

Alexander the Great, the Gordian Knot, and Freemasonry

Alexander, son of Phillip of Macedon, was born in Pella in 356 BC. In 336 BC, at the age of twenty, Alexander ascended the throne following the assassination of his father. By the time of Alexander's death at age of thirty-three in 323 BC, this young Macedonian king, through force and statesmanship, had conquered most of the known world and earned for all time the appellation Alexander the Great. Recently, his exploits were the subject of the PBS series, *In the Footsteps of Alexander*. Still, fascination with Aristotle's most famous pupil, Alexander, never ceases: In fact, his story is soon to be again memorialized by Director Baz Luhrman (*Moulin Rouge*) and Director Oliver Stone (*Platoon*) who are both rushing competing motion pictures about Alexander the Great into production for their respective movie studios (Intermedia and Warner Bros).



Given the magnitude of Alexander's accomplishments, it is hardly surprising that Masonic research and fiction have also plumbed the depths of his historic and legendary exploits. In this regard, many Freemasons may be unaware of the existence of an obscure degree conferred only on Master Masons that relates to Alexander the Great and his famous journey to Gordium. (Plutarch, 33:18) This degree is conferred in Synods of the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot.



Ancient History of Gordium, King Midas, and the Gordian Knot

In the ninth century BC, a Thracian tribe known as the Phrygians occupied a city called Gordium situated where the ancient Royal Road between Lydia and Assyria/Babylonia crossed the river Sangarus. The Phrygian kingdom grew to occupy the greater part of Turkey west of the river Halys. By the eighth century BC, its kings had constructed a fortified citadel containing their palace and surrounded by the now large city.

The most famous king of Phrygia was Midas. (Contemporary Assyrian sources call him Mit-ta-a.) The ancient Midas, is said to have fastened the yoke of his famous chariot with so complicated a knot that nobody could untie it, despite the fact that the oracle had promised that whosoever succeeded would become the ruler of Asia.

However, history also teaches that during the reign of King Midas, the Phrygian Kingdom was invaded by a nomadic tribe, the Cimmerians. In 710 or 709 BC, being hard pressed by the invading Cimmerians, Midas was forced to petition King Sargon II of Assyria for aid, despite which, Midas was unable to quell the tide of the invasion. In 696 or 695 BC, Midas committed suicide after losing in battle.

For the following fifty years, the region fell into confusion until the Lydians reunited western Turkey and built a fortress near the Citadel of Gordium. In 547 BC, the Persian King Cyrus the Great conquered Lidia, garrisoned the fortress and made it the capital of the satrapy Greater Phrygia. Through the reign of Darius the Persian garrison held the city. In the last months of 334, the Macedonian commander Parmenion captured the city. During that winter, his king Alexander the Great joined him and as legend recounts, loosed the famed Gordian Knot. (Plutarch 33: 18)



Masonry and the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot

The ritual of the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot was written by a Mason, Varick Steele, while Bro. Steele was in Germany working as a civilian employee of Radio Free Europe. At the time, Bro. Steele was active in the York Rite of Freemasonry: He served his Chapter as High Priest, his Council as Thrice Illustrious Master, and Commandery as Eminent Commander; he also served as Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter, Royal Arch

Masons of Germany. He based the ritual on his historical research on Alexander the Great and focused on Alexander the Great's excursion to Gordium and the loosing of the Gordian Knot. The chief lesson of this degree was to demonstrate the inherent unity of all *regular* Masons, whether they belong to the York Rite, Scottish Rite, Swedish Rite or other obedience, in all their walks of life and in all nations of the world.

The first Synod instituted was located in Munich, with a membership drawn largely from Master Masons serving in the American military. Thereafter, the Order expanded to at least five other German cities, including: Babylon Synod No. 2, Spangdahlem; Tower Synod No. 8 at Kitzingen; Calvary Synod No. 11, Stuttgart; Palladio Synod No. 12 (city unknown). There is currently an active Synod in the United States at Indianapolis, Indiana, which meets at the Millersville Masonic Lodge: As reported by Bro. Lloyd Atterson, as of 2005 the Synod at Indianapolis had 82 members and was conferring the Order twice a year.

Early in the Order's existence, a Mason from Hollywood, California, Bro. John J. Snyder, who was a personal friend of the founder, received the degree while visiting Munich, Germany. Bro. Snyder went on to establish a Synod in Hollywood, CA on his return: No further information concerning this Hollywood, California Synod's history are available. Bro. Miles Lupien received the degree and went on to establish a Synod in Dharan, Saudi Arabia: Bro. Varick Steele was flown from Germany to preside at the institution of the Dharan Synod. By 1989 total membership in the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot numbered about 1000.

Pursuant to the Constitution of the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot, at least four Masons who are either Knights Templar or Masters of the Royal Secret (32°), A.·A.·S.·R.·., are required to institute the Synod. Once constituted, the Synod may confer the degree on any Master Mason who is in good standing and from a just and regularly constituted Lodge for a sum not less than \$10: The fee entitles the Companion to life membership in the Order. Fees are used to pay the Synod's expenses (essentially the obligatory "feast" following a communication of the Order). Paraphernalia is minimal: A representation of an Ankh and a representation of an ox bow and the Gordian Knot. There are only four officers of the Synod who perform the degree of the Order. These four officers are: Supernal Imperator Alexander, Exalted Suzerain Parmenion, Imperial Exarch Ariston and the Inexorable Inquisitor. The Synod's officers have no other duty except the performance of the ritual. A Synod only meets to perform the ritual.

The Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot remains a fascinating repository of ancient history united with a compelling ritual of moral import. As public attention will undoubtedly soon turn to Baz Luhrman and Oliver Stone's film adaptations of Alexander the Great, Freemasons should be prepared to answer questions that will undoubtedly arise regarding the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot. Perhaps some will be so inquisitive as to seek membership in our fraternity to learn what Masonry can teach regarding Alexander the Great.

We are indebted to Varick Steele for supplying historical information relative to the Ancient and Heroic Order of the Gordian Knot and recollections about the Order's formative years.

Copyright information: ©2009- Mill Valley Lodge #356, Mill Valley, California, USA