

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
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GRAND ORIENT FREEMASONRY

by

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Grand Orient Freemasonry is considered to be Freemasonry in France in which the term "Grand Orient" is used in the same context as the term Grand Lodge is used in the English Obedience. To put the term in its correct historical perspective an independent GRAND LOGE NATIONALE DE FRANCE was created in 1736. It's leadership was derived from the Comte de Clermont. In 1771, Philippe Egalite, Duc de Chartres and subsequently Duc d'Orleans became the Grand Master. The GRAND ORIENT of France was founded on December 27th, 1773. Both organizations continued to function together even though the Grand Orient was created to replace Grand Loge. This dual functioning continued until the French Revolution terminated all Masonic workings. On June 28th, 1799, both organizations, on being reactivated after the Revolution, created an Act of Union which documented the absorption of the Grande Loge into the Grand Orient.

As with all Masonic considerations, it is imperative to deal with the subject in a reasonable and practical manner. Most of the roots of early Freemasonry have been unearthed and have been discussed for many years. Of great significance in considering the ancient beginnings of Masonry in France was the introduction of the Roman Craft Guilds or Collegia into Gaul. Of course, the Gaul of the Romans became the France of today. The Roman Guilds or Collegia were a significant element in the industrial life of ancient Rome. All crafts were represented by Collegia and each College had individual statutes which specified the joint and individual rights and privileges. Each College had its chapel in which were practiced religious rites.

Common analysis has suggested that the original Roman Collegia were the direct predecessors of the later Craft Guilds. It would seem that this would provide a logical connection between the original Collegia through the Craft Guilds and our speculative Masonry of the present time. Unfortunately there are many dark centuries between these organizations which are virtually bereft of historical light. Interestingly enough, the Roman culture had a very profound impact on the culture of Gaul. At the time when the Romans were finally deposed by the invading Franks, the large centers and cities were mostly left to administer themselves as before with the same citizens in office.

The craftsmen of Gaul from the earliest of times grouped together to govern themselves and their craft. With the creation of a feudal government, control was from the feudal lord or eventually from the king. The three steps or stages of the Guilds were the apprentice, the journeyman and the master. It was during the seven years of the journeyman stage that the gildmen went on a tour of France gaining more experience than would be possible by remaining in one location for that period of time. This was the means that the French institution of the Compagnonnage came into existence.

The French Compagnonnage is quite unique in Europe in that there was a specific route that was used by the Gildman for his tour of France. It is of some interest to note that there was great enmity between the three ranks of masons while away from home. After completing the "Tour of France" the journeyman probably settled down in some location as a master mason. Finally, the Revolution abolished the apprentice system and the Guilds in 1846.

In consequence of the upheaval resulting from the French Revolution the official records from this period are virtually non-existent. Many of the prominent Freemasons of this time, including the Grand Master, were beheaded by the guillotine. Those escaping this end remained inconspicuous. The French Revolution was a period of darkness for Freemasonry in France.

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From the records that have come down to us today it would seem that a significant factor in the formation of the Grand Orient was a common lack of acceptance of the origin of Freemasonry in France as being introduced from England. Lalande was the principal founder of the Grand Orient and was the Grand Master from 1776 to 1779.

France was indebted to England for its Freemasonic establishment, the first Masters, the rituals and customs clearly were English. The first lodge, of what we would today call Freemasons, was established in 1725 by Lord Derwent-Waters, the Chevalier Maskelyne, M. le duc d'Heguerty and several other English gentlemen. The first meeting was at the house of Hure, an English restaurateur. This Lodge attracted five to six hundred into Freemasonry and was the beginning of a number of other Lodges such as Goustard, an English lapidary; LeBreton, which was referred to as the Lodge of Louis d'Argent since it was held in a tavern of that name, and a Lodge called Bussy, because it convened in the restaurant of Landelle in the Rue de Bussy.

In 1736, the four Lodges chose Lord d'Harnouester as the first Grand Master in the French jurisdiction. M. le duc d'Antin was elected as Grand Master-General in perpetuity in the Kingdom of France. The individual Lodge Masters at this time changed every three months.

