

# 1 Myth and History

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**Summary** 1.1 The Spread of Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire. – 1.2 The Myth of the Orient in Freemasonry. – 1.3 From the Mythical Orient to the Real Middle East.

## 1.1 The Spread of Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire

On June 24, 1717, four London lodges, the *Goose and Gridiron*, the *Crown*, the *Apple Tree*, and the *Rummer and Grapes*, whose membership included the Anglican pastor Jean-Théophile Désaguliers (1683-1744)<sup>1</sup> and the Presbyterian pastor James Anderson (1684-1739), gathered on the steps of St. Paul's church, where they decided to organise four annual meetings to manage masonic affairs, appointing their first Grand Master. This date marks the beginning of modern speculative Freemasonry. From London, Freemasonry spread quickly throughout the continent, and a mere two decades later, European masons and lodges are known to have been active in several regions of the Levant and North Africa: in Aleppo, Smyrna and Corfu in 1738, in Alexandretta in early 1749, in Eastern Turkey in 1762, in Constantinople in 1769; in 1784-85 in Tunisia and Algeria, in 1794 in Egypt. Masonry was propagated by Europeans seeking their fortune abroad, already in the 18th century, but especially in the 19th: at first diplomats and passing military, then merchants and professionals, but also political exiles who chose the ports of the Southern Mediterranean as their home.

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<sup>1</sup> Of French Huguenot background, scientist and man of letters, he was a member of the Royal Society and well known as a populariser of Newton's theories.

Though the early times were not easy for masons,<sup>2</sup> mostly from the second half of the nineteenth century on, the European imperialist drive favoured the diffusion and consolidation of lodges which in all the provinces of the Ottoman Empire were no longer the exclusive reserve of Europeans, but opened their doors to local Christians, Jews and Muslims. Among the latter, illustrious personalities of the Middle East became members, including princes and governors, high-level functionaries, army officers, members of the higher bourgeoisie, but also intellectuals and even religious scholars and Sufis, who would reach the highest ranks of the local masonic world. Local lodges depended on European Orients, especially the Grand Lodge of England, the Grand Orient of France, the Grand Orient of Italy, but as time passed, independent Orders also arose: the Grand Orient of Egypt, founded in 1872 by Italian freemasons, in its turn gave rise to the Grand National Lodge of Egypt, which would be the most important and long lasting masonic order in the Arab world and in the Middle East in general;<sup>3</sup> in 1909, the Ottoman Grand Orient was founded in Istanbul and until 1918 would remain the main masonic force in the country. So, even though its history in those regions reflects the European geopolitical expansion, it would be a mistake to see in Freemasonry a mere tool for the penetration of colonial powers.<sup>4</sup> The fact that so many Muslims precociously joined meant that their social and political interests entered the Lodges, so it is no surprise that the political activity of many masons actually turned against imperialism. It is an undeniable fact that Freemasonry was part of the political development of those countries, because either such development affected the masonic Orders, or because the brethren took part in the events which redefined the order of the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

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**2** Following excommunication by Clement XII in 1738, religious institutions in the Middle East tied to the Church of Rome – especially Jesuits and Maronites – put pressure on the Ottoman Sultan to outlaw Freemasonry, spreading strongly hostile propaganda against the organisation on a popular level. Thus, an English lodge was sacked in Istanbul in 1748, while, in 1785 in Smyrna, a Muslim who had become a freemason was sentenced to death for heresy. As late as the first half of the nineteenth century, in Istanbul, masons were seen as “dark figures, without faith or law”. Cf. Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 8-9; *Le croissant et le compas*.

**3** Directed by Muslims, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Grand Lodge had more than fifty affiliated lodges throughout the empire, besides some twenty affiliated lodges in neighbouring countries, and thousands of members.

**4** The brethren, who in 1867 wanted to open a branch in Sidi Bel-Abbes, in north-western Algeria, wrote to the Grand Orient of France: “On ne saurait trop fonder des loges dans l’Afrique française, l’influence de la maçonnerie sur les Arabes pourrait être d’un grand secours pour la colonisation” (Yacono, *Un siècle de franc-maçonnerie algérienne*, 250). However, the Italians who, with a French patent, founded the Grand Orient of Egypt, acted in an entirely independent fashion, both from the government of their mother country and from Italian Freemasonry (De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 65-80).

