

Masons Seeking Modernization and Reason on the Eve of the Revolution

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The Masonic congress held in Wilhelmsbad in 1782 and then in Paris were the place of intense philosophical debates within the late XVIIIth century Masonic thinkers. In Wilhelmsbad the major opposition was between the mystico-spiritualist approach represented by Jean-Baptiste Willermoz and the rationalist approach, supported in particular by the German Baron Franz Dietrich von Ditfurth (1738–1813). Those debates continued in Paris within the Philalethes's Congress and its main animator, Savalette de Lange, was finally sensitive to the rationalist criticism and the conceptions defended by Bode during his stay in Paris. The Revolution was soon to come.

Keywords: Masonic Enlightenment, Wilhelmsbad's congress, Philalethes's Congress, Dietrich von Ditfurth, Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, Adam Weishaupt, Adolph Knigge

Masones en busca de la modernización y la razón en vísperas de la revolución

El congreso masónico realizado en Wilhelmsbad en 1782 y luego en París fueron el lugar de intensos debates filosóficos dentro de los pensadores masónicos de finales del siglo XVIII. En Wilhelmsbad, la principal oposición se produjo entre el enfoque místico-espiritualista representado por Jean-Baptiste Willermoz y el enfoque racionalista, apoyado en particular por el barón alemán Franz Dietrich von Ditfurth (1738-1813). Esos debates continuaron en París dentro del Congreso de Philalethes y su principal animadora, Savalette de Lange, fue finalmente sensible a la crítica racionalista y a las concepciones defendidas por Bode durante su estancia en París. La revolución estaba por llegar.

Palabras clave: Ilustración masónica, Congreso de Wilhelmsbad, Congreso de Philalethes, Dietrich von Ditfurth, Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, Adam Weishaupt, Adolph Knigge

共济会成员在革命前夕寻求现代化与理性

1782年在廉姆斯巴德举行的共济会大会，以及随后在巴黎举行的大会是18世纪末期共济会思想家进行激烈哲学辩论的场所。在廉姆斯巴德，Jean-Baptiste Willermoz所代表的神秘唯心主义方法与德国男爵Franz Dietrich von Ditfurth (1738-1813)支持的理性主义方法之间存在主要的对立。这些辩论在巴黎的Philalethes大会上继续进行，其主要推动者Savalette de Lange最终被Bode所捍卫的理性主义批判和概念所撼动。革命很快就要到来。

关键词：共济会启蒙，廉姆斯巴德大会，Philalethes大会，Dietrich von Ditfurth, Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, Adam Weishaupt, Adolph Knigge

In memory of Charles Porset

How radicalized were people's minds as the storm clouds gathered over Europe, in particular in the major monarchies of the time?

Due to the considerable influence they had over society at the time, the evolution of the involvement of the Freemasons in social and political life is of much interest.

The crises within Freemasonry in the 1770s and 1780s and the simultaneous renewal of Masonic activity are in fact symptomatic of the new political understanding Masons had both of themselves and of their actions in society.

The Wilhelmsbad Congress (1782)

The Wilhelmsbad Congress came after the Gaules Congress in Lyon (1778) and before the Par-

is Congresses of 1785 and 1787. From July 16 to September 1, 1782, in Wilhelmsbad, near Hanau and not far from Frankfurt, a congress was held that had major consequences for the history of Franco-German Freemasonries, and European Freemasonries more generally. This was not the first congress, but on this occasion, a decision was to be taken on the future of the Rite of Strict Observance. It had become necessary to restructure the Masonic networks that had been thrown into disorder or rendered defunct by the crisis ongoing in that body since the death of Baron de Hund in 1776. There was widespread doubt about the fundamentals of the Rite of Strict Observance and the "Unknown Superiors." It was felt necessary to restore order by bringing together Masons from across Europe. This meeting was a Franco-German initiative and involved thirty-five Masons in total.

