

# PHILOSOPHICAL SCOTTISH RITE

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The Philosophical Scottish Rite is a masonic rite that emerged in France in the late 18th century. It is considered more philosophical and spiritual compared to other rites in Freemasonry, with a focus on inner wisdom and self-improvement. The rite consists of 33 degrees, each with its own teachings and symbolism relating to virtues, ethics, metaphysics, and esoteric traditions.

In this research paper, I will provide a historical overview of the Philosophical Scottish Rite, analyzing its origins, development, degrees and rituals, as well as its teachings and influences. The paper will examine the rite's relationship to earlier masonic systems, its spread to other countries, and its current status. Key philosophical elements of the rite will also be discussed. Extensive references and citations will be provided throughout.

## **Origins of the Philosophical Scottish Rite**

The Philosophical Scottish Rite has its origins in 18th century French Freemasonry. In the 1750s, a body known as the Chapter of Clermont began conferring advanced degrees beyond the standard three degrees of Craft Masonry. By 1761, the chapter was granting a system of 25 degrees known as the Rite of Perfection or Rite of Heredom [1].

The Rite of Perfection drew heavily on traditions of Scottish Masonry, incorporating elements such as the Knights Templar mythos. It also organized its degrees into a coherent progression focused on wisdom and self-improvement. This new masonic system proved popular, spreading to French colonies in the Americas and throughout Europe in the 1760s and 1770s [2].

In 1781, the prominent French Mason Jean-Baptiste Willermoz joined forces with other masonic leaders to add an additional eight degrees to the Rite of Perfection, forming the Philosophical Scottish Rite. Willermoz was strongly influenced by Christian mysticism, alchemy, and Hermeticism [3]. His goal was to infuse a more spiritual and enlightened character into the rite compared to earlier 18th century systems which focused on chivalric and feudal themes [4].

The name "Scottish" stems from the new rite's incorporation of supposed ancient Scottish masonic traditions. "Philosophical" reflects its more spiritual focus compared to previous rites. The 33 degrees of the rite were organized into four subgroups: 1) Lodge Degrees (1st-

3rd); 2) Chapter Degrees (4th–18th); 3) Council Degrees (19th–30th); and 4) Consistory Degrees (31st–33rd) [1]. This structure remains today.

### **Degrees and Symbolism of the Philosophical Scottish Rite**

The Philosophical Scottish Rite utilizes an elaborate system of symbolism and mythology across its 33 degrees to communicate esoteric teachings and moral lessons.

The Lodge degrees (1°–3°) correspond to the standard Craft Masonry degrees focused on basic initiatic themes like death, rebirth, and brotherhood. The Chapter degrees (4°–18°) adopt legends and virtues associated with orders like Knights Templar to explore spiritual enlightenment and chivalry [3]. For example, the 13° teaches justice through the medieval Christian legend of the martyr Jacques de Molay.

The Council degrees (19°–30°) weave ancient Middle Eastern, Greek, and Kabbalistic myths into allegories about human nature and ethics. The 30° features the Egyptian myth of Osiris, Isis and Typhon to convey lessons about morality and immortality [3].

Finally, the Consistory degrees (31°–33°) synthesize these myths into coherent philosophical statements about faith, reason, and transcendent unity. The capstone 33° centers on advocacy of moral philosophy and religious tolerance [5].

Running throughout the rite are recurring symbols like the Tetragrammaton, the hypotenuse, the double-headed eagle, and the cubical stone to represent themes like God, human duality, elevated perspective, and inner truth [4]. The layered system of degrees aims to stimulate progressive moral development in individuals.

### **Jean-Baptiste Willermoz and His Influences**

Jean-Baptiste Willermoz (1730–1824) was the pivotal figure in reforming the Rite of Perfection into the spiritualized system of the Philosophical Scottish Rite. He was strongly influenced by Christian mysticism, the Enlightenment, and esoteric philosophies popular in 18th century European Masonry [4].

As a youth, Willermoz was introduced to mystical and pietistic currents of Christianity aimed at direct inward knowledge of the Divine. He later became dedicated to Martinism, a mystical Christian philosophy founded by Martinez de Pasqually focused on meditative practices and unlocking human psychic powers and divine wisdom [3]. Willermoz established a Masonic lodge dedicated to integrating Martinism with Craft Masonry.

Willermoz was also influenced by alchemy and Hermeticism, incorporating alchemical symbolism into the Philosophical Scottish Rite. The rite's reference to a "Philosopher's Stone" represents the alchemical pursuit of spiritual purification and inner development [6].

Willermoz helped spread 18th century interests in occult philosophies and esoteric explorations of the soul within Freemasonry.

Through his synthesis of Masonry, Christian mysticism, Hermeticism, and alchemy, Willermoz sought to elevate Freemasonry beyond mere social club into a transformative philosophical system focused on fostering morality and self-improvement through allegory and myth [3]. This synergistic fusion left a lasting imprint on the Distinctive character and ethos of the Philosophical Scottish Rite.

