

# Rosslyn

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*An account of Rosslyn Chapel, Castle and Glen, the connection with the Sinclairs, Freemasons and Rosicrucians, and the design and symbolism of the Chapel.*

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## Introduction

Rosslyn (alternately spelt Roslin) is a small village in Midlothian, Scotland, complete with castle and an ornately beautiful 15th century chapel, situated on the high ground overlooking a deep valley or gorge (Roslyn Glen) through which the River Esk winds its way. The site is located a few miles south of Edinburgh and on the eastern side of the Pentland Hills. It forms or used to form the north end of a major pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela (St. James' of Compostela) in Spain, and is a focus of many legends concerning the Knights Templar and Freemasons.

## The St Clairs (Sinclairs)

Rosslyn is the ancestral home of the St. Clairs (Sinclairs). Before the St. Clairs were given possession of the Barony of Rosslyn in the 11th century, the barony belonged for a long time to a family called 'Roskelyn'.

William de St. Clair, 'the Seemly', accompanied Margaret Athelstane (St Margaret) as her Cup-bearer when the saintly Saxon princess arrived in Scotland in 1066. He is reputed to have been the guardian of a portion of the True Cross of Christ. This was the Holy or Black Rood, dark with age, held enshrined in a jewelled silver and gold reliquary, which St. Margaret carried with her to Scotland.

In addition, Sir William was made the guardian of the Stone of Destiny (i.e. the Stone of Scone) upon which the Scottish Kings were crowned, and which is supposed to have once been Jacob's Pillow brought from the Holy Land upon which the Judaic Kings or Messiahs were once anointed. In return, Sir William was given the lands of Rosslyn and the Engrailed Cross for his and his family's symbol.

Not only were he and his family made the guardians of the holy relics, but they were also appointed to be the protectors of the Scottish Crown and royal family, and of the royal seat of Edinburgh—for the lands of Rosslyn protected Edinburgh from attack from the south, from England. The Pentlands were also included in the grant of lands to the St. Clairs, given as a barony to the first of the St. Clairs to actually live at Roslyn—Sir Henry, son of Sir William 'the Seemly'.

At Rosslyn there was once a healing well, where the blood of St. Katherine of Alexandria was said to flow from the ground in a discharge of bitumen and black oil, "to kure and to remeid divours dolouris of the skin".<sup>1</sup> A pilgrim messenger, bringing a phial of St. Katherine's blood with her from the saint's tomb on Mount Sinai to Queen Margaret, supposedly started the flow of 'blood' by accidentally letting some drops from the phial fall on the ground at this spot. The spring's oily waters were said to hold natural healing properties that were beneficial for skin ailments. St Margaret ordered a small church or chapel to be built over the well, to be guarded by Sir William and his heirs.

St. Margaret's husband, King Malcolm III, had defeated and killed Macbeth, the murderer of Malcolm's father, King Duncan. Later (in 1128), Margaret's son, King David I of Scotland, received a vision of the True Cross whilst out hunting a stag, which saved him from death. To commemorate this event, and to give thanks for his miraculous preservation, David founded the Augustinian Abbey of Holyrood to house the precious relic brought from Hungary, and he established therein Canons Regular from the Priory of St. Andrews in Fife. The St. Clairs were made the guardians of this royal

abbey, and later they also became its major benefactors. It is not, of course, accidental, that Rosslyn lies due south of Holyrood, on a significant north-south energy line known today as the Rose Line.

Under King David the Augustinian and Cistercian Orders founded monasteries and abbeys across Scotland, each simply but beautifully built according to sacred geometric and symbolic principles. Rosslyn itself became the home of the 'black monks' (Augustinians), with the original Rosslyn chapel dedicated as the Church of St. Matthew.

David I also encouraged the Knights Templar, who were themselves closely connected with the Cistercians and the Freemasons. Both the Augustinians and Cistercians had a high degree of knowledge concerning earth energies, particularly those associated with water, and sited their churches accordingly. This knowledge was certainly used at Rosslyn.

