

The Dutch Perfect Ashlar or 'Zuivere Kubiek'.

by Huib Lazet, 28 June 2020 (original version August 2011)

This paper deals with the large cubic stone, hollow, made of slabs of marble, or in many cases of 'marble' painted wood..., that stands in every Dutch lodge room in front of the Worshipful Master's pedestal and supporting the Three Greater Lights. Originally this document was not intended as a paper. I wrote it in 2011 for the late Rev RWBro Neville Cryer as a reply to one of his many inspiring questions. He and I kept an intensive correspondence for nearly fifteen years on our masonic studies. Now and then he would ask me about a specific item in Dutch freemasonry. This time he invited me to explain the nature and function of the 'Zuivere Kubiek', this large outstanding item in Dutch lodge rooms.



Lodge room of 'Loge West-Friesland No. 45' in The Netherlands.

To begin with a bit of history to set the scene.

Freemasonry was first introduced in Rotterdam, in 1721, by a party of English and Scotch merchants¹. One of them was probably Bro. Adam Duncan, who became a Rotterdam citizen in 1730; not unusual since there was a lively Scotch community in that port. The lodge (its name unknown) existed from 1721 to 1726 or '27.² Unfortunately we don't know the contents and proceedings of its meetings. The lodge must have been known in London though, because in 1734 the *'St. James Evening Post'* is said to have reported under the heading *'Holland Nov. 4th 1734'* that a lodge was consecrated in The Hague, stating: *'Besides the lodge of English Freemasons at Rotterdam, another is erected at The Hague'*.

¹ Remarkable: this took place before Rev Anderson published his Constitutions in 1723.

² Kwaadgras, Evert: 'Het Licht aan de Maas' in: *Thoth* 53 (2002), especially p. 42. *Thoth* is published by the Dutch masonic research institution 'Ritus en Tempelbouw'.

Ten years later a 'private lodge' was held in The Hague on 25th September 1731, when Dr John T. Desaguliers PGM came over to initiate Duke Franz of Lotharingen, the later German emperor. This initiation took place in the house of Bro. Lord Chesterfield, the English envoy at The Hague. Only one 'Hollandish Brother' is said to have been present at the occasion.

In 1734 the first Dutch '*l' Union*' Lodge was consecrated in The Hague. It was followed in 1735 by '*Le Véritable Zèle*' Lodge, also in The Hague. Both had an English letter of constitution. Some of the members had been made freemasons in England. On 24th June 1735 a Netherlands Grand Lodge was founded under the curious name of 'La Sincérité'. In 1736 '*De La Paix*' Lodge was constituted in Amsterdam. Freemasonry had made its start in The (Northern) Netherlands. Of course freemasonry had also begun in the Southern Netherlands (Flanders).

By the way: the majority of Dutch freemasons were then aged between 20 and 35 years! Things have changed, haven't they?

Unfortunately the Northern Netherlands Government, the 'Staten van Holland', found Freemasonry to be suspicious and in 1736 proclaimed a total prohibition. A short period of anti-masonry from several quarters followed and the lodges had to cease their activities, until 1745, when the Amsterdam and The Hague lodges 'popped up' again and resumed their meetings. Better times arrived and on 27th December 1756 the 'Grand Lodge in the Republic of The Netherlands' resumed its activities. Though its name changed a few times, its existence has been uninterrupted (... making the Dutch Grand Lodge an older Grand Lodge than the 1813 United GL of England...*smile!*)

From this concise piece of history we can conclude that the '*ritual method and layout*' of freemasonry mainly came from England, whereas the '*manners and dressing*' had a French character. In addition, the whole struggle between the Moderns and Antients evaded the development of Netherlands freemasonry. We followed our own curious path of development, strongly influenced by French and German practices. That's why in the Netherlands until mid 20th century Mark Masonry and Royal Arch were quite unknown and regarded as 'too exotic'. Let me, against this backdrop, now present the 'Dutch Perfect Ashlar'.

We have two stone cubes in the lodge:

- a small one (Smooth Ashlar) for the Fellowcraft to work on immediately after his advancement. I'll come to that at the end of this letter.
- the large 'white marble' one in front of the WM, called the '**Zuivere Kubiek**' or 'Altaar der Waarheid' ('Altar of Truth'). Known by you as 'Perfect Ashlar'.

