



Nugget

Shibboleths - Ancient and Modern

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The derivation of the word Shibboleth.

Summary

This nugget looks into the derivation of the word Shibboleth, used in Feemasonry, and its use as a password in ancient and modern warfare.

Keywords

Freemasonry, Second, Password, Origin, War.



Shibboleths - ancient and modern

The word 'shibboleth' has, like many others, changed its meaning over time, and this can cause confusion for us today. In modern usage, it means an old saying, adage, or belief that has been unthinkingly repeated over and over again, even if it is untrue. Hence, modern writers use the word in phrases such as '*we must abandon the shibboleths of the past.*'

However, in Masonic ceremonies, we use the word in its original meaning of a custom or style of speaking used to distinguish one group of people from another, in particular to separate people considered as safe or friends from those who were unsafe or enemies.

The English word 'shibboleth' is derived from the Hebrew word 'shibbolet'. Originally, this meant either the part of a plant containing the grain (such as an ear of corn), or a stream or torrent. Hence our Masonic reference to '*an ear of corn near to a fall of water.*'

However, in the Bible (Judges, Chapter 12) is the story of how the Israelite judge and military leader Jephthah used the word to distinguish between his own people (who could pronounce it) and their enemies the Ephraimites (who could not pronounce the 'sh' sound). Anyone who could not pronounce the word correctly was presumed to be an enemy and was killed by Jephthah's soldiers.

In a similar way, in the Second World War, the US troops advancing against the Japanese from one Pacific island to the next needed to be sure their supply bases were safe from attack by Japanese saboteurs. They chose the password 'Lollapalooza' for their sentries to use as a challenge because the Japanese were unable to distinguish between the English pronunciation of 'R' and 'L' and would pronounce it 'rorraparooza'. (The origins of 'lollapalooza' are obscure, perhaps from Irish. In early 20th Century American slang, it referred to a person's nature or temperament, so 'sweet lollapalooza' meant 'endearing' or 'attractive'). It's tempting to think that it was an American commander who was familiar with Masonic rituals who devised this modern shibboleth.

Freemasons today use the word much as Jephthah's men did, to distinguish Masons from non-Masons, or to determine which degrees they have passed.

##END##



Recommended use of Nuggets

Nuggets offer a short, simple and readily absorbed means of progressing Masonic knowledge and an easy way to introduce learning to Lodges and Chapters. It is hoped that they will become a regular feature of Lodge and Chapter meetings as well as a source for private-study.

Nuggets can be included as an item in the summons and read at most Lodge/Chapter meetings. They can be:

- Read by either a new or an experienced Mason with the minimum of preparation and practice; *though ideally, they need to be read a few times beforehand.*
- Themed with the meeting or activity.
- Used to initiate a discussion within a Lodge/Chapter, LOI/COI, or group.
- Read at home, and shared as a topic for a future discussion.
- Used as a focus for an unplanned, informal discussion.

For further nuggets and other learning materials visit “Solomon” at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

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