

Cover Page



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Author: Sommer, Dorothe

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A bronze statue of a muscular man, possibly a gladiator or a warrior, is shown in a dynamic pose. He is leaning forward, with his right arm raised and hand gripping a large, dark stone block. His left arm is also raised, supporting the block from below. The statue is set against a background of a rough, textured stone wall made of large, irregular blocks. The lighting is bright, casting shadows on the wall and the statue's body, emphasizing its musculature.

Unity is
Strength

Unity is Strength
Masonic Lodges in Ottoman Syria
with Special Focus on Tripoli and El Mina
(1860 – 1908)

PROEFSCHRIFT

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door

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Dedicated to my father

Transliteration System

I had to choose between the International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies (*IJMES*) rules regarding the transliteration of Arabic names and expressions, or an approach that completely omitted diacritics. On the one hand, academic research should follow rules as strictly as possible. On the other hand, all the individuals studied in the present work signed the registration books of their lodges or other documents using Latin script. Hence, I decided to adopt the second method, following the men's own choices rather than systems of spelling names that only developed after the period in question. In order to be consistent, I adhered to this strategy throughout my research, with the exception of the names of newspapers and magazines, which are mainly to be found in the appendices.

Abbreviations

GLoS: Grand Lodge of Scotland

UGLoE: United Grand Lodge of England

GODF: Grand Orient de France

GODI: Grand Orient d'Italy

OGO: Ottoman Grand Orient (renamed Grand Lodge of Turkey in 1923)

SPC: Syrian Protestant College

AUB: American University Beirut

(Further explanations regarding masonic terminology will be given in the body of the text).

Abstract

The subject of my dissertation comprises the early masonic lodges that existed in the Ottoman Empire between the 1860s and the outbreak of the Young Turk Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century. The aim of this work is to show how Syrian freemasons used the lodges to reach out to other Syrians, in order to strive towards unity inside Ottoman Syria; a unity that they envisioned would produce inter-confessional sociability and strengthen the Empire. Accordingly the statement ‘unity is strength’, first ushered in 1876 by a Syrian masonic grandmaster, is a suitable slogan.¹ Lodges were established to lead the Syrians to ‘moral emancipation’. This cooperation of all masons in the region was thought to advance the cause of the people and to promote the welfare of mankind in general.²

Whilst the main focus is on lodges – especially the *Kadisha* Lodge - in Tripoli, the second biggest city in contemporary Lebanon after Beirut, the theoretical approach will be to place them in the context of other masonic lodges in Ottoman Syria. This will enable a more complex understanding of the masonic network of lodges. I restricted the time span of this study, as the development of the fraternity continued after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 to emerge as an increasingly national movement, with new national masonic grand bodies being established. Whether a complete transition took place is questionable, and consequently this stage requires a separate study.

This dissertation will show how the European concept of freemasonry was transferred to the Middle East, where it found ambitious followers who were more than interested in participating in and establishing a network of lodges throughout

¹ [*l’union fait la force*], Letter from *Le Liban* Lodge to the GOdF, (13.06.1876), *Le Liban*, carton no. 1, Archive of the GOdF, National Library, Paris.

² [*l’émancipation morale*], Letter from *Le Liban* to the GOdF, (22.05.1912), *Le Liban*, carton no. 2, Archive of the GOdF.

their neighbouring area. By taking over fraternal masonic principles and rules, which thereby rendered it fit for its cultural, social and religious surroundings, it was possible for the organisation as such to survive and expand. One central argument of this thesis is that European freemasonry, when placed outside of a Western sphere of influence, developed a life of its own and paradoxically promoted a new sense of Ottoman self-esteem, which automatically distanced itself from Western interference. Syrian freemasons did call on European masonic grand bodies in cases when they hoped to secure protection or financial support. But inside their lodges Europeans were almost completely absent and no Western power exercised control over them and their diverse masonic activities.

The first tenet of the lodges was to spread the idea of inter-sectarian sociability, which helped not only to create local and regional networks useful for the individual needs of lodge members but was also supposed to unify the Syrian people and to consolidate a sense of togetherness. According to the words of Dimitri Sursock, one of the early chairmen of *Le Liban* lodge, freemasonry was supposed to ‘combat ignorance, superstition and fanaticism’, and more specifically ‘religious fanaticism’.³

This thesis directly contradicts previous research carried out in the field of colonial freemasonry, according to which the lodges served as a vanguard for Western purposes of occupation and domination. Freemasonry during the Ottoman era was the first and only institution outside Beirut that overcame religious cleavages, thereby winning over more participants than any other society or fraternity. In this way, it was unique and certainly deserves further consideration for prospective research.

³ [*de combattre l'ignorance, la superstition et le fanatisme...fanatisme religieux*]. Letter from G.D. Sursock to the GOdF to mark the 45th birthday of the lodge in March 1913, seen at the Centre de Recherche et de Documentation Maçonnique, Charles Kesrouani, Ghazir/Lebanon; also: correspondence between Lodge and the GOdF, *Le Liban*, carton no 2, Archive of the GOdF.