Working the Craft or Symbolic Degrees were a number of independent Rites or Systems. These degrees were a necessary qualification for advancement to the additional or "Superior" degrees. On December 27th, 1773, the Grand Orient issued a circular requiring that the three Craft Degrees only, be worked by the Lodges in its jurisdiction pending a revision of the High Degrees to be created by a specially appointed Commission. Following a repetition order of July 3rd, 1777, the Lodges commonly ignored it. In 1782, the Grand Orient removed the Commission and created a "Chambre des Grades" to perform the same function except with greater power and authority. All Lodges were required to submit authenticated rituals of all additional degrees worked by them in 1783, for examination and collation.

A most interesting facet of Grand Orient Freemasonry is the existence of a greater number of degrees offered. Most of these degrees were considered to be "Higher-Grade Freemasonry". By this it is meant that the relevant degrees were offered beyond the Craft Lodge level. The range of these "higher" degrees is nothing less than staggering. Rites were established in which the symbolism and procedure of Alchemy were illustrated and explained. In chemical sciences the object of alchemy was to transmute base metals into gold and to discover the universal cure for diseases. In addition, alchemy included a means of indefinitely prolonging life. Many of the so-called "Higher" degrees were circles of research, not necessarily of attainment, regardless of their external pretensions. There were Grades that attracted those who were inclined to the study of Astrology. It will be remembered that Astrology is a pseudo (or false) science which treats the influences of the stars upon human affairs and of foretelling of terrestrial events by the positions and aspects of the stars.

The range of the "Higher" grades included many rites or grades that must be

referred to as occult. The word occult refers to that which is hidden from sight or pertaining to or concerned with designating alchemy, magic, astrology and other arts and practices involving the use of divination, incantation or other magical formulae. One of the "Higher" rites that shines forth as a star in the black velvet firmament of the sky is the Rite of Elect Priests or des Elus Cohens. The word "Cohens" is corrupt Hebrew and is usually provided in the French plural. The mysterious and magnetic personality of Don Martines Pasqually was first heard from in Toulouse in 1760. He was furnished with a hieroglyphical charter and the title of Inspector-General. He proceeded to Bordeaux in about 1762 where he instructed selected brethren and apparently laid the foundation for this Rite. By 1768, de Pasqually was working toward the completion of his Rite. The Rite, as we know it today, made use of a certain amount of Freemasonic symbolism. The Rite of Elect Priests was involved in a particular unfolding of its inward spiritual meaning. As far as the liturgies are concerned this Rite reflects his imagined position as a Magus or Magician presented in a remarkable form of occult procedure. According to one of its descriptions, " the acquisition - by bodily and spiritual purity - of powers which enable man to establish psychic and spiritual purity"

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Willermoz was probably the most active disciple of de Pasqually. After the death of de Pasqually in Port-au-Prince on September 20th, 1774, Willermoz began to develop some of his master's powers. He reached the pinnacle of these powers in 1785 with the appearance of the Unknown Agent within the circle of the Rite. In 1790, it is reported that the Agent appeared and destroyed one-half of the dictated record. The Unknown Agent or Christ Vision is the apparent pinnacle of this Rite.

Within the Metropolitan Chapter of France is the Seventy-sixth Grade, which was referred to as the Chevalier De L'Aigle Noir, or the Knight of the Black Eagle. This is also referred to as the Rite of the Black Eagle. In this degree there is a recognizable portrayal of the legend of Hiram Abif. Great dramatic license is taken to produce a very dramatic and impressive ceremony. The one element that is in considerable variation with modern portrayals is that a black eagle circled the "indecent internment" for a period of time of nine days before the revealment.

