

**illuminati**

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# illuminati

designation for various groups

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By The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica • Edit History

## Top Questions

- What does the name *illuminati* refer to?
- What are the origins of the illuminati?
- What was the Bavarian illuminati group?
- Who are some notable members of illuminati groups?



illuminati; Adam Weishaupt

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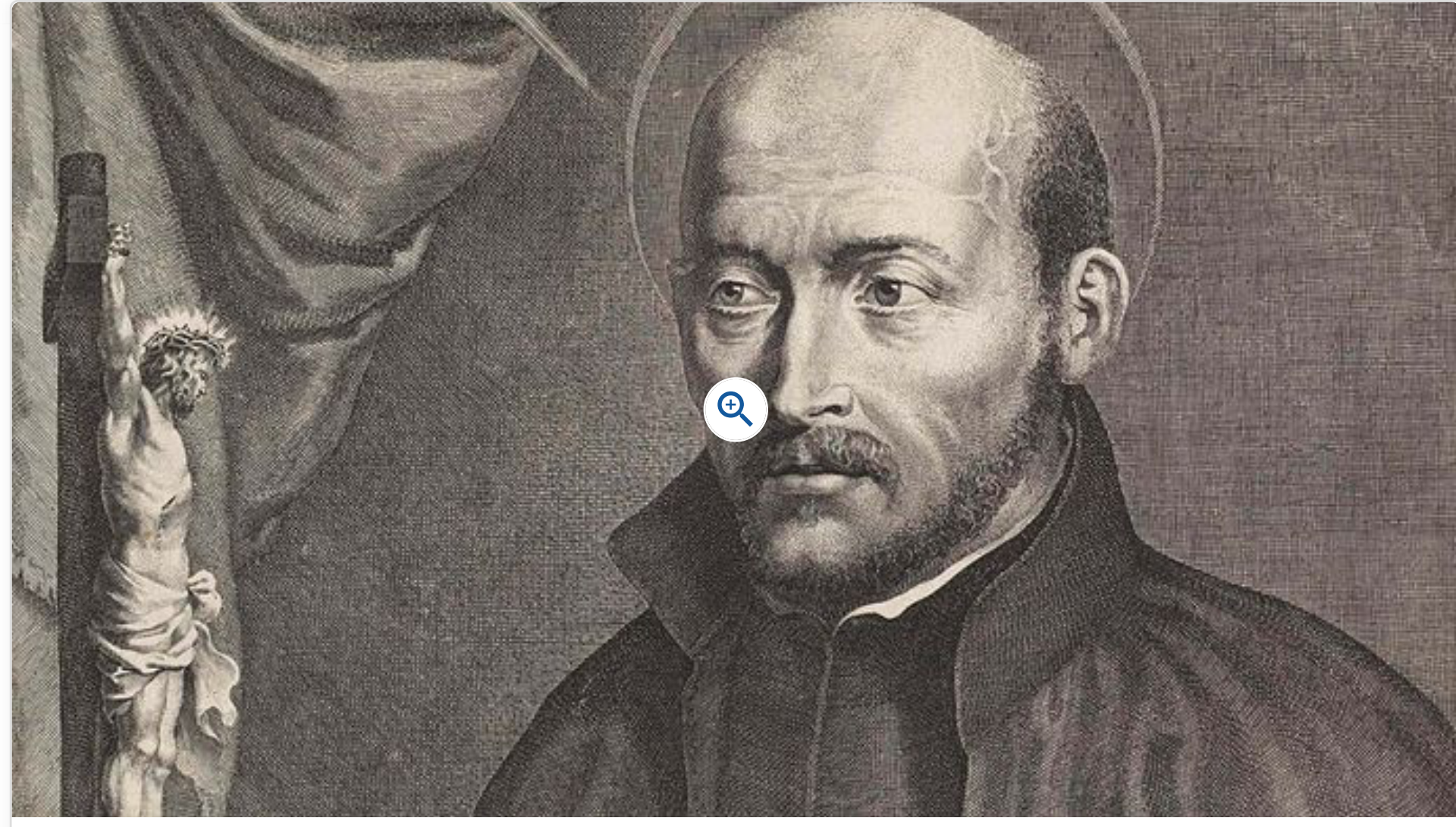
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**illuminati**, [designation](#) in use from the 15th century, assumed by or applied to various groups of persons who claimed to be unusually [enlightened](#). The word is the plural of the Latin *illuminatus* (“revealed” or “enlightened”).

