

Grand homme

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1. Introduction

The term *grand homme* refers to a counter-model to the traditional, military *héros*, which shaped the French history of ideas of the heroic in the second half of the 18th and in the 19th century. It goes back to a contribution by the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt to the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, first published in 1751 by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. Alongside related concepts such as the German cult of genius, the intellectual hero as well as the British *great men*, the *grand homme* also achieved European significance. Simultaneously, the concept experienced a lively medial impact in art, architecture and political symbolism in the 19th century.

2. Origins: The Chevalier de Jaucourt and the masterminds of the French Revolution

The first volume of the *Encyclopédie* appeared in Paris at the beginning of 1752. Among the encyclopaedists who worked on this mammoth task under the guidance of Diderot and d'Alembert, the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt was one of its most active contributors. When the eighth volume of the *Encyclopédie* appeared around the turn of the year 1765/66, it contained an article on the *héros* in

which Jaucourt formulated the concept of the *grand homme* as a counter-model. However, there had already been significant precursors for Jaucourt's ideas earlier in the century. In 1739, Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre had published his *Discours sur les différences du grand homme et de l'homme illustre* as a preface to the *Histoire d'Épaminondas* of Abbé Séran de La Tour. Unlike Jaucourt, who was supposed to distinguish the great man from the war hero, Saint-Pierre had contrasted the inner virtues of the *grand homme* with the enforced outer power of the *homme puissant*.^[1] While the concept of the *héros* had originally been reserved for the man "qui réunissoit les vertus guerrieres aux vertus morales & politiques"^[2], Jaucourt, against the backdrop of the [aristocratic culture of heroization](#) in the mid-eighteenth century, attributed only a greatly reduced significance to it. The *héros* referred exclusively to the war hero, whose heroic deeds required physical ability, military daring and bravery. The moral and political virtues, on the other hand, which were paramount for Jaucourt, were completely absent in the *héros*, in comparison to its ancient predecessor. In contrast, Jaucourt saw the *grand homme* as the new embodiment of classical ideals. This person not only united intellectual talents, genius and virtue, but, in contrast to the *héros*, was also characterised by a deep and lasting concern for the common good, the happiness of the people and a sense of duty towards his prince and the state. Unlike the heroism of the *héros*, which depended entirely on the success of his deeds, that of the *grand homme* was independent of external influences, since it was an internalized heroism that expressed itself not in short-lived, glorious deeds of war but in quiet, enduring good deeds.^[3]

Jaucourt's concept of the *grand homme* must be read against the intellectual-historical background of the French Enlightenment and the social changes of the second half of the 18th century. As a counter-model to the military *héros*, the *grand homme* was simultaneously a rejection of the aristocratic class order and a re-evaluation of the bourgeois, meritocratic social ideal. Jaucourt clearly disparaged the deeds of the war heroes, which served personal glory, in favour of the heroic work of 'great men' for the common good of society.

For both the masterminds and the political actors of the French Revolution, the concept of the *grand homme* proved extremely appealing. While the aristocratic military heroes from the mid-18th century onwards faced visibly new challenges and suffered increasingly from a credibility deficit – for example, through the rise of the *héros subalternes*^[4] among the common soldiers – outstanding literary figures and philosophers such as Voltaire or Rousseau were credibly stylized as *grands hommes*. Unlike the overloaded pictorial representations of aristocratic *héros* of the late *Ancien Régime*, the medial representations of the *grand hommes* emphasized the simplicity of the actors. In his statue, completed in 1781, the sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon depicted Voltaire, who had died a few years earlier, not in a heroic pose with ostentatious regalia, but seated on a simple chair, dressed only in a toga. It was not the outward glory but the inner greatness that was the focus of the depiction. (Fig. 1.)

Fig. 1 – 2: Statues of Voltaire



Fig. 1:
Jean-Antoine Houdon: "Voltaire assis", ca. 1781

Plaster, 137.16 cm × 71.12 cm × 93.98 cm, Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, obj. no. M.2004.5.

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Fig. 2:
Jean-Baptiste Pigalle: "Voltaire nu", 1776

Marble, 150 cm × 89 cm × 77 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, obj. no. Ent. 1962.1 (On loan from the Institut de France.)

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However, the influential Enlightenment philosopher had also been the focus of pictorial representations of the *grand homme*. In 1776, friends and admirers, including Diderot and d'Alembert, presented him with a sculpture they had commissioned from the sculptor Jean-Baptiste Pigalle. In it, the latter had stylised *Voltaire nu* into the ideal image of the aged *grand homme*. (Fig. 2.)

