Malta, the Knights, and Freemasonry[1]

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Formed in London in 1717, over subsequent decades modern Freemasonry spread throughout the whole of eighteenth-century Europe, so quickly and successfully that it still astonishes historians. Its integration and dynamism in Malta, a hub of cultural exchange at the heart of the Mediterranean, is therefore not really surprising, especially given that the young aristocrats who dominated the Order of Saint John (which had many French members) were open to the spirit of their time and particularly to Enlightenment thought. Despite Lodges being condemned by the Pope in 1738, they had many ecclesiastical members in all Catholic countries. The interest of research attempting to improve our understanding of the relationships between Masonry and the Knights of Malta lies not in an apparent paradox (which actually existed not in the eighteenth century), but in the study of the superposition of two networks of sociability, each of which, in its own way, extended over much of Europe. There was a permanent flow of exchange between hundreds of Commanderies of the Order of Saint John in France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria, South Germany... and the Principality of Malta. In all large and medium towns in the kingdoms, the Lodges exchanged "assurances of friendship," welcomed travelling Brothers, corresponded, and cultivated invisible but very real connections throughout Europe. Many young knights were therefore initiated during their period of training in Malta (their "caravans"). Once they returned to the continent, they practiced Masonry, thus contributing to the "Universal Republic of Freemasons," in the words of Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire.

I. Freemasonry in Malta

A/ The First Stones (1730–circa 1750)

Malta appears as one of the first territories in which modern Freemasonry established itself, after Great Britain, the Netherlands, and France. In fact, the first account of the existence of a Lodge on the island dates back to 1730. Shortly before February 14, 1730, the Bailiff of Brandenburg, Philip Guttenburg, made a donation to fund the building of a house for a Masonic Lodge in Msida.[3] Although few traces remain, this early Masonic presence did not escape contemporaries, because in

[1] We wish to thank the *Société de l'Histoire et du Patrimoine de l'Ordre de Malte* (History and Heritage Society of the Order of Malta) and the curator of its archives and its library, Mr. Hugues Lépolard. We are also grateful to our friend Jean-Claude Momal, who helped us with this research and with whom we are working on a prosopography of Freemason Knights of Malta in the eighteenth century, as an extension to this study. Finally, we have drawn significantly on Alain Blondy's excellent book, L'*Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle, des dernières splendeurs à la ruine* (Paris: Bouchène, 2002).

[2] Pierre Mollier, Director of the Grand Orient de France Library and of the Museum of Freemasonry (Paris).

[3] Cited by A.J. Aegius, *History of Freemasonry in Malta 1730–1998* (Valletta: Stiges, 1999), 8. The author refers to the following serial number in the Archives of the Order of Saint John, kept in Malta's National Archives: AOM 1187, page 227.

1740, the inquisitor Ludovico Gualtieri asked Rome what position should be adopted regarding the Freemasons. He was reminded of the 1738 condemnation and invited to pressure the Grand Master of the Order (Raymond Despuig) to publish the *In Eminenti* bull… and to clamp down.[4] So the Grand Master then expels the (French) knights Livry,[5] as well as some of his friends for being Freemasons. Despuig died on January 15, 1741. A few months later his successor, Pinto, banished six other knights from the island for attending Masonic meetings.[6] Correspondence with Rome by the inquisitors Passionei (1743–1754) and then Salviati (1754–1759) shows that the religious authorities often dealt with cases of knights who were Freemason.[7] For example, on September 24, 1757, Cardinal Corsini told the inquisitor Salviati about his suspicions concerning the knights Capons, Somma, Pinto (probably a relative of the Grand Master Serviene), Vaccene, Abela, Grilert, Micallef, Morelli, and Wodworth.[8]

B/ The Lante Trial and the *Perfect Harmony* (1756–1776)

