

The Meaning of the 33rd Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite and A View of Masonry from Above

By



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Earliest documentary sources related to the 33° (not full ritual texts)

1. Grand Constitutions of 1786 (foundational text)

The **oldest foundational document connected to the 33rd Degree** is the so-called *Grand Constitutions* (often dated 1 May 1786, Berlin).

- These constitutions defined:
 - A system of **33 degrees**
 - Governance by a **Supreme Council**
 - Authority of 33° Inspectors General
- They are traditionally attributed to Frederick II of Prussia (though historians debate the extent of his involvement).

However:

- No original 1786 signed copy survives.
- The earliest known manuscript copies date to c. 1801–1802.

Hence, the “oldest text” in physical form is actually early-19th-century copies of an 18th-century constitution.

2. Dalcho Manuscript Copy (c. 1801–1802)

One of the earliest surviving texts is a manuscript written by **Rev. Frederick Dalcho**, a founder of the first Supreme Council (Charleston, 1801).

Title (paraphrased from manuscript heading):

“Constitution, Statutes, Regulations &c. for the Government of the Supreme Council of Inspectors General of the 33rd ...”

This document outlines:

- Powers of the 33°
- Jurisdiction over degrees 17–33
- Structure of Supreme Councils

This is **administrative/constitutional**, not ritual.

3. The 1802 “Circular Throughout the Two Hemispheres”

First printed document issued by the Charleston Supreme Council.

It:

- Publicized the creation of the 33°
- Repeated the 1786 constitutional claims
- Asserted royal authorization origins

Again: explanatory, not a ritual exposure.

Earliest ritual material (manuscript level)

The **original 33° ritual** existed in manuscript form by the early 1800s.

Fragments quoted in historical studies describe:

- The degree's purpose as transmitting "Sovereign Masonic power"
- Creation of Inspectors General councils
- Governance after the monarch's death

But:

- These manuscripts were restricted.
 - Full early ritual texts are not publicly standardized or universally accessible.
 - Different Supreme Councils used variant versions.
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Later published compilations (much later than the origin)

Public or semi-public printed ritual collections only appear in the **late 19th–early 20th century**.

Examples include:

- Compilations used roughly **1885–1925** in U.S. jurisdictions.
- Ritual books compiling degrees 1–33 for internal instructional use (limited circulation).

These are **not the oldest texts**—they are later editorial syntheses.

Key historical timeline

- **1760s**: Rite of Perfection develops precursor high degrees.
 - **1786**: Grand Constitutions define 33° system.
 - **1801**: First Supreme Council (Charleston).
 - **1801–02**: Earliest surviving manuscript constitutions.
 - **1802**: First printed circular.
 - **Late 1800s+**: Printed ritual compilations appear.
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A SUMMARY OF THE 33RD DEGREE RITUAL

33° — Inspector General (Honorary)

Full traditional title:

"Sovereign Grand Inspector General"

Conferred by a Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite.

It is:

- The **highest administrative degree** of the Rite
 - Usually **honorary** (awarded for service)
 - Governing rather than instructional
-

Core Purpose of the Degree

Unlike philosophical degrees (e.g., 18° or 30°), the 33° is about:

- Transmission of **supreme authority**
- Custodianship of the Rite
- Protection of Masonic continuity

- Moral accountability of leadership

It transforms the candidate symbolically into a **guardian of the entire system**.

Ceremonial Structure (Typical Western Jurisdiction Model)

While wording varies, most rituals follow this structural arc:

1. Opening of the Supreme Council

Setting:

- Council chamber rather than a lodge
- Throne or East reserved for the Sovereign Grand Commander
- 33° members present as Inspectors General

Symbolism:

- Supreme governance
- Collegiate authority (rule by council, not monarch alone)

The Council Chamber of the 33rd Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite is illuminated by eleven lights placed as follows (5-3-1-2):

(i) One candelabrum of five lights in the East. The five lights symbolize the five basic parts of the Masonic Teaching, which are the following:

- Devotion to the Great Architect of the Universe (G:A:O:T:U:), representing the principle of transcendence (this concept will be explained later).
- The system, or “mystery,” of the laws of nature.
- The perfection of the true Temple, which is the human heart.
- The victory of Light over Darkness.
- The triumph of Virtue against error and the passions.

