

THE COMACINES
THEIR PREDECESSORS
& THEIR SUCCESSORS

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THE COMACINES



ISOLA COMACINA, FROM LAKE COMO.

THE COMACINES

THEIR PREDECESSORS
AND THEIR SUCCESSORS

BY

W. RAVENSCROFT, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A.



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PREFACE



THIS small volume is an attempt to trace in outline only the story of what, in some respects at least, may be regarded as the most remarkable guild of builders which Europe has produced, and is the outcome first of a lecture and then of articles in the *Antiquary* and the *Transactions* of the Leeds Installed Masters' Association.

Signor Riviora has, I believe, in his work entitled *Le Origini dell' Architettura Lombarda*, published in 1908, reached some of the conclusions I have drawn, especially that which links the Comacines to the Collegium of classical Rome.

I have not seen his book, however, nor that of Professor Merzario, and hence have come to my conclusions independently of them. My obligation to Leader Scott's *Cathedral Builders*, published in 1899, I have acknowledged in my pages.

Part of what I have written is theo-

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retical and part historical, and, in order to avoid destroying the value of the latter, I have endeavoured to keep the two things quite distinct.

I hope my venture has an appeal to the Architect, the Antiquary, the Freemason, and the Traveller.

For help in the illustrations I am indebted to the Proprietors of the *Antiquary*, and of the *Transactions* of the Leeds Installed Masters' Association, who have kindly lent me blocks.

I have also to thank the Lodge of Quatuor Coronati for the loan of their valuable picture of the Four Crowned Martyrs.

I am indebted to Professor Santo Monti for his contribution on the Island of Comacine, and to Mrs. Aubrey le Blond for help in the way of photographs and notes; also to Mr. Albin White, of Reading, for assistance in photography.

W. R.

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CHAPTER I

THE ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY AND THE TEMPLE BUILDERS

SOME few years ago an extremely interesting book was written by a lady under the *nom de plume* of "Leader Scott," and having for its title *The Cathedral Builders*. The reading of that book awakened in me a great desire to know more of its subject, and this was both gratified and stimulated by an unexpected visit to Italy in the spring of 1906. Then followed the collecting of notes and drawings, etc., and a second visit to Italy in the following year, with the further result that one was tempted to set down the outcome of the whole experience.

In doing this, I did not at first contemplate anything more than an outline sketch of the "Cathedral Builders" themselves, but the temptation came in more forms than one to add something as to their antecedents, and

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perhaps also their successors. I do not deny that this, to a certain extent, leads into the realm of conjecture ; but as I hope in the following notes to discriminate—at least, in some degree—between what is theoretical and what is historic, I need not, perhaps, apologize for stepping into so wide a field.

Those who read this paper will judge for themselves what amount of reason there may be in any theories I may submit for consideration.

Perhaps it will be convenient to say what I have to say in regular order, first as to the antecedents of the “Cathedral Builders”—or, as I shall call them, the “Comacines”—then as to their own body, and then as to their successors.

Who and what the Comacines were will appear as I go on ; but it will be well just to state here that they were originally the community of builders who, at the downfall of Rome, left that city, and settled on the Lake of Como.

I shall have to make frequent allusions to Leader Scott's book, to which I am indebted for my earliest interest in this subject. I only wish I could express this to Mrs. Baxter, of Florence, its painstaking author ; but some six years since she died, and thereby the world lost a talented and not adequately appreciated writer.

In order, however, to get back to the antecedents of the Comacines, it is necessary here to make a passing reference to their successors, because one of the most important

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traditions of the latter takes us back to the point from which we start. Most people are aware that, according to Masonic traditions, the ancient rite was associated with the building of King Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, and that, if Freemasonry did not originate there, it was from that association that it derived much of its subsequent form. But perhaps it is not so well known that there have been a host of theories as to the origin of Speculative Masonry. By Speculative Masonry I wish it to be quite understood I mean that system of morals inculcated in the lodges of Freemasons at the present day, and which, largely put into shape in England in the year 1717, has spread wellnigh over this globe of ours. There have been those who held that it did not grow out of the operative guilds of the Middle Ages, but, as a speculative science, linked itself on to a much more remote past. Some associated it with the teaching of Euclid, transmitted through Charles Martel and our own Athelstan; some with the cult of Mithras as practised in Rome, and so back into the sun-worship of hoar Persian antiquity.

Others say it was the outcome of the Greek mysteries; others, still, that it was taught by the Essenes, with whom our Lord is supposed by some to have been associated, and that they descended from the architects of the Temple at Jerusalem; others, again, that it was brought to England by the Culdees, those old Irish missionaries, of whom St. Columba was one, and who were associated

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with the Roman College, and so on, even back to the construction of the Tower of Babel and of Noah's Ark, and to Jabal, the son of Lamech.

Some of these contentions probably take their colour from a similarity in the use of symbols and of the things symbolized—Life and Death, Time and Eternity, Light and Darkness, Good and Evil, and many other such ; above all, perhaps, from the world-wide idea of a fraternity of mankind, wherein brotherly love, truth and charity shall rule.

This, then, leads me to say the argument of this book, which is not to be exclusively or, indeed, chiefly devoted to the history of Freemasonry, will be, so far as the third part of it is concerned, that the Speculative Freemasonry of to-day is the outcome of the Operative Masonry of the Middle Ages, and that, in consequence, while it has striking resemblances to the mysteries of Egypt Greece, and even China, it can claim no direct descent from such, except through the mediæval guilds of artificers. Through those guilds, however, and especially that of the Comacines, modern Freemasonry may claim a grand heredity, and perhaps it may yet be found that some of the legends which have been handed down to us are not so mythical as many are disposed to think.

Whole volumes have been written on this subject, and, therefore, to attempt even a cursory survey of it is quite impossible here.

Those interested in pursuing it farther are referred chiefly to Findel's and Gould's

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Histories of Freemasonry—the former, perhaps, somewhat out of date, but interesting.

With these explanatory remarks I now come to the first part of my subject—the antecedents of the Comacines, and their association with the building of King Solomon's Temple. Most writers are agreed upon the historic basis for the Roman Colleges of Artificers, particularly such as had to do with Operative Masonry. From these, of which more hereafter, we will venture back into the suggestive past, and try to realize the pedigree of at least one important branch of the building craft.

In his work on *The Mythology of the British Isles*, published some four years since, Mr. Charles Squire makes a statement to the effect that "A Hametic race spread around the Mediterranean, coming from North or East or Central Africa. Long-skulled and forming long barrows, they were probably the first people to inhabit the Valley of the Nile, and their offshoots spread into Syria and Asia Minor. The earliest Hellenes found them in Greece under the name of Pelasgoi, the earliest Latins in Italy as the Etruscans, and the Hebrews in Palestine as the Hittites.

