IN SEARCH OF ATLANTIC SOCIABILITY:
FREEMASONS, EMPIRES, AND ATLANTIC HISTORY

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In mid-1740, Charles Brunier, Marquis de Larnage, the governor-general of Saint-Domingue, the French colony on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, sent a letter to the French Secretary of State of the Navy, in which he shared his discomfort with recent events in the coastal town of Léogane. A land surveyor, Sir Viaux, who had only recently arrived in France’s most important colony, had started to attract public interest by “proclaiming himself a leader of the freemasons and pretending to [have been] given orders and the necessary power to establish one or even several freemasons’ lodges in Saint-Domingue.” To the governor-general’s horror, Viaux had already managed to attract some “neophytes” among Léogane’s inhabitants, including notable members of the army, the royal magistracy, and the regional court (conseil supérieur). Without knowing what the fraternity was about, “since one has to be part of it to be initiated into its mystery,” the governor-general told Viaux that he would arrest him and send him back to France if he heard of any further reception or assembly without a formal authorization from the French government. Marquis de Larnage did not consider such an authorization desirable because he was convinced that such a lodge and its secret proceedings would constitute a source of public uproar, of “divorce and dissent . . . in almost every household”: “some ladies were made to believe that the object of this institution and brotherhood was to get along without women, others that the freemasons devoted themselves to the devil.”

The governor-general apparently did not need to fall back on coercive measures to stop the meetings of the lodge, for it left no further traces in the colonial archives, masonic records, or other available sources. While Viaux’s social activities in Léogane remain a footnote in the history of Saint-Domingue, they are part of a much larger story, involving not only this island but the entire Caribbean. At the time when Marquis de Larnage discovered freemasonry in Léogane, the expansion of this relatively new organization to the islands in the Atlantic Ocean was already in full swing. Since the late 1730s, masonic lodges were being established throughout the West Indies, particularly in the British and French colonies, including Saint-Domingue, where a lodge is reported to have been active in the port town of Les

1 Charles de Brunier, comte de Larnage, to the Secretary of State of the Navy, Jean-Frédéric Phélippeaux, comte de Maurepas, July 25, 1740, COL C9A/52, Archives nationales d’outre-mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France; all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
During the eighteenth century, masonic lodges are estimated to have consisted of several thousand members in the French West Indies alone — a considerable number if we take into account the limited size of the white male population that was, at that time, the main and almost sole constituency of freemasonry in the Antilles.

On a larger scale, the short-lived lodge in Léogane and its many Caribbean sister lodges point to the global expansion of freemasonry and related forms of fraternal association and sociability during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With roots in medieval and early modern stonemasons' lodges, modern freemasonry took shape in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Great Britain. Rapidly spreading throughout continental Europe, masonic lodges became a well-known element of sociability in Enlightenment Europe, a secluded world meant to facilitate the practice of the ideals of fraternity and humanity across social, national, and confessional boundaries. Parallel to its steady expansion in Europe, this secluded world transcended the borders of the European continent within a few decades. At the end of the eighteenth century, wide networks of lodges were in place stretching from Europe to North and South America, into the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. As the cited cases in the Antilles suggest, empires — continental and intercontinental alike — constituted important infrastructures for the expansion of freemasonry.

Despite this global dimension, the academic and non-academic study of freemasonry has been largely encased in national (or sub-national) frameworks. In return, scholars in transnational, imperial, or global history have devoted only scarce attention to the worlds of masonic or other related forms of sociability. Building on some recent historiographical trends, this essay argues for connecting the study of sociability to transnational and global history. Focusing on the example of freemasonry in the Atlantic world, and especially in the imperial Caribbean, it seeks to highlight some of the prospects and potentials that a history of Atlantic masonic networks and sociability in the decades around 1800 can offer to the comparative history of empires as well as to Atlantic and global history. In doing so, I will first give a brief overview of freemasonry as a research topic of social history and of its global expansion. I will then discuss different scales of analysis before sketching some analytical perspectives of an Atlantic history of freemasonry.

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3 See the vast prosopographic study: Elisabeth Escalle and Mariel Gouyon Guillaume, Francs-maçons des loges françaises aux Amériques 1770-1850: Dépouillement du fonds maçonnique conservé au département des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale (Paris, 1993).


I. Freemasonry and the “Associational Revolution” of the Eighteenth Century

At the time when Marquis de Larnage enquired about the freemasons, their society had already become a conspicuous element of Western European societies. Modern (“speculative”) freemasonry took shape institutionally in early eighteenth-century Great Britain, even though its origins have been subject to debate. Scholars have traced its historical connections back to the (“operative”) stonemasons’ lodges in the late medieval and early modern British Isles, to compagnonnages or journeymen’s fraternities, to knightly orders and to other initiation societies in early modern Europe. Freemasonry, as it manifested itself institutionally in the early eighteenth century, was part of a multitude of associations, learned and literary societies, academies, and clubs that marked the eighteenth century as the “century of sociability” par excellence. Freemasons organized themselves in “lodges,” a term referring to both the group of members as well as the venue of their meetings. These lodges were affiliated with so-called grand lodges (also referred to as “obediences”). The first of these was the Grand Lodge of London, established in 1717, followed by other grand lodges in Dublin, Paris, and Edinburgh in the 1720s-30s. By the late 1730s, lodges had emerged throughout the British Isles and continental Western Europe. By then in Marquis de Larnage’s native France, lodges existed in every major city — a development the governor of Saint-Domingue may have missed, for he had spent most of his career since the 1710s outside of metropolitan France.

Like other societies during the eighteenth century, the freemasons strove for individual virtuous and moral improvement in an associational setting. Core values were tolerance and fraternity. The emergence and rise of freemasonry were thus closely related to the high value placed on sociability during the Age of Enlightenment, which considered sociable intercourse and fellowship with like-minded and “dignified” individuals as a privileged path to civic virtue and to a better society. At the same time, freemasonry maintained a more complicated relationship with the rational Enlightenment than other

6 Freemasonry comprises a multitude of masonic institutions, grand lodges, doctrines, and ritualistic systems. Some scholars thus tend to talk of “freemasonries.” Yet notwithstanding various internal conflicts and differences, the historical actors conceived and experienced freemasonry as an integrated and (more or less) coherent space due to some basic features which will be presented in the following pages. For the sake of convenience, this paper uses in most parts a singular form and wherever possible abstracts away from the various differentiations. As we will see, this is not to say that freemasonry was a uniform movement.

