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Freemasonry in Italy

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The Modern Freemasonry was created in London in 1717; from there it spread in France, Holland and into the Germanic world. Each Grand Lodge adapted the general rules to its national features. In Italy, the environment was quite different: Italy was not yet a State, being divided into smaller reigns, so a national Grand Lodge was missing. Italian Lodges were set up by foreign Grand Lodges, which patented them. The lodges were therefore under the influence of foreign Crafts. The political climate was also different from that of north-European countries. In England, for instance, Freemasonry was the liberal instrument to bring peace to the nation, which had faced a civil and religious war between Catholic and Protestants. Italy was instead in the domain of a harsh Counter-Reform, which hampered developing free consciences with any means, either brutal or underhanded. Italian Freemasonry was therefore forced to act clandestinely, because of the influence of the Holy See on the various States of the peninsula. This explains the anticlericalism in the Lodges and their becoming 'the gathering place' of nonconformists of every tendency: from deists and libertines to the most convinced champions of the political liberties and the democracy

The first lodge was set up in Florence in 1731 and seven years later on 28th April 1738 the Catholic Church published *In Eminenti*, the first papal bull against Freemasonry. The various Italian States refused to register it, however in Tuscany the situation was delicate: the Medici dynasty was just ended and the political power passed to Francis Stephen of Lorraine, brother-in-law of the Emperor and husband of Maria Teresa. In 1739 Cardinal Corsini, the nephew of Pope Clemens XII, personally asked the Duke to arrest the Freemasons and to hand them on the Inquisition's tribunal. Only the poet Tommaso Crudeli was arrested. He was kept in jail for one year, in hard conditions that seriously weakened his health. He died in 1745. Other lodges were founded in Leghorn, in 1763 and 1765, patented by the Antients. The Moderns instead established two lodges in 1771.

On 27th December 1789 Vincenzo Balzamo arrived in Rome and tried to set up his lodge, which in his opinion would have been working in accordance with the Egyptian ritual (nowadays Memphis and Misraim). Cagliostro was arrested, excommunicated and put in jail in the fortress of Saint Leo, where he died in 1797.

In Turin, in 1744, a lodge probably existed. We surely know that 1749, in Chambéry, was set up the Saint Jean des Trois Mortiers lodge, whose patent had been given by the Grand Lodge of London to the marquis François Noyel de Belleguarde. Other lodges were created afterward. In 1771 this lodge acquired even more importance, due to the quality of the Brethren and to their contacts with other high-rank Freemasons, all over Europe. Let us remind Sebastiano Giraud, a physician, Gabriele Asinari earl of Bernezzo and Giacomo Gamba della Perosa. They all were pupils of Martinez de Pasqually. In 1774, Dr. Giraud set up the Strict Observance – member of which was

Joseph de Maistre. Some years later, in 1779, such Freemasonry converted itself into the Scottish Rectified Rite. In 1783, Vittorio Amedeo III banned Freemasonry from his reign.

In 1746 two Englishmen, John Murray and Joseph Smith set up a new lodge, with the Italian Brothers Giacomo Casanova, Francesco Grisellini and Carlo Goldoni. Other Lodges followed in the forthcoming years. In 1772, Bro. Pietro Gratarol founded L'Union, patented by the Grand Lodge of London.

In Milan, two Swiss citizens, Pierre George Madiott and a certain Moussard, founded the first Lodge around 1756. The abbot Pavesi, the monk Celestino Scalzi, the marquis Ottaviano Casnedi, earl Carlo Belgioso, doctor Vincenzo d'Adda, general Joseph Esterhazy and some officials of the Army were member of the Lodge. In 1776, another lodge was established in Cremona. Worshipful Master was count Pasquale Biffi, a close friend of Cesare Beccaria and of the Verri brothers. Other lodges were in Liguria: in Genua the Old British and Ligurian Lodge was patented by the Grand Lodge of London.

In 1751 pope Benedict XIV released the bull *Providas Romanorum Pontificum*, thus confirming the Freemasonry's prohibition contained in the previous bull, *In Eminenti*. The publication of this new bull forced King Charles VII of Bourbon to ban Freemasonry from his reign.

Neapolitan Freemasonry 'slept until 1763. Charles VII was crowned king of Spain and his throne passed to his son Ferdinand IV, under the tutorship of Bernardo Tanucci. The Grand Lodge of Holland patented Les Zelés lodge, which was promoted Grand Provincial Lodge one year after. The Grand Lodge of London quarreled with its Dutch sister on the right to patent new lodges abroad. The dispute was won by London, whose daughter lodge, Perfect Union, was confirmed Grand Provincial Lodge in 1770. In 1775, however, the prince of Caramanico set up Lo Zelo lodge, claiming independence from any foreign Obedience.

In 1775, King Ferdinand IV forbade any Masonic activity. Some Associates were imprisoned, others exiled. In 1776, Diego Naselli was elected Grand Master of the Neapolitan Grand Lodge. Beside it, the English Provincial Grand Lodge survived. The difference between the two was quite clear: permeated by esotericism, often confining with extravagant fantasy, the former; more democratic, open to Enlightenment the latter. The French Revolution and the following reaction shall sweep both away.