"They spread northward through Europe as far as the Baltic, and westward along the Atlas chain to Spain, France, and Britain. In many cases they reached a comparatively high level of civilization, but in Britain their development must have been early checked." The main point of this statement, for our

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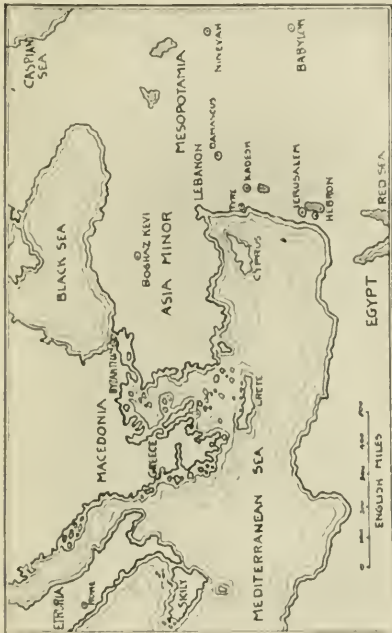
purpose, is that we have these peoples—the Etruscans in Italy, the Pelasgoi in Greece, and the Hittites in Asia Minor and Syria—all said to have come of one stock, and to have similar habits and language based on a common Hametic speech.*

A glance at the map of the Mediterranean will suffice to show how very possible this suggestion is; and if we may put the date of the building of King Solomon's Temple at 1000 years B.C., and that of the founding of Rome at the generally accepted 753 years B.C., we have already at hand in Italy, Asia Minor, and Syria—not to say anything here about Greece—a settled race of people consisting of two nations with a great deal common to both, the Hittites and the Etruscans. Now, as regards the Hittites, Dr. Hugo Winckler, who has been quite recently conducting explorations in Asia Minor, has made discoveries which have placed it beyond doubt that these people were at one time powerful

* In an article in the *Fortnightly Review* for October, 1908, Mr. D. G. Hogarth seeks to point out what the sum of recent archæological discovery, Hittite and other, amounts to in relation to Hellenism, and says: "In sum it amounts to this: that not only was the geographical focus of historic Hellenic civilization the focus also before that of a prehistoric culture of immemorial antiquity and local development, which was on the highest plane of aim and achievement as prehistoric cultures go, but also that the geographical areas enclosing that focus on west, north, and east, round a very wide radius in both the European and Asiatic continents, had been producing objects of utility and art since an equal antiquity, and on only little lower planes of culture."

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rivals of Egypt and Assyria. Following in the footsteps of Professor Sayce, he has found their capital city (Boghaz Kevi) in Cappadocia, and not only this, but a treaty on a clay tablet made



COUNTRIES ROUND THE EASTERN END OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN.

between the Hittite King and Rameses II., who was probably the Pharaoh of the Captivity. This powerful kingdom extended through a considerable part of Asia Minor

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and down into Syria, and so, geographically, the kingdom of Israel would be a next-door neighbour to it. Indeed, the Hittites fought so many of their battles with Egypt in Palestine, particularly round Kadesh, that the smaller tribes of that country became enfeebled and exhausted by the strife, and hence, in the time of Joshua, so easy a prey to the advancing Israelites when they occupied the land.

The editor of the *Antiquary* (November, 1908), says: "It is to the Hittite people, whose empire extended from the Euphrates to the Ægean, and the site of whose capital is now marked by the mounds of Boghaz Kevi, that we must look for the home of the Hyksos, whose origin up to the present has been shrouded in mystery."

A branch of this great nation appears to have been located at Hebron, which is not so far from Jerusalem, when Abraham made treaty for a burial-place. They also spread southward towards the Dead Sea, and were engaged in conflict with Joshua; and it must not be forgotten that if King Solomon's mother was not a Hittite, she was the wife of one.

But recent exploration has demonstrated that nearly all Scripture references to the Hittites do not include the great kingdom north of the Mediterranean, and hence a misconception has arisen as to their place and power as a nation. Now, the Druces of Mount Lebanon may put in a very fair claim to be the descendants of the Hittites of that district, and this *is* claimed for them in an

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article in the *Daily Telegraph* of June 17, 1890; while the Rev. Haskett Smith argues, in the *Transactions of Lodge Quatuor Coronati* (vol. iv., p. 8, 1891), that his two propositions are as follows :

1. That the Druces are none other than the original subjects of Hiram, King of Tyre, and that their ancestors were the builders of Solomon's Temple.

2. That to this very day the Druces retain many evident tokens of their close and intimate connection with the ancient craft of Freemasonry. Moreover, Laurence Oliphant, writing some years ago respecting the Druces of Mount Lebanon, pointed out the very close similarity that exists between their ritual for admission of youths into their secret conclave and the initiation ceremony of a modern apprentice to Speculative Masonry.

And now as regards the Etruscans. Although it is still a matter of some speculation as to who they were, and still a matter of conjecture as to what was their language, it is now admitted on all hands that what the Romans first learned of the arts, especially those of building and pottery, they learned from the Etruscans, and that, indeed, the myth of the founding of Rome by Romulus must be regarded as a myth only, since on the arrival of the earliest settlers, who became the progenitors of that mighty race, the Romans, Rome, actually existing, had its name Roma, which, as it now transpires, is an Etruscan word.

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Professor Lindsay, in his introduction to the most recent edition of Dennis's *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, says: "The question as to the Etruscans, their language and their home *before they migrated into Italy*, will soon be solved, but meanwhile that they were immigrants is likely, for ancient tradition made them come from the East, *in particular from Asia Minor*, and no sufficient reason for doubting this has appeared." Then he tells us that, as regards language, "Etruscan has no affinity with Latin—that was clear—nor did it belong to the Indo-European family of languages. At the end of last century, however, came," he says, "an unexpected wealth of material for our study. A linen cloth wrapped round an Egyptian mummy in the Museum of Agram, in Austria, proved to be the relics of an Etruscan Book of Ritual." Dennis says, in his introduction to his book, that the Etruscans were the chief architects of early Rome; that they built the great temple of Jupiter on the Capitol, and constructed the Cloaca Maxima; and that Rome, whenever she wanted to raise any public building, sent to Etruria for artificers. And, further, as to their antiquity, he writes "that a people of Greek race, the Pelasgi, entered Italy at the head of the Adriatic, and crossing the Apennines, mixed with the mountaineers and drove out the earlier inhabitants, they in their turn being conquered by a third race, called by the Romans the Etrusci. They are supposed to have established their power in the land 1044 B.C.,

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which would be a few years before the building of King Solomon's Temple, and subsequently to the establishment of the Hittites in Asia Minor."

As to their works in plastic art, Dennis remarks that they bear marks of strong Egyptian influence; while Strabo, from personal acquaintance with the antiquities of the respective lands, remarks the analogy between the art of Egypt, Etruria, and early Greece.

Much more might be added in evidence that the Etruscans came out of Asia Minor into Italy, and that they were a similar race to the Hittites—indeed, of the same family. Suffice it to say, however, the conclusion I want to submit respecting the connection of these people with King Solomon's Temple on the one hand, and with the Comacines on the other, is that, at the time of the erection of the Temple—and, be it remembered, its fame was widespread—here were people in Italy, in Asia Minor and in Syria, all of one race, enlightened, working in their own style (influenced, of course, more or less by Assyria and Egypt), partakers, so far as the Syrian branch is concerned, in the building of the Temple, and having descendants in the Druces, who to this day retain masonic traditions; that the Etruscan branch of these people taught the early Romans, who in their turn developed their own colleges, and ultimately became the great Comacine Guild, and that the latter possessed and displayed badges and marks which were

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traditionally linked on to King Solomon himself. Of these more hereafter.

Is it a wild inference that, by traditions, handed down from generation to generation, the Comacines were, at any rate in some senses, the successors of the Temple-builders, and that the masonic stories associated with the Temple told to-day in connection with Freemasonry are not without foundation?

