LETTERS

Please direct all correspondence to: Ian Firla, Robert Graves Trust, St John's College, Oxford, OX1 3JP or via email to graves@xserver.sjc.ox.ac.uk. We welcome all questions and comments, responses to articles, reviews and letters as well as points of information.

received via email:

The White Goddess Sigil

I have not seen the original letter by Harmut Buecher which appeared in *Gravesiana* 2.1, asking for information about the White Goddess Sigil: this analysis is a response to the briefer request for information posted to the Robert Graves discussion list http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/robert-graves/ made by Ian Firla on the 18th of May 1999.

In the Introduction to *The Greek Myths*, Graves outlines a basic procedure for his interpretation of Greek myth. This procedure is critically important for the understanding of the White Goddess sigil:

> True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like. (*Greek Myths*, vol 1, 12)

This approach to myth draws its inspiration and method particularly from the classical anthropologist Jane Harrison, whose work was at its high tide while Graves was a student at Oxford. She does not appear in the indexes of either *The White Goddess* or *The Greek Myths*, but is acknowledged at various points in both works.

Graves most fully discusses the source material for the sigil in Ch.13, of *The White Goddess*, 'Palamedes and the Cranes'. Graves draws on Hyginus' *Fables*, where (in fable 277) apparently contradictory information is given about the 'origin' of the alphabet. Graves tells us that the fable relates: "that the Fates invented the seven letters:

Alpha, [Omicron], Upsilon, Eta, Iota, Beta, and Tau. Or alternatively, that Mercury [i.e., Hermes] invented them after watching the flight of cranes 'which make letters as they fly,'" and also: "that Palamedes, son of Nauplius, invented eleven others" (*White Goddess*, 224-5). Two other individuals are credited with the creation of further letters in this fable, but Cadmus the Phoenician, surprisingly, is not mentioned at all. As Graves points out, he is "usually credited with the invention of the Greek alphabet." Graves acknowledges along the way that the characters themselves "are indisputably borrowed from the Phoenician alphabet' to confirm that his case does not fly in the face of the archaeological record, however strange his argument may seem to be.

Graves fills out the mythical details:

> Palamedes, son of Nauplius... is credited by Philostratus the Lemnian, and by the Scholiast on Euripides's *Orestes*, with the invention not only of the alphabet, but also of lighthouses, measures, scales, the disc, and the 'art of posting sentinels'. He took part in the Trojan War as an ally of the Greeks and at his death was granted a hero-shrine on the Mysian Coast of Asia Minor opposite Lesbos. (225)

The Fates he identifies as "a divided form of the Triple Goddess, and in Greek Legend [they] appear also as the Three Grey Ones and the Three Muses" (225).

Graves argues that Palamedes "ruled over the Mysians, who were of Cretan stock," and that "it was well known to the ancients, as it is to us [referring here to the discovery by Chadwick and Ventris in 1953 that the Linear B script represents an early form of the Greek language], that all the inventions credited to Palamedes originated in Crete" (225). Later he says that, according to Hyginus, a version of the Greek alphabet was taken by Mercury into Egypt, and then brought back to Greece by Cadmus. After that the letters were taken by Evander the Arcadian into Italy where, Graves writes, "his mother Carmenta (the muse) adapted them to the Latin alphabet of fifteen letters" (227). Graves also writes that Hyginus (head of the Palatine

Library in the reign of Augustus) is supported by Pliny who wrote, in his *Natural History*, that "the first Latin alphabet was a Pelasgian one". This is how Graves brings Palamedes and Carmenta, mythical figures belonging to different cultures, together in the same image.

Graves then suggests that the story of the invention of the pre-Cadmean alphabet is concealed in the "confusingly iconotropic myth of Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa". He outlines the structure of the myth as follows:

> Perseus was sent to cut off the head of the snaky-locked Gorgon Medusa, a rival of the Goddess Athene, whose baleful look turned men into stone; and that he could not accomplish the task until he had gone to the three Graeae, 'Grey Ones', the three old sisters of the Gorgons who had only one eye and one tooth between them, and by stealing eye and tooth had blackmailed them into telling him where the grove of the Three Nymphs was to be found. From the three Nymphs he then obtained winged sandals like those of Hermes, a bag to put the Gorgon's head into, and a helmet of invisibility. Hermes also kindly gave him a sickle; and Athene gave him a mirror and showed him a picture of Medusa so that he would recognise her. He threw the tooth of the three Grey Ones, and some say the eye also, into Lake Triton, to break their power, and flew on to Tartessus where the Gorgons lived in a grove on the borders of the ocean; there he cut off the sleeping Medusa's head with the sickle, first looking into the mirror so that the petrifying charm should be broken, thrust the head into his bag, and flew home pursued by other Gorgons. (229)

Graves explains that, for his purposes,

> The Three Nymphs must be understood as the Three Graces, that is to say, the Triple Love-goddess. The Graeae were also known as the Phorcides, which means the

> daughters of Phorcus, or Orcus, and according to the Scholiast on Aeschylus had the form of swans - which is probably an error for cranes, due to a misreading of a sacred picture, since cranes and swans, equally sacred birds, are alike in flying in V-formation. They were in fact the Three Fates. (229)

The Medusa is also described as a daughter of Phorcus by Pausanias, a detail of which Graves was aware (*Greek Myths*, 73).