7 On this debate, see Stevenson, Origins of Freemasonry; Jacob, Origins of Freemasonry; Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, La République universelle des francs-maçons: De Neuton à Metternich (Rennes, 1999), 23-52. For a survey of pre-eighteenth century societies, see Wolfgang Hardtwig, Genossenschaft, Sekt, Verein in Deutschland: Vom Spätmittelalter bis zur Französischen Revolution (Munich, 1997).

8 Ulrich im Hof, Das gesellige Jahrhundert: Gesellschaft und Gesellschaften im Zeitalter der Aufklärung (Munich, 1982).

movements of the time such as the academic movement.10 Through their symbols and organizational forms, the freemasons placed themselves in a gray area between rationality and ancient mysteries, between mechanist theory and alchemy, between transdenomina-
tional leanings and overtly Christian positions, a mixture that held an appeal for many of their members.

In addition to these more general features of freemasonry, six aspects are of particular importance for the context of this essay. First, the freemasons were a voluntary association, that is, an organization based on the principle of free and individual membership whose existence was dependent neither on the state nor the church. While this gave it a certain degree of independence, agency, and ambiguity, it also added to the precariousness of an organization that constantly had to solicit the authorities’ tolerance. The public appearance of freemasonry in different parts of the world was thus to a large extent driven by the desire to convince monarchs and governments that they posed no threat but were beneficial to the social and political order. Rather than being the only voluntary organization of the time, the freemasons were part of what historian Peter Clark has called the “associational revolution,” during which manifold associations and societies popped up throughout eighteenth-century Europe. Shaping a semi-private, semi-public space for conviviality, leisure, and friendly intercourse, these clubs and societies set the stage for the proliferation of modern associations in the following century.11

Second, freemasonry was a homosocial organization, that is, an organization that was, at least in theory, only open to men. While there were, in practice, various intersections and links with mixed-gender spaces and organizations, the lodge room was considered a major institution for the shaping of male subjectivities, positioned between the allegedly diverging or even separate spheres of the marketplace and the family.12

Third, and closely related to its homosociality, freemasonry was a fraternal organization. Along with other religious and non-religious fraternities, it maintained a kinship-like bond — a “symbolic” or “fictive kinship,” as cultural anthropologists and social scientists have termed it — between its members.13 Conceived of as a brother-
hood, freemasonry was to a large extent built on a family model. Family metaphors not only characterized the ties between individual members (referred to as “brothers”), but also served to describe and negotiate the relations between different institutional branches

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(that is, between “mother” and “daughter lodges” or among “sister lodges”). The fraternal ties between members also included the duty of mutual aid and help for “brothers” in need.

Fourth, freemasonry was a society based on initiation, integrated by means of rites, symbols, passwords, and secret signs of identification. Rites marked the admission into the brotherhood as well as the passage between the degrees that a freemason could obtain. The ritualized (and sacralized) space of the lodge was supposed to foster amicable and kinship-like bonds among the members. While the secrecy of their meetings and of the knowledge shared by the initiated lies at the core of freemasonry, it would be misleading to place freemasons in the category of political “secret societies.” In contrast to well-known conspiratorial secret societies such as the Illuminati, freemasons never sought to hide the existence of their institution or its raison d’être. Scholars have thus suggested alternative terms such as “discreet society” for this form of sociability based on secrecy. In empirical reality, however, the boundaries between (apolitical) “discrete societies” and (political) “secret societies” were porous and everything but clear-cut.

Fifth, the internal workings of the lodges obeyed certain rules and procedures that stood in partial contradiction to the political and social structures surrounding them. Thus, all members, regardless of their rank in society, were considered equal within the lodges. The lodges organized themselves along certain democratic and participatory procedures. They based their proceedings on written bylaws (also referred to as “constitutions”) and appointed their officers through periodic elections among their members. This fact, along with the cult of secrecy, has given rise to manifold theories framing the masonic lodges as places of resistance or conspiracy against religious and political authorities. It is true that some lodges, in very specific contexts, may have been drawn into political action. Yet if we look at the social background of their membership, freemasonry was, by and large, not a refuge for political dissidents, insurgents, or


15 For the logics and functions of secrecy in this context, see the seminal article by Wolfgang Hardtwig, “Elitesanspruch und Geheimnis in den Geheimgesellschaften des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in Aufklärung und Geheimgesellschaften, ed. Helmut Reinalter (Munich, 1989), 63-86.

16 Dieter A. Binder, Die diskrete Gesellschaft: Geschichte und Symbolik der Freimaurer, rev. ed. (Innsbruck, 2004); in the English and French contexts, the terms “society with secrets” and “société à secrètes” are also in use.

Eighteenth-century lodges are, in fact, more properly characterized as "sites of social compromise," as social spaces in which parts of the aristocracy and higher middle-classes — also, in part, the clergy — could mingle and interact with each other.¹⁸

Finally, modern freemasonry was from the outset characterized by a pronounced cosmopolitan attitude. The founding document of English freemasonry, the “Constitutions of the Free-Masons” (1723) by Rev. James Anderson, described freemasonry as “the Centre of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain’d at a perpetual Distance.”¹⁹ Similar expressions of cosmopolitanism became a recurrent element in official and unofficial masonic discourse, in catechisms issued by the grand lodges, in speeches held at local lodges, and in the correspondence between lodges or individual freemasons. Considering themselves as protagonists of the eighteenth-century “moral International,”²⁰ Freemasons sought to ignore confessional, political, social, national, and continental boundaries. Although the belief in a Supreme Being was a prerequisite for membership (at least until the late nineteenth century, when some grand lodges in continental Europe started to initiate atheists), the freemasons’ creator god, the “Grand Architect of the Universe," was supposed to transcend specific religious denominations. In fact, however, freemasons were divided on the crucial question of how the cosmos that they set out to (re-)unite would be designed and where its boundaries would be drawn. Discussion and dissent around this question would become a leitmotif of masonic history, fueled by the rapid spread of freemasonry.

