

3 Egyptosophy and Modern Freemasonry

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3.1 Hermeticism and Speculative Freemasonry

Today, it is not yet possible to establish whether accepted Masons introduced into the lodges the symbolic apparatus characteristic of speculative Masonry, or they merely reworked an esoteric heritage already present in operative lodges, though of recent origin. Every thesis about this, however convincing at first glance, leads us into a forest of suppositions. What is undeniable is that modern Masonry, founded in 1717, presented itself as the deposit of a tradition which provided continuity to many typical features of Renaissance Hermeticism: initiation, secrecy, the use of symbolic apparatus to illustrate metaphysical concepts, the presence of kabbalistic references, all aspects supporting a ‘philosophical religion’ honouring cosmic Unity: in this case, the Grand Architect of the Universe. Especially, it assumed (in a manner and through paths unknown to us) the close connection which had long existed between architecture and the art of memory, enriched through time by metaphysical concepts, symbolically translated.¹ The places which Renaissance esotericists had conceived to contain and fix Hermetic meanings (Giulio Camil-

1 One may also think of the diffusion of books with allegorical representations (*Emblemata*), partly due to the *Hypnerotomachia* (1467) mentioned above and to Horapolo’s *Hieroglyphica* (1505): in the sixteenth century, in such drawings there began to appear compasses, set squares, levels, associated with the ideas of rigour, moral in-

lo's *Theatre of Memory* or Giordano Bruno's astral cosmos,² or again the *Theater of the World* for the alchemist Robert Fludd),³ in speculative Masonry took on physical shape in lodges: the entire kabbalistic and alchemical context of the *occult philosophy*, preserved and transmitted to the present day, converged in the complex interpretations of its architectural, iconographic and initiatory symbolisms.

One need only to think of masonic iconography to grasp its importance. The masonic Temple (corresponding to the depiction of the Apprentice's Tracing Board)⁴ is the image of the cosmos, oriented, like churches, from East to West. Just outside the entrance, two columns stand in memory of the two columns of Solomon's Temple. The male column on the right (*Jachin*) bears the Hebrew letter *yod* (י), J, for *yad*, the divine hand (from the verb *yada'*, to cast or know, also sexually), a symbol of fecundation and power. The female column on the left (*Bo'az*) bears the Hebrew letter *bet* (ב), B, the first letter in the Bible, meaning 'house', 'receptacle'. Together they indicate the earthly world, the limit of the created world. The ceiling of the masonic Temple is covered with stars, representing the cosmos, that is the Grand Celestial Lodge where the Grand Architect of the Universe presides over the works.⁵ The chequerboard floor reminds one of the duality of human nature, spiritual and material, the 'black' and the 'white' in-

tegrity, conscience, temperance, which would distinguish the symbolic apparatus of speculative Masonry. Cf. Mainguy, *Symbolique des outils*; Jameux, *L'art de la mémoire*.

2 Giordano Bruno designed a special system of Hermetic memory, described in his *De umbris idearum* and deciphered, at least in its structure, by Frances Yates (*The Art of Memory*, 199-230).

3 The physician Robert Fludd, one of the most famous Hermetic philosophers in the days of King James I, self-proclaimed adept of the Rosy Cross, designed a 'natural', timeless order of places of memory based on the zodiac, associated with a temporal order represented by theatres or stage sets. In his work *Utriusque Cosmi, Maioris scilicet et Minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica Historia*, written in the early 1600s, the cosmos and the theatre are depicted on pages which face each other, so that when one closes the volume, the skies cover the edifice, creating a cosmic vault. The theatre is an Elizabethan scaenae frons, with three openings at the base, two on the upper level (the *loci* of memory) opening onto a crenellated terrace, with at the centre a bow window with the words *theatrum orbi* (theatre for the world). Five columns stand at the openings, with different shapes and colours. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 320-41.

4 In early times, when the proceedings of a lodge were opened in the degree of Apprentice, a tracing board was drawn (generally by the Master of Ceremonies on a blackboard) with the essential symbols of Masonry: set square, compass, the two columns, the gates of the Temple, the sun, the moon, the level, the perpendicular, the chequerboard floor, the unhewn stone and the cubic stone, the three barred windows and the triangle. This was a true magic ritual, indicating the establishment of the lodge, and the board was erased at the end of each meeting. Jacq, *La massoneria, storia e iniziazione*, 229.