The present Rosslyn Chapel, built on or near the site of the old Augustinian church, is likewise dedicated to St. Matthew and was intended to be the Collegiate Church of St. Matthew. Matthew means 'Gift of God'.

## Symbolic Meaning of Rosslyn

Rosslyn appears to have several meanings, like most symbolic names.

*Ross-lynn* is basically derived from two Celtic words—*Ross*, 'a rocky promontory', and *lynn*, 'a waterfall' or 'stream'. It was on the rocky promontory of Rosslyn that the Sinclair castle was built.

But *lynn* also means 'dragon' and is associated with the Celtic goddess, Bride (Bridget). All bubbling springs, streams and lively rivers are her emblem, as also is the rose. Bride is a synonym for the human soul, the bride of the Christ Spirit.

Later members of the Sinclair family saw *Ros* as meaning 'red' or 'rose', and *lynn* as the 'blood of Christ', just as rivers are generally referred to as the blood of the Earth. Rosslyn therefore can signify the Red Blood of Christ, associated with the Holy Grail, which the Rose also symbolises—the Rose which blooms from the heart of the Cross.

Red is the universal colour of life and love, and (in Ancient Egypt) is the colour of *Ma (Maat)*, 'Truth'. Since *Sen*, in Ancient Egypt, meant both 'blood' and 'son', and since so many words and teachings of Freemasonry are derived from the Egyptian system of Masonry, the word Mason (*Ma-sen*) can be understood to mean 'the Son of Truth' or 'True Blood' or 'Red-blooded'—the very meaning of Rosslyn. Freemasonry can thus be seen to be intended as a true brotherhood or Brotherhood of Truth based on love, for 'free' (from the Sanskrit, *frya*) means 'loving'.

## Rosslyn Glen

Rosslyn Glen, which is in fact a tree-cloaked gorge, is said to have once been the most romantic and beautiful glen in Scotland. Some of the most famous men in Scottish literature have lived on its river banks, and it has inspired many of Scotland's greatest poets, including Drummond<sup>2</sup> and Sir Walter Scott.

On the eastern side of this gorge, between Rosslyn Castle and Hawthornden Castle, are located various caves and passages going deep into the rock. One of them, capable of holding sixty men, is Wallace's cave, in which the Scots' hero took refuge when hiding from the English soldiers.

## Rosslyn Village

The village is thought to have been founded by Asterius, whose daughter Panthioria, a Pictish lady, married Donald I in AD 203.

In the 15th century the village was a burgh or town, and was considered to be the third most important town in Scotland after Edinburgh and Haddington.

## Rosslyn Castle

The first St. Clairs' castle, constructed soon after they became the barons of Rosslyn in 1280, is thought to have been built on the site of what is now Rosslyn Chapel, with the original Rosslyn chapel either close by or within the castle, although their original settlement was in the Glen.

The second castle, built in the 1330's soon after the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, lies a few hundred yards to the south of the first castle and present Chapel. Now mostly in ruins, this once formidable castle is perched on a precipitous rock promontory jutting into the gorge, surrounded on three sides by the river.

The castle once had a great library, attached to which was a manuscript manufactory in operation from at least as early as the 15th century. Paper-makers, translators and scribes were employed here by the St. Clairs. It is considered that in the translation and reproduction of important manuscripts Rosslyn could be compared with Anjou in France, and indeed some of the works produced at Rosslyn are known to have originated at Anjou.<sup>3</sup> The castle, including the library, was besieged and destroyed as a military fortification by Cromwell's troops after the battle of Dunbar in 1630.

