

Chapter 11: Greek Mythology and History - its relationship to Masonic Ritual

In the first part of this work, we have identified the important position that Plato's writings hold in Emulation Ritual. As significant as this aspect is, there is another important influence in our ritual. It is the importance that Greek history and mythology plays as a background to our ritual and rubrics.

Understanding that philhellenism was a constant throughout the 19th century in Europe and specifically (from our perspective) – England, it would seem strange if Greek history and mythology had *not* been woven into our Ritual.

What we will do now is briefly investigate some broad Greek historical and mythological themes that are easily apparent in *Emulation Ritual*.

The Importance of the Number 9:

You and I are aware that certain numbers have meaningful significance within our Masonic culture in particular. Some examples are:

The number 3: There are 3 Craft Degrees, 3 Knocks belonging to each Degree, 3 Principal Officers in a lodge.

The number 4: There are 4 Cardinal Virtues, 4 Cardinal Points in a lodge.

The number 7: There are the 7 days of creation, 7 days of the week, 7 Liberal Arts and Sciences, 7 members who make a lodge perfect.

The number 9 has its own peculiar significance which is linked directly with Greek mythology. Before we advance further, we will stop to recall the context within which the number 9, appears in Freemasonic ritual.

This number has significance *only* to the office of the Grand Master. When we salute the Grand Master, we do so with a sign known as *Grand Honours* and we do it – 9 times. On the collar of the Grand Master, there appear 9 links. The question is how do we explain this?

The first thing that we can note is the special significance that the number 9 has in Greek mythology. The number 9 appears with such regularity that we can't dismiss it as a coincidence alone. Here are some examples:

- In Greek mythology, the cosmos (universe) is measured in height and depth by a very interesting explanation: if we were to throw an anvil out of the space inhabited by the ancient gods, it would take *9 days* to reach the earth.
- This same anvil would take *another 9 days* to drop from earth, to the home of Hades – lord of the Underworld.
- For *9 days* and *9 nights*, Leto experienced the gamut of labour pains (having fallen pregnant to the god Zeus).
- When Mnemosyne consequently gave birth, her issue was the *9 Muses*.
- In time, these 9 Muses were joined in a competition by 9 "stupid sisters" against whom they won.
- The *Mysteries of Demeter* demanded that women abstain from sexual intercourse with their husbands for *9 nights*.
- Smyrna – (having been found out for deceiving her father and having sexual intercourse with him), wandered about in exile for *9 months*.
- The mythical creature known as the Hydra had *9 heads*.

The list above is (for the purposes of this example) – only a snapshot.

On the understanding that ancient Greek culture lies at the heart of modern Masonic ritual, it is possible that the reason that the number 9 has a special significance to the office of Grand Master, may lie in the fact that as the Grand Master sits in the Chair of *Royal Solomon*

(who was most renowned for his wisdom) it recalls an allusion to the Greek god Zeus (who is the Father of Wisdom).

According to myth, Zeus gave birth to Athena (the goddess of Wisdom), *through his head*. Having given birth to her in this very unusual way, he became the Father of Wisdom. However – there is one more twist to the story. His 9 natural daughters are the Muses. These Muses control the Arts by which humankind gives eloquent expression to its history, poetry, dance and drama. In essence, the Muses encapsulate all the styles of artistic expression that give us skills at eloquent persuasion.

The 9 Muses are:

Euterpe who governs the expression of lyric poetry

Calliope who governs the expression of heroic poetry

Polyhymnia who governs the expression of divine poetry (hymns)

Thalia who governs the expression of comedic poetry

Erato who governs the expression of love poetry

Each of these 5 sisters supervises elements of poetic expression. The remaining 4 sisters supervise aspects of artistic expression that are not classified as poetic.

Clio who governs the expression of history

Melpomene who governs the expression of tragedy

Terpsichore who governs the expression of choral dance

Urania who governs the expression of astronomical studies

In its own way, we can suggest that the reason that the Grand Master is honoured 9 times, is in symbolic token that in his person is carried the expression of the arts of eloquent persuasion.

Athens, Sparta and Corinth:

Ever since the evening of my Initiation, I have always been intrigued by the characteristics that each of the three Principal Officers represents. Worshipful Master as head of the Lodge sits in the Chair of King Solomon and represents Wisdom. How though do we explain the characteristics of *strength* (Senior Warden) and *beauty* (Junior Warden)?

In a Masonic context, it is through the combination of all three officers that a lodge is governed and achieves the property of - *stability*. What I always found intriguing was the concept that the well-governing of a lodge was achieved by the operation of the three characteristics that the Principal Officers represent – *Wisdom* (Worshipful Master), *Strength* (Senior Warden) and *Beauty* (Junior warden). I began looking for clues. The answers to these clues (...like my black socks with the white stripes) were staring me in the face.