5 Symmetry with Fludd's representations or with Renaissance architectural theories is hard to deny.

nate in each of us.⁶ Among the symbols in the *Chamber of Reflection*, a dark place where the mason meditates, there appears the acrostic VITRIOL (*Visita Interiora Terrae, Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*), alchemical key for discovering the Philosopher's Stone.

These are only a few examples of the rich symbolic heritage which characterises the long and complex initiatory journey of the modern mason, which does not interrupt formally the medieval mythological tradition (from the initiatory sequence involving prophets and sages of antiquity, to the evocation of the Temple of Solomon, to references to Hermes and Egypt), but enriches it with the significance of kabbalistic Hermes developed by the Renaissance.

There can be no doubt that this symbolic synthesis or overlapping, which contributed to the origin of speculative Masonry, was a localised phenomenon, the outcome of the chance convergence between the peculiar British (especially Scottish) masonic mythological heritage and the Hermetic currents moving around at the times: speculative Masonry founded in London in 1717 was the product of that primary esoteric path, certainly not immune to specific political⁷ and religious⁸ issues of the day, which determined some of its substantial aspects and features. However, the later evolution of speculative Masonry shows, at the same time, how this specificity, at least on an esoteric plane, was relative. The surprising speed at which Freemasonry, having cast off its operative aspects, was grafted onto very different geographical, religious and political climates, having little to do with the Britain of those days, is evidence of the widespread cultural substrate it sprang forth from. Masonry found an easy welcome on the Continent, taking root in the fertile soil which Hermeticist humanism had prepared over at least three centuries, thus appearing as a universal message. Of course, Masonry, as it disseminated from Great Britain into Europe and the other continents, became a fragmented organism, but it was this very capacity for adapting to different local religious and political atmospheres that facilitated both diffusion and fragmentation; yet over three centuries it still preserves its fundamental esoteric specificity, beyond the ritual, ideological and political differences among masons.

⁶ The same floor pattern can be observed in one of the theatres of memory drawn by Fludd. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, illustration 18 b, 337.

⁷ For example, Seal-Coon ("The Birth of Freemasonry") places the origin of modern Masonry in the context of political and economic instability in seventeenth century Great Britain, suggesting that speculative lodges may have been havens for royalists persecuted by republicans.

⁸ Dyer ("Some Thoughts in the Origins") places the birth of speculative Masonry in the climate of the religious fault lines cutting through Great Britain, especially between Catholics, Protestants and Rosicrucian and occultist movements.

3.2 Egyptosophy in The Enlightenment

The influence of Egyptosophy on Western civilisation lasted well beyond Renaissance and Reformation – with little concern for Casaubon who in 1614 had definitively dated the *Corpus Hermeticum* to the first centuries of the common era, depriving it of all its aura of ancestral antiquity and especially leaving it an orphan of the god Hermes. Evolving in different forms and manifestations, Egyptosophy arrived regenerated in the times of the Enlightenment also because of its unique combination with politics; in European culture, especially in masonic culture, esoteric Egypt, with its doctrinal and iconographic apparatus, thus took on maximum visibility during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁹

Those who probably best grasped the emancipatory potential of Egyptosophy in politics as well as in culture were the French revolutionaries, steeped in the spirit of the Enlightenment – quite often masons –¹⁰ who also spread on a popular level the image of Egypt as source of primordial wisdom and womb of a universal ‘secular’ religion (erecting new temples in honour of Isis goddess of nature and reason, dotting cities with pyramids, obelisks and sphinxes¹¹ and introducing a new calendar modelled on that of ancient Egypt), also in order to consolidate and legitimise opposition to dominant Christianity. Isis was the core of revolutionary cult and with Napoleon, who during the Egyptian campaign in 1798 had been able to see the imposing monuments of the Nile from close up, became the guardian goddess of Paris.¹²

These developments (which coincided with renewed masonic activity in France after 1801, especially, as already noted, with the spread of lodges drawing their inspiration from Egypt),¹³ were widely supported by eminent scholars – all masonic affiliates.¹⁴ Among these, Court de Gébelin, winner of several awards of the Académie française, who in his work *Le Monde primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne* (1773), maintained that Paris was called after ‘Barris’, the name of the vessel of Isis, goddess of navigation, to whom

⁹ Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*.

¹⁰ Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*, 383-403.