## Rosslyn Chapel

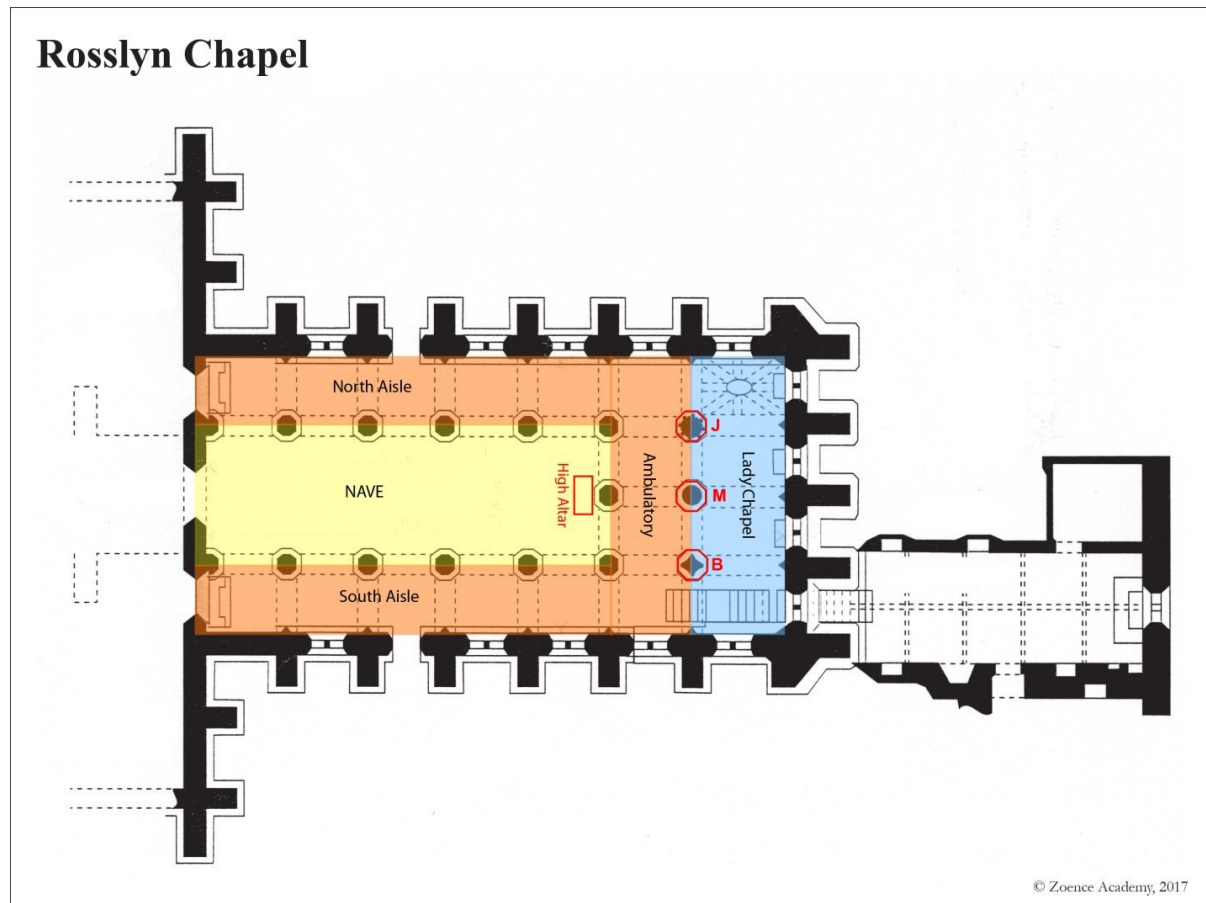
Rosslyn Chapel, formally known as the Collegiate Chapel of St Matthew, was designed and built (1446-86) by William de St. Clair, surnamed 'Prodigus', the third and last Jarl or Prince of Orkney, Earl of Rosslyn, Knight of the Cockle and Golden Fleece,<sup>4</sup> who lived during the reigns of the Scottish kings, James I, II and III. In 1446 William de St. Clair received from Rome the founding charter that gave him papal permission to build a collegiate church. Construction of the building began ten years later, on 20 September 1456.

