

Hilâl. Studi turchi e ottomani 7

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e-ISSN 2610-8895  
ISSN 2610-9484

# Freemasonry and the Orient

## Esotericisms between the East and the West

Barbara De Poli



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari



Freemasonry and the Orient

**Hilâl**  
Studi turchi e ottomani

Serie diretta da  
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Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e sull'Africa Mediterranea

Sezione Asia Orientale e Antropologia

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Palazzo Vendramin dei Carmini

Dorsoduro 3462

30123 Venezia

e-ISSN 2610-9484

ISSN 2610-8917

URL <https://edizionicafoscar.unive.it/en/edizioni4/collane/hilal/>



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Venezia

**Edizioni Ca' Foscari** - Digital Publishing  
2019

Freemasonry and the Orient. Esotericisms between the East and the West  
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Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing  
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia  
Dorsoduro 3246 | 30123 Venezia  
<http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/> | [ecf@unive.it](mailto:ecf@unive.it)

1st edition October 2019

ISBN 978-88-6969-338-0 [ebook]

ISBN 978-88-6969-339-7 [print]

Certificazione scientifica delle Opere pubblicate da Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing: tutti i saggi pubblicati hanno ottenuto il parere favorevole da parte di valutatori esperti della materia, attraverso un processo di revisione anonima sotto la responsabilità del Comitato scientifico della collana. La valutazione è stata condotta in aderenza ai criteri scientifici ed editoriali di Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

Scientific certification of the works published by Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing: all essays published in this volume have received a favourable opinion by subject-matter experts, through an anonymous peer review process under the responsibility of the Scientific Committee of the series. The evaluations were conducted in adherence to the scientific and editorial criteria established by Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

Freemasonry and the Orient. Esotericisms between the East and the West / Barbara De Poli — 1. ed. — Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing, 2019. — 114 pp.; 23 cm. — (Hilâl; 7). — ISBN 978-88-6969-339-7.

URL <http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni/libri/978-88-6969-339-7/>

DOI <http://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-338-0>

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## **Freemasonry and the Orient**

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### **Abstract**

Modern Freemasonry, officially founded in London in 1717, has been the subject of many studies focused on its historic manifestations and influences in social and cultural contexts, but has received less attention in terms of its esoteric principles, especially in relation to one of its main founding archetypes: the Orient, and, in that mythological context, Egypt. References to the Orient already appear in the first regulatory document of Masonry, the *Anderson's Constitutions* of 1723, then become structural in certain later rites, like Misraïm and Memphis. In order to unravel the complex web mixing myth with history, recovering the possible thread with which masons so insistently tie together Masonry and Oriental esotericism, this essay investigates several, apparently diverse, aspects, which are actually complementary to and largely convergent with each other: the significance of the myth of the Orient (and especially the myth of Egypt) within Masonic doctrines; the itinerary of the Hermetic thought within European civilisation and its significance in Freemasonry; the numerous deviations and forgeries concerning the Oriental and Egyptian myth in speculative Freemasonry; the evolution of Hermetic thinking in the Islamic context and its influence on the construction of local esoteric dimensions (Sufism); different esoteric experiences of the Ottoman civilisation from the fifteenth century to the colonial era; convergences and contaminations, true or presumed, in pre-modern times, between esotericisms developed in Europe and in the Middle East; finally, the encounter between Masonry and Islam from the early nineteenth century to the present day. The aim of this book is, on the one hand, to point out mystifications and inventions that have characterised part of the Masonic narrative; on the other hand, to unearth the history of real contaminations and intersections between esotericism of the East and of the West, digging up the common matrix that nourished them.

**Keywords** Egypt. Esotericism. Freemasonry. Hermeticism. Islam. Middle East. Orient. Ottoman Empire. Sufism.





In memory of Maria Pia Pedani



## Introduction

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Truth and authenticity must always, and in the first place, be sought; nothing must be accepted as historical which has not the internal and external evidences of historical verity, and in treating the legends of Masonry - of almost every one of which it may be said, "Se non vero, è ben trovato" - if it is not true, it is well invented - we are not to reject them as altogether fabulous, but as having some hidden and occult meaning, which, as in the case of all other symbols, we must diligently seek to discover. But if it be found that the legend has no symbolic significance, but is simply the distortion of a historical fact, we must carefully eliminate the fabulous increment, and leave the body of truth to which it had been added, to have its just value.

Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry*, 8

As is well known, modern Freemasonry was officially founded in London in 1717, and from there it rapidly spread throughout the continent, adapting to various contexts with surprising speed. The original symbolic and esoteric content underwent developments and evolutions - from British theism to adogmatic French Masonry, from the Scottish rite to the most spurious Egyptian ones - but the many expressions of Freemasonry preserved specific features going back to the first regulatory document, *Anderson's Constitutions* of 1723, which made it a universal phenomenon: its ideally non-political nature, its ecumenical spirit that allowed the worshipper of any religion to join, the initiatory nature defined by secret, aimed at perfecting both the spiritual and the earthly nature of man through a commitment of a metaphysical but also worldly order, to improve society.

Quite clearly, this is a simplification of a complex phenomenon, which has been the subject of many studies focused on its historical

manifestations and influences in social and cultural contexts, but it has received less attention in terms of its esoteric principles, especially in relation to one of the main founding archetypes of Freemasonry: the Orient, and in that mythological context, Egypt.

References to the Orient already appear in the first regulatory document of Masonry, *Anderson's Constitutions* of 1723, then become structural in certain later rites, like Misraïm and Memphis. No doubt exists concerning the substantially symbolic and metaphorical nature of Oriental references in masonic mythopoiesis and in certain rites that define the whole initiatory journey of the mason: no serious specialist could suppose masonic rituals actually derived from ancient Egyptian cults or other traditions of the Levant, and even masonic historians rule out any direct derivation, even for rites that specifically refer to Egypt.<sup>1</sup> However, the symbolic and esoteric value of the 'Oriental' myth grafted onto the initiatory path of the freemason seems to us to be less coincidental than it appears to other scholars<sup>2</sup>, and I think it should not be neglected. In fact, it is significant from two points of view: the supposed Oriental derivation of Masonry places a part of its actual doctrinal sources on a metaphorical level; on the other hand, it confers legitimacy to a meeting between Oriental and European esotericisms.

In order to unravel the complex web mixing myth with history, recovering the possible thread with which masons so insistently tie together Masonry and Oriental esotericism, in this essay I will investigate several, apparently diverse aspects, which are actually complementary to and largely convergent with each other.

First of all, I will give an account of the myth of the Orient (and especially the myth of Egypt) within masonic doctrines, defining its value. Then I will follow the itinerary of Hermetic doctrines of various origin within European civilisation, highlighting their role in defining the currents of thought that, from the Renaissance on, nourished esoteric culture in the context of Christianity and finally converged in Freemasonry. Then, I will trace the Oriental and Egyptian myth in speculative Freemasonry, following its imaginary world, deviations and forgeries, especially when Egyptosophy gave way to Egyptomania, after Napoleon's campaign.

I will move on to trace the evolution of Hermetic thinking in the Islamic context and its influence on the construction of local esoter-

<sup>1</sup> For example, Gastone Ventura, who in the seventies was Sovereign Grand Hierophant General and Sovereign Grand Master of the Ancient and Primitive Oriental Order of Misraïm and Memphis, when telling the history of the Memphis order, attributes no value to the mythology handed down by its founder, Gabriel Marconis, who set the precursors of the Order in Pharaonic Egypt. Ventura wrote: "The claim of the creator of the Rite, made to confer prestige on it with a patina of presumed antiquity, is baseless". Ventura, *I riti massonici*, 60. See also *Franco-Maçonnerie et Egypte*, 3-6.

<sup>2</sup> Porset, *Le voile de Saïs*, 33 ff.; Révauger, *Franco-maçonnerie et orientalisme*, 22.

ic dimensions, highlighting the various sources of Sufism. I will focus on the esoteric experiences of the Ottoman civilisation: from Egypt to Anatolia, from the fifteenth century to the colonial era, Istanbul left much room in its empire for the most spurious manifestations of Islamic spirituality, certainly linked to orthopraxis but often penetrated by much more ancient and fundamentally heterodox components.

Next, I will deal with convergences and contaminations, true or presumed, in pre-modern times, pointing out the distance between superficial and substantial affinities, identifying some actual moments of contact through the centuries, putting aside any will-o'-the-wisp hypothesis of direct seeding.

The myth will in fact become even more significant when the Royal Art spreads in the very Levant of which it claimed to be the heir, in the eighteenth and even more in the nineteenth century. Especially in an Ottoman context, in Anatolia, in the area of Syria and Lebanon and in Egypt, stories of convergence between Oriental and European esotericisms were told, which would forge the masonic spirit, marking new founding traditions especially in the wake of Egyptomania – above all in order to provide the foundation of spurious masonic orders such as the Rite of Memphis.

In the context of the political, human, but also spiritual encounter that the European thrust towards the southern shores of the Mediterranean implied in the imperialist age, real convergences between Western and Eastern esoteric orders took shape when Muslims belonging to Sufi organisms became masons. Anatolia saw a particularly fertile convergence between Freemasonry and Bektashiyya. As Thierry Zarcone clearly pointed out in his studies, the Bektashi dervishes saw lodges as similar orders, with teachings perfectly compatible with their own. This was not the only case: three key individuals, 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'irī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Rizā Tevfik – who from being Sufis became masons – show how complex the meeting between European and Islamic esoteric thinking could be; but they also show how the spiritual dimension could overlap with political involvement and how the social and political context could affect the motivation, purpose and outcome of certain convergences.

Finally, I discuss the encounter between Masonry and Islam in literary currents which, from the early nineteenth century to the present day, have built unlikely hypotheses on supposed Oriental and Western derivations, based on symmetries of a formal substance: some true, most unreliable, some entirely made up. This phenomenon led to a bulky production generally inspired by Theosophical and neospiritualist currents, which as a sort of grey propaganda fed confusion and mystification, actually masking traces of more authentic contaminations.

However, on another front, in the twentieth century, both the passage of European intellectuals from Masonry to Sufism and academ-

ic research on esoteric dimensions and metaphysical thinking in the Islamic context would contribute to restoring the sources and meanings of initiatory paths in the Levant, affording recognition to the real elements of convergence with Western esoteric history, on the part of the Europeans as well.

# 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.

<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** Zarccone, *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 Kedivè 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 Kedivè, 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 substantial 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 mythopoeses 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, une 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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<sup>23</sup> Spieth, *Napoleon's Sorcerers*.

<sup>24</sup> 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*.

<sup>25</sup> Ventura, *I riti massonici*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> 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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<sup>31</sup> Morris, *Freemasonry in the Holy Land*, 223.

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

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

<sup>34</sup> 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-

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

<sup>36</sup> 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.

## 2 Egyptosophy and Hermeticism in Esoteric European Tradition

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**Summary** 2.1 The Origins of Egyptosophy. – 2.2 Egyptosophy in Medieval Masonic Tradition. – 2.3 Egyptosophy during the Renaissance and the Development of Modern Masonic Culture.

### 2.1 The Origins of Egyptosophy

On the symbolic horizon of Freemasonry, it was Egypt above all which took on an axial value, as repository for a heritage of continuity over the millennia.

What Egyptologist Erik Hornung calls ‘Egyptosophy’<sup>1</sup> – that is the fertile and heterogeneous complex of traditions which attribute to Egypt the source of every occult wisdom and knowledge – has remote origins, deeply rooted in European culture.<sup>2</sup> The mother of this system of wisdom and the keystone of Egyptosophy is Hermeticism, a doctrine concerning the divinity and spiritual elevation of Man, through an initiatory Way, full of astrological and alchemical contents and Egyptian magical practices. The home of the Hermetic tradition is considered to be Egypt, and its founder Hermes Trismegistus, the Greek name for the Egyptian god Thot; however only a few doctrinal precedents of Hermeticism can be found in Pharaonic

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<sup>1</sup> Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hornung, *L’Égypte Esotérique*; Baltrušaitis, *La quête d’Isis*; Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt*.

Egypt. These were especially present during the decline of that civilisation, in the Late Period (664-332 BCE) when Thot, already the divinity of wisdom associated with the moon and inventor of writing, turned into a universal God presiding over the world of astrology and occult sciences. However, the typical features of Hermeticism (including alchemy)<sup>3</sup> reveal themselves as typically Hellenistic and in debt especially to oriental contaminations.<sup>4</sup> They were especially widespread in the Ptolemaic court (305-30 BCE), a time of fertile syncretistic cross-pollination between the Greek and the late Egyptian cultures, and found their supreme expression in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and in the *Asclepius* – traditionally attributed to Hermes Trismegistus himself<sup>5</sup> and hence deemed to be extremely ancient. The collections of dialogues which make up these works, considered to be the foundation of wisdom of the Hermetic and Egyptosophical tradition of every age, but actually probably compiled in Greek in the second and third centuries CE, are substantially nourished by popular Greek thought, where one mainly finds strains of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoa and the Gnostics, as well as Judaism and probably Zoroastrianism. They outline what Frances Yates defined as:

Actually a religion, a cult without temples or liturgy, followed in the mind alone, a religious philosophy or philosophical religion containing a gnosis.<sup>6</sup>

It was against this Hellenistic intellectual background that, in the name of Hermes/Thot, Greek scholars began to refer to a legendary Egyptian wisdom – which progressively took on a mythical dimension –<sup>7</sup> establishing a canon which would spread through Europe and become a fixture in the esotericist traditions of the Old Continent. It would accompany the diffusion of the Hellenistic cult of Isis (“generated by Hermes” according to Greek aretalogies of the first century BCE) which, from the Greek islands and the Piraeus reached Rome in 38 CE,<sup>8</sup> after having crossed Sicily and Campania and then left its

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<sup>3</sup> There exists no trace of alchemy in Pharaonic Egypt, though the oldest alchemical texts (dated second century BCE and all in Greek) attribute its origin to the mysteries of Egyptian temples. Hornung, *L’Égypte Esotérique*, 47 ff.; Daumas, *L’alchimie a-t-elle une origine égyptienne?*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ramelli, *Corpus Hermeticum*; Festugière, *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismegiste*.

<sup>5</sup> It was only toward the end of the second century BCE that Thot, whom the Greeks equated with Hermes, became for the Egyptians the ‘Three Times Greatest’ – hence the Greek name Trismegistos, which first appeared in the third century CE.

<sup>6</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Froidefond, *Le Mirage égyptien*; Vasunia, *The Gift of the Nile*.

<sup>8</sup> It was Caligula who ordered the construction of the temple of *Isis campensis* in the Campus Martius.

traces throughout the Empire to Gaul and Germany.<sup>9</sup>

In the Middle Ages, when Christianity prevailed, interest in Hermeticism and Egyptosophy declined but never completely disappeared; indeed, it is beyond doubt that some myths arose in popular milieux in those days – first of all, the one about the foundation of Paris on the site of a temple of Isis – <sup>10</sup> but it should also be remembered that Hermes Trismegistus was mentioned as a philosophical authority of the past by Augustine, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura.

Egyptosophical themes cross the Middle Ages like an underground river, gradually growing as European culture began to receive the Hermetic wisdom cultivated in the Orient by the Arabs and transferred to the West through the Holy Land during the Crusades, but especially through southern Italy and Muslim Spain. The phase of confrontation and encounter with the Islamic world, which characterised the centuries from the eleventh to the fourteenth, would be decisive for the recovery of the Egyptosophical myth in European culture and its later introjection into masonic culture.

## 2.2 Egyptosophy in Medieval Masonic Tradition

Speculative Freemasonry, from its origins, explicitly mentioned the Middle Ages as the era of its foundation. In fact, the first Constitutions, drawn up by the Reverend Anderson and published in London in 1723, contained the “History, Laws, Charges, Orders, Regulations, and Usages, of the Right Worshipful Fraternity of Accepted Free Masons; Collected from their general Records and Their faithful Traditions of many Ages”,<sup>11</sup> that is the statutory documents of the medieval guilds which the new masons claimed to be the heirs of, taking on their symbolic and mythological aspects, and dismissing the operative ones.

It is not important here to establish the reliability of an alleged derivation, or to try to unravel the extraordinarily intricate thread which influences and genealogies have generated across the centuries among currents or bodies with a real or assumed esoteric and initiatory vocation in Europe. In the absence of documentary evidence, the question is and probably will always remain open and debated among scholars.<sup>12</sup> From the specific point of view of this study,

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<sup>9</sup> Baltrušaitis, *La quête d’Isis*, 9-12.

<sup>10</sup> Baltrušaitis, *La quête d’Isis*, 81-111.

<sup>11</sup> Paillard, *Reproduction of the Constitutions*, 1-24 of the original document.

<sup>12</sup> The transition from operative to speculative Freemasonry, about which various theories exist, is a question which has not been solved by historians. The theory which

which focuses on the history of ideas, continuity among the various orders has a mythical and symbolic value. According to this key, one can examine some contents which operative and speculative masonic mythopoiesis appear to imply.

Medieval and Renaissance Masonry was varied and regionally and locally diverse. The most ancient statutory document known for operative Masonry are the *Statutes of Bologna* of 1248, but the texts that Anderson's Constitutions were based on, and which are closest to them, were of British origin: they are the *Old Charges*, especially the *Regius Poem* (1390), the *Cooke Manuscript* (1410-40), the *Melrose Manuscript* (a copy of 1674 which refers to an original of 1581) and the *Grand Lodge No.1 Manuscript* (1583). Of a later date are the *Dumfries No.4 Manuscript* (1710), the *Sloane 3329* (1700), the manuscripts of the *Haughfoot* collection (1696-1715) and the *Wilkinson Manuscript* (1727). To these, must be added the *Schaw Statutes* (1598-99) drawn up in Scotland.

Without going into the specific features of each text,<sup>13</sup> the masonic mythology which normally preceded the statutory part in these documents, later taken up by Anderson, told the origins of the Craft in the following terms: God as creator of the Universe gave Man the Arts, including the most important of all, Geometry which measures the Earth. In the science of Geometry, the mason's Craft is what is most important, since – as the Bible says – it was the first to be created. The first founder of Geometry and Masonry was Jubal, direct descendant of Adam and overseer of works when Cain built the city of Enoch. From then onwards, the masonic tradition was handed down through the millennia. Members of the Order included: Abraham, who transmitted the teachings to the Egyptians; Noah who saved mankind from the flood; Moses; David, under whom masons began building the Temple; Solomon; Pythagoras and the philoso-

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enjoys most credit – the *transition theory* illustrated in the imposing *History of Freemasonry* by Robert Gould and better defined by Harry Carr in the 1950-60s (Carr, “600 years of Craft Ritual”; *Harry Carr's World of Freemasonry*; “Transition from Operative to Speculative Masonry”) – holds that speculative Masonry already began in the 16th century in Scotland, when the so-called ‘accepted’ masons began to join masonic lodges. These were men – nobility, bourgeoisie, clergy – whom the brotherhood wanted to honour, or who brought honour to the brotherhood by their presence, even though they did not work as craftsmen. The phenomenon increased considerably following the Reformation which led to a decline in the building of churches and convents, and hence also in the number of construction workers. In England, in the second half of the 17th century, the prevalence of accepted masons led the lodges to lose all their professional features and turn into cultural and philanthropic associations which made use of rites and symbols inherited from ancient guilds of freemasons. Cf. Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*; Cazzaniga, “La Massoneria come problema storiografico” and “Nascita della massoneria”; Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*.

**13** Cf. Bonvicini, *Massoneria Antica*; Knoop, Jones, Hamer, *The Early Masonic Catechism*; Langlet, *Les textes fondateurs*.

pher Hermes, who taught mankind the sciences; Euclid, one of the founders of geometry in Egypt. Always according to the myth, in the 10th century, King Æthelstan<sup>14</sup> laid down the rules Masons were supposed to observe, according to which “the [a]foresaid art begun in the land of Egypt [...] and so it went from land to land, and from kingdom to kingdom”.<sup>15</sup>

The mythical references of these documents are basically Biblical, or in any case limited to the Christian tradition, including references to Hermes, who as a philosopher was often mentioned by theologians of the time. Masons’ guilds were immersed in the Christian holiness of their work, mainly focused on building churches and cathedrals, embodying the dwelling place and body of Christ. They illustrated the teachings of the Church, represented in symbolisms which define the orientation of buildings, the layout of the interior and their iconographic contents.<sup>16</sup> Yet the influences and new elements derived from the Orient, which would give a significant contribution to the renewal of European symbolic references, also affected the masonic craft.