II. Sociability Within and Across Borders

Most of the features just enumerated, including secrecy, were not unique to the freemasons, but could be found in other eighteenth-century associations as well. What distinguished freemasonry was the combination of all these aspects and its grand scale and transnational reach. Only a few other non-religious movements of the time adopted institutional structures of a comparable intercontinental scope. Compared to the academies that developed similar transnational networks and served as hubs of hospitality for the members of the eighteenth-century République des Lettres, the lodges proved to be more open socially.²¹ As a matter of fact, freemasonry stood out as the foremost institution of what I would call cross-border sociability.
Parallel to its institutional consolidation, the lodge network expanded on an international scale. Only a few years after the foundation of the Grand Lodge in London, the first lodges were established in various parts of continental Europe. On the eve of the French Revolution, an estimated number of more than one hundred thousand people were involved in freemasonry or related organizations in Europe; in France at that time, at least five percent of the male urban adult population were lodge members. Freemasonry was not only “the first secular civic association to achieve success on a European-wide scale,” but it went rapidly beyond the boundaries of the continent. The spread of English freemasonry since the foundation of the first Grand Lodge in London 1717 may serve as an example. Around 1800, the (at that point, two) English Grand Lodges had already created dense networks of local lodges in Europe as well as overseas. By the end of the eighteenth century, the English Grand Lodges and their provincial bodies had recognized more than two hundred lodges in North America, more than forty in South Asia, and more than fifty in the West Indies. Many more followed in the next decades. A century later, the network had become denser, with particularly important nodes in North America, South Africa, Australia, South and South East Asia, as well as in places like Egypt, where a dozen English lodges had been established. These figures only refer to local lodges officially affiliated with the English Grand Lodges. They do not include those lodges affiliated with other grand lodges, such as those in Ireland, Scotland, France, the Netherlands, or (from the 1780s) the United States, which proved no less devoted to the global expansion of freemasonry. Likewise, the figures include neither intrinsically mobile military lodges nor those lodges or lodge-like associations that did not manage — or even aspire — to become formally recognized by masonic officialdom.

The Saint-Domingue lodge that Comte de Larnage referred to in 1740 was in many ways paradigmatic of the rapid expansion of masonic sociability. Gravitating around one person, it points to the major role of individual initiatives in the expansion of the masonic “cosmos.” Like many such “pioneering” lodges, it remained (at least for a certain period) outside of the formalized network of European grand lodges, therefore leaving no traces in the official masonic archives, but only in “profane,” public or private, records. Finally, the lodge in Léogane remained a short-lived experience, a fate it shared with many other such associations, particularly in an overseas context that was marked by an eminently mobile and unstable constituency.


23 Hoffmann, Civil Society, 12.

24 For a list of English lodges up to 1894, see John Lane, Masonic Records, 1717-1894 (London, 1895). For the post-1894, the list has been complemented as Lane’s Masonic Records, version 1.0, URL: www.hrionline.ac.uk/lane. The period of existence of the lodges included in the list varies considerably, from several months to several decades. For further numbers from the British imperial context, see Harland-Jacobs, Builders, 3-5.
Thousands of other lodges, however, went beyond such an initial stage. They were held together by a transnational federal structure and quasi-diplomatic relations. A local lodge became part of the masonic network only when it was recognized by a grand lodge. Such grand lodges had very different — and often conflicting — jurisdictions. While the English grand lodge(s) claimed to function as the universal “mother lodge” with a barely restricted scope of action, grand lodges in continental Europe started to assert sovereignty over territories that increasingly converged with national state borders.\textsuperscript{25} And yet, even the activities of these “national” grand lodges exceeded the territories of the nation-states. In regions with a high number of active lodges, so-called “district” or “provincial grand lodges” were established. In the course of national independence movements, such as in the new world around 1800, provincial grand lodges could transform themselves into new national grand lodges. Already during the eighteenth century, a regular and at times intense masonic correspondence emerged, and this was not only between the local lodges and their respective grand lodges. Local lodges communicated with members belonging to different obediences as well, and the grand lodges developed a system of international relations in which they could establish, maintain, sever, or resume diplomatic relations between each other. In addition, freemasons belonging to different lodges were bound to mutual hospitality and assistance — including logistical, material, or financial support for members in need. Early on, the lodges encountered the problem of non-members trying to exploit these masonic structures of mutual aid. As a consequence, the eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of a complex system of certificates, secret signs, and passwords designed to help freemasons to reveal themselves to each other. The masonic certificates, in particular, became highly demanded “ passports” to the world of the Enlightenment, enabling members on the move to draw on the lodge network and, if needed, on its resources.

The rapid expansion of freemasonry was not centrally planned or orchestrated. Rather, it occurred “in fits and starts, non-stabilized rapid advances, [and] temporary retreats.”\textsuperscript{26} At the current stage of research, we still know little about the different mechanisms that supported this expansion. At least four driving forces can be pointed out, however. First, this expansion was closely connected with migration. The lodges made movements of people easier, but many of them were also the products of this mobility, both in its voluntary and involuntary


forms. Refugees or people in exile established lodges as much as travelers, merchants, diplomats, or settlers. Second, along with the movement of civilians, the mobility of soldiers played an important role. Lodges established or recognized by freemasons in the armies (often organized in ambulant lodges) were among the marks left by military campaigns and invasions. Third, rivalry and conflict between grand lodges contributed to the emergence of a masonic geopolitics, in which competing grand lodges sought to extend their spheres of influence and authority. In the English context, for instance, the rivalry of more than six decades (1751-1813) between two grand lodges (the “Antients” and the “Moderns”) stimulated the foundation of new lodges, especially outside of Europe. Fourth, political structures of rule played a large role in the expansion and transregional institutionalization of freemasonry. This holds true for the nation-states and, as recent research has shown, perhaps even more so for large-scale political entities such as empires.27 These imperial dimensions intersect with the aforementioned factors, since in many cases empires provided the framework for these different forms of mobility and military expansion.