Assuming that I was right and the authors of *Emulation Ritual* had taken as their basis Greek history, Greek mythology and Plato's writings, the answer had to be standing clearly for me to see, (once I had managed to work through it).

The three principal cities of the Greek world were Athens, Sparta and Corinth. We know that Athens has always been the symbol of Wisdom. Athens is even named after the goddess of Wisdom – *Athena*. Sparta had a reputation for its strength, its might, its discipline. Because of these factors that highlight its characteristic of strength, it achieved success over Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Lastly, we have Corinth. In the Greek world, Corinth was

But to Calliope the eldest of the Muses and her next sister Urania they make report of those who spend their lives in philosophy and honour the pursuit which owes its inspiration to these goddesses; among the Muses it is these that concern themselves with the heavens and the whole story of existence, divine and human, and their theme is the finest of them all.

Plato, Phaedrus 259
Trans: Hamilton

renowned for two things - luxury and beauty. Its chief trading exports were its perfumes and its pottery. In the same way that Sparta fought against Athens using ground forces, at the very same time, Corinth was Athens' foe on the seas. In these circumstances, we have a triangle composed of the principal cities of ancient Greece - Athens, Sparta and Corinth.

Stability in the region was a matter of bringing together these three powers. In many ways this is an allusion to the Greek make up of the human individual – an ideal that was comprised of a person of wisdom as well as a person who showed not only physical but mental strength.

It is on these foundations that a cultured person has the luxury to develop the arts and to appreciate not only physical beauty, but the beauty that accompanies fine art, poetry, drama and prose. It is on these foundations that social, civilised human culture can develop and flourish.

In our ritual, the Junior Warden who represents the human characteristic of beauty is instructed during his Installation to use persuasive eloquence; it is the Junior Warden as the model of gracious culture who invites the lodge's visitors to the banquet following the lodge meeting; it is the Junior Warden as the model of social hospitality and etiquette who proposes a toast to the lodge's visitors at the banquet; it is the Junior Warden as the model of cultured humour who injects light-heartedness into the banquet.

If these clues were not enough, there was one further powerful piece of evidence supporting the theory.

We have previously briefly alluded to the cultural descent of the Athenians and Spartans. The Athenians were descended from an ethnic race known as the *Ionians*, while the Spartans were descended from a distinct ethnic group known as the *Dorians*. Understanding this, it is only obvious that we would use the *Ionic* Pillar to represent Wisdom (Athens), the *Doric* Pillar to represent Strength (Sparta) and the *Corinthian* Pillar to represent Beauty (Corinth).

Those black socks with the white stripes have been found again.

The Use of the Gavel

In the protocols for running a lodge, a Worshipful Master has at his side a gavel. This gavel is the symbol of his authority to govern his lodge. He maintains control of this gavel at all times except when an Installing Officer (of superior rank) attends his lodge and needs to sit in the Worshipful Master's Chair to conduct an aspect of the Ceremony.

In this instance, the procedure is this: the Worshipful Master will hand to the Installing Officer his gavel and use words that indicate that this ceremonial gesture transfers authority in the lodge to the Installing Officer.

(Chap 11, Text Insert 3) On first appearance this feature of the ceremony may seem to be anything but ancient Greek in origin, but in actual fact it is a ceremony that appears in one of the first pieces of western literature – Homer's *Odyssey*.

The Corinthians are said to have been the first to change the design of ships...and to have built the first triremes in Greece at Corinth...

...the Corinthians with their city situated on the isthmus, were always engaged in commerce from the earliest times...

..Corinth was powerful through affluence, as the ancient poets confirm by calling the place "wealthy".

All quotes are from Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War 13. Trans. Lattimore

The Symbol of the Pomegranate

In those cultures where the pomegranate is grown, the fruit is often used as a symbol of plenty, of exuberance, of wealth. Our ritual (when it refers to the fruit) uses the same symbolism. There were rows of pomegranates that adorned the capitals of the pillars that stood alone outside Solomon's Temple.

As we've noticed, the authors of *Emulation Ritual* were well versed in sacred scripture and Greek literature and were able to seamlessly blend the two together. In the prominent instance where the pomegranate appears in Greek mythology, it appears not as a symbol of plenty.

Peisenor the herald, past master by experience of public conduct, thrust into his (Telemachus') hands the gavel which gave him right to speak.

Homer, The Odyssey, Book II
Translation by T.E. Lawrence
(Lawrence of Arabia).