At the courts of the expanding Muslim empire, an extraordinary work of translation<sup>17</sup> both drew from and added to the scientific and philosophical knowledge disseminated through a territory ranging from India to North Africa: first of all, Greek science and treatises (the works of Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Hippocrates, Galen) and then Hellenistic, Zoroastrian, Persian and other ‘oriental’ doctrines, cultivated by Arabs (Muslim and Christian) and Jews, together with studies of mathematics, algebra and astronomy, but also astrology, alchemy, Hermeticism, magic and Kabbalah.

Already in the 12th century, knowledge developed in the Orient penetrated into Europe from the Norman court in Palermo of Frederick II, and especially from the Spanish peninsula.<sup>18</sup> In Toledo, reconquered from the Muslims in 1087, an academy of translators (Adelard of Bath, Plato Tiburtinus, Robert of Chester, Hermann of Carinthia, Rudolf of Bruges, Gerard of Cremona, not to mention the contribution of Spanish Jews: Hugo of Santalla, John of Seville, Maimonides, Isaac the Blind) worked at the Latin version of hundreds of Greek

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<sup>14</sup> Æthelstan (d. 939) was the first Anglo-Saxon king to rule over all of England.

<sup>15</sup> The *Matthew Cooke Manuscript*. URL <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/texts/cooke.html>. The text was further elaborated in dozens of other manuscripts, which added the theme of Noah’s Ark or expanded the narrative of Solomon’s Temple and its architect, Hiram Abiff, who appears for the first time in 18th century manuscripts.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mâle, *L’Art religieux du XII siècle en France* and *L’Art religieux au XIII siècle en France*.

<sup>17</sup> Gutas, *Greek Thought*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Rodinson, *Il fascino dell’Islam*; Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*; Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*; Nallino, “Civiltà musulmana”; and, with all due caution, Hunke, *Le soleil d’Allah brille sur l’Occident*.



and Arab scientific and philosophical works (the *Collectio Toledana*).

Philosophical and scientific contributions (especially mathematics and medicine, where the *Canon* of Avicenna was commonly adopted) were often accompanied by the transmission of Hermetic doctrines, mainly propagated by Islamicized Spain. In this particular esoteric culture, alchemy met with special success. Since 1144, when Robert of Chester first translated an Arabic work on the theme into Latin, the Art began to circulate in Europe in the wake of the translations of Arab manuscripts, which in their turn had been developed from Greek originals. First of all, the *Tabula smaragdina*, which it was claimed Apollonius of Tyana had found under a statue at the tomb of Hermes, but was actually the work of an Arab alchemist of the 8th or 9th century, and which soon became the Bible of Western alchemists. Alchemical science spread further during the 13th century, and in the Renaissance it mixed in with works of sympathetic and astral magic, such as the *Picatrix*;<sup>19</sup> no less influential than alchemy was the Kabbalistic doctrine,<sup>20</sup> transmitted by Sephardic Jews from Muslim Spain, an attempt to know God through magic operations based on elaborate mystic combinations of the ten *sefirot* (the most common names of God) and of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Greek, Arab and Jewish works played a decisive role in generating humanistic thought in the Middle Ages,<sup>21</sup> the precursor of the Renaissance reawakening; and there is no doubt how widespread they were in the West, including Great Britain, where speculative Masonry was born. Masonic lodges, which reached their greatest development at the time, took on codes and by-laws where the new ideas and intellectual trends shared in redefining the cultural landscape, even though firmly within a Christian framework. In the preamble to the early fifteenth century *Cooke Manuscript*, is stated that: “The [a]foresaid art begun in the land of Egypt, [...] and so it went from land to land, and from kingdom to kingdom” and that the seven sciences, written on two pillars after the flood were found, and that “a great clerk that [was] called Pythagoras found that one, and Hermes, the philosopher, found that other”, evidence of how operative Masonry had introjected the new (old) canons so widespread at the time.

<sup>19</sup> The anthology by Abū al-Qāsim Maslama al-Majrītī, dating back to the 11th century, was widely known in the fifteenth century through a translation from Arabic into Latin performed under the orders of King Alfonso the Wise of Castile in 1256. According to Garin (*Lo zodiaco della vita*, 53), the work “fits all the vast magical and astrological heritage of the ancient and medieval world into a theoretical framework which is both Platonic and Hermetic”.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Sholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* and *Alchemy and Kabbalah*; Busi, *La Qabbalah* and *La Qabbalah visiva*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Le Goff, *Les intellectuels au Moyen Age*; Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*.

However, though the influence of oriental (Islamic or Byzantine) art on Medieval European art is undeniable,<sup>22</sup> to actually claim the specific influence of Hermetic or alchemical culture on architecture and art of the time means to run after a will-o'-the wisp.<sup>23</sup> Alchemical, astrological and Hermetic texts were already circulating in the twelfth century and, in the thirteenth century schools of Chartres, Solomon was already indicated as the master of oriental and Jewish science and of the Hermetic doctrine, father of magic knowledge and of the secrets and mysteries of science.<sup>24</sup> But it would be a bold step to claim that Hermetic contents had precociously infiltrated the Art of Masonry and that their allegories can be found in Gothic works.<sup>25</sup> Unmistakable Hermetic allusions burst into the fields of art and architecture starting in the fifteenth century. It was in fact during the Renaissance that Hermeticism met with its greatest fortune, and it was then that the Hermetic culture came to maturity, which would provide the decisive esoteric contribution to the establishment of eighteenth century speculative Masonry.

### 2.3 Egyptosophy during the Renaissance and the Development of Modern Masonic Culture

From the fifteenth century on, Hermeticism enjoyed its most important Western 'rediscovery', finding vast expression in artistic and literary milieux, mediated by alchemical, mystical and Neoplatonic circles of the times.<sup>26</sup> A decisive element in the new spread of Hermetic culture was the translation by Marsilio Ficino of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which came to Italy from the Byzantine Orient, and proposed

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**22** Baltrušaitis dedicated a large part of his volume on fantastic in the Middle Ages (*Il Medioevo Fantastico*) on the special influence which Islamic art had on Medieval iconography. Among the vast scientific literature on the influence that Islamic art and architecture had in Europe, see, for example, Howard, *Venice & the East*.

**23** For example in Fulcanelli (pseudonym of an unknown alchemist of the twentieth century), *Le mystère des Cathédrales* and *Les Demeures philosophales*.

**24** William of St-Thierry (d. 1148), a close friend of Saint Bernard, is alleged to have exclaimed: "The brethren of Mont-Dieu! They bring to the darkness of the West the light of the Orient, and in the icy weather of Gaul, the religious fervour of ancient Egypt, that is the solitary path, mirror of celestial life". Le Goff, *Les intellectuels au Moyen Age*, 28, 53-64.

**25** Compare, for example, the dubious interpretation which Bonvicini (*Massoneria Antica*, 330 ff.) offers of some symbols of the Complex of Santo Stefano in Bologna, or *Le Symbolisme Hermétique*, by Wirth, with the aforementioned studies by Mâle on Medieval iconographies of French churches.

**26** Cf. Calvesi, *Il mito dell'Egitto*; Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita*; Zambelli, *L'apprendista stregone*; and especially Yates, *Giordano Bruno*; *The Art of Memory*; *The Occult Philosophy*.

Egypt as the depository of primordial wisdom. Hermeticism favoured the circulation of a concept of the divinity with a pantheistic and immanentist character, the divine/macrocosm Unity reflected in Man/microcosm, which this divinity sums up within Itself.<sup>27</sup> This vision nourished a special current of humanism,<sup>28</sup> which with Hermes' revelation, deemed to be more ancient than that of the Bible and anchored to the spirit of nature, also legitimated nascent modern science – Hermes is mentioned, for example, by Copernicus to justify his new cosmic system. In this outlook, Hermetic contents, blending with Platonic ones, nourished the culture of the Renaissance: they established a continuity of mysteries which, fed by a wisdom rich in magic, astrology, alchemy and Kabbalah (once and for all conjoined to Hermeticism in the philosophy of Pico della Mirandola) in the name of the Thrice-Great sought a reconciliation with Christian doctrine<sup>29</sup> yet at the same time sought to distance itself from it. Initiation into the mysteries of the macrocosm and the microcosm, secret practice of magic, symbolic representation were all organic components of Renaissance Hermetic thought, developed by Ficino, expanded by Pico della Mirandola and taken to its extreme consequences by Giordano Bruno.<sup>30</sup>

Against such a cultural background, iconographies and esoteric allegories with specific Hermetic references entered the very heart of Catholicism;<sup>31</sup> but above all it was architecture which in those days underwent a new theorisation, inspired by Neoplatonic and Hermetic principles, whereby architects imagined churches founded on an ideal circular plan – which finally took on almost magic values – as representation of the macrocosm reflected in the microcosm,<sup>32</sup> protected by a dome, the image of the cosmic vault. As Leon Battista Alberti (d. 1472) wrote, “whatever decoration is used on walls and pavement should pertain to ‘pure philosophy’”.<sup>33</sup> Leon Battista Alber-

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<sup>27</sup> The formula of the *Tabula smaragdina* states: *quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius ad perpetranda miracula Rei Unius*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Garin, *Medioevo e rinascimento* and *La cultura filosofica*.

<sup>29</sup> Hermes, as contemporary of Moses, is supposed to have prophesied Christianity.

<sup>30</sup> Busi, Ebgi, *Giovanni Pico*; Yates, *Giordano Bruno*.

<sup>31</sup> Witness to this can be found in the depiction of the Trismegistus on the floor of the Cathedral of Siena, made around 1482, where Hermes appears next to a figure wearing a turban; or where he appears, together with rich Egyptian-inspired iconography, in the Hall of the Saints of the apartments of Pope Alexander VI Borgia in Rome, made by Pinturicchio between 1492 and 1494. His court was also attended by the alchemist, astrologer and egyptologist Annio da Viterbo, who imagined the origin of the Etruscan and Italic peoples to lie in Egypt. Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*, 32 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Wittkower, *Architectural Principles*.

<sup>33</sup> Wittkower, *Architectural Principles*, 9.

ti is also believed to be one of the possible authors of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, an allegorical romance steeped in pseudo-Egyptian mysticism, which operates a Hermetic synthesis of Hellenistic, Arab and Jewish wisdom.<sup>34</sup>

While theorisation of the golden section, which made an explicit synthesis of harmony and mysticism through mathematics, opened up new architectural prospects, Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, while not unknown in the Middle Ages, was translated several times and took on exemplary importance for Renaissance builders steeped in Hermetic culture.

One author who adopted Vitruvius for an evident and particular metaphysical representation was Giulio Camillo (d. 1544), an outstanding personality of the sixteenth century who combined the Platonic and the Hermetic-Kabbalistic ideas transmitted by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola with the Art of Memory. This was a memorisation technique of Greek origin (but according to Giordano Bruno, invented by Hermes Trismegistus), with a purely practical aim, useful as a support for rhetoric, based on visualising emblematic images able to evoke concepts and words and placing them within an architectural framework (rooms or buildings). Starting in the Middle Ages and especially in the Renaissance, the art of memory gradually took on meaning tied to symbolic and esoteric considerations,<sup>35</sup> nourished by the Hermetic and Kabbalistic thinking of the times.<sup>36</sup> Giulio Camillo, basing himself on Vitruvius, imagined a wooden *Theatre of Memory*, famous throughout Europe because it contained, depicted and 'memorised' in its shape and decorations the harmony of the universe, where the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm expressed itself through a 'veiled' or occult symbolism.<sup>37</sup>

Considering the extensive contribution by Hermetic currents in the context of construction as well, it would be surprising if their principles had not passed into operative masonic milieux – or at least into some of them: the same canons, repeatedly taken up in mason-

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<sup>34</sup> The *Hypnerotomachia*, more commonly attributed to a certain Francesco Colonna, was illustrated and printed anonymously in Venice by Aldo Manuzio in 1499. We refer especially to the image of the *Three Doors*, where a youth must choose among three models of knowledge or 'paths' typical of the Hermetic tradition: theology (*theodoxia*), science (*cosmodoxia*) and love (*erototrophos*), represented by three doors, dug into the rock on the side of a mountain, symbol of Wisdom. Each door is surmounted by letters indicating the 'path' in Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as if to underline the contribution of such traditions to late Medieval and Renaissance culture. Calvesi, *Il mito dell'Egitto*, 10, 14-15.

<sup>35</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*.

<sup>36</sup> In this context, the Scot Alexander Dickson, in 1584, wrote a treatise where the art of memory was placed in a Hermetic conceptual framework. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 266-86; Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*, 16 ff.

<sup>37</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 157-8.

ic documents over decades and centuries, must have gradually enriched the symbolic meaning they transmitted, introjecting the new metaphysical projections which were becoming increasingly widespread in educated context. The hypothesis, repeatedly suggested by Yates,<sup>38</sup> seems to find confirmation in Stevenson's studies on Scottish Freemasonry.<sup>39</sup> In the peculiar environment which gave rise to speculative Freemasonry, a blending between the symbolic-esoteric aspect of operative lodges (rituals and secrets associated with initiation and the practice of a craft, including the *Mason Word*)<sup>40</sup> and the Hermetic aspect appears to be quite likely and is supported by several clues. It can hardly be by chance that article 13 of the *Masonic statutes* drawn up by William Schaw in 1599 says that every apprentice and companion should be examined in "the art of memorie and the science thairof". Schaw himself was "trained in every liberal art and excelled in architecture",<sup>41</sup> had experience as a diplomat and had made many trips in Europe; especially, it has been ascertained that in the Scottish court, where he was well known, Hermetic ideas were circulating and interest was expressed in the Art of Memory, also thanks to the disciples of Giordano Bruno, such as Alexander Dickson.<sup>42</sup>

The Renaissance long gone by, in the age of the Reformation, Hermetic thinking continued to nourish itself in European culture. In 1614, the first Rosicrucian manifestos<sup>43</sup> mysteriously appeared in Kassel, in Germany, followed two years later by the publication of the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* by the Lutheran pastor Johann Valentin Andreae. They gave body to a doctrine which was the direct emanation of the highest expression of Hermetic culture, in its mystic and occult aspects, expressed through alchemical and kabbalistic science. Rosicrucianism generated a vast following: in the seventeenth century, many esoteric bodies referred to the Rosicrucians, and this brought about a new wave of literature on Hermes Trismegistus and the superior wisdom of ancient Egypt.<sup>44</sup> The admission by Andreae himself that his had been a mere *ludibrium* – a 'joke'

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38 Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 274 and *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 206-19.

39 Cf. Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 24, 125 ff.; Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*.

40 The Mason Word is a secret word or sign of recognition which was used in sixteenth century Scotland to allow masons belonging to a certain operative lodge to recognise each other. Numerous legends arose concerning it, for example that it could make those who used it invisible. Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 125 ff.

41 From the tombstone inscription in Latin in Dunfermline Abbey. Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 26.

42 Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 85 ff.

43 Cf. Arnold, *Histoire des Rose-Croix*; Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.

44 Cf. Borrichius, *Hermetis Ægyptiorum*; Kriegsmann, *Conjectaneorum de Germanicae gentis origine*; Hannemann, *L'ovum hermetico*.

of little worth –<sup>45</sup> made no dent in the evocative power and the fertile reproductive potential of the message.

The Rosicrucian manifestos which circulated in the seventeenth century contributed to welding together Hermeticism, alchemy and kabbalistic symbolism inside British lodges,<sup>46</sup> where one finds the first evidence of acceptance of non-operative ('accepted') Masons, who stood out because of their special interest in esotericism. For example, I may mention Robert Moray (accepted in the Edinburgh Lodge in 1641), a military engineer, intimate correspondent of the Jesuit philosopher Athanasius Kircher, enthusiastic Egyptophile and son-in-law of Lord Balcarres, collector of Hermetic and Rosicrucian texts. Elias Ashmole, accepted in Warrington in 1646, on the other hand was an antiquarian, but also a well known alchemist, astrologer and kabbalist. Since the first known speculative Masons had a clear bent for Hermetic sciences, it may be legitimately suspected that these themes were especially listened to and developed in masonic milieux.

The spirit of the times emerges in Henry Adamson's poem, written and published in the 1630s, entitled "The Muses Threnodie, Or, Mirthfull Mournings on the Death of Master Gall":

Thus *Gall* assured me it would be so,  
And my good *Genius* truly doth it know:  
For what we do presage is not in grosse  
For we be brethren of the *Rosie Crosse*;  
We have the *Mason Word* and second sight,  
Things for to come we can foretell aright<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Maclean, "The Impact of the Rosicrucian Manifestos".

<sup>47</sup> Marshall, *History of Perth*, 520.



## 3 Egyptosophy and Modern Freemasonry

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**Summary** 3.1 Hermeticism and Speculative Freemasonry. – 3.2 Egyptosophy in The Enlightenment. – 3.3 Evolution of the Egyptian Myth in Modern Masonry.

### 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.<sup>1</sup> The places which Renaissance esotericists had conceived to contain and fix Hermetic meanings (Giulio Camil-

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<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> or again the *Theater of the World* for the alchemist Robert Fludd),<sup>3</sup> 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)<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> The chequerboard floor reminds one of the duality of human nature, spiritual and material, the 'black' and the 'white' in-

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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 theorisations is hard to deny.

nate in each of us.<sup>6</sup> 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 political<sup>7</sup> and religious<sup>8</sup> 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 –<sup>10</sup> 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 sphinxes<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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),<sup>13</sup> were widely supported by eminent scholars – all masonic affiliates.<sup>14</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*.

<sup>10</sup> Giarrizzo, *Massoneria e illuminismo*, 383-403.

<sup>11</sup> Humbert, *L’Égypte à Paris*.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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)<sup>15</sup> 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*,<sup>16</sup> calls a “full hallucination” where “imagination overflows”.<sup>17</sup>

### 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*

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<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Baltrušaitis, *La quête d'Isis*, 30, 41.

*Grand Sphinx*.<sup>18</sup> 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).<sup>19</sup> But a similar climate could also be found in England.<sup>20</sup>

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,<sup>21</sup> Louis Amiable<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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*

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

<sup>19</sup> Galtier, "La société secrète égyptienne".

<sup>20</sup> 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*.

<sup>21</sup> Guieysse, "L'Égypte ancienne".

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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,<sup>26</sup> 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 Trinitosophes*.<sup>27</sup> It is possible to add to the list: *Les Initiations antiques*.

<sup>24</sup> Guieysse, "L'Egypte ancienne", 21.

<sup>25</sup> Farina, *Il libro completo dei rituali*.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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 Rob-in (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*, there-fore 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”.<sup>28</sup> 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

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

Royal Society,<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.

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**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’Egypte ancienne”, 4-5.





## 4 The Esoteric Culture in the Islamic Middle East

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**Summary** 4.1 Brotherhoods and Esotericism in the Classical Ages. – 4.2 The Islamic Hermetic Tradition. – 4.3 Islamic Esotericism in Ottoman Environment.

### 4.1 Brotherhoods and Esotericism in the Classical Ages

When Europeans in the eighteenth century introduced Freemasonry into the regions south of the Mediterranean, no equivalent organisations existed there; however, as will be seen, the history of Islamic orders which grafted their activity onto ethical, spiritual and esoteric dimensions shows certain interesting elements of contiguity.

To look first at the ‘operative’ context in the Muslim world, the organisation of labour had found specific forms – only partially comparable to European guilds –<sup>1</sup> which had developed along certain main paths, integrated into the religious, cultural, social, economic and political dimension of Islamic societies. Studies on urban institutions in the Middle East have cast a light on many peculiarities and expressions, but the vast extent of the phenomenon, which emerges with different and often contrasting aspects in different ages and geographical areas, has not made it easy to provide a unique

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<sup>1</sup> “Ottoman guilds had certain features in common with their much more fully researched counterparts in western, central and southern Europe. In both these places artisans attempted to limit the exercise of their crafts to those men [...] that they themselves had selected for membership in their associations. To defend this right to regulate access to artisan life, the heads of guilds or perhaps even the entire group employed a whole array of social and economic pressures not excluding violence [...] In this respect there was no great difference between the guilds of Bologna, Amsterdam and Bursa”. Faroqi, *Artisans of Empire*, pos. 246-53.

and clearly delineated interpretation: especially, the *asnāf* (sing. *sinf*, 'guilds') sometimes overlap with other organisms, often with a mystic vocation, of a varied nature, such as the *tariqāt* sufi (lit. mystic ways, brotherhoods), the *futuwwa* (knightly congregations) or the Akhi (brotherhood deriving from or blending into the *futuwwa* in Anatolia)<sup>2</sup> with dimensions which are often confused with each other or mixed together, making it difficult and uncertain to decode their social functions.