¹¹ Humbert, *L’Égypte à Paris*.

¹² Hornung, *L’Égypte Esotérique*, 149-50. The revolutionary cult of Isis fell into obscurity in July 1801, when the Concordat signed by Bonaparte with Pope Pius VII restored Catholicism.

¹³ A lodge of the order *Les Amis du Desert* in Toulouse even designed a pyramid, in the same Egyptian style as the costumes worn by the initiates. Humbert, Pantazzi, Ziegler, *Egyptomania*, 252.

¹⁴ Baltrušaitis, *La quête d’Isis*, 28 ff.

the early cult of the city was dedicated, and that the cathedral of Nôtre Dame was founded on the remains of a temple devoted to her. The theme was also taken up, with some variations, by the intellectual and Girondist, Nicolas de Bonneville, who in *De l'Esprit des religions* (1791) went so far as to associate Isis with Jesus. The monumental work *L'Origine de tous les cultes* (1794) by the archaeologist Charles-François Dupuis extended the topics dealt with in the previous volumes, leading all religions back to an original cult of nature having its cradle in Egypt. Finally, Alexandre Lenoir, a disciple of Dupuis directly tied to the revolutionary currents and conservator of the Musée des Petits Augustins, published *Description chronologique et historique des monuments français* (1801) and *Explication des hiéroglyphes* (1809), where he tried to demonstrate the presence of Egyptian symbols in nearly every medieval church in France.

The myth of Egypt thus enjoyed a new climax (not only in France)¹⁵ rounded off by the aura of scientific rigour attributed to texts of a historic, artistic and archaeological nature which the art historian Baltrušaitis, with his acute capacity for deciphering Egyptian-themed anamorphoses and *aberrations*,¹⁶ calls a “full hallucination” where “imagination overflows”.¹⁷

3.3 Evolution of the Egyptian Myth in Modern Masonry

In this key, especially between the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, freemasons contributed significantly to enriching not only Egyptian mythology, but also to enriching Egyptosophical literature of a Hermetic orientation.

The late eighteenth century climate of Egyptophilia, which especially in Paris felicitously matched the political climate, influenced the expansion of Egyptian themes within Masonry too - themes which, as was seen before, were already present but not yet dominant. As an example, in 1798 in Egypt some scholars following Napoleon's expedition founded the masonic lodge *Saint Jean d'Ecosse du*

¹⁵ In Germany, for example, one can mention the *Treatise on the Mysteries of the Egyptians* wherewith the geologist Ignaz von Born (d. 1791), in 1784 in Vienna, launched the new *Journal für Freymaurer*, or again *Die Symbolische Weisheit der Ägypter aus den verborgensten Denkmälern des Altertums, ein Theil der Ägyptischen Maurerey, der zu Rom nicht verbannt worden*, published by Karl Philip Moritz in 1793.

¹⁶ In other words, those warped interpretations which in the artistic field give rise to a way of reading shapes, but in this specific context produced similar distortions of mythological projections.

¹⁷ Baltrušaitis, *La quête d'Isis*, 30, 41.

Grand Sphinx.¹⁸ On their return home, they brought to Paris numerous Egyptian bas-reliefs, which today figure in the museum collections of the Scottish Mother Lodge of France. Claude-Antoine Thory, the leading figure of the Scottish Philosophical Rite, had established there a sort of initiatory museum, to demonstrate how Masonry was the heir of the ancient Egyptian mysteries. To flesh this thesis out, between 1812 and 1813 he invited Alexandre Lenoir to hold a series of lectures, later collected by the conservator of the *Musée des Petits Augustins* in the work *La Franche-Maçonnerie rendue à sa véritable origine* (Paris, 1814).¹⁹ But a similar climate could also be found in England.²⁰