Grande Oriente d'Italia was founded in June of 1805 in Milan, and was set under the regency of Eugene Beauharnais. It was the epoch of the Napoleonic Freemasonry, more courtesan than loyalist was and heavily neoclassic. With the fall of the French empire and of its Murat's appendage in Naples, the Italian Freemasonry fell in a deep crisis. Some groups went on working under traditional principles, especially in Sicily, but this was not enough to assure the necessary coverage to develop and to produce a sketch of essential unitary Freemasonry at the end of the 'Risorgimento'.

The extreme precedent dispersion of the Masonic groups, combined to the formation of "secret societies" similar to the Freemasonry, but active on the political plain only, contributed to make difficult and hard working the following Masonic reconstruction. The rudder of the rebirth was firmly grasped by the Loggia Ausonia denominated then

“Mother Lodge” that, at the end of 1859, the Grande Oriente d’Italia reconstituted. In those years, the anticlerical position of the Grande Oriente d’Italia became rather hard, above all for the Roman matter, for which the Lodges were lined up against the clergy in Rome.

In the 1867, Giuseppe Garibaldi wrote to the Supreme Council in Palermo: “Let’s make Freemasonry the Roman Bundle, so to act united in politics. We do not yet have the material unity because the moral unity misses us. Let Freemasonry do this and that immediately will be done”.

In 1870, thanks also to the active share of the vertexes of the Craft, then held up by the regent Giuseppe Mazzoni (1808-1889), the Italian Army conquered Rome.

The polemic tones with the Church became sour. In 1884, when the Pope released the encyclical *Humanum Genus*, Freemasonry’s house organ heavily scoffed the Author, pope Leone XIII.

The most important year of the Italian Masonic history of beginning XX century was 1908, when a schism occurred in June. The Parliament he was intensely dealing with a motion formalized by Leonida Bissolati, against the proposal of law for the prohibition of the religious teaching in the elementary schools. Despite the appeals and the declarations of tolerance pronounced in the circumstance by the Grande Oriente d’Italia, many free masons members of Parliament voted against such motion, being thus blamed by Grand Master Ettore Ferrari. Those Brethren then set up a new Masonic body, called Gran Loggia d’Italia of “Piazza del Gesù”, which is still active today, although as co-masonic order.

At the beginning of the First World War, Freemasonry was openly in favor of the war against the Absburgic Empire, either for ideological reasons – Austria was a Catholic country – or to complete the national independence, by annexing Trent and Trieste.

The merit gained throughout the war did not spare Freemasonry from the hate of Fascism. In February 1923, the Gran Consiglio del Fascismo declared the incompatibility between Masonic affiliation and adherence to the Fascist Party. A wave of violence immediately repressed about 400 Italian Lodges, scattering 20.000 Associates.

Mussolini’s politics gained the benevolence of the Roman Catholic Church, flattening the road toward the Laterano’s Agreements. Subsequently many Freemasons were dismissed from public offices, imprisoned or confined.

At the end of 1926, the Grand Master Domizio Torreggiani loosened all the Italian Lodges. The ‘Tribunale Speciale’ (the Fascist Special Court) then condemned him to the confinement of police. When he became blind he was allowed to come back home where he died in 1932. Sporadic groups survived covertly. They persevered in meeting as and where they were able, to preserve the ‘light’.

Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the rebirth of the Italian Freemasonry was characterized by a phantasmagoria of groups seeking after foreign recognitions so to certify their regularity. Most of the regular Grand Lodges

progressively recognized the Grande Oriente d'Italia; the American Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite recognized the Rite at the obedience of Grande Oriente d'Italia.

In 1972 the Grand Master Lino Salvini achieved a double, huge success: the reunion with Gran Loggia d'Italia, Piazza del Gesù and the exchange of Grand Representatives with UGLE, after 110 years.

At the beginning of 1981 went off the scandal of Loggia P2. Both magistrates and Parliament inquired high-rank civil servants charged of conspiracy against the State. "Much ado about nothing" since Freemasonry was discharged by any accusation, the clamor was however such to produce a great number of defections, that brought to the break-up of several Lodges and the weakening of the others. Grand Master Armando Corona (1982 – 1990), worked hard to recoup the prestige of the Craft, shunning the Brethren who had kept an antimasonic behavior.

In 1993 a tremendous episode broke the routine life of Grande Oriente d'Italia. The Grand Master Giuliano Di Bernardo resigned and abandoned his house in the new centre of the Grande Oriente d'Italia, taking away various documents. He motivated his initiative with presumed conspiracies against the laws of the State affected by nonexistent covered Lodges, and denouncing false irregularities allegedly committed by some Lodges. Immediately before going out of Grande Oriente d'Italia with few hundred followers he set up the Gran Loggia Regolare d'Italia, which was recognized by UGLE, as quickly as inexplicably.

The scandal was enormous, the Magistrates inquired; the inquiry lasted ten years but nobody has been ever charged of any crime whatever.

For sake of truth, it must clearly stated that most of the scandals which happened have been artificially alimented by left-wing political parties that considered Freemasonry 'enemy of class' that (allegedly) hampered the democratic life of the country, acting as a 'secret society'. To charge Freemasonry of being a 'secret society' is today ridiculous, since the addresses and telephone number of the various Masonic houses are listed in phone-directories.

Today the Craft counts around 18000 members in over 600 Lodges and has fraternal relations with over 200 foreign Communions in the five continents.