The earliest guilds probably dated back to the ninth century, but they cannot be identified as firmly structured institutions before the fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The Islamic *asnāf* (both Sunni and Shiite) used to organise themselves in the *suq* each according to their profession, in any case following the layout of the marketplace: shops were set out along the same street, depending on the kind of goods they sold or produced. They safeguarded their professional interests, while also providing administrative and tax functions, without neglecting professional ethics. Trade secrets were handed down orally (*dustūr*), to preserve the integrity of tradition through three consecutive degrees, which any free man could achieve: apprentice (*muta'allim*), worker (*sani'*) and master (*mu'allim*).

In terms of their 'code of behaviour', the *asnāf* merged with another important community body, the *futuwwa*.<sup>4</sup> The charters and by-laws of the guilds progressively developed elaborate initiation rites and mystic doctrines, in fact the collections of traditions which have reached us deal above all, if not exclusively, with the spiritual aspect of ritual organisation of the *asnāf* and tell us nothing about professional issues. This kind of ritual finds its most complete representation in the *Fütüvvvet-nāme-i-kebīr* (Great Eulogy of the Futuwwa), by Sayyid Mehmed b. Sayyid,<sup>5</sup> dated 1524, composed in an Ottoman context and with Shiite tendency. It accurately describes the initiatory degrees, nine in all, of which the first three seem to correspond to the degrees of a craft. This work of a general character was authoritative in the Arab provinces of the Empire, but it seems that each *sinf* drew up its own 'guild charter' drawing from the *Fütüvvvet-nāme* and adapting it to its own needs.

<sup>2</sup> The Akhi, whose features vary and are often hard to define, appear as a guild with social and economic purposes, bringing together craftsmen and professionals, as a political lobby or as a mystical brotherhood. Observers in the past, including Ibn Battuta, agree in emphasising their strict ethics and extraordinary generosity - putting into practice the principles exposed by Sulamī. Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions", 234-40.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Massignon, "Sinf"; Vercellin, *Istituzioni del mondo musulmano*; Baer, *Egyptian Guilds*; Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire*.

<sup>4</sup> Cahen, Taeschner, "Futuwwa"; Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *La chevalerie musulmane*; Irwin, "Futuwwa: Chivalry and Gangsterism"; Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions".

<sup>5</sup> Breebaart, "The Fütüvvvet-nāme-i-kebīr".

*Futuwwa*, which defines the esoteric, initiatory side of professional guilds, is quite a multifaceted phenomenon. As we shall see, it does not refer so much to groups of different nature or purpose (whether guilds, bands of brigands, armed militia, knights or Sufi congregations) as to the moral qualities needed to belong to them. Unknown in the pre and proto-Islamic times, the term *futuwwa* comes from *fātā*, a word indicating a young man gifted with *muruwwa* (sense of honour). In early Abbasid times, the term *fityān*, plural of *fātā*, was used to indicate groups of young men, or armed militia, at times engaged in banditry, and it is in the same period that the term derived from it, *futuwwa*, began to be used. The growing importance of youth *futuwwa* also attracted the attention of the well-off and educated classes, interested in the values which were being proposed. The change took place under the caliph al-Nāsir (1181-1225) and the so-called aristocratic *futuwwa* which arose from this new process spread especially in Egypt and Syria.<sup>6</sup> Al-Nāsir changed and disciplined the *futuwwa* of Baghdad, encouraging religious, military and administrative leader to join it, and trying to regulate what arose in it and around it in the context of the *sharī'a*, the Islamic law. He transformed 'chivalry' from a differentiated and local experience into a pan-Islamic institution, driving the princes of the Muslim empire to organise *futuwwa* each in their own domain, introducing privileges to attract the nobility, such as the exclusive practice of certain 'chivalrous' games.

At the same time, Sufism (*tasawwuf*) was developing and trying to give a community organisation to mysticism and asceticism.<sup>7</sup> The first Muslim anchorites already appeared in the times of the Prophet. The phenomenon took on an important institutional dimension in ninth century Baghdad, and then extended well beyond the borders of the Abbasid empire, giving rise to different schools which preached specific esoteric and spiritual approaches, moving from a 'hidden' interpretation of the Qur'an (*'ilm al-bātin*). The *tarīqāt* diverged in several aspects, sometimes giving rise to antinomic mystic behaviour, strongly evolving through time and under the influence of the various local substrates: affiliation, determined by the chain of transmission of the tradition; specific initiatory elements, such as listening to music and poetry (*samā'*) which produced ecstasy, or repetition of sacred formulas (*dhikr*); they also differed in terms of conditions for being admitted to the orders and everyday practices. Sufi orders must not however be assimilated to Christian monastic confraternities: although they might include experiences of spiritual isolation or hermit-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Cahen, "Note sur les debuts de la futuwwa".

<sup>7</sup> Bibliography on Sufism is vast. Cf., among others, Chittick, *Sufism*; Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam*; Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*; Anawati, Gardet, *Mystique musulmane*.

age, Sufi adepts did not practice celibacy, but were men (and sometimes women) whose spiritual vocation also implied an active role in the community, and the different orders, which spread throughout the Islamic world, had important social, cultural and political functions. In the early stages, it was difficulty in collective organisation which brought some Sufi groups, especially the Malāmatiyya order, close to the experience of *futuwwa*. The most ancient treatise in this field to have survived was the *Kitāb al-futuwwa* (The Book of Futuwwa) by Ibn al-Husayn al-Sulamī (932-1021), one of the great figures of Islamic spirituality. In the introduction to the text,<sup>8</sup> the sufi master defines *futuwwa* as a Way that God has opened and “which leads to the most beautiful form of the fulfilment of our duties to Him”. The first to ‘follow the call’ was Adam, who handed it on through the generations: Seth, Idris,<sup>9</sup> Noah, Abraham, the Qur’anic prophets Dhū al-Kifl and Shu’ayb, David, Solomon, Jonah, Jesus<sup>10</sup> and finally Muhammad and three caliphs who followed him, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Alī, were the main transmitters of the Way. The author then continues providing over one hundred and fifty definitions of *futuwwa* to indicate a spiritual path of inner fulfilment. Among other things, *futuwwa* means: “following the ordinances of perfect devotion” and among its imperatives: “respond to cruelty with kindness, and do not punish for an error”; “above all, be generous”; “care for your brethren more than you care for your own family”, “be truthful”; “keep your word and what is entrusted to you”; “remember that you are a servant of Allah and should not regard yourself and your actions highly, nor should you expect a return for your actions”; “do not be idle, but work in this world until you reach the definite state of trust in Allah”; “strengthen your outer self with prayer and your inner self with remembrance of Allah”; “seek a humble life and poverty, and be content and happy with it”; “in this education you must learn to feel joy in the privilege of serving your master”.<sup>11</sup>

Like al-Sulamī, other Sufis were also masters of *fityān*, such as Hasan al-Basrī (d. 728), Abū Hafs al-Nishāpurī (d. 878), founder of the *Malāmatiyya*, Nūrī (d. 908) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240).

According to art historians, the influence of Sufism and of *futuwwa* left a clear trace, especially in ceramics. An example is a twelfth century pitcher, now in the museum of Tbilisi, which bears a long poem expressing, in partly personal and partly mystical terms, the artist’s love for the object he has created and his appreciation of

8 Al-Sulamī, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 33-4.

9 Prophet of Islam, identified with Hermes and the Biblical Enoch.

10 The Qur’an acknowledges the main Biblical prophets, including Jesus, to whom however a divine nature is not attributed.

11 Al-Sulamī, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 37-63.

its use. Oleg Grabar believes that this is not by chance and insists on the presence of *futuwwa* and mysticism in urban culture.<sup>12</sup> Even more exemplary of the close relationship between professional and mystic brotherhood is the case of weavers of *peştamal* (canvas and aprons) of Istanbul associated with the Melâmiyya order, active until the early twentieth century. This brotherhood, which kept its ceremonies secret, was lodged in a caravanserai, where the adepts put together the practice of their craft and mystic contemplation, synchronizing recitation of the *secret dhikr* with the everyday gestures of weaving. It was said that they appeared to weave, but in the depth of their hearts, they read the name of God.<sup>13</sup>

What was said about brotherhoods in the classic Islamic age confirms how difficult it is to interpret specific features of different organisms, beyond contacts and contaminations; however, and for the same reasons, it allows to point out the high degree of intercommunication, which appears more explicitly in intellectual and spiritual experiences. Orders of various kinds – whether related to craftsmanship, chivalry or Sufism – were an integral part of the Islamic social fabric and involved a wide range of social ranks and classes, from subversive bands to craftsmen, from the literati to mystics and to aristocrats. They certainly define the most esoteric aspects of Qur’anic religious contents,<sup>14</sup> but also show more or less marked features which are not always of Islamic origin.

The formidable military expansion of Islam out of the Arab peninsula in the seventh century did not annihilate the civilisations it met with along its way but incorporated them through a process of assimilation in Islamisation. These cultures included other religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Zarathustrianism, later Hinduism. Those believers who refused to convert acquired a new citizenship accepting Islamic political authority, preserving their specificity in a subordinate status of protection (*dhimma*); but the cultures integrated into the Islamic *civitas* also included elements of spirituality foreign to the institutional orthodoxies of the many confessions of the Middle East. These elements of ‘heterodox’ spirituality<sup>15</sup> filtered into the Islamic world, defining some fundamental features of its esotericism.

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<sup>12</sup> Grabar, *Cities and citizens*.

<sup>13</sup> Zarccone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Sulami, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 21-4.

<sup>15</sup> In terms of principle, Islamic law acknowledges citizenship in subordination (*dhimma*) exclusively to the faithful of so-called ‘revealed’ monotheistic religions, the *ahl al-kitâb*, or people of the book (Jews, Christians, Zarathustrians and by extension, Hindus). Other beliefs are associated with paganism and their devotees may be put to death.

## 4.2 The Islamic Hermetic Tradition

In a previous chapter, dealing with Egyptosophy's roots in Europe, I illustrated how the rediscovery of Hermeticism by European humanism owed much to the transfer of esoteric knowledge from the Arab world to the northern shores of the Mediterranean, beginning in the Middle Ages.

The Hermetic substrate of Hellenistic-Ptolemaic origin, in fact, found a way of its own also in the Orient, first Christianised and then Islamised,<sup>16</sup> and affirmed itself with special vitality in the Muslim context, also thanks to identification of Hermes with Idris, acknowledged to be a Prophet in the Qur'an.<sup>17</sup> Especially in the Abbasid epoch, Greek philosophy and sciences became known in translation, mediated from the Syriac and carried out by the Christian communities of Syria; Alexandrian, Neoplatonic and Hellenistic doctrines had another important centre of diffusion at Gondeshapur, in Persia, famous above all for its school of medicine. Hermeticism began to spread in the eighth century, through translation into Arabic of Greek works, partly mediated through the Persian world, and thanks to the pagan community of Harran.<sup>18</sup> Hermetic wisdom nourished a philosophical and esoteric culture circulating from Andalusia to India, where Gnostic<sup>19</sup> and Zarathustrian elements merged with others stemming from the ancient astral religion of Babylon and yet others from Persia and India, giving rise to hundreds of works, mainly dealing with alchemical disciplines or with astrology, magic and talismans – to a lesser degree, spiritual or philosophical writings – which guaranteed acquisition of occult powers deriving from a wisdom held to be very ancient.<sup>20</sup>

Considering the number of works and their diffusion from the farthest eastern and western ends of the Islamic empires, and the number of Muslim scholars who quote Hermes as an authoritative refer-

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*; Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*; El-Daily, *Egyptology*; Fodor, *The Metamorphosis of Imhotep*; Massignon, "Inventaire de la littérature"; Plessner, "Hermes Trismegistus".

<sup>17</sup> Erder, "The Origin of the Name Idris".

<sup>18</sup> Though it is unclear what the beliefs and cults of the Sabians of Harran actually were, the Arabs of the times considered them to be followers of Hermes (Idris), and it was as such that they presented themselves in the ninth century. Reference to a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an was fundamental for obtaining the status of a protected religious minority (*dhimmi*). Cf. Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 64-103; Fahd, *Sabi'a*; Green, *The City of the Moon God*; Hjäppe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes*; Tardieu, "Sabiens coraniques".

<sup>19</sup> Blochet, "Etudes su le gnosticisme musulman".

<sup>20</sup> As Van Bladel specifies (*The Arabic Hermes*, 10): "There are probably more works attributed to Hermes surviving in Arabic than in any other language, and the majority of them are still unknown and unpublished". He is speaking of texts derived from pre-Islamic works, or unpublished Arab productions in the same spirit (237).

ence (not only alchemists and astrologers/astronomers or Sufis, but also historians, philosophers, physicians, secretaries, merchants of the most varied cultural orientation), one has an idea of how truly influential they must have been.<sup>21</sup>

This composite esoteric universe influenced many Sufi masters, from Dhū'l-Nūn al-Misrī (d. 861), to Suhrawardī (d. 1191) to Ibn Sab'īn (d. 1270), leading to a progressive evolution in metaphysical approach. While Sufi practices found their spiritual source in the Qur'an and Sunna, from the ninth-tenth century on, Sufism began to introject these heterodox elements which were coming together from various horizons in the Islamic world. While Ibn al-'Arabī introduced the Gnostic and Neoplatonic system – especially emanatism which culminated in the principle of Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) –, Suhrawardī introduced the mystic experiences of ancient Iranian tradition; and from Asia to North Africa, many brotherhoods introduced elements of Animism and Shamanism into their practices.<sup>22</sup> Especially, Shamanism integrated Alevism, which in Anatolia was the background to the beliefs of Islamised Turkic peoples, and permeated the majority of mystical brotherhoods, including the *futuwwa* and later the Bektashiyya.

But what best represents the mix of scientific, philosophical and esoteric elements which runs through the classic epoch of Islam, defining its features in the initial phases, is certainly the *Kitāb Ikhwān al-safā* ('Encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity'),<sup>23</sup> a work composed around the tenth century in Basra, which expounds on topics involving all the knowledge of the times, distributed in 52 treatises sharing the theme of the substantial unity of microcosm and macrocosm. The anonymous authors of the *Encyclopaedia* incorporate the many components of the cultures mentioned above into a monotheism of Shiite – if not Ismailite – tendency: "Babylonian, Indian and Iranian astrology, Indian and Persian narrative, biblical quotations and cabbalistic influences, references to the New Testament and Christian gnosis",<sup>24</sup> in what is considered the *summa* of knowledge of the civilisation of the times. The *Ikhwān* were judged heretics<sup>25</sup> or semi-heretics, but their writings had a considerable influence on Islamic esoteric culture.

<sup>21</sup> Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 239.

<sup>22</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 1-60; Massignon, "Tasawwuf".

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bausani, *L'Enciclopedia dei Fratelli della Purità*; Baffioni, *L'Epistola degli Ikhwān al-Safā* and "Ikhwān al-Safā"; Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*; El-Bizri, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*; Marquet, *La philosophie des Ihwān al-Safā*; Marquet, *La philosophie des alchimistes*.

<sup>24</sup> Baffioni, "Ikhwān al-Safā".

<sup>25</sup> In 1150, the Caliph al-Mustanjid ordered the copies in circulation of the *Encyclopaedia* to be burned, but the work was saved and later translated into Persian and Turkish.



In the cradle of Hermeticism, Egypt, the interest for the secrets of Trismegistus reached its peak under the Fatimids (973-1171) – who encouraged profanation of Egyptian temples and tombs, in the quest for treasures but also for alchemical, magical and astrological texts –,<sup>26</sup> and it was probably on the banks of the Nile that Hermeticism and Islamic Sufism came together thanks to Dhū l-Nūn al-Misrī. Born in Upper Egypt, Dhū l-Nūn lived most of his life in the Egyptian temple of Akhanim, and according to Arab men of learning of his times, he was able to understand many of the sciences of the temple where he lived and had mastered the art of alchemy, which he acquired from a monk.<sup>27</sup> His thinking also influenced those who were probably the two most learned Sufis, “pervasively influential”<sup>28</sup> on all Islamic esoteric expressions. Ibn al-‘Arabī (who, as has been seen, was also a master of *futuwwa*) wrote a book on his virtues, and the most important mystic poet of Persian literature, Jalāl ad-Din Rūmī (d. 1273), founder of the *tarīqa* of the Mevlevi – known as the ‘whirling dervishes’ – considered himself to be his disciple.<sup>29</sup>

As late as the sixteenth century, to quote Michael Winter: “The number of Sufis who practised occult sciences at that time was legion”,<sup>30</sup> especially alchemy, the kabbalistic arts of divination, magic and astrology, practised more for material than spiritual purposes.<sup>31</sup> Such practices were not however approved by all Muslim mystics or by the more orthodox Sufi schools and, of course, even less by the official institutions based on the madrasas, the Islamic universities, who also opposed popular rituals belonging to such tradition.<sup>32</sup>

Among the works which best reflect popular Hermetic imagination in the land of Egypt is the text commonly known as *Hermetic History* and the *Sira of Sayf*. The *Hermetic History*, translated in 1898 by Baron Carra De Vaux under the title *L'abrégé des merveilles*,<sup>33</sup> is a pot-pourri of materials, probably dating back to the eleventh century, and traces the history of Egypt from antediluvian times, paying special attention to the building of the Pyramids, mixing astrology,

<sup>26</sup> El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 34-44.

<sup>27</sup> El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 51, 163-4.

<sup>28</sup> Massignon, “Tasawwuf”.

<sup>29</sup> El-Daly, *Egyptology*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> Winter, *Society and Religion*, 173.

<sup>31</sup> Winter, *Society and Religion*, 172-6.

<sup>32</sup> Maqrīzī (*Description topographique*, 352-3) says how, around 1378, Sheikh Muhammad Sā'im al-Zāhir, of the Sufi order founded by Sayyid al-Sa'āda, mutilated the face of the Sphinx, destroying its nose because farmers used to bring it offerings.

<sup>33</sup> The origins of the text are obscure. Michael Cook light on Oriental elements as well as elements from Andalusian Spain, without finding an answer to the question, but rejecting with certainty the hypothesis of a Coptic origin. Cook, “Pharaonic History”.

magic, priests, talismans, treasures, fantastic buildings and ancient wisdom. As Cook puts it: "the dominant note is one which a European audience can readily associate with the *Magic Flute*".<sup>34</sup> The text became an indispensable reference for later Egyptian historians, such as al-Maqrizī (d. 1442), whose history of Egypt is equally full of references to the Hermetic tradition<sup>35</sup> and shows the fecundity of magical and astrological thinking in the culture of his age.

The *Sīra of Sayf*,<sup>36</sup> on the other hand, is a popular epic – also a pot-pourri,<sup>37</sup> probably composed in Egypt in the Mamlūk epoch, between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries – which recounts the adventures of the Yemenite 'white' prince, Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan in his war against the 'black' Ethiopian emperor, Sayf Ar'ād (actually Sayfa Ar'ād, d. 1372). Unlike other epic Arab cycles or better known popular narratives, such as *The Thousand and One Nights* (where magic does play an important role), the *Sīra of Sayf* is set in a supernatural universe where men and *jinn*<sup>38</sup> live together with magicians and wizards who fight for power or for the control of natural forces.<sup>39</sup> Though one should not rule out interpretations which refer to the social and political situation of the times,<sup>40</sup> it comes as a surprise that no scholar appears to have noticed the manifest alchemical symbolism of the work. The trials the main character has to go through to become the hero of his age (discover the secret of his birth, win back his father's throne, wed his beloved and, last but not least, find again the *Book of the History of the Nile*), reveal an initiatory path where the fight between the two Sayfs represents the struggle of Man against his own dark side: the black Sayf can be seen as the alchemical stage of *ni-*

<sup>34</sup> Cook, *Pharaonic History*", 71.

<sup>35</sup> Maqrizī, *Description topographique*.

<sup>36</sup> For a partial translation: Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan*.

<sup>37</sup> In this epic, Aboubakr Chraïbi ("Le roman de Sayf Ibn Di Yazan", 120-1) identifies Biblical, Iranian, Indian and Greek elements, besides folk literature, but Joseph Chelhod ("La geste du roi Sayf", 184, 201) believes the atmosphere, steeped in magic, to be authentically Egyptian, and many episodes appear to be taken from popular Egyptian tales, with the basic inspiration being of Egyptian-Hellenistic origin. For Harry Norris ("Sayf b. Di Yazan and the Book of the Nile", 128, 143) too, the story has an Egyptian background and was composed in Egypt.

<sup>38</sup> *Jinns* are Supernatural creatures of the Arab folk tradition, also mentioned in the Qur'an.