## Early illuminati

According to adherents, the source of the “light” was viewed as being directly communicated from a higher source or due to a clarified and exalted condition of the [human intelligence](#). To the former class belong the [Alumbrados](#) (Spanish: “enlightened”) of Spain. Spanish historian [Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo](#) first finds the name about 1492 (in the form *aluminados*, 1498) but traces them back to a [gnostic](#) origin and thinks their views were promoted in Spain through influences from Italy. One of their earliest leaders —indeed, some scholars style her as a “pre-Alumbrado”—was María de Santo Domingo, who came to be known as La Beata de Piedrahita. She was a labourer’s daughter, born in Aldeanueva, south of [Salamanca](#), about 1485. She joined the [Dominican](#) order as a teenager and soon achieved renown as a prophet and mystic who could converse directly with [Jesus Christ](#) and the [Virgin](#). [Ferdinand of Aragon](#) invited her to his court, and he became convinced of the sincerity of her visions. The Dominicans appealed to Pope [Julius II](#) for guidance, and a series of trials were [convened](#) under the [auspices](#) of the [Inquisition](#). Her patrons, which by then included not only Ferdinand but also [Francisco Cardenal Jiménez de Cisneros](#) and the [duke of Alba](#), ensured that no decision was taken against her, and she was cleared in 1510.

[St. Ignatius of Loyola](#), while studying at Salamanca (1527), was brought before an [ecclesiastical](#) commission on a charge of sympathy with the Alumbrados, but he escaped with an [admonition](#). Others were not so fortunate. In 1529 a congregation of unlettered adherents at [Toledo](#) was visited with [scourging](#) and imprisonment. Greater rigours followed, and for about a century the Alumbrados afforded many victims to the [Inquisition](#), especially at [Córdoba](#).



**St. Ignatius of Loyola**

St. Ignatius of Loyola.  
Image: Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The movement (under the name of *Illuminés*) seems to have reached [France](#) from [Seville](#) in 1623. It attained some prominence in [Picardy](#) when joined (1634) by Pierre Guérin, curé of Saint-Georges de Roye, whose followers, known as Guérinets, were suppressed in 1635. Another body of *Illuminés* surfaced in the south of France in 1722 and appears to have lingered till 1794, having [affinities](#) with those known contemporaneously as “French Prophets,” an offshoot of the [Protestant](#) militant [Camisards](#).

Of a different class were the [Rosicrucians](#), who claimed to have originated in 1422 but achieved public notice in 1537. Their teachings combined something of Egyptian [Hermetism](#), Christian gnosticism, Jewish [Kabbala](#), [alchemy](#), and a variety of other [occult](#) beliefs and practices. The earliest [extant](#) writing which mentions the Rosicrucian order was the *Fama Fraternitatis*, first published in 1614 but probably circulated in manuscript form somewhat earlier than this. It recounts the journey of the reputed founder of the movement, [Christian Rosenkreuz](#), to [Damascus](#), Damcar (a legendary hidden city in Arabia), [Egypt](#), and [Fès](#), where he was well received and came into possession of much secret wisdom. He returned finally to [Germany](#), where he chose three others to whom he imparted this wisdom and thus founded the order. Later the number was increased to eight, who separated, each going to a separate country. One of the six articles of agreement they adopted was that the [fraternity](#) should remain secret for 100 years. At the end of 120 years the secret burial place and the perfectly preserved body of the founder were discovered by one of the then members of the order, along with certain documents and symbols held in very high esteem by Rosicrucians. The sacred vault was re-covered, the members of the order dispersed, and the location of the vault was lost to history. The *Fama* ends with an invitation to “some few” to join the fraternity. Among those believed to have been associated with the order were German alchemist [Michael Maier](#), British physician [Robert Fludd](#), and British philosopher and statesman [Sir Francis Bacon](#).



