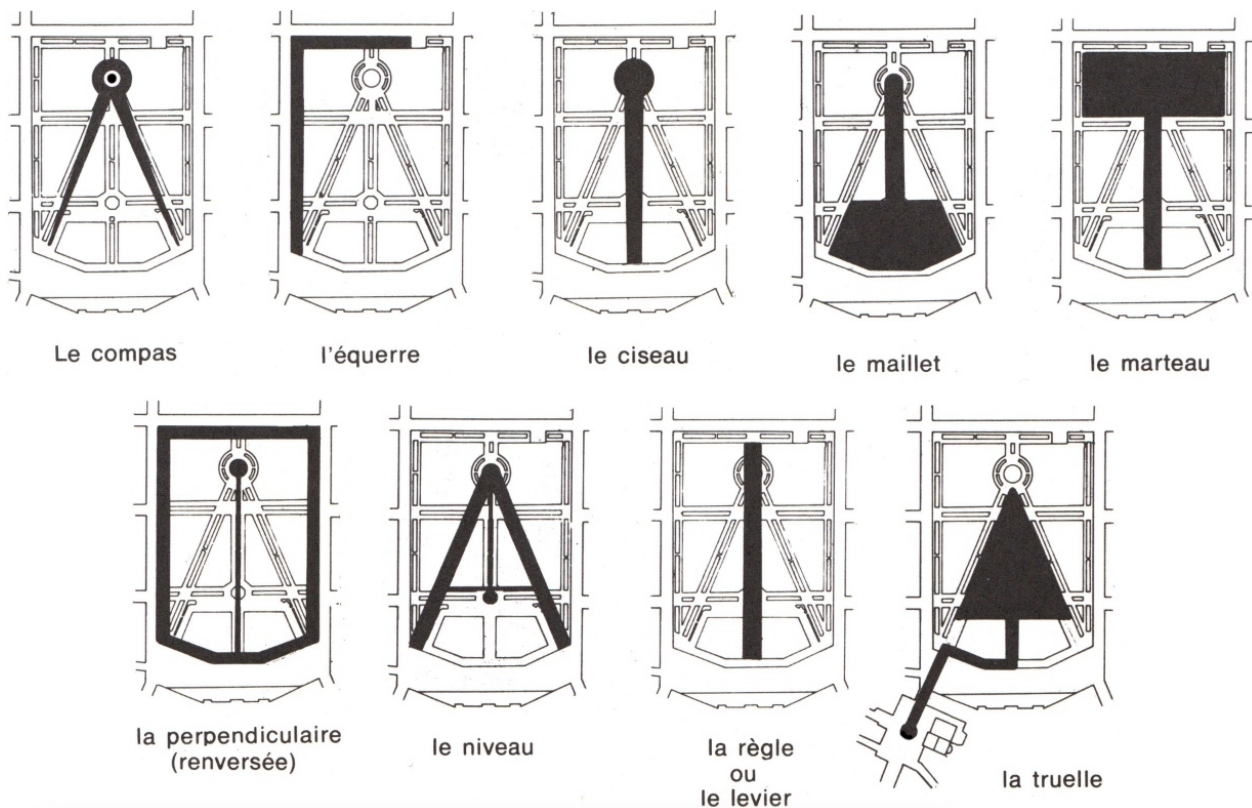


## The Parc de Bruxelles: the largest masonic space in the world?



Our regions were governed by the Austrians when in 1770 Georges-Adam Starhemberg arrived in Brussels having been dispatched by Vienna as to take over duties as Minister Plenipotentiary (akin to Prime Minister). He was one of the descendants of the prestigious Starhemberg family that be instrumental to victory over the Ottomans in 1683. In Brussels, he very quickly took over the advantageous situation left behind by the debonair Charles of Lorraine upon his death. From 1780 (death of Charles de Lorraine) to 1783, Starhemberg even held absolute power with his Lodge's Brother Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen, the new governor, and his relative and Brother Prince Kaunitz, the Chancellor in Vienna.

It was Starhemberg who planned to replace the palace of Charles V, which had burnt down in 1731 with a Royal Quarter worthy of the prestige of the Habsburgs. As well in 1775, the good people of Brussels erected a statue on the Place Royale in homage to Charles of Lorraine. Following this, Starhemberg submitted to Empress Maria Theresa a project for a Royal Quarter in keeping with contemporary tastes.

It is worth mentioning here that Starhemberg was a freemason. At a very young age in Saxony, he was initiated into the Minerve aux Trois Palmiers (Minerva with the Three Palm Trees) Lodge, which later became Minerve au Compas (Minerva with the Compass). This Lodge would come under Strict Observance, an obedience that claims a filiation with the Order of the Temple against an irrational background of an alchemical quest, Rosicrucianism and Kabbalistic studies!

