# The Search for the influence of the Eleusinian Mysteries on Freemasonry in British and French Enlightenment Thought

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The history of Freemasonry is beset with perils. Books proliferate containing various outlandish theories about Masonic origins, acting as a salutary warning of undertaking such a challenging endeavour. In more recent decades, from this centuries-long lineage of eccentrics, amateurs, and the occasional genius has emerged a more reliable account of Freemasonry's institutional history, one to which many of the members of this lodge have contributed. Essential though that foundation is, isolating institutional from what might appropriately be called speculative history ultimately leaves us with a partial view of Freemasonry. Even if we can see from a distance that they are products of the imagination, these speculative histories remain a part of Freemasonry that

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cannot simply be ignored, as well as a valuable means by which to understand its significance from an internal perspective; sources for which are, for obvious reasons, hard to come by. The question of what Freemasons have thought about Freemasonry is a question of the utmost importance, but it is one that non-Freemason historians such as myself are forced by circumstance to approach from an oblique angle. What I will attempt in this article, therefore, is not a contribution to the history of Freemasonry but something rather more modest: a contribution to the history of ideas about Freemasonry's history. Although its roots stretch into the seventeenth century, the focus here will be on the eighteenth, the era of Freemasonry's transformation and expansion beyond these shores. But the turn of a century is in many ways an artificial boundary, something which will be shown through the persistence of fundamentally seventeenth-century historiographical approaches long into the eighteenth. By weaving speculative history in with concurrent debates about the origins and nature of religion within what we retrospectively term 'the Enlightenment', I will make the case for the centrality of Freemasonry to our understanding of the Enlightenment and vice versa. Masonic history should no more be siloed off from the rest of history than intellectual history should be from 'real' history.

The lens through which this picture of Freemasonry and the Enlightenment will viewed here are the Eleusinian mysteries.[1] Across the breadbasket of the Thriasian plain from the Athenian Parthenon stood a very different temple: the Telesterion of Eleusis. Whereas the Parthenon, like every other temple of the ancient world, was built to house a cult statue, the Telesterion (from τελείω, meaning 'to complete' or 'to initiate') contained a throng of people: initiates in the mysteries, a series of secret rituals structured around the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In the myth, the outlines of which are now more familiar than its relationship to the mysteries, Persephone is abducted by Hades and brought to the underworld, provoking the distraught Demeter to search for her lost daughter, which brings her to Eleusis. There, in gratitude for the Eleusinians' provision of succour (which includes her being amused by the goddess Baubo flashing her genitals), she introduces the knowledge of agriculture and her sacred rites, which ancient authors largely concur in having related in some way to the afterlife. The myth concludes when Demeter discovers her daughter's whereabouts and she petitions Zeus for her return, threatening to withhold her abundance from the earth as leverage. But because Persephone has eaten the seed of a pomegranate, she must spend half of the year with her mother and half in the underworld.

1. J. N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); H. Bowden, *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010); and W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). Archaeologically-based studies of the Eleusinian mysteries include: G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961); and M. B. Cosmopoulos, *Bronze Age Eleusis and the Origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

In the eighteenth century, prior to the early nineteenth-century archaeological excavations of the site conducted by the Society of Dilettanti that began to provide a material basis for interpretation, knowledge of the Eleusinian mysteries was restricted to textual sources.[2] These had been helpfully collated by the Dutch humanist Johannes Meursius (1579–1639) in his 1619 compilation *Eleusinia*, which offered very little by way of analysis but made the wild speculations of his successors in the following century all the easier.[3] The sources were comprised of two conflicting groups: pagan authors such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero venerated the mysteries but were bound by the oath of secrecy not to reveal the proceedings;[4] whereas Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius sought to expose the mysteries without necessarily understanding their significance, and were generally fixated – with a touch of envy no doubt – on the idea that they concealed depraved sexual orgies; in this respect conflating Bacchic with Eleusinian mysteries.[5] For Tertullian the initiations involved a kind of brainwashing: the trials that initiates were put through were conceived by pagan priests 'in order that they may mould their opinions by this suspension of full knowledge.'[6]

Exactly how the mythical narrative of Demeter and Persephone was expressed in the form of the rituals of the Eleusinian mysteries is unknown. But there are glimpses of possible elements. Demeter's search for Persephone seems to have been commemorated with the use of torches, and alternating flashes of light and darkness may have been employed to evoke the motif of the descent to and return from the underworld.[7] In a lecture delivered at Freemason's Tavern in 1784, the English Neoplatonist Thomas Taylor argued that this was enabled through use of bright-burning phosphorus lamps.[8] These theatrics may have been supplemented with the high priest, or hierophant, adopting the guise of Demeter by wearing a mask and directing initiates to the underworld.[9] In a fragment of Porphyry preserved in Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel*, though, the hierophant was dressed 'up to represent the demiurge, and the torch-bearer the sun,

2. Society of Dilettanti, *The Unedited Antiquities of Attica* (London, 1817).

3. J. Meursius, *Eleusinia, Sive, de Cereris Eleusinae sacro, Ac festo* (Leiden, 1619). On Meursius's *Eleusinia* see: A. Ben-Tov, 'The Eleusinian Mysteries in the Age of Reason', in M. Mulsow & A. Ben-Tov (eds.), *Knowledge and Profanation: Transgressing the Boundaries of Religion in Premodern Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 197–227. On Meursius generally, see: K. Skovgaard-Petersen, *Historiography at the Court of Christian IV (1588–1648): Studies in the Latin histories of Denmark by Johannes Pontanus and Johannes Meursius* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002).

4. Plato, *Phaedo* 69.D; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.24.2; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 1.119.

5. See, for example: Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians 1; Clement, Exhortation 2; Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel* 2.3.

6. Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 1.1–2.

7. Apollodorus, *Library* 1.5.

8. G. Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 187.

9. Pausanias, *Description of Greece. Arcadia* XV.

the priest at the altar the moon, and the sacred herald Hermes.'[10] Writing in the second and third centuries AD, Bishop Hippolytus claimed that at the summit of the rituals the hierophant presented a single grain of wheat to the assembled.[11] Was this a symbol of Demeter's bestowal of the knowledge of agriculture to the Eleusinians, or was it an illustration from nature of the teaching of an afterlife? In terms of the effect of these rituals on ancient minds, for ancient Neoplatonist authors such as Proclus they promised spiritual transformation, leading the initiate away from terrestrial life to participate in the divine.[12] For Seneca, initiation into the mysteries provided wisdom and knowledge of 'the vast temple of all the gods – the universe itself, whose true apparitions and true aspects she offers to the gaze of our minds.'[13] The myth of Demeter and Persephone, then, could potentially resonate with Christian themes of death and resurrection as well as the idea of spiritual enlightenment, self-knowledge, and worldly wisdom.

For eighteenth-century intellectuals the interpretation of such sources was influenced by both pagan and Christian hermeneutics. Those same early Church Fathers that disparaged the mysteries constructed the historical foundations of the new faith based on a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of the Old Testament as having predicted the coming of Christianity; this approach was known as typology.[14] In the seventeenth century typological interpretation was combined with a pagan tradition of interpretation known as Euhemerism, named after the fourth-century BC Euhemerus, who viewed the gods and their exploits as apotheosised narratives of historical figures and events.[15] It was adapted to explain pagan myths through their supposed similarities to Old Testament figures and stories, which were seen as having been corrupted through historical transmission. But, as the eighteenth century progressed, Euhemerism found a new application. For thinkers of the age of Enlightenment, for whom the emergence and definition of civil society was a central preoccupation, the themes of the myth of Demeter and Persephone were particularly captivating. Demeter, who as well as being the bringer

10. Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 3.12.1.

11. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies 5.3.*

12. Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic* 6.75.5.

13. Seneca, *Epistles* 90.

14. Typology is an interpretative technique is particularly associated with the early Church Father Origen, see: J. W. Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 1998), 32–35. Eusebius is a notable example of the use of Jewish prophecy in Christian apologetics, see: W. J. Ferrar (trans.), *The Proof of the Gospel, being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, 2 vols (London: SPCK, 1920), 1:5. On the influence of typology on the thought of the Renaissance see: D. C. Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); and in the early modern period: P. J. Korshin, *Typologies in England, 1650–1820* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982); and H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).

15. S. Pugh, *Euhemerism and Its Uses: The Mortal Gods* (London and New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2021); N. Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion: Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2016); M. Winiarczyk, *The "Sacred History" of Euhemerus of Messene* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

of agriculture was known as *Thesmophoros*, the lawgiver, lent herself to a reading of myth as the narrativization of the origins of civilization. Agricultural surplus was essential for a stratified society; law was needed to protect that surplus; and an afterlife extended the realm of law into the individual human conscience. By the end of the century, though, this rationalizing approach to myth that was originally cultivated for use in Christian apologetics was aimed back at Christianity with explosive consequences. For an era still defined in religious terms by the shockwaves of the Reformation project of testing the faith against textual proof, the relationship of the mysteries to the afterlife had raised a profound problem: if Christianity did indeed emerge from the Old Testament, then why was such a fundamental doctrine absent from it? Might Christianity, then, not have developed from an alternative source? And might the mysteries have been that source?

In this article, these defining issues for the truth of Christianity that emerged through the discourse on the Eleusinian mysteries will be traced through the works of a few authors, some of them Freemasons, and some of whom are now rather obscure. The picture that will emerge from this attempt at an intellectual history of Freemasonry as explored through the debate on the Eleusinian mysteries is split across the channel, between a more conservative English tradition that sought to defend Christianity through Eleusis in the first half of the eighteenth century, and a more radical continental one that attempted to undermine Christianity through Eleusis – although, as will be seen, there were many unexpected ways of combining the two. The broad distinction is acknowledged by even the virulently anti-Masonic abbé Augustin Barruel (1741–1820) in his *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1798), where he blames the continental strand of Freemasonry for sparking the Revolution but has no quarrel with their English counterparts.[16] Freemasons contributed to and were shaped by a fundamental inversion of the historical foundations of religion from Christian to pagan priority that occurred across the century – a reversal by which the Enlightenment will be here defined.

## The Eleusinian Mysteries in British Thought

There are three major authors who engaged in the debate on the Eleusinian mysteries in Britain in the first half of the eighteenth century. The first is John Toland (1670–1722), who was notably claimed as a Freemason by Margaret Jacob in her 1981 book *The Radical Enlightenment on the basis of his text Pantheisticon* (1720),[17] which purported to reveal

16. A. de Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, 4 vols (London, 1798), 2:263. On Barruel see: M. Riquet, *Augustin de Barruel: un Jésuite face aux Jacobins franc-maçons* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989); and: S. Schaeper-Wimmer, *Augustin Barruel, S. J. (1741–1820): Studien zu Biographie und Werk* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1985).

17. M. C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1981), 23. J. Toland, *Pantheisticon* (London, 1720). On Toland, see: R. E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

the inner workings of a secret society of pantheists, that is, believers in the identity of God and nature.

The second is William Stukeley (1687–1765), a physician, antiquarian, and Anglican priest who we know to have been a Freemason and who is, moreover, the best witness of the early years of its institutional formation.[18]

The third is Stukeley's friend William Warburton (1698–1779), a cleric with a legal background who rose through the ranks of the Church of England to become Bishop of Gloucester, but for whom in spite of his extensive treatment of the mysteries in his most famous work *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738–41) there is no evidence of any Masonic affiliation.[19] There is, though, valuable proof of his awareness of the association between Freemasonry and the mysteries, with Stukeley's diaries recording that he informed Warburton 'that our modern Free-Masonry ceremonys are derivd from the antient initiations of the Mysterys, or descent into hell.'[20]

Explaining why Toland's interest in pagan secret societies does not in fact lead to the conclusion that he was a Freemason, and why instead Stukeley's Christian interest in the mysteries is representative of English Freemasonry's institutional character with regards to religion in the period, is essential to determine the non-radical identity of the society in its period of formation in early eighteenth-century London. Providing this broad intellectual grounding for the establishment intellectual appeal of English Freemasonry obviates the necessity of explaining why a supposedly radical institution was largely led by prominent aristocrats. However, as will be explored in the second half of this article, there was an undeniably radical continental breed of Freemasonry in the second half of the eighteenth century. It likewise conceived of itself through the mysteries, though in a manner that came to fundamentally challenge the historical foundations of Christianity. Crucially, though, this does not represent the emergence of a hidden continuum of radicalism since Freemasonry's inception. Rather, it was a development enabled by an intellectual shift in the understanding of the relationship between paganism and Christianity catalysed by engagement with the mysteries, which was inadvertently set in motion by Warburton as he sought to negotiate between Toland's critique of Anglican orthodoxy and Stukeley's antiquarian-informed defence of it. The dynamic between the three authors may be illustrated in a vignette set down by Stukeley in his diary in 1729, in which Warburton shared Toland's works with him on one of his visits.[21]

18. William Stukeley has received two modern biographical studies: D. B. Haycock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion, and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbrige: Boydell Press, 2002); which revised: S. Piggott, *William Stukeley: An Eighteenth-Century Antiquary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

19. W. Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, 2 vols (London, 1738–41). R. M. Ryley, *William Warburton* (Woodbridge, Conn.: Twayne Publishers, 1984).

20. W. Stukeley, 'Memoirs' [n.d.], Bod. MS. Eng. misc. d. 719/8, fol. 17v, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

21. W. Stukeley, 'Memoirs' [n.d.], Bod. MS. Eng. misc. e. 121, fol. 77r, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

## John Toland

John Toland was born a Catholic in Donegal in 1670, but he abandoned the faith of his birth and embraced Protestantism, studying first in Edinburgh then in Leiden and Utrecht, where he was introduced to the intellectual coterie surrounding the Arminian scholar Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736), including the Quaker merchant Benjamin Furly (1636–1714), and the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704).[22] His first and most notorious text *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), the second edition of which was foolhardily published in his name, was condemned in London and Dublin, causing him to flee the latter city to escape prosecution.[23] In subsequent years he was instrumental in the revival of English republican writers of the mid-seventeenth century, such as James Harrington (1611–77) and John Milton (1608–74).[24] Toland's biography of the latter argued against King Charles I's (1600–49) authorship of *Eikon Basilike* (1648), the controversy of which was compounded in his framing it against the dispute on the canonicity of the books of the Bible by including a long list of apocryphal gospels in *Amyntor* (1699), his defence of the biography.[25] His interest in the history of English republicanism was, though, tempered by his public avowal for the Hanoverian succession in *Anglia Libera* (1701), which led to his inclusion on a delegation to Sophia the Electress of Hanover (1630–1714).[26] This was followed by a visit to Prussia where he ingratiated himself with her daughter the Queen Consort, Sophie Charlotte (1668–1705), to whom his *Letters to Serena* (1704) was dedicated.[27] It was through these connections that he also met the philosopher and court historian Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who viewed him with suspicion, but with whom he corresponded and debated.[28] Toland's later years would see him fluctuating between London and the Continent, making himself by turns useful and a nuisance to figures such as Robert Harley the Earl of Oxford (1661–1724),

22. On the relationship between Le Clerc, Locke, Furly, and Toland see: S. Hutton (ed.), *Benjamin Furly 1646–1714: A Quaker Merchant and His Milieu* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschmi Editore, 2007), 54–8. On Le Clerc, see: A. Barnes, *Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736) et la république des lettres* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1938); and M-C. Pitassi, *Entre croire et savoir: le problème de la méthode chez Jean Le Clerc* (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

23. J. Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious* (London, 1696).

24. J. Toland, *The Oceana of James Harrington, and his other works* (London, 1700); Toland, *The Life of John Milton* (London, 1699). See also: M. Brown, *A Political Biography of John Toland* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012); and J. Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the crisis of Christian culture, 1696–1722* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

25. Anon., *Eikon Basilike: The Pourtraicture of his Sacred Majestie in his Solitudes and Sufferings* (s.n., 1648). J. Toland, *Amyntor: Or, A Defence of Milton's Life* (London, 1699).

