

### Chapter 3: The Greek Connection: 19<sup>th</sup> Century England

It is now a well established fact that in Europe, but in most particular – England and Germany, a cultural phenomenon known as *philhellenism* took hold in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and extended for more than a hundred years throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Philhellenism is a term academics use in describing a “love of all things Greek”.

The first evidence of philhellenism was in the field of literature.

We are accustomed to the thought of walking into a book store and buying translations of works of literature from other languages. It is a commonplace of modern life. However, in the early years of the 1700's, this was far from a commonplace. If you or I wanted to read Caesar's *Commentaries*, Livy's *Histories* or Xenophon's *Anabasis*, we had to be proficient in Latin or Greek. We would buy or loan a book containing the original text and reading it, translate it for ourselves. Academics such as Dr James Anderson would have very well acquainted with the works of Plato and his contemporaries in the original Greek.

The first notable translation of a Greek text into English was that of Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*. It was translated by William Whiston (1667-1752) and published in 1732 in London. The *Antiquities* is a significant document from a Freemasonic perspective. The date of its publication is squarely in the time of the development of the Third Degree and more conspicuously – between the first and second editions of Anderson's *Constitutions* (1723 and 1738) – both significant works in the Freemasonic canon of literature (and something to which we will return to discuss shortly).

One other significant matter - there are aspects of our Ritual which to the un-trained eye appear to be taken from the sacred scriptures, however – there is no doubt that they were actually derived from the *Antiquities*. One such example is that of the *winding staircase* found in the Second Degree. While no such staircase exists in any account of the *Books of Kings* or *Chronicles*, reference to a staircase that wound around from the ground floor to the third level of the Temple appears in *Antiquities*. It was positioned between the outer and inner walls of the Temple.

The first person to translate the complete body of Plato and Aristotle's writings into English was Thomas Taylor (1758-1835). Taylor was the son of a Dissenting minister who held hopes that he would follow in his father's footsteps. While Taylor's career did not follow his father's, Taylor did take an interest in the study of ancient languages – particularly Greek.

The suite of his Greek translations is vast and by the year 1800, he had translated not only the complete works of Aristotle, but also the complete works of Plato and in most particular – *Republic*. For the first time in history, men and women who did not read Greek could read *Republic* in an English translation. All of a sudden, the mystery and intrigue of the original Greek classics was available for anyone to read in reasonably simple English.

This opened a brand new dimension of philosophies, ideas, theories, and histories that had only been available to an elite group of academics. The scope of Greek material which was now available in English translation (philosophy, theology, history, poetry, drama and mythology) suggested strongly that the ancient Greeks were very much *like you and I*. The problems that they faced, the questions that they asked about life and death – these were no different to the questions that we ask today.

Within the space of less than 10 years following *Republic's* first publication, the interest in all things Greek, developed into other fields. The first expression outside of literature was art.

Thomas Bruce, the Seventh Earl of Elgin (1766-1841), swept by the waves of the Greek fad and taking advantage of tensions between the Greeks and Turks at the time, persuaded Athenian officials to permit him to take down the friezes that adorned the Parthenon (both inside and outside) and had them cut, crated and shipped to England. (He had persuaded them that this would be the best of all possible avenues to preserve the art in the event of a Turkish invasion). The measure was meant only to be temporary, but remained in England for the past 200 years despite protests from the Greek Government demanding their return.

The Greek film actress Melina Mercouri (1920-1994) actively advocated for the return of these friezes which are most commonly referred to nowadays as the Elgin Marbles.

When Lord Elgin originally removed the friezes, they were rich in colour. Characters and animals sculptured into the stone had garments of diverse colours even to the detail of skin tones. While in storage with the British Museum, these colours were methodically removed using chemicals and brushes – a practice that ended just months before the Second World War. What now remains of the friezes – an austere, *stone white* – is an English interpretation of what they believed Athenian art *ought to have looked like*.

While on display at the British Museum, these works of art attracted a newer generation to ancient Greek studies.

It was also during these early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that English poetry experimented with a new interpretation of the ancient Greek poetic style known as the *ode*. The chief exponents of this new poetic form known as the *English Ode* were Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. In the chapter titled *Greek Mythology and History: Its Relationship to Masonic Ritual*, specific attention is paid to how Emulation Ritual adapted the Greek ode. The intriguing thing to note for the time being, is that the timing of the composition of Emulation ritual coincided with the apex of the development of the English ode. The timing occurred with *exact precision*.

Related to these poets was the romantic figure of Lord Byron (1788-1824). He was so caught up in the phenomenon of *philhellenism* that he fought alongside the Greeks against the Turks during the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829). While preparing for an attack against the Turkish-held fortress of Lepanto, he contracted an illness and subsequently died a few days later. His heart was buried under a tree in the Greek town of Messolonghi and his remains were preserved and returned for burial in England. British participation in the Greek War of Independence was seen in very classical terms as the continued struggle of the ancient Greeks against their Turkish oppressors – oppressors they had fought against since the days of the Persian Wars.

Lord Byron was also scathing in his opposition to Elgin's "vandalism" of the Parthenon friezes, in his poem – *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

### **The Importance of Plato's Republic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century British class structure...**

The study of Greek ...had the advantage of having no useful function...so it served the purposes of continuing the isolation of an upper class, whose members did not have to earn a living from the rest of the community who did.

*Charles Freeman, The Greek Achievement, (2000), pp 9-10.*

It is impossible to disentangle the institution of Greek studies in the English public schools from the determination to maintain the British class system. The Greeks provided, through Plato's *Republic*, for instance, a model for a leisured ruling class whose right to rule depended on a specialized education denied to the majority who were not considered worthy of it.

*Charles Freeman, The Greek Achievement, (2000), pg 10*

## The Influence of Plato's Republic on Freemasonry and Masonic Ritual.

By the 1830's within the English public school system, Greek became the fashionable language to study. It became fashionable because the study of this language became an important *political tool* to ensure that in a world that was undergoing so many changes as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the English class system would survive *without change*.

This *philhellenic* phenomenon was not just confined to England. It also featured in very broad and passionate terms in Germany. By the 1870's at a site called Hilarik in Turkey, a German entrepreneur called Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) fulfilled a life-long ambition – to discover the actual site of the city that had been peopled by Homer's heroes – Helen, Paris, Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, Menelaus and Priam....the city of *Troy*.

And so it was in this very unique cultural milieu (that extended for the better part of 100 years), that English Freemasonry (reflecting the social, intellectual, historic and philosophic trends of the time), came to adopt the classical Greek model proposed by Plato as the definitive platform for its new, dynamic and innovative ritual.

*Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that  
looks on thee,*

*Nor feels as lovers o'er the  
dust they lov'd ;*

*Dull is the eye that will not  
weep to see*

*Thy walls defac'd, thy  
mouldering shrines remov'd*

*By British hands, which it  
had best behov'd*

*To guard those relics ne'er  
to be restor'd.*

*Curst be the hour when  
from their isle they rov'd,*

*And once again thy  
hopeless bosom gor'd,*

*And snatch'd thy shrinking  
Gods to northern climes abhorr'd.*

*Lord Byron, extract from Childe  
Harold's Pilgrimage (1812-1818)*