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The Double - Headed Eagle: Iconographic sources of the masonic symbol
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SPECIAL ISSUE

THE DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE: ICONOGRAPHIC SOURCES OF THE MASONIC SYMBOL

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In modern times, Freemasonry has also acted as a conservatory of traditional symbolism. The case of the double-headed eagle illustrates the deep roots of the symbols proposed for Masonic meditation.

The double-headed eagle is today the emblem of the most widely practiced system of high Masonic degrees in the world: the Ancient and Accepted Scottish rite. Originally the degrees conferred under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Councils were based strongly on the Judeo-Christian tradition. After evolving over two centuries, this rite now promotes a universalistic spirituality. It is interesting to note that this universal vocation already existed for the emblem selected during the origins of the rite. For an iconographic historian, "the eagle, with the dragon, are the only animals that have existed as an emblem in all countries and in every period. Since the most ancient times, communities have made the double-headed eagle - half-eagle, half mythical animal, like the dragon - an emblematic figure. When Freemasonry adopted some of the Western symbolic imagery in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century, the double-headed eagle was naturally included among these emblems.

I. THE DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE ORIGINATED IN MESOPOTAMIA

A. Creation of the heraldic position of the double-headed eagle among the Hittites

Have double-headed figures existed since time immemorial? A double-headed female figure (a Mother-Goddess?) was discovered at Ctal Hüyük, one of the world's oldest cities. It was dated to the sixth millennium B.C. The first representations of the double-headed eagle are

also extremely old. They have been discovered in archeological sites of the Hitties, who lived throughout Asia Minor from the twentieth to the thirteenth centuries B.C.

They first appeared on cylindrical seals unearthed in the excavation of Boghazköy, the former Hittite capital. They clearly portray a double-headed eagle with widespread wings. A quest for a certain aesthetic led to this "heraldic" position, which can be explained by a natural inclination for symmetry and the likely religious nature of the entity represented. Scientists have dated them to between 1750 and 1715 B.C.; given the context, they were probably used for commercial purposes.

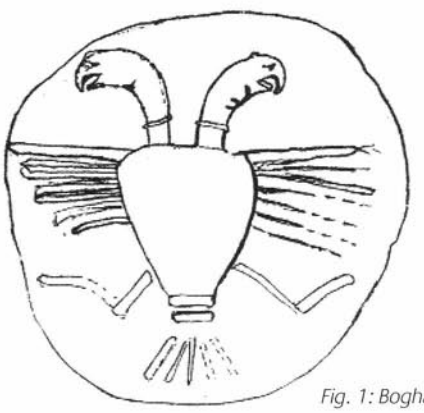
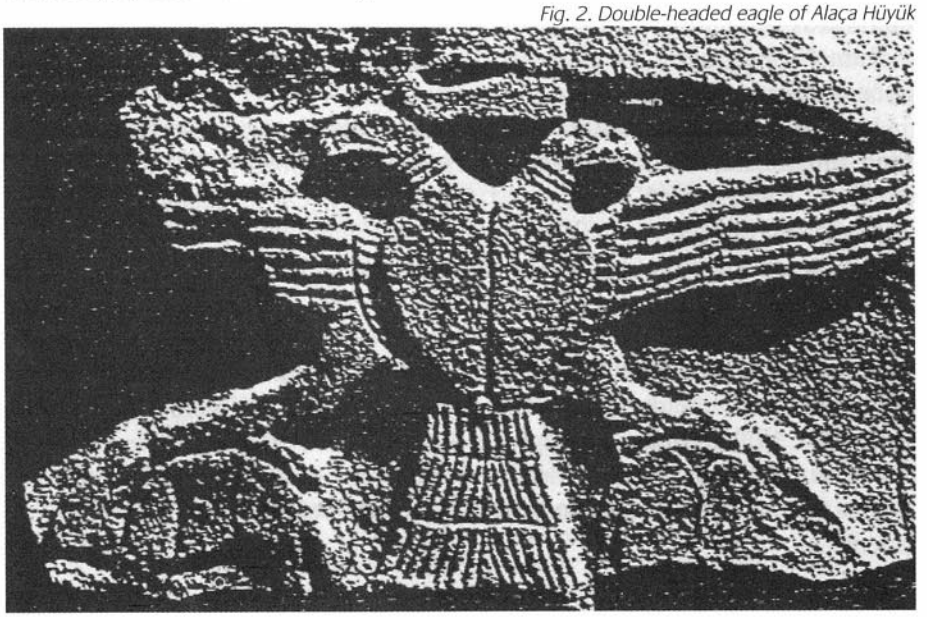


Fig. 1: Boghazköy seal

The image of the double-headed eagle reappears in the same region in two monumental works, in Alaça Hüyük (dated to circa 1400 B.C.) and in Yazilikaya (1250 B.C. at the latest).

