

Illuminism in the Age of Minerva: Pyotr Ivanovich Melissino (1726–1797) and High-Degree Freemasonry in Catherine the Great’s Russia, 1762–1782¹

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This article draws on a rare extant manuscript of the Melissino Rite, preserved in the archives of the Prince Fredrik Masonic Centre in The Hague, as well as on other primary material, in order to examine the pivotal role played by Pyotr Ivanovich Melissino (1726-1797) in forming an Illuminist-Masonic milieu in St. Petersburg from the mid-1760s. Melissino and his high-grade Masonic Rite have hitherto been largely overlooked by scholars, yet this article aims to emphasize the formative influence he played in Russia in creating an “invisible chapter” in which select initiates could embrace currents of Illuminist thought (alchemy, theosophy and Christian Kabbalah in particular). Scholars have principally examined the development of Illuminism in the second half of the eighteenth century within the restricted space of the Chapters of high-degree Freemasonry in France (and to a lesser extent in Germany and other European countries). Little attention has been paid to Illuminism in Russia prior to rise of the Rosicrucian Circle associated with Nikolai Novikov and Johan Schwarz in Moscow in the 1780s. Thus, this article seeks to re-examine the Melissino Rite as part of a pan-European phenomenon, whilst also highlighting its importance within the sizeable aristocratic Masonic milieu in Russia.

In early 1763 a three-day street pageant was staged in Moscow in honour of the recent coronation of Catherine II (1729–1796). Entitled ‘Minerva Triumphant’, the public spectacle portrayed the Russian Empress in the guise of the Roman goddess of wisdom, whose reign was destined to usher in a return

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of the Golden Age.² As Richard Wortman notes, the masquerade presented Catherine as capable of transforming the vices of her subjects through an enlightenment scenario, in which “knowledge and reason were to help” in her quest to “overcome the flaws of humanity”.³

Two years later Catherine II began work on formulating her Great Instruction (*Bol'shoi nakaz*).⁴ Presented to the Legislative Commission in July 1767, Catherine's *Nakaz* was heavily indebted to Montesquieu's *On the Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764). In essence, the Instruction sought to set down her vision of Enlightened principles of governance and civil society.⁵

Such displays of lavish symbolic pageantry and grand theoretical pronouncements in the mid-1760s made it abundantly clear that the Russian Empress was seeking to lay down Russia's official path to enlightenment, via landmarks set out by the *philosophes* of the age. Yet, just as Catherine II was seeking to demarcate the parameters and direction of an official route to Enlightenment, a colonel in her Imperial army, Pyotr Ivanovich Melissino (1726–1797), was endeavouring to construct his own path by establishing an innovative rite of high-degree Freemasonry in St. Petersburg. The so-called Melissino System, which contained seven degrees, offered initiates – Russian and European noblemen – an alternative means of acquiring wisdom and learning via the gradated path of Illuminism.

According to Christine Bergé, the “complex intellectual and spiritual movement now known as ‘Illuminism’”, which emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, formed “an integral part of modern Western esotericism in Europe”.⁶ In an era of increased secularization and the erosion of the power and authority of established church institutions, Illuminism, for some, cast a shard of light through threatening clouds that seemed to offer safe passage to a blessed realm of divine knowledge and truth. Illuminism embraced many of the esoteric currents that had flourished in the Renaissance,

² For a description of the Minerva Triumphant spectacle, see Torzhestvuiushchaia Minerva 1850, 109–128. Also see Dmitriev 1953, 170–189.

³ Wortman 2006, 57.

⁴ For the first English translation of the *Bol'shoi nakaz* by Mikhail Tatishchev see Catherine, the Great, Empress of Russia 1768. For a recent English edition, see Butler and Tomsinov 2010. For the original Russian edition, see *Nakaz Komissii o sostavlenii proekta novogo Ulozheniia* 1767.

⁵ On the influence of Montesquieu on Catherine's *Nakaz*, see Gareth Jones 1998, 658–671. On Catherine's debt to Beccaria, see Cizova 1962, 384–408. On the influence of the French philosophes on Catherine the Great, see Gorbatov 2006. For a general overview of the Enlightenment foundations of Catherine II's *Nakaz*, see Dixon 2010, 174–175.

⁶ Bergé 2006, 600. For a recent discussion on the problematic use of the term “Illuminism”, see Edelstein 2010, 1–6. Edelstein argues that the terms *illuminés* and *théosophes* – associated with Illuminism – do not take into account that people identified with such terms could also define themselves as *philosophes*. Bearing this in mind, I still adhere to the term “Illuminism” in this article, as I do not seek to suggest that it necessarily excludes all aspects of Enlightenment thought.

such as Christian Kabbalah, alchemy, Christian theosophy and Hermetism. Significantly, from the 1760s Illuminism was largely – though not exclusively – channeled and filtered via an amorphous reservoir of initiatic societies (most notably chivalric forms of high-degree freemasonry).⁷

In the last century a host of scholars have studied how Illuminist sentiment was fermented in a variety of masonic and para-masonic organizations in France and, to a lesser extent, in the German-speaking world, Sweden, Great Britain and the United States.⁸ Most recently, Antoine Faivre has listed numerous such initiatic societies, with the majority based in France and German-speaking areas.⁹ To be sure, France and German-speaking areas acted as crucibles of Illuminism in Europe in the latter third of the eighteenth century, where the theosophic ideas of Martines de Pasqually (1708/1709–1774), Louis-Claude Saint-Martin (1743–1803) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) were particularly influential.

Yet, this should not overshadow the significant, innovative and early manifestation of Illuminism in St. Petersburg, as embodied and expressed in the development of the Melissino Rite. Amidst the baroque splendour of St. Petersburg, Melissino established an elaborate hybrid rite that in many ways reflected the cultural smörgåsbord of the Russian capital itself. Thus, Melissino drew on Templar forms of Freemasonry, as developed in France and Germany since the 1750s. Furthermore, the Melissino Rite embraced the whole gamut of Illuminism – Kabbalah, alchemy, Christian theosophy and Hermetism – fully in keeping with the contemporaneous emergence of such currents in France and Germany.

Indeed, I will argue below that the seventh degree of the Melissino Rite is quite possibly unsurpassed among initiatic societies of the era in its spectacular incorporation of Kabbalistic symbolism. In addition, Melissino's masonic system adopted ecclesiastic rites, garments and

⁷ On the role of initiatic societies as institutions that fostered the passage of esoteric traditions into modernity, see von Stuckrad 2005, 113.

⁸ In relation to France, see, for example, Viatte 1928; Joly 1938; Amadou 1989; Le Forestier 1970; Bergé, 1995. On the Order of Gold- und Rosenkreuz, which initially developed in Germany, see Geffarth 2007; McIntosh 2011.

⁹ See Faivre 2010, 63–66. Faivre lists the Strict Observance, founded by Karl von Hund; the Order of the Élus-Coëns, created by Martines de Pasqually; the Rectified Scottish Rite, established by Jean-Baptiste Willermoz; the Gold- und Rosenkreutzer Älteren Systems; the Illuminés d'Avignon; the Ordre de l'Étoile Flamboyante, founded by Théodore-Henri de Tschoudy; the Rite of Johann Wilhelm Zinnendorf; the Clericate of Johann August Starck; the Philalèthes; the Brethren of the Cross, created by Christian Heinrich Haugwitz; the Asiatic Brethren of Austria; the Primitive Rite of the Philadelphians of François Marie Chefdebién d'Armissan; the Egyptian Rite of Cagliostro and The Illuminated Theosophists. All, bar the last society, were based, or initially established, in either France or German-speaking areas. Faivre also notes that Rosicrucianism and the Rectified Rite of Willermoz penetrated into Russia thanks to Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov, and mentions the influential mystical works of Ivan Vladimirovich Lopukhin. For English-language treatments of various aspects of Illuminism in late eighteenth-century Europe, see Webb 1974; Garrett 1975, 97–120; Garrett 1984, 67–81; Bergé 2006, 600–606; Goodrick-Clarke 2008, 131–153; Edelstein 2010, 1–33.

material objects — associated with both the Orthodox and Catholic churches — and, what is more, advocated the active participation of clerics in initiations and ceremonies. In other words, the Melissino Rite does not simply represent the earliest expression of Illuminism within Russia; but is also of much wider significance. Namely, its lavish blend of clerical symbolism and Illuminist currents — especially Kabbalah — offers a unique vision of freemasonry that, it will be argued, influenced other leading European figures associated with the development of esoteric forms of freemasonry and para-masonry.

Melissino and the masonic system that bears his name remain woefully neglected by Russian scholars, even among experts of masonic history.¹⁰ In large measure this lack of attention stems from a prevailing historiography, epitomized by A. V. Semeka a century ago, whereby eighteenth-century Russian freemasonry is divided into three distinct phases: 1) an initial modish period between 1731–1762; 2) an era of so-called “moral” (*nравственное*) masonry in the first half of Catherine the Great’s reign (1762–1781), and a period of nine years between 1781 and 1792 characterized by the search for higher degrees and the victory of Rosicrucianism, or “quasi-scientific” masonry.¹¹ Whilst not all historians have advocated such a rigid chronological division, it remains the case that most studies on the development of Illuminism in Russia — where at the time it was commonly labelled as “Martinism” after Saint-Martin — focus on the Rosicrucian circle of Johann Georg Schwarz (1751–1784) and Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov (1744–1818) in Moscow that was only established in 1782, and the mystical writings of Ivan Vladimirovich Lopukhin (1756–1816).¹² In other words, the existence of the Melissino Rite, between the mid 1760s and 1782, undermines the convenient (and overly simplistic) perception of a “moral” (or rational) phase of freemasonry that gave way to Illuministic currents within the confines of the masonic lodge.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one also encounters a paucity of scholarly material devoted to the Melissino Rite outside Russia. By far the most comprehensive examinations of the masonic system occur in two German publications from the 1820s. In 1823, J. K. A. Fischer, reserved considerable space to the Melissino Rite within a general article on freemasonry in Catherine II’s Russia.¹³ Drawing heavily on this work, the second volume of C. Lenning’s *Encyclopädie der Freimaurerei*, published in 1824, also

10 For brief references and descriptions of the Melissino Rite, see Longinov 1867, 168, fn. 38, 304; Pypin 1916, 118–119; Vernadskii 1917, 56–57; Serkov 2001, 535–536, 965–966.

11 Semeka 1914–1915, 125.

12 For works on Rosicrucianism in eighteenth-century Russia (particularly in Moscow), see Longinov 1858; Longinov 1867; Semeka 1902, 343–400; Tarasov 1914–1915, 1–26; Barskov 1915; Telepneff 1922, 261–292; Ryu 1973, 198–232; Faggionato 2005; Kondakov 2012. The principal works of Lopukhin are *The Spiritual Knight (Dukhovnyi rytsar’)* and *Some Characteristics of the Interior Church*, both published in 1791, which reveal the influence of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and Karl von Eckartshausen. On Lopukhin, see Surovtsev 1901; Faivre 2006, 697–699; Berg 2008, 44–57.