The historian Ludwig Hammermayer has undertaken a methodical analysis of this congress of “restoring order.”¹ It was overseen by a “triumvirate” composed of two German princes, Charles of Hesse-Kassel (1744–1836) and Ferdinand of Brunswick (1721–1792), and the Lyon Mason Jean-Baptiste Willermoz (1730–1824). Hammermayer identified three “philosophical” currents running through the Wilhelmsbad congress: one hermetico-alchemical, another mystico-spiritual, and another rationalist, in the Enlightenment tradition.²

1. Ditfurth-Willermoz conflict

The major opposition within the congress was between the mystico-spiritualist approach represented by Jean-Baptiste Willermoz and the rationalist approach, supported in particular by the German Baron Franz Dietrich von Ditfurth (1738–1813). He entered the Rite of Strict Observance with *Eques ab Orno* as his pseudonym in 1777.³ He soon engaged in a flurry of Mason-

ic activity, founding fifteen “rectified” lodges in two years. A report written by Ditfurth for the Illuminati reveals a bit more about his intervention and the scandal it caused.⁴ The full text of the speech that began the scandal has not survived. We only know about its content through Ditfurth’s report, and an account by Willermoz. Ditfurth relates his adversaries’ reactions, first among them that of Willermoz (*ab Eremo*), of which he gives an extract in French: “Brother *ab Orno* (Ditfurth) has just made a scandalous, impious, and seditious speech, contrary to the Christian faith, unfit to be heard by Masons and good subjects [. . .].”⁵ Ditfurth did not allow himself to be disconcerted by the violence of these attacks, replying: “My brothers, I thought I was attending a Masonic congress among brothers, not an eighth-century ecclesiastical meeting. That is why I made this speech, believing that if I should be wrong I would be gently corrected and not condemned as a heretic and sentenced with no right of appeal.”⁶ In accordance with Chappe

1 Ludwig Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent von 1782: Ein Höhe und Wendepunkt in der Geschichte der deutschen und europäischen Geheimgesellschaften* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1980). The “literature” on the Illuminati, Bavarian and otherwise, is endless, especially where this subject is combined with the theme of illuminism up to the present day. Cf. Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Foire aux Illuminés: Esoterisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2005). On the Illuminati, see more recently Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *Les Illuminati, de la société secrète aux théories du complot* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022).

2 Cf. Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 37–38.

3 It is regrettable that so few studies are available on this individual, whose role in the history of German Freemasonries at the end of the eighteenth century is far from insignificant. See the biographical and bibliographical entry in Charles Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris: Une politique de la folie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996), 548–50.

4 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*.

5 Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 125. Translator’s note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

6 Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 126.

de la Henrière's advice, Ditfurth agreed to retract his speech and present another version at a future session after making corrections, but not without denouncing the intolerant sectarianism of the brothers who had attacked him and reaffirming the orthodox nature of his statements on religion. Outside of the session, he lashed out sarcastically at the opposing camp: "What a magnificent goal it is for Masonry to keep the world blind, stop the spread of the Enlightenment, and to prohibit beneficent monarchs from wanting to guide men to their destination through making them happy. Assuredly, I was not previously acquainted with the goal, but I am stupefied with admiration for it."⁷

2. Princes or brothers?

On July 31, Ditfurth thus submitted a report, this time written in German, and limited himself to adding a few highly characteristic verbal remarks to the submission of his reworked text: "When I affirm that sovereigns have been created for and are there for their subjects and not the subjects for their sovereigns, and that consequently it is their duty to make them happy, this is in no way seditious. The wisest monarch in the world, Joseph II, knows this, and he has no need of a long speech."⁸

Prior to this, he had had a discussion with Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (1730–1793), who after the "Weishaupt era" would later be giv-

en very senior responsibilities within the Illuminati Order. He denied the sacredness of the secrets and mysteries that the heads of the Rite of Strict Observance forbade them to communicate to their brothers. Both had requested and pleaded for egalitarian access to the fundamental secrets, arguing forcefully that brothers could not be convinced of the truth of the doctrine if they could not be informed of the original mysteries. Here too, it was clear that times had changed and that for an entire "wing" of Freemasonry, there was now an urgent need for transparency, at least internally, and for reform of this feudal organization that would soon be labeled as belonging to the *ancien régime*. Ditfurth's double attack against religion and the powers that be was explicitly denounced in a text written by Willermoz. Reporting on Ditfurth's intervention at the congress, Willermoz expressed outrage that the former had had "[. . .] the effrontery, at a meeting of Christians, to attack all principles of religion in the most scandalous manner, to bitterly ridicule all that relates to it, to reduce the ranks and titles of princes to the level of all other parts of society, and to there propose to found a new Masonry on these principles, which are harmful to all true connections between men, a Masonry that would be based only on the new philosophy of this century."⁹

7 Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 128.