Fig. 2. Double-headed eagle of Alaça Hüyük



The context in this case is different and the image seems to be exclusively religious. The eagle has become a symbol of divinity. The eagle from Alaça Hüyük appears on the inner surface of the orthostat relief supporting the sphinx, situated at the monumental entrance to this city. At Yazilikaya, it is found in the middle of a procession of divinities, arranged as an open-air sanctuary.

The image of the double-headed eagle seems to have dropped out of favor in the final Hittite period, from the ninth to the seventh centuries B.C., and disappeared with the end of this empire.

B. Seldjuk and Turkmen Empires: the rediscovery of the double-headed eagle in the High Middle Ages

The double-headed eagle would reappear in the same region, but two thousand years later. In the year 1000, the Seldjuks - Turkish lords from Mongolia who converted to Islam around 920 - invaded Anatolia. In the late eleventh century, the Seldjuks of Anatolia separated from the Grand Seldjuks of Iran to create the Seldjuk Empire known as Rum, as it was situated on Byzantine territory. They set up their capital in Nicea (Iznik), then in Konya.

The double-headed eagle flourished under the reign of the greatest Seldjuk sultan of Konya, Alaeddin Keykübad (1219-1236), and that of his son and successor, Keyhusrem II (1236-1246). The image appeared on fabrics, carved stone, wall tiles and Koran stands. As with any iconographic problem, it is hard to say if the image was borrowed from an earlier depiction or was re-created. Both solutions would have been made possible by the fact that the ancestors of the Seldjuks knew of a double-headed rooster in the fifth century. But it was certainly a borrowed image for the successors of the Seldjuks in the early thirteenth century, the Turkmen. Images of the double-headed eagles were cast on some of their bronze coins, but there were also Sassanid, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Christian motifs, which had clearly been copied from older works.



Fig. 3: Turkmen coin (circa 1197-1219)

C. Byzantium: the double-headed eagle as emblem of the Empire

Constantinople aspired to be the new Rome, and as such, the emblem of the eagle was well known as a symbol of power and sovereignty. As did the Cesars and Augustus of ancient Rome, the Basileus, the Byzantine emperor, sovereign of the Eastern Empire, carried the eagle on the coat of arms. How did the imperial Roman eagle become a double-headed eagle? Byzantine's close relationship with neighboring countries and its enemies, the Seldjuks then the Turkmen, alternated between periods of war and thriving trade. The double-headed eagle very likely arrived in Constantinople on the fabric and coins of a merchant or in the mementos belonging to a soldier. The lecterns in the orthodox churches adorned with this emblem are similar to the Koran stands of the Seldjuks. By its very nature, the image of the double-headed eagle must have been used increasingly in art and symbolism, which gradually altered the design of the imperial eagle. The Basileus Theodorus II Lascaris (1254-1258) was probably the first to make the double-headed eagle the symbol of the empire. Indeed, the two heads of the eagle symbolized particularly well the dual sovereignty - temporal and spiritual - claimed by the Basileus. From this point on, the symbol of the double-headed eagle would be used in the Greek Orthodox Church, and even became its official emblem. The double-headed eagle from the Balkan countries, as well as the same eagle in the Russian empire, were inspired directly from Byzantium.

II. THE DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE IN THE MIDDLE AGES IN EUROPE

A. Appearance of the double-headed eagle in Romanesque art

Several examples of the double-headed eagle can been seen in Romanesque sculpture in the churches of Vouvant (Vendée), Civray (Vienne), Gensac-la-Pallue and Sainte-Colombe (Charente), Moissac (Tarn-et-Garonne) and Vienne (Isère). Although they cannot be dated precisely, none of the churches seems to have been built later than the twelfth century. How did this figure from Asia Minor arrive and flourish in the heart of Western medieval society? Emile Mâle provides an explanation for the classic itinerary of an iconographic image, which could well have been that of the double-headed eagle:

"*In the time of Saint Bernard, in other words, during the height of the Romanesque period, most of the flowers and animals decorating the cloisters and churches were copies of ancient Byzantine and Eastern originals, which the artists reproduced without understanding their meaning.*

The decorative arts in the Middle Ages started through imitation.