13 Fischer 1823, 1–43.

devoted twenty-one pages to describing aspects of the Melissino Rite.¹⁴ Lenning's overview of the fifth degree of the Melissino Rite also forms the basis of an anonymous article that appeared in the tenth volume of *The Masonic Review*, published in Cincinnati in 1853.¹⁵ These three studies effectively represent the grand sum of all masonic scholarship on the Melissino Rite, which to all intents and purposes thereafter fell into obscurity.¹⁶

Prior to an in-depth analysis of the seventh degree of the Melissino System, based on a manuscript copy of the rite preserved in the Kloss Collection of the Prince Frederik Cultural Masonic Centre in The Hague, there will follow an account of Melissino's career and respected position in St. Petersburg's aristocratic milieu.¹⁷ In addition, it will be revealed that Melissino became absorbed in the quest to attain the philosophers' stone as early as 1762. This background will help to contextualise the complex and conflicting demands of a leading official and masonic-illuminist figure in Catherinian Russia. Ultimately, by May 1782, Melissino had come to the conclusion that his pioneering espousal of a distinct form of Illuminist freemasonry could no longer be accommodated with his sense of loyalty and service to his sovereign. Hence, in this regard, the Melissino Rite can be viewed as the first casualty in the opening salvo of Catherine the Great's campaign to tear down the foundations of Illuminism in her empire.

Pyotr Ivanovich Melissino: Catherinian Official, Socialite, Freemason and Aspiring Alchemist

Contemporary accounts of P. I. Melissino paint a vivid portrait of a man in possession of attributes perfectly suited to the myriad demands of life in the elite milieu of Catherine II's Russia. The French commentator Claude François Masson, for example, extolled Melissino as "a man who may, in some measure, be considered as the Richelieu of Russia".¹⁸ Masson backs up this high praise

¹⁴ Lenning 1824, 460–481.

¹⁵ G. H., jr. 1853, 268–273.

¹⁶ An exception is a two-page entry on the Melissino Rite in the *Allgemeines Handbuch der Freimaurerei*. See *Allgemeines Handbuch der Freimaurerei* 1865, 306–307.

¹⁷ Prince Frederik Masonic Cultural Centre, The Hague, Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1. Georg Kloss provides an account of how he acquired the manuscript, which he explains was sent to him in 1837 by Friedrich Mossdorf (1757–1843) via J. K. A. Fischer in Altenburg. Kloss also notes that Mossdorf received the manuscript from Ignatius Aurelius Fessler (1756–1839). See MS 266 VII a. 1, p. 1. For alternative manuscript copies in Berlin, see Secret State Archives of Prussian Cultural Heritage, FM 5.2. R31 No. 236 (originally from the Inseparabilis Provincial Order Chapter in Rostock) and FM 5.2. A. 8 No. 628 (originally from the Archimedes zu den drei Reissbretern Lodge in Altenburg). For a description of the fourth and fifth degrees, *Zwey schottische grade des russischen systems unter des russischen Systems unter Melissino*. Lanskoii and Eshevskii Collection, F. 147, No. 346, Russian State Library, Moscow.

¹⁸ Masson 1802, 346.

by exclaiming his “great practice with scientific theory” in all aspects of the arts and sciences.¹⁹ Melissino is also lauded for having “cultivated literature” and for having a “decided taste for the French theatre”, as well as being fluent in numerous European languages.²⁰ The Frenchman also commends Melissino on his “gallant and magnificent” comportment, which ensured that he was a prominent figure in Petersburg society during Catherine II’s reign. Very similar testimony of Melissino’s “many gifts” was offered by Sergei Alekseevich Tuchkov (1767–1839) in 1789, when he was then serving under Melissino during the Russo-Swedish War (1788–1790).²¹ Moreover, in 1777 the French chargé d’affaires in St. Petersburg, Marie-Daniel Bourée, Baron de Corberon (1748–1810), of whom we shall hear more of below, wrote in his diary that Melissino was “a very amiable man, industrious, full of taste, talented”.²²



*Петръ Ивановичъ
Мелиссино, 1726-1797*

*Pierre Ivanowitch
Mélissino, 1726-1797*

Fig. 1 Portrait of P. I. Melissino in Nikolai Mikhailovich Romanov, *Russkie portrety XVIII i XIX stoletii*, vol. 5, part 2 (St. Petersburg: Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gosudarstvennykh bumag 1909), plate 35.

¹⁹ Masson 1802, 339.

²⁰ Masson 1802, 339–340. Masson mentions that Melissino was fluent in Russian, German, Italian, French, Greek, Latin and English.

²¹ Tuchkov 1908, 26–27. The similarity between Masson’s account and that of Tuchkov is so great that it seems highly probable that one author borrowed from the other (most likely Masson from Tuchkov).

²² Corberon 1901, 295.

One would be hard pushed to discover more persuasive evidence of Melissino's prestige in Petersburg society than the testimony of the famed Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798). On arrival in St. Petersburg in December 1764, the Venetian adventurer quickly presented Melissino with a letter of introduction. Thenceforth, Casanova was invited to sup with Melissino every night of his stay in the Russian capital.²³ Besides these pleasantries, Casanova also escorted Melissino to an Epiphany celebration in 1765, as well as to a military review and a banquet.²⁴ In other words, Melissino was deemed perfectly placed to introduce Casanova to the full range of Petersburg's cultural life: the splendour of a religious ceremony, the discipline of a military display and the air of sumptuousness and excess that attended the epitome of aristocratic associational culture: the lavish feast.

P. I. Melissino's eminence in Petersburg society in the 1760s stemmed in large measure from the first-rate education he received over a period of fifteen years. On April 15, 1735, at the age of nine, Melissino entered the gymnasium of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg.²⁵ Five years later he began his studies at the prestigious Noble Cadet Corps (*Sukhoputnyi shliakhetnyi korpus*) – “the glorious cradle of many heroes and notable men of Russia”.²⁶

Melissino was the son of a Cephalonian physician, Ivan Afanas'evich (d. 1758), who began to serve in the Russia Empire during the reign of Peter the Great and rose to become the Vice-President of the Commerce College in the 1740s.²⁷ According to E. R. Ol'khovskii, I. A. Melissino organised receptions at his St. Petersburg residence in the 1730s in order to provide a conducive intellectual milieu for his children.²⁸

²³ Casanova 2004, 2158.

²⁴ Casanova 2004, 2160–2161, 2178.

²⁵ *Materialy dlia istorii imperatorskoi akademii nauk (1731–1735)* 1886, 851. Melissino is registered at No. 427 (as Peter Johan Ernst Melissino) in the “General List of Students of the Gymnasium” (*General'nyi spisok uchenikov gimnazii*). The entry also reveals that Melissino was born in Courland.

²⁶ Viskovatov 1832, 28.

²⁷ In October 1742, I. A. Melissino formed part of a two-man committee commissioned to inspect the foreign literature of the library of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. See *Materialy dlia istorii imperatorskoi akademii nauk (1742–1743)* 1889, 388, 417, 427, 431, 695, 849, 944. In 1745, as an assessor of the State Justice College, I. A. Melissino was also the leading member of a commission charged with undertaking a revision of the library and kunstkamera of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. On his inspection of the library and kunstkamera, which met with opposition from a number of professors, see *Materialy dlia istorii imperatorskoi akademii nauk (1744–1745)* 1895, 420–421, 423, 558, 599, 611–613, 624; *Materialy dlia istorii imperatorskoi akademii nauk (1746–1747)* 1895, 17, 19, 130, 147. On I. A. Melissino's role as Vice-President of the Commerce College and the promotion of trade with the Levant, Greece and Italy via the Mediterranean Sea and Black Sea in 1741, see *Dokumenty ob ustanovlenii priamykh russko-ital'ianskikh torgovykh sviazei v sereдинe XVIII veka* 1972, 90–93. Melissino had an elder brother, Ivan Ivanovich Melissino (1718–1795), who enjoyed a successful career as the director of Moscow University (1757–1763), the Attorney General of the Holy Synod (1763–1768) and the Curator of Moscow University from 1771 until his death. For more on I. I. Melissino, see Kochetkova and Moiseeva 1999. Available online at: <http://www.pushkinskijdom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=1021> [accessed January 3, 2013].

²⁸ Ol'khovskii 2003, 105.

On graduating from the Cadet Corps in 1750, Melissino remained at the institution in the rank of Second Lieutenant (*podporuchik*). By 1756 Melissino had already risen to the rank of Captain. During this time Melissino played a pivotal role in the burgeoning theatre troupe that was established in 1750, by an official decree issued by Empress Elizabeth.²⁹ Hence, in February 1750 he performed the role of Kiia in a performance of the tragedy *Khorev*, by A. P. Sumarokov (1717–1777).³⁰ Thereafter, he continued to participate in and oversee various theatrical productions.³¹

Melissino went on to enjoy an outstanding military career. Recognition of his talents culminated in 1796, when he was appointed by Emperor Paul as the first General of the Artillery. Prior to this Melissino had served with honour in various military campaigns (The Seven Years' War, the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774 and the Russo-Swedish War of 1788–1790). Moreover, in 1783, Melissino was appointed the Director of the Artillery and Engineering Noble Cadet Corps.³²

By the late 1750s, Melissino had also begun to display a decided talent for pyrotechnics. At this time, for example, he collaborated with St. Petersburg's chief apothecary, Johann Georg Model (1711–1775), in creating a recipe for green fire.³³ According to Fyodor Cheleev, writing in 1824, Melissino discovered from “what nature has up to this time hidden from us [...] a spirituous green fire—and composed from it a representation of palm trees”.³⁴ Melissino's pyrotechnical ingenuity did not go unobserved by Catherine II, whose coronation in Moscow in September 1762 was accompanied by a firework display that he masterminded and that included his flaming green palm trees (see Fig. 2 below).³⁵

²⁹ Viskovatov 1832, 26; Petrovskaia and Somina 1994, 36–37.

³⁰ Viskovatov 1832, 26; Ol'khovskii 2003, 106.

³¹ Viskovatov 1832, 26–28; Petrovskaia and Somina 1994, 38.

³² *Voennyi entsiklopedicheskii leksikon* 1844, 613–614.

³³ In around 1759, Melissino also began studying pyrotechnics with Giuseppe Sarti. See Stählin 1990, 261; Werrett 2010, 165.

³⁴ For a description of Melissino's recipe for green fire see Cheleev 1824, 229–230. Also see Werrett 2010, 230.

³⁵ Werrett 2010, 166. Melissino's prodigious pyrotechnical expertise continued to be employed by the Imperial family for a variety of spectacular ceremonies until September 1796. In the final years of his life alone, for example, he devised firework displays to celebrate the peace with Sweden in 1790, as well as the marriages of grand princes Aleksandr Pavlovich and Konstantin Pavlovich in 1793 and 1796 respectively. See *Opisanie feirverka po okonchaniu torzhestva na sluchai zakliuchennago mira mezhdū e.i.v Ekaterinoiu Vtoroiu i e.v. Gustavom Tret'im korolem shvedskim 1790*; *Opisanie feirverka, pri torzhestve brakosochetaniia ikh imp. Vysochestv gosudaria velikago kniazia Aleksandr Pavlovicha i gosudaryni velikiia kniagini Elisavet Alekseevny: Predstavlennago v Sanktpeterburge na Tsaritsyni lugu, okniabia dnia 1793 goda 1793*; *Opisanie feirverka, pri torzhestve brakosochetaniia ikh imp. Vysochestv gosudaria velikago kniazia Konstantina Pavlovicha i gosudaryni velikiia kniagini Anny Feodorovny: Predstavlennago v Sanktpeterburge, na Never eke, fevralia dnia 1796 goda 1796*. The final firework display planned by Melissino took place on September 1, 1796 (the old Russian New Year). For a description, see *Opisanie feirverka, dannago v Sanktpeterburge na Tsaritsinskom lugu, 1 sentiabria 1796 goda 1796*.