It appears as a symbol of death in much the same way that the "apple" (or more accurately – forbidden fruit) that Eve gave to Adam brought to humankind - mortality. In the Greek myth, the sentiment is identical only with the small twist of a role-reversal.

When Demeter (Goddess of Grain and Fertility), the mother of Persephone understood that her daughter had been abducted by Hades who was the Lord of the Underworld, she was so overcome with grief that the world went into famine as a result of her intense anguish. No crops grew and humankind began to starve. She appealed to Zeus to arrange for her daughter's release from the Underworld. Then she (like Orpheus) descended into the Underworld and met her daughter who was overcome with happiness in seeing her mother. Demeter told Persephone that Zeus had agreed to release her from the Underworld on condition that she had *not eaten anything*. Persephone wavered but eventually told her that she had. Persephone explained that Hades had presented her with a pomegranate when she had first been taken by him into the Underworld. When she resisted, he urged her to taste just a little of the fruit. Against her better inclination she did. Demeter cried. Having eaten of the pomegranate, Persephone had eaten of the fruit of the Underworld and therefore could no longer resume her life prior to her abduction.

So often, Freemasonry has explained as a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. To those who had listened to and delivered Emulation Ritual to candidates in the early years of the nineteenth century, the words and rubrics were rich in the subtleties of Greek allegory and symbolism.

Hopefully, we may be able to restore an understanding of the richness, majesty and poetry of Ritual for Freemasonry's members living in the 21st Century.

The Deacons' Wands

To a new member of the Order, one of the most perplexing realities of ritual work is watching the Junior and Senior Deacon's conduct their solemn ritual-movements holding in their right hand sticks that look remarkably similar to pool cues. These ceremonial sticks are called by the fairy-tale-like term of "wands".

These "wands" have a very ancient pedigree – indeed their pedigree comes from the mystery cults of ancient Greece. One of the most important mystery cults was known as the Mysteries of Eleusis. These mysteries appear to have had some relationship to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. One of the things linking the two is that Eleusis was understood to be the place where Demeter sat and wept at the abduction of her daughter by Hades.

What we do know, is that in this mystery cult, there were officers who carried about with them a ritual-stick that went by the name of a *thyrsos*. This thyrsos is most commonly associated with the god, Hermes.

In Greek mythology, Hermes held the chief distinction of being the messenger of the gods. He was the communication conduit between not only the gods but also between gods

and humankind in general. In his right hand he held the thyrsos. The thyrsos appears to have had a number of uses including being used as a weapon, as a magical instrument and most importantly, an instrument by which souls were led by Hermes into the Underworld.

The parallels between the Hermes myth and Masonic ritual are readily apparent. The Junior and Senior Deacons' chief role is in the capacity of being messengers. The Senior Deacon is the messenger between the Worshipful Master and the Senior Warden, while the Junior Deacon is the messenger between the Senior and Junior Wardens. During the Initiation Ceremony, the Junior Deacon leads the Candidate in ritual work. During the Ceremonies of passing (Second Degree) and Raising (Third Degree), the Senior Deacon leads the Candidate in all ritual work.

There is one last correspondence that is deserving of our attention. In the Degree of the Mark Master Mason, the name that is given to the emblem of the Junior and Senior Deacons' wands was known as a "mercury".

This is a very telling indication that we are on the right track. *Mercury* was the name given to the Roman god whose Greek counterpart was known as Hermes.

Snakes (on Masonic Aprons)

The snake was an important creature in Greek mythology for one very important reason. The citizens of two Greek cities – Athens and Thebes – believed that they were *autochthonous*. This is not a word that we readily come across. It means that they believed that they were born *out of the soil*. The symbol that they used to show that they were born of the soil was the snake – a creature that has a very close association with the soil. Further, in mythology, the first king of Athens was said to have the form of a man from his head to his waist and that of a snake from the waist, down.

The connection between Athens (city of Wisdom) and a snake (symbol of Athens), is translated into our Masonic environment when we consider that our purpose is to become philosopher-kings, products of mythical Athens.

What better symbol for us to use to tie the apron *about our waist* than the figure of the snake?

Jerusalem and Delphi

Fundamental to our Ritual is the building of the Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem. If we look at mediaeval maps of Jerusalem, one thing is clear. To the mediaeval mind, Jerusalem was positioned at the centre of the earth.

To the ancient Greeks, Delphi was the centre of the earth.