After 1789, important actors of the French Revolution increasingly instrumentalized the model of the *grand homme*. The transformation of the church of St. Geneviève in Paris into a national Panthéon meant the institutionalization of the concept of 'great men' of the Revolution. Those buried there were inevitably stylized as *grands hommes*, especially if they were the victims of political assassinations. In addition to these revolutionary death cults, self-dramatization strategies such as the cult of virtue fostered by Maximilien de Robespierre and his followers also showed clear familial resemblances to the model of the *grand homme*.

Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to Consul of the French Republic in 1799 and Emperor of the French in 1804 marked a decisive threshold moment in the intellectual-historical development of the concept of the *grand homme*. By following the revolutionary model of the *soldat-citoyen*, the young, successful revolutionary general Bonaparte succeeded in renewing the popularity of the concept of the military *héros* through the symbol: politically skilful stylization of his victories and (often fictitious) heroic deeds in Italy and Egypt. After his seizure of power, the [heroization](#) of his military successes was accompanied by that of his political deeds, for example via the legislation of the *Code Civil*, in the

context of which Bonaparte styled himself as an exceptional statesman and political messiah. On this basis, the 'hero model Napoleon' developed into an amalgam of *héros* and *grand homme* that was extremely powerful in terms of symbolic politics and which shaped the intellectual history of French discourses on heroes throughout the 19th century. In their struggle for political legitimacy in the wake of the fundamental upheavals after 1789, the societies of the following monarchical and republican regimes were influenced both by the enduring afterlife of Napoleonic hero cults and the focus on the models of heroic and 'great men' as a driving force of history.

3. *Héros*, great man, genius and intellectual hero – related concepts

Both in France and in other national contexts, concepts related to the model of the *grand homme* or characterized by strong family resemblances emerged concurrently and developed and spread in parallel during the 18th and 19th centuries. In France, the concept of the *héros* continued to exist alongside that of the *grand homme*, even if the former was clearly overshadowed by the latter's influence in the last decades of the 18th century. In the German-speaking world, however, the 'Genie' (genius) proved to be a long-lived and influential concept in intellectual history. Prominent literary figures and philosophers of the Enlightenment such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Immanuel Kant had grappled with this in the early 18th century. In the second half of the century, however, it was the 'Stürmer und Dränger' who above all identified their literary and aesthetic as well as their social and political concerns with the concept of genius and thus further profiled the term. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's poem *Prometheus*, written between 1772 and 1774, was virtually a declaration of autonomy for this new idea of genius vis-à-vis its predecessors.^[5]

However, the German concept of genius was sometimes subject to very rapid change. Only a few decades later, Goethe, now as a representative of Weimar Classicism, defined the term in a completely different way. In conversations with his secretary Eckermann, he had already distanced himself from the riotous creative power as the central characteristic of genius, and in its place positioned the longevity and sustainability of his works as the decisive criterion for the success of genius. Following his own meeting with Napoleon, he stylized both the French emperor and himself as this kind of genius, seeking in addition to blur the boundaries between art and politics, the internalized and the external genius, as defined by deed.^[6] As a constant from the times of 'Sturm und Drang', this classical concept of genius retained the principle of 'Gestalthaftigkeit' ('gestalt-ness'), which was still a basic feature of the German idea of genius in the context of the circle of followers around the poet Stefan George at the beginning of the 20th century. In the course of the 19th century, the concept of the intellectual hero, which was often applied to great poets such as Friedrich Schiller, emerged as a much less distinct attribution derived from the genius concept.

In the Anglo-American world, it was the model of the *great man* that enjoyed significant popularity in the 19th century and which was closely related to and even synonymous with the *grand homme*. A paradigmatic moment was marked by the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle's study on the role of the heroic in history. In the 1840 public lecture series *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history*, Carlyle criticized the depoliticization of the heroic that had taken place in Britain in the preceding decades, as well as the post-heroic state in which contemporary Victorian society found itself. He used the terms *hero* and *great man* practically synonymously and contrasted the historical model of decline

which he drew of the history of heroes and hero worship with the theory that the history of the world was nothing but the sum of the biographies of 'great men'[7], which he thus stylized as the sole driving force of all historical progress. Carlyle lastly identified the English revolutionary hero Oliver Cromwell as the ideal type of *great man*, whom he described as an extraordinary man comparable to the model of the *grand homme*, distinguished both by military and political skill as well as by moral and religious virtues. Ten years later, the American philosopher and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was personally acquainted with Carlyle and influenced by his theses, outlined a very similar model of 'great men' in his own series of lectures on *Representative Men*.