III. Different Scales of Analysis

A lodge, the basic unit of freemasonry, was simultaneously embedded in several contexts of differing scale. First, the lodge was an essential feature of local public life, organizing a segment — in most cases the notables and primi inter pares — of local society. Second, the lodge was integrated into an “obedience,” an institutional network orchestrated around a — regionally and/or nationally defined — grand lodge. Third, the lodge was part of a large-scale intercontinental, if not global network that was institutionally stabilized and underpinned by an ideology of cosmopolitan fraternalism. Given how intrinsically these three dimensions are interrelated, it is astonishing that until very recently scholars have taken little notice of freemasonry’s cross-border and large-scale dimensions.28

Though one of the most eminent historians of freemasonry, Robert F. Gould, had already in the late nineteenth century described it as a phenomenon of global reach, subsequent generations of academic and nonacademic scholars have almost invariably privileged a local, regional, or national scale of analysis.29 Thus, for instance, there has been no systematic research on the close connection

27 Harland-Jacobs, Builders.
between migration, migrant cultures, and freemasonry, with the notable exception of Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire’s groundbreaking study on eighteenth-century France. Although Beaurepaire’s work pointed to the necessity of reassessing the role of “foreigners” in “national” freemasonry, it does not seem to have stimulated comparable studies for other countries. This also holds true for the U.S. context, in which the colonial origins of freemasonry and its intrinsic connections to migration are obvious. Yet, although the study of freemasonry and of fraternalism as a whole in the United States has been a vibrant field of innovative scholarship over the past two decades, it has remained largely encased in a national framework and has devoted only passing interest to its transnational or transatlantic entanglements. Histories of freemasonry in North America represent its colonial origins predominantly as a negative foil for freemasonry’s national self-assertion and Americanization.

Likewise, while studies have scrutinized the masonic life in many European or non-European port cities, they have, until very recently, been only moderately interested in its fundamental overseas connections.

There are several reasons for the neglect of freemasonry’s large-scale dimensions. First, institutional history is significant for a field of research that tends to draw to a large extent on institutional archives. As a matter of fact, from the end of the eighteenth century on, the nation-state became the predominant organizational framework of freemasonry. Starting in continental Europe and then spreading to the imperial and non-imperial world, existing or emerging grand lodges increasingly defined and protected spaces of territorial sovereignty that geographically coincided with political boundaries, in most cases those of nation-states. Second, as a reaction to anti-masonic movements, which often nurtured fears of internationalism and world conspiracies, freemasons in Europe and the United States tended to emphasize their patriotism and support of the nation-states and authorities they were subject to. They themselves thus contributed to minimizing the transnational character and global reach of their institution. Third, as a consequence of institutional history, the masonic institutions of research which have emerged in recent years (in Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, for example) still tend to privilege national units of analysis. Finally, it should not be surprising that the (still marginal) topic of freemasonry and sociability has not diverged from the general patterns of academic historiography, which has
The recent surge in transnational, entangled, and global history approaches has contributed to a greater awareness of freemasonry’s cross-border dynamics. Entries on freemasonry have been included in some of the recent dictionaries in transnational and world history. Likewise, new dictionaries and handbooks on freemasonry have appeared that endeavor to take comparative, transnational, and global perspectives more seriously. So far, this increasing interest has hardly trickled down to the field of empirical research. Projects and published research engaged explicitly in cross-border sociability have remained scarce. Since the late 1990s, however, some scholars from various backgrounds have broken new ground in the study of cross-border sociability from a variety of perspectives. These contributions do not only illustrate the new insights that larger scales of analysis can provide for both the study of freemasonry and for transnational, transcultural, or imperial history; they also represent different ways of reframing the topic, even if it is premature to speak of established fields of research. Three of these major areas shall be briefly sketched.

(1) A European perspective: Freemasonry was, first and foremost, a European phenomenon. It emerged out of a European context and saw its most rapid expansion in Europe. Until recently, however, scholars have rarely taken these European dimensions into account. Following Margaret C. Jacob’s pioneering studies, other scholars have started to describe freemasonry on a European scale. While these studies helped to go beyond one particular national context, they have remained in a primarily comparative framework that is less interested in the manifold connections between the cases studied. Against this backdrop, an entangled history of European freemasonry has gradually taken shape, a project put forward in several seminal works by French historian Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire. Building on his studies on the close connection between migration and

35 For a rapid overview over masonic and academic research, with a particular focus on the French context, see Charles Porset, “Masonic Historiography,” in Handbook of Freemasonry, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek (Leiden, 2014), 117-35.


38 A different way to distinguish perspectives is provided by Harland-Jacobs, “Worlds of Brothers.”


40 See esp., Beaurepaire, L’Autre et le Frère; Beaurepaire, République universelle; Beaurepaire, L’Europe; Beaurepaire, L’espace des francs-maçons: Une sociabilité européenne au XVIIIe siècle (Rennes, 2003); Diffusions et circulations des pratiques maçonniques, XVIIIe-XXe siècle, ed. Beaurepaire et al. (Paris, 2013).
freemasonry in France and drawing on unexploited sources outside the institutional archives (especially ego-documents), Beaurepaire has, over the years, shed light on the driving forces, dynamics, and patterns of freemasonry’s transnational expansion in Europe and its gradual and protracted institutionalization as a Pan-European sphere of interaction. His studies constitute an important argument for a better integration of masonic history into the “general” history of Europe. Freemasonry’s close relation to mobility and to certain mobile groups (diplomats, merchants, migrants, as well as prisoners of war), and its interaction with networks of correspondence, diplomacy, business, or ethnic groups makes it an important feature of an entangled socio-cultural history of Europe since the eighteenth century. Although Beaurepaire’s studies were mainly focused on the eighteenth century and the Francophone sphere, they demonstrate the promising new perspectives and insights that a European scale of analysis provides, both for the history of cross-border sociability and an integrated European history in general.41

