

# RES COGITANS VERSUS RES EXTENSA

## An essay on the nature of "Masonic research"

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I am proud to be asked to write an article for Res Cogitans, the journal of the Quatuor Coronati Research Lodge No. 7 of the Grand Lodge of Macedonia. The fact that this article will be published in the very first issue of the journal furthers my responsibility for its content. Considering that the first issue of the journal of a research lodge could usefully provide a perspective on the concept of "Masonic research", I chose to devote my article to this topic.

When we study the rich global literature on Freemasonry, we see that the studies we come across can be classified into two main categories: philosophical studies and historical studies. While the former focuses on the symbolic, esoteric and spiritual aspects of Freemasonry, the latter handles the Craft with regard to its socio-political and socio-cultural facets.

Philosophical studies and historical studies are of quite different natures. Philosophy finds its counterpart in the Cartesian term *res cogitans*, as a method for accessing knowledge of concepts. On the other hand, history, with its aim of understanding social reality, is in the *res extensa*. I do not know whether the choice of the title of the journal also reflects a particular stance in this dualism, but there is no doubt that the two must go hand in hand, in order to understand Freemasonry in all its dimensions.

Of course, Freemasonry is -above all- a tradition of individual accomplishment and a search for truth. With this identity, it will inevitably be the subject of philosophical studies. Yet, with its history of more than three centuries and its existence in every corner of the world, Freemasonry is also an important social phenomenon. Hence, the need to make use of the social sciences -ranging from history to sociology, from political science to social psychology- to understand Freemasonry is obvious.

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Essentially, the *res cogitans* / *res extensa* dualism prevails in the study of many deep-rooted traditions, for example, religions. For example, in the quest to understand the place of women in a given religion, it is necessary to study and evaluate the basic texts of that particular religion. On the other hand, in order to explain why women in Pakistan or Bangladesh can be at the top of politics while this is not the case in the Middle East, an analysis of religious texts does not suffice, and one needs to examine the history, social structure and culture of these countries. Likewise, the basic texts of Freemasonry are not enough to explain the diversity exhibited by today's world panorama of this institution; it is also necessary to look at the different historical developments of Freemasonry in different cultures.

This may be a good moment to emphasize that the adjective "Masonic" in the expression "Masonic research" corresponds to the object of research, and not to the method. In other words, "Masonic research" is not a study by Masonic methods but the academic investigation of Freemasonry. In this respect, the term "research into Freemasonry" better meets this intellectual activity, rather than the term "Masonic research". After all, "being Masonic" and "researching into Freemasonry" are two quite different concepts, the former being spiritual, and the latter scientific. Thus, research into Freemasonry is carried out not only by Freemasons, but also by non-Masons.

Here, an interesting question arises. Is it an advantage or a disadvantage to be a Freemason when researching into Freemasonry? There is a conviction that being a Freemason contributes towards a thorough understanding of Freemasonry. On the other hand, the feeling of identification with Freemasonry is claimed to pose a risk to free thought, neutrality and objectivity required by scientific approach. I sympathise with both points. However, in all my years of research into Freemasonry, I had the privilege of meeting several scholars who had a deep comprehension of Freemasonry without being Freemasons; or those who are Freemasons while they knew how to put aside this identity when doing research. Therefore, I find it more accurate to distinguish among researchers of Freemasonry not as "Masons" as opposed to "non-Masons", but with the scientific qualities of their research.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Open Lectures on Freemasonry (<https://www.openlfm.org>) presents an interesting example of a recent online platform that gathers researchers that may or may not be Freemasons.

When we look at the history of research into Freemasonry conducted by Freemasons, a historically significant development is the consecration of the Quatuor Coronati Research Lodge No. 2076 of the United Grand Lodge of England, in 1886. The Lodge aims to “adopt an evidence-based approach to Masonic history that replaced the more imaginative writings of earlier authors”, which is known as “the ‘authentic school’ of Masonic research”.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the scholarly activities of Quatuor Coronati No. 2076 always represented a pillar of historical research, hence being within the *res extensa*.

Coming to our day, research lodges abound worldwide and some focus on philosophical research, some on historical research. The two approaches need not be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, their complementarity is essential in understanding Freemasonry with all its facets. An important question thus dawns: how should a research lodge weigh these two distinct approaches? This question admits no unique answer, since determining a research agenda depends on the availability of human and material resources. The intellectual orientation and interests of the research group plays an obvious critical role. As importantly, access to archives is an absolute necessity for historical research, which is rendered impossible without historical documents. Hence, a group of scholars who would be interested in the history of Macedonian Freemasonry -a natural inclination for Quatuor Coronati Research Lodge No. 7 of the Grand Lodge of Macedonia- would also be sensitive to the preservation of the archives of this Grand Lodge.

Hoping that these views can contribute, albeit very modestly, to the labour of the Quatuor Coronati Research Lodge No. 7 of the Grand Lodge of Macedonia, I wish *Res Cogitans* every success in its endeavours, and I hereby confirm that I shall always be at your disposal.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.quatuorcoronati.com/>