Over a period of around 20 years, there were many incidents demonstrating the presence of Freemasonry in Malta, particularly within the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. Pushed by the inquisitor, against a background of traditional rivalry between the ecclesiastical authorities and those of the Order, the Grand Master regularly took measures against Freemasons (often the severe penalty of banishment). In April 1776, there was a move from condemnation in principle and ad-hoc measures against individuals to a true official investigation on Freemasonry in Malta, led by the inquisitor Antonio Lante. The investigations began in a charged context, five months after the election of Rohan and seven months after the "priests' revolt." Because of an awareness of the sensitive nature of the subject, the trial took place *in camera* (in relative secrecy). This meticulous police work yielded a highly interesting report[9] on the situation in the 1750s and 1760s. However, very soon, the investigation came to affect everyone, including the inquisitor himself, who was surprised to discover that three of his close circle were Lodge leaders! The ecclesiastical authorities, who had probably supported the initiative as part of their permanent attempts to limit the independence of the Order, learned that several canons of the Cathedral were Masons. As for Rohan, after just a few months in charge, he had

[4] AIM, Lettere della Suprema Congregazione, 27 (1739–1783), f°54: "In ordinea quanto Vostra Signoria ha esposto rispetto alla Società dei Liberi Muratori […] questa Supreme Sagra Congregazione non ha guidicato espediente di trasmetterle altro se non che diversi esemplari della Constitutione Pontifica, con cui la detta società fu gia proibita e condennata […] Proceda contra quelle persone che usassero tuttavia di fare simili adunanze o ascriversi alla mentovata compagnia," cited in Aegius, *History of Freemasonry in Malta*, 9.

[5] It seems there was a significant Masonic hub around Livry from the end of the 1730s. See: Pierre Chevallier, *Le Sceptre, la Crosse et l'Equerre sous Louis XV et Louis XVI 1725–1789* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996), 47.

[6] *Political State of Great Britain* LIX (1740): 427. Cited by Desmond Caywood, "Freemasonry and the Knight of Malta," *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* 83 (1971): 72.

[7] See Aegius, *History of Freemasonry in Malta*, ISSN 10–11.

[8] AIM, Corr. 30, f° 309, cited in Aegius, *History of Freemasonry in Malta*, 11.

[9] See John Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta 1530–1800* (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd, 1979). John Montalto devotes a whole chapter (XIX-Freemasonry) to describing and analyzing this remarkable document. The serial number of the piece in the Malta Inquisition archives is A.I.M. Ms. Processo Lante.

the humiliation of seeing his name cited several times. Not only were there allusions to the Grand Master's Masonry (he was actually initiated to a Lodge in Parma in July 1756), but there were also persistent references to his relative, Prince Camille de Rohan, whose palace in La Valette was one of Malta's most active Masonic centers. The names of many knights, particularly French knights, were revealed. After a few weeks, the inquisition investigators realized they had underestimated the scale of the Masonic phenomenon on the island and in the Order... Finally, following a "regrettable" filing error, the report was "misplaced" and consequently not sent to the Inquisition headquarters in Rome. It was only found 30 years ago, in the Cathedral archives.

One of the main suspects questioned and whose statement is reported was the knight Formosa de Fremeaux. In his interrogation, he explains how he was initiated in 1756, by a Lodge working in Msida. A few days later, he visited another Lodge, led by the knight de Crusyol (Crussol?), who sat in Pawla. Immediately, Formosa de Fremeaux appeared as a highly zealous Mason. He admitted to having had Masonic symbols painted in his house in Zejtun and to hosting a Lodge in his La Valette residence to receive the knight Guasconi, who had come especially from Palermo to be initiated. He gives quite a detailed description of the Masonic ceremonies. From the details he presents, it is clear that the Maltese Masons practiced the Masonic Rite that was used in France at the time, today called the "French Rite." Moreover, the license of the third Lodge cited in the Lante report came from France. On February 13, 1766, in Toulon, Brother Beufier de la Louerie gave the knight Lincel a warrant to create a Lodge in Malta, with the distinctive name of the *Perfect Harmony*. Lincel delegated his warrant to another knight, who would be an active Mason until the end of the century: Ligondès, colonel of the Maltese regiment then chamberlain to the Grand Master. A formerly unknown account confirms and completes the documentation on the Lante trial. It was found in the travel journals of a young German aristocrat: Karl von Zinzendorf.[10] His journal indicates that he was received as a Mason in Malta in March 1766. The Lodge had by then changed its distinctive name slightly, to become *Saint John of Scotland of Secrecy and Harmony*, daughter of Marseille's *Saint John of Scotland*. The name stuck. In his journal on Malta, he also names other members of the Lodge, who like himself were Knights of Malta: Ligondès, Crose-Lincel (the two signatories of the license) Tommasi, Loras, Litta, Guillet de Monthouxanf, and the Prince of Caramanico's younger Brother, the Count of Aquino who accompanied Cagliostro during his stays in Naples, Malta, and Sicily. Most of these names recur later on...