These so-called symbols were often inspired from a design on a piece of Persian fabric or an Arabian rug.

As we pursue a study of eleventh - and twelfth-century decorative arts, we see that they appear more and more as a composite art consisting of borrowed motifs. The multiple elements used start to become clearer. For example, Roman capitals frequently depict two lions arranged symmetrically on either side of a tree or a flower. Should we follow Father Auber and search for the meaning in theological works from the eleventh century? We would be wasting our time: Lenormand proved that these two lions were copies of motifs on fabric produced in Constantinople, from older Persian images. These two animals guard the hom, *the sacred tree of Iran. Even then, Byzantine weavers no longer knew the meaning of the animals and saw in them nothing more than good design elements for an industrial drawing. As for our twelfth-century sculptors, they imitated the figures from the Byzantine rugs brought to France by Venetian merchants, without realizing that they had any other meaning whatsoever.*"

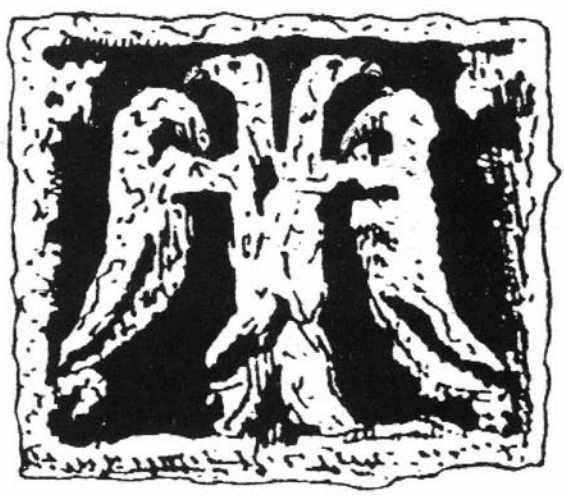


Fig. 4: Civray, Church of Saint Nicolas and Saint Colombe

In fact, in 1895, a piece of fabric from the Middle East, decorated with the double-headed eagle, was found during work in the Périgueux Cathedral. Known as "The Shroud of Saint-Front," it is a piece of silk from the eleventh or twelfth century, from Grand Seldjuk, Turkmen, Constantinople or even Moorish Spain. It is a piece of a bishop's chasuble; the remains of this and other bishops were transferred and placed in a wall in 1173.

One last element supports the thesis that the image was borrowed from the Middle East. The double-headed eagle seems to have appeared often on the coats of arms of the chief crusaders. Jourdain d'Amphermet, Jean de Dion, Hamelin and Geoffroy d'Antenaise, Jean de la Béreaudière, Le Meigre, Amaury de Saint-Cler, Hugues de Sade and Laurent de la Laurencie all carried the double-headed eagle.



Fig. 5: Shroud from the Périgueux Cathedral

B. The double-headed eagle in seals and armorial bearings

Armorial bearings appeared on battlefields in the twelfth century so that the fighters could recognize each other in the heat of the battle. Animals were among the first figures used. Animal imagery accounted for 60 percent of the armorial bearings in 1180, 40 percent in 1250 and stabilized around 30 percent, then dropped to around 25 percent during the fourteenth century. The eagle (one-headed) is one of the major figures in heraldry. But "*In Western armorial bearings, it was used far less frequently than the lion: in the Middle Ages, there was approximately one escutcheon with an eagle for six with a lion; and in modern times, the ratio seems to have increased to one in ten. It is, above all, the rarity of the eagle on the shields of commoners that explains the difference. The eagle is essentially a nobiliary heraldic figure, a symbol of power and authority.*

"The origin and the meaning of the double-headed eagle have been the subject of much debate. It appears that it was above all an essentially graphic theme, and that heraldry borrowed it later from Middle Eastern imagery." The oldest example in France is that of the seal affixed by a Knight Templar, Guillaume de l'Aigle, Temple Commander in Normandy.



