

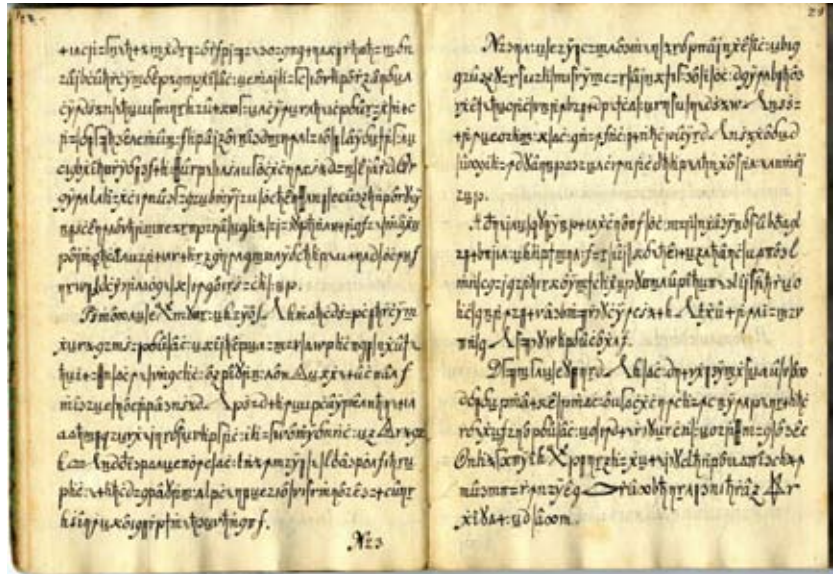
The oculist's secret society

David Baker investigates the optical connections to the manuscript of an 18th-century secret society

Towards the end of last year, a short letter (*Optician*, 25.11.11), referred to an article in the *New York Times* which stated that the so-called 'Copiale Cipher' had been decoded at last. As the correspondent, John Stewart-Robinson, pointed out, it appeared that the document described the rituals of an 18th-century secret society that was obsessed with ophthalmology. The origin of the manuscript, written in complex code, is unknown. It was dubbed the Copiale Cipher after the inscription 'Copiales 3' that appears at the end of the last page.

The Copiale document comprises 75,000 characters written on 105 pages of high-quality double-watermarked paper which are bound in gold and green brocade paper. It was found in the archive of the East Berlin Academy, which later merged with the West Berlin Academy to become the Academy of Arts, Berlin. Analysis of the paper has dated the document to around 1760-80, although Andreas Önnerfors, an historian at Lund University, Sweden, and an expert on secret societies, proposes the 1740s, based on the handwriting style. Aside from 'Copiales 3' the only other plaintext is 'Philipp 1866' on the flyleaf; otherwise the text is a cipher created from 90 distinct symbols, a mixture of Greek and Roman letters and abstract pictograms. There is no word-spacing, and there are no chapter breaks or illustrations; but paragraphs are indented.

Kevin Knight, a linguistics and machine translation expert at the Information Sciences Institute of the University of Southern California, wondered whether translation software could be used as a way of decoding the cipher. Together with two Swedish linguists from Uppsala University, Beáta Megyesi and Christine Schaefer, he used various linguistic and decoding techniques to analyse the text. The initial attempts proved fruitless until they decided



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on the working hypothesis that the plaintext language was most likely German, for these reasons: early linguistic analysis showed a very slight preference for German; the book was located in Germany; the inscription 'Philipp 1866' used the German spelling of that name. The hypothesis proved correct, yielding a complete German text and its translation into English.

The Copiales document can be broadly divided into three parts. The first describes the rituals of the oculist society, including the initiation of a candidate and the first few degrees of progression. The second part is a description of mainstream 18th-century Masonic rituals. The final section provides an insight into other forms of contemporary Freemasonry, especially the Scottish rites that were then becoming popular in Germany (which themselves are claimed by some to have originated in France).

Copiales begins: 'The book of law of the oculist society secret part. Secret lessons for the apprentices. Ceremonies of initiation.' After the candidate's initial pledges of secrecy and fidelity to the society, the Master 'pass[es] to the brother the candidate in body and soul so that he sees if "one cannot help his weak face with an operation". He carries him thereafter to a secondary table where, next to a lot of candles, several instruments and

spectacles, microscopic perspective, a cloth and a glass of water must be present. [The candidate] has to... look upon an unwritten piece of paper for a while. If, after a while, he answers that he cannot see anything written on there, then the master of ceremonies puts [on] him a pair of spectacles and asks him again if he is not able to read the writing. Answer no.