<sup>39</sup> Chelhod, "La geste du roi Sayf", 182.

<sup>40</sup> The epic has often been interpreted as an allegory of the Islamic conquest of Africa, grounded on the liberation of Yemen from the Abyssinian yoke at the end of the sixth century, but it has also been interpreted as probably reflecting conflict between Christian Ethiopia and the Mamluks in the sixteenth century. Norris, "Sayf b. Di Yazan and the Book of the Nile", 130-1; Garcin, "Sira(s) et histoire", 41 et "Sira(s) et histoire II", 230.

*gredo*, the mortal physical component, associated with Saturn (Sayf<sup>41</sup> Ar'ad in the *Sīra* is a worshipper of Saturn), against whom the white Sayf fights in order to achieve *albedo*, the reawakening of the soul which alchemy associates with the element of *water* (and the crowning achievement of Sayf will be to give the Nile to Egypt).<sup>42</sup>

Hermetic writings continued to be mentioned in the Arab tradition at least as late as the eighteenth century, and manuscripts were copied into the nineteenth.<sup>43</sup> The tradition disappeared progressively during the colonial phase, as the scientific and positivist spirit began to prevail, also weakening or modifying the role of Sufi orders. But when Freemasonry began to settle into the Middle East, starting in the nineteenth century, brotherhoods of a wide variety of orders were still an element of everyday Egyptian life, and astrological, alchemical and magical or ritual practices associated with ancient cults were still widespread.

### 4.3 Islamic Esotericism in Ottoman Environment

In the Middle East, the aristocratic *futuwwa* declined until it disappeared in the fourteenth century, continuing in its popular form as the basis of guilds, but also identifying forms of banditry until recent times.<sup>44</sup> However, when Freemasons began to found their lodges, Sufi orders, whether of an erudite or popular tendency, were common,<sup>45</sup> while society was still steeped in beliefs and superstitions tied to magic practices. The British traveller Edward William Lane, who spent the years between 1825 and 1828 in Cairo, blending in with the Egyptians and taking note of various aspects of local life, dedicated three chapters of his *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians* to the magic practices of the times, providing a colourful picture of the everyday relationship of Muslims with the invisible. Lane first of all noticed how deeply rooted the 'darweeshes' were (placing them, not in the chapter on 'Religion and Laws' but in the first devoted to the 'Superstitions'), naming several Sufi orders, with their various sub-orders. The most widespread *tariqāt* were the Rifa'iyya,

<sup>41</sup> The name of the historical character Sayfa As'ad was probably deliberately misspelled in order to indicate the specular nature of the clash.

<sup>42</sup> The spiritual struggle of Man is also represented by the black and white chequerboard pattern on the lodge floors. This reading would provide an answer to Norris' question ("Sayf b. Di Yazan and the Book of the Nile", 131): "What is puzzling is why this duo, Sayf Ar'ad and Sayf b. Dhi Yazan, should have been especially selected".

<sup>43</sup> Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 238.

<sup>44</sup> Jacob, "Eventful Transformations".

<sup>45</sup> Cf. De Jong, *Turuq and Turuq-linked Institutions*; Winter, *Society and Religion*; Goldziher, "Le culte des saints chez les musulmans"; Lane, *Manners and Customs*.

the Qadiriyya, the Ahmadiyya and the Burhamiyya, the Khalwatiyya and the Malāmatiyya.<sup>46</sup> Lane describes only a few of their more eccentric public rituals, such as exhibitions with sharp blades or fire or snake handling, since:

It is impossible to become acquainted with all the tenets, rules, and ceremonies of the darweeshes, as many of them, like those of the freemasons, are not to be divulged to the uninitiated.<sup>47</sup>

The pages of the British scholar take us into a Cairo atmosphere which seems to be still immersed in the magic universe of the *Sira of Sayf*, describing an everyday life marked by definitely heterodox beliefs, though covered with a veil of Islam; fears were quelled using amulets – bearing Qur’anic formulas – which all seem to protect against the evil eye; astrology was practised by a great many people, as was alchemy; the arts of divination were based on tables called *zāirgeh*, designed using orders of letters attributed to Hermes,<sup>48</sup> and magic was divided into ‘spiritual’ (divided again into divine and satanic) and ‘natural’, with the use of drugs. Egyptians believed that a person expert in divine magic, by simply pronouncing certain formulas, could bring the dead back to life, kill the living, ‘teleport’ himself or carry out any other miracle.<sup>49</sup> Lane himself was participant witness to a (successful) magic ritual, which he described in detail, and which clearly left him somewhat disconcerted.<sup>50</sup>

Moving on to Anatolia, in the nineteenth century, like the *futuwwa*, the Akhi too were by now a remote memory. Arnakis believes that, during the phase of late fourteenth century decadence, remnants of the Akhis found “their way into various guilds of craftsmen, while the main body of their religious tenets was perpetuated by the dervishes of the Mevlevi, Khalaveti and Bektashi orders”.<sup>51</sup> This took place especially in Bursa, at that time the capital of the new born Ottoman sultanate, in a religious climate largely dominated by Shiite ulama from northern Iran and Turkestan, where for centuries they had been exposed to a religious syncretism created by Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Manichean, Gnostic, Christian, and Moslem elements. Among the *tarīqāt* which probably inherited part of the esoteric tradition of the Akhi, placing themselves at the most heterodox extreme of mystic tradition, the Bektashi order is especially important for this study

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<sup>46</sup> Winter, *Society and Religion*.

<sup>47</sup> Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 250.

<sup>48</sup> Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 266-7

<sup>49</sup> Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 270-1.

<sup>50</sup> Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 275-82.

<sup>51</sup> Arnakis, “Futuwwa Traditions”, 235.

because of the role it played in the Ottoman Empire and because of the special relationship it would develop with Freemasonry.

The origin of the Bektashi is controversial,<sup>52</sup> but documentary sources show they already existed in the thirteenth century and spread rapidly. Their doctrine was a synthesis of heterogeneous elements: they took their teachings from the Akhi, but also from the Qalandariyya order which had grafted strong Buddhist and other influences onto a Malāmātī doctrinal core.<sup>53</sup> The Bektashi orders, who kept the books containing the old regulations of the *futuwwa*, represent the most syncretic brotherhood of the Ottoman Empire: they interpreted the religious Texts allegorically, preaching the Unity of Being and the identity of the external and internal world, practicing a general tolerance and a special syncretism with Christianity (sharing places of worship, stories of miracles, venerating the same saints or loosely identifying 'Alī with Christ). Analysing such ancient Bektashi texts as *Menākīb-i-Hācī Bektaş-ı Velī* by Hācī Bektaş and the *Saltuk-nāme* by Ebül Hayr-i Rūmī, one can find traces of animism (e.g. cults of nature, worship of hills, trees, rocks, stones), shamanism (e.g. magical practices, healing, clairvoyance, control over fire and the forces of nature, the capacity of bringing the dead back to life, ceremonies in which both sexes took part); Iranian and Far Eastern traditions (e.g. metempsychosis, incarnation, transformation into animals, the theory of the four elements, the cult of fire) as well as Judeo-Christian traditions (ascent to the sky, transformation of water into blood, sending calamities against human beings, reproducing food in large quantities, fecundation by the spirit, opening the seas or rivers to cross them, walking on water).<sup>54</sup> The Bektashiyya also received elements from the Hurūfiyya order, the founder of which, Fadl Allāh, had developed a doctrine based on a kabbalistic combination of letters, before declaring himself a divine manifestation, greater than the Prophet, and being executed as a heretic in 1394.<sup>55</sup>

A specific feature of the order was secrecy, which involved both the mystery of the Sufi spiritual quest (*the unspeakable secret* of a merely esoteric and individual order, by its very nature *bātin*, interior, occult), and – unlike other Sufi orders – ‘accessory’ secrets associated with practices and rituals. Secrecy was first of all associated with the various initiatory levels which coincide with mastery of spiritual practices or stages and states of mystical experience, but equally secret were the rituals which marked the Bektashi experi-

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Arnakis, “Futuwwa Traditions”; Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*; Birge, *Bektashi order*; Brown, *The Darvishes*, 140-74.

<sup>53</sup> Yazıcı, “Qalandariyya”.

<sup>54</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 5-8; 61-72; 87-118.

<sup>55</sup> Bausani, “Hurūfiyya”.

ence, especially the initiatory ceremonies, with the tying of a belt to the neophyte's waist – a practice already to be found in the earlier *futuwwa* – (tied to the neophyte's neck when he was presented to the assembly) or the use of alcoholic beverages, as well as the mixing of sexes during prayer – something which marks a clear distance from orthodox Islamic brotherhoods. Unlike other Sufi schools, only members of the *tariqa* could take part in Bektashi ceremonies.<sup>56</sup> It comes as no surprise that during the initiation ceremony, the guide of the neophyte would warn him with the following formula: *Sakahüm sırrını söyleme sakın!* ("Beware, do not reveal the secret of Sakahüm!").<sup>57</sup>

The Bektashi had an immense popular following (it has been estimated that they had over seven million followers in the Asiatic provinces of the empire, of which 120,000 in Istanbul alone),<sup>58</sup> until they were outlawed in 1826, together with the suppression of the Janisaries of whom they were the spiritual guides. In the following years, they underwent a harsh repression (their masters were driven into exile and their *tekkes*, 'convents', handed over to other orders), but the Bektashi survived in hiding, also in the ranks of other sufi orders, and reappeared at the end of the following decade, in 1839, when, with the favour of Sultan Abdülmecid I, several *tekkes* reopened and began spreading publications about the *tariqa*. Their influence remained significant enough for them to play a role in the revolt of the Young Turks, when a large part of the leadership and activists of the movement belonged to Sufi orders, especially to the Bektashiyya.

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<sup>56</sup> Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 41-55 e 309.

<sup>57</sup> Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 51.

<sup>58</sup> Arnakis, "Futuwwa Traditions", 244.



## **5 Real and Imagined Intersections**

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**Summary** 5.1 Premodern Symmetries and Derivations. – 5.2 European Masons and Muslims. – 5.3 Freemasons and Bektashi.

### **5.1 Premodern Symmetries and Derivations**

In the first part of this study I traced the origins and the paths followed by those esoteric elements which would converge in Freemasonry, pointing out specific features, highlighting how references to the Orient which define mythopoieses (and in some Rites, such as the Misraïm-Memphis, also structure the initiatory architecture) cannot be reduced to mere narrative stratagems. The overall picture, in its essential features, has provided the time and measure in which Greek science and philosophy in the first place, and especially Hellenistic doctrines (Neoplatonic, Pythagorean, Hermetic, Gnostic) became the shared pool from which – directly or indirectly – the Islamic Orient and the Christian West would draw their esoteric and scientific ideas. Especially, in Europe, the Middle Ages appeared as a crucial step along the road of transmission of mysteries of various kinds and origin, through the filter of Islamic culture and, in part, of Sephardic Jewish culture; a passage which would lie at the origin of long-term affinities and parallels for the esoteric traditions of both civilisations.

There is no doubt that Europe, the Middle East and North Africa found themselves with much material, which they then reworked each within their own social, cultural and political structures, irreducibly different and differently monitored by antagonistic theologies. They could not be assimilated to each other – not even on more symbolic and interpretative levels of speculation – and this would play a prima-



ry role in the long-term outcome of both approaches. However, analogies emerge in the heterodox substance of the respective teachings and especially in the consequences of those specific itineraries. It is no coincidence that in both cases heterodox contributions converge in orders with an esoteric-initiatory character, often on the verge of heresy; in their free spiritual and intellectual expression, many Sufis and Muslim philosophers, like many Christian spiritual personalities and thinkers, would meet with condemnation by official religious institutions: some centuries in advance, the Persian mystic al-Hallāj (d. 922), of Zarathustrian origin, shared with Giordano Bruno a tragic fate at the stake,<sup>1</sup> while in 1195, in Cordoba, Averroes (Ibn Rushd) saw his works thrown in a bonfire by the caliph Yaqub al-Mansur, and himself driven into exile; in Baghdad, in 1150, the caliph al-Mustanjid burned and censored *The Letters of the Brethren of Purity* and, in a similar manner, moved by the same reactionary spirit (preventing the spread of ideas which could potentially destabilise the existing authority), in Rome, in 1738, Pope Clement XII condemned Freemasonry, excommunicating its initiates.<sup>2</sup>

The cultural, political and religious dimensions in which the esoteric universes which had arisen in the Islamic and Christian areas had defined their features was certainly irreducible. Yet contagion among the same sources, after repeated contaminations over the centuries, led to syntheses which often evolved on at least parallel levels. It is no surprise that affinities occasionally arose: affinities which, by their very nature and origin, do not however allow us to deduce direct transmission or overlapping. Considering the actual documentary evidence, some theses appear to be creative musings. For example, in 1849, Hammer-Purgstall<sup>3</sup> suggested that European chivalry derived from Arab chivalry, in what Robert Irving called “a barmy essay in which he not only identified futuwwa as an Oriental institution corresponding to Western chivalry but also linked the drinking cup of futuwwa initiation with the Holy Grail”.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that European chivalry preceded Arab chivalry. However, the latter could have influenced the former, as appears from evident analogies

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest of course any symmetry between the mysticism of al-Hallāj and the ideas of Bruno, who developed their thinking on totally different levels and with totally different metaphysical solutions.

<sup>2</sup> The condemnation was repeated by later popes and would cease to operate only with Paul VI, in the 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Hammer-Purgstall, *Sur la chevalerie des Arabes*.

<sup>4</sup> Irving, *Futuwwa*, 161.

noticed by Wacyf Boutros Ghali,<sup>5</sup> Henry Corbin<sup>6</sup> and Paul Du Breuil.<sup>7</sup>

Superficial affinities are not necessarily evidence of substantial ones. However, different kinds of contamination, even due to the study of Arab-Islamic texts for polemical purposes, do appear convincing in certain circumstances. For example, some Arab-Muslim sources are well known to have influenced Dante's *Divine Comedy*,<sup>8</sup> and Muslim eschatological and theological themes were certainly widespread in medieval Europe in literary and philosophical, erudite and popular writings. These emerged clearly in the theological debates in the great universities between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Naples, Salerno, where such erudite Arabs as Mash'allah (Mā sha' Allāh), Albumasar (Abū Ma'shar), Rhazes (al-Rāzī), Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), Averroes (Ibn Rushd) were frequently quoted by scholars of the times. Some say that in 1245, Albertus Magnus presented himself at the university of Paris to hold a speech on Aristotle, dressed in Arab clothing – according to Baltrušaitis, to render a symbolic homage to Islam.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of Islam has also been noticed in the Dominican order, Thomas Aquinas, Raymond Martini, Ramon Llull, who fought the *infidels* through theological confrontation, but ended up by incurring their influence.<sup>10</sup> Especially, Llull – who was able to write and speak fluently in Arabic – in his polemical writings against erudite Muslims had taken on a certain Sufi form in the manner of arguing,<sup>11</sup> and the method of the Jewish Kabbalah, applied to the Latin alphabet, lay at the base of the techniques for combining letters and was the foundation of the dignity of God as expressed in Llull's works; especially, all his Art is based on the names and attributes of God, fundamental in Judaism and Islam. Llull, whose mission was to convert Muslims and Jews, dreamed of no religious syncretism, but in some ways, his work reveals its fulfil-

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<sup>5</sup> Ghali, *La tradition chevaleresque*.

<sup>6</sup> Corbin, *Introduction analytique aux Traités*.

<sup>7</sup> Du Breuil, *La chevalerie et l'Orient*.

<sup>8</sup> Among the various texts which describe Muhammad's ascent to Heaven – the *mi'rāj* – Dante probably knew the *Book of the Ascension* in a French or Latin translation which came to him through his master Brunetto Latini, and it is generally acknowledged that the concept of travel of the soul in celestial kingdoms as an initiatory voyage, Dante's cosmography and the role of the accompanying angel were taken from Arabic texts. Cf. Asin Palacios, *La Escatologia Musulmana*; Saccone, *Il Libro della scala*; Cerulli, *Dante e l'Islam*.

<sup>9</sup> Baltrušaitis, *Medioevo fantastico*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Nallino, *Civiltà musulmana*, 303-4.

<sup>11</sup> In his works, Llull often expressed himself in dialogues, speaking in the first person with his reader, a literary form alien to the West.

ment (and it is no surprise that many in his day saw him as a heretic).<sup>12</sup>

Among the forerunners of modern Masonry, one finds correspondences in two documents already mentioned, each fundamental in its context: the *Cooke Manuscript*, compiled in England and dated between 1410 and 1440 (which in the United Kingdom would inspire later documents, up to *Anderson's Constitutions*), and the *Kitāb al-Futuwwa*, first evidence of the mystic *futuwwa*, drawn up by al-Sulamī in the tenth century, between Nishapur and Jerusalem. Both documents were paradigms for later ones, and define codes of behaviour within their brotherhoods, preceded by introductions which set out their origins. Comparison of the two introductions shows a symmetry of mythical narratives which legitimate their purpose.

Geometry (the Art *par excellence*) in the *Cooke Manuscript*, and *futuwwa* for al-Sulamī (“path to Truth [...] which leads to the beautiful form of the fulfillment of our duties to Him”)<sup>13</sup> were transmitted by God to the first man, Adam, and from him to his progeny and to the other prophets of Mankind. Al-Sulamī tells how the teaching was transmitted through the most important figures mentioned in the Qur'an, the Biblical prophets, followed by the actual Islamic tradition and the first caliphs, in the following order: Abel, Seth, Idris (Enoch), Noah, 'Ād, Hud, Salih, Abraham, Ishmael, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Job, Joseph, Dhū al-Kifl, Shu'ayb, Moses, the Companions of the Cave, ar-Raqīm, David, Solomon, Jonah, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Muhammad, Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Alī. In the *Cooke Manuscript* the most detailed chain of transmission follows a similar sequence, in the Biblical tradition, putting together prophets and the main masters of the Craft: from Adam, the science passed to Lameth, to Jabal and Jubal, from Cain to Enoch, Noah, Pythagoras, Hermes, Cam, Nimrod, Abraham, Euclid, who was one of the inventors of Geometry and taught the science to the Egyptians; then the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt where they learned the mason's craft and passed on their teachings to David and Solomon. From Jerusalem, the Craft was taken to France and other regions: it was passed on from King Charles to Saint Adhabell, to Saint Alban and finally to King Æthelstan.<sup>14</sup>

In both cases, the chains of transmission move on from Biblical to historical times without any break, conferring a sense of eternity and universality to the teachings. The introduction to the *Cooke Manuscript* is followed by a regulatory part which concerns the eth-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lullo, *Il Libro dell'Ordine della Cavalleria*; Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 173-198; Yates, *The occult philosophy*, 9-15; Bonner, *The Art and Logic of Ramon Llull*; Fidora, Rubio, Raimundus Lullus; Muzzi, Raimondo Lullo; Zambelli, *L'apprendista stregone*.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Sulamī, *The Way of Sufi Chivalry*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> It is curious to note that Jesus is mentioned by al-Sulamī but not in the *Cooke Manuscript*.

ics of the craft, while in the *Kitāb al-Futuwwa*, the introduction is followed by a description of the principles of the initiatory Way. The definitions of *futuwwa* given by al-Sulamī, as: “above all, be generous”; “care for your brethren more than you care for your own family”; “be truthful”; “keep your word and what is entrusted to your life”; “seek a humble life and poverty, and be content and happy with it”; “in this education you must learn to feel joy in the privilege of serving your master”, would not come as a surprise in the best known documents of guilds.<sup>15</sup>

In a paper presented at an international Orientalist conference in 1882, the Consular officer Ilyās Abduh Qudsi, member of the Italian Lodge *Siria* in Damascus, draw attention to analogies between local guilds and Masonry (as assemblies, secrets, rituals) wondering:

First, are there any historical connections between the rank and ritual of the Damascene craft organizations and Freemasonry? If so, then is desirable to establish the period and circumstances in which such took place. Secondly, if no such ties existed, then why is approximately the same kind of organization preserved in the crafts as is found in free Masonry? Is this mere coincidence or did the ritual and organization of Masonry develop and grow up in these parts?<sup>16</sup>

Specific affinities can especially be found between European operative Freemasonry and the brotherhood of Istanbul weavers associated with the Melamiyya – spoken of before. The weavers not only tied manual practice to spiritual practice, reciting the *dhikr* as they wove; they also kept their Melami affiliation secret and used secret signs of recognition between masters and disciples, reminiscent of those of the *compagnonnage*.<sup>17</sup> Analogies between *compagnonnage*, Masonry, *futuwwa* and the Akhi were also pointed out by the French scholar Louis Massignon and the Turkish scholar Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, who stressed secrecy, passwords and signs of recognition.<sup>18</sup> Other similarities have also been highlighted between Freemasonry and Ismailites sects and in particular with the Druses.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the *Cologne Charter* of 1535 states: “The introductory laws guiding our actions, and all our efforts, into whatever channel they may be directed, are expressed in the two following precepts: Love and cherish all men as you do your brother, and your blood relations [...] The secrets and mysteries, which conceal our purposes, are only with this one view: to do good unostentatiously and to carry out our resolutions to the very minutest details”. Bonvicini, *Massoneria Antica*, 180.