26. J. Toland, *Anglia libera* (London, 1701). See also: Toland, *An Account of the Courts of Prussia and Hanover; sent to a minister of state in Holland by Mr. Toland* (London, 1705).

27. J. Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704). For their correspondence, see: Toland, *A Collection*, 2:383-402.

28. On Leibniz and Toland's debates see: T. Dagron, *Toland et Leibniz: l'invention du néo-spinozisme* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2009); and G. Carabelli (ed.), *John Toland e G.W. Leibniz: otto lettere* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1974). On Leibniz's relationship with the Electress and Queen Consort see: L. Strickland, *Leibniz and the Two Sophies: The Philosophical Correspondence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

and publishing on a wide range of religious, philosophical, and political subjects up until soon before his impoverished death in Putney in 1722.

*Christianity not Mysterious* contains Toland's most significant treatment of the theme of the pagan mysteries. It is a text that has long been strong-armed to march alongside Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) by historians seeking to trace the origins of deism and thereby the genealogy of a nascent Enlightenment.[29] The stakes of Toland's putative Masonic identity are high, because if Toland could indeed be claimed for Freemasonry, then it too could be positioned as an English contribution to the long Enlightenment narrative of secularization. However, Toland's surprisingly overlooked references to the pagan mysteries in the text align him not with deism or pantheism, but with Unitarianism – a position which would certainly have been considered radical by the Anglican mainstream in the period, but which was by no means as radical as deism or pantheism (though these were certainly ill-defined and bandied about terms at the time, including by Toland). Indeed, not only did Unitarians consider themselves Christians, they considered themselves the *true* Christians, whereas Trinitarians were ultimately pagans by having made three gods out of one.

Against this context of Unitarian ideas, for Toland the pagan mysteries are not evidence of a secret fount of natural philosophical knowledge as might be imagined by the retrospective application of the concerns of *Pantheisticon* to *Christianity not Mysterious*. Instead, they represent how paganism corrupted the primitive Christianity of the man Jesus, elevating him to the status of a God in the doctrine of the Trinity. Christianity is not mysterious in the pagan sense of the mysteries as containing a hidden doctrine; rather its tenets of salvation were made available to all through Jesus, who had arrived at them through intuition, not the reasoned deduction relied on by pagans. Toland's Unitarianism also leads him to undermine the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. If Christianity did emerge from and does still depend on the Old Testament for its truth, then why are essential doctrines such as an afterlife absent from it? Rather than being a key figure in an ultimately Christian story as typology dictated, Toland views Moses through his upbringing in the pharaonic court as essentially an 'Aegyptian philosopher', who absorbed the pantheist pagan tradition of philosophy to theorize about a corporeal God.[30] It is these complex religious-historical and doctrinal debates that provide the context to Toland's *Pantheisticon*, not Freemasonry. Toland saw papist Rome in Eleusis, and regarded only the brief window of Christ's life as the legitimate source for Christianity, which had been corrupted from Paul onwards in a process that eventually led to his deification.

29. J. Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity* (London, 1695).
30. Toland, *Pantheisticon*, 47.

## William Stukeley

William Stukeley was born in 1687 in Holbeach in Lincolnshire. After attending Corpus Christi in Cambridge, he moved to London to study medicine under Richard Mead (1673–1754), a physician and Freemason, then set up a practice in Boston, Lincolnshire. Not having the financial resources to go on a continental Grand Tour, he travelled extensively throughout Britain on a series of annual summer journeys, a habit he would maintain for much of his life. In Lincolnshire Stukeley's insatiable curiosity for historical antiquities as well as the natural world led to his membership in Maurice Johnson's (1688–1755) Spalding Gentlemen's Society. When he moved to London in 1717, membership of the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries followed in 1718. However, his sociable London life would not satisfy him for long; in 1726 he relocated back to Lincolnshire, this time to Grantham. In 1729, after struggling with his medical practice, Stukeley became a cleric, receiving the living of All Saints in Stamford. This sinecure enabled him to pursue his antiquarian interests further, writing and publishing on a wide variety of subjects, the best known of which today are his books on *Stonehenge* (1740) and *Abury* (1743).[31] The final phase of his life saw his return to London after receiving the living of St George the Martyr, Queen Square. by the time he died in 1765.

As well as Stukeley's membership in London's most prestigious learned societies, he had also been 'made a Free Mason at the Salutation Tav., Tavistock Street' on the 6th of January 1721.[32] In a short biography of Stukeley in *The History of Corpus Christi* (1753), his *alma mater*, written by Robert Masters though with the evident input of its subject, it is recorded that 'his Curiosity led him to be initiated into the Mysteries of *Masonry*; imagining them to be the Remains of the famous Mysteries of the Antients.' Immediately after, in a reference to *On the Mysterys*, Masters writes that it was this 'he tells us' which 'enabled him to write more fully thereupon than had been hitherto done, although this Work hath not yet been published.'[33]

William Stukeley's approach to the mysteries provides the means of establishing the relationship between Freemasonry and religion. In contrast to Toland, who sought to divide the Old and New Testaments, Stukeley brings the force of his antiquarian learning to argue for their coherence and interdependence. In Stukeley's biblical worldview knowledge of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was revealed by God to Adam at the beginning of the world, then passed on down the generations of Hebrew patriarchs. From them it eventually corrupts into various pagan traditions about a dying and resurrecting God, as commemorated in the ritual of the mysteries. This first occurs in Egypt, from where they are transferred to Greece, flourishing at Eleusis before being

31. W. Stukeley, *Stonehenge* (London, 1740); Stukeley, *Abury* (London, 1743).
32. Stukeley, *Commentarys*, 54.
33. Robert Masters, *The History of the College of Corpus Christi and the B. Virgin Mary* (Cambridge, 1753), 382.

spread throughout the Mediterranean world via Roman imperial expansion; a version of the mysteries is even brought to Britain by Phoenicians seeking to trade in Cornish tin, where they become the tenets of the druids, a people of particular interest to the author of Stonehenge. Stukeley's fascination with pagan antiquity is not as some rival source of religion or philosophy to Christianity, but as a means of establishing its all-embracing foundations.