CHAPTER II

THE ROMAN COLLEGE AND THE QUATUOR CORONATI

NOW, with sure foothold we come again to the Roman College of Artificers. "The Architectural Collegium of the Romans enjoyed the privilege of a constitution of their own, and were recognized by the State as a legal body. They were placed under their own officer, *Ædilis*, who was skilled in architecture, and, according to Vitruvius's statement (at the time of Augustus), the members were required to be well skilled, and to have a liberal education.

"Upon the overthrow of the Republic, when all other corporations lost their privileges, owing to the despotism of the Emperors, the thirst of the rulers for splendour and renown caused the *collegia* to be confirmed in nearly all their former rights and privileges. Three members were at least required to form a college, and no one was allowed to be a member of several colleges at the same time. Lay or amateur members (*patrons*) were admitted; the corporations held their meetings in secluded rooms or buildings exclusively appropriated to that purpose, and

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most of them had their own schools for the instruction of apprentices and lower grades of workmen. They had also their own peculiar religious ceremonies and priests, and an exchequer belonging to the corporation, an archive, and their own seals. The members took an oath mutually to assist each other; indigent members received relief, and on their demise were buried at the expense of the corporation. They kept registers of the members, some of which are still extant; they had also their records, their masters (*magistri*), wardens (*decuriones*), fellow-crafts and apprentices, censors, treasurers, keepers of archives, secretaries, and serving brethren. Their tools and implements had, besides, a symbolical meaning, and in religious matters they were tolerant.”*

The name of Brother does not become general until the time of the Christian masonic fraternity.

Roman authors and monumental inscriptions furnish undeniable proofs that these associations (*sodalitia*) continued amongst the Romans for a considerable period, and existed in Gaul, Brittany, and our own land.

How far the Steinmetzen (stone-cutters) of Germany, whose regulations the English Freemasons of 1717 are said to have taken as their model in constituting the Speculative body of to-day, were descendants of the Roman colleges it is scarcely within the

* Findel's *History of Freemasonry*, Ed. 1869. pp. 20, 21.

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province of these pages to discuss. Probably they were one branch of the legitimate descendants of that body, and, if so, it is not without significance that they possessed traditions of the Temple at Jerusalem, honoured the great patron saints of the Comacines,



COLUMNS AT WÜRZBURG CATHEDRAL, BAVARIA.

the Quatuor Coronati, and in two columns in the Cathedral of Würzburg, originally situated, like the brazen columns of King Solomon, on either side of the porch, but now in the body of the cathedral (their relative positions reversed), actually show the shafts of those columns interlaced in a

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manner similar to that of the Comacine knot.

To return, however, to the Roman collegia, Gould tells us there is conclusive evidence of their survival till the time of the decline and fall of Rome, each legion having a college attached to it, which accompanied it in its various campaigns. Thus they came to Britain, and we are told that in the early fourth century there were no less than fifty-three important cities, each with its Collegium Fabrorum, in England. Some think they became the progenitors of the English Mediæval Guild of Artificers; our contention, however, will be otherwise.

And now we come to the story of the Quatuor Coronati, whose names are so closely linked with the Roman collegia, the Comacines of the Dark Ages, the Steinmetzen of Germany, and find their place as far west as even England itself.

Obscure and conflicting are the legends of these worthies, and, indeed, it would be a hopeless task to tell their story accurately in all its details. On the other hand, there is so much of general accuracy in the various accounts given, that the fact of their existence is, I believe, nowhere doubted.

To gather and sum up as a brief biography of these men, it would appear that when, in A.D. 298, the Emperor Diocletian was building his baths in Rome, he included a temple to Æsculapius, the God of Health. At that time there were four craftsmen, by name Claudius, Castorius, Semphorianus, and

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Nicostratus, sculptors by trade, or more likely "stone-squarers." They were Christians, and on account of their great skill, which they secretly attributed to their doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, they were in much favour with the Emperor. A fifth craftsman, however, Simplicius, was not so successful, and his tools failed to do the work required of them until taken in hand by Claudius, who said: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, let this iron be strong and fit to work well." Then Simplicius set to work again, and succeeded with the rest. Moreover, he inquired as to this mystery, and, being converted by Claudius, repaired with the other four to Bishop Quirillus, then in prison, and ultimately at his hands received Christian baptism. Then followed disputes with the philosophers, who denounced them to Diocletian as Christians.

He on his part used his influence to save them, and it is not unlikely this remarkable clemency arose from a prudence which dictated how unpopular would be the martyrdom of members of so powerful a guild as the Roman College had then become. But the philosophers were too strong, and the order was given that they should execute a statue of Æsculapius or die. They went on with their work in every other direction, but the statue they would not make. At length others were found to obey the Emperor's mandate, and the five were handed over to the tribune Lampadius, who was to try by gentle methods at first, and afterwards by force

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to get them to recant. The philosophers and other fellow-workmen cried, "Away with the magicians!" The tribune hesitated. Still he would make one more effort. Would they offer sacrifice to the Sun God? No, they served only the God of heaven. Reference was again made to Diocletian, and at last, all efforts failing, they were stripped and beaten with scorpions at the command of Lampadius, who in the same hour expired sitting in his judgment-seat, being torn by an evil spirit.

The news of this violently enraged Diocletian, who, on November 8, had the five shut up in coffins of lead and cast into the Tiber. Forty-two days after, one Nichodemus, a Christian, succeeded in recovering the bodies and placed them in his own home. Several months after this Diocletian, returning from Syria, commanded that all the soldiery on coming to the image of Æsculapius should be compelled to offer incense with sacrifice, especially the city militia, when four of the latter body, called Cornicularii, or wing-leaders, took counsel together, and, being Christians, decided not to obey the Emperor's behest. They are said by some to have been not only *milites* (soldiers), but also artificers, and when they resisted, Diocletian ordered them to be put to death in front of the image with strokes of the plumbata, or thongs weighted with leaden balls. For five days their bodies lay in the streets, when the blessed Sebastian, with the holy Bishop Melchiades, collected them by night, and buried them on the

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road to Lavica, three miles from the city, with other holy men in the cemetery. On the Via Labicana, three miles from Rome, in the Vigna del Fiscale, is the catacomb of the Quatuor Coronati. Presumably by this time those other five had been transferred from the home of Nichodemus to their new resting-place in one of the catacombs. The names of the last four were not known until, in the ninth century, they were miraculously discovered through their military rank, and are now given as Severus, Severianus, Carporferus, and Victorianus; and as they died on the same day in November as the former five, but two years later, their festival is commemorated with the others on this day.

Some confusion exists as to which of the two sets of martyrs were the Quatuor Coronati, and even Leader Scott falls, I think, into error on this point, for in the various accounts the methods of their martyrdom are very mixed. The evidence, however, is certainly in favour of the four soldiers who were executed in A.D. 300, and not of the earlier five stone-squarers. Gould says: "Upon the latter [*i.e.*, the soldiers] Pope Melchiades, A.D. 310, bestowed the title of Quatuor Coronati, or Four Crowned Ones, by which they are described in the more ancient missals and other formularies of public devotion, though in connection with the five who are referred to by name and as holy martyrs. Within twelve years of their death, Melchiades founded the original basilica to

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their honour, and in the seventh century (622) Pope Honorius I. erected a handsome church, in the form of a basilica, to the memory of the four, out of the ruins of a temple of Diana on the Caelian Hill, and in



CHURCH OF S. CARPORFERA, COMO.