**5** For example, in Egypt, Italian freemasons supported Prince Halīm (one of the first Muslim freemasons) against his brother, the ruling Ismā’īl; Masons Ya’qūb Sanū’ and

However, Freemasonry probably played its most significant role, in terms of impact and consequences, as an instrument of Western infiltration in the fields of society, culture and ideology. Masonry succeeded best and propagated most widely in the cosmopolitan climate of the main urban centres of those days, such as Istanbul, Cairo, Beirut or Tunis which during the nineteenth century grew rapidly, undergoing substantial modernisation<sup>6</sup> in customs and social composition. Europeans and people of the Middle East, Christians, Jews and Muslims from every latitude of the Mediterranean converged in these cities. Their cohabitation gave rise to complex inter-community relations, showing sometimes opposite outcomes: from peaceful coexistence, to fertile collaboration, to conflict, to total closure. Different social segments lived in what Ilford, referring to the city of Alexandria between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, called “dynamic contiguity”,<sup>7</sup> where the “European myth” acted as a common denominator, often ineffective as such but projecting towards a horizon of modernity and progress.<sup>8</sup>

In this very dynamic picture, Freemasonry was an important vehicle for facilitating inter-community contact: members of the most diverse communities in terms of cultural and religious origin could meet in lodges where, together with esoteric secrets, they shared a vision of society. Lodges thus became the place where multicultural ideals could take full shape and where even members who belonged to numerically and politically marginal minorities could earn a special social status, which affiliation with Masonry clearly conferred.

Especially, many Ottoman intellectuals joined Freemasonry not only as the best place to build profitable social relations or hatch political plots, but also because lodges were a place where they could measure themselves with Europeans on an immaterial level, a kind of safe ground where new cultural and ideological trends could be cultivated, practised and spread. Freemasonry had among its members important figures of the *nahda*, the ‘rebirth’, the modernising reform

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Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī launched proto-nationalism in the 1870s, while Sa’d Zaghlūl led the company to formal independence in 1922; in Turkey, the alliance between Italian and Ottoman masons gave support to the Young Turk Revolution.

<sup>6</sup> That of modernity, of course, is a complex and controversial concept. For a critical discourse on modernity and its reception in non-Western countries see, for instance, Eisenstadt, *Multiple modernities*.

<sup>7</sup> Ilbert, *A Certain Sense*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Those styling themselves ‘Europeans’ included people of quite different origin, such as the Syro-Lebanese, or people who had never visited Europe but identified themselves with a cultural projection, a ‘façon de vivre’ which they desired and in which they educated their children, often enrolled in French schools and barely able to speak Arabic. Mabro, *Alexandria 1860-1960*, 258.

movement which had its centre of gravity between Syria and Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Magazines enjoying international prestige such as *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilāl*, considered to be the most influential in the Middle East at that time, were published and animated by masons. The most eminent intellectuals of the Arab world wrote for these magazines, and their aim was to propagate the liberal spirit and the idea of modernity and progress based on the European model. On their pages, they disseminated modern sciences (including Darwin's theories), defended the emancipation of women, promoted constitutionalism, supported religious ecumenism and the cultural identity of East and West, and did not hesitate to campaign for Freemasonry directly, as harbingers of those ideals.<sup>10</sup>

However, the high season of Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire was not destined to last long. On the one hand, the dismemberment of the Empire by European powers and the extension of the colonial yoke throughout the Middle East after World War I led to disillusionment with the West, which turned progressively into relentless criticism. The rise of nationalisms and of Islamist movements gradually broke down the multicultural and liberal climate in which Freemasonry had prospered, but what sealed its fate was the foundation of the state of Israel. The anti-masonic propaganda which Jesuits and Maronites had continued to spread during the nineteenth century had not stopped the growth and success of Freemasonry, but since the Thirties, the thesis of the Judeo-masonic plot (in the wake of the European myth, nourished with the dissemination of false documents, such as the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion) began to take root among the public.<sup>11</sup> After 1948, decline came inexorably, and Masonry, associated with the Zionist project, was gradually outlawed in nearly all Middle Eastern countries.

