

**Haunted Chambers:
the Lives of Early Women Freemasons**

by Karen Kidd

A Cornerstone Book

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A Cornerstone Book
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To Greg, my most beloved Profane

Preface

" . . . and I have no doubt other ancient Lodges have their lady members just as ancient buildings have their haunted chambers." W. Fred Vernon, 1892 edition of *Ars Quatour Coronatorum*

Bro. W. Fred Vernon included the above words at the end of his brief article about Isabella Scoon, one of a number of acknowledged early women Freemasons. Vernon knew more about her than we can know now. Like other Malecraft¹ Freemasons of his time, he wrote about early Women Freemasons with the certainty that they existed but with the sureness that they were rare. Oddly for his time, he seems to have been not the least bit uncomfortable with this fact.

Later, it would be different for others.

Historically, the majority of Malecraft Freemasons have been unwilling to acknowledge the existence of women in the Craft. After all, their existence disproves the so-called "no women allowed" rule. That negation causes much discomfort among Malecraft Masons, most of whom further assume if the negation is recognized and acknowledged, they will be compelled to open their Lodges to women Brethren. Rather than face that paradox many of them choose to deny, ridicule and ignore these women.

It occurs to only the more enlightened of the Malecraft that women can – and do – have their own Lodges. They also meet in mixed Lodges. They do so without encroaching upon the men-only domain that is Malecraft Masonry. For Freemasonry is, for a fact and verifiably, triune in nature. There is Male-Only Masonry, there is Female-Only Masonry and there is Co- or Mixed Masonry.

And we know this system can work largely because it does.

It also, however, faces continual opposition from the Malecraft. Despite this, Freemasonry, like life, always finds a way.

But that's not what this book is about. This book is about the before time. In the chapters that follow, I will tell you about women who managed to be made Freemasons (and not a few who tried but failed) in otherwise Malecraft Lodges. I'm going to tell you a story that many have tried – and largely succeeded – to suppress. I'm going to tell you the truth.

Writing this book required more than a little effort, persistence and a certain stubborn commitment to apply high standards of scholarship and research. Which remains rather a novel concept in Freemasonry. Much of the history of Freemasonry in general has suffered from continual scholarly neglect. Though it's quite tempting to think women Freemasons were particu-

larly singled out for this neglect – a certain amount of peer pressure and not a little misogyny played its part – this just isn't true.

Historian of Freemasonry David Stevenson points out that Freemasons frequently “failed to free Masonic history from the ghetto to which it has all too often been consigned by the narrow historical outlook of many Masons combined with the unreasoned prejudice of professional historians.”

Masonic writers were “not equipped with the wider knowledge of historical developments which is necessary if what is happening is to be fully understood,” according to Stevenson². Margaret Jacob, another modern historian of Freemasonry, accurately points out “much of what has been written on Freemasonry is worthless and every library is filled with non-scholarly literature on the subject.”³

Thus Freemasonry, until the last few decades, was what Frances Yates called “the happy-hunting ground of wildly imaginative and uncritical writers.”

“It is time they should be investigated with proper historical and critical methods and there are signs that that time is approaching. In the preface to a book on the genesis of Freemasonry it is stated that the history of masonry ought not to be regarded as something apart but as a branch of social history, a study of a particular institution and the ideas underlying it ‘to be investigated and written in exactly the same way as the history of other institutions.’”

With normal, critical scholarship finally making its way into Freemasonry, it's time to put aside the baggage that has plagued the study of early women Freemasons and apply, to that study, those normal scholarly criteria expected everywhere else. It is no longer acceptable to simply parrot the fairy tales and legends and to adopt the habits of the insufficiently inquisitive who came before. It's time to write about what really happened.

The task is daunting. There were so many early women Freemasons about whom we now know very little and what is left is rapidly slipping away. With each passing generation, we know even less. It's too late to recover the names and stories of the very vast majority. The scholarly squandering and impoverishment cannot be undone. While we may grieve at that, we must accept it and strive not to add to it.

