

Swedish Freemasonry on St Barthélemy around 1800

The Complex History of Transatlantic Fraternalism

Andreas Önnersfors

FOR MOST HISTORIANS OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM, PARTICULARLY THE Caribbean, it comes as a surprise that Sweden was ever involved in colonial adventures on the other side of the Atlantic. The volcanic island of St Barthélemy is part of the chain of islands called the Lesser Antilles. In 1784 it was presented to the Swedish crown as a gift from France, most likely in exchange for Sweden's loyalty in supporting France in the struggle for United States independence. Sweden had been the second country after France to recognize the United States of America diplomatically, and Swedish soldiers fought together with French forces in the War of Independence against the British. St Barthélemy remained a Swedish possession until 1878.

It is also possible that Sweden with the acquisition of the island sought to challenge its arch-rival Denmark, which already in the late seventeenth century had established a Caribbean colony on the Danish Virgin Islands, St Thomas, St John, and St Croix – now US-territory. Given the prominent place of fraternalism in both the Danish and Swed-

ish realms at the time, it is surprising however that there are almost no studies covering Freemasonry and its dynamic history in the Caribbean, which during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century can best be described as a melting pot of different Masonic practices and rites from which eventually the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite emerged in all its ritual richness. Since I started to study the Swedish development almost a decade ago, much research has been carried out highlighting the enormous importance of Freemasonry in the entire region for dynamic encounters in society, economy, and politics. This is not at least expressed by the establishment of REHMLAC ten years ago, the first online open access peer-reviewed journal dedicated to academic research into Freemasonry in general and into the fraternity in Latin America and the Caribbean in particular. REHMLAC (*Revista de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería Latinoamericana y Caribeña*) has over a decade gathered a multi-national and trans-Atlantic team of dedicated researchers – some of them present at this conference – and has created solid scholarly momentum by organizing conferences, courses, and symposia which continuously break new ground in the study of Freemasonry and fraternal culture.

However small a piece in the overall puzzle St Barthélemy might appear, it might provide significant evidence for the development of rituals and organizational culture of Freemasonry on this side of the Atlantic. At a symposium organized at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, in late 2015 Brent Morris related contemporary news concerning Prince Hall Freemasonry, which he was kind enough to share again in writing:

The kidnapping of three free Blacks by Solomon Babson, master of the sloop *Ruby*, occurred in Boston harbor in early 1788, and was described in the February 18, 1788, issue of *The American Herald*, vol. 7, no. 332. One of the victims, Luck, was a Freemason as was his almost purchaser. The purchaser was convinced of the truth of their story, and the governor of St Bartholomew paroled them until written evidence of their situation was obtained.¹

I am indebted to Brent Morris for sharing this with me. Whereas it is of course not possible to verify that the information provided in the article is correct, my research might point at the direction that is at least not at all unrealistic. As we shall see, Freemasonry on St Barthélemy was up and running at the time and so – even providing evidence for what appears as a side-stage to the greater Masonic developments in the region – contributes to a deeper understanding of the particular environment in which Freemasonry operated in the Caribbean. The establishment and short-lived history of Swedish Freemasonry on St Barthélemy is a showcase for transatlantic relationships within the brotherhood at large.

¹ Cf. S. B. Morris & P. Rich, 'Early Newspaper Accounts of Prince Hall Freemasonry', *Heredom* Vol. 22 (2014), 292–3.

