

# THE MELISSINOS' RITE



## 1. Introduction

It is of great difficulty to approach the subject of the Masonic impact of Melissinos' system on Russian society without providing a good deal of information on what the Russian Masonic movement was like. I therefore attempted to provide a general overview of his Masonic development, particularly in that period of the eighteenth century when Russian freemasonry reached its maximum influence, before the lodges were closed by Catherine II in the 1790'S and before the movement re-emerged in different form under Alexander I, transformed by the French revolution and the Napoleonic empire, culminating in the Decembrist movement. There is no doubt in my mind that freemasonry in Russia developed as it did because of a deep dissatisfaction with the kind of spiritual nourishment offered on the one hand by the Orthodox Church and on the other hand by the rationalism of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment.

Tradition claims that, during his wanderings, Peter the Great was initiated by Sir Christopher Wren. However, no evidence exists to support this. It would appear that the first freemasons in Russia were foreigners who immigrated when Peter opened doors to the West. From 1731 to 1770 there was really no authoritative Masonic organization playing a serious part in the awakening of the Empire. After 1770 Freemasonry became a fashionable pastime for nobility. About this time Ivan Yelaguin entered the Craft, because he was curious about its knowledge of hidden rites and sciences. During this period Freemasonry was particularly successful in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where the Yelaguin's system flourished. Later, under Nikolai Novikov the Order grew still further in numbers and wealth, honored itself by beneficent foundations and took an interest in public relief and popular education.

Catherine the Great reigned from 1762 until 1792. At first, Catherine applauded these efforts. Later certain officials began to whisper into the ear of the Empress creating doubts about the Craft. The French Revolution dealt the fatal blow. Catherine, frightened by the events in Paris, trembled before the distant peril to absolute monarchy. The downfall of N.I. Novikov in 1792 and the closing of the lodges in 1794 were not only the consequences of Catherine's increasing fear of the spread of revolutionary ideas from France. There were also in part the result of internal stresses, even feuds, within the Masonic movement itself. The various types of freemasonry were rivals for the control of Russian freemasonry. For example, the competition between the Swedish templar system and Yelaguin lodges was solved by Catherine II when she sent the head of the Templars, Prince G.P. Gagarin, to honorable exile in Moscow.



Many degrees which include the word Knight fall under the Scottish Rite (as well as in other rites). Knighthood first appears in early Freemasonry within the Order of Kilwinning, whose last degree was the *Knighthood of the Rosy Cross*. Another idea of Knighthood belongs at the root of the Strict Observance, two words which first appeared in a document drawn up in 1754 at Kittlitz, where von Hund, owned a manor some 50 miles East from Dresden. They had the double meaning of strictly following the rules of the Order as well as that of distinguishing it from the then current German Freemasonry. In 1741, von Hund was made a freemason in Frankfurt/Main and stayed in Paris in 1742-1743. It remains an unanswered question whether he was then received in a knightly Order through exiled Stuartists, or not. What we know for sure, however, is that, together with a small group of very young men, he founded a Lodge and a Chapter at Kittlitz in 1751. Nothing can better describe the spirit which animated that group from the start than the beginning of the *Rules* it adopted in January 1752.

This is a brief historical background before the appearance of Petros Melissinos and his Rite in 1765.

## 2. Freemasonry in Russia during the eighteenth century

There was a long tradition of magic and alchemy in Russia and in spite the barriers of foreign contamination set up by the Orthodox Church, occult literature was not unknown. The pseudo – Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*, with its alchemical and astrological elements, was known in Russia probably by the end of the nineteenth century and there were copies in the libraries of many Tsars. An exposition of Lull's *Ars Magna* and a translation of his *Ars Brevis* had been produced in Russia in the late seventeenth century and circulated widely. Among “portraits” of Greek sages to be found in the Russian art of seventeenth century were representations of “Hermes Trismegistus”. John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica* formed part of the library of Simeon Polotsky in the reign of Tsar Aleksei.

In eighteenth-century Russia, Freemasonry was inextricably linked a crash course of Westernization, originally embarked on Peter the Great. In fact one should speak about the “*invention of Eastern Europe*” in the eighteenth century, as the alignment of Europe according to east and west during the age of the Enlightenment intellectual project, while reducing the significance of the Renaissance alignment according to north and south. Hereby one should add that Freemasonry began producing its own negations of some Enlightenment ideas, providing a transition to Romanticism.

Due to its popularity, secretive nature, and rumored influence, Freemasonry attracted a lot of attention in Russian history. Thus it came as no surprise that there were more than 3,000 active foreign and Russian Freemasons in the country in the eighteenth century, a number which grew during the period of 1800-1861. Yet, most historians of Russia tend to either downplay the influence of foreign Masons and thereby neglect its international implications or, in a vein of conspiracy theories, attribute all problems in the subsequent development of the country to the “*evil*” nature of forced foreign influences.

While turning to intellectual currents that were new to them (including neo-stoicism) various trends of Christian traditions, Renaissance thought, Hermeticism, Cabalistic thought, Pythagorean and Newtonian science, East European Freemasons tried to assess the spiritual legacy of the Orthodox Church, interrelating it with both ancient and modern Western philosophic traditions, no doubt, a body of thought plagued with contradictions.

Considered from this standpoint of constant borrowing, adapting, and blending together different ideas and traditions, the inability to uncover a singular source of ideological uniformity of Masons, despite the clarity of its general spiritual positions, attests to the fact that Freemasonry grew from the Enlightenment but thus prepared the ground for Romanticism, and the revival of religion in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. By studying the transmission of ideas we will better understand how the Enlightenment context worked with local situations. It is also a study of ideas and European Freemasons that traveled across borders to Russia and of the organization that facilitated this process. Or can also be seen in light of travel and a rising cosmopolitanism in ‘modern’ Europe. To philosophers, an “unexplored country,” a “*tabula rasa*,” in Leibniz's words, Eastern Europe and Russia represented a curious case of developmental potential.

Acompanied by the advances in commerce and aided by external political events, like the Jacobite rebellions, Peter the Great's reforms (and his trip to Europe) initially, fostered the increase in contacts between Europe and Russia in the first decades of the century and contributed to the influx of foreign population to Russia. At the early stages of the development of Freemasonry in Russia, ports became the first and the main centers of Masonic activity. In fact by 1710, Russia had replaced Sweden along the whole stretch of the Baltic coast from Riga to Vyborg and gained control of the Northern trade. The

commercial treaty of 1734 provided a steady flow of northern raw materials to Great Britain from Russia and of Western manufactured goods from Britain to Russia, and Britain became Russia's main trading partner (during the eighteenth century, St. Petersburg had 204 established British trading companies). During the eighteenth century this popular commercial destination attracted foreigners from different countries, cultures, and religions who could become long-term residents and active contributors to the city's public and social life, creating a diverse cosmopolitan population. Also British presence in Riga was significant. In 1765, for instance, the British Consul - General in Russia (and a Junior Warden at the "Perfect Union" lodge in St. Petersburg) Samuel Swallow pointed out, "[i]t will appear that near one half of all the Exports of Riga to all Parts, are shipped by the British residing here".

