

# Roëttiers de Montaleau and the Work of the “Chambre des grades”: The Spirit of the Symbolic Degrees

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## ABSTRACT

In 1773 the first Grand Lodge of France (born in 1735) underwent a profound reform that transformed it into the Grand Orient of France. This reform is the application to Freemasonry of the ideas of the Enlightenment. In the early 1780s, the Grand Orient’s “Chambre des grades” undertook a work on the Masonic ritual to finally establish a reference version that it promulgated in 1785. This version, made under the direction of Brother Roëttiers de Montaleau, is known today as the “Régulateur du Maçon” and is considered the standard text of the French Rite. This article studies the process of fixing this ritual, its sources and the ideas it carries.

**Keywords:** Masonic enlightenment, Grand Orient de France, French Rite, Roëttiers de Montaleau, Chambre des grades, Masonic ritual, Régulateur du Maçon

## Roëttiers de Montaleau y la Obra de la “Chambre des grades”: El Espíritu de los Grados Simbólicos

En 1773 la primera Gran Logia de Francia (nacida en 1735) sufrió una profunda reforma que la transformó en el Gran Oriente de Francia. Esta reforma es la aplicación a la masonería de las ideas de la Ilustración. A principios de la década de 1780, la “Chambre des grades” del Gran Oriente emprendió un trabajo sobre el ritual masónico para finalmente establecer una versión de referencia que promulgó en 1785. Esta versión, realizada bajo la dirección del hermano Roëttiers de Montaleau, se conoce hoy como la “Régulateur du Maçon” y se considera el texto estándar del Rito Francés. Este artículo estudia el proceso de fijación de este ritual, sus fuentes y las ideas que conlleva.

**Palabras clave:** Ilustración masónica, Grand Orient de France, Rito francés, Roëttiers de Montaleau, Chambre des grades, Ritual masónico, Régulateur du Maçon

## Roëttiers de Montaleau 与“等级管理议会”的职责：象征性等级的精神

1773年，首个法兰西总会（诞生于1735年）经历了一场深刻的改革，转变为法兰西大东方总会（Grand Orient de France）。这次改革是启蒙运动思想在共济会中的应用。1780年代初期，大东方总会的“等级管理议会”（Chambre des grades）着手研究共济会仪式，最终建立了参考版本并于1785年进行宣传。该版本在 Roëttiers de Montaleau 兄弟的指导下完成，今天被称为“Régulateur du Maçon”，并且被认为是法兰西礼仪的标准文本。本文研究了确定该仪式的过程、仪式来源及其所承载的思想。

关键词：共济会启蒙，法兰西大东方总会，法兰西礼仪，Roëttiers de Montaleau，等级管理议会（Chambre des grades），共济会仪式，Régulateur du Maçon

The formation of the Grand Orient de France (GODF) (Grand Orient of France) between 1771 and 1773 was the work of a team centered on the Duc de Montmorency-Luxembourg. For several months, they busied themselves creating and proposing a whole suite of reforms in order to constitute a functioning organization. This new Masonic administration naturally needed to address the important question of rituals at one stage or another. On December 27, 1773, during its second plenary assembly, the GODF decided that:

The codification of the Masonic degrees requiring much wisdom and a great deal of diligence on the part of the brothers wishing to undertake it, the Grand Orient has established a commission

specially charged with this work and the Most Respectable Brothers Bacon de la Chevalerie, Comte de Stroganoff, and Baron de Toussaint were appointed as commissioners to draw up this great work. All Brothers who have Masonic knowledge are invited to communicate it to one or other of these Brothers, who can in their turn appoint such learned Brothers as they see fit to assist with their work, so that this knowledge, once codified, can be reported to the Grand Orient and sanctioned by it.

Until this codification is complete, it has been decreed that lodges shall be encouraged to only make use of the first three symbolic degrees.<sup>1</sup>

1 GODF meeting records, FM<sup>1</sup> 114, f°54, Bibliotheque Nationale de France. Translator's note: Our

However, after this bright start, the activities of the commission seem to have been very limited. In fact, it is not mentioned again until 1776. The codification of degrees was referred from body to body, and took almost twelve years. In 1781 this task was transferred to the “Assemblée des trois chambres réunies” (Assembly of the Three Joint Chambers), and then in 1782, to a new “Chambre des grades” (Chamber of Degrees), originally created to take care of the higher degrees. It was at this time that Brother Roëttiers de Montaleau became involved with the issue, gradually taking on a more and more important role. Finally, partly at his initiative, the rituals were finished and voted on: the degree of apprentice on July 15, 1785, fellowcraft on July 29, 1785, and master on August 12, 1785. This was the text published during the consulate and the empire, entitled *Régulateur du Maçon* (Masonic Regulator), and it is still known under that name today.

