

THE ORDER OF THE FRENCH NOACHITES

A Masonic Expression of Bonapartist Nostalgia and Critique in Post-Napoleonic France

By Robert Burns Lodge 59

Introduction

In the politically repressive climate following Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the Emperor's loyal veterans struggled to keep his memory alive amidst a widespread backlash against Bonapartism. It was in this context that a mysterious Masonic order called the Order of the French Noachites emerged in Paris in 1816. Created by former Bonapartists, the order invented elaborate Masonic rituals that allowed its members to secretly memorialize Napoleon through coded references and symbols. This paper will analyze the origins and character of the Noachites, shedding light on a fascinating intersection of Masonic ritual, political dissent, and Bonapartist nostalgia in Restoration France.

The Noachite Legend

According to Masonic tradition, the Noachites originated from ancient Hebrew followers of the Biblical patriarch Noah. As scholar Jacob Katz explains, the Noachite myth included "... the notion that some philosophers of antiquity harbored ideas that agreed with the tenets of biblical religion and morality" (Katz, 20). Various Masonic orders adopted aspects of this legend over the centuries. In Restoration France, the defeated Bonapartists invoked the Noachite concept to invent their own coded rituals memorializing their fallen leader.

Masonry and Politics in Post-1815 France

To understand the Noachites, it is essential to consider the state of Masonry in the tense political environment following Napoleon's final defeat. As historian Albert Lantoiné describes, after Waterloo French Masonic lodges were initially shut down by Louis XVIII's government, which feared they could be hotbeds of opposition (Lantoiné, 215). However, some lodges gradually reopened, provided they accepted apolitical stances. It was in this context that some highly discreet Bonapartists conceived of using Masonic ritual to safely critique the regime and honor Napoleon's memory under the cover of symbolism and allegories.

Founding and Influences

According to Lantoiné's account, the Order of the French Noachites was founded in Paris in 1816 by companions of Napoleon's glory including General Bertrand, who had accompanied the Emperor to his final exile on St. Helena (Lantoiné 218). The order drew inspiration from

the Egyptian Rite, a Masonic order that Napoleon had promoted during his Egyptian campaign and contained references to him encoded within an ancient legend (Curl, 156). Through revived Noachite lore, the founders invented Masonic rituals that allowed veiled celebration of Napoleon's career and critique of his enemies.

Rituals and Symbolism

The Noachite order's rituals centered around three degrees of initiation that incorporated coded references to Napoleon's career and death.

The first degree focused on Napoleon's rise to power. Initiates took on the role of apprentices to an "architect Phaleg," a name that referenced Napoleon through symbolic wordplay. The ritual specified that Phaleg worked for 14 years as apprentice, fellow craft, and master, paralleling Napoleon's journey from obscurity in 1790 to his coronation as Emperor in 1804. Discussion of Phaleg's overseeing the building of an eight-story Tower of Babel further reinforced Napoleon allusions. The tower's floors were given names like Adam, Eve, Noah and so on, with initials that spelled out "Napoleon." This allowed initiation into the legendary origins of the Noachites to become a metaphor for Napoleon's ascent.

The second degree built upon this foundation to memorialize Napoleon's exile and death. Initiates carried an urn supposedly containing Phaleg's ashes, in clear reference to the return of Napoleon's remains from his final resting place on St. Helena in 1840. The ritual emphasized the hour of "six o'clock less ten minutes," pointing to the time of Napoleon's death on May 5, 1821 at that very time. The solemn declaration of "Consummatum est" (it is finished), along with the presence of willow trees traditionally associated with mourning, created a somber memorial for the fallen Emperor coded within Noachite ceremony.

The third degree focused on the concept of restoration, potentially related to hopes for a revival of Napoleonic rule. But with the failure of those hopes after an attempted coup in 1836, the order faded away, having provided a brief yet meaningful venue for remembrance of Napoleon.

Through these rituals, veterans of Napoleon's campaigns were able to sustain a veiled Bonapartist political culture and memory community in the years after 1815, keeping the spirit of their revolution alive even in the face of repression. The order's existence testifies to the enduring allure of Napoleon as a symbolic figure in the early 19th century.

Degrees and Symbolism

The Noachite order had three degrees:

- 1st Degree – Knight
- 2nd Degree – Commander
- 3rd Degree – Grand Elect in Three Points

The rituals of the first degree contained symbolic references to Napoleon's career and rise to power. Initiates took the role of apprentices to the "architect Phaleg," alluding to Napoleon through wordplay. Phaleg worked for 14 years as apprentice, fellow craft, and master, paralleling the arc of Napoleon's journey from obscurity to leadership from 1790-1804. Discussion of the eight-story Tower of Babel also hid coded references, with the floor names Adam, Eve, Noah, etc. having initials that spelled out "Napoleon."

The second degree built upon this symbolism to represent Napoleon's exile and death. Initiates carried an urn containing the "ashes of Phaleg," evoking the return of Napoleon's remains from St. Helena in 1840. The time of "six o'clock less ten minutes" pointed to Napoleon's final moments. The phrase consummatum est (it is finished) and willow tree imagery reinforced the theme of mourning.

Through this multi-layered symbolism, the Noachites sustained the flame of Bonapartism in Restoration France and allowed veterans to memorialize Napoleon through veiled rituals. The order did not survive but offered a fascinating example of Masonic nostalgia.

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