First of all it is however necessary to locate the development of Freemasonry during the eighteenth century in a colonial and transatlantic context. This is an image of foreign factories in Canton, China, from the late eighteenth-century. Sweden, modelled on the British and Dutch examples, established an East India Company in 1738 with the purpose of participating in the lucrative business of east Indian trade, mainly with tea, cotton, and manufactured goods. As Lisa Hellmann recently has pointed out in her brilliant 2015 thesis, *Navigating the foreign quarters: Everyday life of the Swedish East India Company employees in Canton and Macao 1730–1830*, the establishment of Freemasonry in Canton was part of intercultural interactions between traders and locals in the age of nascent economic globalization, in which trust and interpersonal contacts were of essential importance. Long-distance travel across the oceans facilitated cultural phenomena like Freemasonry, where seafarers and traders of different European (and colonial American) origins could meet in zones of shared cultural values and convivial practices. I shall get back to the Swedish lodge established in Canton in a while, but make the claim that Lisa Hellman's conclusions are applicable to studies of the Caribbean. Triangular trade and the exceptional heterogeneity of Caribbean space facilitated or rather necessitated the establishment of intercultural zones of encounter, where common socio-cultural capital could be developed and employed.

Before we jump into the topic of today, please allow me some short remarks about the introduction of Freemasonry to Sweden. Facilitated by intense cultural and political contacts with France, Swedish noblemen were introduced to the Jacobite lodges in Paris during the early 1730s. Thus the first constitution of Swedish Freemasonry is dated 1735 and signed by Charles Radclyffe. Back in Sweden about fifty people were initiated up to around 1750, but initiation figures and lodge establishments started to boom only after Sweden received a second constitution from France in 1752, and a complete system of seven degrees was introduced (from abroad) between 1756 and 1759, the nucleus of the Swedish Rite, which still today has ten degrees in three different consecutive sections within one organization: St John's Freemasonry, covering the craft degrees I–III, St Andrew's Freemasonry in degrees IV–VI (Scottish Master), and Chapter degrees VII–X (Knights Templar).

As we can see, the establishment of the Swedish Rite was embedded in cultural transfer within Europe. During the 1760s a rival Provincial Grand Lodge of Sweden operated in the capital Stockholm and the port town of Gothenburg. However the ancient regularity of Swedish Freemasonry was acknowledged by the Moderns at the beginning of the 1770s, and the Grand Lodge of Sweden has since then remained a regular Masonic body. It is however important to remember that Sweden (to which at the time Finland belonged as an integrated part of the realm) possessed territory on

German soil and established lodges in Swedish-Pomerania by the Baltic Sea, the first of which was the Swedish Army's Lodge.

Furthermore the Swedish Rite was exported to Prussia during the late 1760s, where it is still practised today in the *Grosse Landesloge der Freimaurer von Deutschland*. From there it entered the Russian empire during the following decade, but the Swedish Grand Lodge also attempted to form lodges in Russia by constituting lodges working in the Swedish Rite. Given the dynamics on the international stage, it is not surprising that Swedish Freemasonry turned into a part of the kingdom's tiny yet significant colonial endeavours. Already during the 1760s an attempt had been made to establish a Swedish lodge in Canton, building on a pre-existing circle of Freemasons from different national origins.

It may be that these experiences encouraged the leadership of Swedish Freemasonry to equip Johan Petter Brahelin, wholesaler and first supercharger of the Swedish West-Indian Company founded in 1786, with an interim constitution to establish a lodge in Gustavia.

The document is dated 22 March 1790, the commemoration day of Swedish Freemasonry, and it states that Brahelin is allowed

to use the privilege provided by the General laws of the Order of Freemasons to Scottish Masters to spread light in the royal art as well as pass on the three first degrees in the St. Johns lodge [...] and thus, brother Brahelin is entitled to find and to initiate competent workers for the erection of the Temple.

This right was delegated to Brahelin under three preconditions: first, he was only entitled to do so on St Barthélemy together with eight brethren that he could 'create' as Freemasons, if the right number was not present from the beginning. Secondly, the laws of the order concerning religion, origin, and conduct had to be followed. Nobody was allowed as a member who was not Christian or who had been born of non-Christian parents; slaves were excluded from membership as well as people of bad reputation. Thirdly, Brahelin was free to decide upon a convenient fee, from which 50% together with an annual return and a membership record had to be sent to the Swedish Grand Lodge in Stockholm. If the annual returns proved that a lodge could be erected, this lodge would be constituted legally under the Swedish Grand Lodge. Another document (unfortunately not dated, but in the same pile of manuscripts) is titled 'Humble Project for an Act of Constitution.' It contains basically the same formulations as in the interim-constitution, amended with 'although the members of the lodge already now originate from several nations, the master and deputy master of the lodge shall always be Swedish subjects.' Could it be that this document refers to further correspondence between Brahelin and Stockholm once he arrived on the island, and indeed found Freemasons for the purpose of establishing a lodge?