In addition to trade, another channel for broadening contacts between Great Britain and Russia was military recruitment. By recruiting from sixty to as many as five hundred British subjects to enter Russian service as naval captains, lieutenants, bombardiers, shipbuilders, smiths, and gun-founders on his visit to Britain, Peter made a major contribution to the development of the Russian navy, creating the foundations, at the same time, for the beginning of the long-standing tradition of the British presence in the Russian navy, many of whom, were Freemasons. The estimates of how many British navy specialists Peter recruited vary widely.

In addition, there were pressures of active and powerful rivals abroad and in England. Responding to the rapid growth of the lodges outside of England and faced with a growing dissension from those who were dissatisfied with only three degrees, the Grand Lodge of England needed to find strong leadership and an appropriate administrative structure to regulate and direct the lodges. Such issues as a tendency to change the Grand Masters almost yearly made it difficult to stabilize the brotherhood. In the course of the eighteenth century, there were 38 Grand Masters of the Grand Lodge of England, as compared to only five Grand Masters in the nineteenth century. In the 1730s, the Grand Lodge started creating a system for securing the allegiance of existing lodges, constituting new lodges, and ensuring adherence to the regulations of the English system. This led to the introduction of warrants to distinguish the lodges or individuals belonging to English or high-degree systems and the Ancients, rapidly becoming an influential Masonic trend. Formally, only the properly warranted three-degree lodges could be acknowledged as "regular". All societies whose constitutions did not follow the rules of the Grand Lodge were considered irregular, and their members were banned from visiting regular lodges.

In 1751, this system was slightly revised to make establishment of distant lodges easier without the physical presence of the Grand Master or his Deputies by means of warrants. With the spread of Freemasonry abroad, the Grand Lodges needed the warrants to keep track of all the lodges under their jurisdiction and for lodges to prove their belonging to a particular system. The Provincial Grand Master, the chief Masonic authority in the region, played an important regulating role. Grand Provincial Master had extensive powers to establish lodges in his jurisdiction and oversee the development of Masonic networks.

### **3. The masonic expansion in Russia**

The second Provincial Grand Master of Russia James Keith, is generally recognized as a leading propagator of Freemasonry in Russia. The significance of Keith's activities recognized beyond Freemasons in Russia. James Keith was born in 1696, the younger son of the Earl Marishal of Scotland, "Marishal" being a hereditary office held by the Keiths. Soon after entering Marischal College, founded by his ancestors, to study law, Keith became involved in the Jacobite Uprising of 1715, fled to the continent and entered the service of Spain. With the support of Duke of Liria, James Francis Fitzjames, a grandson of King James VII, Charles' cousin and one of the most prominent Jacobites who was sent by Spain as an

ambassador to Russia, in the beginning of 1728, Keith was commissioned as Major General by Russian Emperor Peter II. In Russia, Keith rose rapidly because “*he always did his duty as a brave officer, without intermeddling with any State intrigues*” received a prestigious appointment as lieutenant colonel in the new regiment of guards overseeing the personal bodyguards of the Empress Anna, and participated in the Polish war of 1733, the German war, and then fought against the Turks in Ukraine.

However, despite his career success, Keith was apprehensive about living in Russia. In 1733, he wrote to a correspondent in Scotland: “*In a word could I forget that I was born in Scotland I should be very happy here [in Russia]. ... I see foreigners of all nations, who are content with their fortune, and are wise enough to make a virtue of necessity but ... for my own part to be quietly at home is the utmost wish*”. In 1747, Keith settled in Prussia because Frederick the Great had previously accepted his elder brother, whom he had made Governor of Neuchatel. Next, Keith became Frederick's Field Marshall, governor of Berlin, and military advisor, but the sources on his last ten years of life are scarce. The last known fact about Keith's life is that he died at the battle of Hochkirchen, 14 October 1758, in the service of Prussia.

It is not clear when and where Keith was initiated into Freemasonry. Sources present no veritable information about his Masonic activities before coming to Russia or after his appointment as the Provincial Grand Master during his stay in London from February 1740 till May 1741. It would seem probable that Keith, a fervent Jacobite, was involved with the Grand Lodge of England only during the one-year term of the Grand-Mastership of his cousin, turning later to Berlin lodges for guidance. One source mentions that it was General Keith who founded a lodge in Halle in December of 1756. It is often assumed that Keith was such an important figure in the history of Russian Freemasonry because during his Mastership in the 1740s Russians started to be initiated into Freemasonry on the same footing as the members of foreign communities. But in fact, despite his presumed vital role in Russian Freemasonry, little is known about his actions as the Provincial Grand Master.

Despite the prominent role that the British played in the introduction of Freemasonry to Russia, the most influential group of foreigners in Russia in the eighteenth century was the Germans. The German influence

and the development of Freemasonry in Russia are often linked to show that Freemasonry was introduced *via* Germany. Several historians point out the existence of relations between a lodge in Petersburg and the Berlin lodge “Drei Weltkugeln” (“Three Globes”) as early as 1738. But since the “Three Globes” was founded not earlier than 1740, any relations between the Russian and this lodge could start only after 1740. In fact it is more probable that the supposed relations between a St. Petersburg lodge and the Three Globes started in 1762-63.



Masonic movement really took off in Russia during Catherine's reign in large part for two reasons. One was the lively intellectual intercourse with Western culture, primarily French, German, English, which characterized her reign. The second was the manifesto issued by Peter III in February 1762, freeing the nobility from compulsory service, giving the class with most pretensions to culture the leisure to travel, study, read and write, and to indulge in all kind of private social activities.

However, the father of Russian freemasonry was Yelaguin. As himself explains in his memoirs, his masonic teacher had told him that true wisdom “*had remained concealed in the temples of Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Jews, the Greeks and the romans and in the Hellenistic mysteries; and in the schools of Solomon ... and in Jerusalem...; and wisdom can also be found in the lodges or schools of Pythagoras, Plato, and among Indian, Chinese, Arab, Druid, and other people famous for knowledge*”. Yelaguin studied “Hermes Trismegistus”, Hebrew and Cabbala, theosophy, Egyptian traditions, Saint Martin’s Des erreurs et de la verite and the writings of Robert Fludd.