For his project for the Royal Quarter, Starhemberg enlisted the services of the sculptor Godecharle, who was most likely a freemason, and the French architect Guimard, about whom little is known. As can be seen in the plan using masonic tools, the 45-degree-angled open compass and its screw are emblematic of the new "Royal" Park: the compass is in fact associated with the Great Architect of the Universe (the creative principle, the Surveyor) and the Venerable Master of a Lodge. It should be noted here that the hammer is specifically a tool of Strict Observance.

Let us follow the brilliant Starhemberg on his symbolic walk from the Place Royale (Royal Square) to the Rue de la Loi where the pediment of the Palais de la Nation (Palace of the Nation, Parliament) stands. Note that the Parc de Bruxelles lies to the West and the central basin to the "symbolic" East ([plan by Ferraris, 1777](#)).

The route starts at the Palace of Charles de Lorraine, the present Place du Musée (Museum Square), which according to some authors has an alchemical character. Through the Montagne de la Cour (Court Mountain), which was to be adorned with a triumphal arch, we reach the Royal Square. The complex was to be enclosed by porticoes, thus creating a kind of sacred space separated from the profane world, the lower city. On the side of the Rue de la Régence, which had not yet been laid out, stood an imposing "Passage des Colonnes" decorated with six trophies of arms. It is tempting to perceive it as being an allusion or analogous to a passage to the dark world, as was the case with the Columns of Hercules (Gibraltar) facing the West and the unknown ocean, or to the two columns of the Masonic temple.

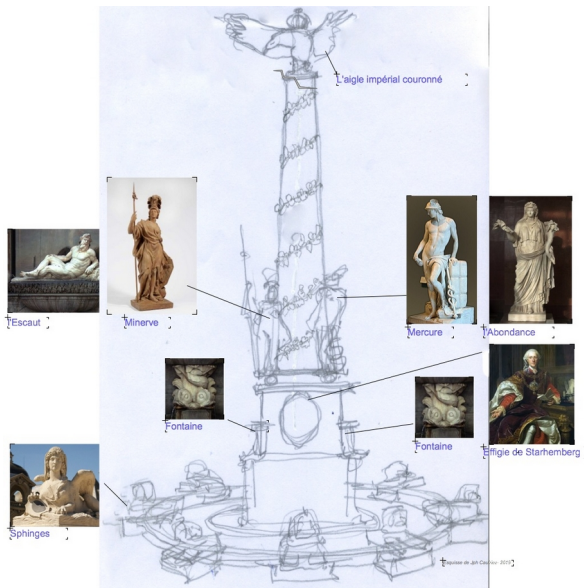
Let us leave aside the Church of Saint-Jacques-sur-Coudenberg (Saint James), built at the same time as the Royal Quarter and which has aspects in common with the Temple of Solomon as the Masons had seen it at the end of the 18th century. But this is not our subject. To the right of the sanctuary, in the little accessible impasse of the Borgendael, we can see Athena's trophy of arms with references to the Golden Fleece, such as of a helmet with ram's horns. The Golden Fleece associated with the alchemical quest in the 18th century is still mentioned at the entrance to the Park, at Rue Royale 14, where Athena is once again highlighted. Yet for the occasion, the dragon who hoarded the famous Fleece coveted by Jason and his Argonauts is heavily drowsy thanks to Medea's potion. The Quest can begin.

Let's take a walk in the Park, which is sown with pomegranate columns, symbols of fraternity and fecundity for the Masons. The observer notices that the oblique path leading to the central basin constitutes the main axis of the Royal Park. Note that "Dirigit Obliqua" is a motto of the Strict Observance dear to Starhemberg, which means: "The crooked shall be made straight" with a view towards regeneration and redemption. This oblique alley has the unusual property of aligning with the setting sun on the day of the Feast on Saint John the evangelist, on December 27th. In the 18th century, St. John's Day was the main feast of obligation for the Order of Freemasons. With numerous Lodges having been placed under its invocation. On this date, the dignitaries were (re)elected and the members attended a banquet preceded by a solemn mass.... On the Feast on Saint John the evangelist, the days became longer and symbolically each Mason meditated on the rebirth of his "inner sun".

Directly to the right of this sloping entrance, we reach the shallows, the last vestiges of Charles V's hunting grounds. One of which contains the statue of Mary Magdalene and the bust of Tsar Peter the Great. Both of these had been moved in the 19th century to what looks like an initiation or election cave. Before being initiated, every Mason is introduced into a cabinet of reflection which invites them to rid of themselves of their prejudices linked to the profane world. Let us recall that Mary Magdalene is venerated by Operative Masonry, one of the sources of Freemasonry. As well the bust of Peter the Great proudly bears the inscription of 1717, which marks the year of his visit to Brussels, and perhaps also the official foundation of Freemasonry in London as well. On the wall, the mirrored letters VITRIOL date only from 1991, but they obviously reinforce the symbolic character of the shallows given that this is a Latin acronym for the alchemical and masonic formula: "Visit the interior of the earth and by rectifying you will find the hidden stone. »

