

Introduction

Truth and authenticity must always, and in the first place, be sought; nothing must be accepted as historical which has not the internal and external evidences of historical verity, and in treating the legends of Masonry - of almost every one of which it may be said, "Se non vero, è ben trovato" - if it is not true, it is well invented - we are not to reject them as altogether fabulous, but as having some hidden and occult meaning, which, as in the case of all other symbols, we must diligently seek to discover. But if it be found that the legend has no symbolic significance, but is simply the distortion of a historical fact, we must carefully eliminate the fabulous increment, and leave the body of truth to which it had been added, to have its just value.

Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry*, 8

As is well known, modern Freemasonry was officially founded in London in 1717, and from there it rapidly spread throughout the continent, adapting to various contexts with surprising speed. The original symbolic and esoteric content underwent developments and evolutions - from British theism to adogmatic French Masonry, from the Scottish rite to the most spurious Egyptian ones - but the many expressions of Freemasonry preserved specific features going back to the first regulatory document, *Anderson's Constitutions* of 1723, which made it a universal phenomenon: its ideally non-political nature, its ecumenical spirit that allowed the worshipper of any religion to join, the initiatory nature defined by secret, aimed at perfecting both the spiritual and the earthly nature of man through a commitment of a metaphysical but also worldly order, to improve society.

Quite clearly, this is a simplification of a complex phenomenon, which has been the subject of many studies focused on its historical

manifestations and influences in social and cultural contexts, but it has received less attention in terms of its esoteric principles, especially in relation to one of the main founding archetypes of Freemasonry: the Orient, and in that mythological context, Egypt.

References to the Orient already appear in the first regulatory document of Masonry, *Anderson's Constitutions* of 1723, then become structural in certain later rites, like Misraïm and Memphis. No doubt exists concerning the substantially symbolic and metaphorical nature of Oriental references in masonic mythopoiesis and in certain rites that define the whole initiatory journey of the mason: no serious specialist could suppose masonic rituals actually derived from ancient Egyptian cults or other traditions of the Levant, and even masonic historians rule out any direct derivation, even for rites that specifically refer to Egypt.¹ However, the symbolic and esoteric value of the 'Oriental' myth grafted onto the initiatory path of the freemason seems to us to be less coincidental than it appears to other scholars², and I think it should not be neglected. In fact, it is significant from two points of view: the supposed Oriental derivation of Masonry places a part of its actual doctrinal sources on a metaphorical level; on the other hand, it confers legitimacy to a meeting between Oriental and European esotericisms.

In order to unravel the complex web mixing myth with history, re-covering the possible thread with which masons so insistently tie together Masonry and Oriental esotericism, in this essay I will investigate several, apparently diverse aspects, which are actually complementary to and largely convergent with each other.

First of all, I will give an account of the myth of the Orient (and especially the myth of Egypt) within masonic doctrines, defining its value. Then I will follow the itinerary of Hermetic doctrines of various origin within European civilisation, highlighting their role in defining the currents of thought that, from the Renaissance on, nourished esoteric culture in the context of Christianity and finally converged in Freemasonry. Then, I will trace the Oriental and Egyptian myth in speculative Freemasonry, following its imaginary world, deviations and forgeries, especially when Egyptosophy gave way to Egyptomania, after Napoleon's campaign.

I will move on to trace the evolution of Hermetic thinking in the Islamic context and its influence on the construction of local esoter-

1 For example, Gastone Ventura, who in the seventies was Sovereign Grand Hierophant General and Sovereign Grand Master of the Ancient and Primitive Oriental Order of Misraïm and Memphis, when telling the history of the Memphis order, attributes no value to the mythology handed down by its founder, Gabriel Marconis, who set the precursors of the Order in Pharaonic Egypt. Ventura wrote: "The claim of the creator of the Rite, made to confer prestige on it with a patina of presumed antiquity, is baseless". Ventura, *I riti massonici*, 60. See also *Franc-Maçonnerie et Egypte*, 3-6.

2 Porset, *Le voile de Saïs*, 33 ff.; Révauger, *Franc-maçonnerie et orientalisme*, 22.

ic dimensions, highlighting the various sources of Sufism. I will focus on the esoteric experiences of the Ottoman civilisation: from Egypt to Anatolia, from the fifteenth century to the colonial era, Istanbul left much room in its empire for the most spurious manifestations of Islamic spirituality, certainly linked to orthopraxis but often penetrated by much more ancient and fundamentally heterodox components.

Next, I will deal with convergences and contaminations, true or presumed, in pre-modern times, pointing out the distance between superficial and substantial affinities, identifying some actual moments of contact through the centuries, putting aside any will-o'-the-wisp hypothesis of direct seeding.

The myth will in fact become even more significant when the Royal Art spreads in the very Levant of which it claimed to be the heir, in the eighteenth and even more in the nineteenth century. Especially in an Ottoman context, in Anatolia, in the area of Syria and Lebanon and in Egypt, stories of convergence between Oriental and European esotericisms were told, which would forge the masonic spirit, marking new founding traditions especially in the wake of Egyptomania - above all in order to provide the foundation of spurious masonic orders such as the Rite of Memphis.

In the context of the political, human, but also spiritual encounter that the European thrust towards the southern shores of the Mediterranean implied in the imperialist age, real convergences between Western and Eastern esoteric orders took shape when Muslims belonging to Sufi organisms became masons. Anatolia saw a particularly fertile convergence between Freemasonry and Bektashiyya. As Thierry Zarcone clearly pointed out in his studies, the Bektashi dervishes saw lodges as similar orders, with teachings perfectly compatible with their own. This was not the only case: three key individuals, 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'irī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Rizā Tevfik - who from being Sufis became masons - show how complex the meeting between European and Islamic esoteric thinking could be; but they also show how the spiritual dimension could overlap with political involvement and how the social and political context could affect the motivation, purpose and outcome of certain convergences.

Finally, I discuss the encounter between Masonry and Islam in literary currents which, from the early nineteenth century to the present day, have built unlikely hypotheses on supposed Oriental and Western derivations, based on symmetries of a formal substance: some true, most unreliable, some entirely made up. This phenomenon led to a bulky production generally inspired by Theosophical and neospiritualist currents, which as a sort of grey propaganda fed confusion and mystification, actually masking traces of more authentic contaminations.

However, on another front, in the twentieth century, both the passage of European intellectuals from Masonry to Sufism and academ-

ic research on esoteric dimensions and metaphysical thinking in the Islamic context would contribute to restoring the sources and meanings of initiatory paths in the Levant, affording recognition to the real elements of convergence with Western esoteric history, on the part of the Europeans as well.