8 Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 130. Note that in 1782, Joseph II enjoyed the unwavering support of the Freemasons.

9 Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 222. In French in the text.

3. A pyrrhic victory

At the Wilhelmsbad Congress however, this approach—"the new philosophy of this century"—met with stiff opposition and it was Willermoz who emerged victorious. Ditfurth acknowledged this defeat and left the congress. Was his behavior astute? It would seem not. Baron de Knigge, who did not like him, thought he had been totally counterproductive.

However, even with a more developed talent for diplomacy and compromise than Ditfurth displayed, conciliation between such divergent positions, "radically" opposed as they were, was hardly imaginable. Moreover, the victory achieved by Willermoz's Chevaliers bienfaisants de la cité sainte (Beneficent Knights of the Holy City) was only partial. They did not win over all Freemasons to their point of view, particularly not the radical wing led by Ditfurth. This wing came together as the Alliance éclectique (Eclectic Alliance), which soon included a significant number of lodges. It was enough to defeat the Illuminati's hopes of leadership, and signaled the failure of their attempt to absorb what was left of the Rite of Strict Observance. Ditfurth was subsequently invited to the Paris Congress, but declined the invitation. He did, however, send a response to the Philalèthes (Philalethes) in which he decried any link between Masonry and theosophy, alchemy and magic or kabbalah. Whatever the outcome of the congress for the rationalist wing, what

is striking is the vivacity and clarity of the opposing sides. A true ideological battle came into the open, and the Masonic "compromise" found it difficult to contain the violence of opposition. The Revolution, it should be said, was soon to come.

4. Weishaupt/Knigge: The end of the Bavarian Illuminati

For Weishaupt it was clear that "[. . .] Monarchical power is only dangerous in the hands of egotistical, brutal, uncultured, and immoral men. But such men should not be authorized to become our superiors. The higher a superior rises within the Order, the more moral he must be. Our entire system is built on this supreme degree of morality, without which it is only a chimera."¹⁰

This was a deeply held conviction relating to his conception of the Order, and one can imagine that Knigge's strategy of flattery and rapidity in recruitment can only have displeased him. Knigge himself did not think particularly well of princes, but his approach was more tactical. He did not want to offend or exclude them, thinking that he could use them, and subject them to the common law of the Order. On this point, he was in agreement with Bode who, in a letter, argued in paradoxical but period-typical fashion for allowing princes to enter the Order: "[. . .] I must on this occasion say that after long reflection, the following truth seems to me to be evident: 'all princes are men by birth: therefore they must

10 Cited in W. Daniel Wilson, *Geheimräte gegen Geheimbünde: Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der klassisch-romantischen Geschichte Weimars* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991), 274–75.

have the same rights as others.”¹¹ The reversal of perspectives is striking. In the name of equal rights, princes must be allowed the benefit of the education the Order provided! Weishaupt, on the other hand, did not believe in this equality of birth. One was born a prince and it was then not possible to return to original equality. This undoubtedly went against the non-essentialist anthropology of the Enlightenment, but ensured the cohesion of the Order. As previously mentioned, Knigge and Bode did not share this anti-monarchical exclusivism. This difference of opinion fueled the increasing tension between Knigge and Weishaupt throughout 1783. Suddenly, these were no longer educators of the human race who were disagreeing with one another, but rather adversaries or even enemies who pulled no punches. The Munich Areopagites attempted to intercede (April 24, 1783).¹² As their representative, Zwack told Knigge that Weishaupt would resign his role as “General” of the Order, that a sort of federal structure would give more autonomy to each of the provinces of the Order, and finally, that Knigge still had, or had (re)gained, Weishaupt’s esteem. But nothing could be done. The difference of opinion was too great. In July 1784, Knigge resigned from all of his roles and a few months later Weishaupt was replaced by Bode. The coup de grâce, as we know, came from without, at least for the Bavarian section: the

Order was banned in Bavaria (the authorities issued a decree in June 1784, renewed in March–August 1785).¹³ Under Bode’s leadership, it continued to exist until around 1790 in other “provinces.” What was just as decisive a blow as the Bavarian ban, or perhaps an even greater one, was the disorder provoked by the all-too-human behavior of the Bavarian branch of the Order.