Stukeley's ideas on the subject are principally set down in his unpublished manuscript *A Dissertation on the Mysterys*, held in two versions in the Wellcome Library, which recently became available online as part of an initiative of the organization I run the UK branch of, Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Preservation, to digitise all of Stukeley's manuscripts.[34] Stukeley's *Dissertation* is structured around his interpretation of the Bembine tablet, a late antique Egyptian-style but likely Roman-produced artefact embellished with decorative rather than syntactical hieroglyphs, which was believed by the baroque polymath Athanasius Kircher to contain the secrets of the mysteries of Isis (and had been viewed by Stukeley's fellow Freemason and physician Richard Mead in Turin in 1695).[35] Stukeley guides the reader through the three sections of the tablet, identifying them as areas of a temple depicted *in plano* in which a sequence of rituals is held that are structured around the passage of the sun and the death and resurrection motif. His account is filled with Masonic terminology recognizable from the near contemporary Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* (1730): as with Prichard, Stukeley's initiate gains entrance to the temple by 'three great knocks';[36] upon admittance he is 'askd, by any of his brethren, where stood the *rex sacrorum* or king', to which 'he would answer, in the east, or regarding the sun rising.'[37] This corresponds with the dialogue in *Masonry Dissected*:

> Q. Where stands your Master?
> A. In the East.
> Q. Why so?
> A. As the Sun rises in the East and opens the Day, so the Master stands in the East … to open the Lodge and to set his Men at Work.[38]

34. W. Stukeley, "Palaeographica Sacra, or Discourses on Monuments of Antiquity that relate to Sacred History. Number II. A Dissertation on the Mysterys of the Antients in an explication of that famous piece of antiquity, the table of Isis" [ca. 1735-1740], MS 4722, Wellcome Library, London; Stukeley, "Palaeographia Sacra or Discourses on Monuments of Antiquity that relate to Sacred History. Number II. A Dissertation on the Mysterys of the Antients, being an explanation of the Table of Isis, or Bembine Table" [1744], MS 4725, Wellcome Library, London.

35. A. Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, 3 vols (Rome, 1652–54). On Kircher's interpretation of the Bembine Tablet see: Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus*, 143–46. For a useful summary of other works on the object, see: E. Leospo, *La Mensa Isiaca di Torino* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 1–28.

36. Stukeley, MS 4725, fol. 30v; Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 10.

37. Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 16r.

38. Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 15.

The initiate proceeds through the areas of the temple, where he is encountered by a bewildering variety of Egyptian gods and goddesses, including three principal deities representing 'the three great lights', described by Prichard as symbolising 'Sun, Moon, and Master Mason.'[39] Eventually he reaches Hecate, who stands behind 'a dead corpse', which concludes the death motif of the initiation.[40] But writing of another key part of the ceremony in the final part of the temple, Stukeley introduces the rebirth/resurrection element, also derived from the patriarchal Christian tradition, with his description of the ancient pagan practice of 'bringing a young infant out of' an Egyptian temple at the 'winter solstice, our christmas time', which is recorded by the late antique Roman author Julius Firmicus Maternus.[41] In Stukeley's view, this festival was the pagan world's celebration at the future coming of a new god – Christ seen through a glass darkly – who had been promised to their forefathers at the beginning of the world. In summary, Stukeley's approach sought to discover a more authentic version of Christianity through his investigation of the mysteries, likewise conceiving of Freemasonry as participating in this venerable tradition. Early Freemasons were not, to use Peter Gay's phrase, 'modern pagans': they were archaeo-Christians.

Stukeley's biblically informed worldview that saw figures of the Old Testament concealed behind pagan deities continued the typological orthodoxy of seventeenth-century paganology as espoused by figures such as Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), Pierre Daniel Huet (1630–1721), and Theophilus Gale (1628–1678), and before them the Church Fathers. Regarding the contemporary context of Freemasonry, though, all the evidence suggests that Stukeley was by no means an outlier in his opinions, but was entirely representative of Freemasonry's institutional self-conception as a society that reached back through a lineage of 'pagan' mysteries and biblical patriarchs to Adamic wisdom.

The Old Charges, the medieval manuscripts that we know to have circulated among Freemasons in the early eighteenth century, contain legendary histories of Freemasonry that move fluidly between pagan and Judaeo-Christian figures, lending them to the wide embrace of Stukeley's interpretation.[42] As to other contemporary writings, the pseudonymous Eugene Philalethes' Long Livers (1722), for example, the body of which treats the relevant theme of the extended lifetimes of the patriarchs, is prefaced by a section on Freemasonry that describes Freemasons as 'primitive Christian brethren': Christians before

39. Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 118r; Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 14.

40. Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 91r; fol. 103r.

41. Stukeley, MS 4722, fol. 113r; fol. 113ar.

42. On the Old Charges see: A. Prescott, 'The Old Charges', in Bogdan & Snoek, *Handbook of Freemasonry*, 33–49. Earlier studies include: D. Knoop, G. P. Jones, & D. Hamer (eds.), *The Two Earliest Masonic MSS* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1938); W. Begemann, *Vorgeschichte und Anfänge der Freimaurerei in England* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1909); and W. J. Hughan, *The Old Charges of the British Freemasons* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1872).

Christ.[43] The second edition of James Anderson's (1690/1–1739) Constitutions diverges from the first edition's relatively neutral section on religion in describing Freemasons as 'true Noachida', writing also of Noah's descendants as having 'in their own peculiar Family preserved the good old Religion of the promised Messiah pure, and also [the] Royal Art [Freemasonry], till the Flood.'[44] Elsewhere, in the non-Masonic context of his Unity in Trinity, Anderson writes that the notion of a promised Messiah in the writings of pagan sages was accountable as 'the Remains of the *Noachical* Religion.'[45]

Finally, Andrew Michael Ramsay (1686–1743) writes in the Toulouse version of his Masonic discourse that the Eleusinian mysteries 'concealed many vestiges of the ancient religion of Noah and the Patriarchs.'[46] Thus, Freemasons of the first half of the eighteenth century widely viewed the society as connecting to an ur-Christian tradition, visible as a primal layer beneath the objectionable aspects of paganism. Although clearly not radical when compared to deism or pantheism, this historical perspective nevertheless provides the theoretical foundations for a form of religious tolerance through a soft focus on biblical origins, unifying the Anglican Stukeley, the Presbyterian Anderson, and the Catholic-convert Ramsay. If early English Freemasonry did indeed contribute to the Enlightenment through the promotion of religious tolerance, then this was not, as might be expected, through reasoned political debate or an institutional structure that brought different social groups together. The patriarchal Christian theme shows its contribution through the very specific conditions of Freemasonry's religious and historical traditions.

How, then, did Freemasonry transform from such mild-mannered and gentlemanly antiquarian Christianity to be blamed for catalysing the French Revolution? To answer that question, we must move away from the immediate context of Freemasonry to address the third figure, William Warburton, whose contributions to the debate on the Eleusinian mysteries would shape the intellectual environment in which later generations of European Freemasons would take very different approaches to the subject.

## William Warburton

William Warburton had received five years of legal training and then spent another five years practising the law in the town of his birth, Newark in Nottinghamshire, before he

43. E. Philalethes, *Long Livers: A Curious History of Such Persons of both Sexes who have liv'd several Ages, and grown Young again* . . . (London, 1722), iii.

44. J. Anderson, *The New Book of Constitutions of the Antient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (London, 1738), 143–44; 4.

45. J. Anderson, *Unity in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, A Dissertation Shewing, Against Idolaters, modern Jews, and Anti-Trinitarians, How the Unity of God is evinc'd, with an account of Polytheism, Antient and Modern* (London, 1733), 13.

