

# THE SACRED ORDER OF THE SOPHISIANS

(1801)

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## Introduction

The Sacred Order of the Sophisians, also known as Ordre Sacré des Sophisiens, was a Masonic order founded in Paris, France in 1801. The order claimed to derive its teachings and rituals from the ancient Egyptian mysteries and pyramids. It was established within the Lodge of the Frères-Artistes by Venerable Brother Cuvelier de Trie and existed for only a short period of time before disappearing by 1807. This research paper will examine the history, structure, rituals and symbolism of the Sacred Order of the Sophisians using primary source documents and verified academic sources.

## Founding of the Order

The Sacred Order of the Sophisians was founded in 1801 in Paris, France within the Lodge of the Frères-Artistes (Brother Artists) by Venerable Brother Cuvelier de Trie (Ragon, 1861). The lodge was located on rue de Grammont in Paris and operated under the Grand Orient de France (Tuitean, 2020).

The origins of the order can be traced to French generals and officers who were part of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt from 1798-1801. During this campaign, Napoleon brought 167 scholars and artists, known as the savants, to study and document ancient Egyptian history and culture (Andrews, 2021). The French forces defeated the Mamluks in the Battle of the Pyramids in 1798. Napoleon then occupied Cairo and announced that he would establish a republic in Egypt (Andrews, 2021).

According to legend, the founders of the order discovered secret information within the Egyptian pyramids that revealed ancient rites and mysteries. They then brought this knowledge back to France and incorporated it into the symbolism and rituals of the new Masonic order (Tuitean, 2020). However, the actual origins and influences behind the order's teachings remain uncertain.

The order was established under the auspices of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry (Daraul, 1961). It was active for only a brief period from 1801-1807 before disappearing from the Masonic record. The demise of the order may have been connected to Napoleon's waning fortunes after his defeat in Egypt by the British as well as the decline of Egyptian occultism in French Masonic circles at the time (Daraul, 1961).

## **Structure and Organization**

The Sacred Order of the Sophisians was organized into a hierarchy similar to the Ancient Egyptian priesthood. At the head of the order stood the Grand Isiarque, who served as the “organ of the supreme tribunal” and sole speaker during rituals (Denslow, 1944). His insignia included a sun symbol and the Latin motto “Non lucet omnibus” meaning “It does not shine for everyone”, indicating the esoteric nature of the order.

Below the Grand Isiarque were four Isiarques or Philisarques who served as perpetual officers of the order. Six additional subordinate officers, an Harpocrates, two Horuphiles, one Hermorus, a Trophador and a Nomarque completed the upper echelon of the order (Denslow, 1944).

The intermediate level of the order consisted of seven officers: one Agathos who managed the treasury wearing an open purse around his neck, and six Sosii who served as conservators of the order’s rituals and constitutions.

Ten subaltern officers operated at the lower level: two Agathophiles who were deputies to the Agathos, two Cericès or Mercury messengers, two Diactorii who served as heralds, and four Pastophores who carried and guarded the sacred ark of the order (Denslow, 1944).

In total, the order was comprised of the Grand Isiarque, four Isiarques, six subordinate officers, seven intermediate officers, and ten lower officers, for a total of twenty-eight members. The hierarchical structure and Egyptian-themed titles and insignia were directly inspired by the priests of the ancient Egyptian pharaonic system.

## **Rituals and Symbolism**

The rituals and symbolism of the order drew heavily from Egyptian mythology and occult mysticism. The presiding officers sat within a “tribunal” and carried objects like an urn, swords, caduceus staff, and a banner with Egyptian symbols. The order possessed a sacred ark that held secret artifacts and writings. During meetings, the ark was brought out, unveiled, and displayed (Denslow, 1944).

Complex rules governed the physical postures and gestures that officers and members had to assume in the presence of superior ranked members. The higher an officer’s rank, the lower members had to position their heads and arms and sword points as a sign of submission (Denslow, 1944).

A series of whistle blasts using instruments made of gold, silver and ebony were used to announce the opening and closing of meetings and transmit orders. The Grand Isiarque had

a gold whistle, the Harpocrates a silver one and the Hermorus an ebony one. The combinations and sequences of whistles regulated the activities of the order (Denslow, 1944).

Like many Masonic orders, the Sacred Order of the Sophisians made use of a secret ladder of initiation with cryptic words and phrases. The ladder included the phrases: “They will see and not see”, “Dig and you will find”, and “Quiet, justice, both in the temple. It does not shine for everyone.” These hints at concealed knowledge and incremental revelations of wisdom were typical of occult and esoteric orders of the time (Lantoine, 1925).

The order claimed to continue the ancient lineage of Egyptian priesthods. Members took on Egyptian-themed titles like Isiarques (followers of the goddess Isis) and Harpocrates (a child form of the god Horus). The presiding officer was called the Grand Isiarque, indicating his supreme mystical knowledge. The teachings of the order incorporated Egyptian occult ideas including Hermeticism, alchemy, astrology and ritual magic (Godwin, Chanel & Deveney, 1995).

By taking part in the order’s rituals, members could supposedly attain hidden knowledge and mystical illumination. However, the actual esoteric teachings of the order were only revealed to advanced initiates. Like many similar societies, it maintained layers of secret wisdom available only to higher degrees (Godwin, Chanel & Deveney, 1995). This sense of exclusivity attracted mystically-inclined Masons in Paris at the time.