I chose to ferret out those stories about to pass away from this generation; to recover that which is about to be lost and to seek the truth. Too long the stories of these women were suppressed, downplayed and denied. It's past time to rescue those stories that still can be retrieved and to see that each of these Brethren in the Craft have their due.

And yet an academic determination to establish a narrow, sterile truth is not the impetus that drove this study. I dared to write this because these women *did* exist. They were living, breathing human beings with all their human ambiguity. They, like their male Brethren of the time, lived and died in the Craft. Like them, their lives were relevant, they are as worthy of study and emulation. They deserve to be remembered.

This book is my modest effort to do just that: to remember them, to tell their stories so far as they can be told with any degree of certainty and to tell the truth that this generation, and the next, will find worthy of remembrance.

*Haunted Chambers:
the Lives of Early Women Freemasons*

Women in Medieval Mason Guilds

* * *

"When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." - Line from the 1962 John Ford movie **"The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance"**

* * *

Sabina von Steinbach's story is an old favorite of Medieval art historians. In that tradition, she was the daughter of Erwin von Steinbach, master builder who raised the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Strasbourg, now in France.

When he died in 1318, with the work left unfinished, Sabina was awarded the contract to complete this great work. And, to this day, her sculptures greet the many visitors and worshipers to the Cathedral. She was "the First Sculptress", said the 19th Century art historian Elizabeth Fries Ellet:

"The task of ornamenting this noble building was in great part entrusted to the young girl, whose genius had already exhibited itself in modeling. Her sculpted groups, and especially those on the portal of the southern aisle, are of remarkable beauty, and have been admired by visitors during the lapse of ages. Here are allegorical figures representing the Christian Church and Judaism; the first of lofty bearing and winning grace, with crowned heads, bearing the cross in their right hands, and in their left the consecrated host. The other figures stand with eyes downcast and drooping head; in the right hand a broken arrow, in the left the shattered tablets of the Mosaic Law. Besides many other groups are four bas-reliefs representing the glorification of the Virgin; her death and burial on one side and on the other her entrance into heaven and triumphant coronation.

"On one of the scrolls, held by the Apostle John, the following lines are inscribed in Latin:

"The grace of God with thee, O, Sabina,
"Whose hands from this hard stone have formed my image."⁵

Masonic historian George F. Fort, in 1881, declared Sabina's story to be of "undoubted authenticity" and Sabina "a woman, so early as the thirteenth century, 'had been made a Freemason'"⁶. If so, Sabina was among the first Freemasons in general, and certainly the first woman Freemason, known by name from the medieval period.

Her story is representative of other women Masons of this time.

The existence of these women Operative Masons has been much doubted by modern Freemasonic Historians, enough so that at least two of them got into a scholarly snit over a single word in one manuscript. Others have simply ignored their existence and still others have denied it. That these women existed is recorded in such documents as still remain. For most reasonable scholars, Masonic or otherwise, that's enough.

Women in the medieval period were apprenticed in the various crafts, though their numbers were low and records about them are scarce. The scarcity isn't tied to their gender so much as the scarcity of records in general from that period. Finding information about individual male apprentices of the time is slightly easier only because there were a greater number of male apprentices. Time eroded records that may once have existed for all peoples of the medieval period, particularly common folk⁷. Early 20th Century Masonic Writer John Fort Newton observed:

“Unfortunately, as so often happens, no records of old Craft-masonry, save those wrought in stone, were made until the movement had begun to decline; and for that reason such documents as have come down to us do not show it at its best. Nevertheless, they range over a period of more than four centuries, and are justly held to be the title deeds of the Order.”⁸

Almost nothing remains to tell us about the less-than-noble who lived during the cathedral building era, the golden age of Operative Masonry in Europe. But there are some things we do know.

Anyone, man or woman, who entered a craft guild was expected to observe the same code of conduct. “All guilds, no matter for what special purpose they were founded, had the same general characteristic principle of brotherly love and social charity,” Abbot Gasquet said in his “Parish Life in Medieval England”⁹. The guilds could afford to be exclusive and insist on candidates of good report as the number of would-be apprentices greatly outnumbered the positions available.

