The Chain of Transmission
The Dionysian Architects

In trying to ascertain the origins of Sacred Geometry and develop a realistic historical chronology, a consideration of the work and traditions of those organizations of craftsmen who employed geometry in the execution of their architectural masterpieces is indispensable. For it is in those great and renowned edifices of history that we find the most prominent and prolific use of Sacred Geometry: The Great Pyramid of Khufu, Stonehenge, King Solomon’s Temple, The Parthenon, Angkor Wat, The Temples of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan, Chartres Cathedral, Glastonbury Abbey, Newark Monumental Earthworks in Ohio, and on and on our list could go. As we become familiar with the design principles at work in all of these structures we find that not only is there a common Sacred Geometry at use, but consistently we find elements of astronomy, geodesy, metrology, geomancy and symbolism incorporated into a coherent system of spiritual architecture, whose specificity contradicts the likelihood of independent development.

This implies the existence of an Order, an organized body of individuals with a common modus operandi. Of course, the existence of such an Order, on the global scale of activity implied by the widespread geographical range of these sacred buildings, across the span of millennia, and with the degree of scientific sophistication implied by the aforementioned design criteria, is not recognized within prevailing academic models of ancient history. History does, however, recognize the existence of orders of builders of a more limited geographic and temporal extent.

It is to one of these that we will now turn our attention.

In the writings of the Greek geographer Strabo (ca. 64 BC – 24 AD) and the Roman historian Eusebius (ca 260 – 340 AD) we find references to a guild of architect/builders designated by the title Dionysian Artificers. Strabo wrote: “Lebedos was the seat and assembly of the Dionysian Artificers who inhabit Ionia to the Hellespont; there they had annually their solemn meetings and festivals in honor of Bacchus.” Strabo goes on to trace their presence in Syria, Persia and India. Eusebius describes them as a secret society with their own signs, tokens and means of recognition and their symbolism was largely derived from the building arts. They first appear in Phoenicia and Asia Minor at least half a century before the building of King Solomon’s Temple, about 31 centuries ago.

Early 19th century Masonic author and scholar Hippolyto Joseph Da Costa penned a work entitled History of the Dionysian Artificers (1820) where he describes the existence of an organized association of builders dating back to at least a millennium BC, whose roots extended deep into the ancient Mystery Religions, and whose presence could be discerned wending its way through history for a thousand years. He writes:

“In this point of view it must be considered an association, traced to the most remote antiquity, and preserved through numberless vicissitudes, yet retaining the original marks of its foundation, scope and tenets.
It appears, that, at a very early period, some contemplative men were desirous of deducting from the observation of nature, moral rules for the conduct of mankind. Astronomy was the science selected for this purpose; architecture was afterwards called in aid of this system; and its followers formed a society or sect... The continuity of this system will be found sometimes broken, a natural effect of conflicting theories, of the alteration of manners, and of change of circumstances, but it will make its appearances in different periods, and the same truth will be seen constantly.”

It should be mentioned that the author, Joseph Da Costa, a citizen of Portugal, was made a Freemason in the city of Philadelphia, USA in the late 18th century. After a journey to England and subsequent return to Portugal in July of 1802, he was arrested by the Holy Inquisition, conveyed in chains to a secret prison and confined to a damp, solitary dungeon for a period of three years for the “crime” of being a Freemason. He was only let out of his cell to be interrogated for extended periods by the “imperial Magistrates” who tried to pressure him into confessing to innumerable crimes he had not committed as well as implicating Masonic confederates in various forms of malfeasance. With the first demand he simply refused to admit that he was guilty of crime, for at that time in Portugal, there was no law against being a Freemason. With the second demand he was unable to comply because he had never been an active Freemason in Portugal and knew no Masons locally. After much mistreatment and the near loss of his life resulting from the harsh conditions of his confinement, Da Costa was eventually rescued by English Brethren who were able to bring political pressure to bear to effect his release “under the protection of the British flag.”

To the benefit of posterity Da Costa did not succumb to his ill-treatment at the hands of the ecclesiastical authorizes, with the complicity of corrupt Lisbon police, enabling him to perform exhaustive research and to author a valuable work on the history of the ancient building societies. In a work published in 1820 he writes:

“This society was called the Dionysian Artificers, as Bacchus was supposed to be the inventor of building theaters; and they performed the Dionysian festivities. From this period, the Science of Astronomy which had given rise to the Dionysian rites, became connected with types taken from the art of building. The Ionian societies... extended their moral views, in conjunction with the art of building, to many useful purposes, and to the practice of acts of benevolence. They had significant wordsk to distinguish their members; and for the same purpose they used emblems taken from the art of building.

—Joseph Da Costa, The Dionysian Artificers

It is important to note the fusion of astronomy and architecture referenced by Da Costa, and the essential role astronomy played in the sacred rites of Dionysus. Astronomy is a constant factor in the study of Sacred Geometry as it is the basis for measuring the temporal periodicities in which the ratios, numbers and proportions of Sacred Geometry prominently manifest themselves.

