

Freemasonry and the Mediaeval Guilds

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The origin and history of Freemasonry is so obscure up to the time of the formation of the Grand Lodges, some two hundred years ago, that everyone is entitled to draw his own conclusions from such evidence as he can gather, and the conclusion I have come to is that at least the form and shape of Freemasonry, as we know it, has come down to us from very remote ages through the medium of the Building Guilds, which probably got it from ancient Egypt.

The building craft has always held an honourable and privileged position because, in early days when men were largely illiterate and books practically non-existent, it was in stone and buildings erected to the glory of God that man was best able to express his highest ideals. Thus the great master builders stood in somewhat intimate relations with the king and the chief priest, who were often one and the same person, as the kings of the earliest dynasties of Egypt were also chief priests. We see this privileged position continued in later times, when kings, popes and prelates were all, at one time or another, great patrons of the building Art.

That there were builders' guilds in ancient Egypt I have no doubt, for the Great Pyramid and the magnificent temples were not the work of amateurs. But the first actual guild of builders of which I have been able to get any definite record is that of the "Dionysian Artificers." This ancient guild flourished about the time of the building of King Solomon's Temple. They were Phoenicians, as was Hiram, King of Tyre, and it is on record that Solomon sent to Hiram for help, and the most natural workmen for Hiram to send would be this well-known guild, which is also mentioned by Strabo and other historians.

They appear to have used signs, words and grips, to have worked in groups or lodges, to have carried their craft far East and far West, and to have left their marks wherever they went. Certainly you find the same marks on ancient buildings in India as you find in England; whether they belong to the same period or not.

That they got their craft from Egypt is highly probable. As you know, the Egyptian Empire at the time of its greatest expansion included all Palestine and Syria, and extended right up to the Euphrates.

Through Greece their lodges percolated into Italy and became the

progenitors of the Roman Collegia. These we know were organised in lodges, ruled over by a master and two wardens; they had three grades and used practically all of our emblems. The "Masonic Temple" at Pompeii is generally supposed to have been one of their buildings, with its two columns at the entrance, its tracing board and other symbols.

The legend, or as it may well be, the story of the Four Crowned Martyrs, the Quatuor Coronati, belongs to this period. The story is that four Christian master masons and the apprentice Simplicius refused to make a statue of Aesculapius, and were tortured to death by Diocletian. Their bodies were said to have been buried at Toulouse; they became the patron saints of the Comacine Masters, and are depicted in the church of St. Lawrence of Rotterdam in an old fresco. They also figure on the cover of the journal of Lodge Quatuor Coronati, the famous Lodge of research called after them.

When Rome fell and the barbarians overran Italy the Roman Colleges were broken up; but at least one survived, which had taken refuge on the island of Comacina in Lake Como. These succeeded in holding their own throughout the period of anarchy which followed the barbarian invasion, and there they established the famous order of the Comacini, or Comacine Masters as they were generally called.

Como had long been a pleasant resort for the wealthy Romans and the Comacine builders had had ample scope for their art.

When the Lombard kingdom had settled down into something like peace and order, Rothares, king of the Lombards, issued a decree, in A.D. 643, placing all the masons in Northern Italy under the control of the Comacini, and from that time, for centuries, they were responsible for most of the great ecclesiastical buildings, not only in Italy but throughout Europe, and even had contacts with the Byzantine Empire in the East. They followed the flag, so to speak, and as Christianity spread through Europe kings and emperors called upon the Comacini to erect churches and cathedrals, castles and fortifications.

They were organised in lodges, which they called Loggia, from which the word Lodge is derived, under masters or Magistri, and all under a grand-master; they used signs, grips and words, wore white aprons and gloves, and employed the square, compasses, level and plumb. They were not merely masons, but architects, sculptors and painters of the highest order, like the cunning man, endued with understanding sent by Hiram to Solomon, who was skilful to work in gold and silver, in brass, in iron, in stone, and in timber, in purple, in blue, and in fine linen, and in crimson; also to grave any manner of graving.

A description of the organisation of a lodge in Tuscany is given in Leader

Scott's "Cathedral Builders."

"First: there is a school where novices are trained in the three sister Arts, painting, sculpture and architecture. When pupils were received from outside the guild, they had to pass a very severe novitiate before being admitted as members, but the sons and nephews of Magistri were, we learn, entitled to be members without novitiate- The qualified Masters were entitled to take pupils and apprentices in their own studios.

"Second: There was the Laborarium or great workshop, where all the hewing of stone, carving of columns and cutting up of woodwork was done; in fact the headquarters of the Brethren who had passed the schools, but were not yet Masters.

"Third: There was the 'Opera' or office of administration, which formed the link between the guild and its patrons. The Ruling Council consisted of four members, elected periodically, two being from the Masters and two being influential citizens, representing the patrons. A ruling prince was often the President."

The ordinary local masons were quite distinct. They had their own organisations, but could only work in their own towns or districts; they were not "Free" masons, but were tied by law and custom to their own localities. The Comacines called them "rough masons" and employed them to assist in work suited to their capabilities.

