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The Egyptian Influence on Nineteenth-Century Freemasonry

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Few if any organizations have been more adept at reconstruction in the face of adversity, and at creating another world and a magical empire, as have the Freemasons, -- which the fanciful use of Egyptian motifs in the nineteenth century clearly illustrates.¹ (*Acetate of With the Craft, Age, and Les Demophiles.*) While a number of recent studies call attention to the historical contributions of fraternal orders in the United States, including the Pythians, Odd Fellows, Woodsmen, and Red Men, movements whose temples in the nineteenth century were found on every Main Street, it is Masonry which was the pre-eminent secret society of the nineteenth century and deserves the most attention.²

At the start of the nineteenth century, most Masonic lodges were relatively simple affairs, both in architecture and in ritual.³ It might be argued that, until that time, lodges had been more concerned with the world of ideas rather than of

ceremony. Authorities such as Margaret Jacob in studying their influence have claimed that the Masonic lodges of that earlier seventeenth and eighteenth century period were the progenitors of civil society despite their secrecy and their gender and social bias. (*Acetate of early lodge.*)

However, the nineteenth century saw the creation of an enormous number of additional Masonic degrees and organizations promising to confer more exalted honors and communicate ever more esoteric secrets, and to accomplish this the Masons increasingly turned to Egypt for a *leitmotif*, both for their dramas and for their buildings.⁴ (*Acetate, Origen Universal Egipcio.*) While the inspiration for this has been credited to the presence of Masons on the Egyptian campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte and the discovery of the Rosetta Stone,⁵ as well as to the influence of Judaism -- witness the synagogue designed by the Mason William Strickland for Philadelphia in 1825⁶ -- it also is sometimes attributed to the enthusiasm aroused by the creation early in the century of two new Masonic organizations, the Rite of Mizraim (Mizraim simply being the plural of Egyptian) and the Rite of Memphis.⁷ (*Acetates of Memphis and Mizraim.*) Mizraim was organized in Milan in 1805 and moved to Paris by 1812. It has ninety degrees, and although claiming to perpetuate the lost tradition of Egyptian hermetics is a confusing collection of rituals partly based on the kabalah and alchemy as well as the so-called Scottish Rite.⁸

Mizraim and Memphis were merged in Italy in 1881 by the famous Italian patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi, but are now practiced both by separate and unified organizations.⁹ (*Acetates of Misraim and of Memphis.*) In England, John Yarker (1833-1913), who served Garibaldi as the grand chancellor in his confederation of Masonic degrees, introduced or re-introduced the Rite of Mizraim as well as other degrees with Egyptian themes, like Garibaldi attempting to combine Mizraim with Memphis.¹⁰

Other sources include Mozart's *Magic Flute* (1791)¹¹ which in the production by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in Berlin in 1815 was given a fully Egyptian staging that would influence subsequent productions.¹² One could go further back in history and assert that the interest in Egypt was prompted by Biblical studies or by the classical tradition and by claims that Greece and Rome were primarily indebted to Egypt.¹³ Or, of course, one could move forward in time to Verdi's *Aida* at the dedication of the Cairo opera house in 1871. As for the motivation, contributing was undoubtedly the fact that virtually all human societies, at all times have turned to the past to authenticate the present."¹⁴

However, putting that debate to one side, in the case of the United States, regardless of possible antecedents, the Egyptian influence on nineteenth century Freemasonry was strongest after the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820s and 1830s waned, and the order began to reconstruct itself.¹⁵ This is at variance with the British experience, where a case can be made that the so-called Egyptian Revival dates to the 1790s and where there was no comparable anti-Masonic activity.¹⁶ Evidences of the a general Egyptian enthusiasm are fairly common throughout the British Empire. (*Acetate of University of Cape Town.*) There are some good examples in the United States as well, notably the Egyptian building of Virginia Commonwealth University (*Acetate*) dating from 1845.