C/ Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony (1788–1792)

After the Lante report, the other main source for the history of Freemasonry in Malta is the file sent to the Grand Lodge of England by a group of Masons, to place under its Obedience their newly recreated Lodge with the distinctive name *Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony.* Once again, the documents describe the situation at the

[10] Christine Lebeau studied the Zinzendorf Brothers outside of the Masonic context, in her thesis entitled *Aristocrates et grands commis à la cour de Vienne (1748–1791). Le modèle français* (Paris: CNRS, 1996). Our thanks to Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, who directed us to this reference discovered by Helmut Watzlawick during his work on the publication of Zinzendorf's travel journals.

time of writing (around 1790), but by citing various Masonic antecedents, they give a great deal of information about the two preceding decades. Moreover, these were internal Masonic documents, so are much more precise concerning the names and masonic careers of the Brothers. Overall, this correspondence with London confirms the picture we have painted so far. The Masons of Malta write that:

> *From the start of the century, our Masonic association under the distinctive name of Harmony and Secrecy embraced and professed all the degrees of symbolic Masonry. Afterwards, in around 1764, our Brothers reunited under the Doctrine of the Lodges of Saint John of Scotland by affiliation with that of Marseille; from then on we remained custodians of the instructions and symbolic rituals up to the three Scottish Degrees, to which those of Knight of the Orient and Knight of the Sun and the Rosy Cross were joined by moral analogy or some other inclination. We preserve these various instructions in their entirety, and, moreover, some of the members [...] are decorated with the High Degrees of foreign or French Masonry.*[11]

Thus, the Maltese Masons used a typical eighteenth-century French Masonic structure. After the traditional Degrees of Apprentice, Fellow, and Master, the Brothers used a series of those high grades that were the privileged channels of esotericism and the chivalric imagination in the century of Enlightenment. These rituals were particularly fashionable in the Lodges of southern France, particularly in Toulon, or around *Saint John of Scotland* in Marseille. Thus, the Knight of the Sun uses an astonishing alchemical symbolism concerning the Rosy Cross, which appears as an attempt to restore primitive Christianity by emphasizing its "initiatory" dimension. The Maltese Brothers explain the circumstances leading them to revive a Lodge which had not met for several years:

> *We, the undersigned Master, Fellow, and Apprentice Brothers, some from the old Maltese Lodge known as Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony, some from other Lodges and under various systems.*
>
> *Regretfully long separated from the whole association and from Masonic work, but wishing to be reintegrated into the ancient practice of a wise and holy rule whose foundations and character will never be erased from our memory, we have eagerly seized the opportunity of the visit from the Very Reverend Brother Count von Kolowrat, current chamberlain to H.M. the Emperor to resume our old practices under his leadership.*[12]

This letter is particularly interesting, because for the first time, it gives the full list of the members of a Maltese Lodge. This shows how deeply Masonry was present at the heart of the Order of Saint John

[11] Translated from: Library-Archives of the United Grand Lodge of England, File on Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony, serial number 1136, item 20/D/6, f°2: "Lettre adressée par les Frères de Malte à la Grande Loge – des 'Moderns' – à Londres, le 24 avril 1792." The original letter from the Brothers of Malta to the Grand Lodge of the "moderns" in London on April 24, 1792, is in French.