The rise and fall of Masonry shows how the institution left more political and cultural than spiritual or metaphysical traces, being perhaps the main gathering place for the forces behind the secularisation which transformed those regions between the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> In most cases, historians consider the vicissitudes of Masonry in the Middle East without stopping to reflect on its esoteric dimension and on the impact this may have had in an Islamic context.

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<sup>9</sup> These authors included Ya'qūb Sanū', Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muhammad 'Abdu, Walī al-Dīn Yakan, Ibrāhīm al-Yāzigi, Khalīl Mutrān, Ahmad Fathī Zaghlūl, Hafnī Nāsif, Ismā'il Sabrī, Ahmad Abū Sa'd, Mahmūd Ramzī Nazīm, Adīb Ishāq, Salīm al-Naqqāsh, Ya'qūb Sarrūf, Fāris Nimr, Shāhin Makāryūs and Jurjī Zaydān.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Cannon, *Nineteenth-Century*; Avino, *L'Occidente nella cultura araba*.

<sup>11</sup> De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto, 228-70*; *The Judeo-Masonic Conspiracy*.

<sup>12</sup> De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*.

However, the success among Muslims of an institution which is first of all esoteric and initiatory cannot be entirely explained by the worldly advantages it offered. It should be recalled that the presence of Muslims in lodges implied that membership was Islamically licit. Though it is true that Masonry promoted the process of secularisation and met with its greatest success among the most westernized social elements of the times, it is also true that the religious factor was still decisive, something European Masons were well aware of. Even when, in 1877, the Grand Orient of France broke with the Grand Lodge of England, giving rise to the adogmatic current (expunging any reference to the Grand Architect of the Universe from rites and abolishing the principle of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul), in Muslim countries, many lodges depending on the French Grand Orient continued to apply the theist rite, having those seeking initiation swear the oath on their respective holy books. In order to make it Islamically licit and ensure maximum expansion, the Scottish rite was also adopted by autonomous orders, such as the Grand National Lodge of Egypt<sup>13</sup> and the Ottoman Grand Orient. Reza Tevfik, one of the Grand Masters of the latter Order, stated: “whoever doesn’t believe in a Creator cannot be a Mason”.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that the lodges attracted such figures as the Algerian emir and Sufi master ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, members of the Egyptian ruling dynasty (the Khedives),<sup>15</sup> religious scholars like Muhammad ‘Abdu or members of Sufi orders such as the Bektashi was no secondary factor for European masons, since it guaranteed the legitimacy of Freemasonry for Muslims, safeguarding it against the hostility of Islamic institutions. Parenthetically, this approach by Muslims to the lodges conferred on Freemasonry a status which no other brotherhood or spiritual order coming from the Christian world ever enjoyed in Islam. Vice versa, when the regional political context began to erode general favour for Freemasonry, the *fatwā*<sup>16</sup> issued by the Grand Mufti of Jordan in 1964, which prohibited joining Mason-

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**13** Possession of the Scottish rite patent caused a split in the Grand Orient of Egypt and led to the foundation of the Grand Lodge and a dispute between the two bodies which would last two decades. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 91-100; 141-52.

**14** Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 319.

**15** Solutore Avventore Zola (*Sunto storico*, 11-12), first Grand Master of the Grand Orient of Egypt, referring to the foundation of the Order, wrote: “The Grand Orient of Egypt owes its development to support from the throne: if the Kevîvè had not been a member, for its foundation, and if he had not protected it, the Order *would have been tormented by religious struggles and persecution by the civil government*; whereas, under the patronage of the Kevîvè, the most eminent personalities were initiated or joined our venerable Rite” [italics added].

