

A Study of the Brothers in the First French Rite Chapters: Between a Spiritual Need and a Culture of Distinction; the Example of Normandy

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ABSTRACT

Based on a study of the first six thousand initiates into Freemasonry in Normandy between 1740 and 1830, this paper wants to sketch an overview of the social context and spirit in which the higher degrees of the French Rite were practiced. The first motivation of joining a French Rite Chapter between 1784 and 1789 is unquestionably the pursuit of an aristocratic dream. But does this situation necessarily exclude the idea of a spiritual motivation on the part of these Freemasons? Social elitism can sit happily alongside an ideal of self-improvement through initiation. Masonic Enlightenment is a complex phenomenon.

Keywords: Masonic Enlightenment, High degrees, Normandy, Grand Chapter, French Rite, Aristocratic dream

Un estudio de los hermanos en los primeros capítulos de rito francés: entre una necesidad espiritual y una cultura de distinción; el ejemplo de normandia

A partir de un estudio de los primeros seis mil iniciados en la masonería en Normandía entre 1740 y 1830, este artículo pretende esbozar un panorama del contexto social y del espíritu en el que se practicaban los grados superiores del Rito Francés. La primera motivación para ingresar en un Capítulo de rito francés entre 1784 y 1789 es, sin duda, la búsqueda de un sueño aristocrático. Pero, ¿esta situación excluye necesariamente la idea de una motivación espiritual por parte de estos masones? El elitismo social puede sentirse felizmente junto a un ideal de superación personal a través de la iniciación. La Ilustración Masónica es un fenómeno complejo.

Palabras clave: Ilustración Masónica, Altos Grados, Normandía, Gran Capítulo, Rito Francés, Sueño Aristocrático

关于首批法兰西礼仪会所成员的研究：精神需求与荣誉文化之间——以诺曼底为例

基于一项对1740-1830年间诺曼底共济会的前6000名入会者的研究，本文试图概述法兰西礼仪更高成员等级实践所处的社会情境与精神。1784-1789年间加入法兰西礼仪分会的首要动机无疑是追求贵族梦。不过，这种情况是否必然排除这些共济会成员的精神动机？社会精英主义能愉快地与“通过入会获得的自我完善”这一理想并存。共济会启蒙是一个复杂的现象。

关键词：共济会启蒙，高成员等级，诺曼底，总会所，法兰西礼仪，贵族梦

Having written a study of the first six thousand initiates into Freemasonry in Normandy between 1740 and 1830,¹ here I want to sketch an overview of the social context and spirit in which the higher degrees of the French Rite were practiced in the province in the first half-century of their existence, from the end of the eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth. I will provide a broad overview of the sociology of those brothers who decided to practice the higher grades under the authority of the Grand Chapitre Général (General Grand Chapter), as well as a reflection on the spirit in which they practiced: the latter point requires an explanation. This approach is dictated by two questions that arise when studying the early days of the higher degrees of the French Rite during this period. The

first question relates to the motivations of initiates, and the second, due to the proximity of the French Revolution to the founding of the Grand Chapitre Général, relates to the impact of the political crisis on those motivations. Did belonging to the higher degrees of the French Rite relate to the extended initiation journey offered by red Freemasonry and/or the prospect of social advancement? From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, the choice to practice these rites undoubtedly demonstrated a uniquely spiritual orientation, but at what point can we see this becoming concrete? These two questions form the basis for my argument, and I will begin by summarizing the context in which the higher degrees of the French Rite were first practiced in Normandy.

¹ Éric Saunier, *Révolution et sociabilité en Normandie au tournant des XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles: 6000 francs-maçons de 1740 à 1830* (Rouen: Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 1999).