[12] Translated from: Library-Archives of the United Grand Lodge of England, File on Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony, serial number 1136, item 20/D/2. Letter of June 30, 1788.

of Jerusalem. The seven founders were all knights. The list features many known names who had meanwhile progressed within the Order, with three becoming Great Crosses: Abel de Loras, then a pillar of the *Langue d'Auvergne* and a member of Grand Master Rohan's close circle, the bailiff Tommasi, former page to Pinto who became Grand Master during the difficult period of the early nineteenth century, and Count de Litta. Kolowrat was Grand Prior of Bohemia and one of Rohan's key men for relations with central Europe. Many members of the Lodge were not just knights: they were dignitaries of the Order. Thirty years later, Formosa de Fremeaux was still on board, and was joined by Ligondès, who even became Venerable (president) in 1790. Because of the atmosphere of growing confusion at the start of the 1790s, the Lodge became a gathering point for Masons, with around 40 Brothers. Over two thirds were knights of Saint John of Jerusalem; the others were either priests or often important employees of the Order, such as Doublet, who was secretary to the Grand Master. Although he was a Mason, there is no proof that Rohan participated in the works of *Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony*. It is even very probable that he abstained, because of his position. However, several clues indicate that he was relatively sympathetic or at least benevolently neutral towards the Lodge.[13] Although he warns against hasty conclusions, Alain Blondy notes that "*the vast majority of knights who in one way or another held very important roles under Rohan's princedom, belonged to Masonry*."[14]

II. The Knights of Malta: a European Masonic Network

A/ Masonry connects Malta to the European Capitals

Although Freemasonry saw a certain success on the island throughout the eighteenth century and in Saint John of Jerusalem, it was also a part of the link between Malta and the different power centers in Europe. The knights travelled extensively. When they were young, they left the land of their birth to complete their "caravans" and spend at least the required period in Malta. Following this, their career in the Order brought them back to the continent to take charge of a Commanderie in France, Italy, Spain, Austria, etc. However, they regularly returned to the island to defend their interests at headquarters and obtain a more important role or position. Not to mention the Order's diplomatic staff in the various Catholic courts and the knights employed for a period in the national navies either in the headquarters or the major ports. There were far more knights of Malta across Europe than there were on the island. The knights' cosmopolitanism, which even became a sort of literary type, inevitably met that of Freemasonry. In fact, by their very nature, the Lodges (particularly in the eighteenth century) were a place of contact and exchange of "commerce" in the old sense of the word. This vocation defined the first article of the founding text of modern Freemasonry, Anderson's *Constitutions* (1723): "*Masonry becomes the Center of the Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons*

[13] There are two types of evidence for this: the ill will with which he followed repeated orders from the Holy See and from the Inquisition to crack down on the Masons, and the shining careers of most Lodge members within the Order.

[14] Translated from Alain Blondy, *L'Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle*, 274.

that must else have remain'd at a perpetual Distance." The Brothers (of Malta!) of the Chevalier des Grieux must have been familiar with this precept repeated by the follower of another cult (though his type of devotions was not all that foreign to many "men of the Religion"):[15] Casanova, who explains in his *Mémoires*:

> *Every young man who travels, who wants to know the wide world, who does not want to be inferior to another and excluded from the company of his equals in our times, must be initiated into what we call Freemasonry.*[16]

Infused with the contemporary idea of the unity of humanity and with their aspiration to the utopia of a universal Brotherhood, Enlightenment thinkers scrupulously made connections with Freemasons in other towns and countries. The itinerant lifestyle of the knight Brothers meant they were inevitably very sensitive to this concept.

There were continuous Masonic links between Malta and the major French ports of the Mediterranean: Toulon and Marseille. From 1760 to 1780, the knights of Ligondès, Le Boscage, Vintimille, Seillons, La Tour du Pin, Pontévès, and Chabriant carried out Masonic works between Toulon and Malta.[17] In the same period, the Lodges of Marseille, with *Saint John of Scotland* at the forefront, regularly had commanders from Malta within their ranks: La Durane de Piolin, Hana, Vincencini[18] Foresta, and Vilhena.[19] As for Torring, a young Apprentice of the Lodge, he was "in Malta." The most unusual case preserved in the annals is that of the Lodge of Narbonne, led by the Chefdebien d'Armissan family. The oldest son was initiated in Malta during his "caravans," and when he returned to Narbonne, he created a Lodge there with his Brothers (the baron, abbot and knights of Chefdebien). There were no less than 13 knights of Malta among the lodge's 48 members.[20] Chefdebien was a passionate Mason in contact with his cousin d'Aigrefeuille, who himself corresponded with those Brothers most informed about

