

On the outskirts of the First French Empire: Freemasons and the "Frenchification" of Piedmont (1802-1814)

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This presentation will focus on Piedmont, the core of the Kingdom of Sardinia. Located in Northwestern Italy, this little realm bordering France had enjoyed a period of splendor for most of the XVIII century. During this period the masonic presence had rapidly spread: in 1749 the first lodge, the "Trois Mortiers", was established in Savoy, in the town of Chambéry. Later on, the Freemasons reached all major cities including the capital Turin, the heart of Piedmont. Here, in 1765 a group of "brothers" created "La Mystérieuse". The lodges at that time consisted of aristocratic military officers belonging to several regiments, such as cavalry, infantry and artillery.

The rivalry between the "Trois Mortiers" and "La Mystérieuse", caused by the desire to become the centre of a local Grand Lodge, had important consequences: the presence of two poles of attraction divided the local community. Nonetheless, the Freemasons in the realm quickly became one of the major players in Italy. Having adopted the Rectified Scottish Regime, they introduced this rite in the Peninsula through opening work groups in the river Po Valley.

The available lists of names for that period show that the vast majority of the members was composed by noblemen (representatives of the court and professional soldiers). The bourgeois element (doctors and lawyers for example) was only a tiny fraction of the whole.

The situation changed in the late eighteenth century: in 1783 king Victor Amadeus III decreed the suppression of the masonic activities. However, this order targeted only Piedmont while Savoy remained relatively safe. At the same time, we have news that military lodges carried on their activities although abolished.

The turning point was year 1794. Two years before, Victor Amadeus had joined the First Coalition against the French Republic. In a context torn by the war and thanks to the allegations linking Freemasonry and the French Revolution, the monarch issued a new charter which finally brought an end to this season.

After the 1796 treaty, which gave the French army free passage through the realm, in 1798 the French occupied the territory forcing the sovereign to abdicate and flee to Sardinia. A provisional revolutionary government was then installed to rule the country. However, the situation was volatile. A counterattack by Austro-Russians was successful and the French left the area in 1799. Yet a few months later, the revolutionary troops under Napoleon's orders won a decisive battle in Marengo (June 14th, 1800).

The defeat of the allied forces sanctioned the collapse of the kingdom. The French occupied one more time the territory, establishing a formally autonomous new administration. On September 11th, 1802, Piedmont officially became an integral part of the French state. The now called twenty-seventh military division, was then divided into six Departments (then reduced to five) and the official language became the French one (although for a couple of years bilingualism prevailed).

The government tried to gain the trust and the loyalty of the new subjects while imposing new rules, laws and customs. As we will see, Freemasonry played an important role in this process.

The first lodge installed in the region was "La Bienfaisance" of Asti. Born in August 1801 it is maybe the first one created in Italy, since general Joachim Murat created "L'Heureuse Rencontre" in Milan only in September of that year.

In Turin, now headquarter of the regional Governor, there was the military lodge called "La Franche Amitié" which hosted officers of the sixty-second line half-brigade. However, this lodge couldn't answer the needs for a place where locals and French occupiers could gather together. So, in 1802 several men decided to set up "La Réunion". In the following months other lodges opened their doors in Alessandria, Savigliano and Cuneo. Their names were, respectively, "La Bienfaisance", "La

Réunion”, “La Parfaite Union” et “L’Hereuse Union”. By the end of the year, Piedmont had already six lodges plus two military ones.

Such rapid growth alarmed the authorities. As a matter of fact, they knew that some affiliates were not so happy about the rulers. The fear was that the old Jacobins, dissatisfied by the new direction carried out by the French Consulate, could join the local leaders to overthrow or undermine the government. A reunion was held in Paris in early September 1802 to check the situation. According to the police, “La Réunion” of Turin was becoming very dangerous. So, the orders were to ban such unlawful activities in the area.

Since the instructions were not so clear (it wasn’t sure if the prohibition applied only to the suspicious lodges, or the veto was for all) the local authorities initially closed their eyes and the masonic groups continued operating in a more discreet way.

The most striking case regards “L’Amitié Eternelle”. In January 1803, right in the middle of proscription, several “brothers” belonging to the public administration in Turin decided to settle down this lodge. Among them was also the regional Governor Jean-Baptiste Jourdan, the same man who had banned the masonic activity on behalf of the First Consul.

This complex and confusing situation continued for about one year. On September 19th, 1803, the new appointed governor Jacques-François de Menou issued a decree by whom the masonic activities were stopped with immediate effect.

The prohibition lasted for two years until its ceasing in 1805. Thanks to that, a new wave emerged: beside the old lodges who resumed their activities, new ones were established.

The documents we have show that even under this second official stop, the masonic activities had continued. As a matter of facts, comparing the lists of members before and after 1803, we can clearly see a growth.

Speaking of new lodges, between 1806 and 1807 they increased by three. They were called “Les Amis de Napoléon le Grand” of Alessandria, “La Candeur” of Casale Monferrato and “La Parfaite Amitié” of Pinerolo. Such expansion was a clear signal: there was a growing demand for this kind of institution by the population and the French administration.

In the following years the masonic community continued to expand with the formation of two other lodges: “La Sincère et Parfaite Union” of Ivrea and “Les Coeurs Unis” of Vercelli. The last wave was between 1810 and 1812. During that period five more lodges were created named “La Philantropie” of Acqui, “La Napoléon-Louise” of Alba, “Les Adelphe Nomophiles” of Saluzzo, “La Vérité” and “La Bienfaisance” of Turin. So, by the end of the Napoleonic era, sixteen masonic groups were operative in Piedmont and over 2000 men had attended the lodges over the years.