#### **4. Who was Melissinos?**

Petros (Pyotr) Ivanovich Melissinos (Πέτρ Μελισσινο), (1726 – 1797) was a Lieutenant General of the Artillery of the Russian and was widely considered the best Russian artilleryman of the 18th century. He was born as Petros Melissinos on the Greek island of Kefallinia (in Greek *Κεφαλληνία*) in 1726, he was of Greek origin and his father was a physician who belonged to the noble Greek family of Melissinos (in Greek *Μελισσηνός*). Throughout his life, he prided himself on his Greek origin. He received a thorough education in his youth (School of land-cadets in St. Petersburg, Faculty of Mechanics in Moscow, physics and mathematics in Paris) and was fluent in many languages including Russian, German, Italian, French, Turkish, as well as his native Greek. He also knew some Latin and English. Melissinos family arrived in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great. While he was staying y in Paris he studied acting. In fact, when he returned to Russia founded a theatrical group, in which he played some roles. Thanks to him the Queen Elizabeth of Russia built a theater in Russia, and himself became a patron of the theater scene of St. Petersburg.



### **MELISSINO**

During the Russo – Turkish War 1678 -1774, Melissinos was in charge of the Russian artillery. His efficient command helped Russian forces prevail against a fourfold numerical superiority of the Ottomans at Khotin, Larga and Kagula. In 1783, he was appointed Director of the Artillery and Engineering Corps in St Petersburg. He is remembered as an organizer of the artillery education in the Russian Empire. After the ascension of Emperor Paul, Melissinos was put in charge of the entire Russian artillery but died the following year.

His son Aleksey Melissinos, a Major General, was killed in the Battle of Dresden (1813). His brother, Ivan Melissinos, was Dean of the Moscow University under Catherine the Great.

Jenkins points out that: *“Melissino himself was intelligent and ambitious and was doing much to promote the cause of the artillery. He could certainly have enjoyed an even more illustrious career were it not for certain defects of character which made him appear less serious about his profession than was in fact the case. He had a reputation of being vain, weak, and a spendthrift. He was a prominent figure in Saint Petersburg society; he spoke several languages, fenced and danced well, and was an authority on the theatre. But it was difficult to take him seriously, and society had nicknamed him “le grand seigneur manqué.” Nonetheless, the school rapidly acquired a name under him, and in very little time the number of cadets more than doubled. The sensible changes in the studies which he introduced with the help of his abler pupils bore fruit; and the major reform in the artillery which subsequently took place was largely the work of his former pupils”.*

A contemporary French commentator, Claude François Masson, described Melissinos as *“a man who may, in some measure, be considered as the Richelieu of Russia”*. This lavish praise is backed up by asserting that he combined *“great practice with scientific theory”* in every aspect of the arts and sciences. Moreover, he *“cultivated literature, and had a decided taste for the French theatre”*. Despite his Greek origin, Melissinos was fluent in European languages with combination with a *“gallant and magnificent”* comportment, ensured that he was a prominent figure in Petersburg society during Catherine’s reign. Claude Masson also describes how his *“military entertainments, his camps, his parties, and even his orgies and follies, will long be the subject of conversation”*. This testimony is corroborated by Johann-Albrecht Euler, the son of the celebrated mathematician Leonhard Euler, who in the summer of 1775 attended a public Masonic entertainment organised by Melissinos:

*“After this dinner, that is to say at 10 o’clock, we went straight to Kammenyi Ostrov, where the freemasons gave the best festival 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 fireworks display”.*

This lavish praise is backed up by asserting that he combined *“great practice with scientific theory”* in every aspect of the arts and sciences. Moreover, he *“cultivated literature, and had a decided taste for the French theatre”*. As stated, Melissinos was fluent in Russian, German, Italian, French, Greek, Latin, and English. This ease with European languages was combined with a *“gallant and magnificent”* comportment, which ensured that he was a prominent figure in Petersburg society during Catherine’s reign. It is fitting, therefore, that when Casanova arrived in St. Petersburg in December 1764, he went straight to Melissinos with a letter of introduction. The Greco-Russian invited Casanova to dine with him every night and entertained him throughout the adventurer’s stay in St. Petersburg. Thus Casanova escorted Melissinos to an Epiphany celebration, as well as to a military review and banquet. Furthermore, Melissinos acted as an intermediary between Casanova and Catherine the Great.

Casanova himself writes in his memoirs:

*“The next day I took a letter of introduction to M. Pietro Ivanovitch Melissino, colonel and afterwards general of artillery. The letter was written by Madame da Loglio, who was very intimate with Melissino. I was most politely welcomed, and after presenting me to his pleasant wife, he asked me once for all to sup with him every night. The house was managed in the French style, and both play and supper were conducted without any ceremony. I met there Melissino’s elder brother, the procurator of the Holy Synod and husband of the Princess Dolgorouki”.*

He adds:

*“Melissino and I were present at an extraordinary ceremony on the Day of the Epiphany, namely the blessing of the Neva, then covered with five feet of ice. After the benediction of the waters children were baptized by being plunged into a large hole which had been made in the ice...”*

During Casanova’s stay in St. Petersburg, it would have been highly unlikely for the two men not to have recognized each other as freemasons and not to have exchanged views on esoteric philosophy and Freemasonry as well. Indeed, in 1764 the 53 – year old Melissinos had yet to introduce his own rite, However, it would be reasonable to assume that by then he bore the framework of the new rite in mind and was seeking for the main structures that would enable him to express his creative Masonic thoughts.

Another significant –though controversial- personality that was associated with Melissinos was Joseph Balsamo, better known as Cagliostro. Prior to arriving in St. Petersburg Cagliostro spent several months residing in Mittau (Jelgava) in neighbouring Courland. It was here that he first established his own distinctive Masonic rite, which fused alchemy, Egyptian mythology, necromancy, and embraced the so-called adoption system that included women. According to von Recke, Cagliostro had persuaded the city’s Masonic grandees, including her father and Count von der Howen, to allow him to open a lodge in the city by performing a number of alchemical experiments.

Cagliostro’s entrance into Petersburg society had been brokered through Melissinos’ Masonic connections, as Count von Howen wrote a letter of introduction to Baron von Heyking, a fellow Courland Mason. Yet, no doubt much to Cagliostro’s consternation, von Heyking treated him with the utmost scorn. In his memoirs von Heyking describes Cagliostro as *“a most brazen and ignorant charlatan”* who had no intelligent conception of physics or chemistry. It is noteworthy, however, that von Heyking concedes that he *“had the talent to win over Count Melissino, the Chevalier C[orberon] [...] and many more”*. In Heyking’s mind this ‘moral blindness’ was inexplicable and was *“a delusion of this time which prepared other fooleries”*. Subsequently, Cagliostro used the space of his Masonic lodge to forge a seemingly magical environment, in which he conducted a series of eight *séances* using the six-year-old son of von Medem as his spirit medium. Alongside conjuring up spirits, Cagliostro also delivered a number of lectures on alchemy and other magical arts. Generally, we can assume that the impact on the Russian nobility of the visit of Cagliostro to St. Petersburg between 1779 and 1780 was significant. Moreover, of great importance was the empress’s personal response to Cagliostro’s visit, which included a series of remarkable letters to Grigorii Potemkin.