Graves then breaks up the myth into a sequence of images, in the manner he suggests in his introduction to *The Greek Myths*. The first of these images is the basis for the White Goddess sigil: "... a naked young man cautiously approaching three shrouded women of whom the central one presents him with an eye and a tooth; the other two point upwards to three cranes flying in a V-formation from right to left" (230).

In his analysis of the myth of the Lamia, Graves suggests that her removable eyes "are perhaps deduced from a picture of the goddess about to bestow mystic sight on a hero by proffering him an eye" (*Greek Myths*, vol 1, 205). It is likely that the presence of the pentagram in the picture signifies the special kind of insight granted to the hero Palamedes.

There are however some details left over: the three spirals, and the serpent, for which we should try to account.

The coils of thread on which Palamedes stands can be easily guessed by those familiar with Greek mythology: they represent the threads governed by the Moerae, or the Three Fates: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. The Fates are identified by Graves as the three aspects of the Goddess. In The *Greek Myths* he writes: "Moerae means 'a share' or 'a phase', and the moon has three phases and three persons: the new, the Maiden-goddess of the spring, the first period of the year; the full moon, the Nymph-goddess of the summer, the second period; and the old moon, the Crone-goddess of autumn, the last period" (48-9).

Which leaves the serpent unaccounted. Given the nature of the subject we should not expect there to be a single viable explanation. In *The Greek Myths*, in the section on the myth of Perseus, Graves writes:

> Perseus ... turned eastward and flew across the Libyan desert, Hermes helping him to carry the weighty head. By the way he dropped the Graeae's eye and tooth into Lake Triton; and some drops of Gorgon blood fell on the desert sand, where they bred a swarm of venomous serpents, one of which later killed Mopsus the Argonaut. (239)

Hermes of course is credited elsewhere (and later) with many of the inventions of Palamedes. He is also the bearer of the '*kerykeion*', or '*caduceus*': the staff surmounted by opposed, interweaving snakes. But Graves, in line for once with the academy of the time, writes in *The Greek Myths* that "the heraldic white ribbons on Hermes's staff were later mistaken for serpents, because he was herald to Hades" (66-7). Cranes, as Graves explains, were sacred to Hermes also.

However, there is another and more plausible source for the appearance of a serpent in the sigil. Graves summarises the theme of *The White Goddess* in the first chapter ('Poets and Gleemen') as the story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year and of the God's "losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride, and layer-out." The poet relates to this story by identifying himself "with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his wierd... The wierd, or rival.... takes countless malevolent or diabolic or serpent-like forms" (*White Goddess*, 24). The serpent can therefore be understood as Palamedes weird: especially since Palamedes is clearly the focus of its attention.

The provenance of the sigil is entirely a product of Graves' method: as far as I am aware there is no antique exemplar of this image. Nor would I expect one to turn up. Graves has reconstructed a ritual image on the basis of an interesting, but highly idiosyncratic interpretative method and analysis. It should however be remembered that *The White Goddess* is about the grammar of poetry and myth before Apollo's academicians moved in and changed the rules. Graves is exploring a pattern of thought through a complex braid of his own understanding, experience and knowledge: both the details of myth and the history of the alphabet are incidental to this.

Ian Firla's posting to the Mailbase list included an interesting

quotation from a letter to T.S. Eliot, in which Graves says: "I have asked Creative Age to send you the cover design of The White Goddess, done by Kenneth Gay with me standing over him all the time. It shows the Goddess Carmenta giving Palaimedes [sic] the eye which enables him to understand the flight of the cranes which originated the alphabet." Graves translated Apuleius' *Golden Ass* in 1947, and that work features a number of visitations of the Goddess to Lucius, the focus of the story. These occur often through the form of an intermediary, male or female, rather than the Goddess herself. It may not be fanciful to imagine that during Karl Gay's labours on the sigil design, Graves saw himself as such an intermediary, as an ambassador of the Goddess.

Finally, the misspelling of 'Palamedes' gives an additional insight into Graves' creative process. The reading of the name given by Graves, 'Mindful of the Ancient One,' (*White Goddess*, 225) is not likely to be correct. However his spelling of the name tells us how he read it: 'palai' means 'long ago,' and Graves has chosen to see a contraction of this word as a component in the name of the hero.

Philip Hunter

Works Cited

Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths, Volume One*. Harmondsworth: Penguin:1960.
….. *The White Goddess*. London: Faber, 1961.