(ii) One candelabrum of three lights in the West. The three lights symbolize the triptych cause–means–result as well as the triptych motion–fermentation–life, upon which the material world is based.

(iii) One candelabrum of one light in the North. This light symbolizes the first (or root) cause and the active force.

(iv) One candelabrum of two lights in the South. The two lights symbolize the principle of duality.

2. Reception of the Candidate

The candidate is introduced as:

- A Knight of the Rite
- A proven servant of humanity
- One found worthy of supreme trust

Key theme: **Merit, not ambition**.

3. Historical Transmission Narrative

A lecture or oration recounts:

- The lineage of high degrees
- Preservation through persecution
- Establishment of Supreme Councils

This often references:

- Chivalric orders
 - Enlightenment philosophy
 - Defense of liberty and conscience
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4. The Investiture

This is the central act.

The candidate receives:

a) White Cap (Tiara-style cap)

Symbolism:

- Purity of judgment
 - Equality among Inspectors
 - Authority tempered by virtue
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b) 33° Jewel

Typical design:

- Double-headed eagle
- Crown above
- “33” within triangle

Symbolism:

- East & West vigilance
 - Temporal & spiritual balance
 - Completion of the Rite
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c) Patent / Charter

Formal document declaring:

- Rank of Sovereign Grand Inspector General
 - Jurisdictional authority
 - Duty to uphold constitutions
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5. The Obligation

A solemn vow is taken (non-verbatim summary):

Themes include:

- Loyalty to the Rite
- Protection of its integrity
- Service to humanity
- Defense of freedom of conscience
- Secrecy of deliberations

Unlike lower degrees, the obligation is framed as **stewardship, not secrecy alone**.

6. The Consecration / Anointing Motif

In some jurisdictions:

- Symbolic consecration occurs
- Sometimes with sword, light, or touch

Represents:

- Transmission of governing power
 - Moral sanctification of authority
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7. Charge to the Inspector General

This is one of the most important lectures.

Key teachings:

Authority is conditional

Power exists only while used justly.

Leadership is sacrificial

The 33° must serve, not rule.

Preservation of the Rite

Guard doctrine, ritual, and fraternity.

Defense of human dignity

A recurring Scottish Rite theme.

According to Grand Master Giuliano Di Bernardo, the Masonic anthropology can be summarized by the quintuple “Freedom, Tolerance, Brotherhood, Transcendence, Initiatory Secret.”

Moral & Philosophical Themes

The 33° synthesizes all prior degrees into governance ethics:

Theme	Meaning
Justice	Fair rule without tyranny (specifically, without arbitrary/irrational authority)
Tolerance	Religious & political liberty (spiritual tolerance)
Responsibility	Authority = burden (moral responsibility)
Continuity	Protect tradition (transfer of meaning from the past to the future)
Enlightenment	Reason (language + thinking) guiding power

Esoteric / Symbolic Interpretations

Researchers often interpret deeper layers:

Double-Headed Eagle

Represents:

- Dual sovereignty (spiritual + temporal)
- East/West unity
- Ancient imperial symbolism reinterpreted morally

Number 33

Common interpretations:

- Completion of human moral ascent
- Mastery of body (3) + soul (3)
- Age of spiritual perfection in Christian mysticism
- Highest point before transcendence

White & Gold Colors

- White → purity of intent
- Gold → incorruptible wisdom

Administrative Reality vs Symbolism

Important distinction:

- **Symbolically:** Supreme wisdom and guardianship
- **Practically:** Governing board membership

33° members:

- Elect leadership
- Manage Rite affairs
- Oversee degrees 4–32
- Maintain constitutions

Variations by Jurisdiction

Ritual structure differs across Supreme Councils, e.g.:

- Scottish Rite Southern Jurisdiction — heavily reworked in 19th c. reforms
- Scottish Rite Northern Masonic Jurisdiction — different dramatic structure
- European Supreme Councils — often shorter, more administrative

But core elements remain:

- Investiture
- Obligation
- Charge
- Governance symbolism

What the 33° Is *Not*

Contrary to conspiracy claims:

- Not “higher Masonry” above Freemasonry (the “Craft”) itself
- Not a separate religion
- Not political rulership

It is an **appendant governing degree** within the Scottish Rite system.