When it comes to the specific case of Freemasonry, the increased American involvement in fraternal orders after the hysteria of anti-Masonry declined (*Acetate of Foresters.*) not only involved membership growth but a vast expansion of the ritual activities and, with that, an increased interest in the architecture of the lodge buildings. the results were often extraordinary. One architectural historian

wrote, (*Acetate, the Scarab.*) trying to make sense of the eclectic Silvergate Masonic temple in San Diego: Traditionally, the Masons have used Egyptian designs in their rituals and buildings. The architects probably drew on this heritage in designing the interior of the building. Inside the Temple are examples of Egyptian Revival design on light fixtures, curtain

Rich and Merchant, Roanoke 4

rods and ceiling stencils. in addition to these occasional designs in the smaller rooms, the large Lodge Room on the third floor is completely Egyptian Revival. it is an impressive, windowless room designed to look like an Egyptian throne room. Exotic designs include stencils of the scarab beetle on light fixtures around th walls; stenciled wooden beams across the ceiling; Egyptian columns flanking a raised, stage area at each end of the room; and three wooden "throne" chairs on each of these stages, each chair having Egyptian designs carved on its back. huge, circular light fixtures hang from the ceiling on long pillars which term innate at the ceiling in a lotus/papyrus design, like the tops of columns.¹⁷

These buildings played an important role in the community, often doubling as theatres and even schools and post offices, and it is fair to note that Masonic lodges have been a neglected factor in considering the nineteenth century creation of "public space". In England, Masonic temples at Boston, Warwick, and Edinburgh survive as testimony to the Egyptian enthusiasm,¹⁸ while in the United States there are far more examples. (*Acetates of Egyptian Revival lodge buildings. Washington Naval Lodge. Boston, England, lodge.*)

As for the esoteric ceremonies, they became for a time the tribal rites of American and other societies, with just as much of an anthropological flavor as the activities of tribes in New Guinea. the humor of the era shows just how much the lodge permeated the popular culture. (*Acetates of humorous postcards.*)

This popularity was partly because in nineteenth-century America, fraternalism was a way by which men escaped from the *profanum vulgus*: once the lodge door was guarded, another world opened. This was a serious world. There is considerable difference in sophistication between the ritualistic activities of Victorian lodges and Hollywood depictions of fraternity initiations. The lodge in the nineteenth century was not a place for comic hijinks, but for the enactment of serious dramas teaching moral precepts.

Such activities required inspiration and Egypt provided it, although sometimes by default since, employing Occam's razor, the extensive Masonic use of Egyptian themes can be attributed simply to the ready availability of Egyptian art, which was far easier to emulate given the numerous available books and

engravings than Assyrian or Persian designs. Egypt was one of the accounts from which artists and architects, whether Masons or not, could take ideas. (*Acetate of The Hall of the Ancients.*) Even degrees which historically had nothing to do with Egypt were costumed with Egyptian dress and staged in Egyptian settings.¹⁹ (*Acetates of art used for Scottish Rite degrees.*) The Egyptian stagings have survived despite their historical inappropriateness and painted backdrops with Egyptian designs are still used by Masonic temples in supreme disregard for the historical content of the degrees. (*Pass around illustrations.*) The Masons were to make continued use of the Egyptian theme in the twentieth century. The George Washington Masonic National Memorial which dominates Alexandria, Virginia, is a replication of the Pharos Lighthouse at Alexandria. The atrium of the Scottish Rite's monumental House of the Temple on 17th Street in Washington is ponderously, but impressively, Egyptian.