<sup>16</sup> McChesney, *Ilyas Qudsi*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Zarccone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 161-2.

<sup>18</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 306.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *The Druses of Syria*; Springett, *Secret sects of Syria*; Aractingi, Lochon, *Secrets initiatiques en Islam; Islam et franc-maçonnerie*. The plausibility of the hypothe-

It has been noticed how the *Cooke Manuscript*, unlike other regulatory documents issued by pre-modern masons' guild,<sup>20</sup> places the roots of the Craft in the Orient and in Egypt (mentioned seven times); however, the pre-modern order which located the origins of its Craft in the Orient was that of the Rosicrucians, with their manifesto *Fama Fraternitas*, where it is told how the mythical founder of the order, Christian Rosenkreuz, born in 1378, was alleged to have travelled and lived a long time in the Levant; in Damascus, where he learned Arabic, in Arabia, in Egypt and finally in Fez in Morocco, where he learned magic and the Kabbalah, before coming back to Europe through Spain.<sup>21</sup> The tale is no less fictitious than other masonic mythologies, but it does express a debt to the Orient (in this case, an explicitly Islamic Orient) which is quite real.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, when in the eighteenth century, but especially in the nineteenth century, Freemasonry spread through the Near East, acknowledgement of a common background shared by Freemasonry and Islamic esotericism was not something to take for granted.

## 5.2 European Masons and Muslims

As was pointed out at the beginning of this study, when freemasons arrived in the Middle East – first in the eighteenth but especially in the nineteenth century – an imagination was reawoken which identified symmetries between Oriental and European esotericists. Some Brothers fantasised about remote initiatory transmissions, leading the origins of Freemasonry back to the days of Solomon and the ancient Egyptians, or associating it with some minority sects, such as the Druze or the Ismailites. However, in general – with a few exceptions like the British ambassador Henry Bulwer or the American diplomat John Porter Brown (who wrote a history of the dervishes)<sup>23</sup> – French, English, Italian masons failed to immediately identify in the present, in the local sufi orders, their possible partners. Different factors made mutual acknowledgement between initiates on both sides of the Mediterranean difficult. One was the ignorance and self-as-

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ses of direct derivation of Freemasonry from Ismailites sects will be examined in the last chapter of this essay.

**20** Cf. the most significant documents in Bonvicini, *Massoneria Antica* and Langlet, *Les textes fondateurs*. The *Cooke Manuscript* is preceded chronologically by the *Regius Poem* (or *Halliwel Manuscript*) of 1390, a much more concise document, which only names Euclid and says that the Craft was born in Egypt.

**21** *The Rosicrucian Manifestos*, 4-5.

**22** Willard, *The Strange Journey*.

**23** Brown, *The Darvishes*.

suredness with which Europeans interacted with the inhabitants of those regions. Anderson's *Constitutions* made Masonry a universal order, potentially open to every creed,<sup>24</sup> but the gap between ideals and their application could be wide.

With few exceptions, Europeans in general (and masons no less than others) who in the nineteenth century moved in large numbers to the Near East and North Africa, especially from France, England and Italy, crossed the Mediterranean in absolute ignorance of the cultures with which they would live for so long, including their spiritual and esoteric dimensions. Xavier Yacono's studies on Freemasonry in Algeria show how masons were not even aware of the existence of Sufi orders. In 1867, the brother Madaule, who played an important role in Algerian Freemasonry, though he made an "intéressante découverte", identifying a "rite musulman dont Abd al-Kader fait partie et auquel je crois devoir donner le nom de rite libre de Mauritanie".<sup>25</sup> Clearly, he was referring to the Qādiriyya order. Speaking of the 'thousand of souls' who inhabited the steppes of the Sahara, Madaule wrote: "Toutes pratiquent les naïves croyances de l'islamisme. Ce culte, le plus tolérant de tous, est aussi celui qui embrasse nos principes avec le plus d'enthousiasme".<sup>26</sup>

The masonic affiliation of the Sufi Emir 'Abd al-Qādir – of which more will be said in the following chapter – is especially significant in this sense. I can only agree with Bruno Etienne's comment on the correspondence between 'Abd al-Qādir and the brethren of the Lodge Henri IV who invited him to become a member:

Les interprétations des Frères, non pas au niveau de la traduction mais du sens 'ésotérique' de la réponse de l'Emir, sont pour le moins surprenants à la fois par leur... absence et par la méconnaissance de la culture arabe dont elles sont la preuve.<sup>27</sup>

For the French, the initiation of the Emir was above all a political opportunity; the meeting with the Algerian Sufi was never seen as a way to connect Freemasonry with an esoteric Islamic dimension felt to be sim-

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<sup>24</sup> "But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is to be *good Men and true*, or Men of Honour and Honefly, by whatever Denominations of Persuasions they may distinguish'd; whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain'd ay perpetual Distance", Paillard, *Reproduction of the Constitutions*, 50 of the original document.

<sup>25</sup> Yacono, *Un siècle de franc-maçonnerie algérienne*, 250-1.

<sup>26</sup> Yacono, *Un siècle de franc-maçonnerie algérienne*, 250.

<sup>27</sup> Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 20.

ilar. The invitation to 'orientalise' Masonry was understood as an 'awakening' of the Orient, as can be seen from the speech held in Paris in the Lodge Henri IV, on June 18, 1864, to celebrate the illustrious affiliation:

Ce que nous avons vu par-dessus tout dans cette initiation, mes Frères, c'est d'arriver par l'Emir à constituer dans l'Orient des loges indigènes, Nous désirons que la maçonnerie *s'orientalise* en quelque sorte, quelle reporte aux lieux qui furent son berceau tous les bienfaits dont elle est susceptible, qu'elle déchire le bandeau de l'ignorance, qu'elle brise à jamais le glaive du fanatisme et ramène enfin ces nations dévoyées, au Grand Temple de l'humanité par les doux chemins de l'amour et de la fraternité.<sup>28</sup>

To understand the attitude of masons towards the local population (indifferently, Muslims, Christians and Jews) one need only to read the minutes of the inter-masonic meetings held in Cairo and Alexandria in January 1867 and 1868,<sup>29</sup> where representatives of lodges of various obediences discussed the suitability of initiating Egyptians, and where those favourable or at least open to thinking this over clashed with others who had a clearly racist attitude. The general tone however shows a feeling of superiority over the natives, and in the best cases a form of paternalism.<sup>30</sup>

John Porter Brown, Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Turkey, struck a different note in his speech in 1870:

La franc-maçonnerie, comme nous le savons tous, tire ses origines de l'Orient et je suis confiant dans le fait qu'elle sera mieux appréciée dans sa terre d'origine, lorsqu'elle sera comprise et connue, ainsi qu'elle mérite.<sup>31</sup>

However, a one-way view appears again when Brown claims that "the Dervishes of *Bektâshee* order consider themselves quite the same as the Freemasons, and are disposed to fraternize with them".<sup>32</sup> If dervishes considered themselves to be almost masons, one does not hear that nineteenth century masons claimed to be almost dervishes.

Of course, Middle Eastern culture in the nineteenth century, even in its marginal esoteric dimension, was very far from positivist European culture, which probably had in Freemasonry its most progressive expression. As was noticed before, when different lodges began

<sup>28</sup> Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 36. Italics added.

<sup>29</sup> *Compte-rendu de l'Assemblée Maçonnique; Compte-rendu de la deuxième Assemblée.*

<sup>30</sup> De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 56-64.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in French translation by Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 277.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, *The Darvishes*, 59.

to settle permanently in the Middle East and North Africa, in the mid-nineteenth century, a great variety of mystic orders were an element in the everyday life of Muslims, but their public manifestations featured the most eccentric practices – so much so that Lane spoke of them in his chapter on ‘Superstitions’. Sufi ritual thus became confused with folk beliefs, which continued the astrological, alchemical and magic practices associated with ancient cults. Europeans, but also orthodox and conservative Muslims as well as the most modernised Middle East intellectuals, saw these traditions as the remains of a dark past, or practices tied to superstition and to an archaic and heterodox folk religiosity. In the Ottoman Empire, and especially in Anatolia, Sufism (also because of its political orientation)<sup>33</sup> was active in the most progressive milieux – such as the Young Turks – but in other modernist and cosmopolitan contexts, it was less appreciated. For example, the Egyptian mason, James Sanua (a Jew whose father came from Livorno in Italy and mother from Cairo), with a profound knowledge of Islam, disciple and friend of another well-known masonic intellectual, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, in a lecture held in 1883 in a lodge of the French Grand Orient in Paris, stated that Sufi orders merited greater attention, since: “leurs agissements sont de plus intérêts-sants à voir pour un maçon en raison de leur paranté avec les notres”.<sup>34</sup>

As in all relations between colonisers and colonised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the masonic milieu, relations between Europeans and Muslims (and here Sanua is definitely on the European side) are not on an even footing. While masons generally ignored the brotherhoods and their nature,<sup>35</sup> the Sufi (in Anatolia, but

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**33** Bektāshiyya, for example, strongly opposed the authoritarian regime of Abdülmeccid II; also, being doctrinally indifferent, if not refractory, to application of the shari‘ah, they appreciated the process of secularisation promoted by the *tanzimāt*. Reza Tevfik, a Bektāshi and Grand Master of the Ottoman Grand Orient from 1918 to 1921, described the Sufi order as characterised by “une bonne disposition d’esprit pour accueillir toute révolution d’ordre politique qui favoriserait une totale liberté de croyance et une administration de la Turquie plus acceptable”, while another Turkish writer claimed that among the Muslims, the Bektāshi personified “l’esprit de démocratie chez les Européens, alors que les imam n’ont cessé de se montrer les serviles agents du despotisme”. Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 117, 313.

**34** Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 302.

**35** In the foundation narrative currently visible on the website of the Sovrano Santuario italiano dell’Antico e Primitivo Rito di Memphis e Misraim, transmission of the mysteries through the Islamic world is ruled out, while credit is given to transmission through the Copts, seen as the natural heirs to the ancient Egyptians: “It is generally accepted that [...] Napoleon was initiated into the ‘Isis’ Lodge, presided over by General Kléber. Concerning the Egyptian Grand Lodge before Napoleon’s campaign, we may say, in brief, that its legendary existence was preserved and developed, with great discretion, within Egyptian communities of the Coptic religion, certainly not of Muslim religion, because, as is well known, the Copts may be considered the natural successors to the ancient Egyptians. On the contrary, today’s Egyptians, being of Arab origin, [...] were always very distant from, and in certain times even hostile towards the his-



also elsewhere) frequently took an interest in Freemasonry. However, 'orientalisation' of the Royal Art as undertaken by Muslims will take a different aspect from what Europeans expected. Lodges built their success in the Middle East mainly in political and cultural terms, and were an effective vehicle for spreading Western modernist ideas; but on the esoteric side, Masonry was actually 'tariqicised': the masonic discourse was assimilated to the symbolic universe of local heterodox mysticism, and Masonry was incorporated as but one of its many expressions, as an organism comparable to the *futuwwa* and to Sufi orders.<sup>36</sup> Masonry was often called a *tariqa*, a term also used to identify its rites and commonly employed to indicate the various 'schools' of Sufism. In the same way, especially in Ottoman Turkish, the terminology of the *futuwwa* would be used to indicate the various degrees of Masonry: apprentice, companion and master, *çırak*, *kalfa*, *usta* (*mubtadā*, *sani*, or *rafiq*, *ustādh* in Arabic). Zarcone also notes how in some documents, the masonic apron was called *peştemal*, a reminiscence of the mystic Melāmi weavers of Istanbul.<sup>37</sup>

However, the order which showed the most symmetries with Masonry and which most successfully paired up with it, was the Bektashi.

### 5.3 Freemasons and Bektashi

The most surprising, practical and well documented symmetries are to be found in Anatolia between modern Freemasonry and the *tariqa* Bektashiyya, the main features of which have been described above.<sup>38</sup> If the initiatory nature of the two orders and spiritual research were general elements which Masonry also shared with other Sufi orders, Zarcone shows how there were much more specific commonalities with the Bektashiyya. The first element in common was secrecy. As was already said, the 'unspeakable secret', tied to the spiritual quest of each initiate, was part and parcel of all Sufi doctrines and rituals, but hiding the association itself and its rituals was a peculiarity of the Bektashiyya, which differed in this from the other orders, but converged with Masonry. There is a particular similarity with Bektashi ritual in the masonic initiation as rebirth and passage from

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tory, culture and religion of ancient Egypt". Antico e Primitivo Rito di Memphis e Misraim, *Storia del rito di Memphis*. URL <http://www.misraimmemphis.org/storia.asp>.

<sup>36</sup> Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 107-12.

<sup>38</sup> The political influence of Carboneria and Masonry (especially Italian) on the movement first of the Young Ottomans and then on that of the Young Turks, and the role played by Masonry in the proclamation of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 and the preparation of the Young Turk revolution of 1908, are historically ascertained facts, which one need not go into here. Cf. Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 29-35; 81-8.

darkness to light, when, to become a master, the candidate relives the murder and resurrection of the architect Hiram. The candidate, symbolically murdered by three evil companions who wish to extort from him the master's secret, is laid out in the centre of the lodge, covered by a sheet. Among the Bektashi too, the initiate lies down on the ground, covered with a white sheet to signify his death to profane life, a ceremony known as 'dying before death'.<sup>39</sup>

Another passage in Bektashi initiation – also to be found in the ancient *futuwwa*, among the Akhi and the Mevlevi – involves binding the neophyte with a rope or belt, reminiscent of the tying of the apron in masonic initiation. Among both Bektashis and freemasons, the ceremony is followed by a shared meal, with a specific ritual, and both brotherhoods give great importance to wine and alcoholic beverages in order to facilitate contemplation. Other important analogies involve the use of candles, the presentation of the initiate with a rope around his neck, a cup with a drink in it (bitter for masons, salted for the Bektashi, and also for the Akhi), the role attributed to the guide of the neophyte during the initiation, the steps, the use of symbolic numbers and other minor details.<sup>40</sup> One difference is that Bektashis admit women, unlike the main masonic orders.<sup>41</sup>

Similarities in doctrine and especially in ritual between Bektashis and freemasons appear disconcerting. Other scholars have noted that in cases where one is able to track down a historical origin, rituals prove to have different sources;<sup>42</sup> however, even excluding contaminations and mutual influence, the symbolic value of both experiences still shows surprising analogies. Zarcone explains:

Nous savons que les ottomans ont *reconnu* dans la Franc-Maçonnerie européenne leurs propres sociabilités confrériques, les *tarikat*, et que cette reconnaissance a facilité d'autant l'implantation de la Franc-Maçonnerie dans l'Empire.<sup>43</sup>

As the French historian – quoting Paul Ricœur – says, *reconnaissance*, 'acknowledgement', does not imply identity:

Dans la notion d'identité il y a seulement l'idée du même; tandis que la reconnaissance est un concept qui intègre directement l'al-

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<sup>39</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 308.

<sup>40</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 308-12.

<sup>41</sup> Exceptions, due to a recent evolution, involve for example the rites of Misraim Memphis and the Grand Lodge of Italy of Piazza del Gesù.

<sup>42</sup> Birge, *Bektashi order*, 234-5; Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 312.

<sup>43</sup> Zarcone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 2.

térité, qui permet une dialectique du même et de l'autre.<sup>44</sup>

In the specific case of Anatolia, the peculiar communion between Bektashi and masons probably also favoured political convergence, since the strategic union between the two orders played no small role in the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and hence on the birth of modern Turkey.<sup>45</sup> In 1906, when associations were forbidden under the repressive climate of Sultan Abdülmecid II, the Young Turks organised in the Hall of Lost Steps of the Salonica lodge *Macedonia Risorta* in Boulma Giani Street, a lodge which depended on the Italian Grand Orient. With approval from the Venerable Master Carasso, they used the lodge – which enjoyed immunity as a foreign organisation – as a base for meetings and for the archive of the movement. Between 1901 and 1908, the lodge *Macedonia Risorta* had a total of 188 members, 23 of whom were high level Ottoman army officers; many were also affiliated with Sufi orders, especially the Bektashyya. As Zarccone points out, “the rule of triple affiliation, ‘Young Turk/Freemason/Bektashi’, would become a characteristic of the epoch”.<sup>46</sup> Clandestine struggle and spiritual background were clearly a common ground uniting Italians and Turks.

This peculiar Ottoman experience shows how affinities which arose in Europe and in the Levant starting from indirect contaminations on the base of remote and partly shared sources, with specific histories of appropriation of these heritages and with a long-term evolution, could casually give rise to quite unexpected convergences. But it also shows how an esoteric and a political dimension could overlap with each other, leading to equally unexpected convergences on other levels. Further examples of a meeting between esotericisms appear from the affiliation to Masonry of some Sufi masters. The affiliation of some important figures can now be taken into consideration: ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Rizā Tevfik. These cases highlight both mutual enrichment on an esoteric level and misunderstandings, but especially they show how relations between Sufis and Freemasons were not founded only on shared values, but were also heavily conditioned – on both sides – by the political, social and cultural climate of that time.

<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur, *La Critique*, 96, citato da Zarccone, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 210-1; *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, 25 ff.; Hamāda, *Al-Adabiyyāt al-māsūniyya*, 320-2; Ferrari, *La Massoneria italiana*, 122 ff.; Iacovella, *Il triangolo e la mezzaluna*.

<sup>46</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 123.

## 6 Sufi and Freemasons in the Ottoman Empire

**Summary** 6.1 ‘Abd Al-Qādir Al-Jazā’irī. – 6.2 Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Afghānī. – 6.3 Rizā Tevfik.

### 6.1 ‘Abd Al-Qādir Al-Jazā’irī

The Algerian Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (1808-1883) is a key figure of his days:<sup>1</sup> an erudite Muslim, a Sufi of the Qādiriyya order, he led the struggle against the French occupation of Algeria and fought for many years before surrendering in 1847. At first imprisoned in France, after an agreement with Napoleon III, in 1852, he was released on committing himself to avoid hindering the colonial enterprise, and spent the rest of his life in Damascus. There, in 1860, after riots based on religion broke out, he protected and saved over 10,000 Christians from being lynched, and this gesture won him respect and approval from French Masonry.

The lodge Henry IV at the Orient of Paris invited him to join the masonic brotherhood, but because of unspecified difficulties in doing so in France, they asked the lodge Les Pyramides of Alexandria in Egypt to carry out his initiation. The lodge accepted, and ‘Abd al-Qādir was initiated there in the first degree on June 18, 1864.

The correspondence between the emir and the two lodges has been carefully studied by Bruno Étienne. It has already been seen how difficult it was for French masons to grasp the esoteric Islamic universe, since their approach to Muslims was dictated mainly by in-

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**1** Cf. Étienne, *Abdelkader and Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*; Yacono, “Abd el-Kader Franc-maçon”; Abd el-Kader, *Ecrits spirituels*.

terests which were strategic (spreading Masonry) if not political (facilitating the colonial enterprise). Especially, the French approach was conditioned by a deterministic approach to history which gave the Europeans primacy of civilisation and the mission of exporting it to the rest of the world, an approach which was not exactly helpful for understanding that world without prejudices. For example, the French, praising 'Abd al-Qādir's heroism in defending the Christians of Damascus, called him "supérieur aux préjugés de caste et de religion", without suspecting that the emir was simply applying the Islamic principles of *dhimma*, protecting recognised minorities.

Especially, the French scholar shows how a large part of 'Abd al-Qādir's doctrinal horizon must have escaped the French, who misunderstood the nature of several of his statements;<sup>2</sup> while the Sufi interpretation which the emir gave, when answering the questions for his affiliation, reveals how he associated Freemasonry with the esoteric dimension of the Sufi orders. The following is a fragment of his answer to the second question:

Quel sont les devoirs de l'homme envers ses semblables?

