Freemasonry in Norway

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During the time period when Freemasonry was introduced, Norway was part of the Danish realm, a conglomerate state made up of a large variety of territories, from Greenland and Iceland to the North, to the Danish isles and Jutland, including possessions in the old German empire. It is crucial to bear this multicultural background in mind when analyzing the history of Freemasonry in the various parts of the Danish realm. In 1814 Norway entered into a political union with Sweden, a union that was dissolved in 1905, when Norway became an independent nation state. The development of Freemasonry in Denmark and Sweden are treated in separate chapters in this volume.

Freemasonry in Norway developed in three different phases: 1749–1818: affiliation to the Danish masonic bodies; 1818–1890: as part of the Swedish Order of Freemasons; 1891 to the present (interrupted 1940–1945 by the Nazi occupation): forming the Norwegian Order of Freemasons.

It is worth mentioning that lodges were established during the late nineteenth century with a German warrant, despite the asserted Swedish supremacy of constitution. The split between Swedish/Norwegian and German/Norwegian masonic jurisdiction lasted until 1960. Whereas the Norwegian Order of Freemasons has a distinctly Christian character, the lodges warranted from Germany defined themselves as part of the deist and religiously tolerant tradition based upon the English constitutions of Freemasonry of 1723. In the years from 1940 to 1945, the Norwegian masonic bodies suffered considerably from persecution under the Nazi occupation, not least by quislings. The Norwegian Order of Freemasons has about 19,000 members and has recently (as of late 2014) featured extensively in media (see below).

The Danish Period

Norwegians were Danish subjects and had been initiated into lodges in Denmark and abroad before a lodge was officially established on Norwegian territory in 1749 – the second oldest lodge establishment in Scandinavia. With a patent from its mother lodge, St. Martin in Copenhagen, the lodge St. Olaus
Freemasonry in Norway was consecrated close to or in Christiania (the old name of the Norwegian capital, now Oslo) on St. Hans Day (midsummer) and named after Olav, the patron saint of Norway. Most evidence suggests that the Danish king, Frederik V, attended the foundation of the lodge during a visit to the Norwegian part of the realm. The lodge St. Martin had close relations to the earliest German lodges in Hamburg (Absalon) and Berlin (Aux troix Globes), and hence it makes sense to place St. Olaus in the same tradition. A Danish-Norwegian provincial Grand lodge was founded with English constitution in the same year of 1749. Unfortunately, no lodge records are preserved that could cast a light on this very early organisation of lodges in the Danish realm. No lodge minutes from St. Olaus earlier than 1757 have been preserved. The first records of this year speak of the assembled Freemasons as “restauratores”, a term from which we can conclude that the lodge was dormant for a couple of years after its establishment. Kristiania had close economic ties to the British Isles, English was as common here as German was in Copenhagen. Freemasonry was identified with a typically British way of organised sociability. A British merchant living in London was initiated into the lodge, as were other foreigners. A number of brethren from abroad, mainly of maritime professions, visited the lodge over the years. St. Olaus adopted the custom of giving its members certain coded names to be used within the lodge. One of the brethren meeting in 1757 called himself in English “The Freethinker”. The close links to Britain led to the establishment in Oslo of a Royal-Arch Chapter constituted from London and working in higher degrees of Freemasonry.

Contrary to the lodges in Copenhagen, St. Olaus seems to have worked completely in the vernacular language. The lodge seems to have been inactive during the years 1764–1772, 1773–1780, and 1792–1810. When the lodge opened again in the 1780s, the dynamic development of Freemasonry on the continent and Scandinavia soon influenced its workings. The Danish lodges now belonged to the VIIth province of the masonic system Strict Observance and the lodge in Kristiania was integrated into the Danish organisation of lodges (see the chapter Freemasonry in Denmark for more information). Carl of Hesse-Kassel now acted as Provincial Grand Master of the Danish lodges and incorporated the Norwegian lodge into his jurisdiction. With the issuing of the warrant, the name of the lodge was changed to St. Olaus til den hvide Leopard, “To the White Leopard”, a name that remains in use up to the present day and that has been associated with the process of “Albedo” (“whitening”) in alchemy. Over the ensuing years, recruitment figures increased. In 1786, a building for masonic purposes was purchased. A central figure during this lively period of Norwegian Freemasonry is Bernt Anker (1746–1805), head of the Anker trading