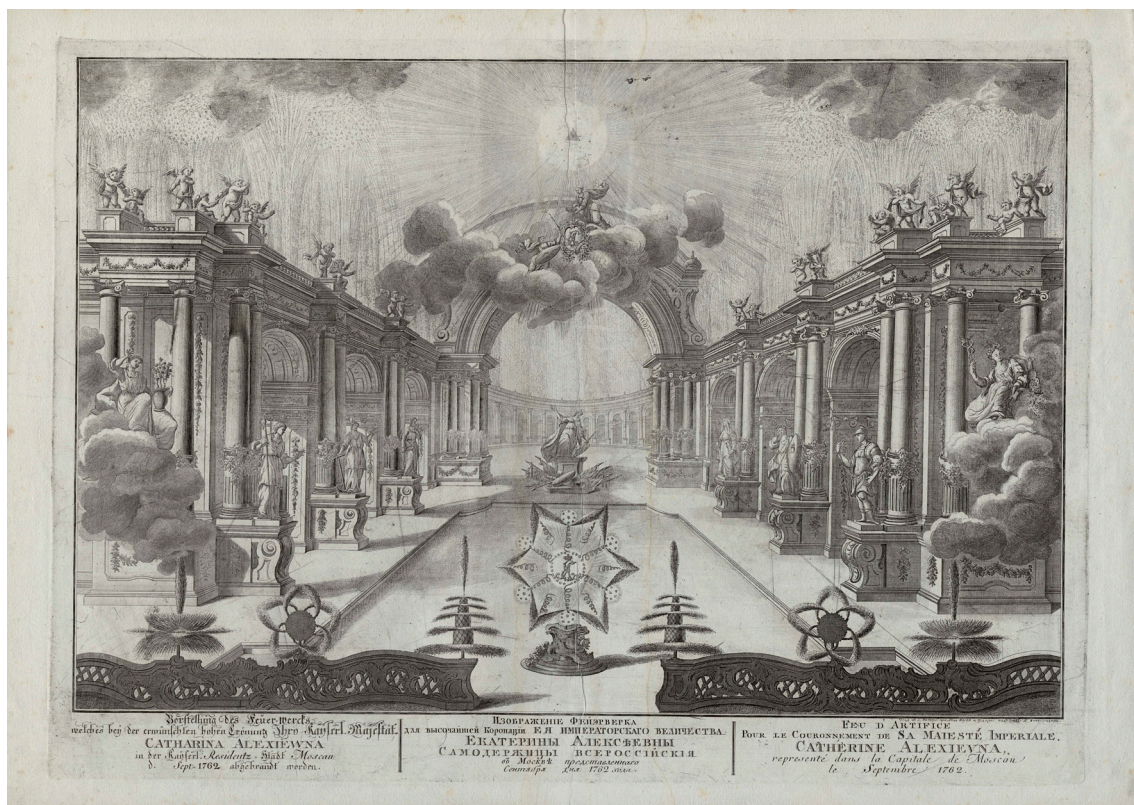


Fig. 2 E. G. Vinogradov, *Izobrazhenie feiervverka dlia vysochaishei koronatsii eia imperatorskago velichestva Ekateriny Alekseevny camoderzhitsy vserossiiskiiia v Moskve predstavlennago sentiabria dnia 1762 goda*, Russian State Library, Moscow, Shch83(2Ros)4l61.

Whilst Catherine II's coronation provided a grand stage for Melissino to display his skills in chemistry and pyrotechnics in an official capacity, it would seem that he also used his time in the old capital to seek out an alchemical adept who was willing to divulge his knowledge of *la science Hermétique*. Such a scenario is revealed by Corberon, who on May 5, 1776 wrote down the following story in his private *Journal* that had been recited by Melissino over dinner in St. Petersburg:

14 years ago g[ener]al Melissino found in Moscow at the coronation [of Catherine II] a man who showed him much knowledge in *le but hermétique*. This man let Melissino watch his work and operations. Melessino was a diligent audience. After some time, Melissino had to join the army and he left his friend to continue his operation. However, after a while he received a letter from this friend telling him that he had failed, but that he would try again. I do not know after what interval Melissino, who was still in the army, went to meet his friend, who, seeing him in one piece, said: congratulate me as I will congratulate you: I succeeded and you are on the right path. Indeed, this man in front of him transmuted lead into gold with a mysterious red powder that he had in a small pot. After seeing this operation his friend gave him a phial of *esprit de vin rectifié blanc*, in which

he put a piece of this powder which at once made the elixir the same beautiful red that he had seen before. Melissino always carries this red powder with him, thinking that the use of it from time to time keeps him healthy and vigorous.

In September 1780, prior to leaving Russia, Corberon noted in his *Journal* that he had sought to meet Melissino's alchemical tutor. He refers to the alchemist as "du docteur Kerstniz, médecin de Moscou", but was unsuccessful in his endeavour as the physician no longer resided in Russia.³⁶ The additional information provided by Corberon strongly suggests that the alchemist in question was Dr. Johann Christian Kerstens (1713–1802). In 1760 the German physician was appointed the first professor of medicine, chemistry, natural history and physics at Moscow University; a post he held until December 1769, when he returned to Germany and took up a position at the University of Kiel.³⁷

As will be discussed below, Melissino's tale of transmutation fascinated Corberon and underpinned his own enthusiastic embrace of Illuminist freemasonry in Russia and later France. By documenting that Melissino's passion for alchemy dated back to at least 1762, Corberon also helps us to understand why this respected Russian official would chose to disregard Catherine's prescribed Enlightenment narrative by developing a high-degree rite of Illuminist freemasonry.

The Melissino Rite and Illuminism in Russia, c. 1765–1782

On May 5, 1782, as Grand Master of the *Loge der Verschwiegenheit* in St. Petersburg, Melissino published an open letter in German to his fellow brethren.³⁸ This unprecedented action – unique in the history of Russian freemasonry – was prompted by Melissino's decision to cease lodge meetings. According to Melissino, the catalyst for closing one of Russia's oldest lodges stemmed from the proclamation on April 8, 1782 of the Ordinance of Good Order, or "Police" Code (*Ustav blagochiniia, ili politseiskii*).³⁹ More specifically, Melissino cited Article 65 as the pretext for his decision, which outlined the following:

³⁶ Corberon, *Journal* MS 3059, p. 360.

³⁷ For more on Kerstens, see von Richter 1817, 342–343.

³⁸ Melissino 1782. In Russian the lodge was known as *Lozha molchalivosti* (Lodge of Discretion) and alternatively as *Lozha skromnosti* (Lodge of Modesty).

³⁹ On the law code, see Pinigin 2004.

The city's authority of order [namely, the police] by law does not recognise the validity of any unsanctioned association, fraternity or any other similar assembly (under whatever name it exists), if these [organizations] appear to have obligations, rules, provisions or by-laws, then none [of them] should be considered; if such a society, association, fraternity or any other similar assembly inflicts harm, damage or losses to the common good; or if [it] is useless, then it will be subject to elimination and prohibition.⁴⁰

This edict, issued to the Russian Senate in the name of Catherine the Great, was evidently perceived by Melissino as a test of loyalty: was his sense of duty and obedience to the sovereign more important to him than his position as one of the leading freemasons in Russia? Nearly four weeks after the announcement of the new legal ordinance, Melissino decided to publicly declare his allegiance to the monarch:

The conscientious observation of the duties towards one's Superior and one's fatherland leads us to focus our most accurate attention on the decrees prescribed by the highest legislative power, and to the holiest obedience of orders; yes, if it were possible, we as true subjects should even anticipate the supreme Will: at the very least the punishments announced by the Law in the case of violation, should never affect us, as a result of non-observation.⁴¹

Melissino felt duty bound by the enactment of the new Police Code to "suspend the meetings of our Lodge until we are convinced that in continuing them we shall not become transgressors of the laws set down by the Most Wise Monarch".⁴²

Yet, the promulgation of the Police Code alone does not fully explain Melissino's dramatic response. After all, no other masonic grandees in Russia interpreted the new legal code as necessitating the closure of other lodges. To be sure, Melissino showed prescience in his awareness of the civic dilemma posed by the new Police Code, but his decision was also based on an acute sense of disillusionment at the current state of freemasonry within Russia:

⁴⁰ See Law 15,379 in *Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiiskoi imperii* 1830, 467.

⁴¹ Melissino 1782, 5.

⁴² Melissino 1782, 5–6.

As beautiful as the red dawn of Freemasonry was in this sky, so did self-interest, mistrust and presumptuous wisdom, like a thick fog, impede the full serene ascent of the sun.

These vices, mothers of Partisanship and Sectarianism, crept into the Order, gave birth to children so much like them: Enmity and Calumny, which shattered the bonds of the union, parted company with the goal [of the Order], destroyed its profit, and drew down the jeers of others upon themselves. There was talk of nothing else amongst Freemasons but of Observances and Systems, and every observance and every system had its own purpose; although, Truth can have but one form.

Melissino's bitter pronouncements against Masonic sectarianism reveal the sentiments of a man who had devoted much of his adult life to promoting freemasonry in Russia. As he himself explains:

You know, my Brothers! how much I have endeavoured to draw the □ [Lodge of Discretion] closer to the aim of freemasonry; not labours of one day, nor of one year seemed to me to be sufficient to give the members of the □ [Lodge] the basic training of a Mason: No, for one part of my life I had pleasure in occupying myself with this increasingly attractive aim.

Melissino here expresses the pivotal role played by the associational culture of freemasonry in his life. To be sure, many aspects of the fraternal sociability offered by freemasonry blended seamlessly into the various spheres of Melissino's life: as an officer, a connoisseur of the arts and sciences and as a consummate performer among the social milieu of the Petersburg elite. Indeed, it is important to stress that many elements of freemasonry in Russia – as practised by Melissino and many others – did not contradict, and often even promoted, the dominant Catherinian Enlightenment narrative.

It is not known when Melissino was initiated into freemasonry, but his name appears third on the list of one of the earliest documents relating to the fraternity in the country, dating from 1756.⁴³ No lodge name is recorded, but the overwhelming majority of the brethren were officers in the Cadets Corps or cavalry and infantry regiments, suggesting a military orientation. Melissino was also the Master of the military Lodge of Mars in Jassy (in modern-day Romania), which was established during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774.⁴⁴

⁴³ Tikhonravov 1862, 51.

⁴⁴ The precise date of the foundation of the Lodge of Mars is not known, but Melissino is noted as its Grand Master in a letter to the Lodge of Urania in St. Petersburg, dated December 28, 1773. See Pypin 1916, 551.

By the mid-1770s, Melissino felt entirely at ease in openly flaunting his status as Grand Master of the Lodge of Discretion (an ironic name in many respects) at lavish masonic festivities in St. Petersburg, which were attended by invited (non-masonic) guests. One such event took place in the summer of 1775 and was described by the mathematician and astronomer Johann Albrecht Euler (1734–1800):

After dinner, that is to say at 10 o'clock, we went straight to Kammenyi Ostrov, where the freemasons gave the best fête in the world. General Melissino of the artillery, who is Grand Master of the lodge was at the head. There was a grand banquet and masked ball [...] [and] a sumptuous and magnificent firework display, which lasted from 11.30 pm until 12.30 am.⁴⁵

It is not hard to imagine Melissino being in his element at this society event, which provides rare evidence of masonic activity in Russia outside the confines of the lodge. After all, this festivity allowed Melissino to proudly proclaim his status as a leading freemason to Petersburg society, whilst also demonstrating his pyrotechnical wizardry and his ability to host a grand entertainment to the discerning Petersburg aristocracy.

