

THE BOWIE-KNIFE, MASONRY, AND DAMASCUS STEEL

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On May 10, 2010, I had the opportunity to go to the "Hall of State" building on the grounds of Fair Park in Dallas, Texas to hear a lecture by Grammy Award winning singer, songwriter and drummer Phil Collins of England. This lecture was sponsored by the Dallas Historical Society. Reputedly, Phil Collins has one of the larger private collections of Alamo history memorabilia in the world. His fascination with The Alamo began at a young age in England. Since then, he has journeyed to San Antonio many times and has purchased a fair number of items which are "purported" (his word) to have been in the hands of the likes of David Crockett, William B. Travis and others. "Purported" is both accurate and revealing. Authenticity is often difficult to determine in the mists of time.

To my knowledge, Mr. Collins is not a Freemason. However, after his speech, I was one of the few who got to shake his hand and visit with him briefly before his handlers whisked him off-stage. I asked him if he knew much about the Masonic affiliations of various men who were at The Alamo? He glanced at a single-page yellow-pad sheet that I had pre-made for the occasion listing the names of several of the known Masons of the period, and he seemed familiar with some of it - but gesturing as if some of it was 'new information' to him. One of his assistants quickly grabbed the paper and said: "I'll hold on to that for Mr. Collins." I was pleased, since Phil was getting mobbed by some autograph-seekers as he was whisked-away. One attendee in the auditorium asked an erroneous question of me: "So, Collins doesn't allow autographs?" I responded: "I wasn't asking him for his autograph, I was GIVING Mr. Collins some historical information." The passerby then took me seriously and clammed-up.

During his lecture, Mr. Collins indicated his admiration for William B. Travis, David Crockett, Jim Bowie, James Bonham, and Almaron Dickinson (who allegedly instructed his widow, Suzanna Dickinson, to drape his Masonic apron over herself and child allegedly for kinder treatment by Mexican soldiers who were Masons. Mr. Collins also indicated his admiration for actors Fess Parker and John Wayne who portrayed those Heroes of The Alamo in films. On my single-sheet of paper, I was clear and concise and listed the Masonic affiliation of each of those men, PLUS, I noted the Masonic affiliations of Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, and even Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. I was careful to note that Santa Anna used Masonry for selfish and self-serving reasons which are denounced by regular Masons who abide by honorable conduct and sincere fraternal obligations.

On the paper, I also noted that Jim Bowie's brother, Rezin Bowie, (pronounced and spelled sometimes as Reason Bowie) designed and perfected the features of the renowned Bowie knife. The actual blacksmithing was done by James Black, a blacksmith from the little town of Washington, Arkansas. Many people casually call any long butcher-knife a "Bowie Knife," That simple description is erroneous. Any genuine Bowie Knife has a fixed blade anywhere from 6 to 12 inches or more --- and characteristically has a "Spanish notch" cut out of the bottom of the blade, near the hilt. Also, the handle had upper guard bent forward in an 'S' shaped design to catch an opponent's blade. The "Spanish notch" adaptation makes a Bowie-knife a particularly lethal weapon, since the knife pierces deeply when it is thrust forward, but the jagged notch enabled much more flesh, bone and sinew to be ripped from the victim's body upon being pulled out. This translated into increased blood-loss and magnified internal injuries which often proved fatal.

James Black, the blacksmith, made many Bowie-Knives and experimented with variants in size, shape, and metallurgical composition. Mr. Black experimented in semi-secrecy --- making slight differences in order to determine higher quality and durability. He was a private man and worked in his shop behind a leather curtain to prevent eavesdroppers from discovering his unique techniques. Some people claim that, by "trial and effort," James Black was able to re-discover the making of Damascus Steel.

To fully appreciate the impact of Damascus Steel, we must quickly review the basic history of its origin: Damascus Steel is hot-forged steel used in Middle Eastern sword making during the years (A.D.) 900 to



1700. Damascus Steel is a type of steel alloy which is both hard and flexible. The predecessor to Damascus Steel may be the metal used by metal smiths in India and Sri Lanka as early as A.D. 300, called wootz steel...high carbon steel of unusually high purity. Glass was added to a mixture of iron and charcoal and then heated. Supposedly, the glass would bind to various impurities which would then be strained-off.

Damascus Steel is often considered "Crusaders' Steel", since the swords of the Knights of the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta (Knights of Malta) and the Knights Templar possessed swords made from this unique Damascus Steel.