46. G. Lamoine, 'The Chevalier de Ramsay's Oration, 1736–7: Early Masonry in France', *AQC* 114 (2001), 226–37; 231.

was ordained as a deacon of the Church of England in 1723.[47] His legal background was carried into his religious writings both as an intellectual concern and in the combative style of his argumentation. In the former respect his robust support of the Test Act (conformity to the state religion as a requirement for public office) in his first major publication *The Alliance between Church and State* (1736), on the basis of 'the infinite Service this Institution [the Church] is of to Civil Society', won him some favours and helped his advancement.[48] But the latter tendency created numerous enemies and had by the time of Edward Gibbon's (1737–94) anonymously published *Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid* (1770) secured his reputation as the tyrant of eighteenth-century letters.[49] Warburton's irascibility in print can perhaps be understood as insecurity: coming to the Church through the practice of provincial law rather than the conventional Oxbridge route would have placed him as something of an outsider, one who had to work doubly hard to make his name. In this respect, as indicated in the comments of William Stukeley cited in the previous chapter, the adaptability of Warburton's pen 'did his business effectually'; having anonymously attacked Alexander Pope (1688–1744) in print in 1728, he then made a *volte-face* regarding what for Stukeley was the theologically suspect *An Essay on Man* (1733–34), positioning it within the tradition of Newtonian natural theology.[50] Through William Murray (1705–93), the influential barrister and first Earl of Mansfield who was to procure him the preachership of Lincoln's Inn in 1746, Warburton met Pope, with whom he cultivated a long-lasting friendship that resulted in his acting as the poet's literary executor. In turn, Pope led to the acquaintance of Ralph Allen (1693–1764), whose reforms to the postal system had generated a fortune that Warburton benefited from by marrying his favourite niece, eventually inheriting his estate of Prior Park just outside Bath, which was built of stone from Allen's quarries. Such favourable conditions and powerful allies helped his career in the Church of England, in which he eventually rose to become the Bishop of Gloucester in 1759.[51]

Warburton was a gatekeeper of the literary and religious republics of letters in eighteenth-century England. With a flick of his pen, he could marshal his acolytes like an army of Russian chatbots to defend the indefensible on his behalf. His reputation was built on his incomplete *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738–41), a magnum opus in size if not necessarily in quality, which set out to counter the point raised by Toland of the problem posed for Christianity by the absence of the doctrine of an afterlife in

47. J. S. Watson, *The Life of William Warburton* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1863).

48. W. Warburton, *The Alliance between Church and State, or, the necessity and equity of an established religion and a test-law demonstrated . . .* (London, 1736).

49. E. Gibbon, 'Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Aeneid', in *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, 5 vols (London: John Murray, 1814), 4:467–514.

50. A. Pope, *An Essay on Man* (London, 1733–34). See: Chapter 2, footnote 29.

51. R. M. Ryley, *William Warburton* (Woodbridge, Conn.: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 7.

Judaism. Whereas Stukeley denied this claim outright, countering it with his vision of a universal Christianity that radiated outwards from Adam onwards, Warburton accepted its absence, but fought a rear-guard action to reject the implications drawn by Toland. Counterintuitively, Warburton argued that it was precisely the lack of the doctrine of an afterlife that proved God's real presence among the Jews. This was because the doctrine was an essential feature of all societies, where it functioned as a carrot and stick to keep the plebs in line with the promises and terrors of a future state. Therefore, in an impressive imaginative leap, Warburton concluded that God himself must have been present to dispense summary justice.

To prove the universality of the belief in the afterlife, Warburton presented the Eleusinian mysteries as his evidence: they were only the most renowned version of a feature of all pagan societies. However, as was pointed out by his critics, if the doctrine of a future state did indeed have a public function, then why was it taught in secret? Warburton fudges this problem by stating that although they were nominally kept secret, this was really just to stimulate curiosity, and in practice the lesser mysteries were open to all. But in the greater mysteries there was indeed a secret doctrine, though one not relating to the afterlife: it was the doctrine of the unity of God, and the revelation that the 'rabble of licentious pagan deities' were in fact the original founders of pagan societies who had been apotheosised over the course of time (an example of the above-mentioned Euhemerism).[52] Knowledge of this process of apotheosis was, in Warburton's view, meant to act as an incentive to the leaders of subsequent pagan societies to seek like treatment for themselves. If, as a contemporary reader, you are bewildered by this idiosyncratic argument, then rest assured that many in the eighteenth century agreed with you: as Colin Kidd points out, measured in ink and paper *The Divine Legation of Moses* caused the biggest controversy in eighteenth-century English letters.[53]

## The Eleusinian Mysteries in French Thought

### *Voltaire*

Shorn of the convoluted apparatus of its reasoning, Warburton's claim that the Eleusinian mysteries concealed the doctrine of the unity of God would go on to have an unexpectedly fruitful career among authors who were deeply unsympathetic to his apologetic motive. One such was Voltaire (1694–1778), who was a vocal critic of Warburton's *Divine Legation* in texts such as *Philosophie de l'histoire* (1765), where he argues that if the doctrine of an afterlife was indeed universal in the ancient world, then its absence among the Jews

52. Warburton, *Divine Legation*, 1:148–49.

53. C. Kidd, *The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain's Wars of Mythography, 1700–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 102.

indicates either the ignorance or concealment of Moses, with both explanations making him an unworthy legislator.[54] Elsewhere in the text he doubles down on his argument by stating that the universality of the doctrine undermines the value of Christian revelation. Nevertheless, despite Voltaire's criticism of *Divine Legation*, his account of the Eleusinian mysteries adopts Warburton's view that they contained the doctrine of monotheism. Warburton's framing of the mysteries, then, had become such a consensus that they were unconsciously absorbed by even an avowed enemy. But in Voltaire's hands Warburton's political monotheism is refashioned as the 'very pure religion' of deism, believed by him to be the original religion of humankind.[55]

Voltaire was initiated into Freemasonry only at the end of his life in the *Neuf Soeurs* lodge in Paris in 1778, so his opinions on the Eleusinian mysteries from the previous decade can hardly be held up as representative of Masonic opinion more broadly.[56] Even later in life it would be questionable, considering one account of the event describes him as appearing 'stunned by the pompous silliness of the spectacle.'[57] However, it is of note that his writings from this earlier period demonstrate awareness of the Masonic identification with the mysteries. Writing of Tertullian's *De Corona* in the chapter on the Eleusinian mysteries in *Philosophie de l'histoire*, Voltaire describes a ceremony in which the initiate is presented with a crown, which he tramples upon, before undergoing a mock death and resurrection ceremony with the hierophant holding a sword above his head. He then comments that 'the free-masons still retain a fragment of this ancient ceremony.'[58] Although intriguing, this should not necessitate the fabrication of Voltaire's prior initiation; as keen a critic and participant in eighteenth-century society, culture, and letters as he was could not help but have absorbed something about the phenomenon of Freemasonry.

### *Antoine Court de Gébelin*

Fortunately, the evidence of Warburton's influence on Masonic conceptions of the Eleusinian mysteries in the second half of the eighteenth century does not rely on Voltaire alone. Instead, we may turn to someone who was not only present at Voltaire's initiation,

54. Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire* (Amsterdam, 1765). Quotations are drawn from the English translation: Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History* (Glasgow, 1766). On Voltaire and Warburton, see: J-M. Moureaux (ed.), *Les oeuvres complètes de Voltaire 64: La défense de mon oncle; A Warburton* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1984). J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire and Warburton* (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1961).

55. Voltaire, *Philosophy of History*, 179.

56. On the history of the lodge, see: L. Amiable, *Une loge maçonnique d'avant 1789: les neuf soeurs* (Paris, 1897); and on Voltaire's initiation, see: C. Porset, *Voltaire franc-maçon: célébration du troisème centenaire de la naissance de Voltaire* (La Rochelle: Rumeur des Ages, 1995).

57. L. P. de Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrets pour server à l'histoire de la republique des lettres en France, tome onzième* (London, 1779), 221.