As for all provinces in the kingdom of France, it is impossible to give an exact moment when the first higher degrees emerged in this province, which had a higher population than the country of Sweden in the eighteenth century. However, one thing is certain: the passion for the higher degrees among Norman Freemasons was immediate, almost concomitant with the emergence of Masonic sociability in Caen, Le Havre, and Rouen, between the middle of the 1730s and the start of the 1740s.² This immediate success can be better comprehended through reading the correspondence between the first Norman Masonic organizations and the Grande Loge de France (Grand Lodge of France) collected in the precious Chapelle collection at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (French National Library), and even more importantly through studying the first memberships list that the Norman lodges sent to the new Grand Orient de France (GODF) (Grand Orient of France) in the middle of the 1770s. An unequivocal picture emerges from studying the Norman files in the Chapelle collection. The craze for “Scottishness” in the 1760s is visible in the diplomas given to masters so that they could travel, and in the observation that lodges used the fact of having members who were master Masons bearing higher degrees as an argument for attempting to impose their au-

thority over other lodges by obtaining the status of “mother lodge.” This status allowed older bodies to regulate local Masonic life throughout the 1760s, when Freemasonry was undergoing a dynamic initial period.³

The first lodge membership rolls that were sent to the young GODF in the middle of the 1770s show high levels of practice of higher degrees in Normandy after only twenty years of existence. With a third of Freemasons bearing these degrees in 1773, their success was highly impressive, especially if the high proportion of “occasional Masons,”⁴ between a quarter and a third of initiates, is taken into account. As further evidence of widespread practice of the higher degrees in Normandy, in addition to high levels in the major Norman Masonic cities under the reign of Louis XVI (over 40 percent in Caen, Le Havre, and Rouen), we find French Rite chapters even in very small towns, like Eu.

Mentioning the town of Eu, whose existence is explained by the highly elitist character of the local blue lodge, brings me on to the description of the sociological aspects and motivations of the brothers who attended the first five chapters of the French Rite present in Normandy: one in Le Havre, one in Caen, one in Eu, and two in Rouen 1789.

2 On the contributions of the Chapelle collection and the birth of Normandy’s Grand Orient de France lodges, see: Saunier, *Révolution et sociabilité*, 45–65.

3 On this point, see: Gérard Gayot, *La Franc-maçonnerie française: Textes et pratiques (XVIII–XIXe siècles)*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

4 My term for Freemasons who attended lodges for less than three years. On this point, see: Saunier, *Révolution et sociabilité*, 188–94.

Since they have around a hundred brothers who can be precisely identified, it is the two Rouen French Rite chapters that allow us to draw the most convincing conclusions when trying to make sense of the social nature of higher degree practice. The popularity of these degrees increased the conflict in Rouen Masonic life. There was tension between the most exclusive lodges and the more recent lodges, which were open to the petite bourgeoisie, as well as between Masonic elites, united by wealth but culturally different, as evidenced by the short lives of two local chapters, Les Chevaliers Réunis (The Reunited Knights) and La Parfaite Union et Raoul (The Perfect Union and Raoul), which emerged simultaneously in 1784.

These chapters had almost a hundred members (eighty-six) between them, and clearly had different recruitment bases, with one being predominantly drawn from the Normandy *parlement*, and the other being predominantly mercantile. This segregated approach was in fact the result of a refusal on the part of Rouen's venal office bourgeoisie and nobility, who attended La Parfaite Union (Perfect Union) Lodge, to allow the merchants to dominate. The foremost Rouen chapter, Les Chevaliers Réunis, had forty members, mostly major traders, almost all of them part of a majority-mercantile lodge, La Céleste Amitié (Heavenly Friendship). It had managed to obtain the status of

mother lodge to La Parfaite Union, despite the latter being older.

After the mercantile elite's major victory in having obtained mother lodge status for La Céleste Amitié when the GODF was founded, Les Chevaliers Réunis was a fresh cause for jealousy among the venal office bourgeoisie and nobility. These two latter groups—the venal office bourgeoisie and nobility—united and, as a result of an initiative on the part of members of La Parfaite Union, found the support of brothers from a highly exclusive lodge recently established near Rouen, in Pavilly. Raoul Lodge was composed almost exclusively of nobles from the Normandy *parlement*, many of whom were at the forefront of the parliamentary response in spring 1788.⁵ This union resulted in the birth of La Parfaite Union et Raoul chapter, whose forty-six members continued to have a conflictual relationship with Les Chevaliers Réunis. The only thing on which the two Rouen chapters worked in concert was to block the request of brothers from Ardent Amitié (Ardent Friendship) Lodge, a blue lodge whose members were of more modest extraction, to establish a French Rite chapter. In order to be able to practice the higher degrees of Freemasonry, these brothers would eventually need to adopt a heterodox rite: the Heredom of Kilwinning Rite.⁶