The Egyptian influence was not confined to decoration and some degrees were through-and-through Egyptian in theme, depending on Egypt for their story line. For example, the thirty-first degree of the Scottish Rite in the version produced by the great ritualist Albert Pike was based on the Book of the Dead and includes speeches by the Soul of Cheres, son of Suphis, and references to the murder of Osiris and his resurrection.²⁰ (*Acetates of the 31st degree.*)

The Scottish Rite, as the century went on, became one of the most popular Masonic degree systems and was established in many countries (*Acetate, Scottish Rite in Roanoke*), including

Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, drawing a scathing commentary:

...this Scottish Rite had its origin in the brains and breasts of an apostate Presbyterian, renegade tyrants, Jews who retained nothing of Judaism but its hatred of Christ, associated with Jesuits, conspiring against the liberties of Europe, and for the overthrow of the Government of France! And its first home in this country was the city of Nullification, Secession, and Rebellion; in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1801, where thirteen Jews and three Protestants: Mitchall, Dalcho and Provost, who had received it from France, falsely pretended to found it on constitutions given by Frederick the Great. If Satan had picked the time, the inventors, and home of this Rite he would have doubtless chosen the same.²¹

Rich and Merchant, Roanoke 6

Despite such criticism, the numbers of Masons in the United States increased remarkably in the last half of the century.

A study shows that in Wisconsin the per cent of population who were Masons was as follows:

1850 .28%

1860 .48%

1870 .87%

1880 .85%

1890 .82%²²

This growth was in the face of opposition as the religious universalism of the Masons was taken seriously by orthodox Christian critics, with some justice since the suggestion has been repeatedly that Masonry offered a more satisfactory spiritual experience for some men than did conventional religion, and enabled them to be religious while asserting their masculinity. This is an argument of Professor Mark C. Carnes of Columbia University in his book *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*:

These ideas and emotions could not be stated publicly. If men had acknowledged that the orders were an alternative form of religion, of family, and of social organization, the forces that had crushed Masonry in the 1820s [the Anti-Masonic hysteria in the United States] might have again besieged the fraternal movement.²³

Not only lodge buildings and ceremonies, with their papyrus stalks, cobra heads, lotus flowers and scarab beetles, testified to Masonic interest in Egypt. Wonderful costumes were created. (*Acetates of costumes.*) And a widespread nineteenth century phenomenon was the erection of obelisks with accompanying Masonic observances, of which the Washington Monument, whose interior displays dozens of Masonic memorial stones, is the prime example.²⁴ (*Acetate of Washington Monument.*)

While existing Masonic institutions fell under the Egyptian influence, quite apart from the evidence of Egypt on the mainstream Masonic buildings and rituals ("mainstream" would include the blue lodges giving the first degrees and the

Scottish and York Rites²⁵) is its significance in the creation of auxiliary organizations that were completely Middle Eastern in their flavor. A major example is the Mystic Shrine, or more properly, the *Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine*, an autonomous organization which recruited from those who have climbed the Masonic ladder and become either Knights Templar or thirty-second degree Scottish Rite Masons. (*Acetates of Shrine, Isis, Ancient Egyptian Order.*) It is probably best known today to the public for its charities such as hospitals for crippled children and centers for severe burn victims, and for sponsorship of events such as the East-West Shrine football bowl and circuses.

Like many Masonic organizations, the Shrine has a legendary past which historians would challenge, claiming that it originated in 656 AD somewhere in the Middle East. Its buildings are called *mosques* and its board of officers is known as a *divan*, with the presiding officer termed the *potentate*. The uniform is modeled after the one used by Zouaves in the French Empire and the red fez is its famous distinctive headdress. The fez became such a status symbol that it was borrowed by many other Masonic groups. Possibly the most remarkably eclectic use of it is by some Masonic Knight Templars, who sport the fez adorned with the Christian crusading cross! (*Acetate of Knights Templar Fez.*)

A competitive group, called the *Mystic Order Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm*, or the Grotto, (*Acetate of Grotto.*) got its start by admitting Masons who have only the first three degrees and was called the poor man's Shrine because members did not have to pay out to take additional degrees as the Nobles must before they can join the Shrine. The Grotto claims to base its ritual on the works of Hakem ben Haschem, the great Al Mokanna or Veiled Prophet.²⁶

There is a separate shrine organization of late nineteenth century origin for blacks, calling itself the Ancient Egyptian Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine.²⁷ (*Acetate of Black Past Imperial Potentates.*) For women, there are groups such as

the Ladies Oriental Shrine, which only admits female relatives of Shriners, and the Ancient Egyptian Order of Princesses of Sharemkhu, which differs from the Ladies Oriental Shrine in requiring a very close relationship such as that of wife or sister. The Grotto has a women's group called the Daughters of Mokanna. The black Shrine has a women's group called the Daughters of Isis.