Réponse. – Il faut qu'il leur donne de bons conseils en les dirigeant vers les avantages (*intérêts*) de ce monde et de l'autre; qu'il les aide en cela, en instruisant l'ignorant et en avertissant l'indifférent (*le distrait*), ne les protégeant, en respectant le grand sans lui porter envie, en compatissant eu petit et pourvoyant à ses besoins, amenant à eux les choses utiles et repoussant d'eux le mal.

Toutes les lois reposent sur deux bases: la première de glorifier Dieu, la seconde d'avoir compassion des créatures de ce Dieu Très Haut, l'homme doit considérer que leur âme et la sienne ont une même origine, et qu'il y a entre elles d'autre diversité que leur enveloppe et leur extérieur; car l'âme entière provient d'un esprit entier qui, comme Eve provenant d'Adam, est l'origine de toutes les âmes. L'âme est une, elle n'est pas multiple, la multiplicité n'est que dans les enveloppes par lesquelles elle se montre, et dans les formes par lesquelles elle brille. C'est que les corps sont des maisons obscures, de noires régions qui, lorsque les lumières de l'âme entière les enveloppent, brillent et luisent par ces lumières qui débordent d'elles.

These few lines show both the ethical heritage of the mystic *futuwwa* and the emanentist teachings of Ibn al-'Arabī (*wahadat al-wujūd*), which 'Abd al-Qādir had taken up and which, as a Sufi master, he understood well.

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2 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 20-33, 50-67.

Unfortunately, the speeches celebrating the masonic affiliation of the emir by the brethren of the lodge Les Pyramides of Alexandria again show their paternalistic attitude towards the Algerian Sufi, and absolute ignorance of his important doctrinal and philosophical references, thus appearing – perhaps unintentionally – offensive and humiliating. According to the French masons his answers (which are actually fully part of the Islamic mystic tradition), “révèlent un libre penseur, élevé aux idées de la plus parfaite civilisation”, his definitions “sont frappées au coin de la logique la plus serrée”, emphasising how “Votre haute intelligence vous a fait apprécier la base de notre doctrine”. However, the speakers did not hesitate to remind him of his defeat by the French, and that the purpose of his initiation was to: “déblayer les ruines de la barbarie, et faire fructifier dans ces pays hostiles et ignorant les germes de la vérité universelle”.<sup>3</sup>

This dialogue shows the difficulties in interacting for both parts, beyond expressing a shared faith in a single God (at the time, the theist tendency still prevailed in French Masonry) and besides the reasons for each to converge. Masons of the time were generally unaware of basic principles of Islamic law, such as the status of *dhimma*, or of the ideas of Ibn al-ʿArabī or of the nature of Sufism, and found it difficult to understand ʿAbd al-Qādir’s esoteric lexicon. But above all, their relations with the emir were strongly prejudiced by the imperialist and Orientalist spirit of the age, which implicitly defined the Muslims as backward barbarians. French masons saw the Algerian Sufi as a tool for masonic penetration to dissipate darkness, “le coin d’entrée dans le roc de la barbarie”.<sup>4</sup> The Sufi emir too probably overestimated the philosophical and mystic quality of his European brethren, and may have decided to be initiated for reasons of conviction (as Étienne believes)<sup>5</sup> or out of personal interest.<sup>6</sup> In any case, when masons and Sufis first met in the Middle East, in the wake of European imperialism, it would have been hard to escape from the political context. This leaves us with some doubts about the sincerity of the emir when, during a trip to France, he pronounced the following words before two masonic delegations (the Amboise speech):

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3 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 41-9.

4 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 34.

5 According to the French Islamologist, ʿAbd al-Qādir might actually have placed moral and spiritual trust in Masonry, “peut-être parce que le langage codé en tant que subculture de la franc-maçonnerie était ce que l’Occident produisait de moins éloigné de la culture musulmane”. Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 70.

6 Some believe he did so to prove his loyalty to France, which was paying him a pension of 150 million francs a year, or because he needed French protection against the Ottomans who repeatedly demanded his expulsion. Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 68-9.

Je considère la franc-maçonnerie comme la première institution du monde. A mon avis, tout homme qui ne professe pas la fois maçonnique est un homme incomplet. J'espère qu'un jour les principes maçonniques seront répandus dans le monde entier. Dès lors tous les peuples vivront dans la paix et la fraternité.<sup>7</sup>

Once back to Syria, 'Abd al-Qādir never attended masonic gatherings in Damascus or in Bayreuth (although he had mason friends), which seems to prove the predominantly strategic nature of his affiliation – perhaps also confirmed by the later initiation of his two sons. However, it is certain that his Sufi formation, as well as the progressive Salafi vocation of the Algerian Emir determined an intellectual contiguity with Freemasonry. Maybe the Amboise speech did not fully reflect his thinking, but he certainly did not consider Masonry incompatible with his spiritual, cultural and political beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

## 6.2 Jamāl Al-Dīn Al-Afghānī

Another example of the meeting between the esoteric Sufi dimension and Masonry is that of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.<sup>9</sup> Due to his progressive and rationalist intellectual approach, together with his open opposition to imperialism and to his political activism, al-Afghānī is considered to be one of the most effective actors in cultural and ideological change in the Levant in the late nineteenth century. He is mainly known for his political commitment, but his reformist efforts probably also found fertile ground for rationalist renovation in his personal Sufi dimension.

Al-Afghānī was not of Arab origin, and, notwithstanding his name, he was not born in Afghanistan but in Iran<sup>10</sup> (and was not a Sunni but a Shiite). Various Persian sources say he received education in Islamic disciplines, in Muslim philosophers and in mysticism. After having stayed in India and in Istanbul, he spent the years from 1871 to 1879 in Egypt where he started his political activity against imperialism and in favour of liberal reforms. In Cairo he began teaching religious sciences, philosophy, logic, Sufism and Arab literature at al-Azhar, the most prestigious Islamic university of the Middle East, enchant-

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<sup>7</sup> Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 71-2.

<sup>8</sup> Zarcone, *Le mystère Abd al-Kader*, pos. Kindle 211, 467, 535-9, 780.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Keddīe, *An Islamic response; Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*; Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*; Pakdaman, *Djamal-Ed-Din Assad Abadi*.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Afghānī was born in 1838-39 in As'adābād. He would claim the event took place in the town of that name in the province of Kunar in Afghanistan; however it is far more likely that he was born in another of the same name near Hamadan in Iran.

ing many of his students with his charisma, students who would play a decisive role in the history of the country, like the reformist intellectual Muhammad ‘Abduh<sup>11</sup> or the nationalist Sa’d Zaghlūl. However, his reformist ideas led to his expulsion from the institution.<sup>12</sup>

It is not known whether he became a mason before 1876, but in the years before, he certainly encouraged masonic publications and supported the organisation, which he saw as a tool for modernist reform and change.<sup>13</sup> After 1876, various documents prove al-Afghānī’s masonic affiliation. First of all, the minutes of a letter found among his private documents discovered in Tehran in 1963, contain a request in Arabic to be admitted to an unnamed lodge, dated March 31, 1875:

I the undersigned, a teacher of philosophical sciences, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Kābulī, aged thirty-seven, ask the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-safā’*), call on the faithful companions (*Khullān wafā’*), guides of the sacred masonic organisation, [...] to be willing and favourable to accept me in that pure organisation, and to let me enter the body of the affiliates of that glorious association.<sup>14</sup>

Another of these documents says: “I entered the lodge on April 7, 1876”, without specifying the name of the lodge. It is hard to understand which lodges he joined during his sojourn in Egypt, since the documents found in Tehran show a sort of ‘masonic frenzy’, which has led to many hypotheses.<sup>15</sup> It is known for certain that, in 1877, al-Afghānī was initiated in the lodge *Star of the East*, under the Grand Lodge of England,<sup>16</sup> and as certified in a letter in Arabic, on December 1877 he was elected Grand Master of the same lodge.<sup>17</sup>

Studies have emphasised how al-Afghānī joined Freemasonry for political reasons, but Elie Kedourie was determined in associating al-Afghānī’s Sufi dimension, always pre-eminent in his human and spiritual career, with his masonic affiliation.<sup>18</sup> This can be seen in the nearly idolatrous adoration of his disciples, closer to that for a mystic master than for an ordinary teacher; or the esoteric character attributed to definitions such as ‘perfect sage’, ‘the true science’ or ‘Truth

<sup>11</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 130-60.

<sup>12</sup> Kudsi-Zadeh, “Afghānī and Freemasonry”, 25-35.

<sup>13</sup> Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn*, 224-6.

<sup>14</sup> Afshar, Mahdavi, *Documents inédits*, doc. 16, repr. 40.

<sup>15</sup> De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 112.

<sup>16</sup> De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Afshar, Mahdavi, *Documents inédits*, doc. 17, repr. 41; Shalash, *Al-Yahūd wa-al-māsūn*, 226-7.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 9-17; Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 8.



personified' which 'Abduh used when speaking of him.<sup>19</sup> Also the formulas used by al-Afghānī in his request for affiliation to Masonry, such as 'brethren of purity' (*Ikhwān al-safā'*), and 'faithful companions' (*Khullān wafā'*), bring unmistakably to mind the Brethren of Purity who in the eighth century wrote treatises accused of heresy. This at least shows that al-Afghānī associated Masonry with a clear philosophical and esoteric dimension. Investigating his private papers, Kedourie sees that the intellectual read and taught works of philosophy and Sufism all his life, and continued to be interested in esoteric topics, such as mystic alphabets and numerical combinations.<sup>20</sup> While al-Afghānī found in Masonry a tool for political action, its esoteric dimension was not foreign to him, and probably not entirely marginal.

However, convergence between al-Afghānī's intellectual and spiritual universe and Masonry should not be sought so much in Sufism, as in what Kedourie calls the passage from the mystic pantheism of Sufism (*wahdat al-wujūd*) to rationalism (with sources in Greek thought, but tied to Western positivism), through a philosophical approach, arriving at "a new rationalist religion".<sup>21</sup> This intellectual path made him a "French style freethinker", as his Indian friend Syed Hussein put it.<sup>22</sup> The belief that, if Scripture contradicts reason and science, it is Scripture (in this case the sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet) which must be reinterpreted,<sup>23</sup> is perfectly compatible with the most progressive masonic spirit of the epoch, especially French and Italian. For al-Afghānī, Masonry must have appeared to be the best soil for receiving and spreading the new reformist ideas – not always favourably accepted in his days.<sup>24</sup>

An enthusiastic modernist, the Persian intellectual propagate the idea that appropriation of Western sciences and techniques was the fundamental key to renew Islam in order to oppose Western imperialism. He believed that after centuries of substantial hermeneutic sclerosis,<sup>25</sup> it was necessary to reopen efforts to interpret the sacred

<sup>19</sup> Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> After being driven out of al-Azhar, al-Afghānī continued teaching at home, and – as one witness told it – when students came to his house, the neighbours would throw stones at them and curse him. Kudsi-Zadeh, "Afghānī and Freemasonry", 25.

<sup>25</sup> The tenth-eleventh centuries, in the Sunni Islamic world, saw the closing of the 'gate of *ijtihad*', that is the esoteric effort aimed at interpreting the Texts (the Qur'an and the Sunna which includes the sayings, the deeds and the silences of the Prophet), in order to establish the legal corpus of the *shari'a*, but also of theology. Since then, interpretation was replaced by *taqlid*, imitation of the ancients, leading to a substantial immobility of Islamic sciences.

texts of Islam against every superstition, conservatism and obscurantism. On this base, inside the *nahda*, he introduced a philosophical and political movement called *islāh*,<sup>26</sup> 'reform', later consolidated by his disciple Muhammad 'Abduh and, at least initially, by Rashīd Ridā. Here, al-Afghānī's thinking converged with that of other Turkish reformists: Mustafa Reşid Pasha and Midhat Pasha (the latter author of the liberal Ottoman Constitution of 1876), among the most important modernising and secularising reformers who changed the laws, institutions and culture of the Ottoman empire in the nineteenth century, masons too, or the writer Nâmık Kemāl, Sufi (perhaps Bek-tashi) and mason, who tried to deduce the spirit of the reform from verses of the Qur'an.<sup>27</sup>

His positions met with hostility from religious institutions but also from the political establishment, and al-Afghānī was repeatedly accused of impiety and heterodoxy.<sup>28</sup> Masonry too began to consider his opinions 'heretical': when al-Afghānī was expelled from Egypt in August 1879, the British consul general wrote: "He was recently expelled from the Freemasons' Lodge at Cairo, of which he was a member, on account of his open disbelief in a Supreme Being",<sup>29</sup> a sign that anti-theist rationalism at the time was also poorly tolerated in many Western milieux, even masonic (especially in British Freemasonry) – although in this case it was probably a mere pretext.<sup>30</sup>

It can be seen here how the link between the Sufi universe and Masonry arose when both sides espoused liberal principles, which in those years of rapid and profound change for the Middle East saw cultural and religious reform built on the foundations of science and freethinking. In this case, Sufism evolved by accepting rationalism which, especially in Italian and French lodges promoted progressive thinking in Europe and around the world throughout the nineteenth century.

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<sup>26</sup> *Islāh* identifies itself with reformist and modernist Salafism, an attempt to modernise Islam starting from the reinterpretation of the original sources. Merad, *Islāh*; De Poli, *Riformisti, conservatori, radicali*; Bori, *Il pensiero radicale islamico*.

<sup>27</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 98.

<sup>28</sup> This was basically the reason he had to leave Istanbul in March 1871. Pakdaman, *Djamal-Ed-Din Assad Abadi*, 45-9.

<sup>29</sup> Archive document quoted by Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> The reasons appear to have been eminently political, since al-Afghānī had personally expressed to the French consul the idea of deposing the Khedive Ismā'il, provoking a dispute among masons. In revenge, and because of his public interventions against the new Khedive Tawfiq, some two months later, on August 26, 1879, al-Afghānī was expelled from the country. De Poli, *La massoneria in Egitto*, 127-31.

### 6.3 Rizā Tevfîk

It has been seen how, in Turkey, politics, Sufism and Freemasonry came the closest together at the dawn of the twentieth century, when many Young Turks, often Bektashi affiliates, joined masonic lodges. In this context, a figure of special note was the politician and intellectual Rizā Tevfîk (1868-1949).

Born into a family hailing from northern Albania, Tevfîk spent his youth at Edirne, Istanbul, Izmir and Gallipoli (Gelibolu); in this last town, as a youth, he first came into contact with the Turkish mysticism of the bards (*aşık*) of popular brotherhoods and, thanks to the whirling dervishes he met at the convent of Hüssameddîn, he read Rumi's *Masnavi*, the great Sufi poem in Persian on which the Mevlevî order was founded.<sup>31</sup> His education was complicated: he studied at the Galata high school in Istanbul, then proceeded to the School of Political and Administrative Sciences (the well known *Mekteb-i mülkiyye*, where some of the most brilliant Ottoman intellectuals of the *fin-de-siècle* studied), then finally enrolled in the Imperial School of Medicine, but was expelled from each school for indiscipline. After obtaining a diploma, he became a doctor at the customs of Istanbul, but in 1907 he joined the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) becoming a strong supporter of the Revolution and after the Constitution was proclaimed in 1908, he started on a political career, being elected to parliament. Of a progressive and liberal bent, in 1911 he began to strongly criticise the authoritarian policies of the CUP and a few years later became one of the founders of the opposition Freedom and Accord Party (*Hürriyet ve İtilâf*, also known as Liberal Entente or Union), which rose to power after the fall of the Young Turks following defeat in World War One. He was twice a minister (of National Education and of Post Telegraph and Telephone), President of the Senate and author of the political and social reforms in Turkey of those years; but he was also one of the signatories of the Treaty of Sèvres, which led to the dismemberment of Ottoman empire, bringing him harsh criticism and personal discomfort. Since he also opposed the rebellion led in Anatolia by Kemal Atatürk, after the victory of the latter, he was put in the list of the 'One Hundred and Fifty' politicians, writers, artists, and intellectuals accused of having betrayed the country and sent into exile in 1922.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence it is hardly surprising that his name has remained marginal in the history of contemporary Turkey; the complexity of his figure, rarely dealt with by Turkish scholars, appears in the work of Thierry Zarcone who, starting from a thorough examination of his

<sup>31</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 339-40, 350.

<sup>32</sup> Exile left a deep mark on Tevfîk, whose intellectual activity declined sharply.

works and of many sources in Ottoman and modern Turkish, devoted a considerable part of his study on mystics, philosophers and masons in Islam to him.<sup>33</sup>

Little is actually known about the masonic career of Tevfîk. According to a Turkish historian, he was initiated during a trip to Great Britain in 1909. On his return home, together with other masons, he made efforts to emancipate Turkish Masonry from the guardianship of such foreign orders as the French and Italian Grand Orientes and the English Grand Lodge. He was one of the nine members of the Supreme Council of the High Degrees of the 33rd degree, he was thus able – already in 1909 – to found a national obedience, the Ottoman Grand Orient, where he was affiliated with the Constitution Lodge, soon becoming its Grand Orator.<sup>34</sup> His role in Turkish Masonry was however controversial and not always tolerant of others. In 1911 he publicly revealed the masonic affiliation of Mûsâ Kâsım, a brother in his lodge but also Shaykh al-Islam, the highest charge in the state Religious Affairs office, creating a scandal which forced Kâsım to resign. Again, in 1918, when he became Grand Master of the Ottoman Grand Orient, a role he kept until 1920, Rizâ Tevfîk launched a ‘purge’ which affected his brethren. His charge certainly had a strong political touch, since his election coincided with the rise to power of his party, the Liberal Entente, following the fall of the Young Turk government: under his guidance, Unionists were even expelled from the lodges, and the order underwent strong rebuilding.<sup>35</sup>

However, Tevfîk’s masonic membership should not be reduced to a merely political dimension.

The Ottoman intellectual was deeply immersed in the mystic culture of his times as a Sufi – he was a *baba* of the Bektashiyya and often attended meetings and convents of the order<sup>36</sup> (as a poet, he was famous for his mystic compositions, also sung by dervishes) – and believed there were several points of contact between Sufism and Masonry. One of the analogies he noted was certainly the vocation for political involvement which both institutions manifested – especially the Melâmî –, but some of his articles clearly show he felt that masonic initiation differed little from the Sufi way, at least in its most ‘enlightened’ manifestations.<sup>37</sup>

Le plus grand devoir moral de la *tariqat melâmiyye*, à mon avis, est d’éprouver une profonde compassion pour l’humanité et de

<sup>33</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 329-494.

<sup>34</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 343.

<sup>35</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 265-6.

<sup>36</sup> He said so to Ramsaur. Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 351

<sup>37</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 343.

ressentir dans sa propre conscience le malheur des autres [...] je suis réellement plus derviche que de nombreux autres derviches et je suis aussi plus que beaucoup d'autres, lié au soufisme. [...] je voudrais seulement dire un ou deux mots au sujet de la maçonnerie. Le premier est que l'on doit savoir avant tout qu'il ne demeure aujourd'hui plus aucun secret, sinon celui constitué pas le "mystère de la création" que l'homme dans sa faiblesse ne peut atteindre. Mon opinion, en ce qui concerne l'ordre maçonnique, est à ce point contraire à ce que croit la plupart des hommes non informés, qu'il m'est impossible de la résumer en quelques mots. Je dirai seulement que celui qui ne croit pas en une puissance créatrice, ne peut être maçon.<sup>38</sup>

Tevfik's interest in metaphysical matters emerges especially in his role as a 'philosopher', as he called himself.<sup>39</sup> Tevfik had a profound knowledge of Western philosophy, which he wrote significant books about,<sup>40</sup> and was equally competent in Islamic philosophy, in history and in the principles of Sufism, about which he published a number of articles. His encyclopaedic knowledge was enriched by the study of a very wide range of sources, facilitated by his mastery of several European and Oriental languages, and his meetings with Western intellectuals, especially orientalists, such as the British Edward G. Browne, E.E. Ramsaur, or the French Barbeir de Meynard and Carra De Vaux. The latter especially held him in high esteem and translated some passages of his *Philosophical Dictionary*.

It would be beyond the scope of this study to go into the complexity of Tevfik's philosophical thinking, a topic which can be read about in Zarcone's work; however, there are certain significant elements for the purposes of this discussion. The works of the Ottoman intellectual in fact show a confluence between Islamic and European thinking which often turns into a synthesis or an acknowledgement of equivalence, not without stretching some points. Especially the conjunction of Western and Islamic mystic philosophy is structured in the doctrine of 'agnosticism' which he developed, that is the idea that Man's intelligence is not able to grasp the essence of things or the nature of the divine (according to Socrates' motto, "all I know is that I know nothing").<sup>41</sup> The Ottoman intellectual formulates his own per-

<sup>38</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 319.