It would seem Melissino and his fellow brethren of the Lodge of Discretion were also proud of their musical culture, judging by the publication in 1777 of a selection of lieder and a cantata.⁴⁶ Moreover, not only were the freemasons keen to demonstrate their vocal and lyrical abilities, but they also wanted to pronounce their devotion to the Empress. The first song in the collection, for example, proclaims their loyalty to the monarch in its exhortation “Hail thee, Catherine! The Fatherland’s delight!”⁴⁷

Songs and speeches in praise of Catherine, masquerades, society banquets and spectacular firework displays hardly contravened the legal stipulations of Article 65 of the Police Code, or fanned the flames of masonic discord. In effect this exoteric dimension of The Lodge of Discretion represented the three Craft Degrees (Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason). This outward face of the lodge presented the brethren as moral and virtuous pillars of Catherine’s

45 Letter from Johann Albrecht Euler to Samuel Formey, 24 July/ 5 August 1775, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriften-abteilung. Also see Beaurepaire 2007, 48.

46 *Freymäurerlieder zum Gebrauch der E. Loge der Verschwiegenheit in St. 1777*. The collection contains 23 songs and 1 cantata.

47 *Freymäurerlieder zum Gebrauch der E. Loge der Verschwiegenheit 1777*, 1. In 1781, a selection of speeches delivered at the Lodge of Modesty was also published in St. Petersburg. See Beer 1781.

realm, whose refined manners and appreciation of the arts and sciences were shining examples to their peers. However, the higher degrees of the innovative Melissino Rite (The Dark Vault, Scottish Master and Knight, Philosophers' Degree and Magnus Sacerdos Templarior[um]), which increasingly embraced an Illuminist outlook, certainly did run counter to the Enlightenment vision cherished by Catherine *and* the masonic ideals of many Russian freemasons.

The exact date when the high-degree Melissino System began to be practiced within the Lodge of Discretion is not known, although 1765 is cited in various sources.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the foundation date of the lodge itself is not known for sure, although in 1836 the German freemason Christian von Nettelbladt claimed that it was established in 1750.⁴⁹ Moreover, frustratingly little is known about the possible influence on Melissino of the freemason Baron Théodore Henri de Tschoudy (1727–1769), from Metz, who spent between 1752–1755 and 1757–1760 in St. Petersburg.⁵⁰ In 1766, Tschoudy published *L'Étoile Flamboyante*, in which he expounded his eponymously titled masonic system that, in short, mixed esotericism (especially Hermetism and alchemy) and Templar symbolism. In this work, Tschoudy includes a speech he delivered at “la loge S. T. à Pétersbourg” in March 1760.⁵¹ It has recently been claimed (without substantiating evidence) that the lodge in question was *Le Silence*, or in other words the Lodge of Discretion.⁵² If so, then this lodge provided a highly productive crucible for the development of Illuminism in Russia. Whatever the case, one can conclude that the masonic milieu in St. Petersburg in the late 1750s and early 1760s proved to be fertile ground for the growth of Illuministic freemasonry – as fashioned by both Melissino and Tschoudy.⁵³

This is most strikingly shown in the seventh degree – referred to as the “First Grade of the Invisible Chapter, or Clerical Office” in the Kloss manuscript – which reveals the extent to which elect initiates of the Melissino System embraced esoteric philosophy in order to pursue their own

48 See Lenning 1824, 460; Pypin 1916, 118.

49 *Kalender für die Provinzial-Loge von Mecklenburg* 1837, 73. Also see *Allgemeines Handbuch der Freimaurerei* 1865, 107; Serkov 2001, 965–966.

50 On Tschoudy's career in Russia, see Rzheutskii 2010, 91–124.

51 Baron de Tschoudy 1766, 35–40.

52 Hally 2000, 105–112. Available online at <http://sog1.free.fr/ArtHally200Tschoudy.htm> [accessed January 9, 2013].

53 One can also see clear similarities between Melissino's Conclave and Johann August Starck's development of his *Clericat* form of Templarism in around 1767, which was also saturated with alchemical symbolism. Starck was resident in St. Petersburg between 1763 and 1765, where he was employed as a teacher at the Protestant St. Petrischule. Starck always maintained that he came into contact with advocates of the clerical Templar system in St. Petersburg, but never mentioned Melissino. Whilst it may be impossible to prove any definitive link between the Melissino Rite and Starck's *Clericat*, it is, nevertheless, clear that St. Petersburg acted as a fertile breeding ground for such Illuminist currents in the 1760s. For a description of the seventh degree of Starck's *Clericat*, see Wöllner 1803, 213–276. For a general analysis of Starck's rite, see Telepneff 1929, 239, 241.

path towards truth and knowledge. Christian rituals, ceremonial garb and Scriptural citations are also an intrinsic part of this highest degree, thereby constituting a complimentary system to established churches, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant.

Whilst the seventh degree will be focused upon in this article, as it embodies by far the fullest and most profound expression of Illuminism (and is arguably the most innovative), a brief overview of the fourth to sixth degrees is worthwhile in order to contextualize the ascent towards the Invisible Chapter. The fourth degree of ‘The Dark Vault’ concentrates on symbols and rituals associated with the legend of Hiram Abiff. The allegorical re-enactment of the death and burial of Hiram, who had been the master mason at work on the construction of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, plays an intrinsic role in the ritual of the third (fellowcraft) degree of Craft freemasonry.⁵⁴

In the ‘Dark Vault’ degree the Hiram legend remains pivotal.⁵⁵ The rite is overseen by a freemason entitled “Master Gabaon”, who elucidates to candidates the significance of being selected to be a “Chosen Master”.⁵⁶ Hence, as part of the ritual included in the fourth oath of the degree, “Master Gabaon” narrates how Solomon initially selected nine of his most trustworthy master masons to search for the slain Hiram.⁵⁷ Moreover, “Master Gabaon” emphasizes the centrality of death for Chosen Masters in their efforts to achieve perfection.⁵⁸

The fifth degree of ‘Scottish Master and Knight’ is redolent of a number of contemporary chivalric masonic rites that espoused a mythical Templar genealogy, of which the most notable was the Order of Strict Observance, which was founded by Karl Gotthelf von Hund (1722–1776).⁵⁹ The crux of the Scottish Templar legend, as demonstrated in the Melissino Rite, is that a band of Master Masons took it upon themselves to bring “the body of Hiram and the Treasure [of the Temple] to Scotland”.⁶⁰ Thereafter this hardy band of Masonic-Templar brothers supposedly established new lodges, in which initiates were exhorted to display “similar loyalty and zeal”.⁶¹

54 On the importance of the Hiram legend in English and French Freemasonry, see Snoek 2003, 11–53.

55 See Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 1–15.

56 On the use of *Gabaon* as a designation of a Master Mason in some eighteenth-century French Masonic rituals, see Morris and Sereiski 2004, 186, fn. 18.

57 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 10.

58 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 9.

59 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 16–35. On the Templar legends in high-degree freemasonry in the eighteenth century, see Mollier 2006, 849–853.

60 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 29.

61 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 35.

The description of the sixth ‘Philosophers’ degree’ is relatively short.⁶² A key aspect of this degree centres on testing an initiate “as to whether he is sufficiently instructed in the secrets of the Chamber of Wisdom”.⁶³ If so, then the new “philosopher” is encouraged to “go forward and discover for yourself our hieroglyphs”!⁶⁴ The catechism in this degree also emphasizes how the initiate has been born-again and is ready to contribute towards the goal of freemasonry to restore the Golden Age.⁶⁵

Thirty-six pages (out of 82) of the Melissino System manuscript in The Hague are devoted to describing the seventh degree and are entitled the “Proceedings of the Induction of a High Priest of the Templars, which follows the Chapter Degree and is called the First Degree of the Invisible Chapter, or Clerical Office”. These proceedings are divided, appropriately, into seven sections: (1) The Opening of the Conclave; (2) The Induction of the Candidate; (3) The Close of the Conclave; (4) The Conclave of Deliberation; (5) The Decoration of the Conclave; (6) Explanation of the First Mystical Tracing Board, by the Grand Deacon of the Chapter; and (7) Explanation of the Second Mystical Tracing Board, by the Grand Operator of the Conclave, who uncovers the magical and theosophical secrets to True Members of the Conclave.

The opening of each Conclave of the seventh degree of the Melissino Rite began with a dramatic rite that immediately illustrates the deeply theurgical nature of the Invisible Chapter. Led by an ordained priest of the Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant confessions, if present, or otherwise by the High Priest of the Conclave, the induction commenced with a rendition of the hymn “Veni, sancte spiritus”, which begins with the lines “Come, Holy Spirit, send forth the heavenly radiance of thy light”.⁶⁶ This Christian liturgical song – performed at Pentecost in Catholic churches –, which is uttered to bring forth the Holy Spirit, was then followed by the enactment of an ancient Jewish religious ritual – the blowing of the shofar, or Horn of Israel. In Jewish liturgical ritual, the shofar is sounded at the onset of Rosh Hashanah, which celebrates God’s creation of Adam and Eve.

In the Melissino Ritual, the sounding of the shofar is invested with Kabbalistic significance, in the spirit of the Lurianic tradition. Hence, either an ordained priest or the High Priest of the Conclave blows the horn seven times, using a specific sequence of sounds: (1) *teq’iah* flourish

62 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 37–46.

63 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 43.

64 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 43.

65 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 44.

66 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 47.

(1 blow); (2) *shevarim* flourishes; (3) *teru'ah* flourishes and (4) *teq'iah* flourish (1 blow). The High Priest then “strikes a blow with Aaron’s Rod”, which is described in the Old Testament (see Exodus 7 and Exodus 4:15–16), as possessing miraculous properties.⁶⁷ Immediately thereafter the congregation recited Psalm 47, which begins “O clap your hands, all ye people” in Latin, after which they all clapped seven times.⁶⁸ According to Gershom Scholem, the blowing of the shofar in Kabbalistic thought is associated with harmony between the rigid powers of judgement and the flowing powers of mercy, as well as defence against, or mastery over, the powers of the “other side”.⁶⁹

Following this powerful invocation of divine, creative forces, the High Priest then begins a catechism with the Grand Operator based on an exposition of the question: “What is the Conclave”? In answer, the Grand Operator replies that “it is a gathering of true pupils of the old philosophers, who in modern times have named themselves ‘Brothers of the Golden Rose Cross’, or also Clerics”.⁷⁰ Thus, the tone rather abruptly switches from Christian and Jewish liturgical rituals – imbued with Kabbalistic significance – to a discussion on the history and contemporary standing of Rosicrucianism. Significantly, the High Priest emphasizes how initiates of the seventh degree of the Melissino Rite are “true students” of the “old philosophers”, whereas self-proclaimed “Rosicrucians” merely represent various hues of charlatanism. Indeed, while the name “Brothers of the Rose Cross” is regarded as venerable, the Grand Secretary stated that it “was abused in times past by the most villainous people, who were simple chymical provincial tricksters”. Furthermore, the Grand Secretary adds that “in recent years a certain Rosenkreuz has set himself up, who has founded a society of so-called German Rosicrucians”. This would appear to be a direct reference to the contemporary Order of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz. Whilst it is stated that “it is true that these are not tricksters”, the Grand Secretary notes that “they have as little knowledge [of alchemy]” as the ‘provincial tricksters’ in that they neither have knowledge of “the true matter nor of the true work of the Royal Art”. A third class of Rosicrucians is also mentioned, who are said to have had “some superficial theoretical concepts of wisdom, but who were still very far removed from the true purpose”.⁷¹ In short, an initiate is made abundantly aware of the fact that the brethren of

67 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 47. The Director of a lodge belonging to the Order of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz also used an imitation of Aaron’s Rod during rituals. See Westlund 2007, available online at: <http://rosae-crucis.net/eng/resources/> [accessed on January 10, 2013].