The rites and ceremonies of most ancient sacred societies are oriented around and based upon the rhythms of nature, the succession of the seasons and the great astronomical cycles
that govern them. That the rites and ceremonies of the Artificers and the Dionysian Mystery religion were intimately related there can be little doubt. What remains in doubt is the exact nature of this relationship. Derived directly from the experience of nature undergoing the death and decay of winter followed by the rebirth of spring, the idea of death and resurrection was integral to both systems, and this a legacy of traditions inherited from Egypt going back to the rites of Osiris. In the Egyptian myth Osiris is murdered by Set/Typhon, his body dismembered and the pieces scattered into the Nile River. His sister and consort Isis eventually retrieves the pieces of Osiris and through certain magical rites is able to restore him to life. That the rites of Osiris embody an astronomical allegory is now virtually indisputable. In the Dionysian myth and in the mysteries as practiced throughout Asia Minor, Dionysus is slain by the Titans who rip him into pieces, evoking the dismemberment of Osiris. Eventually he is restored to life by Rhea, wife of Uranus and mother of Zeus. This solidified the association of Dionysis with resurrection after death. Since Dionysus was a nature god, his mysteries were practiced in the forests and open air. Again, his death and resurrection were seen as symbolical of the death of nature and vegetation during the winter months and their subsequent revival with the coming of spring. Hence, his rites were observed in the spring about the time the leaves returned to the vines, as Dionysus was a god of the vine as well as the inebriation that went along with it. There is considerably more depth which we could explore into the mysteries of Dionysus, but for now it will suffice to say that as they evolved they eventually took the form of elaborate theatrical productions, which in turn required the construction of theatres for the performance of the Mystery plays. Out of this necessity arose an association of builders more than a thousand years before the Common Era, who were also, apparently, imbued with the spiritual principles of the ancient mystery schools. With time and experience the role of the Dionysian builders evolved and they were soon building a variety of structures. John Robison, a late 19th century Masonic defector who nonetheless provided extensive historical investigations, wrote in 1797 regarding the Dionysiac organization:

“... we know that ‘the Dionysiacs of Asia Minor were undoubtedly an association of architects and engineers, who had the exclusive privilege of building temples, stadia, and theatres, under the mysterious tutelage of Bacchus, and were distinguished from the uninitiated or profane inhabitants by the science which they possessed, and by many private signs and tokens by which they recognized each other.”

Apparently, Robison, a devout Christian was put off by what he perceived to be the presence of Pagan elements within the rituals of Freemasonry, which presence would be a natural consequence if the modern incarnation of Freemasonry could actually trace its pedigree back 3000 years. As evidence accumulates the gaps between those builders of 3000 years ago and historically modern Freemasonry, which appeared on the historical stage during the early 18th century, diminishes substantially. However, it is still not possible to demonstrate an unbroken chain from that time to this, and it probably never will be possible to establish unambiguous historical links tying the various fraternities, lodges, guilds and orders of initiated builders into a coherent stream of transmission.

In reference to Robison’s quote, note that the god Bacchus is the Roman counterpart of the Greek Dionysus, just as Jupiter is the Roman counterpart of the Greek Zeus. This is important in
understanding the transmission of the traditions of sacred architecture and geometry. As the Greek god Dionysus evolved into the Roman Bacchus, the Dionysian Artificers evolved into the *Roman Collegium*, a fraternity of Builders employed in Rome and throughout Italy for precisely the same purposes as the Dionysiac Architects were in Greece and surrounding areas. Robison makes mention of “the science which they possessed” which of course refers to the knowledge of astronomy and geometry which formed the working basis of all the fraternities of Mystic Architects throughout history.

A major evolutionary episode in the history of an organized fraternity of initiated builders occurred with the construction of the famed and legendary King Solomon’s Temple. In the 1908 edition of the *Illustrated History and Cyclopedia of Freemasonry* the entry for Dionysian Architects emphasizes their link to the cult of Bacchus and their importance as a link in the chain of transmission form ancient times to the present:

> “Priests of Bacchus, who is also named Dionysus. Becoming skilled in the science of architecture they founded the order of Sidonian Builders, a considerable period before the time of David, King of Israel. From this society—which build the Temple of Solomon—sprung the Roman Colleges of Architects, and these, in their turn, gave birth to the building corporations of the middle ages, from which the present order of Freemasonry is derived. Thus the society of Dionysian Builders is the connecting link between Modern Masonry and the Ancient Mysteries.” pp. 119 – 120

The story of the building of King Solomon’s Temple is recounted in the Hebrew Bible, primarily in the Book of Samuel and the Book of Kings and to a lesser extent in the Book of Chronicles. The Temple of Solomon as a symbol also serves as one of the cornerstones of the Masonic tradition. Many Masonic scholars, as evidenced by the previous quote, believe that the origins of the modern order go back to that eventful undertaking. It is acknowledged by historians that the ancient Hebrews were primarily a pastoral people, so when the decree came from on high to build a temple to the Lord, Solomon turned to King Hiram of Tyre, ruler of the Phoenicians, for it was in his domain that the Dionysian Architects had established a base for their far-flung operations. King Hiram provided the body of skilled builders and artisans for King Solomon’s ambitious project. These events transpired about the mid-10th century BCE. That the Dionysian Artificers would have been the preferred organization for an undertaking of this magnitude is rendered explicit by the words of Manly Palmer Hall in *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*. He writes:

> “The most celebrated of the ancient fraternities of artisans was that of the Dionysiac Architects. This organization was composed exclusively of initiates of the Bacchus-Dionysos cult and was peculiarly consecrated to the science of building and the art of decoration. Acclaimed as being the custodians of a secret and sacred knowledge of architectonics, its members were entrusted with the design and erection of public buildings and monuments. The superlative excellence of their handiwork elevated the members of the guild to a position of surpassing dignity; they were regarded as the master craftsmen of the earth . . . So carefully did the Dionysiac Architects safeguard the
secrets of their craft that only fragmentary records exist of their esoteric teachings.” pp. 568 – 569

We can now state with confidence that a major portion of the “secrets of their craft” and their “esoteric teachings” had largely to do with the sciences of Astronomy and Sacred Geometry and that King Solomons Temple, like all sacred structures of antiquity, served as a repository of this knowledge.