The Chapel was originally intended to be the chancel of a much larger church—a Catholic Collegiate church in the form of a cross with a lofty central tower; but only the chancel (choir), a lower-level eastern retro-chapel (the sacristy) and the foundations of the nave and transepts<sup>5</sup> were completed when Sir William died. The construction of the planned nave and transepts was then abandoned, either from a lack of funds or lack of interest or both. However, an endowment was made for the Chapel to have in perpetuity between four and six ordained canons and two boy choristers, its purpose being to celebrate the Divine Office throughout the day and night as well as to celebrate Mass for all the faithful departed, including the deceased members of the Sinclair family.

The Chapel was used until the Scottish Reformation, when, in 1592, its altars were demolished and services ceased to be held in the Chapel. After this the building fell into a sad state of disrepair. At the end of the 18th century, however, preservation work was started by Sir Alexander Wedderburn, Lord Chancellor, who was created the 1st Earl of Rosslyn. His nephew, Sir James St. Clair Erskine, who succeeded his uncle as the 2nd Earl of Rosslyn, began the work of restoration.<sup>6</sup> In 1861 the chapel was reopened as a place of worship according to the rites of the Scottish Episcopal Church, a member church of the Anglican Communion.

The Chapel (i.e. the chancel—that part of the Collegiate church which was constructed and still exists) is built on a much earlier crypt known as the Lower Chapel, which formed part of the earlier castle on this site. The foundations of the unbuilt nave and transepts, stretching to a distance of 90 feet, were recorded in the 19th century. The decorative carving was executed over a forty-year period.

The interior of the Chapel consists of a high five-bay tunnel-vaulted nave surrounded by low side aisles and ambulatory, with an extension of the ambulatory to the east forming a Lady Chapel, into which the ambulatory opens. The Lady Chapel has a floor that is raised a step higher than the ambulatory, aisles and nave, and contains three altars and a staircase down to the Lower Chapel or Crypt.



The Chapel contains sixteen load-bearing stone columns, fourteen of which are free-standing whilst two are half-buried in the west wall. Twelve of the columns form, in six pairs, the two sides of the five-bay nave, whilst two further columns form the eastern side of the ambulatory behind the high altar. The two remaining free-standing columns stand midway between the side columns of the two most easterly pairs of columns. The westerly one of these two columns rises immediately behind the high altar at the head of the nave.

This whole design is most unusual if not almost unique for a Christian Gothic church, which normally has an arched bay directly behind the high altar, not a central column. However, the design of the Chapel has a parallel with Glasgow Cathedral, which also has a central column behind the high altar. In addition, Rosslyn Chapel incorporates many elements of design from the continent of Europe.

The Rosslyn design not only makes the central column the focus, but also splits the east end spatially into two parts or sides. It doesn't have a unifying effect, as in normal churches, but a dividing effect. It does, however, convey the idea of the three 'pillars' of the cabalistic Tree of Life; and indeed, the

three most easterly free-standing columns are carved in such a way as to form a symbolic representation of the Holy Trinity, known cabalistically as the Crown, Wisdom and Intelligence. These three special columns are known today as the Apprentice's Pillar (south, left-hand, Intelligence), the Mason's Pillar (north, right-hand, Wisdom), and the Earl's Pillar (middle, Crown). All three are beautifully carved to portray what they each represent symbolically, and all three convey the idea of squaring the circle in their design.

Of these three 'Holy Trinity' columns, the left-hand column (Intelligence) in the south is the most famous, because of its association with the story of the apprentice who carved the pillar and then was slain by his jealous master-mason. This story would appear to be a corruption of the Hiram Abiff allegory told in Freemasonry—corrupted perhaps because of a real murder which took place at Rosslyn Chapel during its construction and which necessitated the re-consecration of the Chapel, or else being its own unique allegory to convey the equivalent meaning. The left-hand pillar is associated with mortality and death, as also with the serpent of intelligence, the idea of which is conveyed in the four carved 'serpents' spiralling their way up the Apprentice Pillar from earth to heaven, coupled with the portrayal of dragons on the base of the pillar. They are also known as 'branches', with the whole pillar allegedly representing the Yggdrasil tree of Norse mythology, since the Apprentice is reputed to have come from the Orkneys. Both the four spiralling 'serpents' and the exposed surface of the main pillar are profusely covered with naturalistic and symbolic carvings.