<sup>39</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 330.

<sup>40</sup> He published *Felsefe dersleri*, 'Philosophy Lessons', which in 564 pages collected and developed the texts of his courses, held first in a high school and then at the University of Istanbul (*Dâr ü'l fûnûn*), and the unfinished *Mufasssal kâmus-i-felsefe*, known as *Philosophical Dictionary*, his most appreciated work even though it ended at the letter C.

<sup>41</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 371.

sonal concept of 'agnosticism' developing some points of Ibn 'Arabī's thinking (and adopting his vision of the Unity of Being), together with the thinking of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, interpreting it *a posteriori* as a foundation of Turkish mysticism.<sup>42</sup> He wrote:

De même qu'il existe une forme mystique (Sufi) et théologique de l'agnosticisme, il existe aussi une forme philosophique et scientifique de celui-ci qui est respectable et indiscutable si l'on regarde la philosophie contemporaine.<sup>43</sup>

In a similar fashion, he believed that definition of the principle of the Absolute, one of the crucial points of his thinking, was substantially identical in Ibn 'Arabī and Spencer, but also in Bergson.<sup>44</sup> Animated by the same spirit, he wrote: "En fait, entre la philosophie de Descartes et le soufisme, il n'y a divergence qu'au dernier degré".<sup>45</sup>

Tevfik never gave a systematic structure to his philosophy, and his work was not without limits and contradictions, but his approach shows an effort to create a synthesis between cultures which have roots and epistemes which cannot always be assimilated to each other. This orientation may be seen as an attempt to heal what many, north or south of the Mediterranean, felt to be a fracture of civilisation between East and West, at a time when the East was most fragile in the face of European political and cultural imperialism.<sup>46</sup> Metabolization of modernity also passed through an appropriation of some of its canons in a key which was not contextualised and relative, but absolute and universalising.

However, Tevfik's philosophical studies reveal an interpretation which is unable to free itself from its intellectual focus, clearly centred on metaphysical issues which ever since his adolescence in Galipoli had attracted and profoundly marked him, as he would later write: "je crois que cette influence de Gelibolu m'a apporté la saveur d'une enfance qui respirait la liberté et la spiritualité":<sup>47</sup> in fact, he interpreted Western philosophy through the prism of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, although viewed from a Sufi perspective which

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<sup>42</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 364.

<sup>43</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 372.

<sup>44</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 410.

<sup>45</sup> Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 393.

<sup>46</sup> One may remember the debate between Ernest Renan and Al-Afghani in the spring of 1883. The Persian intellectual had objected to the opinion expressed by Renan according to which Islam and science were substantially incompatible. *Renan/Al-Afghani*. URL <http://blogs.histoireglobale.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Renan-al-Afghani.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Cevdet, *Doctor Rizā Tevfik Bey*, 37-8, quoted by Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 338.

Zarcone calls 'enlightened',<sup>48</sup> specifying that Tevfik "n'a pris du soufisme que ce qui l'intéressait".<sup>49</sup>

This approach is also reminiscent of how 'Abd al-Qādir interpreted Masonry: in fact, the Algerian emir associated the nature of Freemasonry to Islamic esotericism, interpreting its principles in the light of Sufi teachings, and especially of Ibn 'Arabi, the spiritual and doctrinal reference for Tevfik too. There are also clear analogies between the career and views of Tevfik and the experience of al-Afghānī: for the Ottoman intellectual too, Freemasonry was a tool and politics deeply marked his life, but the political and initiatory – Sufi and masonic – careers converged in support to progressive liberal ideas, expressed by his party, the Liberal Entente, espoused by the Bektashiyya order and spread by lodges since the mid nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> It is no surprise then that, like al-Afghānī, Tevfik too, while openly proclaiming his faith in God (although accepting the theist position for the Ottoman Grand Orient) was accused of atheism, of being a mason, *qalandari*<sup>51</sup> or freethinker.<sup>52</sup>

Sufi, mason or philosopher, Tevfik remains an example of a reformist intellectual open to the cultural stimulation of his age, capable of finding analogies and developing original syntheses in the meeting between Islamic and European thinking. As often happens to the freest minds, his capacity for looking critically at his own background and his liberal orientation, both in politics and in metaphysics, earned him stigma from the government and institutional Islam, making people forget his story for a long time.

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<sup>48</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 330.

<sup>49</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 352.

<sup>50</sup> De Poli, *La Massoneria in Egitto*, 162-9.

<sup>51</sup> The Qalandariyya was a heterodox sufi order spread from Morocco to China, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: their followers practised celibacy, lived together and drank alcoholic beverages. Cf. Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 5; Yazıcı, *Qalandariyya*.

<sup>52</sup> Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes*, 382, 442-4.

## 7 Islam and Freemasonry in the Twentieth Century

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**Summary** 7.1 New Myths. – 7.2 A Universal Spirituality. – 7.3 Freemasonry and Islamic Esotericism Today.

### 7.1 New Myths

To conclude this study about the relations between Masonry and the Orient on a mythical, symbolic and esoteric level, a further aspect is the connection between Freemasonry and Islam developed especially, but not only, from the European side, starting in the nineteenth but especially in the twentieth century.

It has been seen how, during the expansion of Masonry in the Levant, starting in the eighteenth century, only a few European masons had paid attention to brotherhoods – especially John Brown –<sup>1</sup> despite the affiliation of some Sufis to the lodges and despite the fact that the convergence between masons and Bektashi had brought out some surprising affinities. The main preoccupation of the brethren who had come to the Middle East was not so much to track down esoteric symmetries with local orders, as to export and propagate Masonry, which in its way had set itself the mission of ‘civilising’ the colonised world, including Muslims (and only after discussions within the lodges concerning the suitability of admitting them).<sup>2</sup> While Freemasonry could be considered compatible with Islam on the basis of Anderson’s *Constitutions*, in the Levant too, its cultural horizon was anchored to its European sources. The Egyptophile fashion, in-

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, *The Darvishes*.

<sup>2</sup> *Compte-rendu de l'Assemblée Maçonnique; Compte-rendu de la deuxième Assemblée*.



stead of restoring the Hermetic roots of Freemasonry, had enriched its imagination with symbolic references to a fundamentally unreal Ancient Egypt, but no relationship had been thought possible with Islamic initiatory experiences.

However, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, undeniable symmetries between some mystic practices in the Middle East and in Freemasonry – like the case of the Bektashi – began to give rise to the idea of a convergence, if not of direct derivation, of Masonry, from Sufism, Ismailism or the Druze. On the basis of purely formal affinities – often of a very general nature, such as numerological symmetries – some publications suggested daring and unlikely overlapping or direct derivation between Islamic (or pre-Islamic) esoteric paths and European ones, through vague historic routes. These ‘studies’, without any hermeneutic base, were supposed by their authors to certify the ancient nature of Masonry and its Oriental origin. Actually, such conjectures failed to find much credit even in masonic milieux. Bernard Springett, who produced an example of this kind of literature in the introduction to his book *Secret Sects of Syria and the Lebanon: a Consideration of their Origin, Creeds and Religious Ceremonies, and their Connection with and Influence upon Modern Freemasonry*, published in 1922, admits that:

A surprising amount of scorn and ridicule has been the reception accorded by Freemasons, both in Great Britain and in America, to previous attempts to place on record some very plain proofs that we are justified in saying in our Masonic Ritual that ‘we came from the East and proceeded to the West’.<sup>3</sup>

Springett tells us how the hypothesis of a direct derivation between Masonry and the Druze, suggested by Haskett Smith,<sup>4</sup> had also met with scepticism in the Masonic public. Blending myth, invention and history, in an article titled *The Druses of Syria and their Relation to Freemasonry*, published in 1891 in the “*Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*”, Smith claimed:

1. that the Druses are none other than the original subjects of Hiram, King of Tyre, and that their ancestors were the builders of Solomon’s Temple;
2. that, to this very day the Druses retain many evident tokens of their close and intimate connection with the Ancient Craft of Freemasonry.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Springett, *Secret Sects*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, “The Druses of Syria”, 7-19.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, “The Druses of Syria”, 9.

Indicating the mountaineering Phoenicians as the craftsmen and Masons who build the Solomon's Temple, he claimed that Druses were their descendants on the basis of sings and passwords that they supposedly inherited, being absolutely convinced that:

I have thus been enabled to trace without, as it seems to me, any missing link, the unbroken continuity between the pastoral subjects of Hiram, King of Thyre and the Druses of the present day.<sup>6</sup>

In the introduction to his work, Springett also quotes A.L. Rawson, who in 1877 had written a long description of his initiation with the Druze for the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky, showing the analogies between the Druze and the Masonic systems, "but his views met with such ridicule among American masons that he considered it would be a thankless and hopeless task to publish anything further in the subject".<sup>7</sup>

Springett's mention of Helena Blavatsky (of whom he also inserts an article in his volume)<sup>8</sup> takes us back to the climate in which this new parascientific literature arose, a confused and imaginative blend of Egyptosophy and Oriental disciplines, often associating both with Masonry to claim the rediscovery of a universal ancestral spirituality. A mountebank for some, an enlightened spiritual being for others, the co-founder<sup>9</sup> of what critic René Guénon called the 'Theosophist pseudo-religion'<sup>10</sup> she had an enormous impact on twentieth century esoteric imagination.<sup>11</sup> Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), who spent her life amidst magicians, magnetisers and spiritualists, and who worked herself as a medium in Cairo and the USA (being found guilty in both places of fraud), established the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York, under the guidance, she claimed, of certain spirits. The message of the spirit guides, and the core of the complex metaphysical system of Theosophy, was based on the principle that different religions bear a universal message, necessary for understanding the absolute Truth; the Theosophical doctrine thus appears as an entirely arbitrary recombination and synthesis of principles present in different faiths or mystic currents, interpreted in various ways. One can find elements of Brahmanism, Buddhism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Jewish Kabbalah, occultism, Egyptomania/Egyptosophy - and, last but not least, evolutionism. Especially the

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, "The Druses of Syria", 9.

<sup>7</sup> Springett, *Secret sects*, 6, 203-7; De Smet, "Les prétendues origines druzes".

<sup>8</sup> Blavatsky, "Lamas and Druses".

<sup>9</sup> The other founder of Theosophy was the reporter Henry Steel Olcott.

<sup>10</sup> Guénon, *Theosophy*, 1-24.

<sup>11</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky*; Lachman, *Madame Blavatsky*.

Egyptosophic strain came to her from the journalist and Egyptologist George Felt,<sup>12</sup> and from the American Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, where she spent some time in the early 1870s. It comes as no surprise that one of the alleged spirit guides, ‘masters of ancient wisdom’ of Blavatsky bore the name of Serapis and that she titled her first book *Isis Unveiled* (1877). Later the Russian medium, who had become a US national, joined the Arya Samāj, a reformist Hindu movement founded in Bombay in 1870 by Swāmī Dayānanda Saraswatī, an organisation which she called the most ancient masonic lodge of India – established before the advent of Jesus –, of which the Theosophical Society deemed itself to be a branch. Actually, there was nothing masonic about Arya Samāj, of absolutely recent origin, and in 1882, Dayānanda Saraswatī broke off relations with the Theosophical Society, calling Blavatsky “a trickster”.<sup>13</sup>

However, Theosophism and its mystic fascination based on a mingle of heterogeneous elements aimed at depicting a synthesis as ‘absolute truth’ had an immense impact on Western Neospiritualism<sup>14</sup>.

It was with this mentality that Springett, in his book on the *Secret sects of Syria and the Lebanon*, recreated a thread connecting various initiatory or pseudo-initiatory organisms and ancient and modern sects, using of a hand-picked selection of superficial analogies. Turning traditional masonic mythopoeies into ‘history’ in order to prove the ancient origins of Masonry, he put together the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the Stellar Cult and, in succession:

The Druids, the Manicheans and Gnostics with all their developments traceable through to the Pythagorean system: the Templars; the Essenes, Therapeutae, Nazarenes, and their modern representatives, the Mandaites, or Christians of St. John; the Sabaeans, Nabatheans and the Samaritans; the Sufeites, and the various Dervish Orders; the secret sects of Islam, the Ismaeli, Bateonians, Karmatians, and Metawileh; the Lodge of Wisdom at Cairo, the Assassins, the Nusairis, and the Druses.<sup>15</sup>

To the Druses he dedicated the longest chapter, associating them with both Tibetan Lamaism and Masonry, which is where he again picked up Haskett Smith’s thesis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Felt took part in the foundation of the Theosophical Society, which he wanted to have called the Egyptological Society.

<sup>13</sup> Guénon, *Theosophy*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> This again is a term of Guénon.

<sup>15</sup> Springett, *Secret sects*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Springett, *Secret sects*, 180-296.

A similar approach characterised Rudolf Von Sebottendorf, born Rudolf Glauer<sup>17</sup> (1875-1945), who, influenced by Theosophy, in 1917 founded the Thule Society in Munich, the 'ideological' forerunner of Nazism.<sup>18</sup> As Von Sebottendorf himself recounted,<sup>19</sup> after an adventurous youth which led him to Australia, in 1900 he landed in Alexandria in Egypt, and stayed in Cairo before reaching Istanbul where he learned Turkish and worked at the service of an influential landowner, Hussein Pasha. It is not clear whether he converted to Islam, but in Turkey he approached Islamic esotericism through the Mevlevi, and thanks to Hussein Pasha who practised Sufism and allegedly introduced him to the secrets of Muslim alchemists, still practised by the Bektashi. In Bursa, a Greek Jewish family from Salonica, the Termudi, also introduced him to the Kabbalah and initiated him in a masonic lodge, perhaps affiliated with the Memphis rite. Von Sebottendorf, who believed that Islamic mysticism shared an Aryan origin with Germanic runes, in 1914 wrote a manuscript which he rewrote and published in Leipzig in 1924 under the title *Die Praxis der alten türkischen Freimaurerei*. There he revealed the spiritual exercises of 'Turkish Masonry', explaining that, contrarily to what is believed in the West, "Islam is far more alive than the Christian religion",<sup>20</sup> and that:

The exercises of the Oriental mason are merely actions taken to make improve oneself and acquire greater knowledge. The following text will show that they represent the secret of the Rosicrucians, the discoveries of the alchemists, the achievement of the seekers' passion, the philosopher's stone. [...] I shall show how Oriental Masonry, even today, is faithful to the ancient philosophers whom modern Masonry has forgotten; one may start by saying right away that the Constitutions of Freemasonry of 1717 are no deviation from the straight path.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of an original spirituality of the Truth, flowing from East to West through direct contaminations among initiatory groups, emanated from specific cultures, historical and social contexts, became

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<sup>17</sup> After becoming an Ottoman citizen in 1911, he appears to have been adopted by an expatriate baron by the name of Heinrich von Sebottendorf, taking his name.

<sup>18</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*; Alleau, *Hitler et les sociétés secrètes*; Galli, *Hitler e il nazismo magico*.

<sup>19</sup> Goodrick-Clarke (*The Occult Roots*, 199-223) used von Sebottendorf's autobiographical writings, with their elements of fantasy, but supported by other documentary sources. One may however be quite sceptical about his esoteric education.

<sup>20</sup> Von Sebottendorf, *La pratica operativa*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Von Sebottendorf, *La pratica operativa*, 15.

a paradigm which gained strength in the twentieth century, through increasingly heterogeneous manifestations, leading up to the New Age movement. This vision would give rise to a series of unlikely hypotheses, but also to specific experiences which would indicate spiritual ways with a universalist vocation. This trans-religious approach would continue to be valid until our days and would gain adepts in the Islamic world as well.

## 7.2 A Universal Spirituality

Sometimes influenced by Theosophism, sometimes firmly opposed to it, sometimes simply following a vocation of their own, various personalities of the twentieth century opened up a new outlook for contemporary spirituality, with a wide variety of contents and outcomes. Some of these figures, in their writings or lives, would provide testimony of their direct experience of Sufism or Freemasonry or both, the connection between Eastern and Western esotericism, giving rise to schools which often had considerable influence. They could follow different individual paths and come from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, but they all shared experiences of transnational life, with itineraries from the East to the West or vice versa. Instead of attempting to classify the components of this very composite universe, it is better to give some examples which show their variety of expression.

The father of the universalist view of religions was certainly René Guénon (1886-1951). Like Helena Blavatsky, Guénon too would have a major impact on contemporary spiritualism or neospiritualism, and, as with the Russian medium, he would have at least as many admirers as detractors. He had a wide range of esoteric interests: when he was very young, Guénon attended Papus' Hermetic occultist school, Masonry, the Martinists (the antechamber of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, long 'in dormancy'), the Gnostic Church of France, but what really changed his life was his encounter with Hinduism, through a master of the Advaita Vedānta when he was twenty. This encounter, he said, founded his metaphysical certainties.<sup>22</sup> He seems to have become a Sufi in 1910, through the Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli, who had been initiated in Cairo in the Shādiliyya *tarīqā* under the name of 'Abd al-Hādī; Guénon's Islamic name became 'Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā.<sup>23</sup> In the two following decades, Guénon set himself the mission of restoring the spiritual destiny of the West, reaching a wide public with his writings, but he was forced to acknowledge

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<sup>22</sup> Laurant, *Le Regard ésotérique*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Urizzi, *Présence du soufisme*, 330-1; Rezki, *René Guénon*, 59.

his failure, and in 1930 departed for Cairo. The trip was supposed to last three months, but once he had established himself in the old quarter of the Egyptian capital, he quickly learned Arabic, became the disciple of a shaykh of the Shādiliyya (among other he has been influenced by ‘Abd al-Rahmân Illaysh, close friend of ‘Abd al-Qādir in Damascus)<sup>24</sup> and publicly converted to Islam, using his Muslim name exclusively from then on. Guénon never returned to Europe and was buried in Cairo on his death in 1951.

Guénon’s thinking was built around a clear basic principle: all religions share a universal truth, which is still preserved in the East. A fierce critic of Theosophy – which however influenced him –<sup>25</sup> Guénon considered it impossible to establish a new religion or spiritual access starting from an arbitrary synthesis of heterogeneous elements, and deemed valid only ancient traditions expressed in their authenticity, which – he believed – all converged towards the spiritual fulfilment of Man. He is considered the founder of the ‘Traditionalist school’ or *perennialisme*, following the term *sophia perennis* suggested by Frithjof Schuon, referring to the nucleus of Truth which can be achieved through gnosis arising from spiritual initiation into one of the major religious Traditions. Already in his *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues*, published in 1921, he had this to say about metaphysical questions:

Tout ce que nous venons de dire est applicable, sans aucune restriction, à n’importe laquelle des doctrines traditionnelles de l’Orient, malgré de grandes différences de forme qui peuvent dissimuler l’identité du fond à un observateur superficiel: cette conception de la métaphysique est vraie à la fois du taoïsme, de la doctrine hindoue, et aussi de l’aspect profond et extra-religieux de l’Islamisme.<sup>26</sup>

Guénon, believing the West to be spiritually ‘lost’, therefore chose the Sufi way for his interior self-fulfilment, but he preserved a certain respect for Freemasonry. Guénon’s masonic experience was brief (approximately from 1909 to 1914) and he certainly considered Freemasonry a corrupted institution. However, he did believe it to be the

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<sup>24</sup> Zarcone, *Le mystère Abd el-Kader*, pos. Kindle 206-2013.

<sup>25</sup> Actually, Guénon got to know Theosophy at an advanced stage of his initiatory path. However, many believe he was influenced by the Theosophical or spiritualist and occultist thinking of the nineteenth century, sharing with Theosophy the principle of a universal spirituality based on a core esoteric teaching that underlies all religions (Smoley, *Against Blavatsky*. However, in academic milieux, many have criticised his totally unscientific approach, where false premises lead to imaginary conclusions (Eco, “La supposta”; Jesi, *Cultura di destra*).

<sup>26</sup> Guénon, *Introduction générale à l’étude*, 56.

only authentic initiatory organisation in the West together with the *compagnonnage*, and he dedicated several articles collected and published posthumously in two volumes.<sup>27</sup>

Even though his treatises are epistemologically weak and have been criticised by academic scholars,<sup>28</sup> Guénon did launch an original hermeneutic approach, 'internal' to the initiatory path, and influenced many contemporary spiritualists and scholars, some of whom were also transitional between Masonry and Sufism. During the twentieth century, the study of Islamic mysticism derived much of its energy from his work and from that of other Europeans converted to Islam and to initiates of Sufi orders, who would refer, directly or indirectly, to dialogue or spiritual convergence between religions.