*To amuse his old age he had formed a society which, under the name of the “Philadelphia Society” (in greek Φιλαδελφική Εταιρεία), and which gave rise to denunciations at which Catharine only laughed, and which Paul treated seriously. The empress, being mistrustful of these assemblies, sent for Melissino, and received from him a promise that he would no longer frequent and protect any (secret )society, including Masonic. He kept his word, and concerned himself no more about them.*

## **5. Melissinos as a freemason and his Masonic circle**

In 1765, Catherine the Great was immersed in formulating her “Grand Instruction” (*“Bolshoi nakaz”*), which was intended as a “guide to the Enlightened principles on which a better government and society might ultimately rest.” At the same time as the empress was composing her *Nakaz*, the eminent masonic



figure of Melissinos established his new Masonic rite in St. Petersburg inspired by chivalric and clerical symbolism and rituals, which advocated an alternative worldview in which alchemy played a pivotal role. Over the course of the following two decades Melissinos' high-grade system of Freemasonry acted as a key crucible in which both Russian and European aristocrats indulged their passion for alchemy in the Russian capital.

We do not exactly know when Melissinos was initiated into Freemasonry. The first reliable Masonic reference about Melissinos is made by Boris Telepneff:

“*Melozino Rite (sic) which had flourished already from 1765 in the Lodge of Silence*”. And the same author adds:

“*A ‘Peter Mellozino’ is listed as WM of a Lodge at Yassy, Moldavia, N° 469, one of the five Lodges composing ‘the Grand Provincial Lodge of Russia [...] originally established in St. Petersburg under the auspices of the Berlin Grand Lodge “Royal York”.* This event took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1770: Yelaguin was elected Grand Master”.

So, if Melissinos was WM of the Lodge of Mars No 469 (and apparently the first WM after the establishment of the lodge) in 1770, then we can safely assume that Melissinos was an active Freemason to another system at the same time he had founded his own the Rite.

From whom Melissinos have been masonically influenced?



A L'ORIENT,  
CHEZ LE SILENCE.

Melissinos may have been influenced by Baron (Louis) Théodore Henri de Tschoudy (1727–1769), who was in the Russian service between 1752–1755 and 1757–1760, and who championed alchemical and cabbalistic symbolism in his Masonic rites and philosophy. He was one of the most active apostles of the school of Ramsay, and adopted his theory of the Templar origin of Freemasonry. Tschoudy, the author of the ritual of The Flaming Star (*L'étoile flamboyante*), was in Russia off and on from 1753 to 1760 and acted as the private secretary of I.I. Shuvalov. He used the name of Chevalier de Lussy and Comte de Putelange and published the first French language periodical in Russia, *le chaméleon littéraire*, in 1759. His masonic rituals seem to have been very influential.

Thus, as already mentioned, Melissinos was a “*consummate socialite*”, he was able to publicly flaunt his Masonic grandeur and elevated status in Petersburg's elite circles. One must look into the distinctive features he developed in the mid 1760s within his own Masonic system.

It wouldn't be an invalid assumption to attribute the ritual of the seven grade system to Melissinos. The possibility of his authorship is likely to be the case if one considers the following facts carefully. He had been a keen freemason for several years, fluent in many foreign languages, erudite, person of great education, member of esoteric circles and thus well-versed in esotericism and also in the Eastern Orthodox ritual.

This is the reason why Melissinos' easily combined chivalric and clerical mythology and rituals linked to the Knights Templar and Orthodox and Catholic liturgical practices alongside Rosicrucian-style esoteric philosophy immersed in alchemical lore.

Furthermore, Melissinos had many contacts with distinguished Greek freemasons who lived in St. Petersburg during that era. In fact, he could be regarded as the most prominent representative, as it were, of the Greek community of Petersburg.

Another eminent figure of the society of St. Petersburg and member of Melissinos' circle was Marinos Carburi or Charvouris (In Greek *Μαρίνος Χαρμπούρης*), another Greek from the Island of Kefallonia, serving as colonel in the Russian Army. Marinos (although we do not have any reference proving that himself was a freemason) was the brother of the famous freemason Marco Carburi (1731-1808), a chemistry professor at the University of Padua, who was sent in 1764-1765 to Sweden by the Venetian government to study mining techniques. Marco, while in Stockholm, visited a lodge, where conferred with Swendeborg. It must be pointed out that Carburi was the major proponent of the Rose – Croix masonry in Italy. He is the one that signed the Chart for the installation of the first lodge in Corfu, under the name *Beneficenza*.

Another eminent figure was Georgios Papazolis (in Greek *Γεώργιος Παπαζώλης* from Siatista. He was the one who inspired brothers Orloff with the vision of the independence of Greek populations. There are no archives according to which we could positively deduct the symperasma that Papazolis was a freemason. Only the Greek historian Kalevras points out that Melissinos and Papazolis (who was initiated by Nikolaos Artinos and Leon Leontiadis to the secret society "Athina" or "Hercules Ropalon") founded a secret society in St Petersburg in order to spread, within the Russian army, the idea of Greek independence.

In April 1782, secret societies were forbidden in Russia. Although Freemasons were non included, Melissinos foreseeing the probable victory of Yelaguin's Grand Lodge, now left almost supreme, took advantage of the edict to gracefully withdraw from the contest and retired to Moscow, directing his lodges to close their doors, in obedience to the law.

## **6. The degrees of the Rite**

Very little reliable information is available about Melesino and his system. The common and oldest source appears to be a paper issued in the *Altenburger Zeitschrift für Freimaurerei*, 1<sup>st</sup> vol (1823): 20-31, a reference provided by the entry MELESINO in Lenning II. Nettelblatt wrote "Melesino became acquainted with several masonic systems in France, England and Italy" without giving any authority for his statement (Nettelblatt 294). These three countries, listed in the same order, come in a letter written in 1809 by Starck to Nettelblatt quoted below, where they apply to an unnamed "famous brother of that Chapter who died in 1764", which cannot apply to Melesino who died in 1797.

According to Isabel De Madariaga Melissinos' system "was affiliated to that of Yelagin". However, in respect of the rituals, the only trustable source of Masonic information is Lenning. Telepneff comments that "*it seemed to be rather chaotic and out of sequence*" with the other degrees of the Rite, which generally "*lacked uniformity and continuity*". According to MacKenzie the Rite contained the exoteric teachings of the Order of Ishmael, however this argument lacks any further proof.

