

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

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FROM ROME TO YORK

Presented to the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

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In the beginning there was the Regis Manuscript. From it has grown most of the legends that are part and parcel of to-days Freemasonry. It dates from about 1390 AD and is, in all probability, a rewrite of an even earlier Document, and fortunate we are to have it. So many documents were lost during the many wars that assailed England down through the centuries that we must rely, in many cases, on oral history, or on quotations from writers who were able to read these documents before they were destroyed.

The Regis Manuscript is a poem of and about moral duties. It is the oldest Masonic document yet to be found. Within its pages can be found fifteen articles on the governance of the Craft and fifteen points of moral duties and obligations which are said to have been devised and enumerated at a Grand Lodge of Freemasons held in the City of York, England, in the year 926 AD, under the auspices of King Athelstane, who regularly held his court in that city.

In 1783 the great historian Robert Preston, talking about the Grand Lodge at York Quotes from a copy of a paper that had once belonged to the Elias Ashmole collection, but was destroyed towards the end of the Civil War. "Many of the ancient records of the brotherhood were destroyed.....in the wars with the Saxons and Danes, yet King Athelstane, the first anointed King of England, and who translated the Bible into the Saxon tongue, when he brought the land into rest and peace, built many great works, and encouraged many masons from France, who were appointed overseers thereof, and brought with them the charges and regulations of the Lodges, preserved since Roman times; who also prevailed with the King to improve the constitutions of the English lodges according to the foreign model, and increase the wages of working masons.

Preston goes on to say "For many years Athelstane held his court at York, he was known as a mild King and a good Masonic brother. His brother Edwin, who he appointed, was qualified in every respect to preside over so celebrated a body of men as the masons. He employed masons to repair and build churches and other superb edifices, in the city of York, at Beverley and at other places.

It seemed to me, after reading the Regius Manuscript, that Preston was correct in his submission that Athelstane held his court at York for many years and that he was known as a mild king and a good Masonic Brother.

Now! I ask you to remember that a Grand Lodge in those days was not quite the same thing as the assemblies held, using that title, today. It consisted of as many of the fraternity at large, and being within a convenient distance, could attend, once or twice a

year, under the auspices of one general head, elected and installed at one of these meetings and who, for the time being, received homage as the sole Governor of the whole body. The idea of confining the privileges of masonry, by a warrant of constitution to certain individuals, convened on certain days at certain places, had no existence. There was but one family among Masons, and every Mason was a branch of that family. We will hear more of this later.

In the Regius Manuscript there is mention of the French King, Charles Martell, who, purportedly, had been in possession of the Masonic secrets and conveyed the knowledge of Geometry to succeeding generations of Masons in Europe and in Britain. Now! Martel spent most of his adult life as Mayor of the Palace of Austrasia and fighting to unite the Frankish Kingdom, a feat which he accomplished just in time to stem the Muslim invasion from Spain in 732 A.D. and died shortly after. He does not appear to have had a lot of time to have had too much building done. However, he was the Grandfather of Charlemagne, who expanded his Empire to incorporate most of Europe, including Italy and Rome. A supporter of the Papacy, he formed and ruled the Holy Roman Empire. He is associated with the Carolingian Renaissance, a revival of Art, Religion and Culture. In the year 782 he called upon Alcuin, a scholar from York, and Paul a monk from Monte Casino, to teach the school which he had organized in his royal palace at Aachen, that the scholars might restore the schools of France. It was he who raised the famous chapel and palace at Aachen which survived many dangers only to be destroyed by the armed forces of both sides in the conflict of World War 2. Considering all of this has given me to think that maybe, the Charles who was the possessor of the Masonic secrets and who sent these laws and constitutions to York and throughout Europe was Charles the Great and not Charles the Hammer.

Elias Ashmole's paper had mentioned that the charges and constitutions of Masons had been preserved from Roman times, so I determined to discover what I could about Roman builders. The first thing that I learned was that the organization of labour into corporative organizations goes far back into antiquity. The Hammurabi code of ancient Babylon dating from around 1790 B.C. implicitly refers to the building trades as having an amount of self government. The Bible spells out the hierarchal organization of the builders at the erection of King Solomon's Temple. In fact when humans gave up their nomadic lifestyle they formed associations of builders to build housing, protective walls and ramparts, and temples in which to worship their respective gods.