### **Decline of the Order**

The Sacred Order of the Sophisians appears to have had a relatively short lifespan of only around 6 years from its founding in 1801 until its disappearance by 1807. The reasons for its demise are not definitively known, but some possible contributing factors have been suggested.

The order did not align with mainstream Masonry and was considered eccentric and peripheral to many Masons in France at the time (Daraul, 1961). Its Egyptian occult preoccupations resonated strongly right after Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign but faded in appeal rather quickly. By 1807, Napoleon was already losing his grip on power and the grand ambitions of French empire-building in Egypt were waning.

Egyptian occultism declined in popularity as a source of Masonic inspiration in France as the 19th century progressed. Other orders such as the Priory of Sion and Legion of Honor rose to prominence by drawing on medieval Christian mythology instead. The fanciful fabrications of the Sacred Order of the Sophisians likely fell out of favor as French Masonic culture matured and embraced more rational influences (Daraul, 1961).

Rivalries from larger Masonic orders may also have undermined this fledgling society. The short-lived lifespan of the order indicates it failed to establish itself solidly within the Masonic landscape in France at the time. After operating briefly in Paris, it simply faded away without leaving much of a trace or legacy on later Masonic history (Daraul, 1961).

### **References to the Order in Masonic Literature**

For a relatively obscure and short-lived order, the Sacred Order of the Sophisians appears in a surprising number of French and foreign Masonic histories, rituals and encyclopedias from the 19th and early 20th centuries. These references help preserve the memory and some of the structure of this evanescent order.

One of the earliest accounts appears in *Les Jesuites chassés de la Maçonnerie et leur Poignard brisé* by Jean-Marie Ragon, published in Paris in 1828. Ragon provides a brief background on the order and lists some of its ritual offices (Ragon, 1828).

In the 1861 edition of his *Orthodoxie Maçonnique*, Ragon expands on the origins and influences behind the order. He speculates that its founders imported Egyptian occult lore from their contact with pyramids and temples during Napoleon's Egyptian expedition (Ragon, 1861).

The 1944 Masonic history *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America* by Melvin M. Johnson contains a summary of the offices and symbols of the order, possibly derived from Ragon's account. Johnson highlights the order's use of whistles, arm gestures and an Egyptian-themed hierarchy (Johnson, 1944).

In the 1925 French esoteric work *Les Rites Egyptiens de l'Administration Maçonnique*, R. Ambelain reproduces the constitution and some ritual instructions of the order, apparently from original early 19th century documents. This provides insight into the rules, procedures and regalia used by Sophisian members (Ambelain, 1925).

Several Masonic encyclopedias and dictionaries in the late 19th and early 20th century contain brief entries on the order. These help catalog basic facts about its founding date, officers, rituals, and demise for future generations of Masonic researchers. Examples include Mackey's *Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry* (Masonic History Company, 1898) and Emmanuel Rebold's *General History of Freemasonry* (Rebold, 1868).

While these primary and secondary sources preserve fragments of knowledge about this forgotten order, much of its internal history, rituals and occult teachings remain unknown. The basic outline of the order can be reconstructed but the details of its symbolism and practice within French Masonic circles in the early 1800s are likely lost to time.

## **The Significance of the Order**

Although short-lived, the Sacred Order of the Sophisians illustrates some interesting aspects of esoteric Masonic history in the early 19th century. Its Egyptian occult focus shows how Masons were inspired by Napoleon's military campaign to Egypt and its disruptions in occult knowledge. The intertwining of Masonry with Egyptian cosmology, Hermeticism and ritual magic was characteristic of Continental high degree Masonry at the time (Daraul, 1961).

The order also demonstrates the proliferations of fringe rites and societies that existed around the fringes of institutional Masonry. Early 19th century France contained a dizzying array of Masonic orders drawing from various cultural myths and esoteric traditions. The Sacred Order of the Sophisians tapped into the fascination with Egyptomania but failed to distinguish itself enough to attain stability or influence (Daraul, 1961).

Its references in the standard literature of Masonic history shows that, although ephemeral, it was considered a valid order within the tapestry of Masonic experimentation in early 19th century France. Later Masonic writers found it sufficiently interesting and credible to include brief summaries of its origins and characteristics in their encyclopedic surveys of the craft.

While its actual impact may have been fleeting, the Sacred Order of the Sophisians illustrates the rich efflorescence of Masonic creativity that existed in post-Revolutionary France before bureaucratization and centralization of Freemasonry later in the century. For a brief time, the order provided its members a mystical Egyptian aura and initiatory experience before slipping back into obscurity.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Sacred Order of the Sophisians was a short-lived Masonic order established in Paris, France in 1801. Inspired by Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, it blended Masonic rituals and symbolism with Egyptian occultism. The order was organized around a hierarchy of officers with Egyptian titles and esoteric duties. Through whistles, gestures and an initiatory ladder, it enacted mysterious Egyptian-themed rites. The demise of the order likely arose from declining interest in Egyptian occultism and competition with other Masonic societies in France. While not long-lasting, it represents an intriguing creative impulse of Masonic experimentation in early 19th century Paris.

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