Entering any of the major craft guilds, including Masonry, was difficult for anyone, male or female. Breaking into Masonry was particularly difficult for those not related to a Mason or who were very low born, such as slaves or serfs, who were practically slaves. For women such as these, it was especially difficult. A woman who aspired to Masonry, without family ties, would need not only that ambition but also a curious mix of bad and good luck. First she would have to avoid her family's profession or any other plans they might have for her. She also would have to hurdle past the many and various marriage laws that stymied such ambition. Then she would have to, somehow, enter what was, effectively, a man's profession and find a Master who would take her on.

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The odds of her being successful were overwhelmingly low, to the point of being nearly impossible. That it was only slightly more possible for a man in similar circumstances likely was of little consolation.

Much more typical was the woman who entered Masonry thru a male relative, such as her father, husband or brother, and learned the Craft informally from them, rather than thru an apprenticeship. In these cases, we hear of them only if this male relative died and the woman assumed membership in the Guild as a widow, orphan or otherwise surviving relative of the deceased Craftsman¹⁰.

Whatever the craft to which they aspired, women usually could expect to be in the minority. Women were the majority members only in textile-based guilds, particularly dyeing and spinning. Even there, their male co-workers received far higher wages and had greater chances at upward mobility¹¹. These inequities in wages plagued women in the crafts for centuries and, eventually, lead to their being barred from many of the guilds. This happened much later, when work dwindled and the men in the guilds hoped to preserve more of it to themselves by denying it to women.

A small number of women did enter the crafts thru an apprenticeship. During one period in Genoa, less than 10 percent of all apprentices were girls¹². "The gender division of labor was of course not new in the Thirteenth Century," explained Medieval wage and labor historian Steven A. Epstein.

" . . .The comparative rarity of women apprentices in the highly skilled trades made the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next a monopoly for men. Male masters displayed no eagerness to train young women, and with few or no women as recognized masters, the guilds did contribute to the narrowing of opportunity for women. Given the structure of medieval crafts, fewer female apprentices meant that fewer women would have the skills necessary to bring to their families more than a subsistence wage."¹³

When a girl did manage to be apprenticed to a Master in any of the guilds, she could expect very much what any other apprentice, male or female, in that craft received. An example of this is what the apprentice was promised in one of the earliest surviving apprentice contracts, from 13th Century Flanders, described by Epstein:

"In the first contract, the master promised to take care of the apprentice 'like his own child' and that this type of obligation, as well as the contract itself and its legal ramifications, provided some

of the same reasons for trust between the parents and a master that a guild statute on the subject might also have provided”¹⁴

The agreements between the Apprentice’s family and the Master, as well as between the Apprentice and the Master, were binding, especially if the Master belonged to a Guild. The contracts often included stiff penalties, for both sides, if the agreement were in any way violated and any secrets, personal or professional, were betrayed. The same was true of the next level of employment, the more mobile “journeyman”, who often served under the same Master to whom they’d been apprenticed.

Apprentices served for terms of as little as six months to as many as 14 years, depending on the trade, though shorter terms may have occurred. “Six months represented a threshold below which the contract may simply not have been worth the cost of committing it to writing,” Epstein pointed out.

“The master and worker both promised to observe the terms of the agreement, which presumably were the length of employment and the rate of pay. The journeymen and –women also promised to work faithfully and well, and the masters obligated themselves to supply work. The consent of both parties was necessary to abrogate the agreement, but the issues of diligence and quality allowed both sides to attempt to break the contract for cause. No master had to keep on a lazy worker and no journeyman had to bear intolerable burdens. Disputes of this kind would find their way to a committee of arbiters, always masters, so journeyman were at a disadvantage if they hoped to escape from a contract.”¹⁵

Even those women who succeeded in their apprenticeships and became journey(wo)men, or “fellows in the craft”, could effectively remove themselves, officially, from the record by marrying. Their labor would become their husband’s and would be viewed as such.