### **Spread of the Rite to Other Countries**

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Philosophical Scottish Rite spread beyond France to the rest of Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world. This diffusion helped establish the rite as an international force in Freemasonry.

In Germany, Friedrich Ludwig Schröder played a key role in disseminating the rite, establishing a Scottish Lodge in Hamburg in 1774 that conferred updated versions of the advanced degrees [1]. The rite also spread through Prussia and the rest of Germany throughout the early 1800s, often adapted to local tastes.

The French West Indies served as an early hub for the spread of the Philosophical Scottish Rite to the Western hemisphere. In 1802, a Supreme Council for the Americas was founded in Charleston, South Carolina, introducing the rite across much of the United States over subsequent decades [2]. The rite also proliferated in parts of South America and Canada.

By the late 19th century, Supreme Councils administering the Philosophical Scottish Rite had been established in countries like England, Spain, Turkey, and Egypt, cementing the rite's reputation as an international order [2]. This worldwide spread was critical to the endurance and continued popularity of Willermoz's original vision.

### **The Rite in Continental Europe vs. the Anglo-Saxon World**

The Philosophical Scottish Rite assumed different forms in Continental Europe compared to the Anglo-Saxon world as it spread internationally. These distinctions reflect contrasting sensibilities between continental and Anglo-Saxon variants of Freemasonry.

In nations like France and Germany, the rite has remained largely true to Willermoz's original ethos, retaining a focus on spiritual introspection, inner wisdom, and intellectual development. Degrees in Continental jurisdictions emphasize the mystical, chivalric, and philosophical elements of the system [7].

In Anglo-Saxon countries like Britain, Canada, and the United States, the rite evolved in a somewhat more secular direction. The degrees were simplified and streamlined, often

downplaying dense symbolism and metaphysical speculations in favor of basic moral lessons and philanthropic activities. Esoteric themes gave way to civic virtues and community service [7].

These divergences reflect broader differences between Continental and Anglo-Saxon Masonry, with the former more metaphysical and initiatic in orientation, while the latter tends to be more rationalist and outward-looking in character [8]. The contrast demonstrates the malleability of the Philosophical Scottish Rite across cultures.

### **Decline and Renewal in the 20th-21st Centuries**

Like many fraternal orders, the Philosophical Scottish Rite suffered declining membership and influence over the 20th century due to modernization and cultural shifts. However, the rite has experienced periodic resurgences, retaining significance.

After 1920, Masonic lodges in the United States moved away from rituals and symbolism towards social activities and philanthropy. Petitions for the Scottish Rite degrees dropped substantially [9]. However, the 1960s and '70s saw peaks in interest linked to searches for meaning among the baby boomer generation [10].

In Europe, Rite activations ebbed and flowed throughout the 20th century in reflection of socio-political currents. For example, the 1957 Treaty of the European Federation renewed interest in the internationalist ideals of Scottish Rite Masonry [11].

Today, the rite faces ongoing pressures to reform and stay relevant in the 21st century [12]. Jurisdictions like the Southern Masonic Jurisdiction in the US have created educational outreach initiatives to reengage members around the rite's history, symbolism and ethical teachings [13]. Such evolutions show the rite's adaptability in modern times.

### **Core Philosophical Elements and Principles**

At its core, the Philosophical Scottish Rite promotes several key philosophical principles that underlie its rituals, mythology, and symbolism. These elements help explain the rite's appeal and continued significance.

1. **Spiritual Universalism** – The rite embraces a universalistic outlook oriented towards the metaphysical unity behind exoteric religious differences. The ultimate objective is knowledge of the Absolute [11].
2. **Moral Philosophy** – Cultivating virtue and living an ethical life are central themes, with each degree teaching particular moral lessons. Masonry serves as an applied ethical system.

3. **Self-Improvement** – The degrees foster constant inner development towards intellectual, moral, and spiritual perfection [4]. The Masonic initiate is progressively transformed across the rite’s journey.
4. **Mystical Inner Wisdom** – The rite emphasizes direct inward knowing and awakening of the “divine spark” within each individual as the path to higher understanding [13].
5. **Liberty and Tolerance** – Running throughout the rite is advocacy of spiritual liberty, intellectual inquiry, and tolerance of diverse perspectives [5].

These principles form the philosophical core of the rite, illuminating its emphasis on moral education, spiritual enlightenment, and cultivation of the self.

## **Conclusion**

The Philosophical Scottish Rite has exerted an immense influence on Freemasonry since its founding in 18th century France. Through its synthesis of esotericism, mystery traditions, and morality, the rite spearheaded the transition of Masonry towards more introspective forms focused on inner wisdom and self-improvement. The rite’s spread across Europe and eventually the globe gave it an international presence within Masonry. While facing ups and downs, it remains active and influential today due to the enduring power of its philosophical vision. The rite provides Masonry with a rich symbolic system and framework of moral education and spiritual seeking that still resonates in the 21st century.

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