

## FREEMASONRY AND THE RITES OF MITHRAS

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In consideration of the fact that the literature of Freemasonry is already rife with myriad fanciful theories as to the potential origins and tributaries to our eminent Fraternity, it is not the objective of the present work to add to the muddle. It is the assertion of the author, however, that a closer look at the Rites of *Mithras* may offer an intriguing insight into at least one, perhaps proto-Masonic, stream of influence.

Mithraism, having its origins in 4th Century BCE Persian Zoroastrianism, was an initiatory Grade system, the knowledge of which comes to us mainly due to the religion's prestigious station as the preferred cult of the Roman Legions.

Mithraic initiates were sometimes referred to as *Syndexioi*, or "fellows of the grip" and it is noted that admission into the community was completed with a handshake with the *Pater* (comparable to the Worshipful Master of the Masonic Lodge), just as *Mithras* and the *Sol Invictus* were represented as doing in a common motif found in many of the extant Mithraic bas-reliefs. This is, of course, Masonically significant particularly when we consider the significance of this grip vis-à-vis the Mithraic Grade of *Leo*, or Lion.

Like the Masonic Lodge, the Mithraic grotto was known to be a microcosmic representation of the universe and, similarly, there are many signs and symbols of a generally astrological character. "The ceiling of the *Caesarea Maritima Mithraeum* retains traces of blue paint, which may mean the ceiling was painted to depict the sky and the stars." [Hopfe, Lewis M., "*Archaeological indications on the origins of Roman Mithraism*" (1994), pg.154] The Mithraic Grade structure was often represented by a seven-runged ladder which also corresponded to the seven classical planets (those visible to the ancients in the absence of telescopic aids - Sol, Luna, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus & Saturn) and the seven alchemical metals (Gold, Silver, Iron, Mercury, Tin, Copper & Lead). This, of course, finds a symbolic parallel in the Masonic Lodge in the representation of Jacob's Ladder and, to a lesser extent, in the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium* which comprise the seven liberal arts and sciences.

The first *Anno Lucis* of Freemasonry (i.e. 4000 BCE), considered in regard to axial precession, would have occurred in proximity to the dawn of the Taurian Age, which spanned from approximately 4000 to 2000 BCE, when the vernal equinox occurred in the vicinity of the constellation Taurus. Mithraism is laden with Taurian imagery, as evidenced in nearly every extant grotto, and it is suggested that the *Tauroctony* - a depiction of *Mithras*, rendered here as a solar anthropomorphism, surmounting and slaying a bull - is often interpreted to be a symbolic representation of the vernal equinox occurring in the zodiacal house of Taurus, thus harkening back to the very same period as that of the Masonic *Anno Lucis*.

In the *Tauroctony*, embordering the central figuration of *Mithras* and the Taurian Bull, there are depictions of the torchbearers *Cautes* and *Cautopates*. These characters, cross-legged and dressed in distinctly Persian garb, have been interpreted as representations of the solstices, as have the Saints John via the two parallel, perpendicular lines - one ascribed with a letter B, denoting John the Baptist, and the other with a letter E, for John the Evangelist - in the Masonic "Point Within A Circle" diagram.

The Mithraic Grade of *Miles* is said to have consisted of the performance of a solar allegory represented in a ritual drama. This allegorically solar interpretation has also been applied, very compellingly, to the *Hiramic Tragedy* in Masonic Ritual. [see: Brown, Robert H., "*Stellar Theology & Masonic Astronomy*" (1882)] "[The] Procession of the Sun-Runner [initiatory ritual] features the *Heliodromus*, escorted by two figures representing *Cautes* and *Cautopates* and preceded by an initiate of the Grade *Miles* leading a ritual enactment of the solar journey around the *Mithraeum*, which was intended to represent the cosmos." [Martin, Luther H., "*Ritual Competence and Mithraic Ritual*" (2004), pg. 257]

The *Leontocephaline*, a common figure also represented in Mithraic bas-relief, is often depicted with two crossed keys, similar to the Jewel of the Treasurer of the Masonic Lodge. Notably, this zoomorphic representation of the *Leo* Grade often included a hammer and tongs at his feet. These instruments, particularly in the Roman Empire, were commonly associated with the god Vulcan who, through syncretization, was also associated with Hephaestus in the Grecian pantheon and Tubal-cain in the Abrahamic canon.

Fragments of an obligation and catechism, presumably extracted from the Mithraic Grade of *Leo*, have been discovered. The catechism is strikingly similar in form to those of the Masonic Degrees, replete with instructional precepts composed in fixed question-and-answer form. In one portion of the fragment, the initiator (presumably, the *Heliodromus*) asks, "How did you become a *Leo*?" to which the initiate replies, "By the [order] of the *Pater*". [see: Third Century *Oxyrhynchus* papyrus which was published by Bartoletti as n. 1162 in *Papiri, Greci e Latini*]

There was also an oath, or Obligation, associated with each of the seven Grade conferrals. "Mithraic initiates were required to swear an oath of secrecy and dedication, and some Grade rituals involved the recital of a catechism, wherein the initiate was asked a series of questions pertaining to the initiation symbolism and had to reply with specific answers." [Geden, A.S., "*Select Passages Illustrating Mithraism*" (1925), pg. 51]

It even appears as though the Mithraic initiates were permitted to travel to, and affiliate with, *Mithraea* other than that in which they were initiated - much like the privileges modern Masons enjoy. "Each *Mithraeum* had its own officers and functionaries [and] there was no central supervisory authority [...] It is known that initiates could transfer with their Grades from one *Mithraeum* to another." [Clauss, M., "*The Roman cult of Mithras*" (2000), pg.139]

This is, by no means, an exhaustive account of the many correlations that illuminate the commonalities which culturally unite Freemasonry and Roman Mithraism, but it is a sufficient beginning for our thoughtful consideration in the ever-expanding study of the possible tributaries to our ancient and honorable Fraternity.

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