A.D. 847 the then reigning Pope rebuilt it with greater magnificence.

Into this church of the Quatuor Coronati were removed, A.D. 848, the remains of the nine martyrs. They were placed in an

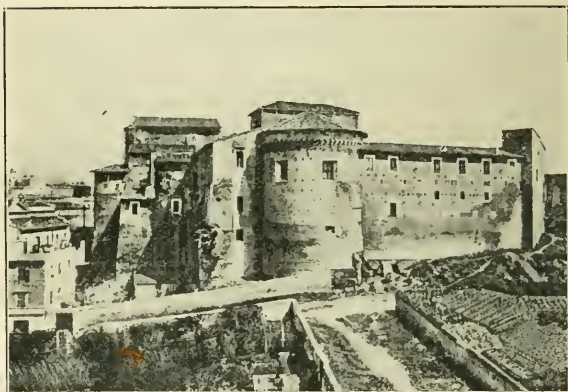
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oratory beneath the high-altar of the church. The four crowned brothers were in two marble sarcophagi, and on either side in two others were disposed the remains of the five, while a very large sarcophagus containing the relics of many others was placed behind them. The crypt under this altar is so dark that it is impossible, without artificial light, to make out clearly the details of the sarcophagi, but there they are to all appearance as above described. The four officers (albeit craftsmen also), instead of the five masons, have become the patron saints of the building trades, while the occupation of the five has survived under the names of the four. The martyrology of Du Saussay, however, claims that the bodies of the five were taken to Toulouse, and of one of them, St. Claduis, we get the memorial to this day in the French name of St. Cloud.

A few words may be permissible here as to the church of the Quatuor Coronati, which not unlikely in the Middle Ages formed the Mecca of the craft-guilds of Europe. It is situated in a somewhat out-of-the-way spot in Rome, not far from the better-known church of S. Clemente. The original church of Honorius, whose altar, as in most early churches, faced the east, being at the west end, was a noble structure, having a long nave with an elevated tribune at the end. Fifteen columns from pagan temples on either side formed the aisles, and supported the gallery above for the nuns who were attached to the church. But in the

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great fire of 1084 it was destroyed, and in 1111 restored by Pope Paschal II., shorn, however, of its ancient glory. The long nave was shortened by erecting a wall across it from the seventh column, through which the entrance to the church is made. Walls also were built between the columns, and ten new columns were placed in the church



CHURCH OF SS. QUATUOR CORONATI, ROME (EXTERIOR).

to form new aisles, so that the whole width of the present church represents the original width of the older nave only. Over the entrance is a fresco representing the four saints in clouds, all holding palms in their hands, the emblem of martyrdom and victory, and they have bay wreaths on their heads. Below are companies of Augustine Sisters

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and novices adoring the saints. The pavement is the work of the Cosmati family, and the vault and walls of the tribunal represent in fresco the four saints being scourged and put into leaden coffins (mark again the confusion in the method of martyrdom), a work of the seventeenth century. The roof of



CHURCH OF SS. QUATUOR CORONATI, ROME (INTERIOR).

cypress has in the centre the four crowned martyrs, all with their working tools in their hands. Further restorations were made in 1624 by Urban VIII.

In the Quadri Porticus Innocent III. (1198-1215) founded a chapel of S. Sylvester, which contains some curious thirteenth-century frescoes of the life of Constantine. From the sixteenth century it has belonged

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to a guild of marble-cutters, who celebrate Mass on the last Sunday of the month. Over the door is a fresco of the four saints, and the inscription : STATUARIORUM ET LAPIDARUM CORPUS ANNO MDLXX.

Besides the representations of the Four Crowned Ones already mentioned, there are many in different parts of Italy, but perhaps the most beautiful is the one in the church of Or S. Michele at Florence. This church was that of the trade guilds of Florence, and in the early sixteenth century the Guild of Smiths, Carpenters, and Masons instructed an amateur sculptor, Nanni di Banco, to prepare a niche therein with the figures of their patron saints.

He set to work, achieved a beautiful result, including in the lower part of the design interesting reliefs, showing the four at work, and all went well until he came to put up his statues when he found he could not get them in. Accordingly—so the story goes—he repaired to Donatello, who offered to get him out of his trouble if he would stand him a supper (there is a truly masonic ring about this), and satisfactorily accomplished the feat by literally making the statues to rub shoulders. It is to be hoped his supper was equally satisfactory. In a picture in the Pinacoteca, Perugia, I found a predella showing three scenes in connection with the Coronati, and they are interesting, but again illustrate the extent of confusion which existed in relation to the methods by which the five or the four met their death.

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QUATUOR CORONATI, FROM OR S. MICHELE,
FLORENCE.

But perhaps the most interesting association to us is the connection between the Quatuor Coronati and England. In his

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ecclesiastical history, A.D. 619, the Venerable Bede has a chapter headed, "Bishop Mellitus by Prayer quenches a Fire in his City." This city was Canterbury, and the record states that "the church of the four crowned



SS. QUATUOR CORONATI.

From the Isabella Missal, British Museum.

martyrs was the place where the fire raged most." This church survived the fire, and some are of opinion that it was erected about the time of St. Augustine, A.D. 597. If this is so, then this was probably the first Christian

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edifice erected after the arrival of the Apostle to the English. The dedication would be both significant and remarkable. Others argue that from its having withstood the fire it was more ancient, being of stone, etc. The present church of St. Alphege, built early in the fifteenth century, is supposed to stand on the site.

In addition to this, also it is of interest to note that the earliest mention of the Quatuor Coronati in a craft document is to be found in a poem of the fourteenth century, known as the "Halliwell" poem.

In the Isabella Missal the four are depicted in a beautiful piece of work, each with a working tool—viz., the square, the plumb-rule, the trowel, and the gavel.

This picture is the original from which the illustration now appearing on all the publications of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge is derived. Mr. Speth, in a most interesting account of the nine martyrs, published in 1895, has taken great pains to give his authorities, and he also adduces good reason for believing in the substantial truth of the legend. Voragine's *Golden Legend* gives the story in a very mixed form.

CHAPTER III

ISOLA COMACINA

IN passing from these four worthies, it may with safety be said they were undoubtedly the patron saints of the most important section of the building communities during the splendour of mediæval operative masonry, and until the period of its decay. We come now to what may be considered the central and most important part of our study, and shifting the scene from Rome—that city of splendour, with its teeming population, many times larger than in the present day, its pomp, luxury, and pride—we find ourselves on a little lonely, but very lovely island, in what is perhaps the most lovely lake in all Europe, the Island of Comacina in the Lake of Como. It is, I believe, the only island the lake possesses, and rising abruptly from its blue-green waters, covered with foliage, all but uninhabited, it rests on the bosom of the lake in spring like an emerald gem.

On every side the shores of the lake slope sharply up and up, rich in foliage of varied tints and plentifully dotted with villages, all picturesque and all teeming with associations of the past in architecture, legend, and old

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customs, which survive to the present day; while away to the north-east over Bellagio and beyond lie the snow-topped mountains which link on the scene to the great Alpine ranges. To stand on an elevated part of this little island, so near the mainland, yet so far removed from the sound of human voice or



ISOLA COMACINA, FROM THE MAINLAND.

industry (its silence, indeed, broken only by the song of birds, a not too common thing in Italy at the present day, however plentiful such may have been in the days of St. Francis), and to look east, west, north, south—whether bathed in glorious sunshine with every detail reflected in the water of the lake as in a

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mirror, or when the black clouds roll up from the mountains and sweep down upon the lake, the thunder breaking on the stillness and echoing from hill to hill—is a thing not to be forgotten; and then to think of its story, of the past, equally characterized with sunshine and tempest, and the great influence the men of this tiny island exercised on Western Europe, is to realize that here is one of the rare spots where Nature and man have combined to put their indelible mark.