“Some women married men in the same line of work, and the couple would offer themselves on the labor market as a team. Other women married men who were in a different line of work and rarely might take on an apprentice of their own. The tanners of Paris expressly prohibited daughters who were not married to men in the craft from taking on apprentices, even though the tanners had ruled that their own daughters were the only women eligible to be apprentices in the first place. Journeyman status was the great dividing line of labor – only a minority of men ever joined the ranks of independent masters, but for women this was an unusual

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and increasingly rare feat. Not surprisingly, the work contracts left the journeyman free to marry as they wished, and these marriages served to consolidate and pass on what wealth existed in the artisan classes."¹⁶

Clearly, all of this is a generalization, over centuries, but it amounts to almost all we know about women – and men – in the craft guilds from this early period. In addition to decay and obscurity of the written record, women of the time were especially targeted for obliteration, especially after the Black Death and what would be called “the burning times”. This period, for women in general and skilled, talented women in particular, for all its fire, was very dark indeed. Edith Hoshino Altbach says in her “German Feminism: Readings in Politics and Literature”:

“For understandable reasons, the texts of witch persecution literature do not make plain the fact that there were female poets and thinkers, painters and sculptors whose works also consisted of flammable material, just like the bodies of their creators, and that it was the women’s culture which aroused the persecutor’s envy to such a high degree. Only the Synagogue and Ecclesia at the Strasbourg cathedral, a work by sculptress Sabina von Steinbach, could withstand the annihilating fire of the envious.”

For these and other reasons, only a few cases of women in Operative Masonic guilds and other crafts come down to us and almost all of these are from the later Medieval period, including the overlap time between Operative and Speculative/Modern Masonry. This list includes:

- A reference to “Gunnilda the Mason” of Norwich in the Calendar of Close Rolls for the year 1256¹⁷.
- Clauses in the 1389 Certificate of the Guild of Masons at Lincoln refer repeatedly to sisters as well as brothers.
- Records of the Corpus Christi Guild at York charges apprentices to swear to obey “the Master, or Dame, or any other Freemason”¹⁸.
- The Regius Manuscript, generally dated to about 1390 and the oldest Masonic manuscript known, refers to Masonry, “In that honest craft to be perfect; And so each one shall teach the other, And love together as sister and brother.”¹⁹ And in its tenth article: “The tenth article is for to know, Among the craft, to high and low, There shall no master supplant another, But be together as sister and brother, In this curious craft, all and some, that belongeth to a master mason.”²⁰
- The Harleian Manuscript of the early 17th Century, under the apprentice charges, requires the new apprentice, repeatedly, to “not disclose your

Master's or Dame's counsels, or secrets. . ." That "Dame" is understood to be a female master is bourn out by the earlier requirement in which the Master's "wife", not called "Dame", is specifically mentioned.²¹ Reference to a female master as "dame" is made in other period manuscripts as well.

- Women could lawfully hold the position of "Dame", or Mistress or equivalent to Master, in late 17th Century Scottish operative Masonic lodges, according to a record from the minutes of the Operative lodge that met Mary's Chapel in Edinburgh. The minutes, dated April 17, 1683, seem to reference the the widows of Master Masons as being eligible to claim these titles. The text reads:

"Edr. 17 of Apryle, 1683. The whilk day, in presence of Thomas Hamilton deakone and John Harvy warden, and remnant masters of the masone craft, in corroborations of the former practise quhich was of use and wont amongst them, it is statute and ordained that it shall be in tyme or in no wayes leithsome for a widow to undertake workes or to imploy journeymen in any maner or way, but if such work as ancient customers of the deceased husbands or any other ouner who may out of kyndnesse offer the benefite of their work to the sd widoes be ofered unto them, than and that caice it shall be leithsome to them to have the benefite of the work, providing alwayes that they bespeake some freeman by whose advyse and concurrance the worke shall be undertaken and the journeymen agreed with, quhich freeman is hereby charged to be altogether inhibited to participate of the benefite arriessing from the sd work, under the paine of doubling the soume reaped and arriessing to them by the sd work unjustly and to the prejudice of the sd widoues, and contrare to the intent of the masters mette for this tyme; and lykewise to underly the censure of the deakon and masters in all tyme coming, if they shall think it expedient to punish them for their malversations and circumventions of the said widoues. Written and subscribed by order and with consent of the deakon, warden, and masters by Ar. Smith, Clerk."²²

- The widow, Margaret Wild, is listed a member of the London Company of Masons in 1663²³.