58. Voltaire, *Philosophy of History*, 179.

but read his thoughts about the Eleusinian mysteries to him at it; 'an object very similar to the mysteries of the Royal Art.'[59] That figure is Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725–84), son of the reviver of Protestantism in France, Antoine Court (1696–1760), who was renowned for organizing al fresco worship beyond the reach of religious authorities in the Languedoc in what was known as the Church of the Desert.[60] Court de Gébelin's upbringing and education at his father's seminary the Académie de Lausanne in Switzerland destined him to continue the Protestant cause. He and Voltaire had first come into contact through their correspondence during the case of Jean Calas (1698–1762), a Protestant merchant who was falsely accused of murdering his son.[61] These religious concerns, as well as republican ones likely identifiable with his Swiss upbringing, hybridize with the programme of antiquarian research in his nine-volume *Monde primitif*, which remained incomplete at his death by auto-electrocution in the bathtub during an ill-fated experiment with the pseudo-science of Mesmerism.[62]

The section on the Eleusinian mysteries from *Monde primitif* that was read by Court de Gébelin to Voltaire is strongly influenced by the eighteenth-century economist François Quesnay's (1694–1774) physiocracy, the central principle of which is that national wealth is solely based on agriculture.[63] But alongside this theory goes the idea that ancient societies expressed themselves through allegory. The myth of Demeter and Persephone allegorically reflects the importance of agriculture in the establishment of civilization, with Persephone's fluctuation between world and underworld representing the seasonal growth of crops. The Eleusinian mysteries were the most prominent celebration of the agricultural foundations of society, with the inhabitants of Athens processing out from their polis to reinstate the 'ties of brotherhood' with the peasant class. All civilizations depend on agriculture, but a republican society recognizes this fact and gives due recognition and appreciation of those foundations. Court de Gébelin, therefore, looked from Eleusis across the Thriasian plain towards Athens as the beacon of political liberty.

59. F. Melchior & D. Diderot, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1790, tome dixième, 1778–1781* (Paris, 1830), 127.

60. A. C. de Gébelin, *Monde primitif, analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne, considéré dans l'histoire civile, religieuse et allégorique du calendrier ou almanach*, 9 vols (Paris, 1773–82), 4:306-353. On Court de Gébelin, see: A.-M. Mercier-Faivre, *Un supplément à l'Encyclopédie: le Monde primitif d'Antoine Court de Gébelin* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), R. Daniel, 'Court de Gébelin. Son cours de religion. Les débuts de son séjour en France (1763–1767)', *École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses*. 78 (1969), 31–63..

61. On the case of Jean Calas see: G. Adams, *The Huguenots and French Opinion: 1685–1787* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991), 211–30.

62. R. Darnton, *Mesmerism and the end of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

63. On physiocracy see: L. Vardi, *The Physiocrats and the World of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and M. Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 189–98. Quesnay recognised Court de Gébelin as a 'disciple bien aimé', see: Ronald Grimsley, 'Court de Gébelin and Le Monde primitif' in A. J. Bingham & V. W. Topazio, *Enlightenment studies in honour of Lester G. Crocker* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1979), 133–44; 133.

Court de Gébelin's politically and economically-based reading of the Eleusinian mysteries demonstrates a clearly different set of priorities to those discussed among British Masonic writers of the first half of the eighteenth century. But their practical and political significance was also combined with religious elements, which play out in his engagement with Warburton. The account of the Eleusinian mysteries in *Monde primitif* corresponds, like that of Voltaire, with core features of *Divine Legation*, including the doctrines of monotheism and an afterlife. For Court de Gébelin, the agricultural aspects have an equally spiritual significance: particularly in the idea that the new life contained within the seed presaged a future state for the soul. A deistically-conceived monotheistic God named Iou, whose simple worship preceded more complex polytheistic systems, is likewise a part Court de Gébelin's account. But he vehemently disagrees with the political fiction aspect of Warburton's argument, stating that the agricultural-spiritual celebrations of the mysteries were an entirely organic outgrowth of human life; they could never have been imposed top-down upon society by a legislator as was the thesis of *Divine Legation*. As with his father's Huguenot preaching *en plein ai*r, the Eleusinian mysteries were an expression of religious liberty that grew from the ground up. In his reading, Eleusis became the Geneva of antiquity, then as in the eighteenth century a bulwark against an autocratic Rome.

Identification of the core tenets of religion as worshipping one God and believing in an afterlife might seem to undermine the role of Christ in transmitting those doctrines. However, we should be wary of assuming that deism, religion as based on reason, necessarily occluded a reasonable conception of Christianity. The correspondence Court de Gébelin identified between the 'pagan' heritage of the Eleusinian mysteries and Christianity may be viewed in the following passage, which furthermore provides a means of relating the two to the social character of Freemasonry:

> The mysteries were not established to teach the unity of God, and the dogmas of creation, of Providence, and of a life to come; but in order to transmit these great truths which we have recognised in all times, and that we hold, as Plato said, to be the most ancient testament ['parole']. At the same time, they were established as a constant reminder to men, and to provide a meeting point which made them reflect on the inestimable advantages of society, and which made them feel how miserable we would be without the laws of order, that order which is not arbitrary, which does not depend on the whims of a legislator, and which was established from the moment of creation, without which creation could not have taken place, much less support itself. It is upon this same social spirit that the Christian communion is partially founded, whose goal for this life is to make men into one body and one spirit for the brotherly love which is the basis of Christianity and the necessary effect of the order and the essential quality

> of man, who was a social being before a reasonable one, his *reasonability* being only a means to perfect and to fulfil the sociability which is the essence of mankind.[64]

Although this passage does not include the Christian-Masonic universalism as specifically based on a prior revelation of Christianity, it sets forward the recognisable ancient lineage narrative and resonates with some of the political features of Ramsay's *Masonic Discourse*. For Ramsay, writing in the 1738 version: 'Men are not essentially distinguished by the difference in the languages they speak, the clothes they wear, the countries they occupy, or the dignities with which they are vested. THE WHOLE WORLD IS ONLY A GREAT REPUBLIC, OF WHICH EACH NATION IS A FAMILY, AND EACH PERSON A CHILD. It was to revive and spread these ancient maxims taken from human nature that our Society was established.'[65] Ramsay himself, who converted to Catholicism and became a Chevalier, was by no means a republican agitator; he knew who buttered his bread. But his conception of a Masonic 'republic' based on virtue, knowledge, and sociability finds expression in a thinker with more serious commitments to republicanism four decades on in Court de Gébelin's characterization of the mysteries. As with the patriarchal Christian theme, the loose rhetoric of brotherhood could be widely interpreted by people with markedly different perspectives. Court de Gébelin demonstrates the ways in which eighteenth-century intellectuals could combine commitments that might seem contradictory today: political economy and animal magnetism, deism and Christianity. He acknowledged the deist foundations of religion transmitted through the mysteries in pagan societies, but remained committed to the value of reformed Christianity which had developed from it.