The 'Zuivere Kubiek'

The Dutch adjective 'Zuiver' has several connotations: 'pure', 'perfect', 'authentic', to some even 'holy'. All these associations are connected with this particular 'Kubiek'. The word '*Kubiek*' itself is typical 'masonic jargon', non-existent in normal Dutch, where the correct word would be '*kubus*'. So the jargon word 'Kubiek' distinguishes this stone from any other

cubic stone. Add the several connotations of 'Zuivere' to it and the stone in front of the WM becomes very particular indeed, especially since it supports the Three Greater Lights: the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and the Compasses³. It has become the *'Pure and Perfect Cube'*, a Cornerstone set in a royal place: on the central line in front of the Worshipful Master. A strange place for a Cornerstone...

Where it came from

The Zuivere Kubiek has another, older name: **'Altaar der Waarheid'**. Literally this name means: 'Altar of Truth'. It is the name of the forerunner of the 'Zuivere Kubiek', a small table or 'stool' that, certainly after 1785, supported the Three Greater Lights. We know almost nothing of the earliest furniture used at lodge meetings, that were very often held in private houses. In 1756 the Netherlands Grand Lodge was established and regular minute-keeping started. In these minutes the pedestal in front of the WM was never mentioned as having a particular function. It just stood there, probably supporting a square and sometimes compasses as well, plus a closed hand Bible. Later on these became the 'Three Great and Emblematic Lights'.

Around 1785 we find a first indication that this simple pedestal was given a functional name: 'Outer' or 'Altaar'. This might be due to the fact that the candidate had to kneel before it and pledge his allegiance to the lodge and masonic secrets by laying his hand(s) on the Three Greater Lights. Almost as if he made an offering on an altar.

In the 2nd half of the 19th century the 'Altaar' became the 'Altaar der Waarheid' ('Altar of Truth'), influenced by romantic German usage: 'Das Altar der Wahrheit'. This 'Altaar der Waarheid', comprising the pedestal and the Three Greater Lights, standing in front of the WM., became an increasingly important piece of lodge furniture. By then it will certainly have influenced the atmosphere and perhaps the free speeches during the workings. Mind you, there was, and still is, no centrally prescribed Dutch ritual. There are only a number of outlines and minimal requirements. Every lodge is free to devise its own rituals within the given framework. Indeed many Worshipful Masters have added their own views and creeds to rituals during their 'reign'. Sometimes enriching. Often certainly not. Moreover, in the 19th century a distinction had developed between exclusively ritual workings in the lodge room, often called the 'Tempel', and club-meetings, called 'Comparities'⁴ in the adjacent meeting room that was also used as the banquet room. The initiations became strictly separated from the club's business. To this day most lodges in The Netherlands still find it 'not done' to read minutes, take ballots, talk finances etcetera in open lodge. Very often the solemnity in Dutch ritual workings strike a chord of a religious service. In this atmosphere the 'Altaar der Waarheid' came for some brethren close to a church altar.

³ As in England, in 1865 these three implements replaced the original Greater Lights, namely the Moon, the Sun and the Master (not being the Master Mason or Master of the Lodge but THE Master.)

⁴ From French 'comparaître', to show up, to assemble.

In 1847 the then Dutch Grandmaster Prince Frederik presented the Order with a monumental building in The Hague, to house the administration, to hold Grand Lodge meetings and to provide the local lodges with furnished lodge rooms and 'comparitie' ('assembly') rooms. The habit had developed of presenting a paper, a 'Piece of Mental Work' called 'Bouwstuk'. This typically Dutch exploration of freemasonry in terms of one's own thoughts and experiences is still a valuable means to put the moral contents of ritual to daily practice. This presentation of a personal 'Bouwstuk' took, and still takes place as a part of the 'club's business' in the 'comparitie' room.

In 1870 the Grand Lodge room at The Hague was refurbished and the 'Altaar der Waarheid', the wooden pedestal supporting the Three Greater Lights was replaced by a large marble cubic stone (hollow, that was.) It was then officially named the 'Zuivere Kubiek', the 'Perfect Cube', as this was considered more neutral and more authentic than 'Altaar'. This new piece of furniture and its name were soon adopted by most lodges. Still, every lodge could use the term they wished and even today you will hear both terms: 'Altaar der Waarheid' and 'Zuivere Kubiek'. They indicate a lodge's 'character': slightly religious or a bit more humanist.