The seven degrees according to the Melissinos' system were as follows:

1. Entered Apprentice;
2. Fellow-Craft;
3. Master-Mason;
4. Dark Vault; Arch

5. Scottish Master;

6. Philosopher;

7. Spiritual Knight (*Magnus Sacerdos Templariorum*)

### **The first three degrees**

The first three degrees followed the traditional Craft (or Blue) lodge system. According to some authors these degrees did not materially differ from those we practice today by the same names.

### **The fourth degree (Dark Vault)**

The fourth grade of Melissinos' Rite dealt mainly with the story of the search for and burial of the dead body of Master Hiram. The history of the fourth grade offers a new variant of the various arbitrary continuations of the dismal legend concerning Hiram. In this degree the Lodge was called the Dark Vault and was covered in black, illuminated by the glow spread by 9 signal lanterns, together with 2 vases of burning spirits. Instead of a Mallet, the four-time Venerable Master (called Gabaon) used a bell and light, the symbol of eternal Truth, which is trapped in a lantern. The number four (sacred number of the degree) was repeated in every form.

### **The fifth degree (Scottish Master)**

The legend of the fifth degree was concerned with the later finding of the coffin of Hiram. According to the ritual of the Scottish Master, or more properly speaking, Scottish Knight, the degree was founded by King Solomon himself and “*was valuable in the second age of the World*”. The number of the Knights was originally only eight but was afterwards increased to sixteen. All who aspired to this dignity were carefully proved and tried and tested and were required to be learned in the seven liberal arts. Moreover, they had to manage the Treasury of the King and of the Temple and to defend them in war, even to sacrifice of their lives. The clothing of their rank, called *Ephata*, was long, of red cloth, bordered with gold, their sashes red and green, worn over the right shoulder, from which the Scotch Knights have derived their present similar custom of wearing the sash. According to Galiffe the fifth grade was one of the Scottish degrees of rigour, forming a transition between contemporary and primitive Freemasonry.

### **The sixth degree (Philosopher)**

The sixth degree was described as a motley agglomeration of solemn oaths and prayers, inculcating the fear of God (in Greek *φόβος Θεού*), humility and self – denial. According to Telepneff the secular knighthood was conferred in this degree. According to Galiffe seven altars, including the High Altar, have been prepared in the Lodge garnished with white wax candles. Arriving at the High Altar, the candidate promised, in the most exalted words, blind obedience, even for penitence that his superiors can inflict. (Singular innovation in Masonry!) Humility is the cardinal virtue of this grade. Other specific philosophical Virtues were: Trust, Truth, Generosity, Obedience, Gentleness, Courage and, finally, THE SOUND JUDGEMENT (*Finite coronat opus*).

### **The seventh degree**

The fact that Melissinos' Rite combined chivalric and clerical mythology and rituals linked to the Knights Templar and Orthodox and Catholic liturgical practices alongside Rosicrucian-style esoteric philosophy is most apparent in the seventh degree entitled *Magnus Sacerdos Templariorum*. In terms of alchemy, this is most evident in the rituals and symbolism associated with the seventh degree. As Boris Telepneff has noted, the ceremony was cloaked in the language of spiritual alchemy, whereby the “mystical process of regeneration” was enacted via the “separation of [the] Spiritual essence of Man from his Terrestrial Nature”.

The opening ceremony of the initiation into this degree imitates Orthodox (or Catholic) rites associated with Chrismation, in which the initiate is consecrated with holy anointing oil. The High Priest then sung the opening line from the Catholic hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, known as the Golden Sequence, seven times, which is traditionally sung at Pentecost. In other words, the clerics were invoking the Holy Spirit to descend upon them. The High Priest then approached the altar, on which he placed a ceremonial rod of Aaron seven times. The altar was also adorned with six small candles and in the middle were seven lit candles. What is more, in front of the altar could be seen a white curtain, which was decorated with a red cross produced from the convergence of four black daleths. It is worth mentioning here that the use of the colours black, white and red had an alchemical meaning, symbolizing death, purification and rebirth, as well as relating to the passion and resurrection of Christ. Thus, from the beginning the ceremony for initiates into the seventh degree fused Orthodox and Catholic liturgical rites, Templar garb, and “magic crosses” composed from a Hebrew letter. After the initial consecration ceremony, the high priest cited the opening line of Psalm 47—“*O clap your hands all ye people*”, before beginning the catechism, “dealing with revelations of occult Wisdom”.

Thus, in answer to the question of “*what is the conclave?*,” the High Priest answers by proclaiming that it was a “*genuine assembly of true disciples of ancient wise leaders of the world, now called Brethren of the Rose Cross and also Clerics.*” Fascinatingly, the high priest then emphasizes the difference between this Rosicrucian Order and its predecessors. First, it is stressed that “*this most-venerable name has been abused in former times by fraudulent 'base' chemists,*” which would seemingly be a reference to the seventeenth-century Rosicrucian sympathizers. Next, the high priest states that “*in recent years ... a certain society of so-called German Rosicrucians has been established,*” who are apparently numerous but they “*have but little knowledge of the Royal Art*”. In addition, the high priest speaks of a third (unnamed) group, which he concedes had “*some shallow theoretical concepts of wisdom but [is] still very far from the true purpose*”. The importance of alchemy within the conclave is stressed further in the next question and answer of the catechism, which adopts a *Paracelsian* understanding the so-called Royal Art as “*the Art and Wisdom of Nature*”. Moreover, wisdom itself is pronounced to be “*the knowledge of God and the whole of nature*”.

The catechism then discusses *Genesis*, whereby it is stated that the divine spirit formed from Chaos and took the form of the light (*Lux*). This light is understood in an alchemical sense; namely it was divided into the pure (from which the sky was formed) and the impure, from which the volcanic matter of the earth's crust was formed. After the discussion of Creation, the ceremony



switches dramatically to the ritualistic death of the initiate, which involves the candidate washing his hands in holy oil seven times, before the high-priest invokes death by pronouncing the Latin phrase *Ecce homo* (“Behold the Man”), which was uttered by Pilate in the version of John 19:5 when he presents a scourged Jesus before his crucifixion. After lying face down on a straw mattress for several minutes, the initiate is ‘resurrected’ and anointed with holy oil. The candidate then swears three oaths of loyalty. Significantly, these protestations of devotion are uttered in the names of “*Harris, Aumont, David and Jonathan*”.

Here, the Melissinos Rite once again drew on a Templar legend, which narrated that Pierre d’Aumont, the Provincial Grand Master of Auvergne, fled to Scotland in 1313 and was met by George Harris, the Grand Commander of the Order. Hence, whilst the first part of the catechism promoted the Rosicrucian heritage of the Order, the oath-swearing ceremony reinforces Templar associations.