Wholesaler Johann Petter Brahelin had been initiated on 28 April 1784 in the lodge *St Jean Auxiliaire* in Stockholm. He was passed to the Fellowcraft degree in the same lodge in November and raised to the third degree in December of the same year. In 1785 he received his Scottish Apprentice and Fellow Degree (IV and V) and in the following year the Scottish Master's Degree (VI, which the constitution refers to) in the Scottish lodge *L'Innocent* in Stockholm. Apparently Brahelin was not promoted further within Freemasonry, and we have hitherto not been able to trace more biographical evidence or whether his business was successful or not. We have also been unable to confirm whether Brahelin was involved with a lodge on St Barthélemy. As I stated earlier, it is however likely that among the inhabitants of the Swedish island was a group of active Freemasons who might have come into contact with Brahelin. He returned to Sweden in 1793 and then travelled back to the West Indies, where he stayed until his death in 1802. Maybe his initiative was instrumental in establishing the lodge for which we have proof of existence since 1797.

The title page of a Masonic pocket calendar, which appeared after the end of the 1770s, provides basic information about the officers and meeting dates of Swedish lodges. The issue for 1798 is the first to mention a lodge named *La Sudermanie* after Duke Charles of Sudermania, the Grand Master of Swedish Freemasonry. The lodge had returned impeccable membership records and extracts of its protocols during 1797 and was officially constituted in October of the same year, and had been formed most likely a few months earlier.

The existence of a list of officers from St Barthélemy in the pocket calendar suggests that information was submitted in 1797, which would make sense. In April 1798 the lodge, of which a majority of the members were of French nationality, elected new officers and on 24 June in the same year a Bro. Martin de Clarencieux in his function as Master opened the lodge, installed the new officers and a Bro. Touron was installed as Worshipful Master. At this meeting a letter of the Swedish Grand Lodge was read out concerning the constitution of the lodge. The Caribbean brethren were also informed about the list of officers of the Swedish Grand Lodge as well as of lodges under the Swedish Constitution, to which the lodge *Södermanland, la Sudermanie*, was added with the number 35. Also at this meeting a letter was read out from the Grand Secretary of the Swedish Grand Lodge, Count Battram, who promised that the required constitution documents would soon be issued and sent to the West Indies through a returning Swedish Bro. Flodberg. At the table lodge that followed the meeting toasts were raised for the Swedish throne and Grand Master Duke Charles. Lists of lodge officers were inserted in many later editions of the pocket calendar.

Between 1798 and 1801 the same list of officers was inserted in the above-mentioned *Almanac portatif*. We read under number 18 *Södermanlands Loge på Barthelemi i Westindien*:

Worshipful Master: *John Martius de Clarencieux*
Deputy Master: *Claude François [T]erasse*
Senior Warden: *Alexandre Vardrobe*
Junior Warden: *Louis Joyeau*
Secretary: *Pierre Antoine Enjalbert*
Treasurer: *Joseph François Bernier*

For some reason however this list does not correspond to the membership records returned to Stockholm, presenting different names and further offices: In the 'List of Officers and Members that make out the Respectable lodge of Saint John, under the distinct title of *La Sudermanie* No. 35 at the Orient of Gustavia on the Island of St. Barthélemy, constituted by the Mother Lodge of Sweden by the patent of its Most Worshipful Grand Master the Duke of Sudermania the twelfth day of the seventh month of the Masonic year of 5797 [1797]' we find around fifty names.