There is an old Masonic legend that masonry was introduced into England in the time of Athelstan, which may or not be true. The Venerable Bede certainly mentions that builders were brought from Gaul to build the church at Wearmouth in A.D. 674, and there are features about that and other churches built at that time which are typical of the Comacine style.

Whether they were Comacines or not, it is pretty certain that the latter came over in the time of William the Conqueror. Before his conquest of England, William had brought an Italian, Lanfranc by name, to be Abbot of Bee in Normandy, and Lanfranc had brought Italian workmen with him to build the abbey there. The name Lanfranc, by the way, occurs several times in the records of the Comacine Masters. After the Conquest he became Abbot of Canterbury, and the building of cathedrals and -castles in the Norman style was started all over England.

A notable point in this connection is that the great innovations and changes in styles of architecture throughout Europe came practically simultaneously, such, for instance, as the change from Norman to Gothic, showing the influence of the master-hand of a great guild. It is also noticeable that in the case of nearly all the ecclesiastical building of those

early days the name of -the actual architect appears to be unknown.

Now, to come to their connection with Ireland. Most of us are familiar with the name of John the Lombard, who is reputed to have been the master builder when Christchurch Cathedral, in Dublin, was built by Strongbow and St. Lawrence O'Toole. The appellation of " The Lombard " shows pretty clearly that he was one of the Comacine Masters. His tomb is in the Cathedral, and the inscription on it reads:- "John the Master Builder of the Brotherhood of Parma and Dame Ramez Perez of St. Salvador of Asturias his wife, and all his family who died in this land lie here."

We can, however, go back beyond the time of John the Lombard to find a connection between the early ecclesiastical architecture of Ireland and Italy- In the early days of Christianity in Ireland, the Irish saints and missionaries travelled far and wide, and were well known and highly respected in Italy. In fact, two of them, Saints Fredianus and Columbanus, became Bishop of Lucca and Abbot of Bobbio respectively. Saint Columbanus, we are told, had been sheltered by Agiluf, King of the Lombards, who reigned from A.D. 591 to A.D. 615, and it is evident that from that time there was considerable interchange of ideas, spiritual and material, between Ireland and Italy. I will quote two short paragraphs from Leader Scott's book "Cathedral Builders" to illustrate the point:

"The only difference between the Round Towers of Ireland and those of Italy in the first five centuries after Christ is the conical roof, which is due entirely to exigencies of climate. The hewing of the square stones, the close-fitting masonry, the Roman cement, the simple arches of the windows with their solidly cut supports, are all of pure Lombard-Roman style of the time when Saints Fredianus and Columbanus were in Italy."

"By the ninth and tenth centuries the Irish Cross had reached its full development. It was no longer a sign on a slab, but a beautiful sculptured cross with a circle crowning it like a halo, and suggesting the eternity of the human cross of our Saviour. And here again the art is precisely that of the Italian sculptors. There is in the Roman Forum a cross of earlier date than either the cross of King Flami at Clonmacnoise (AD. 904) or that of Muereadach at Monasterboise (A.D. 924), of which the shape and ornaments are similar to both of them. The cross of Saints Patrick and Columban at Kells has too all the marks of the Comacine work, as one sees it in the oldest churches at Como and Verona."

The most typical, perhaps, of all the Comacine symbols, and they were prolific in symbols, is the Comacine knot, the interlaced scroll of a single cord of three strands, denoting the Trinity, without beginning or end, symbolising Eternity.

And now I must take you for a few minutes into the realm of Irish legend and romance. There is, perhaps, no name more familiar in Irish legend than that of Gobhan Saer, the wonder Smith who built the most incredible fairy palaces and such things. That Gobhan Saer was an actual individual, round whose name the most marvelous myths have grown up, is made pretty clear by Eugene O'Curry (Manners and customs of the Antient Irish) and other authorities. Among them I would mention our Brother Philip Crossle, and those of you who wish to follow up the quest will find much to interest you in an article by him in the Transactions of the Lodge of Research of 1934.

Stripped of all its romantic surroundings the story of Gobhan Saer is briefly as follows:—

About the time that St. Columbanus was sheltering with Agilulf of Lombardy there appeared in Ireland a swarthy foreigner: "This rusty large black youth. It is not known of what stock his race." So says an ancient chronicle. His name, Torinus (of Turin) was Irishised so to speak, into Tuirbi Traghamar, (Turvey of the Strand), a name which is still commemorated in Turvey's-Strand near Donabate. His son called himself Comancinus-Liber, which the Irish could not understand, took him at his word and called him Gobhan Saer, which, I understand, can be translated as "Free Mason."