By contrast, the right-hand pillar or Mason's Pillar in the north displays four straight engaged-columns, like vertical rays of light descending from heaven to earth, signifying the Wisdom which is light. Whilst the four engaged-columns are smooth, the main pillar exposed between them is carved with a beautiful 'living' pattern. The right-hand pillar in Cabala is associated with life, light, immortality and Wisdom, the Word of God, which is the Master. It is the Master who slays the mortal human soul (the Apprentice) when the master-work is complete, in order to raise the soul from mortality to immortality—from being the apprentice to being the master.

The central Earl's Pillar, by contrast, has sixteen engaged-columns, eight large, eight small, rising vertically up the outside of the Pillar, thereby conveying the idea of the eight-spoked wheel of life or mandala. The whole surface of the pillar, including the engaged-columns, is smooth, free of any carvings.

The pillars of Wisdom and Intelligence are also known to Freemasons as Wisdom and Strength, whilst their third pillar, representing the Crown made manifest, is called Beauty and is signified by the altar of incense in the heart-centre of Solomon's Temple—represented at Rosslyn by the high altar in the Chapel.<sup>7</sup> Beneath this high altar is a crypt, now sealed and containing the bodies of twenty St. Clair knights laid out in full armour. The crypt is in two compartments separated by a wall down the centre. The entrance to it is under a floor slab between the two free-standing central pillars on the north side of the Chapel.<sup>8</sup>

The whole Chapel is elaborately carved in deeply meaningful ways—'a Bible in Stone'. The carvings illustrate nature in its myriads of natural forms, like a Garden of Eden, with human figures enfolded in its foliage. Roses are depicted everywhere, as also are portrayals of the Green Man. There are many Biblical themes and images.

The vaulted nave of the roof is divided into five sections (determined by the five bays of the nave). Starting in the east, the first section is decorated with daises, symbolic of innocence and gentleness. The second section is filled with lilies, emblematic of purity, such as that of the Virgin Mary. The third section contains flowers opening to the sun, representative of hearts and minds opening to the spiritual sun. The fourth section is adorned with roses, symbolic of the fully loving and beautiful soul. The fifth and most westerly section is spangled with stars containing within them a cornucopia, a dove, four guardian angels, the moon and the sun. The sun, moon and stars signify the 'lights'

created on the Fourth Day of Creation, as well as being associated with the three Great Pillars of Cabala and Freemasonry. The cornucopia represents nature, but also the grail containing the fruits of a soul's good labour, the labour of love. The four guardian angels are the four great cherubim, guardians of Eden and of the Throne of God. The dove is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Normally one would expect this five-bay progressive series—from daises to stars—to be arranged the other way around, such that the stars, etc., form the most easterly section above the high altar, but here at Rosslyn the symbolic progression of the five-bay vault is from east to west for some special reason, perhaps suggesting Solomon's Temple whose high altar or ark of the covenant is in the west.

It would seem that one of the unique qualities of Rosslyn Chapel is the fact that few, if any, British or continental chapels or cathedrals have portrayed in stone carving such a full version of the story of the Bible interwoven with esoteric allegories from other related sources, as a complete allegorical wisdom teaching.

## The St Clairs and Freemasonry

Robert the Bruce appointed **William St. Clair of Rosslyn** as the first hereditary Grand Master of the Royal Order and Overseer of the revitalised Scottish Freemasons, the King being the Sovereign Grand Master of both. Previous to this the St. Clairs of Rosslyn had been the hereditary Grand Masters of all the Scottish Guilds, which position they continued to enjoy.

A century later, in 1441, another William de St. Clair was confirmed by James II of Scotland as the hereditary Patron, Overseer and Protector of the Scottish Masons—thus being the Supreme Grand Master and Principal of the Royal Order of Scotland.