(2) An intercultural perspective: Freemasonry did not remain a European organization alone. Academic research has become increasingly interested in its early boom in the European borderlands, especially in the broader Mediterranean basin.42 In fact, lodges flourished not only on the Euro-Mediterranean coast, but also in the Levant, the Middle East, and North Africa — areas that were mostly part of the Ottoman Empire until the early twentieth century. While many of the early lodges in these regions were founded and populated by European migrants, traders, diplomats or colonists, scholars have highlighted the fact that throughout the nineteenth century freemasonry enjoyed increasing popularity among certain segments of local — and to a large extent Muslim — societies. The most important contributions to an understanding of non-European, “native” freemasonry in the Middle East and North Africa have come from French academics, notably from political scientist Bruno Etienne and historian Thierry Zarcone. While these two scholars have engaged with different aspects and areas — Etienne with the question of the adherence of Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir (1808-83), the most prominent leader of the anticolonial resistance in nineteenth-century Algeria, and Zarcone with masonic or para-masonic societies throughout the Ottoman Empire and Iran — both have described freemasonry as an object and arena of cross-cultural appropriations, encounters, and transfers.43 Zarcone, especially, has pointed to the various structural and ideological affinities and interactions between


secular fraternities and certain religious (especially Sufi) brotherhoods, a phenomenon that historian Maurice Agulhon had already discovered in the radically different Catholic context of Southern France. Less concerned with aspects of mobility than the European approach, the studies by Etienne, Zarcone, and an increasing number of other researchers emphasize the role of freemasonry and comparable structures of sociability for intercultural relations and transfers in borderland contexts.

(3) An imperial perspective: The Mediterranean context points to the significance of colonialism for the development of cross-border sociability. Empires were among the most important structures in which masonic sociability expanded and flourished on a global scale. While the importance of intra-imperial fraternal networks has been recognized since the 1970s, scholars have only recently begun to discover empires as a valuable unit of analysis for research into freemasonry and other fraternal organizations. Thanks to historian Jessica Harland-Jacobs, the British case is by far the best studied. Covering two centuries and a wide range of different regions, Harland-Jacobs’ path-breaking study analyzes the complex interplay between the British Empire and freemasonry since the 1720s. In fact, British overseas rule and the various forms of mobility it entailed did not only constitute a main mechanism of freemasonry’s global expansion; the brotherhood also provided a flexible social infrastructure for hierarchies, alliances, and conflicts over religion, political affiliation, social advancement, race, nationality, and ethnicity on an intercontinental scale. Although Harland-Jacobs alludes to the potential of subversive uses, she emphasizes the various social, moral, emotional, spiritual, material, and ideological functions that made freemasonry an imperial institution par excellence. Similar to the two other perspectives, these recent scholarly achievements have opened up broad and largely unknown horizons. French and Dutch imperial freemasonries still lack comparable scholarship, however, as do several important subtopics (including for the British

45 Research in this area has become a burgeoning field, see e.g. Dorothe Sommer, Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire: A
47 See especially Harland-Jacobs, Builders.
Empire), such as the development of freemasonry outside of white settler colonies, dysfunctional or subversive uses, and inter- or trans-imperial dynamics.  

The three perspectives sketched here pose a major challenge to the predominant way of analyzing the history of freemasonry, and fraternalism as a whole, in a national or sub-national framework. With varying foci, they propose radically different units of analysis and promising new ways of bringing the large-scale and cross-border dimensions into the history of sociability. Their results are highly relevant for our understanding of national and local freemasonries and will necessarily influence their study. Thus, to name but one example, the British Empire was a major arena in which the rivalry between the two English grand lodges was played out and was a significant factor in the rivalry’s outcome. To be sure, large-scale and cross-border units of analysis cannot simply supersede previous national or local ones. As holds true for other fields of historical research, local, national or transnational approaches, micro- and macro-perspectives, local prosopography and translocal network analysis must be seen as complementary. The study of cross-border sociability can benefit to a great extent from the results and the methodological finesse of research conducted on a local or national scale.

IV. Atlantic Perspectives

Against this historiographical background, we return to the masonic lodges in Saint-Domingue and other Caribbean islands, with which this essay began. What would be the best perspective for studying them? At first sight, the imperial perspective may appear to be the most natural and most appropriate approach. Most (though not all) of the lodges found in the West Indian colonies were indeed affiliated with grand lodges in their respective colonial metropoles in Europe, and most of them were dominated by nationals from these metropoles. Viaux’s short-lived lodge in Léogane would then appear as a product of French imperial freemasonry, just as the numerous lodges in Jamaica or Barbados would figure as part of British imperial freemasonry. But how would such an approach account for the fact that many of Saint-Domingue’s lodges, in the midst of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), affiliated with a relatively new player — the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; and for the fact that, after Haitian independence, many of these lodges were reestablished in the United States or other West Indian islands such as Cuba?  


50 See, on (parts of) these lodges, Agnès Renault, D’une île rebelle à une île fidèle: Les Francs de Santiago de Cuba (1791-1825) (Mont-Saint-Aignan, 2012), 304-19.
that later on many of these lodges could be found on the East Coast of the United States, and Louisiana in particular? Such facts, I would argue, call for an “Atlanticist” perspective; that is, a perspective that takes into account the manifold interactions and connections within the Atlantic basin.

Since the 1980s at the latest, Atlantic history has become a booming field of historical research, especially for the period from the European discovery of the Americas until the early nineteenth century. Scholars in Atlantic history consider the Atlantic Ocean a heterogeneous zone of interaction between the Americas, Europe, and Africa that was shaped and integrated by various economic, cultural, social, political, intellectual, and environmental relations and exchanges. Their research sheds light on the various mobile groups and their networks (of seaman, pirates, merchants, but also of slaves and other forced migrants), on cultural transfers, on the mobility of ideas, on the emergence of creole identities and on societies that are not confined to one single imperial or national sphere. In practice, there are, to be sure, different ways of writing Atlantic history. Conceptions of “the Atlantic” vary according to the researchers’ focus — whether they concentrate on northern or southern part, or on specific ethnic or religious groups. It also varies according to the way that the “Atlanticist” perspective is put into operation. In an often cited article, David Armitage has distinguished three variations of approach: those studies which take the ocean as the unit of analysis (“circum-Atlantic”); those focused on comparisons (between different places, countries, etc.) within this unit (“trans-Atlantic”); and histories that put a region or country into a wider Atlantic context (“cis-Atlantic”).