Gobhan Saer was a notable builder. He is described in an ancient life of St. Abban, as: A distinguished builder residing convenient to St. Abban, whose constant occupation it was to do the work of the Saints in every place in which they were." You will find in O'Curry some records of the oratories and churches which he built for St. Abban, St. Moling and others of the Hierarchy of the day. But it seems to have been in Round Towers that he really specialised: Sir Thomas Drew writes:- " Tradition and chronicle are very precise as to what Towers the great Free-Mason, son of Torinus, built, and which he was not responsible for. They are in each case the most 'artful' of all the Towers of Ireland." He goes on to say:—" Whence came to Ireland the masonic secret of the 'entasis' of the column, the tradition of ancient Greece and Rome ? Some Master of the Collegium, preserving an ancient knowledge, alone could have imparted this-" (Entasis is the gentle, almost imperceptible, swelling of the shaft of a column.)

The modus operandi of the masons in early days in England is described in Hope's "Essay on Architecture" as follows:-

"A body of freemasons would appear near the castle of some great lord who wished to build a church or enlarge his castle. They were under the rule of a Master, elected from among their number, who nominated one

man out of ten as wardens to supervise the other nine. They first erected temporary huts for their own use, and then a central Lodge ... If required they seem to have called in the assistance of the local guild to help them with the rough work, but they do not seem to have admitted them to the assembly in the lodge with which they opened each day's work Here they met in secret, none but free masons present, and with a tyler to guard the door against cowan and eavesdropper."

By the middle of the fourteenth century the Comacine Guild was losing its international character and beginning to split up, owing to internal dissension, and national bodies of free-masons were organised. No doubt numbers of Italians had settled in the countries in which they had been working so long, and had been absorbed into the people of the country. It is to be noted that it is about this time that the first of the Ancient Charges begin to appear, of which there are a great number extant, from the Regius or Halliwell MS., dated about 1390, to one in the possession of the Lodge of Antiquity No. 2, which is dated A.D. 1686.

These Ancient Charges give rather fantastical stories of the origin of Masonry, which may be allegorical, a point which seems to me to be rather overlooked by historians, when we consider how much of our ritual is allegorical, and are the foundation on which the Constitutions were afterwards based.

The masonic historian Gould says:—"As far as I -can gather, the Upper Ten, so to speak, of the building trades gathered themselves together in more regular and elaborately constituted bodies about the close of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteen centuries in both Germany and England, and at the same time began, in the latter country, to be called Freemasons."

The Reformation and the abolition of the monasteries were a death-blow to the supreme art of building, and except for a spurt caused by the building of the great Universities, Freemasonry fell upon evil times and declined. An attempt at resuscitation, with the help of Italian craftsmen, about 1600, did not come to much, and the Civil Wars intervened, which put an end to all such enterprise till the Restoration and the Great Fire of London. Freemasonry then took a new lease of life, and we begin to come into the historical period of which we have definite records.

During the dark period, when Masonry was, one might say, rather under the weather, several very distinguished persons joined the Order, including Elias Ashmole. Now what was likely to induce a man like Elias Ashmole, the founder of the Ashmolean Library, to join a rather decadent trades union of builders, unless there was something in it of a very much more spiritual nature? It is clear that he, and men like him who joined at

that time, recognised that it was, or included, a peculiar system of morals. In fact that within this organisation or society, and shielded by the secrecy which legitimately guarded the secrets of the builders' art, lay truths which had in this way been brought safely through the dark ages of ignorance, superstition and religious dogma, and persecution. They have often been accused of having brought Rosicrucian ideas into-Masonry. I think it is much more likely that they found them there, or expected to find them, and so were brought into the fold-

You will remember that in Ireland, on an old brass square found in a bridge in Limerick, was inscribed:- "I will strive to live with love and care upon the level by the square." Showing that the esoteric teaching of the Craft, both in England and in Ireland, was not confined to operative work. How much deeper it went in the higher Degrees we do not know, but it is remarkable that Degrees like those of the Temple were conferred in Craft Lodges in Ireland in former days.

With the building of St. Paul's Cathedral, A.D. 1675, we begin to come into the open, though it is unfortunate that so many of the early records of Lodges now existing have been lost. For the building of St- Paul's a Lodge was formed in the old-fashioned style that I have described. And from that "Old Lodge of St. Paul's" as it is called in early records, meeting at the Goose and Gridiron in St. Paul's Churchyard, is descended a Lodge to which I have for many years belonged, the Lodge of Antiquity No. 2.

Sir Christopher Wren was himself Master, and we still preserve the maul, which was used in laying the foundation stone of the Cathedral, and the set of mahogany candlesticks presented by him to the Lodge. In the Minute recording it he is referred to as "Our worthy Old Master." His son, the second Christopher, was subsequently Master of the Lodge, which was one of the four which founded the Grand Lodge of England.

With the story of how, between 1675 and 1717, it gradually changed by the infiltration of Accepted Masons from an operative to a speculative Lodge, I will not burden you. Suffice to say that even so late as 1786 there were Lodges which would not admit any but operative masons.

The W.M. tendered grateful thanks to Brother Pranks, and called the assembled Brethren to express their appreciation with acclamation. Brother Franks briefly thanked the Brethren for the reception accorded to his work.