Fr. Christian Rosenkreutz, IX^o, ---who lived from A.D. 1378 to A.D. 1484 ---- the founder of our Rosicrucian Society was bound on a trip to the Holy Land when his companion became sick and died at Cyprus. From there, Rosenkreutz continued onto Damascus, Syria, and other parts of the region, thence going to parts of modern-day Arabia. I feel Rosenkreutz did indeed make his pilgrimage to Jerusalem and other holy sites in The Holy Land, before going to Spain and eventually back to his homeland in Germany where he died. Rosenkreutz and the members of his new Order were interested in knowledge, information, and the practical application of a wide range of subject-matter ----both tangible and intangible.

Members of the Rosicrucian Order studied physics, medicine, mysticism and art. They also attempted to study the history of the galaxy in relation to Almighty God's plan for mankind. They were not so much interested in astrology as they were in Astronomy. Astrology dwells on the zodiac for predictions for the future. Fr. Rosenkreutz was more interested in learning wisdom from the past via astrology and relying on constant signs, signals, and tokens which could be deciphered for the present-day as well as into the future. It is comparable to our modern habit of regularly looking at a clock or wristwatch in "telling time." By observing signs and prompts.... we stay on a steady, reliable schedule. The scientific realm possessed all sorts of possibilities. Many Rosicrucians pondered the makeup of the Universe ---- including such things as comets. While many people focused intently on positive (or foreboding) signs associated with comets, Rosicrucians were already wondering about the physical composition of comets, planets, and minerals --- and then trying to comprehend how the physical composition of various elements can change when heated, cooled, or filtered. All the while, Fr. Rosenkreutz and the Fratres of this new society continued their devotion to Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Redeemer. Their travels took them into foreign lands and their journeys were not without a great deal of risk to their personal safety.

As a Roman Catholic priest, Father Christian Rosenkreutz, generally believed in non-violence. However, he was not oblivious to the hazards which a Christian faced when venturing into unknown places. Although Fr. Rosenkreutz and his followers preached the Gospel and tried to politely seek and share worldly knowledge --- their efforts were sometimes spurned by onlookers. Rosicrucians were occasionally laughed at; subjected to ridicule; or threatened with death. It was the admonishment of Fr. Rosenkreutz to never force any person to listen. Education and wisdom must be sought by interested persons with willing hearts, willing minds, and willing ears. To ensure safety, Rosenkreutz mandated that the members of his Society go out in pairs, two-by-two, in their attempts to fan outward seeking new information by way of uncovering ancient traditions. They were to reunite once a year to update the Society as a whole on their progress. This School of Learned Thought (or early Rosicrucian College) was the culmination of enormous effort and many years of travel --- usually by the members traveling on foot.

Fr. Rosenkreutz obviously wanted his new Order to use various other Mendicant Orders as a template. They were religious orders which depended directly on the charity of the people for their livelihood. The Franciscans and Dominicans were of this model. A member or Frater in the Rosicrucian Society was to use his knowledge for the benefit of mankind ---- and at no charge; gratis. The members were admonished to wear no special uniform or habit; but wear the customary garb of the country in which they traveled or resided in.

Walking for days and days....and miles upon miles while on-foot, can be an arduous and grueling task. Although members wore the normal clothing of their host country, it was common for members (especially older members) to use walking-sticks or staffs to assist them in such long journeys. Ancient Rosicrucians rarely carried visible swords, since their intentions were peaceful and non-aggressive. However, some Rosicrucians did cover the tips of spears that they used for hunting (and the blades of the few swords they



had) with leather to give the appearance of an ordinary walking stick. Those rare Rosicrucian swords were much longer than normal ceremonial swords. The unusually long blade edge was exceedingly sharp. They almost resembled a fireplace poker or stoker. However, the final tip of the blade didn't taper to a point as in normal swords--- it was flat, almost as if the tip were sawn in a square-angle to make it dull (or blunt) at the end. These flat-tipped swords were carried with the blunt tip of the blade pointed downward to the ground. The blade being entirely wrapped in leather....with thick wrapping at the bottom, was to provide a cushion to absorb the shock of hitting the ground, when used essentially as a walking-cane. A long, thin, tightly-wrapped scabbard looked more like a pole or cane than it did as a receptacle for a blade. The hilt provided as good a handle as any other walking stick. And, so the sword (as such) of a Rosicrucian was always nearby, but almost never readily seen by any observer. The 'scabbard' didn't even look like a scabbard, so it was camouflaged by such an ordinary design. The hidden sword was inconspicuous; yet very handy. The supposed walking-stick looked as plain as the simple garb of the man who was possessing it. However, if the need arose, protection was quickly at hand.