68 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 48.

69 Scholem 1965, 130.

70 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 48.

71 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 48.

the seventh degree of the Melissino Rite are the only legitimate conveyors of the truth of the “old philosophers”.

Having established the superiority of the Melissino Rite over Rosicrucian societies, the High Priest moves onto an epistemic theory of truth as the basis of the “true secret of the Conclave”. Thus, in reply to the question of “What is truth”? it is stated that the answer is “The understanding of God and all of the natural world”. This epistemic theory is enveloped in alchemical symbolism, although “common chymistry is of no use at all”. Rather, alchemy here serves as a means of understanding God’s actions in creating the world. Hence, God is envisaged as the ultimate alchemist, who initially formed the “dark chaos which consisted of troubled water and fire”. Subsequently, “the Spirit of God hovered over the waters”, begetting “the light”, which he then divided “into the pure and impure”, with the former being used to create the sky and the latter “the volcanic matter of the globe, which through being burnt to ashes becomes the earth”.⁷²

The opening catechism then proclaims the divine powers inherent in man, who is “created in the image of God and has his origin from out of him” and “the matter from which he takes his birth God himself has purified”. Accordingly, as man “is made from the purest part of the earth [...]” and as his body is an “anatomy of the world” he is able to grasp both the “harmonic proportion of the building that is the world” and “the geometric calculation of his vessel (the vessel of the philosopher [or, in other words, alchemist])”. The High Priest concludes the catechism with the call to his fellow clerics to “Let us fashion this light of wisdom with our hands, and in following the example of the Lord of Hosts create a small world and in his Thrice Holy Name open the Conclave of Wisdom”.⁷³

The opening of the Conclave concludes with the High Priest once again striking Aaron’s Rod and then beckoning the clerics to approach him in order to receive the blessing and to kiss the Cross that hangs upon his chest. Next follows a lengthy description of the initiation ceremony of a candidate cleric. After preparing the initiate in the appropriate vestments, the candidate enters the Conclave, during which time the brethren exclaim in Latin: “Behold! A priest of the Templars who is approaching the Altar of the Lord with full humility of heart, putting off all vanities that are in this world, that he might acquire wisdom!”

⁷² Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 49.

⁷³ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 50–51. On the alchemical vessel as a symbol of the soul, see McLean 1986, available online at <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/vessel.html> [accessed January 10, 2013].

The initial phase of the candidate's induction – conducted in both Latin and Hebrew – invokes passages from the New Testament related to the Transfiguration and from both books of the Bible related to purification. Whilst receiving the long white vestment denoting the candidate's imminent status as a cleric, for example, the Grand Deacon commands “Receive this vestment of wisdom, that thou be radiant before the Lord, and thy countenance shall be as white as snow”. This passage draws on Matthew 17:2, which describes the Transfiguration and how Christ's “face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was as white as the light”. The initiation ritual also draws on the account of the cleansing of a leper in the Jordan (see Luke 4:27 and 2 Corinthians 5:1–14), as well as paraphrasing Psalm 51: “Thou shalt wash me, o Lord, and I shall be whitened beyond the snow.”⁷⁴

After being symbolically purified, the inductee is then deemed ready to receive the chrism, or in other words the gift of the Holy Spirit: “Lord my God, may thy holy blessing descend from heaven upon this oil, that our brother can be anointed with this holy chrism and can through Christ our Lord receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, together with the gift of sanctity and wisdom.” A symbolic re-enactment of the trial of Christ before Pilate ensues, with various pronouncements from Matthew (27:17, 27:21, 27:23). Moreover, when in front of the Conclave's altar, the Preparer “put the reed of *Ecce homo*, known amongst us as *Jamsuph*, into the Candidate's hand”.⁷⁵ Once again, the Melissino Rite blends Christian and Kabbalistic symbolism. Thus, the reed is linked to the one given to Christ by Pilate, as well as the Red Sea (*Yam Suf* in Hebrew), which in *The Zohar* is described as “the Sea of the End” and as Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812) states “serves as a screen which separates the World of Emanation from the next World, the Word of Creation”.⁷⁶

Various insults are then heaped upon the candidate by numerous clerics: he is, for example, a blasphemer, “he hath spoken evil of the High Priest”, has “spoken unjust things against the ruler of the country”, has been “a traitor to his native country” and “hath perjured against the sacred Order”. Due to the candidate confessing to this multitude of sins, he is allowed to be ordained (after having been degraded further by being thrown onto his belly on a straw mattress).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 54. Psalm 51 reads: “wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.”

⁷⁵ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 55.

⁷⁶ Zalman 1807. Available online at: <http://www.ascentofsafed.com/Teachings/Advanced/Holidays/Rothschild/pesach7-rsz-dr.html> [accessed January 10, 2013].

⁷⁷ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 55–56.

Having successfully endured his ritual degradation, the candidate swears the oath, after which the High Priest gives him the sign, grip and words of the degree. The latter include Harris and Aumont (as well as David and Jonathan), thereby emphasizing the continued Templar elements in the Rite. Thus, according to Templar legend, Pierre d'Aumont, the Provincial Grand Master of Auvergne, fled to Scotland in 1313 in the face of persecution in the France of Philip IV, where he was met by George Harris, the Grand Commander of the Order.⁷⁸

Next, the new initiate is led by the Preparer before a table on which lies the masonic tracing board covered with a linen sheet and adorned with a red cross. The tracing board is then uncovered and the High Priest expounds upon the esoteric laws preserved by the Order since antiquity:

We, High Priest and Knights Templar, have received, handed down to us by three pupils of Pythagoras and Zeno [...] the hermetic-cabbalistic science and the secret of the divine magic. The Order and the Laws of our Sacred Conclave command that we convey our sciences to only a few Chosen Ones of our Chapter, so that secrets of such importance shall not be profaned.

Since, however, at the moment the perfect number for the Orient of Russia is incomplete, we have chosen you [...] to assume a place amongst the number of Chosen Ones of our Conclave in our Invisible Chapter, and to obtain from the Very Worshipful Grand Deacon and Grand Operator all the light and all the theosophical, cabbalistic and hermetic knowledge, which you are now qualified to receive. Receive these same things with proper deference and reflect most profoundly on them, while you praise God, the All-powerful, who has hidden the greatest marvels of nature in such an insignificant object that is hidden from the greater part of humankind.⁷⁹

Here we have a quintessential justification for the esoteric passing down of knowledge, wholly in the spirit of Matthew 7:6, which warns against casting pearls before swine.

The induction of the candidate begins to draw to a close when the High Priest once again blows the shofar seven times (whilst all brothers fall to their knees). The ten clerics participating in the induction then call out the following ten names: (1) Shekhinah; (2) Metatron; (3) Meschiah; (4) Yinnon; (5) Zemach; (6) Menachem; (7) David; (8) Shiloh; (9) Elias and (10) Yesod.⁸⁰ These names

⁷⁸ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 59.

⁷⁹ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 60.

⁸⁰ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 62–63. The manuscript gives alternative spellings (Schechina, Finnon, Schiloch and Jesod) for the first, fourth, eighth and tenth names.

accord with Jewish titles of the Messiah. Seven of these names (with the exception of Shekhinah, Metatron and Yesod) are referred to by Ravi Huna.⁸¹ Moreover, *The Zohar* also contains passages in which the names Metatron and Shekhinah are synonymous with the Messiah, whilst Elliot Wolfson notes that the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, an early Jewish mystical text, underscores “the correlation of the masculine *Yesod* and the Messiah”.⁸² One can also read Kabbalistic significance into the pronouncement of ten names of the messiah, which suggests a link to the ten sephiroth (of which more below).

The initiation concludes with the formal investiture of the candidate, which includes a “magico-theosophical” priestly cross of the Templars, “made up from four Hebraic Daleths” and a “laurel-wreath of wisdom”. The High Priest also tied a “Priestly Crown around the Candidate’s head [and placed] upon it a wreath of laurel”.⁸³

The Conclave itself nears its close with a final seven blows of the shofar and the pounding of Aaron’s Rod, after which the High Priest addresses the Preparer as to whether “there is an exact connection between God and man”? In reply the Treasurer answers: “Indeed, for all the strengths of God are in him, and just as we have the structure of the Sephiroth on our emblem, so also do they exist in [the] man.” Asked by the High Priest to expand upon this Kabbalistic understanding, the Treasurer adds: “Hidden in the head is the EnSoph [sic], and the remaining parts of his body are formed completely according to the Cabbalistic structure.”⁸⁴ The Treasurer is here referring to the depiction of Adam Kadmon (Primordial Man) as the sephirothic tree of life.⁸⁵ Thus, we learn that the image of Adam Kadmon is actually the emblem of the clerics.

⁸¹ Buber 1893, 87; W. Hincks 1823, 647.

⁸² Hincks 1823, 647–648; Wolfson 1995, 83.

⁸³ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 64.

⁸⁴ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 66.

⁸⁵ On the significance of Adam Kadmon in Lurianic Kabbalah, see Scholem 1974, 137–142.

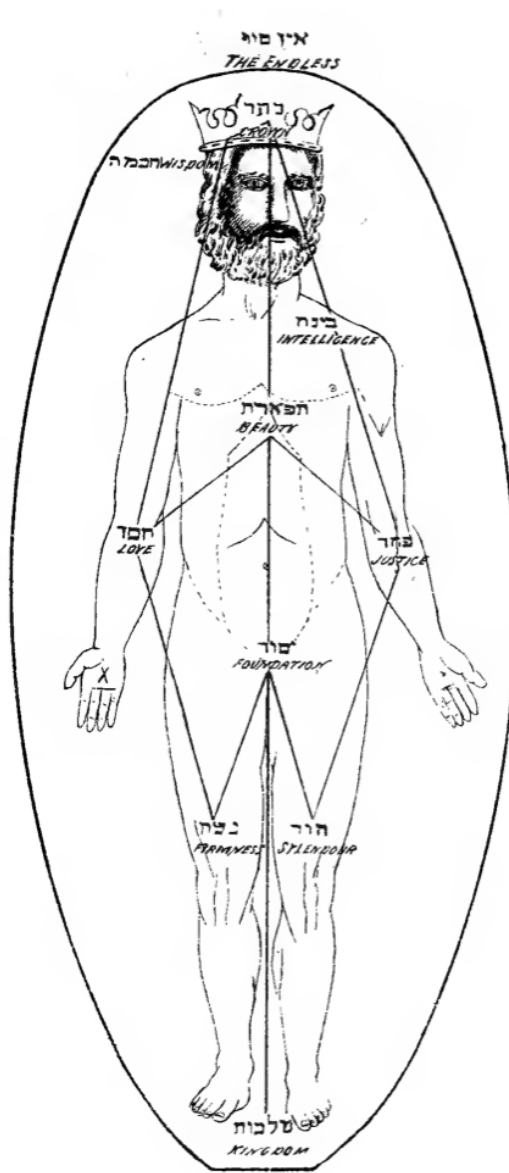


Fig. 3 Illustration of Adam Kadmon (Primordial Man). Source: Christian D. Ginzburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Learning* (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1920), 98–99.