In 1602 a St. Clair Charter was issued by James I of England & VI of Scotland reconfirming this hereditary office, and in 1630 a second Charter was issued by Charles I of Great Britain reaffirming the first Charter.

The St. Clairs remained the hereditary Grand Masters of Scottish Freemasonry until an 18th century William St. Clair voluntarily relinquished his family's role in 1736, in order to effect the creation of the Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of Scotland. (He was immediately elected Grand Master by the Grand Lodge, and thereafter all Grand Masters have been elected.) This ended a period of nearly five hundred years during which the St. Clairs of Rosslyn had been the hereditary Grand Masters of the Crafts and Guilds and Orders of Scotland.

## The St Clairs and Knights Templar

The St. Clairs and their close relatives, the families of Chaumont, Gisors, d'Evreux and de Bar, had always been deeply involved with the Knights Templar and their associated Order, the Prieuré de Sion. Many of them were (allegedly) Grand Masters of the Prieuré as well as of the Knights Templar.<sup>9</sup> The first Templar Grand Master, Hugo de Payne, was married to Katherine St. Clair.

Prince Henry Sinclair, first Jarl of the Orkneys and known as 'The Holy Sinclair', with the aid of Templar funding commissioned a fleet of twelve ships for a voyage of exploration to the 'New World'. Led by Prince Henry and under the guidance of Antonio Zeno of Venice, the expedition landed in Nova Scotia in 1398, wintered there and later explored the eastern seaboard of what is now the USA. The purpose was to establish a Templar colony, free of suppression and living according to the wise laws of Christ and Solomon.

The Scottish headquarters of the Knights Templar was located at Temple, a short distance south-west of Rosslyn and likewise on an equally steep bank of the River Esk. Formerly known as Balantradoch, it was renamed Temple after the Templars settled there in the 13th century.

## The Knights Templar

When the Knights Templar were persecuted and dissolved in other countries at the beginning of the 14th century, many Templars fled from France and England to Scotland where they found refuge. The then king of Scotland, Robert the Bruce, had been assisted by Templars at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, and became himself not only a Templar but the Sovereign Grand Master both of the Military Order and of all the Guilds in Scotland. He gave the Templars royal protection, but insisted that they became a secret organisation under another name. They were, therefore, reconstituted and renamed as the Royal Order of Scotland.<sup>10</sup>

The Royal Order had existed before Robert the Bruce as a superior form of St. John's Masonry, having been founded in the days of King David I when both the Order of Knights Templar and Freemasonry were first introduced to Scotland. It was then known as the Royal Order of Heredom (H.R.D.M.), with its seat located at Kilwinning.

With the absorption of the Templars into the Royal Order, the Order was expanded with the addition of the Red or Rosy Cross (R.S.Y.C.S.) degrees of chivalry, the total number of degrees being increased to the full cabalistic number of 33. The system of initiation now provided by the Royal Order became known as the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, in which the 14th degree of the Grand Elect, Perfect and Sublime Mason (the Degree of Perfection), completing the Royal Arch of Solomon, is the gateway leading from the Freemasonic degrees to the Templar degrees of the Rosy Cross.<sup>11</sup>

Freemasonry, which in its original form as practised in the ancient Mystery schools always led to the so-called chivalric, princely and priestly degrees, thus became revitalised and overseen in a transformative way by the Templar initiates in Scotland—the Order of the Knights Templar itself having always been associated with its own form of Freemasonry, based upon the ancient pattern.

Interestingly, and almost certainly on purpose, the Royal Order of Scotland's initials are 'ROS', the Rosicrucian sign signifying, in Latin, 'dew'. The esoteric meaning of this Rosicrucian dew, or *rosa solis*, or *ros solis*, can be found in both the Bacon and Shakespeare works.

Which brings us back to Rosslyn.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Sinclair, *The Sword and the Grail*, ch. 4, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Drummond (born 1585), known as 'a tender lover, a gentle poet and a handsome cavalier', was a most accomplished man, speaking Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish and Hebrew, and being the first Scottish poet to write in pure English. At the age of 24 he possessed over 550 books in these different languages, including 50 in English, among them Shakespeare and Spenser. He was not only a poet and historian, but also well versed in mechanics, and an inventor.

