

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.

And on the pedestal these words appear:

"My name is OZYMANDIAS, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

– Shelley –

Lessons from Antiquity: Ozymandias and Freemasonry

By Steven E. Lowe, June 2016

Written in 1817 by Percy Shelley, as friendly competition with his friend and fellow poet, Horace Smith, "Ozymandias" can be interpreted as a cautionary tale from antiquity for all mankind but in particular for portions of our venerable institution (Cliff, 2016). It is from this viewpoint that we should observe and contemplate the words contained therein and attempt to make some inferences towards the present state of our individual lodges and in some small way, Freemasonry in general. A better understanding of these similarities may challenge some of our traditional views and longstanding assumptions, which tend to pervade our planning and impede our preparedness for the future of our fraternity.

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By Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Looking back on his journey, our “traveller” explains that he has seen the vestiges of a colossal monument, likely erected to a ruler of some renown. A tribute created by a great civilization or society, one capable of creating and supporting such wonderful works, whether voluntary or involuntarily. Unfortunately, the ravages of time have not been kind to the structure and all that remains is a pair of legs sticking out from the desert sand. Next to the forlorn limbs lies a half buried face, on which the storyteller describes that the sculptor has placed a smirk of arrogance upon its lips. On the base these words were written, “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” But the rest of the greatness is all gone. Nothing remains but sand and barren land.

It has been suggested that Shelley and Smith created their sonnets as entertainment and competition with each other “in the wake of Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798” and that “Ozymandias” was actually a Greek reference to the Pharaoh “Ramses II” (Mikics, 2016). As we know from history, the great works of the Egyptian Pharaoh’s were lost to time for thousands of years until recently discovered in more modern eras. That which was thought to be indestructible and never-ending was eventually lost to history. Oh, how time ravages the stupendous works of man.

But how do we apply this to Freemasonry and our lodges? Consider how we venerate our mysteries and how we celebrate, even boast, at the hundreds of years of our existence as a fraternity. We reminisce with fondness at the golden era of our times and the millions of members we once enjoyed. But gone are the days when we erected massive temples with which to conduct our business; ever more rapidly we sell off our buildings and we routinely consolidate our lodges as our membership numbers dwindle over time.

According to the poem, Ozymandias believed he was invincible, without comparison, and that no other ruler could match his greatness. Perhaps we too suffer from our own historical greatness. Can you name some things that might demonstrate your lodges’ similarity to Ozymandias?

- The lodge building itself...What is the condition of your lodge? Wood paneling, old carpet, faded or chipped paint, decades out of style?
- Masonic Temples across the nation, once thought indispensable, sold or demolished?
- Historical artifacts hanging in the lodges, mildewed, tossed in a back room full of housekeeping items or scattered in a closet amongst landscaping and paint supplies?

- Photos of past members with no historical importance conveyed to new members, no adoration or mention other than to state that they were once where we now stand?
- Plaques of past achievements or names of honored members for contributions long forgotten, no mention of the fellowship or the efforts required in achieving them?
- What is the legacy that you're leaving with these items or a building in disrepair?
- Will a fellow traveler visit this location in future and see your monuments lying in the shifting sands?

Our traveler denotes the smirk upon the lips of Ozymandias, suggesting the artist was somewhat mocking in his design. Still, the artist's heart was "fed" because of the opportunity to create such a structure; therefore, the artist and Ozymandias are inevitably linked by their need for one another to demonstrate their own significance. Similarly, we are the new artists, our hearts being fed by the mystique of being Masons. There is the allure of being part of something bigger than ourselves, of making a difference in the lives of others, of making a difference in our communities...the list of reasons we sought to become Masons is likely endless and obviously very personal.

Yet, there are those of us that see the ritual work as unimportant, as something outdated or to be mocked or derided as trivial and inconsequential. The practice of which is often a means to an end and something that we do in order to fulfill our obligation to inspection season. Snickers and guffaws may accompany our blunders and imperfections, errors are excused and ignored or dismissed with such regularity that pursuit of perfection is derided as fruitless or simply unnecessary. But yet we use these same rituals, these same tenants, as the basis for what makes us a great fraternity, what makes us better than we were before we entered. We hold these items up with such reverence when we discuss with new members what it means to be a Mason. It's possible that we only mock ourselves with such apathy.

Ozymandias tells us that we should despair. We can never be as great as he, yet here we are, standing on the precipice of time, traveling on the exact same path as Ozymandias. BUT! That you are thinking about it already makes you different than Ozymandias. That you will consider what it is that needs to be done **and you take action** against complacency **WILL** protect you and our fraternity from the desert sands.

Name some things that can be done to ensure that when you're gone, the fraternity lives on and is healthy in its existence:

- Endowment memberships
- Lodge maintenance, upkeep, and updating to keep pace with changing times
- Community involvement and visibility (ADVERTISE, ADVERTISE, ADVERTISE both in media outlets and by the appearance of your building – would you hire someone who was wearing a suit from 1965? Would you pursue involvement in a building that looks like was last updated during the Johnson Administration? Who was L.B.J, you ask? Exactly! Your new members cannot relate to an old decaying building and you shouldn't ask them to settle for it.
- Ritual practice and fellowcraft teams – pride in performance enhances fellowship and lodge pride. Raise the bar and expectations but do so in a manner that is empowering to your members – Teach, don't preach.
- Apply Freemasonry to daily living. Share stories of how the fraternity or tenants therein have impacted your life and how you apply the knowledge you have gained.
- Historical relevance – know your past, celebrate your past, emulate the best qualities of past members, events, activities, and build on these in the future. If you were there – write it down and describe what it means to you. This is the legacy of our involvement.
- Don't assume that because your lodge has existed for nearly 200 years that it will be there in five years. Without leadership, active members, a legacy of financial security, community acknowledgement and involvement, modernization of your surroundings and a steady influx of new members...your monuments will be left standing in the sand and you will merely be a story told to future generations.

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