The available data allows us to fix some points. In the first place, the “Italians” (we are using this word for the people living in Piedmont and native people of the Po Valley) are the majority of the adherents, meaning the 52%. The French are the 21% while the remainder 27% is not clearly identifiable because the place of birth or the origin are missing. After all, we must not forget that since Piedmont became an integral part of the French state, the inhabitants tried to Frenchify their names. So, in several cases, the mere combination of name and surname is not enough to solve the problem.

It is easier to analyse the social and economic backgrounds. The civil administrators (prefects, mayors, police commissioners and bureaucrats to name a few) alongside military officers, represent the majority of the community: 65% of the total number. Instead, the 33% is composed by the so-called local elite such as doctors, lawyers, lecturers, aristocrats and landowners. So, alongside the old ruling class, we have new figures who, despite being already important, finally gained the official recognition of their status within the society.

A clear example of this is Charles Matthew Capelli. Born in 1765 in the little village of Scarnafigi he graduated in Medicine at the university of Turin. As a military doctor he gained a certain prestige in the realm before being associated to the College of Medicine of Turin. After the battle of Marengo, he began working with the occupying forces. Chosen as sub-prefect of Savigliano in 1801, he was then one of the founders of the local lodge “La Réunion”. From 1804 to 1807, year of his appointment

as member of the “Corps législatif” in Paris, he served as Worshipful Master of the lodge. Even when transferred in the capital of the Empire he maintained ties with “La Réunion”, obtaining also the title of Honorary Worshipful Master. In 1811 Capelli became assistant professor of compared anatomy at the University of Turin later changed in a full position.

The aristocracy involved in the masonic temples was essentially the same who had been attracted by the revolutionary ideas even though there were also individuals who were attracted by the “normalization process” undertaken by Napoleon. The second ones were dreaming of regaining their lost wealth and prestige.

Lastly there was a 2% of clerics. Furthermore, this tiny minority can be split in two: on one side there is the Catholic clergy, on the other side the Protestant one. The first component was a minority and consisted of low-key members such as canons and curates. The second one was linked to a specific group, the Waldensians. This group was one of the oldest Protestant community in Italy, and was located between the Alps and the town of Pinerolo (in the southwest part of the Po department). During the “ancient regime” this religious minority had known a harsh treatment being excluded from a number of economic and social activities. So, since 1798 they welcomed the French occupation and the reforms introduced in the country. As a result, some of their representatives decided to enter the lodges.

The historical and geographical background explains some of the existing differences among the Piedmont’s lodges. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that “La Parfaite Amitié” of Pinerolo had a relatively high Protestant presence and a lot of local inhabitants. On the other hand, the two lodges established in Alexandria, because of the military importance of the fortified town – on the outskirts of the First French Empire and bordering the Kingdom of Italy – hosted several Piedmont and French officials belonging to the army. On the contrary, since Turin was the seat of the regional government, the three local lodges held the bureaucratic class and the management component. For example, “La Verité” consisted of imperial guards and workers for the royal court held by prince Camillo Borghese who ruled the country from 1808 to 1814.

However, towards the end of the Napoleonic era tensions and suspicions increased. In 1812, with the French invasion of Russia, the way Freemasonry was perceived by the French authorities in the Italian peninsula greatly changed.

The following year Viceroy Eugène de Beauharnais forbade the masonic meetings in the Kingdom of Italy. In Piedmont, two episodes show how the police was getting more and more dubious about the masonic activities. In 1812 “L’Amitié Eternelle” asked permission to establish a Scottish Chapter where the Freemasons with Higher Degrees could meet separately. The mayor of Turin made the divisional director of the police Jean-Louis de Douhet d’Auzers decide. The officer strongly denied his authorization because he was afraid that the law enforcement couldn’t work at its best.

According to the director, his denial was the result of a careful reflection. First of all, in a recently annexed country, gatherings where people can speak freely couldn’t be tolerated. Secondly, the Piedmont’s lodges had an inappropriate attitude. This refusal was a clear sign that times had changed: now the Napoleonic government, aware of the mounting discontent, was afraid of conspiracies and rebellions.

In the last two years of the foreign domination the masonic community experienced a deterioration. With the exception of “L’Amitié Eternelle” and few others, which quickly collapsed, the decline was slow and yet inevitable. Nonetheless, in many places the activities continued until the French retreat in 1814.

The Congress of Vienna revived the kingdom of Sardinia with the addition of new territories (the former republic of Genoa). The idea was to create a strong buffer state to limit the French state. With the Restoration and the return of king Victor Emmanuel I, Freemasonry was banned once again. In the eyes of the monarch the Freemasons were too compromised with the Napoleonic regime. So, on June 10th, 1814, the ruler reiterated the royal prohibition against this organization. The punishments were severe: confiscation of property and job loss. With this act and similar ones in other Italian states, Freemasonry disappeared: for its rebirth we will have to wait until 1859.

In conclusion, we can say that the Napoleonic Freemasonry played an essential role in Piedmont: the rulers gained a way to filter and recruit people for the new ruling class, while the prominent citizens gained direct access to recover their lost status or to support a government which was perceived as best suited to the new circumstances.