Thus it is clear: before 1789, social motivations seem to have won out over spiritual motivations for joining

5 See: Saunier, *Révolution et sociabilité*, 243–248.

6 See: “Mathéus, Jean,” in *Le Monde maçonnique des Lumières (Europe-Amériques & colonies): Dictionnaire prosopographique*, ed. Charles Porset and Cécile Révauger (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013), 3: 1917–18.

the higher degrees of the French Rite, and a look at the social makeup of these two chapters confirms this. Their recruitment base validates Joseph de Maistre's description of the higher degrees of Freemasonry as "the noble branch of a hydra with two heads." Sociological analysis, both of the proportion of brothers by order or of individual standings within the internal categories of these orders, gives edifying results. On the first point, we can see that the level of higher degrees among nobles was 44.6 percent, but among commoners was only 33.8 percent. Going on to look at the divisions within these orders, the higher the social status, the higher the position reached. Thus, among members of the nobility, the only two groups where over half of initiates practiced the higher degrees of the French Rite were dignitaries from the Cours souveraines (Sovereign Courts, such as *parlement*) (53 percent) and officers of state (57 percent). Among commoners, the trend for these degrees was more pronounced among royal officers (35 percent) and merchants (33 percent) than among shopkeepers and the legal profession (30 percent).

As it was a result of aspirations to distinction,⁷ the practice of higher degrees evokes strategies aiming to compensate for a lack of peer recognition, comparable to those studied by Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret in the context of

financiers.⁸ It is interesting to note that it was ennobled traders, such as the bibliophile Midy d'Andé and the industrialist Rondeaux de Montbray (who was one of the first mayors of Rouen under the Revolution), who took the reins of Les Chevaliers Réunis, established by Rouen traders who wanted to steal a march on the *parlement's* nobility.

The pursuit of an aristocratic dream within the first French Rite chapters is therefore in little doubt between 1784 and 1789, but does this situation necessarily exclude the idea of a spiritual motivation on the part of these Freemasons? Let us see. Social elitism can sit happily alongside an ideal of self-improvement through initiation. At least this is the case in the private papers of Armand Gaborria, who, as I have mentioned more than once before, is a rich source with an interesting Masonic journey.⁹ In terms of the pronounced liking that this eighteenth-century Freemason had for initiation and personal development, the moment when he advanced to the higher grades of the French Rite seems to have been crucial, even if Gaborria later preferred to follow other initiatory paths.

It is impossible to distill here all that which the thousands of pages written by this Bordeaux trader, initiated aged twenty, have to tell us on this point. However, perhaps the greatest emphasis should be on how his ad-

7 See: Eric Saunier, "Les noblesses normandes et la Franc-maçonnerie: Diversité des cultures et culture de la distinction au XVIII^e siècle," in *Les noblesses normandes: XVI^e-XIX^e siècle*, ed. Alain Hugon and Ariane Boltanski, (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 267-89.

8 See Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Gens de finance à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Complexe, 1993), 129-46.

9 "Gaborria, Armand," in *Le Monde maçonnique*, ed. Porset and Révauger 2: 1241-2.

vancement to the higher grades of the French Rite were a turning point in his spiritual development. When he arrived in Lille at the end of the 1770s to set up in manufacturing, Gaborria was already a Freemason, but his spiritual preoccupations were few. It was when he was initiated into the higher degrees by a Brother Alavoine that his Masonic journey began in earnest in this area. Taking on senior responsibilities within the Collège des Philalèthes, founding a branch of the Rite of Memphis-Misraim during the Consulate,¹⁰ and disseminating the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in France and Italy during the First Empire: the spiritual dimension of Gaborria's Masonic involvement after reaching the higher degrees is strongly evident. It took the form of a passion for Rites that shows in his writing, in particular in an unfinished personal encyclopedia.

More concerned with self-development through Masonry than social prestige (he was but a very small-scale manufacturer), Armand Gaborria is of course only one example. However, in reading his "intimate Masonic writings," it seems that the spiritual dimension was very much present in the engagement of this blue Freemason in the higher degrees of French Rite Freemasonry, although he would soon aban-

don it due to disenchantment caused by the Revolution.¹¹ Let us now consider the Revolutionary period through the lens of the ways in which it represented a fundamental rupture, leading motivations for advancing to the higher grades of the French Rite to take an exclusively spiritual direction.