I have so far not found any reasons as to why there are differences between the printed list in the *Almanac portatif* and the written documents that actually were returned to Stockholm. Apparently there was a lack of communication between the receiver (generally the Grand Secretary) and the editors of the *Almanac portatif*. However what we can guess from the handwritten membership records and the *Almanac portatif* is that there was an annual change between the officers of the lodge, and that there was an office for the 'ex-venerable', as in the English system, with annual changes and the office of the Past Master. This was not the rule in Sweden. Worshipful Masters were elected on at least a five-year basis, and promotion in the offices was regulated strictly. Also no separate degree for a Past Master ever existed in Sweden (to this day). Something else also obviously differed from the Swedish rite – namely the higher degrees. In the annual return of 1799 we find for the first time a membership record of the Chapter of Rose Croix, according to the heading: 'List of officers and members that make out the Sovereign Chapter of Rose Croix Established within the Respectable Lodge La Sudermanie at the Orient of Gustavia on the Island of St. Barthélemy.' This list contains forty names, around the half of the members listed as *Absents par Congéé* ('absent by agreement').

A first comparison of the names and degrees of the members in both lodges reveals a strange fact. Although more than 90% of the members of St Johns lodge have higher degrees than the first three, this does not make them automatically members of the Rose Croix chapter. And vice versa: out of forty members of the Rose Croix chapter only twelve are members of the St Johns lodge, all of them officers of the chapter and three of them holding the leading offices of Master and wardens in the St John's lodge. If we do

not count the absent members of the chapter out of which nobody is listed as member of the St John's lodge, however, only five members of the chapter remain with no affiliation to *La Sudermanie*. Eleven out of the twelve are also listed as founders of the St John's lodge. This suggests the following chain of events: the group of eleven, all already holding the Rose Croix degree, establish a chapter before 1797 and start to admit people who have received their first three degrees in other lodges and previous to the establishment of *La Sudermanie*. Secondly, many of the members of the chapter leave St Barthélemy before 1797, but are still listed by agreement. Hence they do not form the new St John's lodge and are not members of it. When in 1797 the St John's lodge is established, the previously mentioned eleven out of twelve together with another group of twelve (perhaps arriving around that year), a majority of which in 1799 held the so-called *Chevalier de l'Orient* ('Knight of the East') degree, make up the founding members of *La Sudermanie*. The only odd case remaining is that of *Pierre Antoine Enjalbert*, born in 1757. He is listed as a *Chevalier de l'Orient* in the membership record of the chapter (and also as one of the absent brethren) and he is likewise listed as Secretary of the St John's lodge in the *Almanac Portatif* between 1798 and 1803 and between 1803 and 1809 as Senior Warden. However his name does not appear on the 1799 membership record of *La Sudermanie*. The confusion triggered by diverging information on the lists suggests that Caribbean Freemasonry was very much influenced by the mobility of its members. In the case of the Rose Croix chapter and *La Sudermanie*, among Swedish, not only possibly Jewish and most certainly American names remind us of the diversity of the Caribbean brotherhood, but also notes such as *la Guadelope*, *Ancien Venerable de Eustache* and of course the brethren absent by agreement suggest that mobility across the Caribbean islands was a significant part of Freemasonry of the time (possibly also triggered by the ongoing Haitian slave rebellion) and we will come back to that aspect later on.

The social composition of *La Sudermanie* is dominated by wholesalers who comprise twenty-seven out of forty-six members, followed by eleven 'citizens' with no profession specified, three state employees (Sweden and the French Republic), three craftsmen (baker, musician, and goldsmith) and two medical doctors. Out of the forty members of the Rose Croix chapter, only twenty-five have details on their profession listed. However, of the remaining fifteen, fourteen also are members of *La Sudermanie* and hence it is easy to retrieve the missing information. We find again twenty-seven wholesalers, followed by four citizens, two medical doctors, two craftsmen (the baker from above and another goldsmith), two sea captains, and one employee of the Swedish West India Company. The average age of members in *La Sudermanie* was thirty-eight and a half years, in the Chapter about a year and a half lower.