Beyond such methodological divisions, Atlantic history’s approaches share some commonalities and differences with the three aforementioned large-scale perspectives on freemasonry. Although Atlantic history deals with (Western) European history, it stresses the intra-European entanglements much less than the transoceanic connections of Europe. Likewise, while it is closely related to the history of European overseas empires, Atlantic history does not limit itself to the history of one particular empire. Thus, one of its major advantages is that it brings several empires — with their various interactions, overlaps, and shifting boundaries — into view. Adopting an intercultural perspective, it shares an interest in multicultural borderland situations. Yet, compared to the Mediterranean context,


its story is only partly about the Euro-Christian (colonial) confrontation with existing non-European and non-Christian civilizations; its other part is about the violent creation of neo-European Creole and African-Creole colonial societies.

From the outset, the Atlantic played a major role in the expansion of freemasonry and related fraternal organizations. Parallel to its expansion in Europe, freemasons’ lodges flourished in North America from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. From this time on, the British, French, and Dutch Caribbean colonies turned into major masonic hubs and, starting in the early nineteenth century, freemasonry also became an important social and political factor in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking parts of the Americas. In sub-Saharan Africa until the end of the nineteenth century, most masonic lodges were clustered along the Atlantic coast and the Cape Colony.

This is not new. Historians of freemasonry have regularly alluded to its transatlantic dimensions, and a dictionary published in 2013 is decidedly transatlantic in scope. As Jessica Harland-Jacobs has recently pointed out, “Atlantic history is a necessary approach for understanding many developments in the history of fraternalism; at the same time, the study of fraternalism can shed revealing light on understudied aspects of the Atlantic world.” Yet, while some religious fraternities, especially the Jesuits, have started to receive attention from an “Atlanticist” perspective, the prospects of bringing together Atlantic history and the study of freemasonry and other secular fraternities have hardly been spelled out so far. There are only few books or edited volumes that cover freemasonry on more than one side of the Atlantic, and those that exist do not use the Atlantic as their unit of analysis. Only few regional studies on freemasonry in the Americas, Europe, or Africa have, at least partly, an Atlantic framing or “cis-Atlantic” approach in accordance with Armitage’s typology.

The disregard appears to be mutual. Historians of transatlantic migration and trade, consumer cultures, imperial rule or revolutionary
turmoil in the Atlantic world do not devote a great deal of attention to fraternal networks and the worlds of sociability. The lodges are absent from the “Atlantic Enlightenment”; they remain unnoticed in accounts of Atlantic merchants’ networks and culture; they have been of no interest to those studying Sephardic networks throughout the Atlantic world; they play no role in the analysis of refugee movements in the revolutionary Atlantic.57 In all these cases, I would argue, historians have left aside valuable new research questions, promising insights, and, not least, large amounts of unused source material and data.

Some of the general prospects that a history of freemasonry provides for Atlantic history are rather obvious. The history of freemasonry points to a still largely understudied system of networks along which people moved, got into contact, and interacted with each other over long distances within the Atlantic world. It highlights an important layer in the history of mutual aid, philanthropy, and charity in the Atlantic. Being both essentially local and global, freemasonry constitutes a phenomenon that allows for the combination and reconciliation of the regional, comparative, and circum-Atlantic dimensions of Atlantic history. At the same time, since the Atlantic lodges are woven into a worldwide network, their study can help to counter a criticism often raised against Atlantic history — namely, that its approaches risk artificially isolating the region from its manifold connections with the rest of the world.58

Besides these general aspects, several more specific assets and prospects can be pointed out. In fact, the topic lends itself to elaboration and to asking more precise questions that might help us to go beyond the plausible but trivial conclusion that everything was, in the end, interconnected. This requires an approach that does not limit itself to the mere detection of far-reaching connections and entanglements — a tendency that still characterizes a great deal of scholarship in global or new world history.59 As already stated, raising such questions does not mean rejecting research that is still dominantly framed by the nation-state. As a matter of fact, over the years nationally or regionally framed scholarship on freemasonry, fraternalism, and sociability has developed a variety of perspectives and reached a level of sophistication that has a lot to offer to research in large-scale and cross-border contexts. I will illustrate this by briefly sketching three research questions and perspectives that an Atlantic history of freemasonry could expand on.


Social historians see one of the most relevant features of freemasonry in a specific form of sociability, that is, the ideal of free, pure, non-purposive conviviality with others. Shielded from the “profane” world, masonic lodges were meant to provide a space for the establishment of emotional bonds and friendship between people who otherwise would have remained strangers. Though such practices of sociability were not confined to one specific social group, they tended to involve primarily the upper classes. The masonic lodges constituted, in other words, an important element in local and cross-border sociability as well as in the integration of — existing or aspiring — elites. Building on this well-established branch of social history, it becomes possible to study the significance, forms, possibilities, and limits of such forms of cross-border sociability in the imperial context of the Atlantic.

An Atlantic perspective brings into focus places and people that tend to remain at the margins of studies framed by the nation-state. Atlantic freemasonry was to a large extent made outside of the political and masonic centers of power in Europe, that is, in Atlantic port cities both in Europe and the Americas. Scholars have only recently become aware of the fact that freemasonry in port cities bore distinctive traits, as the lodges met a growing demand among mobile groups that were involved in and on the move within overseas trade. In this context, they have emphasized the importance of masonic certificates for travelers and of trust built through membership, which was of quintessential importance to commercial contacts over long distances. Lodges in such strategically important borderland contexts tended to defy the “nationalization” of the masonic institution and the claims to territorial sovereignty from ascending national grand lodges by maintaining and extending their own international networks. In the Atlantic context, interactions between European, American, and Caribbean lodges were particularly intense and often followed particular patterns that were beyond the grasp of the political and masonic metropoles, such as London and Paris. Thus, lodges in Bordeaux created numerous lodges in the French Antilles and continued to play a major intermediary role between Caribbean lodges and Paris throughout the eighteenth century. Likewise, an Atlantic perspective brings into view specific groups for which these organizations and networks were of major importance: the civil and military personnel of colonial administration, settlers, seamen, and people involved in overseas trade.
Taken together, the Atlantic lodges enable us to examine how different layers of local, imperial, and transimperial sociability intersected within their network. A brief look at one case may help to illustrate this awkwardly abstract idea: Saint-Domingue in the second half of the eighteenth century, later to become Haiti. As in metropolitan France, freemasonry prospered in the second half of the eighteenth century in the French colonial sphere. In some parts of the Caribbean, notably in Saint-Domingue, an extraordinary density of lodges—even by Western European standards—developed, shaping the social life of the coastal towns in particular. With certain variations, the lodges brought together aristocratic planters or their local agents, military and civil representatives from the metropole, urban creoles, absentee landlords, and merchants, including slave traders. The aspiring group of free men of color who also sought entrance, however, remained excluded for a long time. The lodges were thus closely connected to the structures and conflicts of Saint-Domingue’s colonial society. Yet—and this would be the second layer, which we may call imperial—they also maintained close ties with lodges in Atlantic port cities, such as Bordeaux and Le Havre, where freemasonry also flourished in the second half of the eighteenth century. Those lodges were, to a large extent, dominated by merchants—including a significant proportion of men involved in the transatlantic slave trade. In the critical period of late 1780s and early 1790s, when debates about the abolition of slavery came to a head in French politics, the lodges in the Antilles and in Atlantic port cities formed an important imperialist and pro-slavery lobby within French freemasonry. At the same time—and this would be a third layer—the lodges in Saint-Domingue functioned as important platforms of a transatlantic community that formed itself beyond state and imperial borders and organized itself in the Antilles, just as in American and European port cities. Thus, some of the lodges included large proportions of non-French members and kept up connections with other lodges in the Americas outside the French imperial sphere.