**16** A *fatwā* is a not binding Islamic legal pronouncement, issued by an expert in religious law (*mufti*), usually at the request of an individual or judge to resolve a specific issue where Islamic jurisprudence is unclear.

ry because it was a “Jewish creation”, doubtless contributed to Muslims abandoning the lodges.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, to fully grasp the reasons why Freemasonry took root in the Islamic world, it is not enough to explore the varieties of masonic political, social and cultural activities in the Levant. One needs to explore the metaphysical side of the masonic experience in its encounter with Islamic esoteric dimensions, in order to identify which elements enabled the meeting or at least defused the potential clash. Here its mythopoetic dimension played a fundamental role, along with the evolution of masonic imagination in the Ottoman Levant: to understand history, it's best to start from myth.

## 1.2 The Myth of the Orient in Freemasonry

Masonry arose and rooted itself in the European Christian cultural context, even though it went beyond institutional religious paradigms. Hence it is no surprise that Christian references prevailed in the early doctrinal texts, but already in the first regulatory document of the Grand Lodge in England, one could find mentions of Oriental wisdom which seem not to be based on strict Biblical symbolism. In Anderson's *Constitutions* of 1723, the centre of the Craft of Building and its architectural apex was Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites, whose presence leads the growth of Freemasonry back to the dawn of mankind, it is said, transmitted their knowledge first of all in the East, as can be seen from various passages:

[Freemasonry] was especially preserved in Shinar and Assyria [...] In these parts, upon the Tygris and Euphrates, afterwards flourished many learned priests and mathematicians, known by the names of Chaldees and Magi, who preserved the good science Geometry [...] And no doubt the Royal Art was brought down to Egypt by Mitzraim, the second son of Ham [...] and particularly the famous Pyramids, demonstrate the early taste and genius of that ancient kingdom. [...] So that after the erection of Solomon's Temple, Masonry was improved in all the neighbouring nations [...] Syria, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Chaldea, Babylonia, Media, Persia, Arabia, Africa, Lesser Asia, Greece, and other parts of Europe [...] even in India [...] For from Sicily, as well as from Greece, Egypt and Asia, the ancient Romans learned both the science and the art.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn*, 291.

<sup>18</sup> Paillard, *Reproduction of the Constitutions*, 1-24 of the original document.

The Oriental matrix of the masonic Craft, in its Israelite roots and its dissemination from ancient Asia to Africa thus appears to be consubstantial to the founding myth and doctrines of Masonry, marking its symbolism and mysteries from the outset.

Later on, Egypt became the main esoteric reference for some new masonic orders. Influenced by imagination about Ancient Egypt, widespread at the time in Europe, or fascinated by the remains of the Pharaonic civilisation directly observed during Napoleon's campaign, the founders of these rites clothed them with references and symbols taken from the Pharaonic iconography, and conferred legitimacy on their own orders through an initiatory chain which had its farthest roots in Ancient Egypt.

One of the first Orients to give itself an Egyptian tradition was the Golden and Rosy Cross established in 1776 by some Masons mainly involved in alchemical and Pharaonic themes.<sup>19</sup> However, much greater fame attached itself to the Egyptian Rite founded in 1784 by the esotericist and impostor Giuseppe Balsamo, alias Alessandro Count of Cagliostro, who appointed himself its Gran Cofto, claiming to be in possession of a never revealed *mysterium magnum*, as well as of the Philosopher's Stone.<sup>20</sup> Cagliostro's order is also thought to be one of the possible sources of the masonic Rite of Misraïm.<sup>21</sup> According to one of those who conceived the order, Marc Bédarride, the esoteric tradition of Misraïm descended from Egyptian mysteries through a jumbled trail including, among others, Adam, the occultist Balaam, Solomon, the Etruscans, the crusaders and Saladin. The tradition was supposedly handed down to Marc's father, Gad Bédarride, who in 1782, it was claimed, received initiation at the hands of the "wise patriarch Ananiah Egyptian Great Conservator".<sup>22</sup>

Other rites tied to the Pharaonic tradition emerged in the same period, or after Napoleon's campaign in Egypt which nourished fantasies about Ancient Egypt, giving rise to a true *Egyptomania*, which would last for a long time in the continent. As a little known example,

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**19** The book of *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians of the 16th and 17th Centuries* was drawn up in this milieu, blending alchemy, Rosicrucianism and Masonry. Cf. Le Forestier, *La Franc-Maçonnerie templière et occultiste*, 543 ff.; Rebisse, *Rosacrocianesimo e massoneria*.