Konstantin Burmistrov states that “Russian masons were particularly fascinated by the Kabbalistic concept of the primordial man, Adam Kadmon”.⁸⁶ He has in mind, in particular, the copious notes of Ivan P. Elagin (1725–1793), dating from the 1780s, which frequently contemplate the significance and symbolism of Adam Kadmon.⁸⁷ Yet, whilst the Elagin notebooks are interesting, they only amount to philosophical musings. The Melissino Rite, on the other hand, actively incorporated Adam Kadmon as an emblem many years earlier, and invoked his significance in the rituals pertaining to the closing of the Conclave.

⁸⁶ Burmistrov 2010, f. 86. The Order of Gold- und Rosenkreuz also drew on the symbolism of Adam Kadmon in the fifth degree of their order. See Beyer 1925, 210; McIntosh 2011, 73.

⁸⁷ See Elagin notebooks f. 68.

The Conclave also concludes with a reaffirmation of the belief in the alchemical dynamic at work in nature and the cosmos. The High Priest asks, for example, “What arises from the human being when he dies”? The reply comes that he is reborn, “for through putrefaction worms grow from his body”. Next, in reply to the question of how “his rebirth and transfiguration are brought about”, the addressee responds that “every created being, including the Great Celestial Orbs themselves can reach no transfiguration without being burnt to dust and ashes”.⁸⁸

The fourth (and briefest) part of the description of the seventh degree concerns the so-called Conclave of Deliberation, which was held “whenever an extraordinary case demands the meeting of members”. On such an occasion, the Conclave was opened and closed in exactly the same manner as with the induction of a new candidate. However, the High Priest adds an astrological element when closing the meeting: “We have today completed our labours happily with the assistance of the 7 planetary rulers.”⁸⁹

Interestingly, the Kloss manuscript also contains a description of the how the Conclave was decorated during gatherings. First, it is significant that the manuscript stipulates that if possible ceremonial acts should always “be carried out in a church or consecrated chapel”.⁹⁰ Inside this sacred space, a white curtain, adorned with a cross composed of four black daleths (see Fig. 4 below), was hung in front of the altar.⁹¹

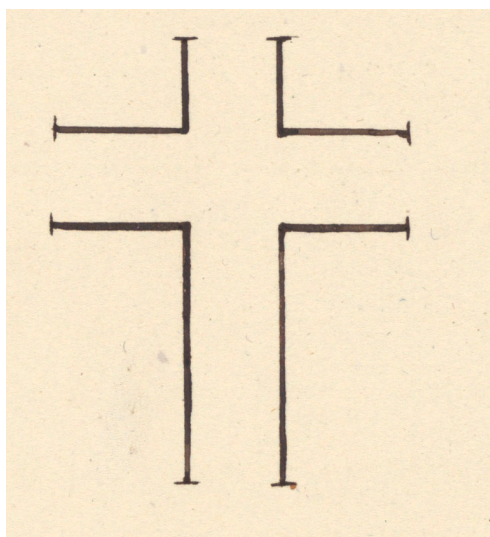


Fig. 4 Illustration of the Cross of Four Black Daleths, Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 69.

⁸⁸ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 67.

⁸⁹ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 68.

⁹⁰ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 68.

⁹¹ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f.68.

On the altar was placed the Bible (open at the Book of Revelation) and Aaron's Rod. On a small table, situated behind the altar, were placed a phial of oil, the *Yam Suf* and a washbasin. Crucially, the description of the decoration of the Conclave also notes that "in the middle of the sephiroth stands a small table, on which the carpets lie".⁹² That is to say, not only is the sephirotic image of Adam Kadmon the emblem of the Order, but the actual utilisation of space during a Conclave is also conceived of in terms of the ten sephiroth. Furthermore, it is explained that in "the Conclave members sit in the configuration of the sephiroth". Accordingly, it is stressed that "there must be no more than 10 Conclave members in a Conclave".⁹³

The importance attached to this Kabbalistic symbolism is elaborated in the next section, entitled "Explanation of the First Mystical Tracing Board by the Grand Deacon of the Chapter".⁹⁴ Herein, the Grand Deacon explained that the cause for the insistence on there only being 10 members of a Conclave is "a magical one", as "this Cabbala draws its origin from the word of God". Thus, "when men pleasing to God gather together in the number of 10, the spirit of God is in the midst of them, guides and blesses their steps". However, the Grand Deacon continues that if "there are fewer, then the Schechina (Shekhinah) moves away and their works are never blessed". Furthermore, the Grand Deacon explains that "where the spirit of man works, there the Metatron [sic] must be, to bless him".⁹⁵ As Andrei Orlov notes, *The Zohar* accords the angel Metatron (also the male aspect of the Shekhinah) the role of heavenly high priest.⁹⁶ Hence, the clerics of the Melissino Rite believed that they were only able to harness the powers of this spirit in their own liturgical ceremonies by forming a theurgical sephiroth.

The Grand Deacon began his interpretation of the first mystical tracing board by stressing how his brethren were seeing before them "all the secrets of all Masonry and of the Royal Art drawn together into one".⁹⁷ He then reveals the alchemical-hermetic meaning symbolised in the tracing board. First, he begins by outlining the different meanings attached to the initials J. B. M. in hierarchical degrees of the Order. Hence, in the "Symbolic Grades", that is the first three degrees, they refer to "Jackin, Boaz and Mackbenack", whereas in the Order of the Knights they

⁹² Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 69–70.

⁹³ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 70.

⁹⁴ On the role and history of the masonic tracing board, see Dring 1916, 243–325.

⁹⁵ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 74.

⁹⁶ Orlov 2005, 115, 200–203. On the identification of the Shekhinah with Metatron, see Wolfson 1994, 257–260.

⁹⁷ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 71.

mean “Jacobus Burgundicus Molaius”.⁹⁸ However, in the Priestly Order the Grand Deacon reveals that the initials have a hermetic meaning – “ignis, maris balneum” (‘fire, sea-bath’) – as “here the shape of the M is changed in Water, for which the reversed triangle is the chymical symbol”.⁹⁹ In other words, the initials represent the alchemical process of heating matter in a bain-marie.¹⁰⁰

The Grand Deacon then provides a remarkable alchemical reading of Creation, along with an interpretation of how the so-called Royal Art provided the ultimate means of transforming an unworked stone into a perfected ashlar. He also champions alchemy as giving man the chance to restore himself to the state of primordial health enjoyed by Adam, that is, via the goal of perfecting the elusive philosophers’ stone:

This water-bath is the matter of Creation, from which God has made the world and all the created beings. And it is this matter also of which the ancient Magi availed themselves in order to make of it their magic fire. It is the origin of all marvels of nature, the chaotic and first water [...] The unworked stone is that mineral electrum, with which we heat the perfect metals and precious stones. It contains the fiery air about which the philosophers speak. This was the fiery cloud and the fiery column of the Israelites, the Holy Fire of the High Priests, the fiery chariot of Ezekiel, and the one in which Elijah rode up to Heaven, the fire, the smoke and the mist of which St. John speaks of in the Book of Revelation.

The cubical stone is the alkaline Universal-salt, which dissolves all metals and precious stones, because this salt is the mother, the origin, and the magnet of all of them. The Master Degree speaks to us of the [sprig of] Acacia found on Hiram’s grave. This Acacia is the true matter, from which the philosophers draw their Treasures. It is the true light of the World, from which the glorious Hiram will rise under the guise of the Redeemer. It is the burning coal of which Isaiah and Ezekiel speak, and which must be prepared in accordance with the hidden system of the wise men of old and the philosophers [...]

98 Jachin and Boaz were the two columns that stood in the porch of Solomon’s Temple. On the derivation of the word “Macbenac” and on the origin of its use in Masonic rituals, see Bogdan 2007, 82. The initials in the Order of Knights of the Melissino Rite refers to Jacques de Molay (c. 1244–1314), the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar.

99 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 72.

100 On the role of heat and the bain-marie in alchemical experiments, see Haeffner 2004, 67–68.

One of our most mysterious materials is therefore the burning coal, which the Egyptian Cabbala names clearly and without fuss.

The second is that greenish foam that floats on the sea of the philosophers. One without the other can create nothing; only those of our Conclave, who have received the appropriate instruction on how to unite these two materials in accordance with our practical Cabbala have the good fortune to see this first water come into being. From it comes afterwards the grey salt called the mineral Electrum, or else the Saturnine Antimony, and from this salt comes finally the Mercurial-water which dissolves all metals, minerals, precious stones and all compositions of nature, and which keeps the days of man in complete health through to his very last goal in life.¹⁰¹

Thus, the Grand Deacon's alchemical interpretation does not merely describe the long-cherished goal of producing the philosophers' stone, but also skillfully associates alchemy with references to fire linked to Old Testament prophets, as well as the masonic legend of Hiram's murder.

After the rich alchemical interpretation proffered by the Grand Deacon, the Grand Operator sets forth an equally spectacular (and highly complex) theosophical interpretation.¹⁰² Four interrelated topics are addressed in this explanation of the mystical carpet: (1) a Kabbalistic reading of the number 666 in relation to Christ's crucifixion; (2) a comparison of the *urim* (a divinatory stone set in the breastplate of a Jewish high priest) with Christ; (3) a catechistic discussion of the similarities between the trinity in nature and the "High Divine Trinity" and (4) an interpretation of the "great secret of the 10 sephiroth".¹⁰³

The contemplation of the Kabbalistic significance of the number 666 focuses on three Greek letters: χ (chi) ξ (xi) and σ (sigma). As the Grand Operator states, these letters "are taken from the *Apocalypsis* and signify the number six hundred and sixty-six". Rather than signifying the number of the beast, the Grand Operator links this number directly to Christ. Indeed, more Kabbalistic interpretation is used to reinforce this claim. Thus, it is stated that "this Cabbala goes much

101 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 72–74.

102 This final section section is entitled "Explanation of the First Mystical Tracing Board by the Grand Operator of the Conclave, who uncovers the magical and theosophical secrets to True Members of the Conclave". See Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 75.

103 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 78.

further still: for the sign of the Chi indicates a cross, the Xi the Trinity and the Unity, the Sigma a pair of scales”.¹⁰⁴ From this the Grand Operator was able to pronounce the following belief:

Whence therefore ‘Christos, Xilon, Stauros’ denotes that Jesus Christ on the Cross, when still on the Rood had within him the characteristics of the Divine Trinity, and moreover, still possessed 3 different Offices, because he was God, man and mediator, kept balance between compassion and justice. He was therefore one in person and 3 in being; this totals 3, and had 3 distinct characteristics, which makes 6, and gives the root of the cabbalistic number 666.¹⁰⁵

This Kabbalistic interpretation is reinforced still further by adding that “Christos means in Greek ‘the annointed one’; Xylon means ‘wood’ and Stauros ‘a pair of scales’”.

After this dizzying display of Kabbalistic gymnastics, the Grand Operator then confidently proclaimed to his brethren that “we shall [now] see the connection that the Saviour’s wonderful mysteries have with the hermetic”.¹⁰⁶ This link rests on a comparison of the similar inherent qualities manifested in both Jesus Christ and the Jewish high priest’s *urim*. Thus, Christ “was of a divine and human nature”, whilst the *urim* similarly “was of a supercelestial, but visible and corporeal nature, and thus had the characteristics of human beings”.¹⁰⁷

The third section of the Grand Operator’s interpretation provides an intriguing account of “the trinity in nature” and how it can be “compared to the High Divine Trinity”. Thus, as with the divine Trinity, the equivalent in nature has a spirit “which in fact has the heavenly and the earthly nature around it and divides itself into three spirits, differing in substance, but one in Being”. Everything is said to exist in and through this natural trinity. Fascinatingly, the Grand Operator added that “if for a moment it should cease to be effective [...] the spheres, which the Almighty Arm upholds by this wondrous concord, would collapse [...] See: the world will perish in this way, as the gravity theory of the great Newton himself clearly teaches”.¹⁰⁸ Thus, this nod to “the first principles of the new natural science” is not cited to champion the merits of empirical observation, but to advance an eschatological mindset.

