

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH  
650 Fisgard Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1R6  
1995 - 6

Committee on Research & Education, Grand Lodge of Quebec, A.F. & A.M.

*(Note: The statements and Opinions which follow are those of the author and although published by the Committee of Research & Education, they do not carry the official endorsement of the Grand Lodge of Quebec, A.F. & A.M.)*

#### **THE COMACINES**

by

Wor. Bro. John G. Hanna

These Masters of Comacine were first brought to the attention of the Masonic world by Bro. George Franklin Fort, in his great work, "The Early History and Antiquities of Freemasonry". published in 1877, in which he noted the granting of two charters, the first in A.D. 643, by Rotharis, and the later in A.D. 743, by Luitprand, both kings of Lombardy, to the Magistri Comacini, or Masters of Como. In these charters minute and specific regulations were laid down for the government of the Craft, and the duties they were to perform. Their wages in corn, wine and oil were also specified.

The consensus of Masonic opinion has been that the Roman Colleges of Artificers were the legitimate predecessors of the cathedral building Masons of the Middle Ages, but, that following the fall of Rome in A.D. 410, there was a gap of several centuries which has never been satisfactorily bridged. In fact, there seems to have been a belief that the Collegia collapsed with the fall of the Eternal City. The purpose of this inquiry is to show that such was not the case, but that the Collegia remained in being as a highly skilled body of artificers and craftsmen, performing wondrous feats of architecture until merged with, or created the Masters of Comacini by the royal decree of King Rotharis; thus eventually forming the link between the Roman Colleges of Artificers and the Cathedral builders of the Middle Ages.

It is claimed that after the fall of Rome, which was captured and sacked by the Gothic chieftain Alaric in A.D. 410, the remaining members of the Collegia fled for safe-keeping to the strongly fortified and independent state of Como in Northern Italy, where they remained until the storms of the barbarian invasions had spent their force.

The antiquary, Monnert de Villard, was commissioned by the Italian government to make a survey of the Como district, and has published the results of his explorations on the Island of Comacini, and of research in the archives of Milan and Como. He regards the Comacine Masters as the descendants of the Roman Collegia. He contends that before the fall of Rome they had established Collegia throughout Lombardy and elsewhere in the Roman Empire, and that from Rome's enemies rather than directly from Rome, they fled to Comacini.

Mackey says that Como retained its prosperity until the fall of the Empire, and continued in a flourishing condition under the Goths and under the Lombards.

But long before the capture of Rome by the Gothic leader Alaric, a far greater evil befell the ancient capital of the world. In A.D. 328, the Emperor Constantine removed the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, thus reducing at one fell blow the City of Rome, once the Mistress of the world, to the status of a

petty provincial town. The glory that was Rome had faded. The eagles had indeed departed. One is reminded, perhaps nostalgically, of some lines of Kipling:

"Lo, all our pomp of yesterday, Is one with Nineveh and Tyre."

When Constantine removed the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium he took with him the greater part of his most highly skilled architects and builders, members of the Roman Colleges of Artificers, for the purpose of carrying into execution his plans for the beautifying and adorning his new capital.

We are informed by Fort that one of the first concessions of the Emperor Constantine on coming to Byzantium was made in favour of these Colleges of Artificers, whom, by edict, he declared to be under the patronage of the Empire. And an adequate salary was enacted for each professional architect. In A.D. 337, a rescript was proclaimed by the Emperor that all these architects and craftsmen should receive entire immunity from civil extractions, wheresoever these corporations might be dispersed. And in the year 364 it was expressly declared that corporate privileges conceded them by the earlier government of the Eternal City should remain intact.

In the time of the Emperor Theodosius, the immunities of the corporations of builders, legalized by the royal rescript of his predecessors were reaffirmed when his Code was published in A.D. 438.