The degree to which the Melissinos lodge acted as a crucible for various strands of high-grade ritual practice is epitomized by the high priests ruminations on the meaning and significance of the letters J, B, and M that made up the three pillars of Masonry. First, the high priest explains that it refers to *Jachin, Boaz, and Macbenac*, with the last name laden with Templar symbolism. The Templar associations are then stressed still further by the explanation that the three letters in the Scottish Master degree also refer to *Jacobus Burgundicus Molaius*, or in other words Jacques de Molay.

Moreover, the high priest adds that initiates in the seventh degree are privy to the Hermetic meaning of the three initials, which are expressed in Latin as *Ignis, Materis Balneum* (“fire and the sea-bath”) or *ignis et beata material* (“fire and the blessed matter”). This Hermetic explanation of the three pillars of Masonry is then followed by a highly esoteric alchemical description of the process towards the creation of the philosophers’ stone.

## **7. Johann August Starck and the connection with Melissinos**

The Melissinos’ Rite was only practiced in Russia between the mid 1765 and 1781, but its importance and influence should not be underestimated. Whilst Melissino directly drew on Rosicrucian and Templar traditions when formulating his rite, he was also highly innovative in his adoption of clerical symbolism and in incorporating Orthodox and Catholic liturgical rites. Melissinos’ notion of a select clerical order that was privy to an intricate form of Judeo-Christian theosophical knowledge, interlaced with Cabbala and alchemy was contemporaneous with Martines de Pasqually’s development of the Order of Elus Coens in France in the 1760s. Melissinos connection with Johann August Starck is a very significant point in order to comprehend the evolution of Knight (and spiritual) Masonry.



**Johann August von Starck**

Starck is a central figure of the eighteenth century whose intelligence and culture were outstanding. Together with Carl Gotthelf von Hund, Carl Friedrich Eckleff, Etienne Morin and Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, he belonged to the

Freemasons who exerted a considerable influence upon rites and rituals still practised in contemporary Freemasonry. The fact that his name (spelled Stark) is found as one of the signatories of the Grand Constitutions of 1786 is touched upon in Annex II. According to Bernheim “*no one ever heard of the Templar Clerics before Starck appeared on the Masonic scene and wrote his first letter to von Hund, March 31, 1767, which was a few weeks after he founded a Lodge in Wismar; together with Baron Friedrich von Veogesack*”. Bernheim, also, points out that Starck “*was a Freemason possessed of an unusually high degree of culture, familiar with ancient civilizations and dead languages, a deeply religious protestant theologian at heart*”.

Freemasonry appealed to him as it still does to many men of our generation, but his views of what Freemasonry really is may shock some - though not all - contemporary members of the Craft: ‘Freemasonry is a nursery in which the Order picks out those receptive for its most intimate secrets’. ‘*The Order*’ *within, part of, but distinct from, Freemasonry*. While studying at Göttingen, Starck was made a Mason in a French military lodge in 1761. He had been in St. Petersburg from 1762 - 1765 as teacher of Oriental languages, and was also a deep student of theology and philosophy. In St. Petersburg he had come into contact with the Melissinos’ System, which was both hermetic and theosophic in its tenets. Whatever Starck saw, heard or experienced when he lived in St. Petersburg must have impressed the young man of twenty-three he was then. The books he wrote before and after he stopped all official masonic activities in 1778 show he never changed his mind about the Order. We can conclude that the idea of spiritual or clerical Knights may have been originated somewhere in St. Petersburg, but it is difficult to decide whether it was grasped first from some unknown source by Starck and then influenced Melissinos or *vice versa* (Telepneff 251 and note 101, Allgemeines Handbuch, ii, 307). I tend to agree with Gould who suggests that in the 7<sup>o</sup> degree of the rite, Magnus Sacerdos Templariorum, Starck “*found inspiration for his Clerical Rite*”.

In May 1768 he went back to St. Petersburg (between 1763 and 1765 he had visited and taught Oriental languages and archaeology at the Petrinum school) at St. Petersburg as private secretary to Prince Wiäsemkoi. The same year he propagated a Masonic system, when he inaugurated a Clerical Chapter in the city. Starck held that the mystic traditions of the Knights Templars, derived by them from those still older fraternities with whom they had been in contact in the East, were preserved amongst the clericals of that Order who had cherished their unbroken continuity until his days, and he announced that he was in communication with certain Superiors, or chiefs of the Order.

The precise connection between the Melissinos’ Rite and the system introduced into St. Petersburg by Starck is difficult to ascertain. It has been claimed (however without proof) that Starck frequented Melissinos’ lodge in the city between 1763 and 1765. According to Collis “it is clear ... that Starck’s chivalric and clerical vision of Masonry closely mirrored that expounded by Melissinos in the same city”. Telepneff points out that “*in fact, it was known [!] that Starck did frequent Melissino’s Lodge at St. Petersburg*” and cited “Blum 13” as an authority. Which cannot be taken as an authority at all, since Blum wrote “the Lodge he [Starck] often visited in St. Petersburg belonged, *according to Fessler* [my italics], to the Melesino’s system, a kind of Templar Chapter of a more sacerdotal than priestly character”. Blum referred his reader to pages 194-196 of the Fessler’s articles mentioned in note 17 above, where Fessler asserted “in Melesino’s Lodge, he [Starck] saw [!] the “*erhabnen Ritter Gottes*” [Sublime Knight of God], [a degree] he had probably learned about earlier from the French Officers in Göttingen, arranged into a Templar Chapter with a more priestly than military and knightly character. [...] it may have given him the first idea of introducing a Templar Clericat in the Lodges’. Fessler however gave here no authority whatsoever.

In a letter written to Nettelblatt in September 1809, Starck mentioned Melissinos’ Chapter, but not Melissinos himself:

*“To be sure, I had great relations with the remains of the Scottish Chapter in Petersburg, accordingly I became afterwards actually everything in my hands, not only what they had, but also what a worldwide famous Brother of that Chapter, who died in 1764, collected in Italy, France and Scotland; however I was not the only and main actor [in Wismar]: Vegesack also had uncommon knowledge: I still own the copy of the patent which Count de la Tour du Pin drew up for him as a Cleric and Böhnen was a member of the Swedish Chapter”* .

The emergence of the Melissinos’ (as well as Starck’s) systems of high-grade Freemasonry in St. Petersburg in the 1760s was symptomatic of a wider European trend. As Goodrick - Clarke has observed, esoterically-minded Masonic sects in the second half of the eighteenth century, such as the Strict Observance in Germany, provided “*a vehicle for the transmission of theosophical and alchemical traditions*”. Within the security of the Masonic lodge, a section of Europe’s aristocratic ruling class craved an alternative worldview to the rational and materialist doctrines being expounded by the likes of the Philosophes. Hence, they sought inspiration from the Western esoteric tradition that had flourished in the early modern period, alongside an acceptance of mystical Christian doctrines.