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[15] Jean Potocki, who knew Malta well, having been received as a knight there in 1778 and stayed there for some time, gave the following words to one of the heroes in his extraordinary novel The Manuscript Found in Saragossa: "I entered Malta before leaving childhood [...], so I could and still can have a claim to the first Dignities of the Order. However, since these are accessed only later in life, and I had nothing to do in the meantime, I followed the example of our first bailiffs, who perhaps should have set me a better one. In a word, I spent my time making love." Translated from the French in René Radrizzani, *Histoire du commandeur de Toralva* (Paris: Edition José Corti, 1990), 535. Our thanks to Pierre Lachkareff for pointing out this rich reference to us. On this image in literature, it is also useful to consult Claire Eliane Engel's writings on their place in the Abbé Prévost's novels. See *Les Chevaliers de Malte* (Paris: Les Presses contemporaines, 1972), 249–253.

[16] Translated from Charles Porset, "Casanova Franc-maçon," *Chroniques d'Histoire maçonnique* 49 (1998): 5.

[17] *Tableau général des Frères qui composent la R∴ Loge de St. Jean de la Marine, sous le titre distinctif de la Parfaite Harmonie, constituée à l'Orient de Toulon le 20 avril 1764, arrêté le 14 mars 5785 [1785]*. ("List of the Brothers of the St. Jean de la Marine Lodge, under the distinctive title of the Perfect Harmony, formed in the Orient of Toulon on April 20, 1764, stopped on March 14, 5785 [1785].")

[18] Jacques Choisey, *La Respectable Loge de Saint Jean d'Ecosse, Mère Loge Ecossaise à l'Orient de Marseille, entre 1762 et 1787* (Brussels: Ed. Memo & Codec, 1986), 47 and 49.

[19] *Tableau des Frères qui composent la T.R. Loge Saint Jean d'Ecosse, à l'Orient de Marseille […] 1784* ("List of the Brothers in the *Saint Jean d'Ecosse* Lodge, in the Orient of Marseille […] 1784,") [printed], Lib. GODF AR 113-2, item 517.

[20] Rite Primitif, *Tableau de la première* [loge] du Rite Primitif en France (Narbonne, 1790).

the Mysteries of the (Masonic) Order in Paris, Lyon, and even Germany. Alain Blondy also describes the case of... *Saint John of Jerusalem*,[21] who from Saône to Rhône gathered several knights around the commander Tulle de Villefranche, to the extent that the Lyon Brothers simply called the group "the Malta Lodge."[22] On December 13, 1766, the young knight Karl von Zinzendorf, who we left as a Mason in Malta, was in Strasbourg. He was participating in the work of the *Candeur* Lodge, to which he was introduced by another knight of Saint John of Jerusalem, Brother Flachslanden, second warden of the lodge.[23] *La Candeur* was a real nerve-center for links with Germany and central Europe.[24]

When *Saint John's Lodge of Secrecy and Harmony* reformed in 1788, it showed great concern to establish solid relationships with England. The correspondence contains many expressions of allegiance to the Grand Lodge of London. The Brothers emphasize "*the Most Reverend Brother the Count von Kolowrat [… who made us] determined to resume our works under the regime of the Supreme Lodge of England*." He was the man in charge of presenting and defending the case before the English, with whom he seemed to have privileged links.[25] However, Kolowrat was not only the guarantor of the London-Malta link. He also maintained strong relationships with other European Masonic centers. Thus, a few years before, he took part in an important event for French and German Masonries. It is surprising to find on the "*Table of deputies in the General Congress of Freemasons under the Rectified Rite gathered in Wilhelmsbad from July 16 to September 1, 1782 [...] the Count von Kolowrat Liebstein, Chamberlain to H.M. Imperial, in O. Fr. Franciscus Eq. Ab Aquila fulgente, with the full powers of the Chapter of Saint Hypolite in Vienna and of Hermandstadt in Transylvania.*"[26] Introduced into the Grand Lodge of England, Brother Kollowrat was also a familiar of Germanic Masonry. However, the international contacts of the Maltese Lodge also extended to other areas. At a time when the Brothers were trying to establish themselves under English protection, some of the most eminent members of the Lodge being composed also belonged to another Lodge in Rome, this time under the Paris Obedience. In fact, a record of the *Réunion des Amis Intimes* is to be found in the archives of the Grand Orient de France,[27]

[21] From the first half of the eighteenth century, it was common to see a rapprochement between Freemasonry and the knightly orders, and many Lodges used the name *Saint John of Jerusalem*. The Lodge created in Nancy in 1772 still exists today, under the Obedience of the Grand Orient de France.