'During this time the master of ceremonies comforts him as well as he can, raises his hopes for improvement, washes his eyes with a cloth and if nothing helps, he will announce that they have to proceed with the operation. Then all those present members reach for the candles, place themselves around the candidate, and the master of ceremonies; the Master plucks a hair from the eyebrow with a pair of small tweezers under constant urging, comfort and encouragement and concludes herewith the operation...' At length the candidate is led back to the secondary table where, instead of the blank piece of paper, 'the entire teaching for the apprentices is placed...' And the candidate is finally initiated into the society with instructions from the secretary as to how to behave as an apprentice.

Various other ocular signals are illustrated, mainly being choreographed signs of recognition between members at the beginning of rituals. For instance: 'Thirdly, one takes tobacco with the thumb and

the middle finger of the left hand. Touch with the left hand your left eye.' Or, this method of indicating an apprentice: 'First, somebody touches with the right hand his right eye. With my right hand I brush over the right side of the neck...'

Knight notes that the eye is part of the symbology of secret societies, which may in part explain the fixation of this society on the eye, implying that its members were not necessarily optical practitioners themselves. But could there be an optical connection after all?

There is some interesting information regarding the founding of a Masonic lodge in Frankfurt that could conceivably link it with Copiale. A paper, 'Masonic Passwords. Their Development and Use in the Early 18th Century' (ACF Jackson, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, Vol 87 for the Year 1974, Pub Nov 1975, pp106-119) contains some intriguing passages. In the 1740s Frankfurt was of prime diplomatic importance, with constant traffic of high-ranking statesmen. One of these was Philipp Frederick Steinheil, a German diplomat who was founder and first Master of the Frankfurt

Lodge of Union, which was officially consecrated in June 1742. But according to JG Findel, in *General History of Freemasonry* (1861) there had been some form of lodge there a full year earlier, which had close links to a French lodge at Lyons.

Steinheil, who had been initiated while en poste in London, was present in Grand Lodge in March 1741 at the election of the Earl of Morton as Grand Master, and gave one of the addresses. He was able to use his connections to gain *post facto* regularisation of his Frankfurt lodge. His 'sponsor' was one Bro Beaumont, oculist to the Prince of Wales. The Charter from the Grand Lodge of England, dated February 8, 1743, states that Beaumont having assured 'us that the Lodge had been constituted in due form under the name of Union, and as a daughter of the Union Lodge of London, we do hereby recognize it, etc and order that the members of either Lodge be equally considered members of the other.' So, however tentatively, we have a connection between a Philipp, an oculist and French Freemasonry (and hence the Scottish rites mentioned in Copiales).

Could the Copiale document have belonged to Steinheil? An obvious problem is the date of the inscription – 1866. It may be merely a coincidence, but the aforementioned JG Findel published another major work, *History of Freemasonry*, in German, in 1866. Nevertheless it is intriguing to speculate as to whether Philipp refers to Steinheil but '1866' is a date that was added later, perhaps by someone doing research (Findel himself?) or someone who obtained the document after reading that work when it was published. Some further information may come to light when a follow-up paper by Knight, Megyesi and Schaefer is published, probably later this year, in the recently established *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*. At the present time, those 18th-century German oculist aficionados remain obscure, and the term 'Copiales' a complete mystery. ●

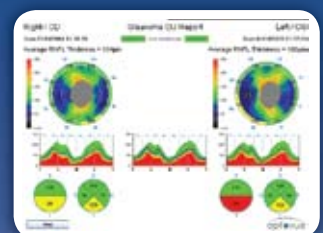
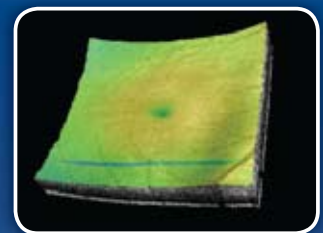
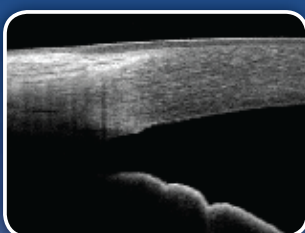
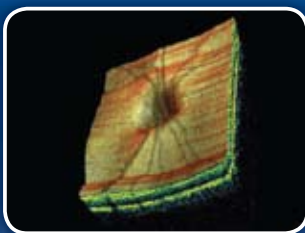
Acknowledgement

My thanks to Arthur Baker for guidance on Masonic matters.

● David Baker is an independent optometrist

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