The Grand Orient finally had a standardized ritual for the three initial degrees. But upon learning that it took twelve years of debate, proceedings, and referrals between bodies, one might have concerns as to the fidelity of the result to the original ritual heritage of

French Masonry. Buried under views, opinions, and contributions, might not the traditions of early French Masonry have been disfigured by the painstaking labor of the various Grand Orient bodies? Examining the text, however, it is surprising how faithful they are to the rituals of the 1740s–1760s, and beyond that, to those of the first Grand Lodge of 1717, and even to the most ancient known Masonic rituals.<sup>2</sup> The reason for this, generally speaking, is that although the process was long, the Grand Orient’s work concentrated on the finalization of the texts and, above all, the development of a certain number of rules<sup>3</sup> (majority required to be present within a lodge for a non-Mason to be initiated, time periods for moving from one degree to another), or elements peripheral to the ritual itself (phrases provided for new initiates to meditate on, details of tracing boards, etc.). However, these procedures did have a certain philosophical import. For example, on June 22, 1781, the Assemblée des trois chambres réunies was working on the questions a candidate should be asked on the threshold of being admitted into the Order:

The Brothers then presented various questions to be put to

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translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material are our own.

2 See: Pierre Mollier, “De l’authenticité traditionnelle des rituels symboliques du Grand Orient de France et du Régulateur,” in *Le Régulateur du Maçon: Les grades symboliques du Rite Français; Histoire et textes fondateurs* (Paris: Dervy, 2018), 375–91.

3 This aspect might seem secondary today, but at the time, the Grand Orient often received queries from lodges about such problems. One example among numerous others: in October 1784, the president of the GODF assembly received an accusation that the “Réunion des Etrangers Lodge (Strangers’ Meeting Lodge), of the Paris Orient, after having received a new member advanced him, five days later, on the same day, to the degrees of fellowcraft and master” (FM<sup>1</sup> 16, f°126 verso, Bibliothèque Nationale de France). The matter was referred to the Chambre de Paris (Paris Chamber) to be examined.

new members in the Chamber of Reflection. After having examined these, the Trois chambres adopted the five following questions, presented by the Most Venerable Brother Millon.

1. What is the first duty of an honnête homme (respectable man)?
2. What does an honnête homme owe to himself?
3. What does he owe to his peers?
4. What is the most proper way to make our happiness immutable in this world?
5. What are the most proper virtues to obtain universal esteem and affection?<sup>4</sup>

It is very interesting to note that these questions do not ask the candidate about their metaphysical ideas in any way. Their area of investigation is exclusively moral, and for the two final questions, social. Of course, overly quick or anachronistic conclusions must be avoided, but nonetheless this can be seen as a sign of the approach of those leading the Grand Orient around 1780. During the twenty-fifth assembly, on July 13, 1781:

The Venerable Brother Salivet then proposed a number of different maxims to be placed in

the room of reflection. The Trois chambres chose five of them, which were agreed in the following form.

1. If you only came here out of curiosity, go.
2. If you fear being shown your own faults, you will do badly among us.
3. If you are capable of lying, beware, for we will find you out.
4. If you believe in human differences, leave, for we know none.
5. If your soul has felt fear, go no further.<sup>5</sup>

These five maxims survived the vicissitudes of the years of debates that followed. We find them in the definitive text and, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, printed in the *Régulateur du Maçon*. Both the questions for candidates and the maxims for the room of reflection would last through the highs and lows of the eventful existence of the GODE, to such an extent that they seem to be a defining feature of the prerequisites for initiation under the French Rite.

On some points, however, the work of standardizing the degrees went beyond simply formalizing them. For the degree of apprentice, the text in-

4 Twenty-fourth assembly of the Trois chambres réunies, June 22, 1781, FM<sup>1</sup> 89, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

5 Twenty-fifth assembly of the Trois chambres réunies, July 13, 1781, FM<sup>1</sup> 89, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

cluded elements that were not part of either British sources or the first French disclosures of the 1740s, but which can be found in several manuscripts from the 1760s and 1770s. For example, both the test of the cup of bitterness and the purifications by water and fire are present in the rituals of the “Scottish” Mother-Lodge of Avignon.<sup>6</sup> Were these elements typical of the Mother-Lodge’s Scottish Rite, or were they simply examples of the embellishments added by those eighteenth-century brothers who enjoyed ritual, in Avignon and elsewhere? The question is not clear cut, as it should be remembered that the “Scottish” were present in the process of codifying the degrees. Thus the Respectable Le Contrat Social (The Social Contract) Lodge was among the lodges consulted by the Grand Orient’s 149th assembly, and Thory, then a member of the Saint-Alexandre d’Écosse (Saint Alexander of Scotland) Lodge, took part in several sessions. It should be noted in any case that it was not (yet?) a matter of a passage through the four elements, but only a purification by water and fire. The “test” relates therefore less to alchemy and more to the traditional sym-