I am indebted to Dr. Santo Monti of Como for some interesting notes he kindly lent me, relating to the island, from which, by his permission, I extract the following: “The isle itself, called Cristopoli by the Longobards, measures about a mile in circumference, and has a long, glorious, and sad history. . . . There were monuments which dated as far back as to the fifth century of our era. Now the island is nearly abandoned, uncultivated, and contains a few vestiges of the old fortifications and the churches. The population of the island must have been extremely numerous then, according to the chronicles; the churches thereon were not less than nine (chapels and oratories included). One of them was dedicated to S. Euphemia with a chapter of twelve canons, including Bishop Litigerio, in 1031. Of all these churches only the remnants of three are left. One of them is at the east end of the isle, it has been heightened a story and actually serves as a barn or shed for the cattle; the ancient part of it inside

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as well as outside is of well-wrought stone, so closely combined (especially inside) that it seems of a single piece. The portion of the outside wall is decorated with semicircular



RUINED CHAPEL, ISOLA COMACINA, LAKE COMO,
NOW USED AS A COWSHED.

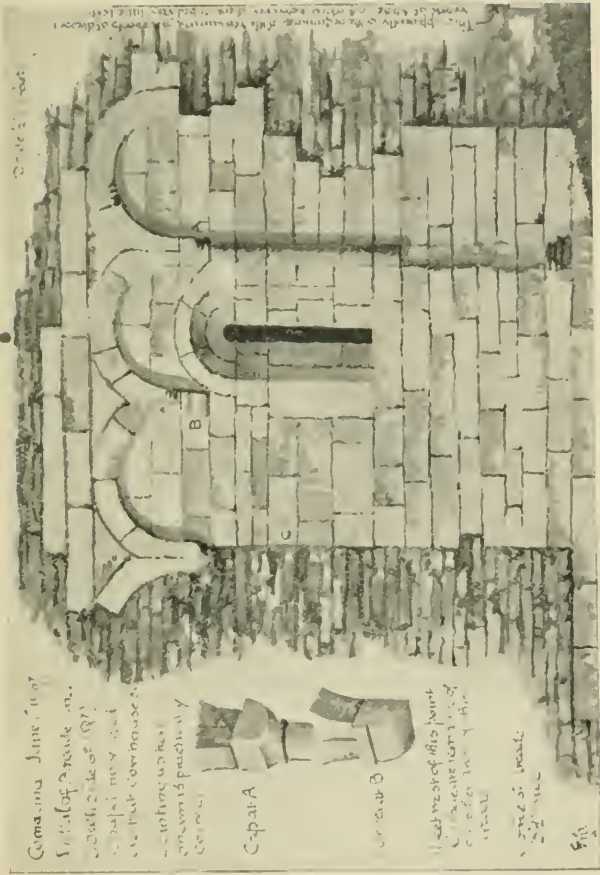
arches alternately supported by 'Mensolac' and vertical cords, with capitals of cubicular form and square bases. Under the last of these arches there is a window. The church

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with the north façade finished in two equal absides, with a window towards east in each ; outside the choir presents a sole semicircle (which contains the two absides).

“The second remnant, little rising above the earth, is that of a very spacious edifice called the Dome, and the spot where it stood still conserves the name, but no other traces remain of it. Judging by the foundation it must have been solidly constructed. A little farther toward the north are the vestiges of the third, consisting of the choir, which, semicircular in shape, is decorated with the cord design (vertically) composed alternately of stone and ‘terra cuite.’ The bases of these cords is simple flat stone. The inside of the edifice is filled with débris. In one of these nine churches, probably in the one dedicated to S. Euphemia, there was a marble slab 1.84×0.70 metres, in round characters comparatively well executed considering the period. It was in praise of Bishop Agrippino, of the first half of the seventh century. When the island was devastated and the church and other buildings destroyed in 1169, the above named slab was transferred to the opposite shore, where it found a place in the parochial church on the main altar, where it served as a desk thereupon. A few years ago it was taken away and moved into the basis of the said altar, where the inscription can be read without any difficulty.”

This Agrippino was consecrated in 606. He prepared for himself a tomb in the church



DETAIL OF WALL ARCADE, ISOLA COMACINA, LAKE COMO.


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of S. Euphemia on the island, and was buried in it in 620.

Dr. Monti concludes from the foregoing and other evidence in his possession that the remains of the churches in the island are previous to the seventh century. It has been my good fortune to pay two visits to this island, the second of which was on Saturday, June 1, 1907, and one was gratified subsequently to learn what Dr. Monti had to say respecting the little sanctuary, the discovery of which occasioned my second visit and subsequent correspondence with him.

CHAPTER IV

ISOLA COMACINA AND THE COMACINES

HE history of the island is very little known to English-speaking people, albeit a tragic one, and it may be of interest here to give a few details, without pretending to do more than that.

We are first introduced to the Island of Comacina as a very strongly fortified place, built by the Gauls, and afterwards rebuilt by the Romans, as a defence against the people of Grisons, one of the Swiss cantons lying north of the Lake of Como, and at no great distance therefrom.

About the year A.D. 480, when the Emperor Zeno sat upon the throne of the East Theodoric the Ostrogoth, practically master of Italy, took a good deal of interest in the island on account of its beauty and habitableness, and, as we are told, extended it.

Probably this extension meant further fortification, since it would have required a considerable amount of strength to render it the desirable spot for habitation which Theodoric would require it to be. Not only so, but being in a convenient situation some

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twenty miles from Como, and surrounded by water, it had from time to time become a storehouse of treasure, so that we read it had within its walls a vast accumulation of wealth.

The next association is with the great General Narses, through whose action or inaction, as the case may be, the island fell to the Lombards.

It came about in this way :

Narses, an eunuch, short of stature, bent and ugly, was at the age of sixty selected by Justinian, the Emperor of the East, and placed in command of the army in Italy as a General, although he had never seen service before. And, notwithstanding this, he showed such marvellous skill and discernment as to thoroughly justify the extraordinary step the Emperor had taken. Indeed, after having been once recalled to Constantinople, he was found to be the only man capable of carrying on the wars in Italy against the barbarians, and in a second campaign he practically mastered the kingdom. Goths, Huns, and Vandals had successively been beaten back or amalgamated ; and when Narses was a second time recalled, the only hostile nation on the horizon was the Lombard. Narses was apparently recalled because, through the failure of means of support for his army from the capital, his taxes on the people bore so heavily that they petitioned the Emperor to remove him from the command.

Narses refused to obey the order of the

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Emperor (then Justin II.) to return, and hence the story that the Empress Sophia cried: "I know what to do with the old eunuch: he shall be confined to his proper place in the women's quarters, and forced to spin wool with the maids."

On receiving this insulting message, Narses is said to have replied: "Then I shall spin such a coil for the Empress as she will never unravel so long as she lives."

Whether or not Narses took his revenge by inviting the Lombards to come into Italy is uncertain, but doubtless, if their coming was not due to his action, it was more or less encouraged by his inaction.