#### **8. Melissinos and esoteric tradition - The Search for the Philosophers’ Stone and Melissinos’ manuscript**

In Russia, the seek of inspiration from the esoteric tradition is epitomized by Melissinos, who espoused the dynamic potential of the Western tradition to transform and impact upon both the individual and the surrounding environment. In other words, Melissinos did not simply utilize the alchemical tradition for Masonic rituals and symbolism; he also “*succeeded in establishing an active circle of fellow adepts from across Europe in St. Petersburg, who collaborated on harnessing what they saw as the inherent potential of alchemical transmutation*”. Known members of the Melissinos’ Masonic Circle who actively engaged in alchemical pursuits, as testified by Marie-Daniel Bourrée, Baron de Corberon (1748–1810) in his *Journal*, include Corberon himself as well as Carl Adolph Brühl (1742–1802), Louis-Auguste le Tonnelier, Baron de Breuteuil (1730–1807), Baron Karl Heinrich von Heyking (1752–1809), Henri-Frederic Levetzan (a Danish officer), Victor Amadeus of Anhalt-Schaumburg, Abbé Pasquini (a Sienese man of letters), Prince Fyodor Sergeevich Gagarin (1757–1794), Ivan Matveevich Tolstoi, Aleksandr Ivanovich Odoevskii and a certain Chevalier Duménil. The ultimate goal of alchemists is to produce the philosophers’ stone, which is “*the arcane of all arcane, possessing the power to perfect imperfection in all things*”.



Remarkably, Melissinos was the linchpin of an international coterie of would-be-adepts and fellow Masons who enthusiastically pursued this long-cherished goal in St. Petersburg in the 1770s and early 1780s. The evidence of such active alchemical experimentation overturns the view, expressed by Iurii Lotman and Stephen Baehr, among others, that Russian Masons in this period did not undertake alchemical experiments.

Ôhe extent to which the Melissinos Masonic circle indulged in alchemical pursuits is revealed in the journal of Marie-Daniel Bourée, Baron de Corberon (1748–1810). The Frenchman arrived in St. Petersburg in November 1775, where he was secretary to the French legation until 1777 and then *chargé d’affaires* until returning to Paris in 1780. On arrival in the Russian capital Corberon immediately entered into a Masonic-

alchemical network. Thus, within days of being in St. Petersburg the Saxon nobleman Count Carl Adolph von Brühl (1742–1802) lent the French diplomat a 1754 edition of *Bibliothèque des philosophes alchimiques ou hermétiques*. Corberon and Brühl were soon joined in their alchemical experiments in early 1776 by a French aristocrat named the Chevalier Duménil and the Abbé Pasquini, a Sieneese man of letters.

However, as Antoine Faivre has noted, of all the Masons in St. Petersburg it was Melissino who made by far the strongest impression on the French diplomat. On 5 May 1776, Corberon records in his journal that he had a meeting with Melissino in a lodge. At this meeting Melissino evidently boasted to Corberon that he was in possession of a vial that contained an elixir capable of bringing about good health and youthful vigour. A little over a year later, in June 1777, both Corberon and his friend von Brühl were initiated into the seventh degree of Melissino's Masonic system. The foreign aristocrats had been recognised as worthy adepts by Melissino, who in accepting them into his *inner sanctum* would consequently instruct them in perfecting their alchemical labours. Baron Karl von Heyking (1751–1809), a nobleman from Courland, was also initiated into the seventh degree of Melissino's Rite at the same ceremony as Corberon. In his reminiscences, von Heyking writes that Melissinos had "a passion for alchemy" and that on initiation into the Melissinos' Masonic Rite he realised that its purpose was to explore "*the hermetic mysteries or the philosophers' stone*".

Corberon's journal provides ample evidence of such alchemical pursuits, especially immediately prior to his departure for France in the autumn of 1780. In September 1780, for example, Prince Fedor Sergeevich Gagarin (1757–1794), a captain in the Izmailovskii Guards, offered to show Corberon a book in which he claimed he was able to obtain "*the true mercury without fire, which was itself created in a bottle of vulgar mercury*". Moreover, in the same month the aspiring alchemist Ivan Matveevich Tolstoi (1746–1808), a major in the Preobrazhenskii Guards, asked Corberon whether he could subscribe to the latter's "*mytho-hermetic archive*". The flurry of alchemical activity prior to Corberon leaving St. Petersburg also included receiving one-and-a-half pounds of alchemical matter from a certain Gedin, on condition that he did not reveal how to make it. Corberon describes the alchemical substance as being composed of a certain powder mixed with a few pieces of metal called *vulcain lunatique*, and adds that "we shall see whether I find a small laboratory in Paris" in order to utilize the concoction.

However, undoubtedly the most prized alchemical possession that Corberon took back to Paris with him was Melissinos "great manuscript", along with six of his designs for lodge carpets. It would seem Melissinos had entrusted Corberon with the necessary means to export the Russian's esoteric form of high-grade Masonry to France. Whilst the French diplomat later became attracted to various other esoteric groups, including Swedenborgians and the Illuminati of Avignon, he continued to extol the alchemical mastery of Melissinos, as contained in the Russian's manuscript. In 1787, for example Corberon wrote to von Brühl regarding this cherished manuscript. According to Corberon, the document relates to an incident in 1772, when Melissinos had purportedly seen, handled and smelled "*transmuted gold and the elixir of life*" after assisting in an alchemical experiment carried out by a certain German doctor based in Moscow named Kerstniz. Corberon himself writes that he was keen to meet with the German alchemist in 1780, but was informed that he had suddenly left Moscow in 1773 and had not returned. It seems highly likely that the doctor in question was Johann Christian Kerstens (1713–1802), who in 1758 became the first professor of medicine, chemistry, natural history, and physics at Moscow University. However, before leaving Moscow Corberon notes that Kerstens gave Melissinos a manuscript outlining how to carry out his alchemical method of acquiring the philosophers' stone. In turn, Melissinos entrusted Corberon with a copy of this alchemical manuscript, which was written in hieroglyphs and also contained a short passage in German. Corberon confesses to von Brühl that "*it is well, my friend, that Providence has allowed me to find here, without searching, a man who can unveil these emblems*". The Frenchman then offers a tantalizing fragment to von Brühl "*in the utmost secrecy*," which reveals that it is necessary to labour for nine months,



but that neither metal, coal, or fire is necessary. The value Corberon attached to Melissinos' alchemical manuscript is also demonstrated by the manner in which he promoted it in France in the 1780s. Thus, in July 1781, for example, Corberon met with Cardinal de Rohan (1734–1803) in Strasbourg and lent him Melissinos' manuscript. Several years later Corberon also lent the Melissinos manuscript to Count Angiviller (1726–1810), a leading patron of the arts and personal friend of Louis XVI.