Fig. 6: Seal of Guillaume de l'Aigle, Temple Commander

The second case is that of Jocelin de Chanchevrier, dated 1229. We have been able to calculate that up until 1300, barely 7 percent of the eagles on French arms were double-headed.

The double-headed eagle is therefore not an important heraldic device in terms of quantity. However, the status of the people who selected it for their shields may have contributed to its distinct image. Hence, it appeared on the arms of Bertrand du Guesclin (1320-1380). He was a tournament hero, a knight-errant of legendary renown, a victorious warrior and then High Constable under Charles VI, the model of the perfect knight.

Bertrand du Guesclin wore "*argent, double-headed eagle sable, crowned with gules coticed, beaked, armed and langued gules.*" The double-headed eagle therefore became linked to the idea of the perfect knight in the medieval mind.

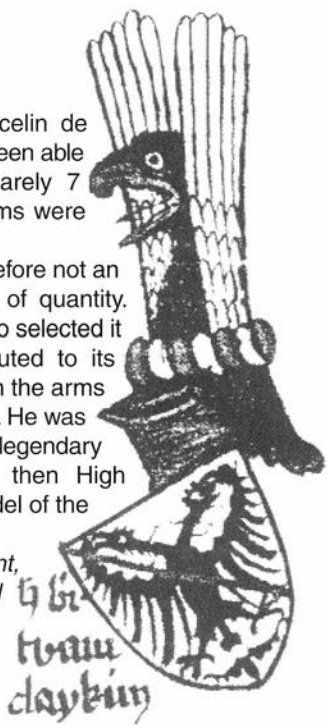


Fig 7: Du Guesclin's shield

In addition to its appearance on the arms of the crusader knights, the double-headed eagle was also included on the arms of a medieval hospitaller order, the Canons Regular of Saint Anthony who wore, "*or, double-headed eagle displayed sable, both diadémé, gold crown at neck, from which hangs a gold escutcheon, cross tau azure.*"