This was in the year 568, when Narses was ninety years of age. The Imperial Captain Francilio held the city of Como, together with the Island of Comacina and the surrounding country, for the Empire, and one of the first results of the attitude taken by Narses was a Lombard attack upon Como under Albion, which for some time it sustained; but when, after a time, it fell, Francilio retired to Comacina, where, with considerable bravery, he entrenched himself. This also was in the year 568.

Francilio appears to have kept his hold on the island until the year 584, when, being again attacked by the Lombards, under Antaris, who naturally found in this little fortress holding by the Empire, when all around was slipping away, a menace to the security of his kingdom. After a six months' siege, the island fell into their hands, and Francilio,

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having secured honourable terms, retired to Ravenna.

The fall was accomplished by a fleet of boats, which surrounded the island and starved out the garrison.

The Lombards had called the island Christopolis, because, like Christ, it had become the refuge of the hopeless, a very sanctuary of the destitute and fugitive, gentle and simple. The vast treasure stored in it by many cities fell into the hands of the Lombards.

About the close of the sixth century we find Comacina again undergoing a siege. This time it is held by an insubordinate chieftain, one Gardulf, Duke of Bergamo, who, having been already subdued once, rose in arms against his King, Agilulf, who was in some sense the founder of the Lombard Kingdom. Agilulf besieged and captured the island, took the Duke prisoner, and, contrary to all expectation, spared his life, partly from chivalrous, and partly from diplomatic, considerations.

In the year 686 a conspiracy was made against King Guiniperto, the sixteenth King of Lombardy, by one Alahis, to drive him from the throne. While the King was gone to the chase, Alahis stirred up sedition in the royal city of Pavia, whence the King was obliged to withdraw to the Island of Comacina, where he fortified himself strongly. But the partners to the conspiracy made a voyage to the island unknown to Alahis, and besought the King to pardon them for the

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wrong they had committed; and Alahis being at that time absent from the city, the conspirators restored Guiniperto to his former position.

Guiniperto reigned over Lombardy until the year 700, when at his death the succession of his son Luitperto was disputed by Regimperto, Duke of Turin and cousin of Guiniperto. Luitperto was a minor in the care of Arisprando, a faithful warrior. With a large body of troops Regimperto defeated Arisprando at the Battle of Novara, and usurped the throne, which soon passed to his son, Aribert II. (701-712). (One authority says this man was the son of Alahis, who had recently died.) He took Luitperto prisoner and put him to death, and Arisprando fled to Comacina.

Here he was pursued by Aribert, and, distrusting his own forces, fled into Bavaria, whereupon the island was levelled by the soldiers of Aribert. The latter took vengeance on Arisprando by blinding his wife and children, and depriving them of their ears and tongues, but allowed one infant, Luitprando, to escape, his father thinking him to be too young to be dangerous. Little did he imagine what the sequel would be, for Arisprando, collecting forces in Bavaria, descended into Italy like a bolt from the blue, and defeated Aribert at the moment when his power seemed to be at its zenith.

The latter hurried to Pavia, seized as much gold as he could carry, and in his flight was drowned by the weight of his treasure in

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attempting to cross the River Ticcino. Arisprando then ascended the Lombard throne, and, dying shortly after (712), bequeathed it to his son Luitprando, who became the most illustrious of the Lombard Kings, and about the year 718 rebuilt Comacina.

An interval of peace for the island may then have set in, for the star of Charlemagne was in the ascendant, and the time for the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire was drawing near.

Indeed, intervals of quiet must have been periodically enjoyed, or the devastation with which the island was overthrown time after time could not have been effaced so thoroughly as it evidently was. Moreover, it is stated that Charlemagne restored it, and probably from that time onward for a considerable period the Comacine Guild would be able to mature and develop and exercise its ever-widening influence in both East and West. Final peace for Comacina, however, was not to be, and its downfall was brought about in a quite incidental way.

Milan had grown in pride and splendour, and in her Imperial haughtiness she was pressing hard upon the smaller cities of the neighbourhood, particularly Lodi and Como.

Secretly two of the men of Lodi laid their case before the Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, who swore to avenge their wrongs. On their return these ambassadors were treated as fools, for no one believed in the promise of the Emperor, and all judged that,

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in consequence of what they had done, the yoke of Milan would be heavier than before. But, although delayed, the Emperor's threat was ultimately carried out with a vengeance on Milan, which awed and terrified the whole of the district, and Lodi and Como, for the time at least, were relieved of the oppressor.

Comacina took side with the Milanese, and hence incurred the bitterest hatred from the men of Como; thus, when the opportunity came, they took their revenge. They had already sacked the island in 1124, had seen their own city destroyed in 1127, and rebuilt in 1152; and now, about the year 1160, or shortly after, they attacked Comacina again, setting fire to it after a desperate struggle. Still the islanders would not come to terms, and so the neighbouring country was put to fire and sword, as also Borgo di Menagio.

For this and other things the Milanese besieged Como, when the latter was succoured with provisions by the confederate lands of the Lario, to the great detriment of the islanders, who forbade them the passage. Moreover, the siege of Como was shortly raised, and then they reassembled their forces and took their revenge on the islanders severely, capturing also the fortress of Nesso. The hour had come for vengeance, and Como took care it should not pass unheeded, while at the same time the blow should be dealt so effectively as to remove all possibility of recovery. A decree was obtained from the Emperor that it should never be

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rebuilt, and practically that decree has held good to this very day.

Dr. Monti says it was in 1169 the final blow was given. And so its tragedy closes, and, indeed, except for the one church now standing on the island, it has remained desolate, probably much in the condition in which it is found to-day—destitute of inhabitants, save the one cowherd who looks after his few head of cattle, and shorn of all dwellings except the one ruined chapel now used to house both cattle and cowherd.

What a thrilling story could be told if only details of the history of this stubborn little island were available! And how strangely it reflects in miniature the way in which throughout the Middle Ages, especially in Italy, the arts of peace and the horrors of strife flourished side by side.

Frederick II. or his successor, Rudolf I., gave the island to Leo, Bishop of Como, in the year 1253, with conditions restricting him not to fortify it; and in 1467 the people of Como restored the ancient church on the island in honour of St. John the Baptist, and placed in it a marble having a badly-constructed inscription, which, translated, runs as follows:

“It is in the year 1160.

“When the island was destroyed there was a great pestilence. The ancient church being restored saved the lives of those bringing sacred gifts when overwhelmed by a hailstorm. The first day of May saw the commencement of the work, and the last

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day put the finishing touch to it, in the year 1400—add 67 and all will be understood.”

This garbled sentence probably refers to two, if not more, different periods, and it is translated from Ballarini's *Compendio delle croniche della Città di Como*, published in Como 1619.

How far the present church on the island can be identified with this restored building it is difficult to say, but the present building dedicated to St. John the Baptist is, according to Dr. Monti, of the sixteenth century.

Pauli Jovii, in 1559, wrote concerning the Island of Comacina, and the following is a translation of what he says: “Over against this portion of the Salarian shore there stretches an island facing it lengthwise, displaying as one sails by the ruins of an ancient city, [destroyed] by order of the people of Como, that the Larian people, warned by this punishment, might be admonished to preserve their fidelity to their parent city of Como. This city was famous in the time of the Goths, who had such confidence in its fortifications that they stored in it the treasures of all their nation.”

