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Freemasonry in Greece

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A topic insufficiently researched in Greece nowadays is the existence and historical progression of freemasonry in the country. Great debates occur whenever this theme is mentioned, with conspiracy theorists doing their best to blame all of the misfortunes of the Greek state on the existence of the lodges. This article will examine briefly the intriguing and little-known history of freemasonry in the Greek world, as it has unfolded over the past two centuries.

The Early Days: Venetian Influence and the Spirit of Revolution

The first Freemason's Lodge in Greece was created in 1782 on Corfu. At the time, the island was still under Venetian rule, while the Ottomans occupied most of the rest of Greece. The Lodge's name was "Beneficenza" and was under the direction of the Grand Lodge of Verona, based in Padova, Italy. During that period there were quite a few Greek people residing or studying in Northern Italy, and they were the ones who formed the nucleus of the first Greek lodge; soon they would spread the organizational structure of Freemasonry all around the Greek diaspora in Europe.

In 1790 in Vienna, Greek merchants and intellectuals formed an organization similar in some respects to the Masons. It was called "Bon Cuisins" and was presumably associated with the Greek pre-revolutionary intellectual Rigas Feraios, one of the leading figures in spreading revolutionary idea among those Greeks still under the Turkish occupation. This era was one of intellectual ferment, following the American and French revolutions, and thus offered an excellent environment for the dissemination of new ideas. This ideological development would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the world of empires and the emergence of the nation-state.

In the case of Greece, it seems that the lodges became veritable repositories of knowledge, where the information and ideals needed to start an uprising were collected and shared with a select few. Usually, these were Greeks of the diaspora who had the intellectual capacity, as well as the capital, to take the first decisive revolutionary actions.

After 1789, a series of Masonic lodges opened throughout the Heptanisa ("seven islands") off the western Greek coast, islands such as Corfu, Kefalonia, Lefkada, Ithaka, Zakynthos. At that time, these represented the only area in the Hellenic world in relative peace and prosperity, being as they were under Venetian control.

In 1810, one of the leading figures of Corfu, Dionysios Romas, merged the two existing local lodges, Filogenia and Agathoergia and thus created the Grand Anatolian Lodge of Hellas and Corfu. After this event, Masonic lodges mushroomed across the Hellenic world so that already by 1812 the Greeks in Moscow were able to organize a formidable secret society. Under the auspices of Ioannis Kapodistrias, the then-Russian Foreign Minister, a Masonic lodge that encompassed the Greek elite of Tsarist Russia and played an important role towards creating the framework for the forthcoming Greek revolution

was created.

Interestingly, it was named the “Phoenix Lodge. The ancient symbol of the Phoenix – the mythical bird that rises from its own ashes – is frequently encountered in Greek mysticism. Ioannis Kapodistrias would become the first head of state in Greece (1827-1831) and was the head of the Phoenix Lodge while still in Moscow. In fact, he even named the first Greek currency ‘phoenix,’ but after his assassination by a Greek clan chief, the famous ‘drachma’ was born.

The grandest Greek secret society of them all, the Philiki Etaireia (“Friendly Society”) used the phoenix as its symbol. Nowadays it is still one of the symbolic emblems of the Freemason Lodges in Greece. Lastly, during the Junta in Greece (1967-1974) the symbol of the regime was the Phoenix again; presumably this owed to the membership of some of its officers in certain Greek Masonic lodges.

One of the most important organizations in modern Greek history, the Philiki Etaireia was established on September 14, 1814 in Odessa; it is widely assumed to have been an offshoot of the Phoenix Lodge of Moscow. However, Kapodistrias himself would later voice his opposition to the organization. It was created in order to prepare the Greek populace to rise up against the Ottoman Empire. Its leaders were Nikolaos Skoufas, from the Arta province of Epiros, Emmanuel Ksanthos from Patmos in the Dodecanese, and Athanasios Tsakalov, also from Epirus.

These men had previous connections with secret societies. Ksanthos was a member of the Lodge of Lefkada, while Skoufas’ associate Konstantinos Rados was a devotee of the Italian “Charcoal-burners” Carbonarism movement, an equivalent to the Greek group, which sought the unification of Italy. For his part, the much younger Tsakalov had been a founding member of Ellinoglwssso Xenodoxeio (the “Greek-speaking Hotel”), an unsuccessful precursor to the Etaireia that was devoted to the same goal of an independent Greece.

It is worthwhile to note that the date of the society’s creation was that of the “Holy Cross” which in the Greek Orthodox calendar has been associated with the miraculous victory of the Byzantine Empire against a combined Avar-Persian siege in 614 AD. According to hagiographic tradition, Constantinople was in dire danger of falling to the barbarians, until the patriarch of the city ran across the walls, armed with an icon of the Virgin Mary (the icon now resides in the Monastery of Dionysiou on Mt. Athos).