- The names of two widows are listed in the Mason's Court Book record in 1696²⁴.

- Several instances of male apprentices being assigned to work under female masters during the period 1713-1715 appear in the records of the "Worshipful Company of Masons" in MS 5984 of the Guildhall Library in London.

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- In 1713, the London Company of Masons recorded the apprenticeship of Mary Banister, daughter of a barber in Barking. Her apprenticeship was to last seven years and she paid five shillings to the company. The same year the company also recorded the membership of widows²⁵.

While the above caused many a 19th and 20th Century Masonic writer to wince and thrash about for generally implausible explanations, no period documentation caused quite as much kerfuffle as did a single word in York MS No 4. That word is "shee".

The manuscript, dated to 1693, recounts the story of King Edwin and his becoming a Mason, as well as an assembly of Masons at York. The manuscript is preserved in the Provincial Grand Lodge of East Lancashire in Manchester. In March 2008, I was permitted to view a portion of this manuscript. And to photograph it. In that manuscript is a sentence that reads (with my italics),

"The one of the elders takeing the Booke and that hee or *shee* that is to be made mason shall lay their hands thereon, and the charge shall be given."

Photographs of this portion are published in these pages for the reader to examine.

One detail immediately apparent about this passage in the manuscript is the size of the handwriting, which is larger here than in the surrounding text. This is an old clerical practice of the time referred to as "engrossing" and indicates the information has been clarified or added²⁶. York MS No 4 is widely believed to be a copy of a much older document. At the time, when old documents that were still needed were wearing out, it was quite common for custodians to have them recopied. People made their living hand-copying old documents.

When new copies were made, clarifications and entire passages could be added and the larger "engrossed" handwriting would indicate those additions in the new manuscript.

In addition to the portions that are engrossed, the surrounding text in York Roll No. 4 is in "secretary hand". This hand was derived from the "law running hand"²⁷ of the 16th Century but came into general use for all informal writing by the end of the 17th Century. By contrast, the text of the added passage, in addition to being engrossed, also is in "round hand", developed in the 17th Century and based on the "Chancery Cursive". "Round hand" was generally used for semi-formal writing. This change in hand in York Roll No. 4 likely is to further emphasize this passage is an addition.²⁸

On its face, it appears the instructions in this passage, about the elder taking the book and the person being made a mason to lay their hands upon

it and the charge be given, had not been part of the original document. We know this because the entire passage is in larger script. Perhaps its absence from the older document created confusion in times prior or maybe there was some concern these instructions were about to be forgotten. For whatever reason, the addition was made. Given the context, it was the instructions, and not the gender of the Candidate being made a Mason, that was key to the addition.

Regardless, like everyone else who studies this manuscript, when I had this portion of York Roll No. 4 before me, I wanted to see that one word: "shee".

More than a century before I lay eyes upon it, the manuscript and that one word came under the gaze of William James Hughan, a noted late 19th Masonic scholar who issued this opinion about this one word in his own "Constitutions of the Freemasons"²⁹ in 1869. He started off by trying to reassure anyone who might be alarmed by this word:

"This reference is unquestionably to a *female* being admitted, and has caused no little surprise in some quarters: we do not, however, see anything to excite astonishment, because as we have before stated, this Manuscript must not be judged simply by the date when the copy was written. It is likely enough a transcript of a much older document, and in former times the Guilds, from which the Crafts evidently sprung, admitted both sexes³⁰ . . . We are not prepared to advocate the opinion that women, as with men, were admitted into the *Mysteries of Masonry* . . . There is [in the manuscript] more than one reference to the 'Dame' as well as the Master, especially in the 'Apprentice Charge', the like of which we have not read before, and is a strong support of our views that women really did at times employ Masons as the Masters did. We believe then, under certain conditions, in early times, women were admitted into the Masons' Guilds as well as into others, and were generally the 'wives or daughters of Gild Brothers', who did not, however, take part in its administrations or councils. Bearing this in mind, the clause in the MS of York, 1963, is fully explained and is at once an evidence of its antiquity, as the custom to admit women into the Guilds appears gradually to have been discontinued as the years rolled on. It is the only Masonic MS we know of that mentions such a clause for women."