Paulus Longobardus writes in his History “that the Isle of Comacina, in the Larian Lake, was captured and overthrown by Aripertus, King of Lombardy, when Arisprandus, who had brought up and trained Luitpertus, the boy-king, had by chance fled thither after his defeat in the battle by Novaria. However, after the arrival of Charlemagne, who overthrew the

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kingdom of Lombardy, I found the island restored. From this island our family of the Jovii derives its origin, and there are extant evidences of the wealth of our ancestors—to wit, the Church of Mary Magdalene in the town of Stabium, distant over against the island across the Eudipus by the very short passage of two stadia. These ancestors of the Jovii contributed fields from their estates with pious liberality for the succour of the needy and of travellers, and for 600 years there had remained in our family the uninterrupted privilege of nominating the prefect and priest.

“Moreover, we bear to-day also on our coat of arms, as proof of our descent, the castle of the island, superimposed on the Larian waters, with the addition of the Roman Eagle, with which Fredericus Ahenobarbus honoured our family, just as lately we have added the Columns of Hercules, by the gift of the Emperor Charles I., who looked with extremely favouring eyes on our zealous efforts.

“After the destruction of Milan, however, the people of Como, aided by the resources of Ahenobarbus, in revenge for the recent treachery of the islanders, completely devastated the island, ordering the inhabitants to remove to Varena, adding the decree, for a severe public example, that no one should ever build again on the island. And so it has remained for 400 years, hideous with its enormous ruins; and to-day, with merely the church remaining, which was spared through

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superstitious awe, it remains a habitation for the rabbits.”

And who were the masters who lived at Comacina? Mention has already been made of the survival of the Architectural College in Rome after the other guilds had been suppressed, and to this college probably belonged some at least of the nine martyrs to whom we have been alluding. But when Rome fell under Goth and Vandal, and reached a condition such as is pictured by Gregory the Great, there was no further call for the fraternity in Rome, and, accordingly, about A.D. 460 they, being now entirely Christian, fled, and travelling northwards, settled themselves in the district of Como, choosing for their headquarters the Island of Comacina, where they fortified their position, and in the sixth century held their own against the Lombards for twenty years before being subjugated; while in the twelfth century again they held their independence until overthrown by Como, and condemned to desolation by Frederick Barbarossa.

It is, of course, impossible to fix the exact date of their coming to Comacina, but it is noteworthy that it was in 480 that Theodoric interested himself in the island, and caused building work to be done upon it. This is the more suggestive, since it points to the probability, not only of a connection between Theodoric and the Comacine masters, but also suggests their association with Ravenna. Further, it is clear that when Belisarius entered Rome, after it was besieged by Totila

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in A.D. 547, he found people willing to help with the rebuilding, but *none skilled to guide them*.

Documentary evidence, dating back to A.D. 643, refers to them as the *Majestri Comacini*, and although it is not certain whether this appellation located them on



INTERIOR OF CHURCH AT TORCELLO, VENICE.

the island or is intended to apply to the district around Como, it is clear that by this time they were a compact and powerful guild, capable of asserting their rights, and that the guild was properly organized, having degrees of different ranks and *Magistri* at their head. Now, when we consider that during what historians have generally regarded

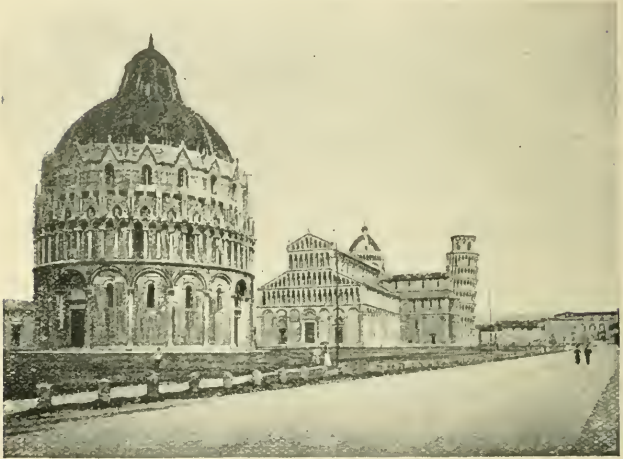
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as the Dark Ages, between A.D. 500 and 1200, there was a perfect and consistent link between the old and the new, and a perfect and consistent development of architecture—be it Lombard Byzantine, as at Ravenna and Venice; Romanesque, as at Pisa; Lombard Gothic, as at Milan; Norman Saracen, as in Sicily and the South, each style having its individuality, and yet at the same time its relation to the other—we can form no other conclusion than that to a well-organized body of men such order must be attributed.

Moreover, when we further consider that in the twelfth century the round arch prevailed in Italy, Germany, France, and England, with details having wonderful similarity and practically Lombard in character; that in the thirteenth century, when pointed arches mingled with the round ones in Italy they did so in all the other countries mentioned; and that the art of church building was in full power when other arts and commerce were but just beginning, we are forced to the conclusion that nothing short of a sound organization can have brought about such a result. And our conclusion that to the Comacine Masters are mainly due the mighty achievements spread throughout Western Europe is borne out by fact. To them can be traced the churches of S. Ambrose at Milan, the cathedral at Monza, S. Fidele and S. Abbondio at Como, S. Michele at Pavia, S. Vitale at Ravenna, S. Agnese, S. Lorenzo, S. Clemente and

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others at Rome, as well as the more ornate cathedrals of Pisa, Lucca, Milan, Arezzo, Brescia, etc., and the cloisters and aisles of Monreale and Palermo. Through the Comacines architecture and sculpture spread to France and Spain, Germany and England, and there developed into new and varied



CATHEDRAL, BAPTISTERY, AND LEANING TOWER, PISA.

styles, according to the exigencies of climate, material, etc. It was from these brethren at Como that Gregory sent artificers to England to accompany St. Augustine, and Gregory II. sent such to Germany with Boniface, while Charlemagne fetched them into France to build his church of Aix la Chapelle, the pro-

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totype of French Gothic, and, as some say, modelled on S. Vitale, Ravenna.

It is really wonderful how little seems to be known of these Comacine Masters, and, indeed, until Leader Scott drew attention to them, what little was known appears to have been confined to a small circle. This is what the late Rev. Charles Kingsley says in his lecture on the Roman and the Teuton (1891): "Then follow some curious laws in favour of the Masters of Como, Magistri Comacenes, perhaps the original germ of the great society of Freemasons, belonging, no doubt, to the Roman population who were settled about the Lake of Como, and were hired on contract (as the laws themselves express) to build for the Lombards, who, of course, had no skill to make anything beyond a skin tent or a log hall."

Mr. T. G. Jackson, R.A., in his review of *Le Origini dell' Architettura Lombarda* (*Architectural Review* for August, 1907) says: "Signor Riviora traces a reminiscence of the old Etruscan art which preceded that of Rome, coexisted for a long time with it, and to which there is good reason to think Roman art owed a much larger share of its peculiar character than has been generally admitted. "In Germany it is recorded that Bishop Rufus of Treves brought artificers from Italy to repair his cathedral—possibly among them were members of the mysterious Guild of Magistri Comacini, of whom so little is known with exactitude."

