used by the public.

Because Masonry is not a nineteenth-century creation like so many of the fraternal orders, its medals have an older and often particular antiquarian interest that those of other fraternities.7 The celebrated and controversial Masonic scholar Albert Mackey wrote in 1917 that, “The earliest Masonic medal of which we have an authentic account is that know as the `Freemason´s ducat´, which was struck at Brunswick in 1743. The number
have since so greatly increased, that it would be impossible to give even a
catalogue of them. They are struck every year by lodges to commemorate
some distinguished member or some remarkable event.”

As most of us know who are members of the Craft know, by 1767,
there are reports of silver medals that were worn around the neck by
members on public feast days, at funerals and other special events. Some
of the early Masonic medals both in the United States and Europe are
known for being pierced or fretted along with a certain amount of engraving,
and the suggestion has been made that they were not created by specialist
medal-makers but often by watch makers: “... (they resemble) the watch
‘cocks’ – that is, the decorative plates, which in the old watches, carry the
outer bearing of the balance-wheel. These cocks are pierced or fretted and
engraved, and although only as large as a six-pence, include as many
masonic emblems as many of the jewels having six times their area...The
obvious suggestion is that many of the old masonic jewels of the type
described were the work of watchmakers.”

Outsiders have to be educated to the fact that any discussion of
Masonic medals must dismiss the supposition that Masonry is one cohesive
movement. That is untrue even within countries, let alone between them. It
comes as a surprise to non-Masons that the jewels vary so much according
to the particular rite involved. Probably it is more accurate to speak of
Masonries in the plural, for the differences are large and while in some
places the Masons are conspiratorial and clandestine, elsewhere they are
benign and charitable, for example, in the Masonic case:

Although Freemasonry is usually considered a singular phenomenon, it is
actually a diverse and wide-ranging complex of many different orients;
orders; directorates; societies; national, provincial, and grand lodges; rites;
and systems. At different times and different places Freemasonry can be politically revolutionary or reactionary, actively involved in public affairs or in retreat from the world, rational or mystic. Some orders and lodges have fallen into obscurantism, charlantry, and religious intolerance. Freemasonry has thrived in different forms in Catholic countries such as France, Italy, and Poland, predominantly Protestant countries like the United States, Orthodox countries like Russia, Islamic countries like Turkey, and recently in Israel. (To this must be added the rapid revival of Freemasonry underway in Russia and other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States.) Freemasons trace their founding variously to the builders of Solomon’s temples, the Knights Templars of the Crusades, and the craftsmen of medieval English and European guilds.¹¹

Another difficulty for non-Masons is that while quite a few Masonic rituals make specific reference to medals and quite often the ritual includes the conferring of a medal on the initiate, public discussion of the rituals is subject to certain reservations. In the first or Entered Apprentice degree, which every Mason regardless of ultimate rank must take, the candidate is told that membership as symbolized by the white apron is more of an honour than the Garter or the Golden Fleece.¹² In the celebrated third degree, the candidate receives a jewel which he thinks indicates he has finished the initiation ceremony, only to be brought back into the lodge for the real and highly dramatic portion of the ritual. How much of this we are willing to discuss with non-Masons varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Then there is the matter of the great variety of Masonic medals issued in large number for the various ceremonies, such as Mark Master degree tokens and pennies. One might suggest that the collecting of Mark and Chapter tokens is as widespread a hobby in the United States as is the collecting of festival jewels in Britain. Since by the nineteenth century there were more than 1000 different Masonic degrees or initiation ceremonies, it can be appreciated that the number of medals or tokens used in one or
another of these rituals becomes numerous. All of this, and especially the
secrecy, strikes the non-member numismaticist as strange and it may indeed
seem “hokey”, but that is obviously not our view and was hardly the view of
our predecessors, who as the Victorian age lengthened displayed an ever-
growing and enormous appetite for more degrees.

There are several ways in which the gulf between numismatics and
Masonic jewel collecting can be narrowed. One is for more Masonic jewel
collectors to participate in numismatic societies and write for their journals.
Sauce for the goose being sauce for the gander, it would also be good to see
participation in Masonic journals of non-Mason collectors. As the situation
now stands, neither group has much to say to the either, and that is
regrettable. A practical step might be for Diadem to be sent on either a
complimentary basis to the leading numismatic societies, all of which
maintain libraries.

Dr. Paul Rich is a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society and life member
of the American Numismatic Society. His mother lodge is St. John’s Lodge
in Boston, Massachusetts, which dates to 1733.

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1. Members of what appear to be secret societies, including those belong to
Masonic organizations, often assert that matters are not secret but ‘discrete’.
Allen E. Roberts, Freemasonry in American History, Macoy Publishing,
Richmond (Virginia), 1985, 1. “Secrecy”, Royal Arch Mason, Vol.18 No.4,
Winter 1994, 118. The problem of how much can be openly discussed
remains with us, although there has been a pronounced movement towards open discussion.

2. “The trend of Masonic thought at any given period is probably better reflected in the rituals in use at that time than anywhere else, and this phase of Masonic study and research has been sadly neglected, probably due to the many difficulties confronting the one undertaking it.” Wm. L. Cummings, “Rites and Ritual”, *Royal Arch Mason*, Vol.18 No.4, Winter 1994 (originally published in the June 1944 issue, 179-183), 107.


4. “...the Shriners, the Order of the Eastern Star, the International Order of Job’s Daughters, the Order of the Golden Chain, the Order of the Amaranth, the Prince Hall organisation, not to mention the Mystic Order of Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm!!, The Ancient Egyptian Order of Sciots!! Or the Order of the White Shrine of Jerusalem. And I assure you that this little list has hardly scratched the surface!” Henry Engelsman, “From the Editor’s Chair”, *The Diadem*, April 1994, No.14, 1.
“Young Protestant middle-class men sought their rituals not only in the fraternal and beneficiary lodges, but also in scores of voluntary associations with primarily religious, reform, political, or economic objectives. College fraternities are an obvious example, but they involved few men and their initiations were brief and underdeveloped. Fraternal initiation was more important in Mormonism, temperance societies, the Know-Nothings and the Knights of the Golden Circle, the Grange, labor and veterans’ organizations, and the life insurance industry. Historians of each of these subjects have commented on the peculiar role of initiation, which they generally have attributed to shield members from blacklisting, and fraternal life insurance firms used ritual to remind members to pay premiums. What is less appreciated is the extent to which founders and members regarded ritual as important in and of itself.” Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989.


7. This is not to say that other fraternal organizations do not have material that numismatic scholars will find interesting. But Masonry is the “grandfather of fraternalism” and hence has a special appeal.