The removal of the capital of empire from Rome to Byzantium was the cause of some confusion in nomenclature amongst historians and writers, and the empire was referred to by a variety of names. It was called in turn, the Byzantium Empire, the Eastern Empire, the Greek Empire, but down to the reign of Charlemagne it was both politically and religiously the Roman Empire. In fact, so late as the latter part of the eighth century, possibly to the time of Charlemagne, the Bishops of Rome, in common with all the other bishops of the Christian church, had to have their election confirmed by the Emperor at Byzantium before entering upon their official functions. The emperor was, in effect, the head of the whole Christian church.

This must not, however, be confused with a new, pseudo-like empire which arose about the end of the eighth century. It seems to have come into being as the result of some kind of a deal between the Pope and the German emperor, and was known under the resounding, all-embracing title of the Holy Roman Empire. But as someone has facetiously remarked, it was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor was it an empire.

#### THEODORIC THE GREAT 493-527 A.D.

The reign of this great prince is of considerable Masonic interest. Educated at Byzantium from the age of eight to eighteen, he is said to have been of culture and the most broad-minded and advanced of all the Germanic invaders of Italy. At the head of the Ostrogothic tribesmen, and by virtue of a commission from the emperor at Byzantium he entered Italy about the year A.D. 493, and, defeating the Visigothic ruler Odoacer, established his throne and capital at Ravenna.

One of the first acts of his reign was the introduction of numerous skilled architects and craftsmen from Byzantium, over whom he placed an architect-in-chief, in effect a Grand Master Mason. His letter of instructions to this great official is still extant and reads in part as follows:- "It is your duty to

direct the mason, the sculptor, the painter, the worker in stone, in bronze, in plaster. in mosaic. What they know not you will teach them." Under this, great architect building was carried on throughout the Kingdom, notably in Ravenna, in Rome and at Comacine.

These Masons, so brought to Italy from Byzantium were the lineal successors of those whom Constantine had taken with him from Rome to Byzantium in A.D.328. Thus the Roman Collegia had returned to Italy and, in fact, to Rome. itself. They were also located again at Como, thus rejoining those of their ancient brethren who had found refuge in that region during the troublous ages.

Fort says that the building associations of Northern Italy had by the express decree of Theodoric been permitted to preserve their right of association and immunities in accordance with the laws of the Eastern empire, or to live by such customs as they might elect. It will thus be seen that Theodoric unified the Masons he had imported from Byzantium and those he found at Como in Northern Italy into one harmonious whole, and continued to them their ancient rights and privileges - rights and privileges, which, as we have already seen, had their origin in the Eternal City itself.

The story of the great King Theodoric has come down to us through the centuries in history and legend. He reigned for some 33 years, during the greater part of which long period he was distinguished for his religious tolerance, his administration of justice and the patronage of the liberal arts and sciences, especially that of architecture.

#### THE LOMBARDS.

After the death of Theodoric in A.D. 527, the Emperor Justinian, taking advantage of the confusion which followed, sent his armies into Italy, and by A.D.554, after many bloody conflicts with the Goths, succeeded in re-uniting it with the Roman Empire.

Barely, however, had the process of re-unification been completed, and, indeed, several spots of resistance remained, when in A.D. 568, the Lombards, under their renowned King Alboin, invaded Northern Italy, and gained possession of the territory now known as Lombardy.

The city of Como appears to have been captured that same year. But the imperial general, Francillo, retired to the strong island fortress of Comacini, held out for about 20 years. In the year 584, however, being starved into submission by means of a fleet blockade, he capitulated to the Lombard king Antaris; and granted honourable terms of surrender, retired to Ravenna.

Ford remarks that when the charter of Rotharis was promulgated in A.D.643, the inhabitants had already attained to so a high degree of skill as to be designated "Magistri Comacini" or Masters of Como. The Lombards continued to enforce all the laws of the Roman Empire, and thus from the outset the Masonic fraternity retained all its ancient rights and privileges.

The Lombards were certainly not a barbarous people when they seized Northern Italy. Moving gradually from their original home in Northern Germany several centuries before, they had been in touch with Roman civilization for a long period. In fact, they furnished several important contingents to the Imperial armies in Italy during the wars against the Goths. It is indeed said that the Imperial general Narses connived at their capture of Lombardy in revenge for

certain intrigues against him in Byzantium, the Roman capital.