**20** Cf. Porset, "Cagliostro e la massoneria", 290-311; Brunet, *Cagliostro*; Gentile, *Il mistero di Cagliostro*; Montini, *Cagliostro il Grande Cofto*.

**21** The order, of uncertain origin, probably derived from a rite founded in 1803 by the Bédarride brothers and then developed under the influence of the Order of the Illuminati of Avignon and Cagliostro's rite. Cf. Ventura, *I riti massonici*, 15 ff.; Renders, *The Misraim Rite*.

**22** Renders (*The Misraim Rite*) mentions other minor rites spread in France, which referred explicitly to the Egyptian tradition, such as the Order of African Architects, born in Germany, the Holy Order of the Sophists, the Perfect Initiates of Egypt, the Sovereign Pyramid of the Friends of the Desert in Toulouse.

one may take the *Ordre Sacré des Sophisiens*, founded in France in 1801 by playwright Cuvelier de Trie, who built his symbolism on imagination about Ancient Egypt and the cult of Isis. The order, which survived until 1824, brought together many who had taken part in Napoleon's expedition, including Vinant Denon, who was the director general of the Louvre.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the rite of Memphis was destined to a long life. It was officially established in France in 1838 by Etienne Marconis de Nègre, the son of an Italian, officer in Napoleon's army in Egypt, founded on a lodge set up by his father after returning home.<sup>24</sup> According to Marconis, in Alexandria, Mark the Evangelist converted Ormus, a priest of the cult of Seraphis who then gave life in Egypt to the initiatory society of the Wise Men of the Light, also initiating some Essenes. The Essenes then transmitted their secrets to the Knights Templar in Palestine, who in their turn took the tradition to Scotland, where it gave rise to an order of oriental Masonry.<sup>25</sup> The Rite has 92 degrees, which constantly refer to the tradition of Ancient Egypt, with titles such as Patriarch of Isis, Sublime Sage of the Pyramids, Knight of the Sphinx and Interpreter of Hieroglyphics. Together with the rite of Misraïm (with which it merged in 1945 giving rise to the Ancient and Primitive Oriental Rite of Memphis Misraïm), it makes up the so-called 'Egyptian Freemasonry'.

Despite the insistent evocation of Oriental, and especially Egyptian, doctrinal references by European masonic orders, they are certainly not built on an actual continuity of mysteries through the millennia. The mythopoieses which place the masonic matrix in Ancient Egypt or in an undefined Orient are of mere symbolic and metaphorical value. I can only agree with Marie-Cécile Révauger when she writes that:

L'Orient est avant tout une convention, un espace sacré tracé par les francs-maçons, le cadre imaginaire de leurs 'travaux', qui assure le dépaysement nécessaire à leur liberté de penser, lieu de sagesse, loin de toute censure politique ou religieuse.<sup>26</sup>

Charles Porset has rightly pointed out how references to the 'Egyptianness' of Freemasonry also had a misleading political and ideological purpose: focussing on Egypt as the source of original wisdom,

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**23** Spieth, *Napoleon's Sorcerers*.

**24** Cf. Ventura, *I riti massonici*; Monerau, *Les secrets hermétiques de la franc-maçonnerie*; Caillet, *La franc-maçonnerie égyptienne*; Antico e primitivo rito orientale di Misraïm e Memphis, *Breve storia*; Antico e Primitivo Rito di Memphis e Misraïm, *Storia del rito di Memphis*.

**25** Ventura, *I riti massonici*, 60.

**26** Révauger, *Franc-maçonnerie et orientalisme*, 22.

Masons could indirectly reduce Christianity to a secondary religious form and free themselves from Papal authority.<sup>27</sup> In eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, *Egyptomania*<sup>28</sup> spread an imagination inspired by the Pharaonic civilisation in the arts, architecture and fashion. This doubtless helped to expand the role of Egypt in masonic imagination, influencing – somewhat opportunistically – the symbolical references of the Egyptian masonic orders mentioned above and also inspiring – as will be seen – the reform of initiatory masonic rituals.