That method and design was gained from knowledge passed-down from the Romans who carried a bundle of rods, sometimes with an axe inserted among them. Additionally, in England, as early as the year A.D. 1236, a sword was carried by the Earl of Chester. It was called Curtane and being without a point; it was said to be emblematic of the spirit of mercy indicative of one who walks uprightly; of one who possesses an innocent heart., and of one who protects the weak & defends the innocent without being outwardly militant.

It was also during the time when Fr. Christian Rosenkreutz lived, when the use of a crucifix became much more common to see throughout Europe and parts of the Mediterranean. And, it was routine for Rosicrucians to carry crucifixes among their belongings. A crucifix is a three-dimensional cross with a representation of Jesus' body. Also included is a nameplate bearing the initials "INRI". Many modern Catholic Churches have crucifixes above the altar; but in the Middle Ages it was commonplace to see large crucifixes high across the central-axis of a Church. During the time of Fr. Christian Rosenkreutz, advances in metalworking enabled smaller crucifixes to be made and hung on walls of living quarters of the monks (when they lived in actual structures as their houses of abode) --and eventually crucifixes were hung inside homes of the laity. It was thought that such a display warded-off demons and brought health, happiness, and reverence to the household. The symbol of a rose denoted both purity and secrecy. When the two symbols were combined (the rose and the cross), it was a constant reminder of religious and philosophical solace. Knowledge of all types is God-given. And, Faith helps show us how to apply knowledge in fruitful areas of endeavor such as Medicine or Law.

The "Healing Arts" studied by Rosicrucians were a more studious blending of religious, medical, and philosophical principles. The study of alchemy is somewhat allied with the study of physics. However, alchemy is not solely confined to transforming base metals into gold. Sometimes, it is the hoped-for attempt at transforming ordinary matter into something of higher value or purity, which ultimately may produce greater utility and also save (or enhance) human life. It is evident that early Rosicrucians were interested in the manufacture of Damascus Steel. Most experts acknowledge that the ability to make Damascus Steel is truly an art form. Around the year A.D. 1750, that precise knowledge was lost. Thankfully, it was later recovered, at least in part. The subject of Damascus Steel is indeed worthy of our study, due to it being a shining example of ancient wisdom which was 'lost' and eventually 'recovered'.

The noted Masonic scholar, Albert G. Mackey, in his Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, spoke of an Alchemical and Hermetical Society in Germany around the year A.D. 1777, called the "Freres de la Rose Croiz d'Or." He described their jewel as the golden compasses attached to a blue ribbon, the symbol of purity and wisdom. The Fratres wore a silver ring with the letters I.A.A.T, denoting the initials of Ignis, Aer, Aqua, Terra (or Fire, Air, Water, Earth). It is my belief that most, if not all of those Fratres were Freemasons who had attained the Blue Degrees of the Symbolic Lodge and also had attained the Rose Croiz degree of what eventually became the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. What sets them apart is that they used a set of Compasses made from silver, and a Square made from Damascus Steel. This group was one of the legitimate successor groups to the Rosicrucian Society founded Fr. Christian Rosenkreutz.

In my reading of Masonic history, I find much commentary about the practical use of a Square as a working-tool by stonemasons and the allegorical symbolism derived from it by Freemasons. However,



precious little is said about what material composition makes a square "perfect" for the builder's use. Albert G. Mackey noted that another Masonic scholar, Brother Jeremy Cross marked the surface of a square with lines in inches making it erroneously a measuring instrument of distance or length and breath...which it is not. Mackey correctly notes that a square has a plain surface, the sides or legs embracing 90 degrees and is solely a "trying square" intended only to test the accuracy of the sides of a stone and to see that its edges subtend the same angle. Jeremy Cross confused the tool with wood crafting; while Albert Mackey correctly re-defined its purpose in stone-cutting and its bridge to today's fraternity of Speculative Freemasons.

Stonework and metalwork often overlap in techniques used and in the outcome of the finished product. In the Holy Bible was mention the man known as Tubal Cain, the son of Lamech and Zillah, and brother of Naamah. He was an artificer of iron and bronze and was the master of all coppersmiths and blacksmiths (Genesis 4:22).