Freemasonry should not be seen as another cohesive and self-contained segment of the Atlantic world along the lines of a “Black Atlantic” or a White, Green, Catholic, Protestant, Native American, Iberian or German Atlantic. Instead, the study of Atlantic freemasonry can help to counter the “balkanization” of Atlantic history into multiple sub-Atlantics. Due to its ductile nature—as its “plasticity,” as some have termed it—masonic sociability associated with other connections and relationships, be they based on kinship, religious,
political, or professional solidarity, or on national origin. Lodges thus seem to have been of particular importance for diverse groups within the Atlantic world: for certain diasporas (such as the Sephardic Jewish diaspora in the British and Dutch Caribbean), within the armies, and for certain professional groups, all of whom used the masonic network to reinforce their group solidarity and cohesion over long distances. Studying freemasonry in this context may help us to gain a better and more complex image of the Atlantic as a world organized in several overlapping networks, instead of in adjacent, monolithic blocs.

2. Cosmopolitanism, Colonialism, and Slavery

I have already referred to the decidedly cosmopolitan attitude that freemasons cultivated. Notwithstanding certain regional and national variations, freemasonry embraced prominent cosmopolitan elements of Enlightenment thinking early on. With the support of the brotherhood, their members were supposed to be “strangers nowhere in the world,” to take on Denis Diderot’s famous 1751 definition of cosmopolitanism. Masonic cosmopolitanism was based on ideals of inclusiveness and tolerance, on the belief in the unity of mankind, and on a sense of “world citizenship” (Weltbürgertum). Seen against the backdrop of its cosmopolitan declaration of faith, freemasonry sought to form a “universal family tied together by affection.”

Masonic cosmopolitanism was without doubt one of the driving forces behind the global expansion of freemasonry. Yet, at the same time, its rapid expansion posed serious challenges to its practice of cosmopolitanism. As freemasonry spread throughout Europe and beyond, it became an urgent matter for freemasons to define who the members of their “universal family” would be, who its citizens were, and where the borders of the cosmos they would inhabit would be drawn. Thus, in practice, the freemasons’ cosmopolitanism did not necessarily make them agents of a radical “secularization” or internationalism. Despite their notorious conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church and with officials of other dominations, leading eighteenth-century members tended to anchor freemasonry, to varying degrees, in Christian values and traditions. Already Anderson’s Constitution of 1723 sought to bar the way to a radical form of internationalism by stressing that a freemason “is a peaceable Subject to the Civil Powers, wherever he resides or works, and is never to be concern’d in Plots and Conspiracies against the Peace and Welfare of the Nation.”
Against this backdrop, the history of globalizing freemasonry (and other fraternities) was from the very beginning marked by a fundamental tension between an ostensibly inclusive ideology and exclusive membership practices. Already in the European context, masonic cosmopolitanism stood in conflict with several forms of exclusion: generally, women were excluded from the brotherhood; in many countries Jews, in some cases Catholics, and almost everywhere the lower classes were excluded as well.\(^75\) Yet, the real litmus test for masonic cosmopolitanism came with the lodges’ expansion overseas. Here, freemasonry experienced other cultural and social differences, which led to new mechanisms of exclusion and distinction from non-Christians and non-Europeans. The masonic tension between universal claims and exclusive practices was thus not just a characteristic of European bourgeois culture, as some have suggested.\(^76\) It also fit in easily with one of the basic mechanisms of imperial rule: the tension between universalist incorporation and differentiation.\(^77\)

An Atlantic perspective thus sheds new light on the masonic “politics of difference” and its interaction with non-masonic hierarchies and forms of exclusion. The Atlantic lodges started as places of sociability for the “white” Atlantic of Creoles and migrants of European origin. Lodges in North America and the West Indies alike followed patterns of racial segregation by vigorously opposing the admission of people of color. However, and at the same time, the lodges’ claims to universalism attracted free men of color, ex-slaves, and colonized people, who demanded to be allowed to take part in freemasonry.\(^78\) Moreover, opposition to the existing forms of exclusion came not only from the groups that were being excluded, but also from within freemasonry. Freemasons in the metropoles and colonies regularly clashed about how to deal with excluded groups, such as persons of color or polytheists. Taking these embattled boundaries of sociability as its starting point, an Atlantic history of freemasonry promises new insights into the complex relationship between imperial rule and cosmopolitanism — both as ideology and social practice — during the Age of Enlightenment. The coherence of the masonic network provides a vast field for the study and comparison of different forms and mechanisms of exclusion, both in the colonies and in the metropoles, and of the complex interactions between imperial culture overseas and civic culture in Europe. The Atlantic perspective can help to extend this comparison beyond the borders of one empire. More than anything, it also points to the institutions of slavery and the slave trade, and the complicated relationship freemasonry maintained with them.