However, reference to an ancient initiatory chain seems intrinsic to the genesis of Freemasonry, and seems to ignore political and ideological convenience, preceding and going beyond any passing Orientalist or Egyptophile fashion. As Gian Mario Cazzaniga notes, in Masonry, the Orient becomes an archetype: the masonic temple is laid out East to West, because the (initiatory) light rises in the East, where revelation has its origin. The seat of the Venerable Master and the altar where the neophyte takes his oath are both to the East; *Orient* in general indicates a lodge, while the *Grand Orient* is the national body to which lodges of various rites are affiliated; finally, the *Eternal Orient* is the place which awaits masons after their earthly life.<sup>29</sup> The Orient thus becomes the symbolic container of the mysteries of Masonry, derived from an esoteric source which for centuries has watered (all) the shores of the Mediterranean, where the ideal and mythical continuity expressed in masonic mythology renders historical continuity meaningless.

In this sense, and on a strictly figurative level, the foundation of Masonry in the Near East and particularly in Egypt, is a sort of return to the cradle of primordial wisdom. When European Masons arrived in the Levant, and Ottoman Christians, Muslims and Jews began to join, the myth found new life and was further reinforced.

### 1.3 From the Mythical Orient to the Real Middle East

Examining its symbolical and mythopoetical architecture, Bruno Etienne wrote that Freemasonry appears as “une forme statique du voyage en Orient”.<sup>30</sup> The historical record shows how, for some masons who had landed in the Orient in the wake of the imperialist drive, the experience of the real Orient turned from static to dynamic, and blended in with the mythological imagination, becoming in all like-

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<sup>27</sup> Porset, *Le voile de Saïs*, 33 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Curl, *Egyptomania*; Humbert, Pantazzi, Ziegler (éds.), *Egyptomania*; Humbert, *L’Égypte à Paris*.

<sup>29</sup> Cazzaniga, *Nascita della massoneria*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Étienne, *L’Égyptomanie dans l’hagiographie maçonnique*.

lihood an opportunity for new founding myths. Thus, Robert Morris, when he arrived in Palestine in 1868, dreamed of setting up a lodge at the base of the Temple of Jerusalem,<sup>31</sup> while Haskett Smith, in Syria, had fantasies of a Druze origin of Masonry.<sup>32</sup>

Especially, Egyptian mysteries would become crucial for the brethren of lodges founded in Egypt, and the legends which spoke of the ancient legacies of Oriental sages would be updated in a peculiar fashion. The rite of Memphis, which certainly owed its origin to the experience in Egypt of an officer of Napoleon's expedition, not only claimed ancient origins (as seen before), but took a new look at the initiatory transmission, placing the decisive moment at the feet of the Pyramids, during Bonaparte's stay there. In 1883 in Alexandria, Solutore Avventore Zola, born in Turin and who for ten years was the Grand Master of the Grand Orient of Egypt and Grand Hierophant of the Primitive Rite of Memphis, published the *Sunto storico della Massoneria in Egitto* (Historical Summary of Masonry in Egypt), where he told the story of the Grand Orient he had established and led, including the founding myth of the Rite of Memphis as exposed by Marconis. Besides repeating the ancient transmission through Ormus and Saint Mark, Zola reported the decisive circumstance giving life to the Order:

What however is more certain is that in (August) 1798, Napoleon the Great and Kléber, though already masons, received initiation and affiliation with the Rite of Memphis from a man of venerable age and wise in doctrine and customs, who said he descended from the ancient sages of Egypt. The initiation took place at Cheops' Pyramid and they received a ring as the only sign of their investiture.<sup>33</sup>

The plausibility of the episode is more than doubtful<sup>34</sup> and, as was mentioned in the introduction to this book, it does not receive credit from either Gastone Ventura or the official website of the rite, where we can read:

Jean Etienne Marconis, basing himself on the narrative of Father Gabriel and of the brethren of his lodge, recounts the profile, sub-

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**31** Morris, *Freemasonry in the Holy Land*, 223.