*Nicolas-Marie Leclerc de Sept-Chênes*

Another French intellectual and – I will argue – Freemason, who acknowledged the priority of paganism to Christianity without accepting that this undermined its entire foundations was Nicolas-Marie Leclerc de Sept-Chênes (1751–88). A tutor to Louis XVI (1754–93) who taught him English by translating Edward Gibbon, he later became a member of his chamber and cabinet; he was perhaps fortunate to die just before the onset of the French Revolution, although it has left him a relative unknown today. In his *Essai sur la religion des anciens Grecs* (1787), Sept-Chênes wrote extensively on the mysteries, which he claims 'inculcated all the principles of a pure morality' and provided the 'source of many traditions which have since been held universally sacred.'[66] Sept-Chênes disregards

64. Gébelin, *Monde primitif*, 4:317.

65. G. Lamoine, 'The Chevalier de Ramsay's Oration, 1736-7: Early Masonry in France', *AQC* 114 (2001), 226–37.

66. N-M. Leclerc de Sept-Chênes, *Essai sur la religion des anciens Grecs* (Paris, 1787). The French edition was published anonymously. Quotations are drawn from the English translation, which identifies Sept-Chênes as the author: Sept-Chênes, *The Religion of the Ancient Greeks* (London, 1788), v.

the objectionable parts of paganism as public cult whilst maintaining that the 'essence' of ancient religion was contained in the mysteries, which corresponds in its 'end, spirit, and character' with Christianity.[67] In contrast to Court de Gébelin's view of religion's natural emergence from the people and the primacy of deist monotheism, Sept-Chênes takes a more elitist approach, based on the impact that observing the heavens had in shaping religion's emergence. Initially, the movement of the planets gave rise to polytheism, but it is only with the mathematical explanation of those movements with the establishment of astronomy proper that a single artificer God is conceived. Unlike Warburton's paradox of monotheism concealed within a polytheistic society, the astronomical genealogy of religion provides Sept-Chênes with an explanation for their co-existence: the mysteries did not destroy polytheism, but confined it 'within its true bounds' as a preliminary to the worship of the Supreme Being, from which polytheistic gods 'are all but an emanation.'[68] Countering Warburton's political conception of the doctrine of the afterlife, Sept-Chênes, like Court de Gébelin, simply acknowledges its universal and permanent existence as assured in the 'language of true philosophy.'[69]

As to the events of the mysteries themselves, they served a similar function to baptism in saving the initiate from original sin. In the lesser mysteries the initiate was brought to a river and 'plunged into the water as an emblem of regeneration', with the bodily cleansing symbolizing the purification of the soul.[70] This 'baptism' was followed by sacrifices and preparatory questions, but the full revelation of the mysteries was held until the greater. In the greater mysteries, a cosmological-theological 'system of the world' was represented in the symbolic roles of the officials: with the hierophant, or chief priest, representing God; the torch-bearer the sun; and the altar priest the moon.[71] Another official was a sacred herald who kept away the profane. The initiations involved a series of trials and horrifying spectacles followed by visions of beauty. Like Voltaire, Sept-Chênes references Tertullian's *De corona* as a key part of the proceedings, with the initiate being 'presented with a crown, which he trod under foot, and as soon as the sword was held over his head, he feigned to fall down dead, then seemed again to return to life.'[72] At the conclusion, the initiated received a robe 'which he ever afterwards wore as an honourable badge.'[73]

If the foregoing does not sound sufficiently familiar to convince one of the Masonic subtext of Sept-Chênes account of the mysteries, the following passage which paraphrases Ramsay's *Oration* hopefully will:

67. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, v.
68. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, 141.
69. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, 146.
70. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, 162.
71. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, 165.
72. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, 169. Tertullian, *De corona* 15.
73. Sept-Chênes, *La religion*, 169.

> Thus, the Mysteries of antiquity scarcely changed their form when Christianity became the prevailing religion. At that period the Jews also adopted them, and among these people they were the origin of the Cabala. We may affirm, that afterwards they never ceased to exist. We see them shining in great lustre through the darkness of the middle ages; and whether the traces of them were preserved in spite of the ignorance which then covered the Western World, or whether the age of chivalry brought them from the East, it is certain that our brave chevaliers acquired in that expedition those heroic virtues that have made them so celebrated, of which perhaps it would be difficult at this day to find an example, and which at least console us for the barbarism of those ages that involved the history of the human mind in impenetrable obscurity. At the revival of letters, the Mysteries acquired new lustre. They obtained an influence over the still barbarous manners, which they no doubt contributed to soften by inculcating particularly the principles of a refined morality. The ceremonies with which they are attended prove to this day from whence they drew their origin. They seem to have retained their magnificent decorations and ancient observances, only to demonstrate, that in the midst of revolutions which have swept away so many nations from the face of the earth: men, since the establishment of societies, compose but one great family. Whatever conformity there may exist between the Mysteries of the Moderns and those of the Ancients, the latter are particularly distinguished from the former in having made an essential part of the religion, or rather in having constituted the religion itself.[74]

In this reading, for Sept-Chênes contemporary Freemasonry is not a religion, but it was historically involved in transmitting some of the core tenets of religion through its origins in the mysteries. Sept-Chênes is, furthermore, careful to distinguish himself from the potentially republican interpretation of Ramsay's cosmopolitanism as espoused by Court de Gébelin: for him true equality is only valid in religion, which 'teaches us, that all are equal, and that there is no real pre-eminence but that which is conferred by virtue.'[75] Those who two years after the publication of his book would instigate the French Revolution would no doubt beg to differ.

### *Charles-François Dupuis and Thomas Paine*

It is to that generation of revolutionary participants that we must now turn. To introduce them, we may consider another founding member of the *Neuf Soeurs* lodge, the astronomer and atheist Jérôme Lalande (1732–1807), and his protege Charles-François Dupuis (1742–1809).[76] I remain uncertain as to whether Dupuis was himself a Freemason. The close

74. Sept-Chênes, La religion, 203-204.

75. Sept-Chênes, La religion, 156.

76. On Lalande's life and career see: S. Dumont, *Un astronome des Lumières: Jérôme Lalande* (Paris: Vuibert, 2007); and H. Monod-Cassidy, 'Un astronome-philosophe: Jérôme Lalande', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 56 (1967), 907–30. On his involvement with Freemasonry see: C. Porset, '*Siderus Latomorum*: Lalande franc-maçon', in G. Boistel, J. Lamy, & C. Le Lay, *Jérôme Lalande (1732–1807): Une trajectoire scientifique* (Rennes:

relationship with Lalande and references to Freemasonry in his *Origine de tous les cultes, ou, religion universelle* (1795) would seem to indicate the likelihood.[77] However, as we saw with the fanfare of Voltaire's initiation above, eighteenth-century Freemasons tended to be fairly vocal about notable members, so it is surprising that there is not more positive evidence for it if he was. Then again, the tumult of the Revolution did lead to extensive archival loss, which might explain the lack. Whichever it might be, the influence and support Lalande bestowed upon Dupuis, and in turn the influence of Dupuis' work on Thomas Paine's (1737–1809) *An Essay on the Origins of Free-Masonry* (*c*.1803–05) necessitates his inclusion here.[78] *Origine* represents the most extensive articulation of the argument that Christianity's development from the Eleusinian mysteries fundamentally undermines its value – described as the 'ne plus ultra of infidelity' by his critics.[79]

Lalande and Dupuis were both *wunderkinder*. As a budding astronomer, Lalande had been sent to Berlin in 1751 to observe the parallax of the moon, where he impressed Frederick the Great (1712–86). Dupuis had a modest upbringing, but his fortunes were transformed as a boy when the Duc de la Rochefoucauld (1747–1827) discovered him using trigonometry to measure the height of a tower and decided to sponsor his education. He became a professor of rhetoric at twenty-four, then studied law, eventually becoming a parliamentary advocate. During a lesson in astronomy with Lalande in 1778 Dupuis 'had the happy idea that the generations of mythology were the rising and the setting of the stars', which 'became for him the key to all antiquity.'[80] His first application of this insight was in the *Mémoires sur l'origine des constellations* (1781), which Lalande included in a new edition of his book *Astronomie* (1771) that included a history of the discipline.[81] In it, Dupuis argued that the signs of the zodiac represented an annual agricultural programme of works with, for example, Virgo signalling the time for sowing and Taurus for ploughing. With the phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes taken into account, this sequence could be used to match up with that of a specific geographical region by which to date the origins of civilisation. His calculations pointed to ancient Egypt at a time far exceeding the biblically-derived chronology.