All of these organizations go to great lengths to project an image of age. Meeting rooms are often based on notions of what a Pharonic temple looks like, although they often are eclectic and blend Persia, Egyptian, Islamic and Coney Island themes. Undoubtedly some, though not all, of the members think they are participating in very ancient ceremonies.

In actual fact the Shrine appears to have been invented by a medical doctor, Walter Millard Fleming. Dr. Fleming was active in Freemasonry in New York City in the 1870s. He belonged to both the Scottish and York rites of Masonry. In 1867 a friend of Dr. Fleming, William J. Florence, returned from a trip to Middle East full of enthusiasm for Islamic architecture and costumes. Florence was an actor and his real name was William Jermyn Conlin. One story about his part in the beginning of the Shrine holds that he actually received the Shrine ritual from another Mason, Charles T. McClenachan, before he went on his travels.²⁸

In any event, the passion for Orientalism proved contagious and along with McClenachan, Fleming and Florence devised a ritual which would be given only to Masons who had climbed the York or Scottish Rite ladders.²⁹ The Odd Fellows, Pythians and other groups responded with additional orders with an Egyptian and general Middle Eastern theme. The Shrine eventually established itself in nearly 200 cities in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Panama.

Little of this had any real connection with Egypt. *(Acetate, Freemasonry in Egypt and Cartoon of Secret Egyptian tomb painting.)* Nevertheless, Masonry did attempt to grow in the Arab world and during the last half of the nineteenth century, was politically

significant in the Ottoman Empire.³⁰ Arab tradition was embraced in the search for ritualistic legitimacy: a Masonic authority asserted that the *koreish* or guardians of the sacred kaaba in Mecca were members!!³¹ One might think that the Islamic world would react with pleasure to the erection of Arabic-style buildings and the desire of leading Americans to dress up as Middle Easterners. That was not the case. The organization in the Middle East encountered criticism and disapproval.³² The treatment the Masons have received from some Arabs and Muslims has been harsh to the point of persecution .³³

Ultimately then the influence the order had with the Arabs is problematical: one Victorian-era member waylaid in the desert was spared by a bedouin about to cut off his finger to acquire his Masonic ring. Asked if he had given the great high-sign, he recounted: "I did not. The fellow may have been a Mason — there are lodges in Damascus, Aleppo and Baghdad — but he was no brother of mine, for though he left me my ring, he took my watch, my money, my letter of credit and my baggage."³⁴ Considering the way in which Masonry used Islamic motifs in a secular way, the aggrieved traveler was probably lucky to escape with his life. That the biggest mosque in town may have a bar and has a membership which includes Catholics, Presbyterians, Jews, and Episcopalians is one of the ironies of cultural history.

It proved impossible to completely Egyptize the Masonic movement. The spiritual teachings that could be extracted from Egypt were less than could be found elsewhere; ultimately Grecian urns are superior to mummies. The lodges could use Egyptian decors for their meeting rooms but it takes more than crocodiles, sphinxes and winged discs to make something Egyptian. The Egyptian revival as far as the Masons were concerned was part of a general stew that they concocted of orientalism and exoticism, of stucco fantasies with limited historical authenticity. Freemasonry is supremely eclectic. (*Acetate of mythical animals.*)

Steven Bullock remarks: "Divergent understanding of Masonry may be inevitable. Brothers adapted the fraternity to an extraordinary range of cultural and geographical settings...Masonry's elements of mystery helped lead the Enlightenment into romanticism. A broad and nuanced view...may not be possible in the foreseeable future. "³⁵

That is undoubtedly true, but it is also true that to understand the nineteenth century one must understand the secret orders which were so much a part of it. We live in a less florid time (*Acetate of Roanoke Scottish Rite Temple.*) and perhaps we are the poorer for it.