Thus, the Romanian diplomat Michel Vâlsan (1911-1974), follower of Guénon,<sup>29</sup> converted to Islam and became a master of the Shādiliyya *tariqā* in Paris under the name Shaykh Mustafa 'Abd al-'Azīz. Especially through his writings for the review *Etudes Traditionnelles* which he also directed, Vâlsan practically founded western contemporary studies on Ibn 'Arabī, translating many of his works.<sup>30</sup> Commenting on some essays by Guénon, Vâlsan went back to the topic of the relationship between Masonry and Oriental traditions, including Islam, in a series of articles published in *Etudes Traditionnelles* under the title *Les derniers hauts grades de l'Ecossisme et la Réalisation descendante*.<sup>31</sup>

The Swiss mystic of German origin, Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) as a youth came in touch with the Qur'an and Hindu texts such as the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, and at the age of 17, he read and appreciated Guénon, with whom he shared the rejection of the European civilisation of his day and the idea of a mystic Truth at the core of different religions.<sup>32</sup> At the age of 22, he went to Paris to study Arabic. In 1932 he decided to travel to India to seek a spiritual teacher, but then he went to Mostaganem in Algeria, where for four months he attended the school of the Sufi teacher Ahmad al-Alawī and converted to Islam under the name of 'Isā Nūr ad-Dīn. Invested with the title

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<sup>27</sup> Guénon, *Etudes sur la franc-maçonnerie*. For a critique of Guénon studies on Freemasonry see Di Bernardo, "René Guénon e la Massoneria".

<sup>28</sup> According to Umberto Eco, Guénon, in his reflections on the Rosicrucians, showed "sovereign disdain for any historical and philological criterion" ("Arnold e i Rosa-Croce", 6).

<sup>29</sup> Vâlsan, "La fonction de René Guénon" and *L'Islam et la Fonction de René Guénon*.

<sup>30</sup> *Les écrits de Michel Vâlsan*. URL <http://www.sciencesacree.com/pages/les-ecrits-de-michel-valsan.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Vâlsan, "La fonction de René Guénon". The articles are collected in Vâlsan, *La realizzazione discendente*.

<sup>32</sup> Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon*; Nasr, *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*; *Frithjof Schuon Archive*. URL <http://www.frithjofschuon.info/english/home.aspx>.

of shaykh in 1936, he founded the first Sufi order in Europe in Basel.<sup>33</sup> Schuon was also a friend of the Swiss Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), another major figure in the *perennialist* school, who also converted to Islam in Morocco in the 1930s and was initiated into Sufism. He was also author of important works on Islamic esotericism and alchemy.

In France, one can also mention Bruno Étienne (1937-2009): initiated into the lodge *Le Phare de la renaissance* in Marseilles in 1960, he remained a member of the French Grand Orient until his death. A researcher with the CNRS, he spent several years in North Africa before becoming Professor at the Institut d'études politiques di Aix-en-Provence. As an academic, but also a direct *connaisseur* of the esoteric dimension, he dealt with Islamic spirituality, also in the relationship with Masonry, sometimes putting aside scientific rigour: "On comprend donc que pour traiter ce sujet (soufisme/maçonnerie), je vais être amené à quitter quelque peu la voie scientifique que j'ai proposé de suivre jusqu'ici".<sup>34</sup> Especially, he dedicated two works to the figure of 'Abd al-Qādir.<sup>35</sup> As a young man, Henry Corbin (1903-1978) too was influenced by Guénon's thinking, and his passion for Oriental spirituality led him first to Istanbul and then to Iran, where he began studying Shiite spirituality, producing key works in that context in the Department of Iranistics he had set up at the Institut Français. Corbin, who became a mason in 1962 (he was initiated into the lodge *Les Compagnons du Sept* No. 3, which obeyed the French Grand National Lodge - Opéra 6), was very close to the Shiite esoteric milieu which he studied and dedicated a large part of his academic and social engagement to supporting spiritual and esoteric dialogue between the three Abrahamic religions, for example through the University of Saint John of Jerusalem, the International Centre for comparative spiritual research which he founded with other academics. Freemasonry is also Thierry Zarcone (Worshipful Master of the Research Lodge Villard de Honnecourt), the most prominent scholar on Ottoman freemasonry, and source repeatedly mentioned even in this book of ours.

There is no intention to express any judgement on the value of the personalities spoken of here, or on their writings: the different examples of mystic and esoteric erudition illustrated so far are important for us because they show how during the twentieth century, interest in Oriental spirituality led to reflections concerning the possible convergence between European and Islamic esoteric paths, with special reference to Masonry and Sufism. Also seen from Europe, Western and Eastern esotericism are no longer watertight universes, but

<sup>33</sup> Fascinated by native American culture, after several years of travel in the USA, in 1980 Schuon moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where he died at the age of ninety.

<sup>34</sup> Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 104.

<sup>35</sup> Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*; *Abdelkader*.



reflections of a universal spirituality, which present many commonalities. Ever since its foundation and throughout the nineteenth century, Masonry implanted in the Orient presented itself as a tool for exporting Western culture, including esoteric culture; but from the twentieth century, it would be Islam which fascinated many European intellectuals and spiritualists. Paradoxically, Europeans would start to insist on the affinity between 'Western' and 'Eastern' initiatory systems with an empirical attitude, approaching and converting to Sufism, at the time when the masonic experience in the Middle East was beginning to decline or had ended, from the 1930s on and especially in the second half of the twentieth century. The effect therefore was mainly on the West and contributed in no way to reinforcing the masonic experience in the Islamic context, overwhelmed as it was by regional geopolitical developments and conspiracy thinking.

### 7.3 Freemasonry and Islamic Esotericism Today

The founders of Traditionalist thinking and the personalities who helped the universalist spiritual vocation take root belong to at least one of the esoteric traditions of the East or the West, being initiated into recognised masonic orders or Sufi orders in the Islamic world, some also having done research in an academic context. However, recent or still active movements exist which pick up universalist thinking, giving rise to partly syncretistic experiences, through initiatives or studies which are marginal both in academic circles and among the official orders they supposedly adhere to.

For example, Sayyid Idris al-Hāshimī, known as Idries Shah (1924-1996),<sup>36</sup> considered one of the most influential exponents of Western Neosufism and its most successful populariser, never belonged to any Islamic Sufi order. Born in India, to an Afghan father and Scottish mother, Shah grew up in England, having been exposed since childhood to the most diverse influences thanks to his father's work as a diplomat and to the open-mindedness of his family. In the late 1950s, Shah began to work with Gerald Gardner, founder of the Wicca, the British neopagan movements – influenced in its turn by Theosophy –<sup>37</sup> and already back then he began popularising Sufism, after having come into contact with a group inspired by the teachings of another influential philosopher and mystic of the time, Georges Ivanovič Gurdjieff. In 1964 he published his most significant work, *The Sufis*, with help from and a long introduction by his friend Rob-

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<sup>36</sup> Moore, "Neo-Sufism"; Dervish, "Idris Shah"; Lewin, *The Diffusion of Sufi Ideas*; Sedgwick, *Neo-Sufism in the 1960s*.

<sup>37</sup> Heselton, *Wiccan Roots*.

ert Graves. In this work, Shah, who believed in “the essential unity of all religious faith”<sup>38</sup> claimed that Sufism preceded Islam and that “Sufis show how and why the message of self-perfection may be carried into every conceivable kind of society, irrespective of its nominal religious or social commitment”,<sup>39</sup> suggesting, among other things, an outlook with an evolutionary touch to it.<sup>40</sup> While he admits that very similar esoteric elements can be found in different civilizations, quoting the saying “pears are not found only in Samarkand”<sup>41</sup> and speaks of ‘confluence’ among the various esoteric traditions, he also claims direct seeding by Sufism for Western esoteric experiences. The Knights Templar,<sup>42</sup> Saint Francis of Assisi,<sup>43</sup> the Carboneria,<sup>44</sup> the Order of the Garter,<sup>45</sup> Masonry,<sup>46</sup> the Rosicrucians<sup>47</sup> all supposedly derived directly from Sufi orders. To support this hypothesis, Shah used quite original arguments, associating for example the hut, *baracca*, of the *carbonari* with the *baraka* (!), the Islam blessing also used in Sufism,<sup>48</sup> or freely using numerological keys. Shah also alludes to the initiation to ancient esoteric mysteries of a general of Napoleon’s army during the Campaign of Egypt (an episode that recall general Kléber and Napoleon initiation mentioned by Zola), who presumably “founded the Order of the Seekers of Wisdom, otherwise known as the Sufiyyin-the Sufis”<sup>49</sup> – but fails to give us the general’s name or provide precise details about the source (“a book perhaps correctly entitled the *Mélange*”).<sup>50</sup> As has already been said, Shah was neither initiated nor founded Sufi orders, but in 1965, he established in London the Institute for Cultural Research (an educational charity aimed at stimulating “study, debate, education and research into all aspects of human thought, behaviour and culture”)<sup>51</sup> – which in 2013 became The Idries Shah Foundation.<sup>52</sup>

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38 Shah, *The Sufis*, 39.

39 Shah, *The Sufis*, 27.

40 Shah, *The Sufis*, 61-3.

41 Shah, *The Sufis*, 42.

42 Shah, *The Sufis*, 254-6.

43 Shah, *The Sufis*, 257-64.

44 Shah, *The Sufis*, 194-204.

45 Shah, *The Sufis*, 245-53.

46 Shah, *The Sufis*, 205-15.

47 Shah, *The Sufis*, 274.

48 Shah, *The Sufis*, 202.

49 Shah, *The Sufis*, 270.

50 Shah, *The Sufis*, 270.

51 *The Institute for Cultural Research, Welcome*. URL <http://www.i-c-r.org.uk>.

52 URL <https://idriesshahfoundation.org/>.

While Shah spread a school of thought emancipated from the Islamic roots of Sufism, the Ecumenical Arab Grand Orient (GOAO) founded by Jean-Marc Aractingi appears quite marginal, if not irregular, in the context of the masonic family.<sup>53</sup> According to its own website, the GOAO (Obédience française d'Etude et de Recherche travaillant au Rite Œcuménique – Judéo-Chrétien-Musulman) includes an Ecumenical Arab Grand Orient of Lebanon, of France, of the Indian Ocean and of the Ivory Coast. The site refers to a Centre de Recherche et d'Initiation au Rite Œcuménique, based in Normandy, which:

a pour mission principale d'initier les postulants au différents grandes de ce rite. De Plus, il se veut être un 'Think tank' du Rite Œcuménique qui plonge ses racines dans le Rite Ecossais Ancien et Accepté (REEA) tel qu'il a apparu au XVIIIème siècle, et étend sa ramure vers les différents mythes et voies initiatiques arabo-islamiques. Le Rite Œcuménique a été élaboré par le Grand Maître Mondial du Grand Orient Arabe Œcuménique, le TSF Jean-Marc ARACTINGI.<sup>54</sup>

As Aractingi himself puts it:

Si J'ai élaboré un nouveau rite en franc-maçonnerie, le rite œcuménique ou abrahamique (judéo-chrétien et musulman), alors qu'il existe une multitude de rites [...] c'est parce que tous ces rites fondent leurs références uniquement sur la culture biblique [...] et que seul le Rite Œcuménique (RO), tout en préservant l'essentiel de ces différentes cultures, les complète en faisant référence à la culture arabo-musulmane. Un rite qui se veut universel et compréhensible pour toutes les cultures du monde, que l'on soit d'origine asiatique, africaine, européenne ou autre.<sup>55</sup>

Jean-Marc Aractingi, by profession an engineer and diplomat, former Master of the Grand Lodge of France at the Orient of Paris and high dignitary of the Sovereign International Sanctuary of the Egyptian rites of Memphis-Misraïm, published an *Histoire Mondiale de la Franc-Maçonnerie en Terre d'Islam*, in two volumes, and together with

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<sup>53</sup> Pragman, "Que Représente".

<sup>54</sup> Centre de Recherche et d'Initiation. URL [http://grandorientarabe.org/index.php?p=1\\_12\\_Rite-cum-nique](http://grandorientarabe.org/index.php?p=1_12_Rite-cum-nique).

<sup>55</sup> Centre de Recherche et d'Initiation. URL [http://grandorientarabe.org/index.php?p=1\\_12\\_Rite-cum-nique](http://grandorientarabe.org/index.php?p=1_12_Rite-cum-nique); Aractingi, Introduction a *Le Rite Œcuménique*; Aractingi, *Le Pape, Rituels et Catechismes*.

Christian Lochon<sup>56</sup> wrote *Secrets initiatiques en Islam et rituels maçonniques. Druzes, Ismaéliens, Alaouites, confréries soufies*. In this work, the authors highlight the closeness of the Sufi esoteric way to the masonic one, comparing for example the initiatory rituals of the Islamic world (Bektashi and Shiite sects: Alawi, Ismaili and Druze, where they partly replicate Haskett Smith's study without quoting the source). Aractinigi and Lochon in 2014 also published *Islam et franc-maçonnerie. Traditions ésotériques*, dedicated to some heterogeneous aspects of Mediterranean spirituality and esotericism. Generally speaking, the volume brings out symbolic, mythical and initiatory elements taken from various traditions which present analogies, to uphold the thesis of a substantial identity of spiritual paths, ignoring or underestimating any element which, by distinguishing among traditions, makes each unique. For example, they write:

Le fait que les religions juive, chrétienne, musulmane tout aussi bien que la franc-maçonnerie se déclarent 'universelles' montre qu'avec patience et ténacité, nous nous devons de souligner que l'humanisme méditerranéen est bien notre substrat culturel commun malgré la diversité des appellations de nos croyances. [...] Mythes et tradition constituent la mémoire des hommes éclairés a la recherche de l'initiation authentique.<sup>57</sup>

The authors insist on the universal message of religions as an element of convergence, and not as the aspiration by each to become the one faith at the expense of the others, as even a glance at history shows us is the case.

In the United States too, movements exist which combine Masonry and Islam. For example, Mustafa El-Amin, author of *Al-Islam, Christianity and Freemasonry and of Freemasonry, Ancient Egypt and Islamic Destiny*, claims a connection between Freemasonry, America and Ancient Egypt. El-Amin explores the great contributions that the ancients Africans of Egypt made to the West and the entire world, convincing himself of the confluence of the Western esoteric front into the spiritual world of Islam: especially *Freemasonry, Ancient Egypt and Islamic Destiny* "points out that the ancient wise of Egypt and the hidden teachings of Freemasonry alludes to an 'Islamic destiny', the ultimate idea for advancing society on the basis of justice".<sup>58</sup> In

<sup>56</sup> With a literary and Orientalist education, Lochon has lived and taught in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Iran. He was cultural attaché of the French Embassy in Baghdad, Khartoum and Damascus, director of studies and research at the Centre des Hautes Etudes sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes (CHEAM), and taught in the Educational Institute for Imams at the Grand Mosque of Paris.

<sup>57</sup> Aractinigi, Lochon, *Islam et franc-maçonnerie*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Back cover of the volume *Freemasonry, Ancient Egypt and Islamic Destiny*.

the USA, again, it's quite spread the Shrine (Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine), a paramasonic brotherhood<sup>59</sup> (all Shriners are masons), "a fraternal organization of men who are dedicated to brotherhood, compassion and service to others",<sup>60</sup> founded in 1872 by the physician Walter Millard Fleming (1838-1913) and the actor William Jeremy 'Billy' Florence (1831-1891). The Shrine adopted 'Arab' and Oriental symbolism, and its members wear a fez, with an emblem reminiscent of various Oriental symbols,<sup>61</sup> while the temples are often associated with mosques.<sup>62</sup> Though all this seems to have a purely casual and largely playful origin, its symbolic impact is not to be neglected.<sup>63</sup> Of special interest is the fact that a member of the Shrine, Albert Rawson (d. 1902), considered a fine connoisseur of the Christian and Islamic East, used the image of 'Abd al-Qādir to attract proselytes, claiming in 1877, to be in correspondence with the Emir. In fact, in American masonic circles, the Algerian Emir enjoyed particular fame and prestige, evoked for his humanity and tolerance and above all for his Sufi mysticism – but mistakenly believed by the Shrine a Bektashi. On his death, in June 1883, the Imperial Council of Shriners brought up a communiqué in the New York Times entitled "Abd el-Kader's Masonic Friends", recalling that the emir was considered "head of the [Shrine] order in the Eastern hemisphere".<sup>64</sup>

More examples could be given, but the substance does not change. While clear elements of affinity between European and Oriental esoteric dimensions do exist, formal syncretisms (based on ideas of direct derivation, a universalist vision of religions as an ecumene, or an idea of Masonry represented by Islamic symbols) betray a simplification, if not a distortion, of the history of relations between differ-

<sup>59</sup> Specialists generally reserve the term "paramasonic" for orders and societies not technically belonging to Masonry, but which admit only masonic as members, or else for "auxiliary" youth or women's organisations.

<sup>60</sup> *Shriners International*. URL <https://www.shrinersinternational.org/Shriners/History/Beginnings>.

<sup>61</sup> "The scimitar stands for the backbone of the fraternity, its members. The two claws are for the Shriners fraternity and its philanthropy. The sphinx stands for the governing body of the Shriners. The five-pointed star represents the thousands of children helped by the philanthropy each year". Shriners International. *History. Beginnings*.

<sup>62</sup> El-Amin, *Al-Islam, Christianity, & Freemason* (video).

<sup>63</sup> "Billy Florence had been on tour in France and had been invited to a party given by an Arabian diplomat. The exotic style, flavours and music of the Arabian-themed party inspired him to suggest this as a theme for the new fraternity. Walter Fleming, a devoted fraternity brother, built on Fleming's ideas and used his knowledge of fraternal ritual to transform the Arabian theme into the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (A.A.O.N.M.S.). With the help of the Knickerbocker Cottage regulars, Fleming drafted the ritual, designed the emblem and costumes, formulated a salutation and declared that members would wear the red fez". Shriners International. *History. Beginnings*.

<sup>64</sup> Zarccone, *Le mystère Abd el-Kader*, pos. Kindle 1284-1318.

ent civilisations. Especially, they detach history and esoteric forms from the underlying metaphysical, political and social paths where certain phenomena have arisen, and which make each experience unique and specific in its kind. These approaches also mask the profound differences which marked both the civilisations in the region and conflicts (just as violent in the political and military field as in the theological one) between Christianity and Islam over the centuries, not to mention the conflicts within the Christian and Islamic worlds themselves.

However, a syncretistic vision does show the will to build a link between Islamic and European esotericism, with special reference to Masonry, in order to develop a spiritual ecumene which can overcome the social and political barriers which prevent meeting and cause clashes of civilisations.<sup>65</sup> Taking gnosis and the Hermetic approach to be a universal value which confirms the unity of being, each of these readings – even when their origins and goals are not always clear – contributes to creating a collective culture open to encounter and favourable to dialogue; in today's globalised world, they can help spread antibodies against ever spreading radicalisation.

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<sup>65</sup> Theosophical and Traditionalist currents certainly influenced right wing movements – not last Nazism – in Europe, but they also influenced left wing ones. This study limits itself to observing the spiritual aspects of these approaches, without going into political manipulations, some of which had devastating results.

## Glossary of Arabic And Turkish Terms

- çırak*: apprentice  
*dhimma*: lit. subordinate legal status of protection for non-Muslims living in an Islamic state  
*dustūr*: code, constitution  
*fata/fityān*: young member of the *futuwwa*  
*futuwwa*: chivalry  
*'ilm al-bātin*: occult science  
*Islāh*: reform  
*Kalfa*: companion  
*mu'allim*: master  
*muta'allim*: apprentice  
*nahda*: awakening or 'renaissance', cultural movement developed in Egypt at the end of the 19th century  
*peştemal*: canvas and aprons  
*qalandarī*: heretic  
*rafiq*: master  
*sani'*: worker  
*sharī'a*: the Islamic law.  
*sinf/asnāf*: urban guilds  
*tariqa*: lit. 'way', Islamic brotherhood  
*tasawwuf*: sufisms  
*usta*: master  
*ustādh*: master  
*wahdat al-wujūd*: unity of Being  
*zàirgeh*: Egyptian tables for the arts of divination

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The symbolic and historical dimension of the main founding archetypes of Freemasonry – the Orient with a special focus on Egypt – are at the core of this book, which aims to recover the red thread with which masons tie together Masonry and Oriental esotericism. If, on the one hand, the Author points out mystifications and inventions that have characterised part of the Masonic narrative on its origins; on the other hand, she unearths the history of real contaminations and intersections between esotericism of the East and the West, digging up the common matrix that nourished them.

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