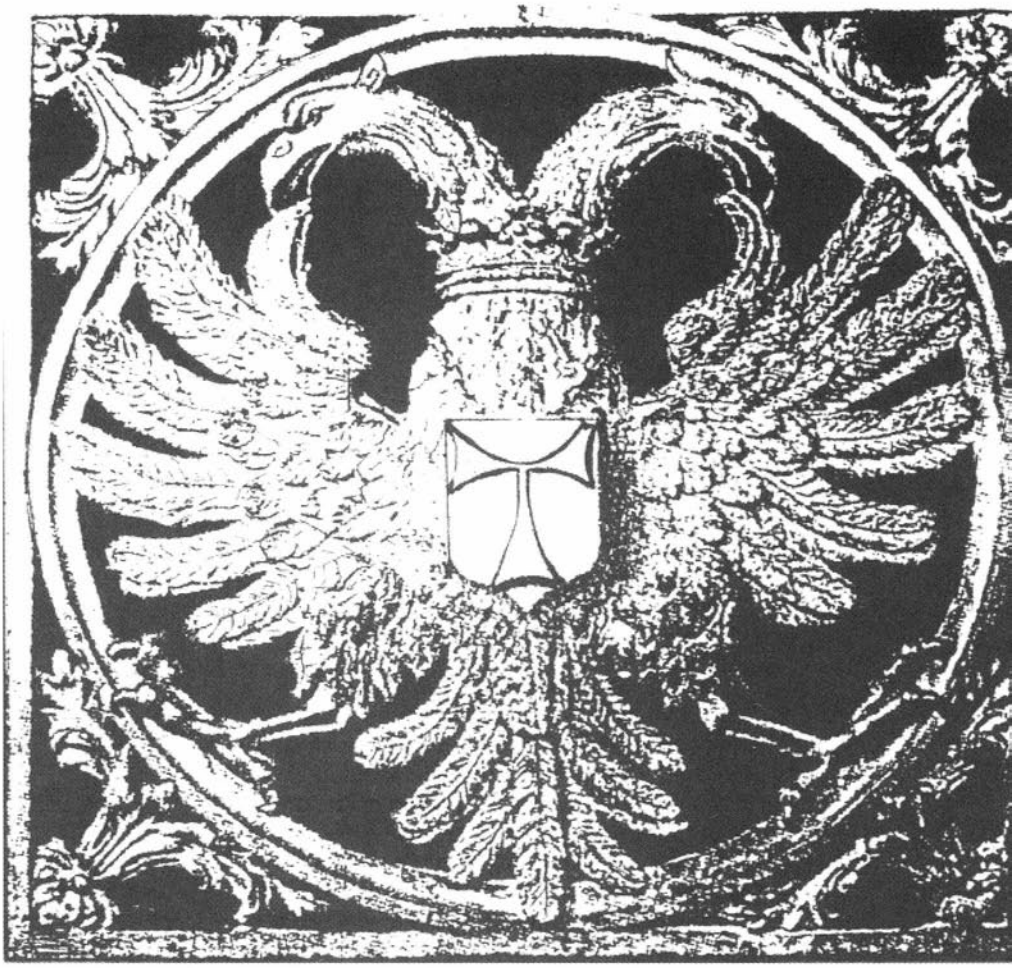


Fig. 8: Arms of the Canons Regular of Saint Anthony

C. The double-headed eagle in modern Europe

As we move closer to the fifteenth century, the image of the double-headed eagle appeared more often in Germanic countries, where it is now often seen as its exclusive domain, although this is somewhat erroneous. But "*despite a few exceptional examples during the period of Frederic II, it was truly under the reign of Emperor Sigismond, in other words, in the early fifteenth century, that the double-headed eagle finally became the emperor's heraldic figure, while the single-headed eagle was reserved to the king of the Romans from this point on.*"

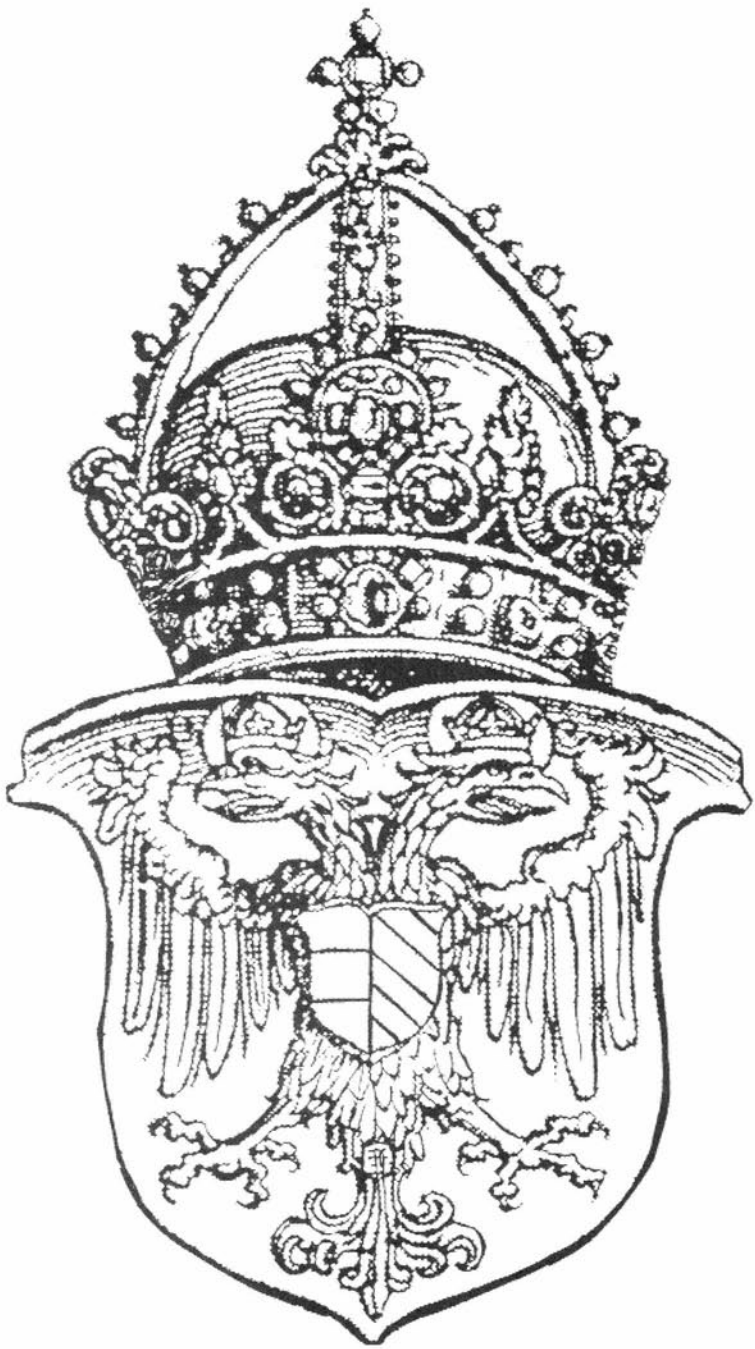


Fig. 9: Coat of arms of the Holy Empire

By the late eighteenth century, the image of the Spread Eagle in heraldly had been adopted for arms of nearly 500 European families; for 200 of them, it constituted the complete coat of arms.