104 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 76.

105 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 76.

106 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 76–77.

107 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 77.

108 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 78.

Lastly, the Grand Operator turns to “the great secret of the 10 Sephiroth”, beginning with their meaning in Latin: (1) *Chesser* (keter) – *Corona*; (2) *Thipheres* (Tiferet) – *Splendor*; (3) *Chochmack* (Hokhmah) – *Sapientia*; (4) *Nezach* (Nezah) – *Victoria*; (5) *Binach* (Binah) – *Prudentia*; (6) *Haod* (Hod) – *Famae*; (7) *Ghedulach* (Gedullah) – *Gratia*; (8) *Jesod* (Yesod Olam) – *Fundamentum*; (9) *Ghewurach* (Gevurah) – *Fortitudo* and (10) *Malchos* (Malkhut) – *Regnum*.¹⁰⁹ The Grand Operator then cites “Rabbi Zoar” (presumably a reference to *The Zohar*) in order to elucidate the Kabbalistic concept of *Ein Sof*: “God has existed from eternity onwards, and his kingdom has neither beginning nor end, but he was within himself, and before the Creation there was nothing, except God’s being, to which the prophets have given the name *EnSoph* (unending being).” This passage is indeed very similar to *The Zohar* (part ii, section “Bo”, 42b), which states: “Before He gave any shape to the world, before He produced any form, He was alone, without form and without resemblance to anything else. Who then can comprehend how He was before the Creation?”

After this explanation of the concept of *Ein Sof*, the Grand Operator relates the process of Creation, whereby God “made four areas of space, which the prophets named as the four different heavens”. A brief elucidation of the Kabbalistic doctrine of the four worlds then follows:

The first is named *Aziloh* (Azilut) and contains the three Sephiro: *Chesser*, *Chochmach* and *Binach*.

The second is called: *Berioch* (Briah), and contains a further three Sephiro, namely *Ghedulach*, *Ghewurach* and *Thiphheeres*. The third is callefourth is already amongst the Sephiro; and was given the name *Asioch* (Assiyah).¹¹⁰

As Pinchas Giller explains, the highest world of Azilut is the realm of abstracted and inaccessible divinity, whilst Briah is a world of pure creation. The third world of Yezirah is a realm of formation, whilst lastly, the world of Assiyah relates to action in the phenomenal realm.¹¹¹

A more detailed elaboration of the worlds of Azilut, Briah and Yezirah then ensues. Thus, the first heaven of Azilut is described as the realm where “the crown, wisdom and prudence reside”, below which is “the throne of the Eternal Being”. The will of the Eternal Being is said to be communicated to the second heaven (Briah) “by means of these three Sephiro”, which “set the angels and the hosts into motion, prescribe the boundaries that can never be transgressed; and

¹⁰⁹ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 79.

¹¹⁰ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f.79.

¹¹¹ Giller 2011, 57.

form a luminous void which is filled completely with the glory of the Eternal Being". Within this void "resides the *Schechina*, which is the shadow of God, and which we call a spirit proceeding from all the might together".¹¹²

The Grand Operator's theosophical discussion of the second world of *Briah*, or pure creation, emphasizes the magical roles played by Metatron, the Urim and Thummim within the Ephod of the Jewish high priest and the thaumaturgical properties inherent in the seven planets. Indeed, the passage begins with a description of how the second heaven is the dwelling place of Metatron, the Ephod and the "7 mirrors" (planets), above which "was the whole Schemhamphoras" that "contains the 72 letters and the 12 tribes of Israel". Moreover, the Grand Operator relates how "at the centre point of this magical Talisman was our divine Urim", which is described as being "a red stone of a celestial radiance, upon which an equilateral triangle and 3 *jods* were engraved, to signify the Trinity cabbalistically". What is more, it is explained that "God commanded the Urim and Thummim, which are Light and Perfection, to be confined within the Couchen [sic] Ephod".¹¹³

At this point the Grand Operator reveals the theosophical interpretation of the initials J. B. M., which relate to "Jerziroth, Berioch and Metraton". According to the Grand Operator these letters are particularly significant, as Metatron "is the spirit of the Messiah, who holds sway over all the archangels, hosts and planetary spirits".¹¹⁴ Subsequently, the orator provides the magical-alchemical qualities associated with the seven planetary spirits. Thus, Mars is defined as "the radiance" and "means our magical fire", whereas the Moon is "the Kingdom", or in other words "our white tinged earth which turns all metals and minerals into silver" and the Sun is "the perfect Urim and the foundation of all perfectness".¹¹⁵

Lastly, the Grand Operator reveals that the *Jeziroth*, or third world, is "that space where all these planetary spirits reside". Here, it is described how these planets "have a certain influence on the treatment of the Urim", as "our celestial Nitrum is drawn precisely from the rays of the sun and the moon, by the strength of the human magnet, which takes its origin in the fourth heaven". The Grand Operator goes on to explain that a cleric is able by theurgy to "draw out this divine

112 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 79–80.

113 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 80. The word "Couchon" would seem to be an erroneous spelling of the Hebrew "Cohen", meaning priest. One also finds the use of the notion of Shemhamphorash and the magical properties of the Urim in the ninth degree of the Gold-und Rosenkreuz. See Westlund 2007; Geffarth 2007, 188. On the association between the Urim and Thummim and the philosophers' stone, see Khunrath 1653, 204.

114 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 80.

115 Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff 80–81.

matter”, or celestial Nitrum, from “our sublunary world”. The goal of the adept is nothing less than to “make from it the Electrum, which produces the Urim”. According to the Grand Operator, this process is “so abstract and peculiar” that it can only be achieved “by one of our Brethren”. Indeed, the need to be initiated into the Conclave in order to be privy to this esoteric wisdom is stressed in no uncertain terms:

All human insight and wisdom, the deepest reading knowledge of all chymical and philosophical texts, the solidest knowledge of the older and the newer Chemistry and finally the greatest expenditures and expenses are useless in order to achieve this, so long as one has not been led to it through the Sacred Door of our Order.¹¹⁶

The Grand Operator may have believed that the brethren of his Conclave were the sole agents able to draw down the magical powers of the celestial Nitrum via theurgical rites. However, the ninth degree of the Order of the Gold- und Rosenkreuz also revolved around the alchemical and magical knowledge needed to form the Urim and Thummim. Irrespective of whether the Grand Operator was aware of the similarity of the rival rites, he ends his theosophical interpretation by beseeching his brethren to “revere [...] these items of knowledge” as they are “a gift of God” bequeathed to them alone. Tellingly, he concludes by reiterating how the brethren of the Conclave are duty-bound to honour God “for the good graces he has heaped upon us in this century of adversity”.¹¹⁷ Ending on such a note highlights the manner in which the claims of Illuministic exceptionalism proffered by various initiatic societies across Europe in the closing decades of the eighteenth century were borne out of a sense of religious, social and cultural crisis.

Melissino and the Illuminist Milieu in St. Petersburg and Beyond

In an age of such seeming adversity, who in the Russian Imperial capital was both attracted to *and* deemed worthy of ordination into the Conclave, or Invisible Chapter of the Melissino Rite? In terms of numbers, the description of the decoration of the Conclave notes that “in the whole world there are only 7 High Priests, 7 Deacons and 7 Operators”.¹¹⁸ One gleans a smattering of

¹¹⁶ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, ff. 81–82.

¹¹⁷ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 82.

¹¹⁸ Kloss Collection, MS 266 VII a 1, f. 70

information regarding the Conclave from Aleksandr Borisovich Kurakin (1752–1818), one of the most prominent freemasons in Russia in the 1770s and 1780s.¹¹⁹ In February 1777, Kurakin wrote to Charles, Duke of Sudermanland (1748–1818) regarding Melissino and his Rite, in the midst of a concerted attempt to introduce the Swedish Rite of Freemasonry into Russia. In this letter, Kurakin informs the duke that “the General Melissino has the glory of being the first to introduce Masonic work here”. Besides this intriguing remark, Kurakin reveals that the so-called Invisible Chapter of the Melissino Rite was “composed of more than twenty members”. One of these clerics was evidently Kurakin himself, as he informs the Swedish duke that since he has been received into this Order he has sworn an oath not to reveal its secrets.¹²⁰

Fortunately Kurakin’s reticence to expose the secrets of the Invisible Chapter of the Melissino Rite was a sentiment not shared by Baron Karl von Heyking (1751–1809), a nobleman and eminent freemason from Courland. Heyking was ordained into the Conclave of the Melissino Rite in June 1777. In a rather condescending tone, Heyking narrates how his Masonic credentials were put to the test by Melissino when the pair met for the first time:

I was delighted to meet General Melissino [...] I realised that he [was among those] who believed the interior aim of this Order to be the hermetic mysteries, or the philosophers’ stone. To assure myself even more I gave the appearance of grasping this system: he unbuttoned further and asked me: are you a Rosicrucian? – Yes, that is what I am – You know then the genuine hermetic explanation of the three first grades of J and B. M? – Yes, I know: *ignis and beata materia!*¹²¹

On the one hand, both Kurakin and Heyking attest to the esteem in which Melissino was held in Petersburg society and within the wider masonic fraternity, yet on the other hand both accounts are scornful of the esoteric dimensions of his Conclave. Thus, Kurakin remarks that “it follows a very complicated system that is filled with errors”.¹²² Heyking is more specific (and acerbic) in his description of how the higher degrees “in the system of Melissino [...] lead to an

119 On Kurakin’s Masonic career, see, for example, Telepneff 1926, 174–196.

120 Letter from Aleksandr Borisovich Kurakin to Charles, Duke of Sudermanland, 8/19 February, 1777. Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), Moscow, 1414, Opis 1, delo 5300, f. 9.

121 von Heyking, *Mes réminiscences ou mémoires de C[harles-Henri] B[aron] d’H[eyking] écrits par lui-même avec les portraits de plusieurs homes du nord*, part 1, chapter 6, n.p.

122 Kurakin to Charles, Duke of Sudermanland, 8/19 February, 1777, RGVA, Moscow, 1414, Opis 1, delo 5300, f. 9.

alchemical process [that is] very obscure to me, but where all the amateurs of retorts and alembics found the true philosophical light and the key of all the secrets of nature”.¹²³

One such amateur seeker of the secrets of nature, who fully embraced the Illuminist theosophy of the Invisible Chapter, was the aforementioned Corberon. In contrast to Kurakin and Heyking, much of Corberon’s esteem for Melissino and his masonic rite rested on the latter’s self-proclaimed authority as an alchemical adept. Corberon’s *Journal* also reveals the pivotal role played by a manuscript – the so-called *Testament de Mola[y]* – in legitimating the Melissino Rite in the Frenchman’s eyes. Melissino tantalizes Corberon by promoting himself as the custodian of this mysterious manuscript, which, as will be seen, not only drew on Templar mythology connected with Jacques de Molay, the Order’s last Grand Master, but also included the method for transmuting iron into gold, veiled in hieroglyphic symbols, which had been transmitted to Melissino when the German doctor left Moscow. First and foremost, Corberon craves to win the trust of Melissino and to gain initiation into the highest degree of his masonic rite in order to gain privileged access to the alchemical secrets contained within the testament.

