

RITE OF PERNETY, OR ILLUMINÉS OF AVIGNON

(1766)

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The Rite of Pernety, or Illuminés of Avignon: History, Rituals, and Influence on Esoteric Freemasonry

Introduction

The Rite of Pernety was a quasi-Masonic initiatory order established in France in the 1780s that fused occult and alchemical symbolism with Masonic structure. Founded by Dom Antoine-Joseph Pernety, a former Benedictine monk with interest in esotericism, the rite claimed to impart ancient mystical secrets through elaborate ritual dramatizations (Moreau, 1940). At its peak in the late 18th century, the order had over 500 members across southern France before declining after the French Revolution due to crackdowns on secret societies (Monneret, 2017). Although short-lived, the Rite of Pernety pioneered certain ritual forms, symbols, and philosophical underpinnings that would significantly impact later esoteric interpretations of Freemasonry in the 19th century and beyond.

Dom Pernety and the Founding of the Rite

Dom Antoine-Joseph Pernety (1716-1796) was a French monk and scholar who became fascinated with occultism and alchemy later in life. As a young Benedictine, Pernety focused his studies on theology, geography, and astronomy, publishing several scientific treatises. In 1763, he joined a French scientific expedition to the island of Guadeloupe. Pernety remained for seven years, becoming familiar with the vegetation, geography, and indigenous people of the Americas (Moreau, 1940).

After returning to France in 1770, Pernety became librarian at the Benedictine monastery of Saint Germain-des-Prés in Paris, which contained an extensive collection of esoteric literature. Through these rare texts, Pernety became engrossed in subjects like Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Neo-Platonism, and alchemy (Monneret, 2017). Dissatisfied with monastic life, Pernety left the Benedictines in 1778 and traveled south to Avignon. He began promulgating his own esoteric philosophies, publishing several books on topics like ancient mysteries, divination, and communicate with spirits of the dead.

In 1783, Pernety established a Masonic-style order known as the Rite Hermétique des Illuminés d'Avignon, or the Rite of the Illuminati of Avignon. He initiated the first members that year, using rituals that incorporated Masonic structure with occult and alchemical symbols and teachings. The early membership drew heavily from local notables, including

merchants, doctors, parliamentary members, aristocrats, and clerics (Monneret, 2017). The rite spread through Marseilles and across Provence, reaching a peak of around 500 initiates by 1789 (Moreau, 1940).

Rituals and Symbolism

The initiation rituals of Pernety's rite were elaborate dramatic productions meant to impart mystical enlightenment. The primary symbols of the order were the winged caduceus, representing philosophical Mercury, and the Ouroboros, symbolizing infinity and the Prima Materia. Ritual tools included swords, pentacles, divining rods, and other implements meant to harness supposed cosmic powers (Clavel, 1843).

The initiation ceremony for men had several stages. First, the candidate prepared with prayer and fasting to purify himself. He was led blindfolded into the candlelit temple, containing an altar draped in black and strewn with human bones, skulls, pentacles, and vials of liquid. Kneeling before the altar, he took oaths of secrecy as the master initiate waved a sword over his head. After this symbolic death and rebirth, he was symbolically resurrected from a coffin to be initiated into occult wisdom (Monneret, 2017).

The rite made use of Kabbalistic symbolism, Hebrew letters, and metaphysical references to planets and stars. The stages of initiation aligned with cosmic bodies, elemental forces, and mystical grades. Members donned colorful robes, amulets, and headdresses for rituals representing Egyptian and Hermetic mysteries. The rite synthesized these eclectic esoteric elements with aspects of European Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Templar legends, and Christian imagery in dramatic, magically-charged ceremonies (Moreau, 1940).

Philosophy and Teachings

The overall aim of Pernety's rite was spiritual regeneration and transcendence. Pernety believed that humanity had descended from an original divine state into degradation over millennia, but that individuals could reattain communion with the Prima Materia through initiation (Monneret, 2017). This regenerative process aligned with alchemical transmutation of base matter into spiritual gold.

The rite taught an elaborate complex of metaphysics drawn from Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Neoplatonism and esoteric Christianity. Pernety adapted these concepts into his own philosophy concerning cycles of creation and destruction, pathways of reincarnating souls, and correspondences between man, God, and the universe. He articulated this syncretic cosmology through extensive writings produced while running the society in Avignon (Moreau, 1940).

The rite practiced divination, animal magnetism, and natural magic rituals meant to harness occult forces. Pernety encouraged members to keep dream journals to interpret symbols and obtain mystical insights. However, the rite stopped short of evocations, spirit conjuring, or other activities deemed morally questionable. Pernety aimed for mystical regeneration within a Christian context, not casting spells (Monneret, 2017).

Decline and Subsequent Influence

After the French Revolution in 1789, public sentiment turned against secret societies associated with the aristocracy. Pernety's death in 1796 also took away the rite's central figurehead. The order dissolved through the early 19th century, with the last lodge closing in 1821 (Moreau, 1940). However, the Rite of Pernety had lasting influence on esoteric branches of Freemasonry in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Pernety's incorporation of elaborate costumes, theatrical rituals, and occult mysticism directly inspired later Masonic rites focused on esotericism, such as the Primitive Rite of Narbonne and the Rite of Memphis–Misraim (Monneret, 2017). The 19th century Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor adapted many of Pernety's symbols and initiation rituals infused with practical magic. Elements of the rite's alchemical philosophy also contributed to the revival of Rosicrucian groups and other initiatory orders up through contemporary times (Faivre, 2010).

The Rite of Pernety occupied a unique place bridging Masonic structure with eclectic occultism in the late 18th century. Through its integration of elaborate ritual, mystical cosmology, and ostensible ancient secrets, it pioneered an esoteric interpretation of Freemasonry that shaped Western initiatory societies long after Pernety's own order faded away.

References

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