In the Rite of the Black Eagle the candidate is prepared in a Chamber of Reflection by being stripped almost to the skin. After being given a pair of slippers he is dressed in a short, blood-stained garment. At this point he is left to meditate, the door being guarded by two brethren armed with drawn swords. The Chapter received notification of his preparation and the whole assembly passed in procession through the Chamber with drawn swords. Following this parade, the members returned to their places, leaving the Chief Officers. At this point the Master would declare that an innocent man had been murdered with criminal still alive. At this point the guards would bind the arms of the candidate leading him to a chamber draped in black and illuminated by a single lamp which gave off fumes of sulphur. Clad only in a blood-stained apron, a Brother would assume the position of a corpse. The candidate on being restored to light was told to contemplate on the remains of one who had so unjustly been slain, impressing on him his "guilt" in the murder. The guards leaving, the candidate was left to contemplate. The guards remained within close proximity still on the watch in case his condition should require care or he attempted to escape. A second procession would approach in a short period of time headed by the Master. The Master would determine if the candidate was moved by the ordeal. After being re-hoodwinked it would be announced by the Warden that the candidate had more unfortunate than guilty and that the real criminal is he who has suffered already and that an accomplice has been found who must also die. The

accomplice, already under arrest, is charged, condemned and executed in dumb show. At this point the candidate is introduced to the assemblage as a worthy Freemason who desires to become a Knight of the Black Eagle. He is praised for his fortitude and is pledged on the Holy Gospels and receives the secrets of the Grade and the proper insignia.

The Rite of the Black Eagle is replete with much symbolism. In all there are three grades of the Rite of the Black Eagle which are used to further impress the candidate with the lessons of the Rite. The Knights of the Black Eagle are called the Brethren of the Rose-Cross in commemoration of the Rose Nobles made by their Brother Raymond Lully who was one of those great philosophers who accomplished the marriage of the spouse with the six virgins, or the metals lead, tin, iron, copper, mercury and silver. Again we meet alchemy as an unseen part of the ritual.

Through the fall of Napoleon in 1870, the bourgeois dynasty ended forever, leaving in its place an infidel republic. By 1877, there was no one in the Grand Orient who believed in God, it being considered that religion was synonymous with priestcraft and that the Bible was a sacerdotal or "priestly" charter. The Name and Symbols of the Great Architect of the Universe were removed from all the Lodges. Since this period there has been somewhat of a softening of this rigid "anti-religious" position. As of November 1913, French Freemasonry desired a rapprochement or reunification with Freemasonic Obediences in other countries. The conditions of this rapprochement mainly included a belief in the Great Architect of the Universe and the placement of the Bible on its altars. After this repositioning there was immediate recognition by the Grand Lodges of England and the United States.

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Largely as a result of intercourse between the United States and France during World War I, a number of American Grand Lodges recognized French jurisdictions and allowed visitation. However, this has not blossomed into a universal condition.

There are a number of stories that purport to indicate that there have been some women who have been either initiated as a Freemason or have taken part in the ceremonies of a Lodge of Freemasons in the English Obedience. However, there is only an interdiction on the part of the Grand Lodge of England regarding women as Freemasons. This single point has been a major factor in the non-recognition of French Freemasonry on the part of the Grand Lodge of England.

The degree structure, especially "above" the level of the craft Lodge in France exhibits an enormously varied motif. On the other hand, the degree structure of the Grand Lodge of England exhibits a definite pattern in the instruction of the individual member. There is some variance in the sequence of the non-craft Lodge degrees, but it is obvious there is a definite pattern of instruction. The point that is being made is that the one area of total divergence between the Grand Orient and the English Grand Lodge is in the terms of the non-craft Lodge degrees.

In summation, it is of considerable interest to follow the development of Freemasonry in France. As introduced in France originally by Englishmen it eventually turned to reflect the essence of the changing times in France and also the French temperament. In the last one hundred and fifty years there have been a number of very colorful and dynamic Freemasons who have used a correct or imagined relationship with the Grand Orient to result in activities that were both self-satisfying to themselves and also financially profitable. This was particularly the case in the "New World"1 of the Western Hemisphere.

Overviewing the differences between Grand Orient Freemasonry and Grand Lodge of England Freemasonry it is obvious to the casual observer there are profound differences. If the casual observer can but step back and view the "large picture" it becomes obvious that he must observe, "vive le difference".

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