bolism of Christian baptism. Whether a “Scottish” import or inclusion of a more widespread practice, these new rites show symbols that originally belonged to the higher degrees descending into the three initial degrees.<sup>7</sup> The same goes for the “test of blood.” However, the higher degrees, by their nature more flexible, may here only be a link in the chain connecting Masonry to more ancient societies. Thus we find a test of “salted wine” in the initiation ritual of the Compagnies d’Archers (Archers’ Guilds) that is strongly reminiscent of the Masonic “cup of bitterness.”<sup>8</sup> The same rite was also part of the seventeenth-century journeymen’s guilds.<sup>9</sup>

The major undertaking of the Grand Orient dignitaries was the revitalization of the degree of fellowcraft. Since the tripartition of the two former Scottish degrees of “entered apprentice” and “master mason or fellow craft” around 1720, the new degree of fellowcraft had not yet found its own identity. Almost all the symbolic content of the former fellow craft—the word Mason and the five points of fellowship—had been transferred to either the first or the third degree of the new system. It

6 See: René Désaguliers, “Essai de recherche des origines, en France, du Rite Ecosais pour les trois premiers grades, Premier grade de la Franche-maçonnerie [. . .] suiv. le Rit de la M.L.E. de l’Orient d’Avignon,” *Renaissance traditionnelle* 54–55 (1983): 135. Pascal Du Santra, “Un rituel avignonnais d’Apprenti du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle ou la Maçonnerie théâtralisée,” *Renaissance traditionnelle* 133 (2003): 2–19.

7 And perhaps more precisely from Pirlet’s “Scottish Trinitarian” system, oral communication with René Désaguliers and Roger Dachez, December 1989. See also the ideas put forward by Guy Verval, “A propos de trois rituels remarquables,” afterword to *Rituels du Rite français Moderne 1786: Apprenti-Compagnon-Maitre*, (Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1991), XV.

8 See the admission ritual for archers, documented in 1751, cited in Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *Nobles jeux de l’Arc et loges maçonniques dans la France des Lumières: Enquête sur une sociabilité en mutation* (Cahors: Éditions Ivoire-Claire, 2002), 191–92.

9 Emile Coornaert, *Les Compagnonnages en France du Moyen-âge à nos jours* (Paris: Les Éditions ouvrières, 1966), 353.

had admittedly been allocated teaching around the blazing star and the letter G, but the ceremony was only a simple reception into the lodge accompanied by the taking of an oath. The ritual for the intermediary degree was then so short that, until the 1780s, it would frequently be conferred in the same evening following initiation as an apprentice. A new member therefore went from being a layman to “Apprentice-Fellowcraft” in just a matter of hours! The Grand Orient bodies therefore designed a ceremony and teachings to enrich the degree of fellowcraft and at last give it real symbolic coherence and weight. To reach the second degree, the apprentice would need to make five journeys, each of which would allow them to discover a tool. This addition was destined for great posterity and the five journeys of fellowcraft became a classic part of French Masonic tradition. Another interesting point is that although throughout the eighteenth century French Freemasons seemed to be doing everything they could to put distance between themselves and the operative sources of the order—oh, were it that they were just symbolic!—in order to provide teaching for the degree of fellowcraft, Roëttiers de Montaleau and

his friends went back to “practical masonry.” Was this a development that followed logically from the very name of the degree (“compagnon” [member of a journeymen’s guild] in French), with elements being borrowed from the practices of these guilds? The Parisian bourgeois, readers of Rousseau and the *Encyclopédie*, would have encountered guild members in everyday life during this paradoxical period, when the distance between social classes was highly compatible with social promiscuity.<sup>10</sup> A more likely explanation is that this was a reconstruction based on the allegorical commentaries typical of European esoteric sensibilities from the sixteenth century onward. Speculations about tools were common in Renaissance emblem books.<sup>11</sup> Here again, it is important not to overestimate the rigidity of the border between learned and popular culture. Trade guilds—in particular their higher ranking members from the artisanal middle class—were highly likely to be familiar with these glosses on the symbolic meanings of tools. Whatever the reason, for the first time since its conception, “speculative” Freemasonry honored elements relating to “operative” masonry<sup>12</sup> and directed its adherents to meditate on them. At the

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10 The ostracism the text demonstrates in the prerequisites for initiation—“No man should be admitted who is in a base and abject state. Rarely shall an artisan be admitted, even if he is a master craftsman, especially in places where corporations and guilds have not been established. Those workers known as journeymen in crafts or trades shall never be admitted”—does not preclude such borrowings. Besides which, this exclusion was merely theoretical and eighteenth-century Parisian Masonry included many brothers, some of considerable importance, from the “trades.”