The great affinity of British society for the concept of the *great man* stemmed above all from the fact that Jaucourt's model of the *grand homme* corresponded much more closely to the British understanding of the hero in the late 18th and 19th centuries than, for example, the [transgressive](#), charismatic hero model represented by Napoleon Bonaparte. Bonaparte's adversary, the Duke of Wellington, was stylized during the 19th century as the embodiment of such a British hero, contrasting the dazzling exceptionalism of the energetic French hero of action with a heroic sense of duty and restraint.[8]

4. Panthéon and national temples of glory – intellectual-historical and medial articulations in the long 19th century

The pantheonization of 'great men' was the most prominent phenomenon of the intellectual, performative and political articulation of the 'cult of great men', which first appeared in France during the French Revolution, but subsequently became European.

In 1791, the recently completed church of St. Geneviève in Paris was transformed into the Panthéon, a national temple of fame, which was to serve in future as a burial place for 'great men' who had rendered outstanding services to France. (See also [National Hero](#).) The first to receive this honour was the revolutionary politician Marquis de Mirabeau, who died at the beginning of April 1791, followed shortly afterwards by Voltaire's body which was also transferred there. This step signified the symbolic political institutionalization of the cult of 'great men' by the revolution, which remained an integral part of the political culture during subsequent years. Throughout the phase of radical revolution from 1792 onwards, the means of pantheonization was also extensively used. The two most prominent victims of political assassination during this period, Le Peletier de Saint Fargeau and Jean Paul Marat, were both buried as [martyrs](#) and revolutionary heroes in the Panthéon in 1793. However, this form of heroization was also subject to the rapid political change that characterized the revolution. As early as 1795, after the fall of the Reign of Terror, the bodies of Saint Fargeau and Marat were removed from the Panthéon; Mirabeau's body having already suffered the same fate the previous year.

Nevertheless, with the transformation of the church of St. Geneviève into the Panthéon, one of France's most enduring memorials, both materially and in terms of the history of ideas, had been created.[9] At the same time, however, this institutionalization of the cult of the 'great men' also contributed in the long term to a loss of significance of the model of the *grand homme* which, within a few decades of the nineteenth century lost its distinctiveness in France compared to the model of the *héros*. This was also paradigmatically demonstrated by the Panthéon: in 1837, a new frontispiece

commissioned by the July Monarchy from the sculptor David d'Angers was placed above the main portal. (Fig. 3.) In the centre it showed the female personification of glory distributing laurel wreaths to the civilians approaching from the left and to the military 'great men' coming from the right. The term *grand homme* was applied to both groups without distinction, as evidenced by the inscription below the frontispiece: "Aux grands hommes la patrie reconnaissante".

Fig. 3: Frontispiece of the Pantheon , 1837



Outside France, too, the idea of national temples of fame for 'great men' gained currency. In Great Britain, Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey had existed since the 16th century as a tradition particularly for the posthumous tribute to great artists. Following the French model, however, the transformation of London's St. Paul's Cathedral into a Pantheon was purposefully pursued at the beginning of the 19th century to serve as the final resting place of great politicians and generals such as Nelson and Wellington.[10]

In the German-speaking world, Ludwig I of Bavaria took up the idea of a national temple of glory immediately after the end of the Wars of Liberation. In 1842, after a protracted building process, the Valhalla was inaugurated near Regensburg, which the Bavarian king intended to be a memorial to the 'great men' of the German nation. In this institutionalization of the cult of 'great men' along the French model, Ludwig saw an important instrument for creating national identity and tradition.

5. Research overview

The history of the *Encyclopédie* as well as of its encyclopaedists has been extensively recorded and studied by both historical and literary scholars. Most of this research, however, relates to the complete works and the conception of the *Encyclopédie* as a whole or deals biographically with the editors and contributors.[11] The model of the *grand homme* has been studied in French research primarily from the point of view of the cult of 'great men', whether from general aspects of the history of ideas or specific aspects of the history of art.[12] The long history of the German idea of genius and the cult of genius has been extensively researched, especially in Germanic literary studies.[13] For the British concept of the great man, on the other hand, there are hardly any independent studies; rather, important actors in these discourses, such as Thomas Carlyle, have been treated biographically and in literary studies.[14] The significance of the Panthéon and the idea of national temples of fame as both material and conceptual sites of remembrance was impressively examined and highlighted by Mona Ozouf in the influential collective work on *Lieux de Mémoire* edited by Pierre Nora.[15] For a history of

the relationship between the concepts of *grand homme* and *héros*, Ronald G. Asch's recent study *Herbst des Helden* is particularly noteworthy.[16] Michael Gamper's work *Der große Mann* adroitly details the concept of the *grand homme* and its location in the history of ideas.[17]