[22] Alain Blondy, L'Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle, 267.

[23] Strasbourg National University Library, Manuscript 5437, *Registre des procès-verbaux de la loge de la Candeur constituée mère des loges du Grand Orient de Strasbourg*, f° 176. Our thanks to Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire for bringing this reference to our attention.

[24] Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *L'autre et le Frère, l'étranger et la Franc-maçonnerie en France au XVIIIe siècle France* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998), particularly chapter 9: "La Candeur, orient de Strasbourg: un creuset maçonnique," 399–443. At the start of the 1770s, there was another Maltese knight in the ranks: de Brülh.

[25] In fact, the register of the Grand Secretary of London includes several letters exchanged with Kolowrat, particularly on the affairs of Naples where Masonry had been banned. These show a mutual understanding between the two correspondents. See Alain Blondy, *L'Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle*, 76.

[26] Grand Prieuré des Gaules, Les Cahiers verts, *Les Convents du Régime Ecossais Rectifié*, special edition (Paris, 2005), 144–146.

[27] The Grand Orient de France's correspondence archives for this period are currently kept in the *Cabinet des manuscrits*. BnF, FM2 575.

for which the Venerable in 1789 was… the bailiff Abel de Loras. Its members included Count von Kolowrat and the knight Guillet de Monthoux, Loras's nephew and adoptive son.

This situation illustrates both the mobility of Malta's high executives within Enlightenment Europe and the way in which the new Masonic network was coupled with and completed the old Maltese network. In the late 1780s, the (main?) Lodge of Malta, which seems to have been a sort of annex of a part of the Order's leadership, was consequently in contact with the Masonic centers of London, Paris, and Rome, with a few connections in Germany and Austria. Again, over-interpretation should be avoided. However, it is necessary to note that in Malta, Loras and Kolowrat were the leaders of the party wishing to free the Order from the direct and predominant influence of Versailles. The Grand Master had even stopped making decisions of any importance without the approval of the French Ministry. The enemies of the "French party" wanted to give the Order back some room for maneuver by rebalancing the powers that influenced it, particularly by trying to preserve relationships with the Court of Naples, with Spain in the background, and by bringing new players like Russia or England onto the Mediterranean scene. Thus, it is highly likely that the attachment of the *Secrecy and Harmony* to London, on Kolowrat's initiative, was not purely driven by Masonic motives. However, the affair would end badly. Loras[28] was in Rome in 1789, responsible for representing the Order to the Pope. He wanted to be made an official ambassador for Malta. Obviously, being both a representative of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem to the Holy See and a Worshipful Master chairing over a Lodge of the Grand Orient could pose problems for fault-finders.[29] However, his links with Cagliostro also worked against him. High on the list of the Inquisition's investigation of the "Grand Copht" of "Egyptian Masonry," he was forced to flee by night to Naples, where he took refuge. He then moved on to Malta, where (with mixed success) he tried to return to grace with the Grand Master Rohan.

B/ Three Good Reasons for Knights to be Masons

The cosmopolitanism to which knights were in some ways predisposed was one of the factors explaining their relative enthusiasm for Freemasonry, but it was not the only reason. There was also the spirit of the times, and Alain Blondy rightly emphasizes that it was in no way unusual for a knight of Malta in the eighteenth century to be a Mason. Knights were simply like the young, well-off people of any period, who had the leisure to take an interest in the innovations of their time. They could not remain unaware of the papal condemnation, but it is clear that few of them were frightened by it. Speaking to his ambassador in Rome, Cardinal Fleury answered without illusion that: "*The bull that the Pope has issued against the Freemasons may not be enough to abolish this Brotherhood, if there is no penalty besides the*

[28] Loras has a bad reputation and historians are often very critical about him. Without wishing to plead in his defense, two points explaining this severity can be discussed. Firstly, he was one of the main players of the party which was in fact hostile to France, which obviously wins him no favor from a primarily French historiography. Secondly, most of the accounts about his personality are from his sworn enemy (who was nevertheless a Brother in knighthood and Masonry), Dolomieu.