Considering the symbolism and importance of the day for the Greek nation, one can assume that the creators of the Philiki Etaireia chose it in order to highlight to their followers the historical role that this organization planned to play in the future. Indeed, the members of the organization were inevitably highborn and ambitious, and included many Phanariots living in Russia. They firmly believed in the mutual obligation to the Etaireia’s secrecy, to the extent that those who revealed its secrets were murdered.

With such severity was the Filiki Etaireia able to maintain its cohesion and, in less than seven years, to encompass the length and breadth of Greek populations in Europe, from Alexandria and Antioch to Budapest and Trieste. Most importantly, it created the intellectual foundations upon which a revolutionary uprising could be established.

Freemasonry in Greece after 1830: Philanthropy, Scandal and Schism

During the early years of independence in Greece, there was no notable activity among the Freemasons. Only in 1863, the year that the new Glücksburg royal dynasty came to Greece, was the Panellinio Lodge established in Athens, soon to be followed by numerous others in provisional Greek towns. In 1867, the Grand Orient Lodge of Italy accepted the autonomy of Greek Freemasons and the “Great Orient Lodge of Hellas” was created. The same organization has been known under this name since 1936.

The 19th century saw the Freemasons in Greece engaged in continuous recruitment of new members, despite the fact that it never became fully accepted by Greek society. Freemasonry was often viewed as a heresy by the Orthodox Church, or as a manifestation of unwanted foreign influence in the political sphere. Nevertheless, various philanthropic initiatives were undertaken because of Masonic activity. Schools, hospitals, support during wartime, scholarships and so on were the legacy of Greek lodges. These factors explain why, in 1927, the Greek state recognized the Hellenic Lodge as a philanthropic association administered by the Ministry of Public Health.

Unfortunately, during the WWII occupation the Germans destroyed most of the Greek Masonic archives. The lodges stopped operating during this turbulent period. In the aftermath of the war, Freemasonry gradually regained its previous influence and spread further in Greek society. Today, a grand building in the centre of Athens attests to the economic affluence of the organization that has managed to retain its veil of secrecy right through the present day.

During the military dictatorship in Greece of 1967-1974, officers involved in the Junta were accused of being Freemasons, something that was decidedly bad public relations for the Greek Grand Lodge. In 1980, a Greek journalist, Kostas Tsarouchas, revealed the names and ranks of numerous Greek Freemasons. This revelation created certain havoc in the Athenian world, because a large number of politicians, judges, academics and other were said to be involved- precisely at a time when political passions in the country were running high, one year before the first socialist government of Andreas Papandreou took power.

Later, in 1993, the Grand Lodge of Greece was accused by the mother lodge of London of engaging in political activity, supposedly a no-no for Freemasons worldwide. Thus once again was the image of the Greek Lodge tarnished, and as a result a schism began that ultimately brought about the creation of several unrecognized Masonic Lodges in Greece.

However, it should be added that politics and Freemasonry do mix; it would be incomprehensible to expect otherwise from a class of people frequently involved in politics and who exercise political clout. The 1993 argument with the Grand Lodge in London happened, according to rumors, from the different opinions between the Greeks and the British over who had the right to initiate and take under its influence the newly emerging Masonic lodges of the Balkan states. If true, this would most certainly amount to an act of politics of the higher level. Moreover, its Anglo-Saxon members have always heavily influenced the global Freemason movement, and even nowadays, the majority of

the members worldwide are to be found in Britain, the USA, Canada and Australia. Obviously, the influence they exert is not only spiritual but political as well.

Greek Freemasonry: Some Conclusions

Even though it is difficult to keep track of developments in the Freemason world due to its secrecy, some interesting notes can be made so far as the Greek example is concerned. In our days, numerous associations have been active within the Greek society such as the Rotary Club and the Junior Chamber International, and there has been a veritable mushrooming of esoteric societies and other forms of more or less secret fraternities. This proliferation of groups has weakened the traditional supremacy of the Freemasons in Greece.

On balance, the Greek Freemasonry movement has most historical significance in that it was the main procreator of the revolutionary organizations of the early 19th century, chief among them the Philiki Etairia. Similar societies both before and after have drawn from a rich tradition of esoteric customs, symbols and activities. These can be traced ultimately back to the pagan mystery cults of Greek Antiquity, and the later crypto-Christian groups (when Christians were still being persecuted by the Roman Empire). It can even be argued that the pyramidal, multi-leveled organizational hierarchy of the Philiki Etairia resembles somewhat the neo-Platonic conception of the universal organization of ideality and divinity as laid out by ancient authors such as Porphyry and Plotinus.

If all of these are indeed manifestations of the unique Greek passion for convoluted and complex organization, irrational rules and secrecy (the undoing of which would open onto time-honored themes of scandal and betrayal), then one can perceive a continuous historical tradition, in which Freemasonry becomes just one epoch's manifestation of the seminal impulses and psyche of a people.