The Frenchman arrived in St. Petersburg in January 1776, where he served as secretary to the French Legation until 1777 and then as chargé d’affaires until 1780. During his residence in Petersburg, Corberon made extensive entries in his *Journal*, which represents an unrivalled source in terms of revealing the absorption of a European nobleman and diplomat in the Illuminist milieu revolving around Melissino. Corberon first refers to Melissino on March 3, 1776, briefly noting that he had visited his lodge, which is “said to have curious knowledge”.¹²⁴

On May 1, 1776, Corberon records that he dined with Melissino, who during the meal first revealed to him that he was in possession of an elixir capable of restoring health and youthful vigour.¹²⁵ By this time, Corberon had already immersed himself in an alchemical and hermetic circle in the Russian capital, which included his close friend Carl Adolph von Brühl (1742–1802), from Saxony, Chevalier Jean Duménil and a cleric named Abbé Pasquini.¹²⁶ Four days later, Corberon once again dined with Melissino, who revealed more details about how he had come into possession of his alchemical elixir. Evidently Melissino also outlined the general structure of

¹²³ Heyking, *Mes réminiscences*, vol. 2, part 1, chapter 6, n.p.

¹²⁴ Marie-Daniel Bourrée, Baron de Corberon, *Journal de Marie-Daniel Bourrée, chevalier, puis baron de Corberon, de 1775 à 1793*, Médiathèque Ceccano, Avignon, MS 3055, 115-6; Corberon 1901, 175.

¹²⁵ Corberon, *Un Diplomate Français*, vol. 2, pp. 295, 298.

¹²⁶ See Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3055, p. 296. For a brief biography of Duménil, who was governor to a Prince Trubetskoi (most probably Pyotr Sergeevich Trubetskoi (1760–1817)), see Mézin and Rjéoutski 2011, 283. On April 29, 1776, for example, Corberon wrote down a “Ricetta alchimica” by Pasquini, which had been given to him by Brühl. See *Journal*, MS 3055, p. 269.

his Masonic rite, as Corberon writes that it consists of seven degrees. The Frenchman provides a cursory summary of the first six degrees, before describing how the last degree consists of twelve initiates, who dedicate themselves to perfecting the philosophers' stone. Moreover, Melissino completes his recruitment drive by promising to confer the sixth degree to Corberon, and, crucially, to allow the Frenchman to be privy to the *Testament de Molay*.

True to his word, on May 10, 1776 Melissino showed Corberon the *Testament*, during a seven-hour meeting, which the latter described as consisting of a “discourse in German and several hieroglyphic designs applicable to the hermetic oeuvre”. With his curiosity well and truly piqued, Corberon proposed to redesign a faulty burner used by Melissino during his alchemical operations. In return, Melissino agreed to allow Corberon to make a copy of the *Testament*.¹²⁷

The Frenchman did not have to wait long before in June 1776 Melissino also officially proposed him for initiation into the sixth degree of his rite, for the sum of 69 roubles. Moreover, Corberon records that he was permitted to assist in a *réception d'initiés* on June 23, 1776 (the Feast Day of St. John), in which two Russians – “Miateleff et Cacheloff” – were ordained into the Chapter.¹²⁸ Here Corberon is referring to Pyotr Vasil'evich Miatlev (1756–1833)¹²⁹ and Rodion Aleksandrovich Koshelev (1749–1827), the latter of whom would go on to play a pivotal role in promoting theosophical ideas to Emperor Alexander I in the early nineteenth century.¹³⁰

An entry in Corberon's *Journal* on October 4, 1776 once again refers directly to the Invisible Chapter, in which, the Frenchman notes that Melissino teaches “initiates about the *prima materia* and the different processes it is subjected to in order to complete *l'oeuvre*”, or in other words the philosophers' stone.¹³¹ Corberon describes to his brother his pleasure at being promised entry into this Conclave as he will be able to discover for himself the opinion his brethren have regarding this “beautiful dream” (*belle chimère*).¹³²

The Frenchman's wish was realised in June 1777, when he and von Brühl were initiated into the exclusive Conclave of the Melissino Rite.¹³³ Thereafter, Corberon continued to be preoccupied with alchemical experiments. Indeed, one can note a flurry of alchemical activity in the weeks

127 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3055, 322–323.

128 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3055, 450.

129 On Miatlev's Masonic career, see Serkov 2001, 571, 954, 966, 977.

130 On Koshelev's influence on Emperor Alexander I, see Kondakov 2012, 429–449.

131 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3056, 247; *Un Diplomate Français*, vol. 2, 3.

132 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3056, 247; *Un Diplomate Français*, vol. 2, 3.

133 Corberon, *Journal* MS 3057, 214.

before his departure for France in the autumn of 1780. In September 1780, for example, as mentioned, Corberon sought to meet “docteur Kerstniz” in Moscow. Furthermore, Prince Fyodor Sergeevich Gagarin (1757–1794), a captain in the Izmailovskii Guards, offered to show Corberon a book, which enabled him to obtain “the true mercury without fire”. In the same month Corberon received a request from Ivan Matveevich Tolstoi (1746–1808), a major in the Preobrazhenskii Guards, to subscribe to the former’s “mytho-hermetic archive”.¹³⁴

In October 1780, on the very eve of his departure, Melissino presented Corberon with his “great manuscript”, or *Le Testament de Mola[y]* and six designs for lodge tracing boards.¹³⁵ It would seem Melissino had entrusted Corberon with the authority to promote his Masonic rite in France. This is borne out by subsequent entries in Corberon’s *Journal*. In July 1781, for example, Corberon met with Cardinal de Rohan (1734–1803) in Strasbourg and lent him Melissino’s manuscript.¹³⁶ In March 1786 Corberon also lent the Melissino manuscript to Count Angiviller (1726–1820), a leading patron of the arts and personal friend of Louis XVI.¹³⁷ Judging by a letter written to von Brühl on July 21, 1787, Corberon remained fascinated by Melissino’s manuscript long after leaving Russia. In this letter, Corberon recounts Melissino’s tale about witnessing the transmutation of lead into gold, which he first heard in St. Petersburg eleven years earlier.¹³⁸ It transpires Corberon had been frustrated for many years by being unable to decipher the hieroglyphic symbols in order to reveal the alchemical “grand secret”. However, as he recounts: “It is well, my friend, that Providence has allowed me to find here, without searching, a man who can unveil these emblems.” Corberon then offers von Brühl a tantalizing fragment “in the utmost secrecy”, which reveals that it is necessary to labour for nine months, but that neither metal, coal or fire is necessary.¹³⁹

In the 1780s Corberon became one of the foremost exponents of Illuminism in France, and could be found in the company of Cagliostro and Swedenborgians, as well as being an initiate of Franz Mesmer’s Society of Harmony.¹⁴⁰ The Frenchman was far from being a mere protégé of Melissino, yet, at the same time he remained a loyal promoter of the Russian’s masonic rite throughout this decade. This is highlighted in a letter Corberon wrote to Tadeusz Grabianka

134 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3059, 328–331.

135 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3059, 430–430v.

136 Corberon, *Journal*, MS 3060, 150–150v.

137 *Recueil de Corberon*, MS 3060, 37–38, March 27, 1786, Médiathèque Ceccano, Avignon.

138 The passage of time may explain why in his letter to von Brühl, from 1787, he refers to Melissino witnessing the transmutation in 1772. See *Recueil de Corberon*, MS 3060, p. 64.

139 Marie-Daniel Bourrée, Baron de Corberon, *Recueil de Corberon*, Médiathèque Ceccano, Avignon MS 3060, 64–64v.

140 On Corberon’s membership in various Illuminist societies in France in the 1780s, see Faivre 1967, 259–287.

(1740–1807) on August 11, 1789, amidst the revolutionary convulsions besetting France.¹⁴¹ At this time Corberon was hoping to become an initiate of the so-called Illuminés de d’Avignon, a highly esoteric society led by Grabianka and Antoine-Joseph Pernety (1716–1796).¹⁴²

Significantly, Corberon provides in-depth details of his initiation into the 7th degree of the Melissino Rite, as well as the pivotal role played by the *Testament*. Indeed, Corberon notes that the manuscript consists of a “hieroglyphic script in 17 folio sheets, of which 14 are figures, and the rest in German”. Moreover, the Frenchman recounts the story of how Melissino witnessed the transmutation of gold and was able to secure the recipe from a German doctor in Moscow, as well as the fact that he had been permitted to make a copy.¹⁴³ In other words, without too much subtlety Corberon is staking his claim as a worthy candidate for the Illuminés, based on his links to Melissino and his possession of a copy of the *Testament de Molay*. Corberon also attempts to portray a sense of loyalty by asking Grabianka whether his “gratitude towards Melissino” did not give him “the duty to write to him in order to procure your correspondence, and the advantages that belong to it”. These ‘advantages’ apparently go “well beyond that of transmutation etc”.¹⁴⁴ In other words, whilst Corberon openly acknowledges his indebtedness to Melissino, he also flatters Grabianka by emphasizing how the Illuminés d’Avignon was much more than merely a society of alchemical adepts. By this time Corberon had embraced millenarianism, with alchemy assuming a lesser role in his worldview. However, throughout much of the 1780s, as is apparent, Corberon continued to extoll Melissino and his *Testament* among many of his illuminist peers in France.

Conclusion

A variety of terms have been coined in the past forty years – “occult underground”, “the mystical international” and “the super-enlightenment” – in order to try and encapsulate the spirit of Illuminism as it flourished in (predominantly) aristocratic initiatic societies across Europe at the close of the eighteenth century.¹⁴⁵ In a sense, all of these terms could be applied to the Melissino Rite, yet each is also insufficient to grasp the complex dynamic of the masonic system as it was practiced in St. Petersburg. One could, for example, highlight the secretive nature of the Conclave

141 *Recueil de Corberon*, MS 3060, 95–96.

142 For a brief introductory essay on the Illuminés d’Avignon, as well as a bibliography, see Snoek 2006, 597–600.

143 *Recueil de Corberon*, MS 3060, 95v.

144 *Recueil de Corberon*, MS 3060, 96.

145 See Webb 1974, respectively.

as an anti-establishment association that concealed itself from the Enlightened glare of Catherine II's Russia. Yet, Melissino was clearly horrified – as is demonstrated by his letter to his fellow brethren in May 1782 – at the thought of his lodge being perceived as (let alone actually) working against the interests of the Russian sovereign.

The Melissino Rite also acted as a formative crucible in St. Petersburg for both Russian and European noblemen to ferment their Illuminist worldviews. Known members of the seventh degree alone included initiates from Saxony (von Brühl), France (Corberon), Courland (von Heyking) and Russia (A. B. Kurakin, Koshelev and Miatlev), many of whom went on to play leading roles in pan-European Masonic networks and in the transmission of esoteric ideas.

In many respects, it is also possible to view Melissino as a “super-enlightenment” figure, that is, someone who was at one-and-the-same-time a *philosophe* and an *illuminé*, in which it is hard to draw a line in the sand. Yet, this ignores Melissino's evident awareness of the contradictions between his public role as a loyal servant and learned scientific authority, and his espousal of an Illuminist vision that chose a select few to seek divine wisdom and power. In the spring of 1782 Melissino felt compelled to make a concrete choice between *either* loyalty to the Empress and state, or to his masonic system. In an age of adversity, Melissino chose to sail with the wind, yet he left behind an Illuminist legacy and vision that was influential in Russia and, arguably, across Europe.

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