[29] The person finally named as ambassador, Camille de Rohan, also occupied these two positions.

fear of excommunication. The court of Rome applies this penalty so often that today, it has little preventive power."[30]

Aside from the spirit of the times (Marie-Antoinette wrote to her sister that "*everyone is a Freemason*"[31]) there are two more unexpected factors that explain the Masonic commitment of the knights of Malta. The first also concerns the mentality of the time, although in another register. Certain high-society Lodges were simply centers for noble sociability in the eighteenth century. Thus, the *Société Olympique* emanating from the *Olympique de la Parfaite Estime* Lodge contained 9 princes, 13 dukes, 55 marquises, 57 counts, 19 viscounts, and 13 barons… including 17 Knights of Malta, one of whom was the great Suffren. The *Candeur* Lodge (closely linked to Orléans) and the *Contrat Social* Lodge also contained many Maltese Masons. Similar situations were seen in the provinces although to a lesser extent. For example, in Toulouse, although there were several Knights of Malta in the ranks of the *Vérité Reconnue* Lodge, this was primarily because it was a meeting point for the local aristocracy. In fact, it was "*by far the most exclusive Lodge in the town, because it contained not only magistrates, military personnel, and gentlemen, but also no commoners, and because there were clearly more nobles of the sword than nobles of the robe.*"[32]

A third and final, more subtle and even more mysterious motive further explains the presence of knights in Lodges: some showed a clear interest in Christian esotericism. We will not retrace the relations between Loras and Cagliostro here. However, it is also unusual to observe the relative over-representation of the Maltese in Lodges professing the Rectified Scottish Rite: Chefdebien in Narbonne, Aigrefeuille in Montpellier then in Paris, du Bourg and Guibert in Toulouse, La Croix de Sayve in Grenoble, Monspey in Lyon… As for Kolowrat, he participated, but Chefdebien was also there at the founding event of the Rite: the Congress of Wilhelmsbad. Yet the Rectified Scottish Rite and its Order of Benevolent Knights of the Holy City saw themselves as restoring true chivalry in service of the most essential mysteries of Christianity. Its structures were those of an Order of chivalry. Its ceremonies and its instructions were meant to explain the relationships between God, men, and the universe by the mediation of Jesus Christ and intermediary spirits. The Knights of Malta therefore practiced a very distinctive type of Masonry.

The work of the Congress of Wilhelmsbad provides an interesting account of the esoteric speculations of certain Knights of Malta at debates concerning whether the Templars held occult knowledge. Brother Willermoz made a parallel with the Order of Malta and evoked the case of knights versed in these issues. The issue discussed was the presence, in the very structure of the Order of the Temple, of elements linked to the numerical symbolism that is so important in Freemasonry in general, and in the professed gnosis of theosophist Masons in particular:

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[30] Translated from Pierre Chevallier, *Le Sceptre, la Crosse et l'Equerre sous Louis XV et Louis XVI 1725–1789* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996), 76.

[31] Translation of Pierre Chevallier's citation in: *Histoire de la Franc-maçonnerie française* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), t.I, 209. Source: Paul Vogt d'Hunolstein, *Correspondance inédite de Marie-Antoinette* (Paris: Dentu, 1864).

[32] Translated from Michel Taillefer, *La Franc-maçonnerie Toulousaine: 1741–1799* (Paris: Commission d'Histoire de la Révolution Française/ENSB-CTHS, 1984), 133.