Hiram, King of Tyre, plays an important role in Masonry. His kingdom of Tyre is almost forgotten except for the modern-day town of Tyre, in Lebanon ---situated just a short distance from Damascus, Syria (possibly less than 60 miles apart). Jesus Christ visited the coasts of Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15:21) and (Mark 7:24). Damascus is said to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world!!! Damascus was one of the first places to receive Christianity due to the ministry of Saint Paul. In later centuries, Damascus had a sizeable Christian population. The Muslim leader Saladin (who had Kurdish ancestors himself) made a gesture just as the crusades were ending to allow some Christian pilgrims from western Europe to pass through Damascus en-route to Jerusalem to proceed on to their Holy Land pilgrimage to fulfill their vows --- and then they were allowed to return home. Today, Damascus is home to about 10,000 Orthodox Christians as well as 4,900 Catholic Armenians.

Damascus has been a crossroads of diversity. Different faiths, different cultures, and different ways of toiling in a particular field of study led to many new inventions and adaptations, making Damascus a city which was considered a world-class center of knowledge and product development. Various tools made from iron, brass, and steel were either fabricated or modified in Damascus. Squares made with Damascus Steel proved quite durable. Today's stainless steel is one step beyond that --- as a further advancement: since stainless steel has a high chromium content, making it resistant to rust and corrosion.

I find it quite significant that the ancient Knights Templar used Damascus Steel in their swords, and our Masonic Brother Jim Bowie had his Bowie-Knife made from Damascus Steel. Swords and Knives should not be looked upon as mere weapons. They are legitimate means of personal protection.

According to news reports of the time, James Bowie engaged in protective self-defense with his famed Knife to repel an attack of three would-be assassins. According to accounts, Bowie's knife nearly decapitated one man; disemboweled a second man; and split the skull of the third man.

Jim Bowie was born in Kentucky, and became a Master Mason in Loge L'Humble Chaumiere #19 (Humble Cottage Lodge #19) in Opelousas, Louisiana. Bowie was baptized a Roman Catholic on April 28, 1828. He died at the Battle of The Alamo, March 6, 1836, and his name is engraved in a coffin reputedly containing his ashes as well as the ashes of David Crockett and William B. Travis at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of San Fernando in downtown San Antonio, Texas, only a few blocks from The Alamo.

Jim Bowie and Fr. Christian Rosenkreutz lived in different centuries and walked on different continents. Both men believed in the sanctity of Almighty God, and each man cherished his fraternal friendships in this world. Both men put a high price on human life and guarded their lives (as well as guarded those people around them) with due vigilance and honor. Rosenkreutz and Bowie knew that knowledge is power; but they also knew that sharp blades are a formidable deterrent to attack. Life was to be preserved; and aggressors had to be repelled. The difference between "life and death" ultimately boiled-down to the choices a person made. Both men saw advantages in having blades made from Damascus Steel. The swords made from this unique type of steelmaking process evolved from years of tedious study. Damascus Steel derived from the active endeavor of the artisan/blacksmith/craftsman to seek higher & higher levels of purity...while diminishing the levels of impurities or defects. Bowie obviously took a "pro-active" attitude to



carrying a blade with him. The followers of Fr. Rosenkreutz took a more passive or "re-active" attitude. But, when lives were in jeopardy, they all turned to Damascus Steel for help and protection.

As Masonic Rosicrucians, we greatly prize Purity. Copper, silver, and steel each have their various purposes of utility. Each metal has a basic worth...but they also have "value added worth" when transformed for a higher & greater purpose. Our task, as Masonic Scholars, is to patiently sift through, search for, and preserve unique knowledge of items of "worth." Damascus Steel has been shaped and molded to fit various needs and various purposes. Let us continue our study of (and appreciation for) The Bowie-Knife, Masonry, and Damascus Steel. By our actions and faith, we are ourselves shaped and molded into a more worthy product suitable for the Heavens Above.

Sources / Recommended Readings :

- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33° and K.T.
- Personal visit by James A. Marples, VII° with Phil Collins, 10 May 2010 at Hall of State Bldg. at Fair Park, Dallas, Texas.
- Personal visit by James A. Marples to the Roman Catholic Cathedral of San Fernando, in downtown San Antonio, Texas, 09 November 2009.
- Damascus History and Tourism. website: <http://www.olddamascus.com>
- Grand Lodge Masonic Library and Museum, Waco, Texas

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