Delphi is a town that is situated some 15 kilometres from Athens. In the town there was a stone known as the *omphalos* (or navel-stone) that marked the centre of the earth. The myth behind this was very simply explained. Zeus had sent two birds from the opposite ends of the earth and the spot where the birds crossed was marked by the omphalos. It was here, at the Temple of Delphi that the gods communicated with the Greeks. So, in the cultures of both the Greeks and the Hebrews, their holy city marked not only the centre of the world, but the site where the divine and humankind communicated.

The Symposium, the Festive Board and Xenia

One of the features of Greek social life was a get-together to which only males attended. At its most basic level, it was a banquet where wine would be drunk, food would be served, music (in the way of a lyre-player or singer) would be supplied, stories told and where philosophy and current affairs would be discussed. The meeting had a protocol of its own and was known as a *symposion*. We call it by its Latin equivalent, symposium. This basic level shares many resemblances to the banquet that takes place after a formal lodge meeting. It is

an opportunity to sit with other lodge members, eat and drink together, share table talk and enjoy the company of like-minded men. It also has a protocol of its own and is known by the term, Festive Board.

One of the most important features of the protocol is the extension of hospitality. A visitor to the lodge is treated with the highest extension of hospitality which mirrors the Greek concept of *xenia*. *Xenia* or "guest-friendship" is the convention of extending the highest level of hospitality to strangers. By convention, a guest is under the protection of Zeus.

A Parallel to the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem Degree

The Degree of the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem is an extension of the Third Degree in the same way that the Degree of the Mark Master Mason is an extension of the Second Degree. In South Australia and the Northern Territory, the First Three Degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason, together with the Mark Master Mason and Royal Arch Degrees are the only suite of Degrees recognised under its Constitution.

We have mentioned previously that in Plato's *Timaeus*, he explains the creation of the world by a Divine *Geometrician of the Universe* who uses five geometric shapes to create everything that makes of the composition of the cosmos. These geometric shapes are known as the "Platonic solids" and are discussed in the Address to the Second Chair: Symbolical Lecture.

Odes

In any Masonic ceremony, we do *not* sing hymns. The term that we use for any song within a Masonic context is an *ode*.

The very first odes were composed by the ancient Greeks with the foremost representative of its class being the poet, Pindar (c. 522-443 BCE).

As we have come to understand, in England and Germany during the early years of the 19th century, everything Greek was in vogue. Greek was the state of high fashion. One of the most artistically expressive forms of adapting Greek art to an English form is represented by the development of the English Ode, which took as its basis both the original Greek and its later Roman development.

The characteristic that is most peculiar about this transformation of Greek into English ode composition is the *timing*. The peak of its development coincided exactly with the period within which Emulation Ritual was being devised (1813-1823). Arguably the five most important English odes were all written in the year 1819 and they were *Ode to the West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley together with four odes by John Keats - *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on Melancholy*. *Ode to Psyche* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* are both rich in the flavour of - *ancient Greece*.

The Pillars at the Porch way of King Solomon's Temple

In the earliest evidence that we have of the beginnings of Freemasonry, we do not have any reference *oral traditions* to the two pillars at the porch way of King Solomon's Temple. There is a good reason for this. The earliest documents we have structure ritual about the Biblical Patriarch, *Noah* – not King Solomon. The ritual based about King Solomon is a much later variant. However, in place of the two pillars of King Solomon, ancient ritual referred to *another* two pillars. These pillars appear not in the bible, but in the writings of a Jewish priest who was born shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus the Nazarene. The priest's name was Josephus and he wrote about them in a commentary that he wrote on the Old

On Platonic Solids...

...and when reduced to their amount in right angles, will be found equal to the five regular Platonic bodies which represent the four elements and the sphere of the universe.

Address to the Second Chair: Symbolical Lecture, Ritual of the Supreme Degree of the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem.

Testament stories and related of Greek-speaking Jews living in Palestine in the First Century of the Christian era.

The pillars he refers to were designed to house all the knowledge of humankind in the event of either a natural catastrophe caused exclusively by two elements – fire and water. The knowledge that was inscribed on these pillars was effectively the liberal arts and sciences. Here was the concern – in the same way that we are disciplined to make back-up discs of our work in the fear that a virus or worm might destroy the images, documents, spreadsheets and other matters of personal interest to us, the ancients feared natural catastrophes which had historically wiped out not only knowledge itself but entire civilisations. This is something that we will revisit in the Postscript to this book. The “back-up disc” that they designed was two pillars. One was built of material that would withstand fire, while the other was built of material designed to withstand water – most specifically, *flood*. The cultural memory of the Great Flood is one that appears not only in Hebrew writings, but in Babylonian and of chief importance to us – ancient Greek writings.