The Philosophical Meaning of the 33rd Degree: From governance to cosmic moral stewardship.

At the level of philosophy, the 33rd Degree is not only an administrative degree, but also the culmination of moral, intellectual, and spiritual responsibility acquired through all prior degrees.

- Lower degrees teach virtues
- Higher degrees test justice
- The 33° **embodies universal guardianship**

1. From Power → Responsibility

From the perspective of Masonic governance, the 33rd Degree means and implies supreme authority over the Rite.

From the perspective of Masonic philosophy, the 33rd Degree means and implies supreme accountability before humanity and the Great Architect of the Universe (G::A::O::T::U::). According to Grand Master Giuliano Di Bernardo’s Masonic philosophy, which I endorse, the G::A::O::T::U:: should be interpreted as an ideal of transcendence, specifically, as a symbol of humanity’s perfection (neither as a distinct, ontological God nor as a religious syncretistic doctrine).

In few words:

- Authority is symbolic, not dominative
- The 33° answers to moral law, not personal will

Framed leadership is primarily a **moral burden, and not a privilege.**

2. Universal Justice Philosophy

The Inspector General undertakes the responsibility to operate as:

- An arbiter of fairness
- A defender of conscience
- A protector of human dignity

3. Integration of Philosophical Universalism

Truth is universal; the 33° must recognize wisdom across civilizations.

4. The Crowned Double-Headed Eagle

The crowned double-headed eagle symbolizes:

- Balanced sovereignty
- Wisdom ruling power
- Moral oversight of governance

5. The Number 33 — Symbolic perfection of the Rite’s hierarchical system

$$3 \times 11 = 33$$

where:

3 symbolizes: harmony, creativity, and completeness, often representing the union of opposing forces (1 and 2) to create a new, **balanced whole**. Across various traditions, it signifies the “middle ground,” the “third element” that balances a pair. In **dialectics**, we have the triad thesis–antithesis–synthesis.

11 symbolizes: the apex and perfection of the mastery of the Tetraktys. The **Tetraktys** is a triangular symbol composed of ten points arranged in four rows, which was of profound mystical and mathematical importance to the followers of Pythagoras in ancient Greece. It represents the sum of the first four numbers ($1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$), symbolizing the organization of space, the cosmos, and the foundation of musical harmony. Hence, the number 11 can be regarded as a “**Master Number**.” It generally symbolizes intuition, spiritual awakening, enlightenment, and a bridge between the mortal and the divine.

6. The Inspector General as “Sentinel of Civilization”

The 33° is not just guardian of Masonry — but of:

- Liberty
- Knowledge
- Ethical governance
- Human progress

Thus the 33° becomes:

A philosophical knight of humanity.

7. Esoteric Light Motif

The “Light” symbolism:

The 33° safeguards light for the world

Light =

- Knowledge
- Moral truth
- Transcendence (a vision of anthropological perfection)

This ties the degree to the Rite’s overarching illumination theme.

8. Internal vs External Authority

True sovereignty is inward.

Meaning:

- Mastery of self > mastery of institutions
- Moral discipline precedes governance
- Without virtue, rank is void

Thus the 33° is:

- Symbolic culmination of inner initiation
- Not merely administrative promotion

9. Chivalric Reframing

In the context of Masonic Orders, “chivalry” is symbolic, not literal in a historical sense. The chivalric degrees of Masonic Orders are symbolic in nature and do not form part of the honors conferred by monarchs (e.g., the Sovereign of the UK, the Sovereign of Spain, etc.) or senior ecclesiastical dignitaries (e.g., the Pope of Rome, the Patriarch of Constantinople, etc.). The chivalric degrees of Masonic Orders are not public offices/honors, but esoteric titles, and, therefore, they have meaning and validity only within the symbolic context of the respective Masonic Orders. Hence, in the context of Masonic Orders, chivalric degrees, such as Knight Kadosh (30°), create symbolic “Knights,” and symbolic (Masonic) chivalry means and implies:

- Defense of the oppressed
- Protection of truth
- Resistance to tyranny
- Service without selfishness

10. Splendor vs Decadence: A Theme in Need of a Focus

The members of the 33rd degree realize, and are explicitly taught, that their object is not to rebuild the material Temple of King Solomon, but a moral temple, wherein truth and love will dwell, and people will live as an ecumenical brotherhood abiding by the laws of eternal equity and justice. Moreover, the members of the 33rd degree realize, and are explicitly taught, that they have not to avenge the murder of Hiram Abiff, who is a symbol of Masonic wisdom—which ignorance, lust for power, and falsehood have concealed from many people—but they must go on in search of the laws that regulate the moral world.