Egyptian imagery became increasingly important in every Rite. It became an organic element in newly founded orders specifically referring to Egypt (the Rite of Memphis, Cagliostro's Egyptian rite and the Rite of Misraïm mentioned at the beginning of this essay), but also in the works of the Grand Orient of France. When introducing a lecture on *Ancient Egypt and Masonry*, held in 1887 by the egyptologist Paul Guieysse for the Grand Orient de France,²¹ Louis Amiable²² noticed how until 1789 masonic initiation rites made no reference to esoteric Egypt. He observes that the *Recueil précieux de la maçonnerie Adonhiramite* by Louis Guillemain de Saint-Victor, published in 1786 and reprinted several times until 1789, in the part dedicated to the "apprentices' catechism", described them as three simple walks blindfolded.²³ But fourteen years later, rituals for the acceptance of masonic candidates had changed radically. According to Amiable, the change followed publication, always by Saint-Victor, in 1787, of *Origine de la Maçonnerie Adonhiramite*, where the author described in rich detail the complex and terrible trials based on the four elements to which Egyptian priests supposedly submitted initiates in the subterranean passages of Memphis. It was again Saint-Victor who described this 'update' to masonic initiation in *Recueil*

18 Cf. Collaveri, *Napoleone Imperatore*, 75-6; Galtier, "La société secrète égyptienne", 8.

19 Galtier, "La société secrète égyptienne".

20 Smith, George. *The Use and Abuse of the Free Masonry*. London 1783, quoted by Baltrušaitis, *La quête d'Isis*, 72 fn. 26. The tradition would last a long time; among works in English, cf. Chapman, *The Great Pyramid*; Wood, *On Ancient Egyptian Symbols*; Covey-Crump, *Egyptian Mysteries*; Fellows, *The Mysteries of Freemasonry*.

21 Guieysse, "L'Égypte ancienne".

22 Rituals of French Freemasonry began to distinguish themselves from those of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite after 1858, with progressive removal of any religious reference. The schism would become official in 1877, and in 1886 Amiable would lead a masonic commission which completed the adogmatic reform of the French rite, giving it a clear positivist imprint. More specifically initiatory rites however preserved analogies with the Ancient and Accepted Scottish rite.

23 Guieysse, "L'Égypte ancienne", 21.

élémentaire de la Franc-maçonnerie Adonhiramite (Jerusalem 1803): the candidate, loaded with irons, had to pass through a frame or diaphragm, accompanied by threatening words; his way hindered by obstacles which appeared dangerous to the candidate temporarily deprived of sight; passage through flames; tasting a bitter drink (indicating respectively purification through fire and water); a simulated branding with a red hot iron; and finally, bleeding, staged or actually practised.²⁴

Rituals were later simplified and, in Amiable's times became as they are today, reduced to a symbolic trial always inspired by a passage through the four elements.²⁵ Initiatory trials practised in lodges were certainly the result of later developments, partly due to the *Egyptomania* which had met with such success after Bonaparte's return from the Campaign in Egypt, and partly to the spread, since the 1730s, of a literature where Egyptian initiations were at the heart of the plot.

The forerunner of this kind of literature was the 'historical' novel published in 1731 in Paris by Abbé J. Terrasson, entitled *Sethos, histoire et vie tirée des monuments et anecdotes de l'ancienne Egypte, traduite d'un manuscrit grec*, which also inspired the libretto for Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The novel, which was repeatedly reprinted until 1812, introduced for the first time the idea that the Great Pyramid was a place of initiation,²⁶ and took on a value of historical evidence. But the list of pseudo-Hermetic works, authentic fiction, mere figments of the imagination of Terrasson's imitators, is a long one. To mention only works written at the turn of the nineteenth century, one of the most controversial was *Crata Repoa* - an expression the meaning of which is obscure -, or *Einweihungen in der alten geheimen Gesellschaft der Egyptischen Priester* (*Initiation into a secret society of ancient Egyptian priests*). The text appeared without publisher or printer in 1770 in Germany, where it was seen as an authentic description of Egyptian initiations. In 1778 it was published in Berlin by the Stahlbaum bookshop and then translated and published in 1821 in Paris by Antoine Bailleul, a member of the lodge *Les Tri-nosophes*.²⁷ It is possible to add to the list: *Les Initiations antiques*.

²⁴ Guieysse, "L'Egypte ancienne", 21.

²⁵ Farina, *Il libro completo dei rituali*.

²⁶ As Hornung (*L'Egypte Esotérique*, 35-7) says, until then in every Mediterranean culture, pyramids had been seen as burial sites, often associated with astronomy; but the hypothesis that they could be places of initiation, as soon as it arose, began to enjoy - and still enjoys - great success in esoteric milieux.

²⁷ Ragon, later known as publisher of a set of rituals, in a fn. on page 32 of his reproduction of *Crata Repoa* in 1860, claimed to be the French editor of the document, appointed by Bailleul to give proper form to a German manuscript with a French interlinear translation, written by a mason by the name of Köppen.