Fort says: "The Lombards placed Europe under great obligations by the development of that complex and ingenious system of exchange, banking, insurance, book-keeping, and commercial and maritime law. They also invented the business of public loans."

Therefore it is not surprising that a talented and vigorous people such as these should have developed and brought to a high degree of perfection the art of architecture, which they found flourishing and ready to their hands, in the skilled Masonic fraternities around Lake Como, when they conquered the country.

#### THE COMACINES.

During the 200 years of Lombard rule, and indeed much longer, many splendid churches and cathedrals were built throughout Lombardy, in Florence, in Pavia, and in Milan to mention a few.

As there was no suitable building material to be found near those places, and indeed throughout the whole of the Lombardy plane, suitable stone, marble and timber were procured from the region around Lake Como. Here the material was taken from the quarries, and thence conveyed to the Lodge rooms, where skilled artificers cut, carved and indented their work so that it might be fit for its place in the intended structure. This was the cradle for the Masters of Comacini.

Lord Lindsay, in his Sketches of Christian Art, writes: "what chiefly contributed to the diffusion of religious architecture over Europe was the exclusive monopoly in Christian architecture, conceded by the Popes toward the close of the 9th century, to the Masons of Como, then and for ages afterward, when the title of Magistri Comacini had long been absorbed in that of Free and Accepted Masons, associated as a craft or brotherhood in art and friendship."

Mackey in his history says that the architectural school of Como was of such repute in the 10th century that according to Muratoria, the historian of Italy, the name of Magistri Comacini, or Masters of Como, came to be the generic name of all these associations or architects.

#### ARCHITECTURE

At Byzantium, the Roman architects and builders whom Constantine had taken with him to his new capital, came in contact with the customs, the cultures and the arts and sciences of the ancient East, particularly that of architecture. All of these has their influence on the craftsmen, collective and individual. And thus, almost insensibly, down the centuries, through the blending of the massive and impressive architecture of the west, with lighter, perhaps more imaginative touch of the east, emerged a new order in architecture - the Byzantine.

Ford tells us that the energizing power of Byzantine art not only extended from the Indian Ocean to the surging waters of the Atlantic, but its influence was felt in the dominions of, as he calls it, Hyperborean Russia. For centuries he says, Byzantium continued to be the source whence all the art knowledge of the civilized world was derived.

The great Mosque of Omar, built in Jerusalem for the Saracens in A.D.

688-91, was planned, erected and adorned by Lodges of the Roman Collegia from Byzantium.

During the early stages of the Comacine or Lombard school of architecture, the architecture of Europe was that which had been derived from the builders of Rome, and all the churches erected in Italy, in Gaul and even as far as Britain, were built upon the model of the Roman Basilica. The style of architecture which was eventually developed at Byzantium was very different from the Roman. The principal differences, according to Mackey, were the four naves as part of a cross of equal limbs, and especially the surmounting dome or cupola, which was, generally, octagonal in shape. This style the Comacines adopted in part, modifying it with the Roman type, and finally developing the Gothic as a new system peculiarly their own.

Masonic writers incline to the opinion that the Comacines turned to the Byzantine style because the religious architects of Lombardy found it better developed in religious symbolism and thus more suitable for church architecture.

The Gothic architecture, as developed by the Comacines, was further modified as it spread northward into Europe. In the skilled hands of the architects and builders in Britain, who wrought wonders in stone, it became a thing of awesome, breath-taking beauty, as the many ancient cathedrals and churches remain to testify.

#### SYMBOLISM

According to Ravenscroft, the Comacines were rich in symbolism. But, as he says, the great and distinguishing badges of the order were the Endless Knot and the Lion of Judah.