As I indicated, there is no established Dutch ritual, only a prescribed framework and recommended examples. However, there is 'Ritus en Tempelbouw', the masonic research institution that aimed at restoring the rituals and furnishings of lodges that had been stolen and destroyed in World War II. Their successive recommendations in 1955 were adopted by the governing body of the Grand East of the Netherlands and presented as such to the lodges. While restoring the rituals, the wise brethren of Ritus en Tempelbouw removed many of the 'adhering fantasies' from the 19th century and brought back forgotten original elements, thereby alluding to other degrees that originally belonged to the 'craft'. They did a magnificent job, so that we have an excellent set of recommended, though not binding standard rituals. In the 1955 version the terms 'Altaar der Waarheid' and 'Zuivere Kubiek' are used alternatively. Perhaps a compromise. The 1980 version consistently uses 'Zuivere Kubiek'.

'Opening of a New Working Year'

Does the Zuivere Kubiek play another role besides that of a piece of furniture? Yes it certainly does. Dutch freemasons have always been very creative when it comes to transforming misunderstood (or meaningless) furniture, objects, gestures, words and actions into meaningful symbols and ritual elements⁵. So, we have devised a key role for the Zuivere

⁵ For instance: a hoodwinked Dutch Candidate is perambulated around the lodge (we say 'he undertakes a journey') and half-way the Northern column (the row of chairs) a stumbling block is put before his feet. His conductor helps him to 'overcome' this obstacle (alluding to mental obstacles). The origin of this journey and the stumbling block may well have been the presentation of an English Candidate and the kneeling bench where he listened to the invocation. Perhaps a rough sketch was misinterpreted by a Dutch brother who never was a witness himself. Who knows...

Kubiek in a very nice ritual performed every September to resume masonic labour after the summer holidays: the 'Opening of a New Working Year'. This ritual dates from about 1955. Here it is in a nutshell.

The WM concludes that after a period of rest labours must be resumed. Then the Orator reminds all brethren that King Solomon wished to build the Temple. His father's friend, Hiram of Tyrus sent him a Master Architect: Hiram Abiff. He also provided wood from the Lebanon, cut by a host of workers etcetera. Perfectly hewn stones were to be carried to Jerusalem. On mount Moriah, on the trashing floor of Arauna, a place where peace, love and unity dwelled, there stood the cornerstone, a beautiful block of marble, shaped into a perfect cube. This fine stone was to be the principal cause and the foundation on which the building would be erected. The three Grand Masters consider carving a name into this cornerstone. Which name? They conclude that it should be the name of the GAotU. However: the GAotU wrote His name in the skies, carved it on the mountains, cut it in the bedrock of rivers, set His mark on field, flower and bush, on bird and beast, fish and creeping animal, spelled it on clouds and on sunshine, on silence and on storm, on the flash of His fury and on the rainbow of His covenant, and etched it in men's hearts and spoke to their souls through His grandeur. He need not have His name chiselled in stone. So the cornerstone was to remain nameless.

The three leaders of the works consider writing a year on the cornerstone. The year of the GAotU? Which year would that be? The years that men existed? The years of the GAotU himself, that can only be expressed by an eternity of eternities? Naming years of the GAotU would be like vainly using His name. So the cornerstone was to be without a year.

It need not be adorned as it was in itself a testimony of a mighty event, the origin of great truths and a promise of a glorious order to which our masonic labour is devoted.

Then the Orator recites how the three Grand Masters assemble at the cornerstone to see if all is ready to start building. At that moment the WM leaves the throne and he and the two Wardens assemble around the 'Zuivere Kubiek'. The Junior Warden has taken a square, a level and a plumb (with rope) from the floorcloth and hands these tools to the WM, who announces that King Solomon retained the Square, and returned the level to Hiram of Tyrus (here the SW) and the plumb to Hiram Abiff (here the JW), saying: "*Keep these until the Temple is finished and I will require you to return them to me. If you will not respond then, I will send messengers to find you. Now aid me in establishing if every thing is ready to start our building labours.*"

Then the JW *kneels down* and applies the plumb to one of the ribs of the 'Zuivere Kubiek' and checks its perfect vertical position⁶, followed by the SW who places the level on the top of the Zuivere Kubiek and *bends over* to establish its perfect horizontal position, after which the WM, *standing upright*, applies his square on three

⁶ 'he proves the masonry to be perpendicular or 'upright' ...'

adjacent ribs ⁷, and concludes that the building of the Temple can commence. All three keep their working tools and reassume their seats.

To me this is one of the most touching pieces of masonic ritual and every summer I look forward to it.

There is no further lecture in which the 'Zuivere Kubiek' itself is described, or its function and meaning explained. It just stands there, silent, as a foundation for our masonic labours, which is demonstrated once a year.

By the way: it's remarkable, that in our Royal Arch ritual the three names are found, carved in another fine piece of marble... And in an Irish Royal Arch Chapter you may also find a large cubic stone with signs on it.