Recherches sur les initiations anciennes et modernes by Abbé Robin (1779), or *Les Plus Secrets Mystères des Hauts Grades de la Maçonnerie Dévoilés, ou le Vrai Rose-Croix, traduit de l'anglois, suivi du Noachite traduit de l'Allemand* (Jerusalem, 1774), by M. de Bérage.

Saint-Victor, in his *Origine de la Maçonnerie Adonhiramite*, therefore merely presented a variation on the theme.

This literary production weighed heavily on later Egyptosophy, since - by transferring Hermetic initiation into the heart of the Pyramids - it gave rise to a mythopoiesis which would mark not only masonic rituals and initiations but would also enter such divergent esoteric currents as Blavatsky's Theosophy and Aleister Crowley's occultism, continuing in the New Age movement to infiltrate contemporary collective imagination.

Going back to the opening question of this essay, that is the function of the Egyptian myth in Freemasonry, its origin and evolution show - beyond all appearance - how it is anything but ephemeral and occasional.

The complex path summarised here shows the multiple factors which contributed to building modern Masonry and especially its imagination. This was an evolution which, without any need to recur to direct derivations from legendary Oriental orders or ancient operative congregations, shows an ideal continuity of a metaphysical order with a flow of constantly reworked esoteric thinking, having its farthest roots in the Ptolemaic court. This flow has since then met with an important diffusion in Europe, overcoming cyclical phases of latency and regeneration.

While not denying the heavy dose of inventiveness and creativity to be found in masonic (and pre-masonic) literature of the Hermetic or Egyptosophic variety, which came together in building the various masonic founding myths and rituals, it would be a mistake to liquidate the process of construction of the Egyptian narrative as a mere "invention of tradition".²⁸ Rather, it should be seen as a reactivation, not without intentional and original reinterpretations and additions, of a mysteric thread which was the object of constant renewal ever since its remote origin. Right from the Middle Ages and especially in the Renaissance, it stimulated the construction of humanistic currents which fed on rationalist thinking and esoteric research as indissoluble aspects of Wisdom and Knowledge - one need only to think of the figure of the Jesuit father Athanasius Kircher (d. 1680), a convinced Hermeticist and also author of many works on medicine and geology, or of the mathematician and kabbalist magus John Dee (d. 1608), or of some founders of the British academy, the

²⁸ Cf. Hobsbawm, Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*; Dachez, *L'invention de la franc-maçonnerie*.

Royal Society,²⁹ who made no secret of their Hermetic propensities, or of Newton (d. 1727) himself, a practising alchemist - and inside Freemasonry, they helped to define and forge the spirit of the institution. In this sense, the patchwork upholding these mysteric readings does not invalidate the attempt - authentic in its motivations and purpose - to connect up again with a hermeneutics of the world, of Man and of spirituality rooted in Hellenistic syncretism, viewed through the lens of a mythologised Egypt.

In this context, the speech delivered by the President of the Council of the Grand Orient of France, Colfavrou, during the lecture mentioned above, is eloquent:

It is our duty to dissipate legends. Legends were long used; they helped to give our great institution what we can call tradition, always useful for fighting against certain traditions which I need not dwell on. But it is also necessary for us to seek in those traditions not so much the direct origin of the institution, as practised by us for over a century, as the origin of the efforts of the human spirit to emancipate itself from errors and especially from the clutches of despotism.³⁰

Like the Orient, Egypt emancipated from historical reality thus became the archetype and symbol of an esoteric aspiration which translates, on the one hand, the unknown of the Socratic mystery of human existence (and the initiation of the mason to self-knowledge), and on the other, the desire for freedom of thought; and it is with this composite spirit, and notwithstanding the obvious inconsistency of 'legends' and blatant mystifications, that it becomes a structural component of the masonic imagination.

29 Among the founding fathers of the Royal Society, the British academy of sciences established in 1660, were personalities close to the Hermetic currents, closely tied to the birth of speculative Freemasonry. These included Elias Ashmole and Robert Moray, known to have been among the first speculative masons to be accepted in Scottish lodges. Also Jean-Théophile Désaguliers, who in 1714 became a member of the Society and a few years later would be one of the founders of the Grand Lodge of England.

30 Guieysse, "L'Égypte ancienne", 4-5.