The Paris Congresses (1785–1787) and the Masonic renewal

1. The renewal of the Illuminati

This political failure of the Illuminati Order in 1785 did not, however, mean the end of the Order, as the Bavarian ban did not extend to the entire Germanic region. Bode steered the course of the area not affected by the ban on the Order: Thuringia. He was in regular contact with other Freemasons and Illuminati. In 1787, he decided to attend the second congress organized by French Freemasons. He traveled with Wilhelm von dem Bussche (1756–1817) to the French capital, but arrived too late to attend the sessions. Instead, he had the opportunity to both meet some prominent French Masons, in particular the president of the Philalèthes’ council, Savalette de Langes (1746–1797), and to consult all the documents he wished. Before concluding, it should be noted that Bode was well-known to

11 Hammermeyer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent*, 655.

12 *Ibid.*, 598.

13 In 1785, a lightning strike killed Father Johann Jakob Lanz (1735–1745), known as Socrates, and secret documents found on his body led the Bavarian government to take steps to ban the Illuminati. A real “witch hunt” ensued.

French Freemasons after the Wilhelmsbad Congress and that the Franco-German alliance was taken for granted, as evidenced by the two members of the congress allocated to Franco-German exchanges during the congress.¹⁴

Bode's report read to the Paris Congress in absentia is striking for its author's anticlericalism, or more specifically his anti-Catholicism. Draw your own conclusions: Bode starts by attributing the creation of Freemasonry to the Jesuits. He then interprets the murder of Hiram by two of his fellowcraft masons as the allegorical destruction of the Roman Catholic hierarchy by the two reformers Luther and Calvin. After having toyed with the theory of Freemasonry being brought from England by the Stuarts and having discussed the degree of St-André d'Écosse (St. Andrew of Scotland), he tells of how the lodges spread throughout Europe. But the meaning of the institution was soon lost. To keep their followers and to disguise their real origins, other secrets were invented. "The secret was then only made up of words, signs, and ceremonies that gave the impression of another more important secret, and one sought it from degree to degree without ever finding anything but more words and more signs. In the end, these meetings were just fraternal organizations of men who helped each other out when

needed [. . .] and held symbolic ceremonies whose mysterious meaning was no longer known and that each of them interpreted in his own way."¹⁵

It is striking to see Freemasonry being subject to anthropological deciphering by its own members, deconstructing the reality of its beliefs and rites. Freemasonry—or let us say Masonic rites—was nothing but an artifact intended to bring together its members but with no historical basis.

2. Illuminati and Philalèthes

In fact, it was the religious connection that was the subject of radical critique. Savalette de Langes was truly struck by this, leading him to compliment Bode.¹⁶ The latter had heard French Masons say that "skillful words have brought these Brothers out of their superstitions relating to occult and sublime science and they are finally ready to accept the ideas of right and pure reason."¹⁷

Savelette was so convinced by Bode's anticlerical words that he crossed the aisle and, followed by three other French Masons, joined illuminism: "All four of us have made the solemn promise to work for the good of humanity through the means that our connection offers us. Amen."¹⁸

Thus there was indeed a movement of French brothers, Philalèthes, to illuminism in 1787.

14 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 275.

15 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 226.

16 He politely said to him "As you alone, sir, are an entire congress," Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 229.

17 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 230.

18 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 230–31.

The first invitational circular from Savalette de Langes to European Masons, with the aim of organizing a congress to be held 1785 (delayed until 1787), confirms the stability of their new beliefs: “This century that some have called Philosophical, seems to be destined by divine wisdom to be the period of great revolutions in all areas of human knowledge. The exact sciences are making rapid, confident progress. Conjectural knowledge is seeking to reinforce itself through experience, to become more methodical and consistent: the most interesting discoveries are multiplying, political systems have themselves experienced the most unexpected changes; everything has, simply put, felt to a greater or lesser extent the

vibrations of the immense shock that has struck this Universe.”¹⁹

The clarity and modernity of the style is striking. A new grounding in time and space was renewing the experience of living in the world. Here is how Savalette de Langes summarized the principles required by Masonic morals and/or religion at the end of his text: “The existence of a single God, the Immortality and Immateriality of the Soul, Suffering, and Reward in another life.”²⁰

This was a reaffirmation of a simplicity of philosophical and religious engagement and a clear distancing from the occult sciences. Cagliostro had lost a great deal of ground.

19 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 255.

20 Porset, *Les Philalèthes et les Convents de Paris*, 263.