¹ "The importance of Freemasonry in the history of the Egyptian Revival is considerable: the idea of Egypt as the source of all knowledge of architecture and of all wisdom as enshrined in the Hermetic Mysteries was potent. The Craft was traced to Egypt, and the Israelites were supposed to have learned the skills of architecture from the Egyptians." James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival: a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1994, 134.

² For a discussion of recent scholarship on the origins of Freemasonry see Steven C. Bullock, "Initiating the Enlightenment?: Recent Scholarship on European Freemasonry", *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol.20 No.1, 1996, 80-92 available at http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/eighteenth-century_life/20.1er_stevenson.html

³ As in all searching for the genealogy of ideas, there are prior examples of the use of Egyptian themes. See *e.g.* Jean-Marcel Humbert, *L'Egypte a Paris*, Action Artistique de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 1996, 62. See also Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Witchcraft", Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 199, 3-13.

⁴ For the distinctions between *Egyptian revival*, *Egyptomania*, *Agyptenrezepion*, *Agyptosophie*, *Egyptophilia*, *Egyptianing* see Izak Carnelius, "Egyptianising

Motifs in South African Architecture and Literature", at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/e...ferences/enco/Sunday/Cornelius.htm>

⁵ . Allegedly, "Most of the Mission to Egypt which had accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte were Masons of old initiatic Rites: the Philalets, African Architects, Hermetic Rite, the Philaethes, the Primitive Rite, not omitting for anything the Grand Orient of France." "The Rite of Memphis" at <http://users.londonweb.net/ibcsystems/ritemem.htm>

⁶ William L. Fox, "How the Sphinx Came to Washington", at <http://www.srmason-sj.org/council/temple/Templertour/sphinxhist.html>

⁷ Of course, as with other Masonic bodies, Mizraim and Memphis both would claim far earlier origins, a "sales pitch" which was behind the idea of adopting historical themes. Fraternal orders embrace antiquity as it confers legitimacy and prestige, and there are few that do not put forward the idea of ancient antecedents.

⁸ "Oriental Rite of Mizraim", <http://www.geocities...Athens/Acropolis/1896/mizhist.html>

⁹ "Acting clandestinely for eighteen years, restored in 1838, re-dissolved in 1841, coming out once more from obscurity in 1848, Mizraim set out towards fusion with the Rite of Memphis in 1881, a fusion under the impulse of Giuseppe Garibaldi." "The Rite of Mizraim", <http://users.londonweb.net/ibcsystems/ritofmiz.htm>

¹⁰ "John Yarker" at <http://users.londonweb.net/ibcsystems/yarker.htm>

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¹² Bullock, *op.cit.* Richard G. Carrott, *The Egyptian Revival: its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning, 1808-1858*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978, 109. James Stevens Curl, *A Celebration of Death*, B.T.Batsford, London, 2nd ed., 193, 194.

¹³ Patrick Conner ed., *The Inspiration of Egypt: Its influence on British Artists, Travellers and Designers, 1700-1900*, Brighton Borough Council (England), 1983, 1-3, 117.

¹⁴ Hutton, *op.cit.*, 9.

¹⁵ See Carrott, *op.cit.*, 109-110. Egyptian motifs also begin to appear in college fraternal architecture and ritual of the period -- The 1856 Skull & Bones building at Yale, and subsequently Sphinx at Dartmouth, Phi Gamma Delta at Yale. "Halls, Tombs and Houses: Student Society Architecture at Dartmouth" at <http://meachams...ott/darch/halls/hallscontents5.html>

¹⁶ Conner, 38.

¹⁷ Helen Mc Cormick Hobbs-Halmay, "The Development of Egyptian Revival Architecture in San Diego County", *The Journal of San Diego History*, Spring 1992, Vol.38 No.2, at <http://www.sandliegohistory.org/journal/92spring/revival.htm>
Silvergate was actually built in 1931, an example of how the fascination of the Masons with the Egyptian style continued.