\(^75\) On women and Jews, see especially Jacob, Living the Enlightenment, 120–42; Jacob Katz, Jews and Freemasons in Europe, 1723–1939 (Cambridge, MA, 1970).


\(^77\) See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference (Princeton, 2010), 11–13.

3. An Infrastructure for Transfers?

The masonic lodges are generally regarded as one basic element of the nascent public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe. According to Jürgen Habermas’ classic study, forms of informal sociability, as practiced by masonic lodges and other private clubs, served as fertile ground for the emergence of a bourgeois “public sphere,” in which ideas would be subject to open, non-hierarchical, and rational debate.79 Even if intellectual exchange was not the lodges’ primary and original purpose, they provided a platform and an infrastructure that brought people into contact and exchange. Books, ideas, and concepts circulated within their network.

An Atlantic perspective on freemasonry sets out to explore to what extent this also applied to the Atlantic world. In fact, the eighteenth-century Atlantic emerged as one of the main spaces of interaction for freemasons. Thus, in masonic history, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Atlantic was a particularly dynamic area of institutional change and fragmentation that gave rise to the creation of new systems, such as independent grand lodge networks.80 The Atlantic Ocean was the main breeding ground for what became the most widespread masonic rite in the world, the “Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite,” a high degree system which took shape in various interactions between Western Europe, the West Indies, and the U.S. East Coast. Brought to Saint-Domingue by a French trader from Bordeaux, Etienne Morin, in the 1740s, the “high degrees” flourished in the Antilles, before coming — via Jamaica — to the United States, where they received their definite systematic form.81 Yet, the lodges’ function as an infrastructure for transfers and exchanges (of all kinds) went well beyond the confines of inner-masonic history. As historian David Shields and others have pointed out, freemasonry and other sociable associations played a major role in the formation of a polite (male, white) public sphere in colonial British America.82 Moreover, in the eighteenth-century Antilles, numerous links can be found between lodges and local learned societies that saw themselves as part of the universal Republic of Letters.83


82 David Shields, Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America (Chapel Hill, 1997). See also Hackett, That Religion, 19-54.

A classic, though still intriguing question is to what extent the lodges, whether intentionally or unintentionally, enhanced the transfer of ideas and organizational forms that contradicted or subverted existing political structures. From an “Atlanticist” point of view in the context of colonialism and slavery, we have to ask whether opponents of imperial rule and anti-slavery activists also used the lodges to organize themselves. Much like in the European context, this question cannot be easily answered. As already stated, the Atlantic lodge system was deeply entrenched in the structures of colonial societies and the slave trade. However, it also attracted actors and groups who called into question existing structures. This holds particularly true for the transatlantic revolutionary complex around 1800: throughout the Atlantic, freemasonry attracted not only colonial elites, but also the aspiring middle classes in British North America — most notably in the case of New England — who considered masonic lodges as places for the construction of a (post-) revolutionary social order. The lodges also attracted free men of color throughout the Americas who strove for social respectability and political equality. Lodges in continental Europe provided support for their revolutionary brethren in North America, and freemasons in Jamaica helped set up overtly revolutionary lodges in Central and South America. Yet, masonic lodges were also of major significance for antirevolutionary refugees and exiles from British America, Europe, and the West Indies. So far, the connections between freemasonry and the American and French Revolutions have been analyzed separately; an Atlantic perspective will allow us to examine the role of the masonic networks in connecting the different arenas of the revolutionary Atlantic, including the use of these networks by both revolutionary activists and their adversaries, many of whom crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean between the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean.

Conclusion

The short episode of the lodge in Léogane in 1740 discussed at the beginning of this essay has provided a first glimpse into a vast world of fraternal sociability that expanded throughout the Atlantic world in the following decades. This lodge and the reactions to it also give us a sense of the significance — positive or negative — that historical actors attached to the issues of sociability and freemasonry. This significance stands in sharp contrast to the relative indifference of later generations of historians of the Atlantic world. In neglecting
this topic, historians have not only missed out on promising new insights, but have ignored an important facet of the historical actors’ everyday life and experience. In fact, masonic and other fraternal organizations were ubiquitous throughout the different Atlantic empires and emerging nations of the Atlantic world; they were closely intertwined with all kinds of voluntary and involuntary mobility in the Atlantic; they were a central feature of Atlantic port cities in Europe, the Americas, West Africa, and the Caribbean; they intersected with various professional, political, ethnic, or religious networks stretching across the ocean; and they played a prominent role in the turmoil of Atlantic revolutions, wars, and the struggles over slavery and its abolition. Against this backdrop, we need to inquire how and to what extent the Atlantic world was shaped and integrated by freemasonry and other forms of fraternal sociability, and how, in turn, fraternalism and sociability was shaped by the Atlantic world.

As this essay has argued, bringing the histories of sociability and Atlantic history together will be beneficial for both fields of research. Taking up a classic topic of social history, the study of cross-border sociability can contribute to the emerging field of a global or transnational social history, which needs to be more than a history of migration and mobility. As other scholars have started to demonstrate for other cases, the study of sociability and fraternalism in cross-border and large-scale contexts opens up new perspectives and new research questions. Research concepts and methodologies that have so far been applied mainly on a national or regional scale reveal themselves in a new light and generate new insights. As I have sought to demonstrate, the history of “Atlantic sociability” consists of several intersecting histories: a history of many thousands of people seeking to cultivate kinship-like ties and a specific form of sociability across continental boundaries; a history of power structures and exclusion, which were in constant conflict with a utopian universalism; and a history of the exchange and appropriation of ideas that could, at times, challenge existing political and social structures. Numerous further perspectives on “Atlantic sociability” will be fruitful: the Atlantic lodge networks can tell us a lot about the shaping and large-scale transmission of gender norms, about the management of emotions and friendship across long distances and cultural boundaries, and about the globalization of anti-masonry and conspiracy theories, to name but a few possible topics. Finally, the obvious limits of Atlantic masonic “brothering” — forms of exclusion and sectarianism, schism, and new borders — should also urge us to
think more about the limits of expansion, about ruptures, and about processes of disconnection at a time when “connectivity” seems to be becoming our fetish.

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