III. THE ORIGINS OF THE DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE IN MASONRY

The double-headed eagle appeared in Masonry in France in the early years of the 1760s with the degree of Knight Kadosh or Grand Inspector Grand Elect (G.I.G.E.). It can be seen in the famous letter that the Masons of Metz wrote to those of Lyon in June of 1761. This valuable document discussed reciprocal information for the dignitaries of the order concerning the known or practiced degrees in the two lodges. The Lorraine Mason explained that their highest degree was the "*Knight Grand Inspector Grand Elect highest degree*"; hence, *"All the degrees* [...] *are subordinate to the latter*," although:

"The minor attribute [of this degree] is a golden spread eagle wearing the crown of a prince on both heads and holding a dagger in its claws. The major attribute is an eight-pointed red cross similar to the Maltese Cross. A sword and a dagger are in the circle in the center."

A handsome seal depicting a double-headed eagle appears at the bottom on a copy of a report in the archives of the Saint Jean Lodge in Metz. This document is dated April 25, 1763, and it is significant in that it was signed by Brother Le Boucher de Lénoncourt. He is known as one of the leading supporters of the Kadosh degree in the 1760s. This seal is therefore very likely the first representation of the double-headed eagle in Masonry. Can we attribute the creation of this seal to Augustin Pantaléon, and engraver and one of the figures in the group led by Le Boucher de Lénoncourth? This would give us the original image of the double-headed eagle in the Masonic Order as well as its creator!

In a confidential letter to Willemoz, Meunier de Précourt revealed the secret instruction of the degree of Grand Inspector Grand Elect or Knight Kadosh: the Freemasons are, in fact, descendants of "*these famous, ill-fated T ... [Templars].*" And he added a commentary concerning the degree's emblem:

"The eagle carrying a dagger in its claws, with these words: Neccum Adonay, Vengeance à Dieu, *represents the last words of Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master, when he summoned the pope and the king; a terrible summons confirmed by the event. The eagle, the animal that flies highest in the sky and the only one that look at the sun, is exactly the right emblem for this ill-fated old man."*

In the following letter, in which Meunier de Précourt examines in detail the links between the Templars and the Knights G.I.G.E., the explanation is somewhat different. It was the Templars who survived the physical punishment who:

"Like the eagle, who is the king of birds and the only one to stare at the sun, they took it as their device by arming it with a dagger in its claws, as if to demand justice from the god for such a horrible attack."

We should note that these explanations do not explain the "spread wing" aspect of this eagle. Perhaps this was to help support the precedence of the Kadosh over another degree that appeared at the same time and rivaled the Knight G.I.G.E. for the ultimate position in Masonry: the Knight of the Rose Croix Eagle. The symbolism of the single-headed eagle played a role. But perhaps the double-headed eagle, a image of chivalry and sovereignty belonging to the shared imagery of Western symbolism, simply appeared to be a correct choice for this degree to which "*All [the others should be] subordinate*"—a degree that aimed to hold the most precious revelations of Masonry and aspired to govern the Order.



Fig. 10: Drawing of the seal of Le Boucher de Lénoncourt

The fact remains that the G.I.G.E. or Knight Kadosh would be highly successful in French Masonry in the 1760, and with it, its emblem of the double-headed eagle. Hence, starting in 1762, the dignitaries of the Grande Loge des Maîtres in Paris, known as France, presided by Chaillon de Jonville (substituting for the Grand Master), declared that they were "d*ecorated with the Degree par Excellence of the G.I.G.E.*" All the manuscript rituals of the G.I.G.E. or Knight Kadosh that we still have depict the double-headed eagle as the emblem of this degree. It is linked to the ultimate stage of Masonry, and it therefore symbolizes a leadership position in the Première Grande Loge de France.