**Robert Fludd**

Robert Fludd, detail of an engraving from *Integrum Morborum Mysterium*, 1631.  
Image: Courtesy of the Royal College of Physicians, London

## The Bavarian illuminati

Perhaps the group most closely associated with the name *illuminati* was a short-lived movement of [republican](#) free thought founded on [May Day](#) 1776 by [Adam Weishaupt](#), professor of [canon law](#) at [Ingolstadt](#) and a former [Jesuit](#). The members of this [secret society](#) called themselves “Perfectibilists.” Their founder’s aim was to replace [Christianity](#) with a religion of [reason](#), as later did the [revolutionaries of France](#) and the 19th-century positivist philosopher [Auguste Comte](#). The order was organized along Jesuit lines and kept internal [discipline](#) and a system of mutual surveillance based on that model. Its members pledged obedience to their superiors and were divided into three main classes: the first included “novices,” “minervals,” and “lesser illuminati”; the second consisted of freemasons (“ordinary,” “Scottish,” and “Scottish knights”); and the third or “mystery” class [comprised](#) two grades of “priest” and “regent” as well as “magus” and “king.”



Beginning with a narrow circle of [disciples](#) carefully selected from among his own students, Weishaupt gradually extended his recruitment efforts from Ingolstadt to Eichstätt, [Freising](#), [Munich](#), and elsewhere, with special attention being given to the enlistment of young men of wealth, rank, and social importance. From 1778 onward Weishaupt’s illuminati began to make contact with various [Masonic](#) lodges, where, under the impulse of [Adolf Franz Friedrich, Freiherr von Knigge](#), one of their chief converts, they often managed to gain a commanding position. It was to Knigge that the society was indebted for the extremely elaborate constitution (never, however, actually realized) as well as its internal communication system. Each member of the order had given him a special name, generally [classical](#), by which he alone was addressed in official writing (Weishaupt was referred to as [Spartacus](#) while Knigge was [Philo](#)). All internal correspondence was conducted in [cipher](#), and to increase the mystification, towns and provinces were invested with new and altogether arbitrary [designations](#).

At its period of greatest development, Weishaupt’s “Bavarian Illuminati” included in its operations a very wide area, extending from [Italy](#) to [Denmark](#) and from [Warsaw](#) to [Paris](#); at no time, however, do its numbers appear to have exceeded 2,000. The order and its doctrines appealed to literary giants such as [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#) and [Johann Gottfried von Herder](#) as well as the dukes Ernest II of Gotha and [Charles Augustus of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach](#). Such notables were claimed as members although it is questionable if they were actually so. Weishaupt’s illuminati were believed to have included astronomer [Johann Bode](#), writer and bookseller [Friedrich Nicolai](#), philosopher [Friedrich Jacobi](#), and poet [Friedrich Leopold, Graf zu Stolberg-Stolberg](#).



**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, oil painting by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1828; in the Neue Pinakothek, Munich.  
Image: Courtesy of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, München, Neue Pinakothek

Secret societies of this kind fitted in with the idea of [benevolent despotism](#) as a vehicle for the [Enlightenment](#), as Goethe shows in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. The movement suffered from internal dissension and was ultimately banned by an edict of the [Bavarian government](#) in 1785. Some members were imprisoned, while others were driven from their homes. Weishaupt was stripped of his chair at Ingolstadt and banished from Bavaria. After 1785 the historical record contains no further activities of Weishaupt’s illuminati, but the order figured prominently in [conspiracy theories](#) for centuries after its disbanding. It was credited with activities ranging from the instigation of the [French Revolution](#) to the [assassination of U.S. Pres. John F. Kennedy](#), and the notion of an all-knowing [cabal](#) of ancient masters remained a powerful image in the popular [consciousness](#) into the 21st century.

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