The Endless Knot is to this day one of the most beautiful and interesting details in connection with the carving of stone, and while its pattern is varied in many ways, the principle is one and the same throughout. It consists generally (mainly indeed, but not always) of a cord of three strands, sometimes of two - and this cord generally is without beginning or ending. The interlacing is so intricate as to give it the name of "Intereccia". It is, he says, to this day known in Italy as King Solomon's Knot. It is the badge of the same brotherhood - the sign manual of the same guild of craftsmen.

The tassels which hang suspended from the four corners of our Lodge are said to be survivals, and are held to represent the four cardinal virtues; temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice

#### THE MERGING OF CHRISTIAN MOSAIC AND TEUTONIC SYMBOLISM.

Ford says that the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 330, guaranteed the Jews certain rights and privileges, and that large numbers of Hebrew scholars settled in his capital city of Constantinople.

It is well known, he says, that the early Christians entertained a profound reverence for Mosaic rites, which were taught in the schools established by these learned Hebrews. The building of Solomon's Temple was a central part of this Israelitish lore, which after the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity became a favourite study of the Christians. So much so, in fact, that after the completion of the great cathedral of St. Sophia at Byzantium, the

Emperor Justinian is said to have exclaimed: "I have completed a fabric far superior to the one erected by Solomon at Jerusalem."

Ford is of the opinion that Jewish rites and ceremonies combined with traditional lore, largely aided in moulding the pre-Christian Colleges of builders at Byzantium into harmony with Christian teachings.

21.

Mathematical knowledge, for which, as he says, the Jews were justly famous, was imparted to the Byzantine Colleges of artificers by learned Jewish rabbis, who had settled in the new capital of empire. From them they also received much instruction in Hebrew legends and folk-lore, some of which eventually found their way into the ritualism and symbolism of the Craft Lodges. He thought that certain of these traditions notably the Hiram legend, and the omnific word, or, as we sometimes call it, the Mason Word, together with other details, were transmitted to Italy with the Byzantine artificers, whom the Gothic king, Theodoric the Great, caused to be sent to Italy.

The theory developed by Ford is that the seed of our present day Freemasonry was carried to Italy by the Master Builders whom King Theodoric brought from Byzantium. The seed took root during the long reign of Theodoric, and had obtained substantial growth in Lombardy about the time Rotharis, the Lombard king, granted the charter to the Magistri Comacini in A.D. 643. It was about this time he thinks, that the complete fusion of, what we may with justice call, that curious blending of Christian, Mosaic and Teutonic mysticism, which is Freemasonry, took place.

This junction, he adds, afforded the substantial basis of subsequent Lodge appointments and ritualism, such as have been descended to modern Freemasonry.

#### DEGREES

Ravenscroft says, and I make a brief summary from his extensive notes; In the 7th century the Magistri Comacini were a properly organized body, having different degrees of rank. The higher order were called Magistri, and were competent to act as architects. Under them worked the colligantes; these appear to have consisted of novices and craftsmen. They were called into Lodges by a Grand Master, to hear of affairs common to the order, to accept novices and confer superior degrees on others. Masters coming from other Lodges were received and employed. Apprentices were not paid the same as craftsmen. Long and hard were the initiations and mysterious were the meetings and the teachings. and to enoble themselves they dated their origin from Solomon's Temple.

In conclusion let me quote what Professor Merzario, an eminent authority has to say: "In the darkness which extended all over Italy, only one small lamp remained alight . . . making a bright spark in the darkness that extended over Europe. It was from the Magistri Comacini. Their respective names are unknown, their individual works unspecialized. We may safely say that of all the works of art between A.D. 900 and 1000, the greater and better part are due to that brotherhood - always faithful and often secret - of the Magistri Comacini. The authority and judgment of learned men justify the assertion."

Longfellow in his eulogy of The Builders penned these golden lines:

In the elder years of art  
Builders wrought with greatest care

Each minute and hidden part.  
For the gods see everywhere.

Montreal, November 1, 1954

\*\*\*

\* The Victoria Lodge of Education and Research is indebted with thanks to  
the Author  
and to the Committee on Research & Education, Grand Lodge of Quebec A.F. & A.M.  
for the presentation of this paper.

\*\*\*\*\*