However, particularly since the mid-20th century, humanity, with the historical West at its center, has entered an era characterized by constant performance, shouted opinions, “flabby pluralism” (a pejorative term, often associated with Richard Bernstein), rewarding the outrageous, valuing speed more than depth, and outweighing intellectual rigor by popularity. In a society that rewards visibility over understanding and that has substituted the Cartesian principle “cogito ergo sum” with the principle “I pay or consume therefore I am,” what happens to those who think more deeply and are genuine rationalists? Topics like these pull me towards the Masonic philosophy of Giuliano Di Bernardo, especially his analysis of the decadence of Masonry after the end of World War II. Di Bernardo sees the “decadence” of Masonry as the result of:

- moral drift and loss of ethical grounding,
- misunderstanding or empty use of symbolism,
- institutional corruption and identity confusion,
- and a widening gap between the philosophical ideal and everyday practice.

For him, the cure is not cosmetic reform, but a philosophical and moral **return to initiatory purpose** and clarity about what Masonry truly is—a practical philosophy of human self-understanding and moral improvement.

Origins: Enlightenment “Splendor”

Di Bernardo frames early modern Freemasonry—particularly 18th-century European Masonry—as a moment of **intellectual and moral splendor** rooted in Enlightenment culture.

Key features he highlights:

a) Rational spirituality

Freemasonry harmonized reason and transcendence without dogmatic religion. It provided a symbolic path to ethical elevation compatible with Enlightenment rationality.

b) Universal brotherhood

It transcended confessional and national divisions—radical in an era marked by sectarian conflict and/or nationalism.

c) Moral anthropology

Di Bernardo interprets early Masonry as a philosophical project about the nature of the human being:

- freedom,
- dignity,
- perfectibility,
- ethical self-construction.

d) Initiation as inner transformation

Initiation originally meant a disciplined journey of moral and intellectual refinement—not merely ceremonial progression.

In this period, symbolism functioned as a **language of philosophical truths**, not mystical ornament.

Institutional Expansion—The Turning Point

Di Bernardo sees decline beginning when Freemasonry shifted from **elite philosophical circles to mass institutional organizations** (19th–20th centuries).

Structural consequences

- Rapid numerical growth diluted intellectual rigor.
- Administrative and bureaucratic concerns overshadowed initiatory depth.
- Lodges became socially prestigious rather than philosophically demanding.
- The attitudes of American democracy and pop culture swept away the traditional European elitist Masonries.

He does not treat expansion as inherently negative—but as the point where **quantity began to undermine quality**.

Politicization and Instrumentalization

A central historical argument is that Masonry gradually became entangled in:

- nationalist movements (going hand-in-hand with the division of Masonic jurisdictions according to state borders),
- anti-clerical struggles,
- party politics,
- power networks, and
- public relations techniques.

While Masonry historically interacted with political modernity, Di Bernardo argues that it **ceased to be supra-political** and instead became instrumentalized.

This shift marks a decisive break from Enlightenment universalism.

Ritual Without Philosophy

As Masonry spread, Di Bernardo argues that:

- Rituals were preserved,
- but their philosophical content was forgotten or trivialized.

He sees modern practice as often characterized by:

- formalism,
- shallow theatrical symbolism,
- memorized catechisms without understanding.

Thus, initiation became **performative rather than transformative**.

Identity Fragmentation

Historically, Freemasonry diversified into many rites, obediences, and interpretive schools.

Di Bernardo argues this pluralization produced confusion about what Masonry *is*:

Historical Masonry	Decadent Masonry
Philosophical anthropology	Mysticism / occultism
Ethical initiation	Social club
Universalist	Politicized
Rational-symbolic	Mystical-dogmatic

He is especially critical of attempts to redefine Masonry as:

- a religion,
- a substitute church,
- a system of religious syncretism,
- or a system of pure mysticism (i.e., a method without clearly formulated teleology).