Evidently the situation on St Barthélemy must have been strange for the Swedish Order of Freemasons. Duke Charles, the Grand Master, had signed a constitution for

the lodge on the Caribbean island; however he and the leadership of the order had apparently no idea about what was going on in the Swedish colony. Since Charles was about to finalize the major reform of the Swedish Rite and its organizational framework, it is no surprise that he in 1800 appointed the new governor of the island Hans Henrik Anckarheim (1748–1814) as supervisor of the lodges and at the same time provided him with a secret instruction with different tasks: to find out how many degrees were conferred and what differences there were compared to the Swedish Rite (this suggests that Anckarheim was initiated in a couple of degrees in Sweden – otherwise he would have been unable to make up his mind about this task); to make a copy of the rituals of the first three degrees and to provide sensitive intelligence on the members of the lodge, their influence and personal character regarding morals and political attitudes and ‘what profit they can create for the order and in general.’ The lodge also received a new seal, reflecting ritual changes in the Swedish rite.

However the geopolitical situation caused severe delays to Anckarheim’s mission. Owing to the war between the United Kingdom and the French Republic the Caribbean had turned into a dynamic war theatre of naval and colonial confrontation between those two great powers. At that time of the Napoleonic wars Sweden was still neutral. It entered the continental alliance against France in 1805. But regardless of its status the British navy had occupied St Barthélemy in 1801. Because of the changed situation the lodge *La Sudermanie* held a meeting in February 1801, deciding to suspend all further meetings until more peaceful times. The lodge was used as a hospital facility during the British invasion; its documents and belongings were sealed and stashed away. However the lodge met annually for discussions, and in October 1803 it was decided to re-open the work in the subsequent year on the name day of Duke Charles, 28 January.

There is preserved a lengthy letter from Anckarheim to Duke Charles, dated 1804, which cannot be recounted here in detail, but which provides extremely interesting insights into the Masonic reality in the Caribbean in general and on the Swedish island in particular. What particularly stands out is how Freemasonry was responsive to the extreme mobility of its members due to warfare, trading opportunities, and other pulling or pushing factors. In comparison to other more geographically stable lodges it seems that the lodges in the Caribbean are to be considered almost as itinerant military lodges, with the difference being that it was the members who moved across maritime space and the lodges that remained in seaports across the islands. There must have been a spirit of pragmatic universality catering for this mobility. It appears also as if the only way to accommodate for this flexibility was multilingual communication. An example of this is the act of obedience that the members of the Swedish lodge on St Barthélemy signed in 1806 in three languages: Swedish, French, and English.

It is likely that *La Sudermanie* continued to work despite the instability caused by the Napoleonic wars, which also affected the Caribbean. The last preserved annual return is dated 1809, and in 1810 a new list of officers was inserted in the Swedish Masonic pocket calendar. We know that in 1816 an apparently unsuccessful attempt was made to reactivate the lodge. Its name and location were still printed in the Masonic pocket calendar up to the return of St Barthélemy to France in 1878. Short as the episode of Swedish Freemasonry on the islands appears, so it provides important insights into the general nature of the fraternity in the Caribbean. Not least is the fact that the names of dozens of Freemasons have been preserved in the Swedish archives across the Atlantic and might constitute the starting point for further socio-biographical studies.

Merchants, regardless of 'national' or even linguistic background and origin, made up the single largest portion of the Swedish lodges established on St Barthélemy. Perhaps their economic interests constituted a larger binding force than diverging cultural backgrounds. However, it is interesting to notice that Swedes, Germans, French, Americans, and British as well as possibly also Jews, East Europeans, or even Creoles were taking part in the Masonic work. Freemasonry in the Caribbean appears thus as a zone liberated from any cultural or proto-national connotations. It created a compatible cultural sign system that was easy to acquire and to access, crossing cultural and social borders.