Corberon's journal throws invaluable light on the almost obsessive interest displayed by the Melissinos Circle in alchemy between 1776 and 1780. This cosmopolitan group of Masonic adepts included noblemen from France, Denmark, Saxony, Tuscany, and Russia, who all looked to Melissinos for instruction in their alchemical pursuits. Moreover, the journal also demonstrates how the Melissinos Circle in St. Petersburg formed part of a wider pan-European alchemical - Masonic network, which actively sought to exchange knowledge. In October 1776, for example, Corberon describes how von Brühl had assisted in an alchemical transmutation in Holland and that the alchemist had agreed to correspond with the Saxon. In the summer of 1777, Corberon also wrote down an alchemical recipe for anti-mony that had purportedly enriched a man in Warsaw and which had been relayed to him by Colonel d'Aloy, the Courland Ambassador in St. Petersburg via Baron Heyking in Poland.

## 9. Conclusions

When Freemasonry was introduced in Russia had become fashionable – too much so and purely fashionable. St Petersburg was a strange medley of men from all parts of the world; men who knew nothing of either or Obedience, in fact so-called Masons, who had not the slightest idea what they were to understand Freemasonry. The Masonic lodges that sprang up then were for the most part cosmopolitan institutions. However, for idealistic Russians of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, freemasonry was a source of spiritual comfort, enlightened ideas and humanistic values. As the government was aware, a Masonic lodge was capable of developing either into a politically benign force which encouraged self-improvement and philanthropy or into a seedbed for revolutionary ideas. On the one hand, lodges fostered a belief in the possibility of self-perfection and insisted on a high standard of personal conduct. Masons also performed charitable deeds, visiting prisons, promoting education and aiding the poor. On the other hand, their social concern was bound eventually to lead to reflection on the causes of social problems and to consideration of all sorts of ways of removing political obstacles to the solution of those problems.

The attraction of the knight degrees lays in its mythical connection both with the construction of the Temple of Solomon and with the Templars in the Crusades, who had allegedly survived the destruction of the Order by *Philippe le Bel* in the fourteenth century. The templar masonry was particularly attractive to Russians, as not only did it adopt splendid and dramatic cloaks, but its member were known as knights, using the latin *eques*. Since Russia had no medieval history of chivalry and knighthood (orders of knighthood were only introduced by Peter the Great) the Templars appealed particularly to the aristocracy and the nobles. In Orthodox and ethnically multivariate Russia was not easy for a purely a western masonic system to be widely adopted.

Melissinos was a *polypragmon* man. Waite says that his Rite was “anything but fiction conceived in the brain of Melissinos”. Mackenzie states that he was a masonic “*comet of a season*”, a “*pseudo-masonic egg*” that was never hatched. He was a good soldier, a keen freemason, a scientist during his whole life. According to Iuri Lotman, interest in alchemical philosophy in eighteenth-century Russia combined an “*obscurantist denial of science, open charlatanism and social utopianism*”. In terms of scientific obscurantism, it is impossible to categorize Melissinos as such a figure. Claude François Masson describes how Melissinos “*succeeded in restoring to good condition the foundries of St. Petersburg, improved the composition of the metal by the invention of an alloy which bears his name, and introduced a new method of boring cannon.*” Furthermore, Melissinos’ alchemical collaboration with the eminent and respected Dr. Kerstens, the first professor of medicine, chemistry and physics at the University of Moscow, illustrates how an enthusiasm for actively seeking alchemical secrets did not necessitate a detachment from progressive scientific inquiry.



Regarding his involvement with alchemy and the search of philosophers’ stone, I would argue that alchemical philosophy and practice allowed for a combination of spiritual and pseudo-scientific elements. In this sense alchemy promoted the idea of spiritual *and* material perfectibility. Thus, esoteric symbolism—with its emphasis on death and rebirth—was in harmony with Masonic ideals and could easily be fused with the Christian doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection. Moreover, it can be argued that the ardent belief in being able to concoct the perfect alchemical recipe contributed much to scientific advancement, and, as in the case of Melissinos, produced real benefits for the Russian state. In short, alchemy provided a means for nobleman, such as Melissinos, to combine esoteric philosophy, faith, and scientific pursuits (expressed most strongly in the space of the Masonic lodge).

The charge of open charlatanism, which would be wholeheartedly endorsed by Catherine the Great, is also problematic. The very public exploits of Cagliostro in St. Petersburg provide the most clear-cut example of opportunism. However, one must remember that the Melissinos Circle, carried out their alchemical experiments within an exclusive Masonic sphere restricted to initiated adepts. Thus, the members of the circle were on a level with each other and did not seek personal gain and fame from their shared alchemical endeavours.

One is also hard-pushed to discern any elements of social utopiansim in the Masonic worldviews of

Petersburg Masons. The likes of Melissino and Elagin, for example, did not pursue the same philanthropic and social goals pursued by Novikov in Moscow. However, this does not mean that the Petersburg group of Melissinos were insular and cut off from the world around them. Rather, their outlook was more cosmopolitan and elevated above their immediate environment. The Melissinos Circle of Russian and Western European aristocrats embody the growing sense of a shared worldview that was becoming increasingly threatened in both intellectual and social terms. Thus, whilst aristocratic Russian Masons in St. Petersburg posed no threat to the *status quo*, they did challenge the philosophical foundations underpinning Catherine's vision of reform. In this regard, one can understand the ferocity of the campaign waged by the empress against alchemy in her capital city and in her realm in general. Strictly masonically speaking the system of Melissinos looks like an imitation of the Strict Observance. Evidently, foundering in the sea of knowledge, Melissinos attempted to draw up a compendium of Masonic system based on the establishment of the Order of the Temple, as well as his previous Masonic expertise, and his initiation in the higher degrees of Swedish Rite.

The fact that Melissinos' Rite combined chivalric and clerical mythology and rituals linked to the Knights Templar and Orthodox and Catholic liturgical practices alongside Rosicrucian-style esoteric philosophy is most apparent in the seventh degree (*Magnus Sacerdos Templariorum*). In terms of alchemy, this is most evident in the rituals and symbolism associated with the seventh degree. The whole ceremony was cloaked in the language of spiritual alchemy, whereby the "*mystical process of regeneration*" was enacted *via* the separation of the spiritual essence of Man from his terrestrial Nature.

The system is a Masonic creation of the time of the development of the beyond the Craft Masonic degrees. There is reference to Scottish tradition (Scotch Master) so as Knight Templars tradition, in order to show the initiatory / spiritual sequel to the modern Freemasonry and the non loss of the initiatory keys. To Melissinos we are indebted for the historical fiction that the Knights Templar were divided into military and sacerdotal members; that the latter possessed all the secrets and mystic learning of the Order; and they had preserved a continuous existence down to the eighteenth century. Melissinos (and then Starck) claimed to be the emissary of these Clerical Templars, asserted their superiority over the secular Knights.