Freemasonry entered the Ottoman Empire in the context of European economic and political intervention in the Middle East, and 1860 sectarian violence in Damascus and Mount Lebanon. But contrary to common perception of freemasonry as a tool of the West abroad, masonic lodges in Greater Syria at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century were independent structures. Syria presents a specificity in the fact that the lodges were created by Syrians and not by Europeans, as was the case in Egypt and in Constantinople during the same period. Dorothee Sommer convincingly shows how the lodges were crucial element in the formation of intellectual life in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and how freemasonry worked as a socio-cultural movement in an Empire in search of modernity. Sommer’s thesis is that freemasonry served to unite disparate groupings by producing interreligious sociability in a fragmented Ottoman society. Based on archives and interviews with relatives of former members of Masonic orders in Tripoli and El Mina (Lebanon), the author tends to share the very utopian dream of the brotherhood to unite mankind for its well-being.

The first chapter covers the intellectual and political context in which freemason lodges were opened under the rule of Abdulhamid II in Lebanon and Syria. It presents Ottomanism as the reaction of Ottoman authorities to the increasing intervention of the Western powers in the Empire in the mid nineteenth century. The aim of Ottomanism was to strengthen the attachment of the individual to the Empire and to reintegrate minorities, who may have been tempted by acquiring foreign citizenship. A set of three laws was adopted to restore the Ottoman control over its subjects and territories by means of modernising reforms (1858 Land Law, 1864 Vilayet Law, and the 1869 Law of Ottoman Nationality), but too much emphasis was given to the Turkish contribution to the Empire, and Ottomanism failed to counter the rise of several nationalisms. As Paul Dumont underlined, the positive effect of nationalism was “the destruction of ethnic and religious barriers between different components of the Ottoman population” (p. 37).

The second chapter, entitled ‘Masonic Principles Challenged’, explains the development of masonic principles and shows its ability to unite Syrian members. In 18th century Europe, freemason lodges were arenas for the formation of the emerging concept of civil society, and of a new political culture based on the individual; free but united by fraternity and equality. Turkish and Egyptian lodges turned towards nationalism and displayed antipathy against Western meddling (p. 67). But the lodges in Greater Syria never cut their ties with Western lodges, and did not develop a nationalist discourse. Arab thinkers, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mohammed Abdah, Yacoub Sarruf, and Faris Nimr used freemasonry as a tool, but most of them had developed their thoughts prior to initiation in a lodge. According to Sommer, “When freemasons spoke about emancipation, they did not consider a political separation from the Ottoman Empire; rather and emancipation of thought and liberation from religious confinement that had made it impossible to create a feeling of belonging among Syrians” (p. 72).

The third chapter (‘Masonic Grand Bodies’) covers the various affiliations of freemasons. The Grand Lodge of Scotland, founded in 1736 in Edinburgh, opened one of the first lodges in Aleppo and Smyrna, but lodges expanded mainly in Constantinople and Cairo a century later. According to Paul Dumont, the proclamation of the 1839 Reform Edict allowed Ottomans and foreigners alike to establish philanthropic societies, and served to the opening of lodges. Turkish lodges supported the Young Turk movement prior to 1908 revolution and kept their distance from their affiliated European lodges. Lodges in Greater Syria used different affiliations to European bodies, but never parted from them.

The fourth chapter examines the role of masonic lodges in late Ottoman Beirut. Freemasons in Beirut had to compromise between the universal conception of the brotherhood and the formation of a particular identity. The first lodges used French for the rituals and initiation, but Arabic might have been used for the debates. Prominent masons were members of major families, such as the Sursock, who were Christians, and the Abdulwahab, two of the few Muslim families who joined freemasonry.
from its very inception in the region. Freemasons numbered nearly 1,500 by the time of the Young Turk Revolution, “outnumbering any other social and political institution besides religious communities” (p. 217). Though interesting, the chapter is a bit too descriptive and lacks a substantial argument, instead providing successive biographies of members of several lodges.

The fifth chapter analyses lodges in Mount Lebanon, the members of which tended to be associated with the theatre and arts in general. The sixth chapter deals with lodges in Tripoli and El Mina (near Tripoli). The city was more conservative and had considerably fewer intellectual activities, seeing that it was more focused on trade, especially after the introduction of steam shipping by the middle of 19th century. Three masonic lodges were created between 1906 and 1918. Two were under the Grand Lodge of Scotland and a third under the Grand National Lodge of Egypt. The first sessions of Al Kadisha lodge were conducted in French. It constituted a form of inter-sectarian sociability, which enabled them to create networks. But although the lodges sought to strive towards tolerance and unity, they were themselves the places of political and religious disputes (for instance Sunneen lodge was closed by the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1927). The 1908 Young Turk revolution in the Middle East had an impact on the civic sphere, with increased intellectual and political activities. Modernization included the possibility of playing with several identities, and created its own bounds.

We can regret that the author does not quote the major book *Ottoman Brothers. Muslims, Christians and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* written by Michele Campos. Campos shows how freemasonry helped to shape the civic public sphere evolving in the Ottoman Empire. The link between masonic lodges and municipal bodies is missing. It would also have been relevant to analyze the recruitment to the lodges, and to study the reaffirmation of social classes, but the work remains of remarkable value.

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