Shortly after Hughan published his observations, David Murray Lyon, another Masonic scholar and a contemporary of Hughan's, decided to publicly disagree with Hughan. In his "History of the Lodge of Edinburgh, Mary's Chapel No. 1", Lyon started by pointing out what Hughan didn't

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say; that the word “shee” is proof of women being initiated into Masonry (which, clearly, is what the manuscript, itself, says):

“In other than Brother Hughan’s hands the appearance in the Manuscript of the noun ‘shee’ might have been held as evidence that in olden times it had been a custom of the Masonic Fraternity to initiate females. But the grounds are here too slender upon which to build such a theory and Brother Hughan, it will be seen, does not adopt it. The introduction of ‘shee’ into this particular copy of the Constitutions appears to us to have been either through an error in transcription of the pronoun ‘they’, or from a desire to make directions anent the manner in which the charges were to be given and the oath administered harmonise with what we conceive to be an interpolation of the word ‘dame’ in conjunction with that of master. Taken in connection with the context, the substitution of the article ‘the’ for the adverb ‘then’ is unquestionably the fault of the copyist. We are of the opinion that the introduction of ‘shee’ proceeded from the same cause; for even had ‘dame’ been in the original, there would have been no necessity for converting *they* into *she* in the sentence referred to, seeing that the injunction given to apprentices as to their duty to the “dames” in whose employment they might be, in no way implies that it was the practice for these dames themselves to be initiated. The variations of expression and orthography that are to be found in existing copies of the ancient Constitutions are due in great measure to the mis-transcription, ignorance or whim of copyists.”

In other words, Lyons claimed the copyist miscopied the word “they” and rendered it “shee”. Lyon also seemed to think that the word “shee” was the only addition to the manuscript. Given the change in handwriting, it’s clear the entire sentence was added and, in the context, it wasn’t the gender of the Candidate that made the addition important but the instructions for the making of a Mason, of either sex.

This seems an odd error for Lyon to make. However, it’s not clear that Lyon ever saw the manuscript. He could well have made an educated – if misogynistically desperate – guess as to what “really” happened. Blaming the copyist for making what, in the 17th Century, would have been seen as a glaring error – if error it was – seemed logical to Lyon.

Hughan wasn’t long in his response. He met Lyon head on, recommended there be no quick rush to judgment and defended the skill of the copyist:

“Bro. D. Murray Lyon informs us that in the case of female membership in Scottish Incorporations, the freedom of the Craft, carried with it no right to a voice in the administration of their affairs: that able writer because of this fact and others reasons, considers the clause under notice, (in the York M.S.) to be an interpolation and should read ‘hee or they’ instead of ‘hee or shee’. As it is the only known Manuscript which contains such a provision, it will be well to suspend judgment until further researches have been made. At all events the copyist was certainly a good scribe and not one likely to make an important addition to the usual Rolls, without some authority at least.”³¹

Hughan also pointed out there are other “Apprentice Charges” that make reference to female Masons in the Operative period:

“The ‘Apprentice Charge,’ considered peculiar to this M.S. has since been discovered in the ‘Harleian 1942’ and the ‘Hope’ Mss. Evidently the Apprentices were required, according to this charge, (which was composed of ten clauses), to serve their Master or Dame, as the case may be; thus there is prima facie evidence of females occupying the position of Employers, and therefore it is probable they were in some respects accounted members of the Masonic Body.”³²

While many other Masonic historians have had at least as much trouble as Lyon in dealing with Hughan’s “prima facie evidence”, not all of them have. The Rev. A. F. A. Woodford, another contemporary of Hughan’s and his collaborator in “Old Charges”, re-enforced the theory”