6. References

- 1 Cf. Gamper, Michael: *Der große Mann. Geschichte eines politischen Phantasmas*. Göttingen 2016: Wallstein, 57.
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- 3 Cf. Jaucourt: "HÉROS, s.m. (Gramm.)", 1778, 381-382.
- 4 See also: d'Aucour, Claude Godard: *L'Académie militaire, ou Les héros subalternes (2 Vols.)*. Amsterdam 1749: par la Société.
- 5 Cf. Schmidt, Jochen: *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik 1750–1945. Vol. 1: Von der Aufklärung bis zum Idealismus*. 2nd ed. Darmstadt 1988: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 263-265.
- 6 Cf. Beßlich, Barbara: *Der deutsche Napoleon-Mythos. Literatur und Erinnerung 1800 bis 1945*. Darmstadt 2007: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 150-159.
- 7 Cf. Carlyle, Thomas: *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history. Six lectures. Reported, with emendations and additions*. London 1841: Fraser, 47.
- 8 See also: Pears, Iain: "The Gentleman and the Hero. Wellington and Napoleon in the Nineteenth Century". In: Porter, Roy (Ed.): *Myths of the English*. Cambridge 1992: Polity Press, 216-236.
- 9 See also: Ozouf, Mona: "Le Panthéon". In: Nora, Pierre (Ed.): *Les Lieux de Mémoire (Vol. 1): La République*. Paris 1984: Gallimard, 139-166.
- 10 Cf. Hoock, Holger: *Empires of the Imagination. Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750-1850*. London 2010: Profile Books, 184-187.
- 11 Cf. Blom, Philipp: *Enlightening the World: Encyclopédie, the Book That Changed the Course of History*, New York 2005: Palgrave Macmillan. Cf. Haechler, Jean: *L'Encyclopédie de Diderot et de... Jaucourt. Essai biographique sur le chevalier Louis de Jaucourt*. Paris 1995: Champion.
- 12 Cf. Maaz, Bernhard: *Vom Kult des Genies. David d'Angers' Bildnisse von Goethe bis Caspar David Friedrich*. München/Berlin 2004: Deutscher Kunstverlag. Cf. Minois, Georges: *Le culte des grands hommes. Des héros homériques au star system*. Paris 2005: Audibert.
- 13 Cf. Schmidt, Jochen: *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik 1750–1945 (2 Vols.)*. Heidelberg 2004: Winter.
- 14 Cf. Heffner, Simon: *Moral Desperado. A Life of Thomas Carlyle*. London 1995: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. Cf. Morrow, John: *Thomas Carlyle*. London 2006: Hambledon Continuum. Cf. Rosenberg, John D.: *Carlyle and the Burden of History*. Oxford 1985: Clarendon Press.
- 15 Cf. Ozouf: "Le Panthéon", 1984.
- 16 Cf. Asch, Ronald G.: *Herbst des Helden. Modelle des Heroischen und heroische Lebensentwürfe in England und Frankreich von den Religionskriegen bis zum Zeitalter der Aufklärung: ein Essay*. Würzburg 2016: Ergon.
- 17 Cf. Gamper: *Der große Mann*, 2016.

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- Asch, Ronald G.: Herbst des Helden. Modelle des Heroischen und heroische Lebensentwürfe in England und Frankreich von den Religionskriegen bis zum Zeitalter der Aufklärung. Ein Essay. Würzburg 2016: Ergon.
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8. List of images

- 1 Jean-Antoine Houdon: "Voltaire assis", ca. 1781, Plaster, 137.16 cm × 71.12 cm × 93.98 cm, Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, obj. no. M.2004.5.
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- 2 Jean-Baptiste Pigalle: "Voltaire nu", 1776, Marble, 150 cm × 89 cm × 77 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, obj. no. Ent. 1962.1 (On loan from the Institut de France.)
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- 3 Frontispiece of the Pantheon, 1837, Paris. Design and construction by David d'Angers
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Index	<p>Authors: Benjamin Marquart</p> <p>Persons and Figures: Napoleon Bonaparte, Thomas Carlyle, Denis Diderot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stefan George, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Honoré Gabriel Riqueti (Count of Mirabeau), Jean-Antoine Houdon, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, Maximilien Robespierre, Friedrich Schiller, Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), Arthur Wellesley (1st Duke of Wellington), David d'Angers (Pierre-Jean David), Johann Peter Eckermann, Louis de Jaucourt, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Oliver Cromwell, Louis-Michel le Peletier (Marquis de Saint-Fargeau), Prometheus (figure), Ludwig I (King of Bavaria), Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Paul Marat, Horatio Nelson / Admiral Nelson</p> <p>Spaces and Locations: France, Anglo-America, Italy, London, Great Britain, Paris, Regensburg, Westminster Abbey (London), Panthéon (Paris)</p> <p>Time and Events: French Revolution, Ancien Régime, Age of Enlightenment / Age of Reason, 'Sturm und Drang' (German literature), Weimar Classicism, 18th century, Victorian era</p>

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