Returning to the oblique alley, we come across a delicate statue of Charity. This is precisely the most prized quality required of a Mason in the 18th century. At that time, the Order still had its Christian roots, even though it did not have allegiance to the Pope. Thus a declared atheist could not enter the Order. Proceeding towards the Rue de la Loi or the symbolic Orient, we come to two sculpted monuments in front of the circular basin. The one on the left is dedicated to Starhemberg with the

representation of his coat of arms, while [the one on the right is purely Masonic](#): at the feet of the child on the left (the Companion), we can see the chisel and the burin, tools of the Masonic Apprentice. The second on the right (the Master) holds the square and the compass in his left hand. Meanwhile the Companion is unrolling the plan for the Park which is crowned with roses: this is his masterpiece, a masterpiece that is required of every Apprentice during his initiation-reception.



These two monuments were a consolation prize for Starhemberg, as Joseph II, during a visit to Brussels, had refused to erect a triangular obelisk. According to the Austrian correspondence of the time, this obelisk was to be built in the round basin and was to be the "last stone of the whole edifice". In fact, Joseph II claimed that the obelisk was too expensive for him. An incongruous objection, given the highly liberal Prince of Starhemberg had put the surrounding abbeys and the states (provinces) to work covering the costs of the new Royal Quarter, but also that of the obelisk! The latter's allegories were eloquent: Minerva/Athena, Hermes, Ceres/Isis, etc. with the whole to be crowned with an golden eagle and protected by eight sphinxes. Later, at Wespelaar Castle, the same Godecharle

would erect a visibly Masonic obelisk on an island on the Champs Elysées where the virtuous heroes whose souls were immortal rest.

In the central axis of the Brussels Park, Gilles-Lambert Godecharle, still that very same Godecharle, designed the majestic [pediment of the Palais de la Nation](#) (now the Parliament, Rue de la Loi) entitled "Justice Rewarding Virtue and Punishing Vices". An eminently masonic concept that was constantly repeated in the rituals of the late 18th century. Virtue can be considered to correspond to Knowledge and Vices to ignorance. In short, Minerva/Athena (Wisdom) presents a winged figure or the Chosen One to Justice who offers him a laurel wreath, while Seven Virtues appear alternately on the pediment. One of them has a Masonic triangle on its chest, representing the Eye of Consciousness or the creative Principle.

On the axis, at the other end of the park once stood the Starhemberg residence, which became the matrix of the present Grand Salon blanc (Grand White Hall) of the Royal Palace. The (destroyed) Heraldic Chamber was also located here, where the Treasury of the Golden Fleece was held until the Austrians left (1794).

For Austrian Freemasons who were keen on occultism and alchemy with a Rosicrucian inspiration, the Golden Fleece was similar to the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Long Life. The median axis of the Park therefore linked the Golden Fleece, the obelisk (the Supreme Being) and the pediment of the Palace of the Nation, all centred on the regeneration and immortality of the soul.

But that is not all, in the 19th century the Masonic character of the Park seems to have been strengthened. In 1881, the Freemason Thomas Vinçotte paid homage to his brother Godecharle by dedicating a naked young woman to him, unveiling a sketch of the pediment of the Palais de la Nation. It is entitled "Allegory of Truth" and which stands on a mound among bushes, not far from the central basin. Now, isn't the vocation of every Freemason to seek the Truth whatever the difficulties may be, or even the disillusionment that may ensue?

The Prince of Starhemberg, who returned to Vienna in 1783, has us speak of him one last time. The Freihaustheater located on his property will represent 223 times Mozart's Magic Flute, a Masonic opera if ever there was one! Like Starhemberg, the young prodigy was a member of the Strict Observance, the Germanic branch of Freemasonry but also the most esoteric of the 18th century.

## Proof by Les Amis Philanthropes?



To celebrate the bicentenary of its foundation in 1798, the Lodge of the Philanthropic Friends ordered an official stamp from Bpost on the theme of Free Thought.

Gérard Alsteens was the designer of the stamp itself (to the right of the illustration).

Unusually, Les Amis Philanthropes accompanied the stamp with a design of the Park surrounded by a sort of chain of union. This is therefore a first-rate claim, even a formal proof: indeed, why choose the Park if there is nothing symbolic about it!

Jean-Pol Ducène, a philatelist expert in Masonic themes, further confirmed the Masonic character of the Park on his site.

Article by Joël Goffin  
writer and librarian

The entire study (in French) "Le Quartier Royal: une Forêt de symboles" is available on line at <https://bruges-la-morte.net>.

Illustrations :

Rectified plan of Saint-Hilaire (Pascal Pirotte)

Sketch of the Godecharle obelisk never placed in the park (Jean-Paul Caufriez)

The Prince of Starhemberg (wikimedia commons)

Amis Philanthropes commemorative stamp (Joël Goffin coll.)