We can observe that at the time of its greatest splendor, it was divided into nine Provinces, each governed by a Provincial Leader, that the number of nine leaders corresponds to the number of founders, coming to ten with its General Grand Master. Some state that this number expresses great things: this observation, which is rather indifferent to me, might be scorned and mocked by some, and perhaps it will also retain the attention of others. As for me, I leave it to each individual according to the meaning they wish to give it, noting only that when we want to verify the origin and goal of an Order or Society, we must not neglect any of the keys that might help with this verification. I further observe that the Order of Malta, born in the same place in almost the same period, appears to have been established on the same basis that it still retains today, although some tongues of this Order have ceased their action. Even today, it is represented in Malta by nine pillars or Order leaders under different names, who with their Grand Master make ten, and, in the General Chapters, by 27 representatives, who with the same Grand Master make 28, which comes down to the same; this conformity is interesting, and perhaps we might manage to find some even more interesting causes for it in the old archives of the Order. I know several of its members who are convinced of this. [33]

These interesting words were spoken at a small gathering before at least two other Knights of Malta: the Brothers (in Masonry) *Eques a Capite Galeato* (Chefdebien) and *ab Aquila Fulgente* (Kolowrat). Silence equals consent! The Maltese were perhaps also looking for an ideal (fantasy) chivalry in the High Degrees of Masonry: one which they could not find in the everyday life of the Order.[33]

Whatever the private reasons (social or "esoteric") which brought them to the Lodge, the knights subsequently practiced Masonry across Europe. Whether their works were in the spirit of Diderot's Encyclopedia or whether they heralded a romantic quest, for the Knights of Malta, membership of a Lodge was above all a way of being in their century, a means of connection to the present of their time. However, by partaking in this new sociability, which was the more or less legitimate offspring of Enlightenment thinkers, they in fact participated in a great change in minds and in a revolution "which everything seemed to portend, yet which nobody saw coming,"[35] according to the pertinent observation of Brother de Ségur.

It is necessary to avoid any anachronism. Although many eighteenth-century Lodges were sensitive to new ideas, they cannot under any circumstances be considered as a whole to have been a militant wing of the *philosophical party*. The fact that many Knights of Malta were Masons should not be interpreted as a conversion of Voltaire's and

[33] Translated from: Grand Prieuré des Gaules, Les Cahiers verts, "Préavis du Fr. ab Eremo, Gr. Grand Prieuré des Gaules, Les Cahiers verts,Chancelier de la IIe [province …] sur la question concernant la légitimité de la filiation de l'O. du T. avec notre système actuel […]," *Les Convents du Régime Ecossais Rectifié*, special edition, 53–54.

[34] Pierre Mollier, *La Chevalerie maçonnique: imaginaire chevaleresque, légende templière et Franc-maçonnerie au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Dervy, 2005).

[35] *Mémoires du Comte de Ségur*, Tome II, 95. The Count of Ségur was not Maltese, but he left an excellent description of his reception into the *Ordre de Saint Lazare*, comparing this venerable ceremony and the evolution of the century.

Diderot's ideas. One current of Masonry, well-represented in Malta, arises more from a pre-romantic sensibility, or even from what could be called the "anti-Enlightenment thinkers." Masonic initiation was in this case probably experienced as a way of reconnecting with the true knightly essence of the Order. From the 1790s, the strong presence of Masonry at the highest level of Saint John of Jerusalem provoked comments about a "Masonic conspiracy" which supposedly influenced the leaders of the Order and finally led to the fall of Malta. This theory attributes to it a unity of thought and action that it never possessed and still does not possess. Thus, two of the most significant Mason-Knights, Loras and Dolomieu, fought so bitterly that if Masonry did in a way weaken the Order, it was more by internal disputes than by any mythical conspiracy! However, the Maltese Lodge, with its branches in the main European capitals, brought together knights who defended fairly similar positions within Saint John of Jerusalem. Consequently, it seems that Masonry did constitute a sort of "party" with Loras and Kolowrat as its figureheads. This party had a following in de Rohan's Princedom and attempted to play a part after 1797. For a while, in fact, "*the bailiff de Loras, having subjugated the Grand Master, controlled [...] the policy of Malta*."[36] Thus the "Lodge of the knights" probably had an influence, but its real nature and extent are difficult to judge in the power balances among which Malta tried to defend its position in the Mediterranean setting.

[36] Translated from Alain Blondy, L'*Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle*, 258–259.