According to Plutarch, colleges of artisans were established in Rome around 715 B.C. by King Numa Pompilius including that of Carpenters, Roman society did not at that time acknowledge a very extensive division of labour and this college probably included Masons. Going through the centuries we find that house builders often fell within the category of Carpenters, yet the oldest code of laws, that of Hammurabi mentions Architects, carpenters, stonecutters, masons and bricklayers.

In the constitution attributed to Servius Tullius around 750 B.C. and which remained in force until 241 B.C. the Roman Collegia formed one of its essential parts. This constitution is the first to bring into effect the Roman system of organization according to Centuries and it cites three collegia, each of which formed one Century: the *tignarii* (the builders), the *oerarii* (workers in bronze and copper) and *cornicines* (trumpeters). These three colleges of privileged artisans, endowed with political prerogatives, were called upon to render the greatest service to a people who lived in an almost perpetual state of war. They were soldiers just as much as they were artisans. The oerarii who forged

shields and weaponry, the cornicines who called the Roman Legions to war, and these tignarii who built, repaired and positioned ballista and catapults, who built the fortified walls and camps and rebuilt, always better than before, what the enemy destroyed.

The tignarii survived when the Julia laws of around 67B.C abolished a large number of other colleges, but with some restrictions, like they were only allowed one banquet a month. The fact that they became more subordinate to the state did not hinder their development, mostly because they were the ones who had direct contact with the people of Rome and became the most important cogs in the Imperial administration. This system became the inspiration in later centuries for the European sovereigns in their fight against feudalism when they found Roman institutions and laws still in place in the east

The Christian influence in Rome brought about a decline in slavery, free labour became more developed under the organizations in the corporative form of the collegia, and every professional was compelled to join the college of his trade. By the time that the fourth century rolled around there were both public and private colleges. Public colleges included all of the professions that were indispensable to sustaining the people: suppliers of food, construction materials, manufacturing arms, horse breeding and so on. They became known as Corporati

The other Colleges were actually semi-public bodies, including the builders, the stone and marble cutters as well as bankers, doctors, teachers and Wine merchants. The state granted each collegium a monopoly on its trade. The members also had the advantage of being exempt from certain taxes, they could not be drafted into labour, they were allowed to sell their real estate and slaves (but only to their colleagues).

From the beginning the laws and institutions of Rome were of a religious nature. This was also true of the Collegia and each college had its own gods who looked after the wellbeing of the institution and its members. It is thought from discoveries made at Chichester, England and at Nice in France, that the deity of the tignarii was Minerva, goddess of wisdom. It is also likely that some foreign deities were invoked because of the itinerant nature of the workers, and the fact that the Romans benefited from the architectural knowledge of the Greeks, who in turn had been influenced by the Persians, Egyptians and Syrians. In fact during the first Century A.D. there was a significant immigration of Syrians into the Roman Empire and Rome in particular and indeed they were the most significant propagators of Christianity among the working classes. As we have seen; the collegia were part and parcel of the Roman Legions wherever they went, and when forts became towns it was the Masons and Carpenters who built them and places like Bath, London and Chester sprang into being leaving a legacy that we still enjoy today.

The sacred character attached to labour continued with the rise of Christianity which enabled workers to acquire an even greater value, and in the earliest constitutions it was ordered that work be remunerated and little by little slavery diminished. The fate of serfs also gradually improved

Socially and practically the traditional rites of the collegia survived over the time of the late Empire. With their initiatory and sacred value adapted to the spirit of the new age these rites had the strength of popular custom and the workers interest in keeping them as signs of identification and professional secrets. It is thought that it was for reasons of this nature that Christianity adopted pagan rituals, symbols and gods whom it made into legendary saints. By giving these deities souls they assured the perpetuation of the values

that these gods represented symbolically. Saint Gregory wrote to his missionaries “Purify the temples, but do not destroy them, for so long as the nation witnesses the survival of its former places of prayer it will use them out of habit and you will win them easier to the worship of the true God.” “Christianity restored life and soul to the surviving symbols of universal belief” to quote Eliphas Levi.

When the Western Empire collapsed under repeated waves of invasion, the Franks who had been mercenaries for the Romans and fought with them against the Huns and the Vandals were in a position to take control of Gaul and with the Salien Franks in the south it is seen that corporations of merchants and craftsmen of Gallic-Roman descent survived. This is when we start to see the proof of the survival of the collegia in the erection of certain buildings in that area at that time. One such is the cathedral built in Clermont around 455 A.D., in Chalon a church supported by columns, decorated with coloured marble and mosaic paintings. The knowledge of their craft and reputation became such that their influence spread beyond Gaul.