Ben Jonson, the Poet Laureate, visited Drummond in 1619, having walked from London in defiance of Lord Bacon's hint that he "loved not see poesy go on other feet than poetical Dactylus and Spondaeus". (Ben Jonson was then a good friend of Bacon, and one of Bacon's 'good pens'.) Jonson and Drummond spent a few days together in January 1619, and in April Jonson stayed with the Scottish poet for a further three weeks. (The recorded conversation of the two poets during this time was published by the Shakespeare Society in 1842.) During his stay in Scotland, Jonson was

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entertained to a civil banquet and was given the freedom of the City of Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Brydon, *Rosslyn – A History of the Guilds, the Masons and the Rosy Cross*.

<sup>4</sup> The Order of the Golden Fleece was one of the two most prestigious Orders of Knighthood in Europe, the other being the Order of St. George and the Garter. The latter was founded by King Edward III of England in 1348, based on the plans for such an Order devised by Richard I ('Coeur de Lion') as a revival of King Arthur's Order or Society of St. George and the Round Table (c. AD 520-540). The Order of the Golden Fleece was founded on 10 January 1429, just seventeen years before the foundation of Rosslyn Chapel. The Order was instituted by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy and Earl of Flanders. It consisted at first of only thirty Knights, and its first meeting was in 1431 in Flanders. Later the Order increased its numbers to seventy-eight. In the 17th century Rosicrucian publication, *The Chemical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz*, Rosencreutz was invested with the Order of the Golden Fleece.

The 'Cockle' refers to the '*Coquille St. Jacques*' – the clamshell symbol of St. James and the emblem of a pilgrim. 'Knight of the Cockle' alludes to 'The Order di San Jago di Compostella'—better known as 'The Knights of Santiago'—which was founded in the 12th century with strong Templar connections. After the Knights Templar Order was suppressed in 1307, many Templars joined this particular Order.

<sup>5</sup> The foundations of the nave and transepts, stretching to a distance of 90 feet, were recorded in the 19th century.

<sup>6</sup> The Earl of Rosslyn, *Rosslyn, Its Chapel, Castle and Scenic Lore*.

<sup>7</sup> The Three Pillars are also known as Wisdom, Beauty and Truth.

<sup>8</sup> The Earl of Rosslyn, *Rosslyn, Its Chapel, Castle and Scenic Lore*, ch. 2, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> N.B. Each Grand Master of the Prieuré de Sion was known as *Nautonnier*, an old French word meaning 'Navigator' or 'Helmsman', referring in particular to Tiphys, the helmsman of the ship Argo in which the Argonauts sailed to find the Golden Fleece.

<sup>10</sup> The Royal Order of Scotland was known in French as '*L'Ordre de Heredom de Kilwinning*'. This denotes two parts: (i) The Order of Heredom, said to have originated in the reign of King David I of Scotland, when Knights Templar were first introduced into Scotland by Hugo de Payens; and (ii) The Rosy Cross of Kilwinning, named after the place where the meetings of the Royal Order were convened after its foundation by King Robert the Bruce.

<sup>11</sup> The 33 Degrees scheme of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry refers to the degree of the Royal Arch of Solomon as being the 13th degree, and the Degree of Perfection, which completes the Royal Arch, as the 14th degree. See Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (1871); Robert Macoy, *A Dictionary of Freemasonry* (1815-1895, republ. 1989).

English Freemasonry refers to the Royal Arch as the 4th degree, the first three degrees being the Craft degrees. There is a relationship between the 33 degrees recognised in Scottish Freemasonry and the 7 major degrees of initiation to be found in the Freemasonry of the ancient Mystery Schools. The Royal Arch as 4th degree belongs to the latter scheme. The 7 major degrees contain the 33 minor degrees. The cabalistic Tree of Life is a way to understand this.