¹⁸ Conner, 95-96.

¹⁹ See Henry C. Clausen, *Clausen's Commentaries on Morals and Dogma*, The Supreme Council, 33^o, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A., 2nd ed., 1983, 228-249.

²⁰ Clausen, 195-201.

²¹ . J.Blanchard, *Scotch Rite Masonry Illustrated*, Vol. I, Charles T. Powner, Chicago, reprinted. 1979, 29.

²² Compiled by Rick Gustafson, email message on 30 March 1998, philalethes@prx.net

²³ . Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989, 149-150.

²⁴ Peggy McDowell and Richard E. Meyer, *The Revival Styles in American Memorial Art*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green (Ohio), 1994, 133-144.

²⁵ This influence extended to scholarship, where unsubstantiated claims were made as to the Egyptian origins of the ritual., e.g. Manly P. Hall, *Freemasonry of the Ancient Egyptians*, The Philosophers Press, Los Angeles, 1937, 80.

²⁶ . Henry Wilson Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., Macoy Publishing, Richmond (Virginia), 1996, 196.

²⁷ . Coil, 204.

²⁸ . Coil, 253.

²⁹ . Coil, 252-253.

³⁰ . See Jacques Berque, *Egypt: Imperialism and Revolution*, Faber & Faber, 1972, 215, 255. Also Alexander Scholah, *Egypt for the Egyptians! The Socio-political Crisis in Egypt, 1878-1882*, Ithaca Press, 1981, 106-07, 326. Scholah identifies the British Vice Consul in Cairo in 1879, Rafael Borg, as active in Masonic activities. *Ibid.*

³¹ . John Yarker, "Arab Masonry", AQC, Vol.19, 1906, 243. See also Haskett Smith, "The Druses of Syria and Their Relation to Freemasonry", AQC, Vol.IV, 1891, 7-19. A compulsive need to have the Arabs endorse the antiquity of Freemasonry runs through such articles.

³² . The Saudi Gazette in Janaury 1995 carried an following anonymous article under the title "The Curse of Freemasonry" from which the following is excerpted: "Not enough has been written about Freemasonry. But one such book is Freemasonry, by Muhammad Safwat al Saqqa Amini and Sa'di Abu Habib. In this book is contained the decision of the Islamic Jurisprudence College, which we reproduce hereunder. "The College of Islamic Jurisprudence, in its session convened at Makkah on 15th July 1978, examined the issue of Freemasonry, of those affiliated with it and the legal Islamic judgment on it, after adequate study of this dangerous organization, and the body of literature on it, inclusive of the College's own published documents, books, and newspaper and journal articles.,,It has become evident to the College of Islamic Jurisprudence the strong relation of Freemasonry to world Zionist Jewry. Thus it has been able to dominate many officials in the Arab countries concerning the question of Palestine, and to interfere in the Palestine question on behalf of the Jews and world Zionism. Therefore, and for the detailed data on Freemasonry's activity, its considerable danger, its wicked dressing and its cunning aims, the College of Islamic Jurisprudence considers Freemasonry one of the most dangerously destructive organizations to Islam and to Muslims. Whoever would associate himself with it while in knowledge of its true nature and aims, would be a non believer in Islam and uncounted among its adherents."

³³ . "As at 1978, the Grand Lodge of Iran possessed forty three Lodges, and 1,035 members. This year was the last time that the Craft in Iran was heard of in the outside Masonic world. The Islamic Revolution in Iran saw Freemasonry swept away rapidly, and it would appear that a number of Masons suffered execution at

its hands. Whether these deaths were occasioned for political or anti-Masonic reasons will probably never be known, and the fate of many Iranian Masons may equally remain a mystery. One thing is certain, the Craft in Iran is destroyed." Little, 4.

³⁴ . E.Alexander Powell, *The Last Home of Mystery*, John Long, 1929, 302.

³⁵ Bullock, *op.cit.*