In Italy the Ostrogoths became masters of the whole peninsula in 493 and not only did they leave the Romans their own laws but the king subjected his own barbarians to the force of Roman law. In 554 they were driven out of Italy by the forces of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. That also was short lived, In 568 another German tribe The Lombards invaded the peninsula, but their conquest was not complete. The South, Rome, Venice and Ravenna all remained attached to Byzantium. In the Lombard Kingdom, Roman law remained in effect, for Roman subjects until 643, when the Edict of Rotharis abolished them. This edict was in effect a freeing of master masons, giving them the right to stipulate salaries and make contracts, these master masons were known as Magistri Comacini, or masters of Como. They were grouped into a corporation similar to a



collegium and enjoyed an absolute monopoly. The Comacine masters were known as skilled architects and they contributed a great deal to architecture in northern Italy. They introduced designs originating from Byzantium and other eastern sources. Their design of an endless cord woven into what is called the Comacine knot reminds one of the serrated tassel of Masonic lodges.

So we see that the builders in stone, Masons, survived in Europe and continued to be corporative entities, under the auspices of the church in most instances and as the missionaries moved to bring the word of God so did the Masons move to build the churches, abbeys and cathedrals. But what was happening in Britain, which after all is where modern Freemasonry has its roots.

When the Emperor Claudius sent several centuries of builders into Great Britain in 43 A.D. to help protect Romans from Scottish raids, there were no towns, let alone cities in that country. The builders collegia constructed camps for the use of the Legions, then baths and bridges, temples and great homes were built and the camps took the shape of cities one of which was Eboracum, which became York and was the first community in Great Britain to be promoted to the rank of Roman City. The Romans had a tough time of it in Britain, Constantly harassed by the Welsh, forever building walls to try and keep out the Scots and the Picts (four in all, One in 90, one in 120, one in 140 and one built by Severus in 207 A.D.), then in 287 A.D. Carausius rebelled against Rome and took possession of Britain. he adopted the title of Emperor, and made his capital Verulam (now St. Albans) He confirmed to the collegia all of their ancient rights and privileges and added the right of special jurisdiction. He then kept the builders busy with the

construction of Imperial residences and public buildings. He was assassinated in 293 A.D. He was succeeded by Constantius who made his capital Eboracum (York). Then all hell broke loose!! He was killed in action against the Picts , Constantine became Emperor, made Christianity the state religion and Moved his capital to Byzantium. The invasions of the Barbarians began, causing Rome to withdraw from Britain and indeed most of Europe.

When the Angles, Saxons and Danes arrived on the shores of the British Isles they brought to an end their Roman civilization, but the collegia survived in a somewhat changed form, known as guilds. Among these guilds were those devoted to building and its allied trades, but there was not too much building going on, and the tradesmen were impressed into whichever army happened to control the territory in which they lived at the time. Soon there were very few Masons and carpenters left to do anything but the most basic of constructions. When in the end, the Saxons were the conquerors, and the barbarians became ready to live a more peaceful life, there were few left with the skills to accomplish the erection of those buildings required by the state, church and populace. The time was 926 A.D. Athelstane was the king of England and his capital was York, he needed builders and so he sent to France and to Italy to find them and the religious orders sent them to him. When they arrived they were given the jobs of overseers, they drew up the plans of the buildings to suit their clients needs, trained the workmen to do the work. Made sure that they were adequately compensated for their work and most importantly brought their own constitutions, which became the foundation documents for Freemasonry

York had been a place of Christian worship since the 4th century the first church, a wooden structure was erected in 627 and a stone structure was built in 637 and was dedicated to St. Peter. The school and library were established by the 8th century. In 741 it was destroyed by fire and a more impressive structure containing thirty altars was built. after the Saxons were defeated by the Normans in 1066 it was the Benedictine Archbishop of York (Ealdred) who traveled to Westminster to crown William. It was probably from York that some of the Masons came to build the Abbey at Kilwinning in 1140 and again bringing their constitutions with them, another story for another time.

And so we have come full circle back to Athelstane and to his calling into session the First Grand Lodge of Masons from which there emerged in due time those organizations which gave us Freemasonry

Remember the collegia because from them we get the best examples of how and why it is that such a thing as Freemasonry grows out of human nature. When life becomes hard and it grows complex, so that the individual finds himself helpless to battle the world alone, he discovers that if he combines his own individual forces with that of his neighbors and friends, that what he alone cannot do, he might do through cooperation. By pooling resources, knowledge, influence and good will, multitudes of people have learned to hold their own in a cold hard world.

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