**32** Cf. Smith, *The Druses of Syria*, 7-19; De Smet, *Les prétendues origines druzes de la Franc-maçonnerie*, 261-74.

**33** Zola, *Sunto Storico*, 5; Zaydān, *Tārīkh al-Māsūniyya*, 150-1.

**34** No further documents or testimony exist confirming the account by Etienne Marconis, which history itself seems to deny: the alleged foundation of the Isis lodge appears to be inconsistent with the movements of Kléber and Napoleon, who not only had a tense relationship with each other, but also had few opportunities to meet in Cairo. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 39-45.

stance and history (*perhaps legendary*) of a Rite also designed to comprise within a single ritual corpus the numerous elements of Egyptian initiatory tradition present in the many Rites operating at the time.<sup>35</sup>

However, the myth has a further implication: the alleged modern transmission of Memphis by local initiates to the benefit of French officials not only conferred legitimacy on the new Rite, renewing presumed ancient teachings; it also suggested secret esoteric affinities among worlds which at the end of the 18th century appeared far apart and without communication to each other, bringing to mind *ante litteram* what would later be themes of René Guénon.

The encounter between masons and people of the Levant, who in large numbers flocked to the lodges opened by Europeans, led to a new flourishing of foundational mythologies with a decisive meeting between the West and an East which was also explicitly Islamic. Another well known mason, Jurjī Zaydān, a Christian of Lebanese origin and a prominent intellectual living in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century, in his *General History of Freemasonry* published in 1882, for example, outlined the cyclical way mysteries were transmitted, describing in profuse detail (and with a good deal of imagination) all the mythical stations from the Egypt of the Pharaohs to the Middle Ages and modern times. The author specified that ancient Masonry, from which European Masonry too drew its origins, was born in the Pharaonic culture, at the time the Pyramids were built, when secret societies associated with the craft of Masonry and architecture reached their highest level of technical accuracy. According to Zaydān, these associations were still active in the country in the Middle Ages, when European Freemasons arrived, and the Egyptian caliphs assigned them the task of designing and building mosques, fortresses and bastions, including for example the mosque of Ibn Tulūn. Later, thanks to a process of transmission of mysteries reserved to only a few adepts, initiatory teachings survived in Egypt within certain esoteric groups, which merged with the French lodges when Freemasonry was introduced by Napoleon and his generals during the Campaign of Egypt, "since the Egyptian secret societies knew teachings very close to the masonic ones".<sup>36</sup>

When Freemasonry spread to the Middle East, adaptation of mythopoetic narratives to the context found two justifications: on the part of the Europeans, it facilitated acceptance of Masonry in the local milieu; on the part of Levantine Freemasons, it helped le-

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**35** Antico e Primitivo Rito di Memphis e Misraim, *Storia del rito di Memphis*. Italics added.

**36** Zaydān, *Tārīkh al-Māsūniyya*, 148-50.

gitimate their joining an institution of Christian origin, foreign to the universe of local brotherhoods and suspected of harbouring imperialist ambitions. It has been seen how important this double legitimation was: the origin of Masonry appeared in entirely new versions which express themselves as the sharing of a very similar heritage among the esoteric cultures of two opposite cultural shores, with the Islamic component becoming a full part of the process of transmission of mysteries.

Actually, this narrative expedient was apparently counterproductive: the obvious mystification made any real symmetry between European and Oriental esoteric experience seem highly unlikely. However, the link between Eastern and Western esotericism is less fanciful than one might think.

Right from the outset, the Orient was a symbolic container for imagination about the Royal Art, not only providing the imagery for an esoteric content of supposedly archetypal origin, but also defining a real place: the masonic tradition, in fact, following a far from straight path, draws from a source of mysteries which touches all the shores of the Mediterranean and which actually does have historic roots in the Orient. Following the itineraries of the respective contaminations, one can track down an esoteric culture shared between Europe and the Near East, starting from a composite original nucleus, responsible for unexpected symmetries which, when masons would come across Sufis, especially starting in the nineteenth century, would in certain cases allow for mutual recognition.

The most axial element, as the repository of an ideal heritage of continuity over the millennia, was Hermeticism, which in this symbolic horizon had its keystone in Egypt.