“The words, ‘hee or shee,’ in York MS. No. 4, are only equivalent to what may be shown in other Guild regulations, and the suggestion that ‘shee’ should read ‘they,’ though made by so great an authority as Bro. D. Murray Lyon, is not, we venture to think, tenable in the face of the evidence of female Guild membership of some kind which may be adduced. The usage, as far as the Masons are concerned, proves the great antiquity of the instruction”

Masonic historians since have either ignored this one word in the manuscript or have sided with either Hughan or Lyon. After almost 150 years, Hughan seems to be winning out. In a talk given to the Philalethes Society, a portion of which was published in *Masonic Times* in 1995, VW Bro. the Rev. Neville B. Cryer cited his own unique experience with the manuscript and, clearly, fell in with Hughan:

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"I now am the Chairman of the Heritage Committee of York. I know these documents; I've examined them, and I'm telling you, they say 'she,' without any question.

"Of course, we have a problem, haven't we; to try to explain that. My predecessors would not try to explain this; they were too male oriented. The fact remains that, there it is, in an ancient document of a 17th century date."

There were women – not many, but there were – in the Operative Masonic guilds in Medieval times.

They existed.

Period.

We should reasonably accept this "prima facie evidence" as the basis for that statement and this study. In accepting it as fact, we must also be ready to dismiss any traditions and legends that don't stand up to scrutiny. No matter how cherished the legend might be. If it didn't happen, implying it did reduces the credibility of those instances when it did happen. And, so, we must look at evidence of women in the Medieval Masonic guilds with a very critical eye.

And we must give up Sabina von Steinbach.

She never existed.

Period.

This is the judgment of art historians who have, in the past few decades, re-examined the now lost inscription on that scroll held by the hand of St. John, the sculpture attributed to Sabina. They found it doesn't say what many thought it did. One of these art historians is Leslie Ross, who points out Sabina's story likely was created to further romanticize her supposed father's story. For while he did exist, we know little about him:

"Erwin's daughter, Sabina von Steinbach, was also 'discovered' in the nineteenth century. Based on a (now lost) inscription on one of the sculptures on the exterior of the Strasbourg cathedral (naming a 'Savinae'), a nineteenth-century scholar attributed several famous sculptures both on the exterior and interior of the cathedral to the previously unacknowledged but extremely skillful female sculptor, Sabina von Steinbach, the daughter of Erwin. That the sculptures in question date to a period approximately four decades before Erwin's work at the cathedral was evidently not recognized then or was seen as being not at all problematic. The name of Sabina von Steinbach continues to occur in studies of medieval female artists."³³

Natalie Harris Bluestone further explains the misunderstanding:

“The legend of Sabina stems from a misreading and mistranslation of an inscription on the portal, which identifies one “Sabina” as the donor who made it possible for the sculptures to be cut from ‘petra dura’ or hard (read ‘expensive’) stone. ‘Steinbach’ is not a literal translation of ‘petra dura’ and probably stems from some desire to elaborate the romantic legend that has grown up around the name of the (documented) Erwin. In fact, the style of the pseudo-Sabian figures, Ecclesia and Synagogue, indicates a manufacture of ca. 1225, some fifty years before the recorded activity of Erwin and long before his death, which, in the legend provides the occasion for Sabina’s intervention.”

But she adds:

“The truth that inheres in this legend, however, consists in its example of a Western medieval tradition: the woman artist who learns her craft from an artist-father (or some other male relative, such as husband, brother or uncle). In these circumstances, the woman of the artisan class would have had access to such training. Should the male artist died, on occasion the daughter/wife/sister/niece would inherit and run his workshop. Guild records for the late Middle Ages repeatedly describe wives as business partners and specifically allow for them to inherit and take over their deceased husband’s craft or trade.”³⁴

Perhaps this is the reason to remember Sabina’s legend, if not her reality. For her story mimics what it was to be a woman Mason in the Medieval Operative period. To have a chance to be made a Mason, if only thru one’s male relatives from whom the Craft was received. And to carry on, in the memory of a deceased loved one, the labor that was a family tradition.

In this way, Sabina’s is the story and name of a woman who never existed; who represents the many women who did exist but whose stories and names are forgotten.