In a research context when sources from the Revolutionary period are rare or sometimes entirely absent, the First Empire is the easiest period, in Rouen, Normandy, and elsewhere, through which to establish the chronology of this rupture. What conclusions can be drawn based on Norman sources, and in particular the sources from those Rouen lodges that were on the more modest end of the financial scale?¹² The evolutionary schema for the practice of the higher degrees is simultaneously clear and perhaps also more complex than it appears. At first sight, the reasons a brother might choose "red Freemasonry" do not seem to have changed compared to 1784–1789. The "aristocratic dream" seems to have been intact and to have remained the key factor fueling advancement to these grades. Thus, in Rouen, while blue Freemasonry was mostly open to the middle class, the social elite gathered at the *Ardente Amitié* (Ardent Friendship) chapter, as had previously

10 See: Eric Saunier, "Les bâtisseurs de Rite: Armand Gaborria, Turin et le rite de Misraïm," in *Les plus belles pages de la franc-maçonnerie*, ed. Alain-Jacques Lacot and Pierre Mollier (Paris: Dervy, 2003), 98–102.

11 See: Eric Saunier, "Le parcours initiatique d'Armand Gaborria au temps de la Révolution ou la réciprocité des influences," in "Franc-maçonnerie et politique au siècle des Lumières: Europe-Amériques," ed. Cécile Révauger, special edition, *Lumières 7* (2006): 83–95.

12 See: Eric Saunier, "Cambacérés et l'éco-sisme: Du rêve de perfectionnement initiatique à l'instrumentalisation politique," in *Jean-Jacques Régis de Camacérés: Aux origines de l'éco-sisme institutionnel*, ed. Jacques Oréface (Nancy: Kairos, 2019), 41–53.

been the case with Les Chevaliers Réunis and La Parfaite Union et Raoul. In fact, among the members of the Ardente Amitié chapter we find the mayor, Lézurier de la Martel, his two deputies Baron Desmadières and Baron Héron d'Agironne, a senator of the empire, Nicolas Vimard, the four most prominent bankers in Rouen, and many other members of the Rouen elite. The membership rolls from other Norman chapters are highly similar. In Alençon, the La Fidélité (Fidelity) chapter was headed by François Lelièvre, president of the Orne Conseil général (Regional Council), and included the *préfet* La Magdeleine, the mayor Jacques Mercier, and the five most prominent manufacturers in the city.

However, it should be noted that there are limitations to the idea of perfect stability in the recruitment of brothers into French Rite chapters centered on elitist choices identical to those which prevailed before the Revolution. In Rouen too, we see the prestigious chapter Ardente Amitié using the Heredom of Kilwinning Rite and not the French Rite, the latter being used by a second chapter, La Parfaite Egalité (Perfect Equality), with a more democratic recruitment profile.

A more democratic recruitment profile and therefore more similar to the normal social composition of the blue lodges, proof that the spiritual dimension won out as motivation to advance to these degrees: this may be a change

that began during the First Empire. This is undoubtedly what emerges from the study of the social makeup of the eighteen French Rite chapters that operated for varying lengths of time and with varying levels of activity during the Restoration in Normandy, in particular in the Seine-Inférieure département (11) where they prospered, especially in Rouen where we see four chapters,¹³ and in Le Havre, where Aménité (Affability) competed with the Trois H (Three Hs) chapter, higher degree Freemasons at this time ruling out any idea of cohabitation. Three groups effectively shared control of these chapters between 1815 and 1830. These were the new professions doctors and engineers associated with merchants (those that Ch. Charle named “le monde des capacités”). The thirty-six members of the Arts Réunis (United Arts) chapter during the Restoration offer a good example of the transformations that came about during the Bourbon Restoration, and in particular from the 1820s onward when the destiny of Freemasons seemed more threatened by the ultra-royalists coming to power. More than half the members of this chapter (nineteen) were in fact ordinary city-center traders in a city where thirty years earlier the first French Rite chapters only included the most illustrious merchants. A new stage had begun.

13 Each of the lodges operating in Rouen at the time of the Restoration—La Parfaite Egalité, Les Arts Réunis, La Persévérance Couronnée (Crowned Perseverance), and La Sincère Amitié (Sincere Friendship)—had its own chapter.