11 Roger Dachez, “Tradition du métier et sources historiques de la pensée symbolique dans la Maçonnerie spéculative,” in “Symboles et Mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques (XVII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles): Filiations et emprunts,” special issue, *ARIES* (1999): 49–57.

12 Thierry Boudignon, “Le néo-opérativisme dans la Franc-maçonnerie spéculative anglaise et française à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> et au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in “De la Maçonnerie opérative à la Franc-maçonnerie spéculative: Filiations et ruptures,” special issue, *Renaissance traditionnelle* 118–19

same time, to complete this veritable renaissance of the degree of fellowcraft, the Grand Orient officials allocated to it an entire tranche of Masonic instruction that had until then been taught to apprentices. As the fifth science, geometry, ought to command a fellowcraft Mason’s whole attention, the sections of the catechism relating to the dimensions of the lodge, its shape, its orientation, and the elements that support it—the three pillars—were transferred to the second degree. New initiates therefore did not discover the meaning of certain symbolic elements present in the first degree until they advanced to the second.

The degree of master sanctioned by the Grand Orient is completely consistent with the most venerable French traditions on the subject. Thus, the ancient word is not forgotten, and is known by all masters, but another is used instead for reasons of prudence.<sup>13</sup> There is therefore no more left to discover and this version of the Hiram Legend thus preserves a real independence from the symbolic degrees. The higher degrees are not necessary to complete the story. The instruction for the degree of master includes an inspired turn of phrase that proved highly successful and entered French Masonic tradition, becoming a classic expres-

sion: “To bring together that which is scattered.” Some might see within it an allusion to the analogies between the Hiram Legend and the myth of Osiris, while others point to the way it echoes the passage of Anderson’s *Constitutions* that explains that “Masonry becomes the Center of Union.”<sup>14</sup> In another echo of long-standing practices, the text underscores several times the importance of instruction by questions and responses—catechism—which brothers are encouraged to recite as often as possible. Between a symbolic litany and the “art of memory,” it is presented as a fundamental part of the practice and teaching of each degree.

As for the general approach of the codification, it should be emphasized that there is a clear tendency to sideline the ostensibly religious phraseology that is found in several places in the French Rite between 1740 and 1760. This choice was probably governed by diverse, perhaps even contradictory, factors. First there was a concern to expunge anything that could be interpreted as parody or even sacrilege, a desire to avoid blurring the boundaries between domains that was inspired by a respect for religion that would have been natural for men steeped in the culture of the ancien régime. But it is possible that this was also muddled

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(1999): 113.

13 Verval, “A propos de trois rituels remarquables,” XX–XXIV; and Jan Snoek, “The Evolution of the Hiram Legend from Prichard’s Masonry Dissected to the Emulation Ritual, in England and in France,” in “Symboles et Mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques (XVII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles): Filiations et emprunts,” special issue, *ARIES* (1999): 59–92.

14 James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons: Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity, For the Use of the Lodges* (London: Hunter, Senex, and Hooke, 1723), Article 1, “Concerning God and Religion.”

with another concern that was emerging at that time: an aspiration to secularization in line with Enlightenment values. This subtle formal emancipation from Judeo-Christian sources should not be seen as militant, however, and while some expressions were watered down, the entire symbolic corpus was carefully conserved. This meant that the religious resonances were no longer imposed, and only “those with ears to hear” would detect them, leaving others free to engage with the purely moral and allegorical content.

From 1773 to 1785, twelve years passed between the decision to set down a ritual that would ensure “uniformity within the work of workshops” and its adoption, followed by its diffusion. But the work of codification itself only started in 1781, so the gestation of

the symbolic degrees only ultimately lasted four years. Behind the splendor of sessions of the various Grand Orient bodies, it was in fact a small team centered around Roëttiers de Montaleau that brought this work to fruition. Work that consisted less, it should once again be stressed, of creating a ritual than setting down ceremonies common to the majority of French lodges in the eighteenth century, in a way that favored sobriety and authenticity. As the foreword states, “the Grand Orient de France [. . .] thought it necessary to return Masonry to its ancient practices, which some innovators have attempted to alter, and to reestablish these first and important initiations in their antique and respectable purity.” Thus these texts are linked to the very sources of the ritual and symbolic heritage of Freemasonry.