In *Timaeus*, Plato relates a story concerning the destruction of knowledge by two natural elements. These are identical to the ones referred to by Josephus and which appear in the earliest documents relating to Freemasonry – *fire* and *water*. The story goes on to relate how the Greeks did not record their knowledge to preserve it for future generations, but it was the ancient Egyptians who preserved this knowledge in hieroglyphic characters on their temple walls.

In Emulation ritual, we have a very artistic allusion to this story from *Timaeus* and to Josephus' account of the two pillars. Here, the authors have adapted these two literary streams with the biblical story of King Solomon's construction of the Temple to allude to the presence of these two pillars housing the “constitutional rolls” of Freemasonry – another way of saying that are housed the laws and regulations of Freemasonry from destruction by physical forces.

Plato's link with memorising Ritual

While the prohibition against reading ritual during lodge meetings does not appear in the Constitution or Regulations of the Grand Lodge of South Australia and Northern Territory, this prohibition has existed from the earliest days by a convention which appears in our Lodge Manual which is a guide for how ritual is to be performed.

One of the most important skills that Plato emphasises that a philosopher ruler is to develop is the art of memory. We remember that in Greek mythology, *Mnemosyne* (or *Memory*) is the mother of the Nine Muses through whom the art of persuasive eloquence is demonstrated. Similarly, in a work known as *Phaedrus*, Plato pointedly addresses the importance of learning wisdom by interacting with others by the simple effort of *talking to them*, rather than writing it down. In the passage quoted, Plato was emphasising this simple point that appears to be the basis for the convention that is instilled in the *Manual of Lodge Workings* and that we practice in the Craft Degrees – that in a lodge meeting, no brother (other than the Director of Ceremonies), ought to have a copy of the Ritual in his possession.

As Plato reminded us:

You who are the father of writing (...the Egyptian God Thoth), have out of fondness for your offspring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of their own internal resources...And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality...because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom, they will be a burden to society.

Plato, Phaedrus, 275
Trans: Hamilton

So we'd better count forgetfulness as a factor which precludes a mind from being good enough at philosophy. We'd better make a good memory a prerequisite.

Republic, 486d Trans: Waterfield

And now for something completely different...

No looking back...

In the Third Degree of the beautiful *Schröder Ritual* – a German Ritual practiced by Lodge Concordia (under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of South Australia and Northern Territory), the Candidate is expressly *forbidden to look back* as he is conducted about the lodge prior to taking his Third Degree Obligation. This prohibition to look back appears meaningless without an explanation of its possible mythical basis.

Within the body of Greek mythology are three very meaningful expressions of the importance of not looking back.

The first appears in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus was very much in love with Eurydice. When she had hitched up her skirts and run barefoot through a field, she was bitten by a snake and tragically, died. Orpheus was so overcome with remorse that he made a descent into the Underworld to ask Hades to return her to life. Orpheus (like Demeter before him) had made this journey into the Underworld to plead for the return to life of a loved one. Hades was so overcome by Orpheus' grief that he allowed Eurydice to return on *one condition*:

Orpheus was to conduct her back to life, but during the journey upward through the Underworld, he was *not permitted to look back*.

All was going well until he was almost at the level of our earth-bound existence. He turned and looked behind to ensure that Eurydice was following him. The moment he did this, Eurydice was escorted back by spirits into the Underworld, never to return to Orpheus.

The second appears in the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha. These characters are the Greek version of Noah and his wife. When the Great Flood had subsided and all of humankind (other than Deucalion and Pyrrha) had perished, they each picked up lumps of clay and *without looking back* they threw these lumps of clay over their shoulders. Deucalion's lumps of clay transformed into men while Pyrrha's transformed into women. This is the way that human life recommenced after the Great Flood.

In Greek mythology there is also the myth of the Three Fates. These Three Fates were the goddesses who determined our individual destinies. Their names were Clotho, Lacheis and Atropos. Clotho spun the thread of our lives, Lacheis measured its length and Atropos was the goddess whose task was to cut the thread of our lives. The intriguing thing about Atropos is that her name means *no turning back*.

In *Republic* (617c-617e), Plato refers to the Three Fates in his own myth. Here, the Fates accompany the Sirens in singing. Lacheis sings of the Past, Clotho sings of the Present and Atropos sings of the Future. (Dickens made good use in adapting this myth to his short story of *A Christmas Carol*).

However, in the standard myth, the one constant is the reference to life and death so it is appropriate to include this in the ritual of the Third Degree when we are faced with the certainty that we will be unable to escape death.

At some defined moment in time, Atropos will cut the thread of *your life* as well as *mine*.