Irish Royal Arch Grand Chapter

'Mourning Ritual'

A ritual event in which the 'Zuivere Kubiek' plays a 'supporting' role is the short Dutch 'Mourning Ritual' to commemorate a Brother or Brethren who had to lay down their earthly tools. In short the main part of the ritual is as follows.

The lights in the lodge room are dimmed. The WM asks the SW why there is silence, and the latter answers that no materials are brought forward.⁸ The Wardens are ordered to walk along the seats and the JW finds an empty seat on which lay the apron and gloves of the diseased. He enquires the Brother next to this seat, who answers that Brother A had to lay down his tools and was summoned to 'higher office'. Then this Brother (usually one who has been very close to the diseased) takes up apron and gloves and brings them to the WM who has taken position at the 'Zuivere Kubiek'. He receives the regalia and *'takes them back, since the craftsman has no need for them any longer; but he will happily welcome a new apprentice to the craft to hand out these regalia again'*. Then he lays three white roses on the 'Zuivere Kubiek' in an equilateral triangle around the Three Greater Lights, saying: 'Faithful to himself',

⁷ 'this is fair work, and square...'

⁸ '... the work has come to a standstill...'

putting the 1st rose at the base, 'in support of his fellow humans', laying the 2nd rose, and 'dedicated to the Master', arranging the 3rd rose. Following this there is a short silence and the 'Broederketen', the Chain of Brethren, in German: die Bruderkette, is formed to close the void place, and at the same time the lights in the lodge room are turned up again.

Here the 'Zuivere Kubiek' is a support for the Three Greater Lights plus the three white roses.

Smooth Ashlar

Now let me explain something about the other cube stone in our lodge, the small one, a smooth ashlar called 'Kubieke Steen'.

As the Rough Ashlar, the Dutch 'Ruwe Steen' is in the first degree placed on the floor at the North side of the floor cloth, to be worked on by the new Apprentice with his tools, chisel and common gavel, so the Smooth Ashlar, the 'Kubieke Steen' stands on the floor in the 2nd degree, South of the floor cloth, to be tested with a square and a straight-edge by the newly advanced Fellowcraft. In fact here he receives his 'instruction' from the SW, as follows:

The SW and the young FC stand at the 'Kubieke Steen'. The SW says: *'Brother Fellowcraft, this cubic stone that was hidden in the Ruwe Steen (Rough Ashlar), but of which you had a clear concept, has through your work as an Apprentice come into daylight. Now, kneel down as I do, on your left knee and test your work as follows.'* Then the SW shows how to skim three adjacent sides of the stone with the straight-edge and to test three adjacent corners with the square. The FC copies. Both stand up and the SW reports: *'WM, the FC has been instructed.'*

I never fail to be impressed and moved by this very short instruction. And I enjoy silently the beautiful connection with the Mark degree, unnoticed by nearly all the Brethren. Mind you, only 6% of the Master Masons in The Netherlands are Mark Masons, so unknowingly most of our Brethren witness here a very compact version of the presentation of materials to be tested. And it's interesting that in our Dutch 2nd degree the maker of the stone is also the judge of it. Beautiful, isn't it? Now and then, when I give a short talk in a Mark Lodge, I bring up this point. Whenever I talk to FC's and MM's about the Mark degree, I bring up this FC's instruction and claim that it is enlarged and elaborated in the Mark degree.

By the way, in our Dutch workings a wooden or metal ruler has long ago taken the place of the original straight-edge. Simply because most straight-edges have ruler markings and because rulers are straight! Moreover the straight-edge as a builder's tool is not widely known anymore. So in nowadays Dutch lodges a simple metal or wooden ruler is named '24-delige maatstok' (24 inch Gauge) and with it three adjacent ribs of the 'Kubieke Steen' are measured, as if checking the equal lengths of the sides. This procedure in combination with the application of the square should prove the stone to be a (nearly) perfect cube. Such events give me a chance to tell my Dutch brethren about the Mediaeval Entered Apprentice becoming a Fellowcraft and then going through the subsequent ranks of Fellow Craftsmen, each making his particular proof of craftsmanship. I always wind up at the Mark degree. I wonder why...

Dutch freemasonry with its particularities was to VW Bro Neville Cryer a rich source of ritual and symbolic elements that over the centuries have disappeared in English freemasonry. I hope that this paper has given you a small view of foreign and perhaps old English features, and may inspire you to take a closer and perhaps surprising look at developments in freemasonry on the European continent.

Sincerely and Fraternaly,
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