Case-studies

There are several case-studies of degeneration of Masonic institutions:

- scandals,
- mafocracy,
- factionalism,
- loss of moral authority,
- petit-bourgeois opportunism,
- public mistrust.

For Di Bernardo, these are not isolated failures but manifestations of a deeper philosophical decay.

From Enlightenment Project to Institutional Shell

Di Bernardo's historical thesis can be summarized as a three-stage trajectory:

1. **Foundational Splendor:** Enlightenment philosophical-initiatory project.
2. **Expansion and Dilution:** Growth, politicization, bureaucratization.
3. **Decadence:** Loss of moral center, symbolic illiteracy, identity confusion.

Regarding a thorough analysis of society's glamor and annoyances as well as of the tension between deep thinkers and mass culture, I should refer my readers to works by Arthur Schopenhauer.

Refounding vs Superficial Reform

Because the problem is historical and structural, we should reject superficial reforms and all beautification and public relations techniques.

We need a “**refoundation**” grounded in:

- restored philosophical rigor,
- authentic initiatory pedagogy,
- moral seriousness,
- clear identity as philosophical anthropology.

In other words: a return not to the past institutionally, but to its **foundational intellectual spirit**. This is the project that, in line with Giuliano Di Bernardo's analysis, I put forward in my Masonic Book (in Greek): *Μαθήματα Τεκτονικής Φιλοσοφίας*, https://www.iambos.gr/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=36259 and in my Masonic essays published in English on my website:

<https://nicolaslaos-official.gr/a-guild-of-literati/>

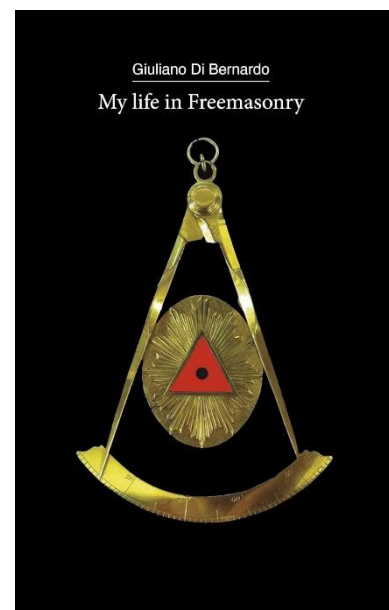
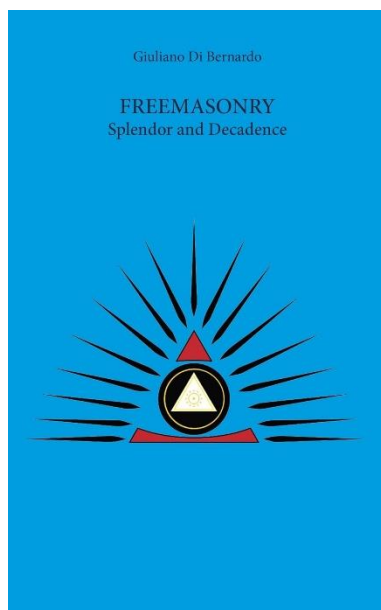
Big-picture interpretation

For Di Bernardo, the history of Freemasonry mirrors a broader trajectory of modernity:

- Enlightenment ideals arise with philosophical clarity.
- Institutions expand and distort them in a context of popularization and profanity.
- Bureaucracy, politics, and mass culture dilute them.
- Symbolic traditions survive—but emptied of meaning.

Thus, Masonic decadence is both:

- an internal crisis,
- and a symptom of wider civilizational drift.



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Clarification Statement:

I manage an international, globalist Masonic Project practicing Symbolic Masonry (the “Craft”) and the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in the context of one, unified, international Obedience, according to, and in the service of, the Masonic teachings and guidelines that I have received from the Most Eminent Brother Professor Giuliano Di Bernardo in his capacity as the Founder and Grand Master of the Dignity Order and the Accademia degli Illuminati and as a former Grand Master of the Grand Orient of Italy and active member of the 33rd Degree of the Supreme Council for Italy affiliated to the Grand Orient of Italy.

Nicolas Laos

Reference: Νικόλαος Λάος, *Μαθήματα Τεκτονικής Φιλοσοφίας*, Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Ίαμβος,

https://www.iambos.gr/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=36259