The length of time between the publication of *Mémoires* in 1781 and his *Origine de tous les cultes* in 1795 is explicable through the almost monomaniacal thoroughness with which he treats the subject across seven volumes. It is revolutionary in both lower and upper

Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 195–222. See also the older study: L. Amiable, *Le franc-maçon Jérôme Lalande* (Paris: Charavay Frères, 1889); and his Masonic writings: M. Chomarat (ed.), *Jérôme Lalande: Écrits sur la Franc-Maçonnerie* (Lyon: Centre culturel de Buenc, 1982).

77. C-F. Dupuis, *Origine de tous les cultes. Ou, religion universelle*, 7 vols (Paris, 1795).

78. T. Paine, *An Essay on the Origin of Freemasonry* (London, 1818).

79. J. Priestley, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works*, 25 vols (London, 1817–31), 17: 320–321.

80. J. Lalande, *Bibliographie astronomique; avec l'histoire des l'astronomie depuis 1781 jusqu'à 1802* (Paris, 1803), 573.

81. C-F. Dupuis, *Mémoire sur l'origine des constellations et sur l'explication de la fable par le moyen de l'astronomie* (Paris, 1781); J. Lalande, *Astronomie*, 4 vols (Paris, 1771).

caps senses: emblazoned with the words 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité', it should be read in part as an intellectual justification to the reinvented French Republican Calendar that he contributed to, with Lalande likewise putting forward suggestions. Another influential figure upon the calendar, Sylvain Maréchal (1750–1803), was likewise a Freemason and atheist.[82] Dupuis' account of the origins of all religious worship begins with primitive man confronted by the totality of the universe, which he worships as 'the great idea of a universal cause or God'.[83] Subsequently, he witnesses the 'succession of the days and nights', which he interprets as two principles which are at 'the basis of all religions': God and the Devil.[84] Then observation of the heavenly bodies gives rise to the rich narratives of mythology, with the movements of the sun expressed in Egyptian and Greek gods such as Osiris and Bacchus.

Outlining this development and explaining the astronomical significance of a variety of myths takes Dupuis the first three volumes. It is only in the fourth that the mysteries are introduced and with them religion in an institutional sense. Dupuis does not reject the mysteries in their entirety. In fact, in their provision of the doctrine of an afterlife he acknowledges their essential role in the formation of civilization, with a Warburtonian focus on individual morality as the basis for societal laws. But even though the doctrine is initially a civilizing force, to maintain belief in the fiction of an afterlife of Elysium and Tartarus requires ever more stringent cultural and social control. The corrupting force on religion is the introduction of purgatory by priests, which replaces the absolute consequences of moral action with a system of bargaining. Truly civilized life must emancipate itself from this inheritance to recognize that the afterlife is a fictionalization of a fundamental truth: 'It is up to the conscience of the honest man to recompense his virtues, and to that of the guilty to punish his crimes. There you have it: the true Elysium, the true Tartarus, created by Nature herself.'[85]

Like Sept-Chênes, Dupuis claims that rituals of the mysteries were conceived of as a cosmological-theologial system. Persephone's fluctuation between the world and the underworld represents the struggle between the principles of light and darkness in the universe, which in the most sacred part of the mysteries transforms into the narrative of Bacchus, the son of Demeter: 'in this sanctuary was given the spectacle of the passion, the death and the resurrection of Bacchus, whose infant image was exposed to the eyes of the initiates, at the time of the 25th of December.'[86] Jesus Christ is but a mask placed upon the face of Bacchus, the sun god. Christians are no more than solar worshippers. The Republican calendar that Dupuis contributed to attempted to rip off the Christian

82. M. Dommanget, *Sylvain Maréchal: The Godless Man* (Chicago, Il.: Haymarket Books, 2023).
83. Dupuis, *Origine*, 1:xviii.
84. Dupuis, *Origine*, 1:xxi.
85. Dupuis, *Origine*, 4:526.
86. Dupuis, *Origine*, 4:597.

mask and get people to live in harmony nature. As Dupuis writes: 'Let us close the sanctuaries, where all is imposture and illusion; and draw ideas of order and wisdom from the contemplation of the Universe. That is our only temple. Let us study the secrets of nature. They are the only mysteries.'[87]

As discussed above, I remain cautious about claiming Dupuis as a Freemason. Fortunately for my argument, Dupuis influenced the English radical Thomas Paine, as may be seen in his *Essay on the Origins of Free-Masonry*:

> The Christian religion and masonry have one and the same common origin, both are derived from the worship of the sun, the difference between their origins is, that the Christian religion is a parody on the worship of the sun, in which they put a man whom they call Christ, in the place of the sun, and pay him the same adoration which was originally paid to the sun . . .[88]

Although he was thoroughly at home on the continent, Paine brings us back full circle to the context of English Freemasonry as discussed above through the example of William Stukeley. These two authors are a mirror image of each other: for Stukeley the similarity between paganism and Christianity could be accounted for by a prior revelation of Christianity that had corrupted into paganism, for Paine it was the opposite. The similarity between the two religions was explicable by the priority of paganism, a discovery which wholly invalidates Christianity's claims to truth.

## Conclusion

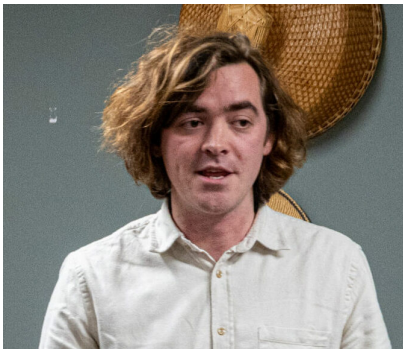
Like Freemasonry, our knowledge of the Eleusinian mysteries is bound up in a paradox of sources. Pagan authors hint at the meaning without revealing it, and Christian ones reveal the form of the proceedings without necessarily understanding their significance. Similarly, like myth, Freemasonry has some stable contours, but its resistance to final definition comes from the variety of interpretations it inspires rather than dogma. If there was a simply definable dogmatic content to either Freemasonry or the Eleusinian mysteries, then it would indeed be remarkable that it had been concealed so well. These structural boundaries require approaching both subjects at one remove through a history interpretation. Taken together, though, the diverse interpretations documented in this article are not purely subjective on the part of their authors but manifest certain contours of their own.

In the first half of the eighteenth century in England, seventeenth-century intellectual concerns remained prevalent among Freemasons such as Stukeley, Anderson, and Ramsay. They participated in a tradition of apologetic history that sought to defend Christianity

87. Dupuis, *Origine*, 4:782.
88. Paine, *Free-Masonry*, 5.

through the study of other religions, in which context the Eleusinian mysteries represented a particularly compelling subject through their ambiguous relationship to Christian doctrines. But, as Toland pointed out, perhaps their version of Christianity was more similar to paganism than Judaism? In the hands of William Warburton, who acknowledged the seriousness of this critique, an eccentric attempt at defending the historical foundations of Christianity ultimately undermined them further. At first, Masonic authors such as Court de Gébelin and Leclerc de Sept-Chênes tried to preserve Christianity's value without relying on those Old Testament foundations. However, as figures such as Lalande, Dupuis, and Paine demonstrate, this intermediate position was a gateway to dispensing with Christianity's value altogether. Such a reversal in ideas about the origins of religion points to a profound transformation by which the Enlightenment may be defined, in the broadest of historiographical terms, as the bookend to late antiquity when Christianity first emerged like a cuckoo from Judaism. Likewise, the Enlightenment emerged not as a preconceived project fully formed and armoured like Athena from Zeus' split skull, but was a messy process of negotiation in which actions and intentions had unexpected consequences. Attempting to pin down Freemasonry's influence on the Enlightenment as either – in Jonathan Israel's terms – radical or moderate, is to miss the point.[89] What is striking and requires explanation is the emergence of moderation from conservatism, and radicalism from moderation.


89. J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).



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