There is indeed so little known with

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exactitude, but a great deal may be, and, indeed, chapter and verse can be given for a large part of what we claim for the Comacines. We have already noted that they were called into England, Germany, and France, and there is no reason to doubt that to a very large extent, whenever some building of importance was wanted in Western Europe one of the lodges of Comacines was applied to. The notion so common amongst us that the great cathedral and church builders were the ecclesiastics may be true in the sense that they promoted these works, but that they were the chief architects, except in rare instances, cannot be borne out by the facts of the case. Doubtless some were admitted to the Guilds of Craftsmen as lay members, while others qualified as architects, but in the main skilled and properly organized workmen were called in. They were even summoned back to Rome, and, indeed, their hand is to be found in all the great buildings of the ages between A.D. 500 and 1200, and in many after that.

A really good illustration of this it fell to my lot to find. The interesting church of S. Ambrogio at Milan has a very fine atrium, and on the outside there is a tablet with this inscription :

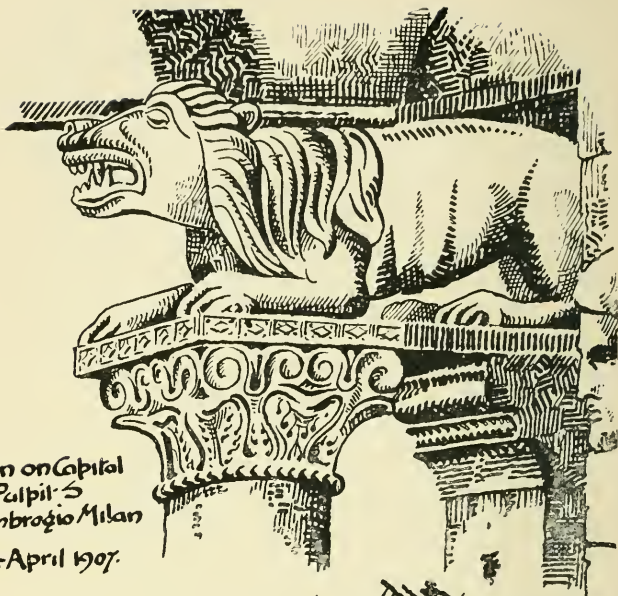
AVSPERTO DA BISSONE
ARCIVESCOVO DU MILAN.
DAL DCCCLXVIII AL DCCCLXXXI.
ERESE QVEST ATRIO.

Which in English reads, "Auspert of Bissone, Archbishop of Milan from 868 to 881, built

The Comacines

this atrium." But Leader Scott says, Look amongst the foliage and you will find the real name of the architect, "Magister Adam." So on two occasions I did look with all the care I could bring, and, notwithstanding two of the custodians of the church, one of whom had been there for forty years, told me there was no such person as Magister Adam concerned with the building, but that Auspert built the atrium, my search at the last moment, and just as I was giving it up as vain, was rewarded, not where Leader Scott said exactly, but not far off. There on the top of one of the shafts of the main entrance to the church were the letters indeed, "Magister Adam," but *upside down*.

It was no small pleasure to fetch one of the men who had denied Magister Adam's connection with the church, and to see the undisguised surprise with which he regarded my discovery, and the truly amusing way in which he reluctantly abandoned his scepticism. The explanation of the "Magister Adam" being upside down may be that, according to some critics, the atrium of St. Ambrogio was rebuilt some two hundred years after his time, and that in replacing this particular stone it got put in the wrong way up. But this is only one case among many—for instance, on a monument in Sta. Maria in Trastevere one reads the name of "Magister Paulus," and on the Palazzo Ragione in Milan there is a little equestrian statue of the Podesta Oldrado, dated 1233, by Benedetto Antelami, chief of the Coma-



Lion on Capital
of Pulpit S
Ambrogio Milan

14 April 1907.

Inscription of "Magister
Adam" on Column left
side of principal entrance
to S. Ambrogio Milan.

15 April 1907.



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cine masters. I quite believe that careful research would demonstrate the custom of calling in the guild to prepare the design as well as to execute the work. Moreover, it is a significant thing that, after the removal of the lodge of Lucca to Florence, on December 14, 1321, no great work in architecture arose either in Lucca, Pistoja, or Pisa, while all the great Florentine buildings date after this time.

One word as to the development of architecture under the Comacines. The Romans had evolved an art in which architectural treatment largely masked real construction, especially when the latter was in cement or brick. Their adornment was superficial, and it was for the Comacines to develop the style which chiefly in Italy became a treatment of real arches (round) on real columns (the latter often taken from older Roman buildings) and slightly pitched wooden roofs, which they afterwards developed internally into barrel vaults. Then came upon them the side influences from the East and South, that from the East bringing the Dome and Byzantine ornamentation, and that from the South (Saracenic) developing into the Italian Gothic or Pointed styles, which matured into the completeness of our Northern cathedrals both in France and England, until the whole succumbed to the enormous sweep of the Renaissance, which appropriated all the Roman orders, together with the vault and the dome, and ultimately supplanted the architecture of the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER V

THE COMACINE LODGES



AND now let us endeavour to trace the constitution of these Comacine lodges, and to ascertain something of their relation to the world at large.

It is capable of proof that in the seventh 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. With and under them worked the Colligantes: these appear to have consisted of novices and craftsmen. These Magistri Comacini are first mentioned by name in the laws of the Longobard King Rotharis (A.D. 652).

In the under church of S. Clemente at Rome there is a fresco of the tenth century which shows the master mason directing his men, and some think they can discern beneath the toga a master's apron. For my own part, although I looked carefully for it, I should not like to say it is undoubtedly there; but be this so or not, there is no mistaking the Magister who is named Sesinius, and who somewhat angrily directs his men, call-

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ing them sons of Pute. Under the life of S. Clemente, Voragine in the *Golden Legend* gives a different version to the masonic



FRESCOES IN LOWER CHURCH, S. CLEMENTE,
ROME.

tradition of Sesinius, but which scarcely corresponds with the fresco.

An Italian writer, referring to these guilds (Cesare Cantu Storia di Como), says : "They were called together in the Loggie (hence Lodge) by a grand master to hear of affairs

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common to the order, to accept novices, and confer superior degrees on others. The chief Lodge had other dependences, and all members were instructed in their duties to the society and taught to direct every action to the Glory of the Lord and His worship—to live faithful to God and the government—to lend themselves to the public good and fraternal charity.” “Strength, force and beauty were their symbols ; Bishops, Princes, men of high rank who studied architecture fraternized with them.” “From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries grand masters took oaths of discretion and fidelity. Masters coming from other Lodges were received and employed, Apprentices were not paid in the same manner as Craftsmen, and all questions were settled in Council.”

One other authority under this head may suffice—Signor Agostino Segredio, who, in his work on the building guilds of Venice, says: “While we are speaking of the Masonic Companies and their jealous secrecy we must not forget the most grand and potent guild of the Middle Ages, that of the Freemasons ; originating most probably from the builders of Como (Magistri Comacini), it spread beyond the Alps. Popes gave them their benediction, monarchs protected them, and the most powerful thought it an honour to be inscribed in their ranks ; they with the utmost jealousy practised all the arts connected with building, and by severe laws and penalties (perhaps also with bloodshed) prohibited others from the practice of building

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important edifices. Long and hard were the initiations to aspirants, and mysterious were the meetings and the teaching, and to enoble themselves they dated their origin from Solomon's Temple."

Some go so far as to say these guilds of craftsmen in the Middle Ages expanded their



COMACINE LODGE, ASSISI, WHICH HAS MASONIC DEVICE OVER ENTRANCE.

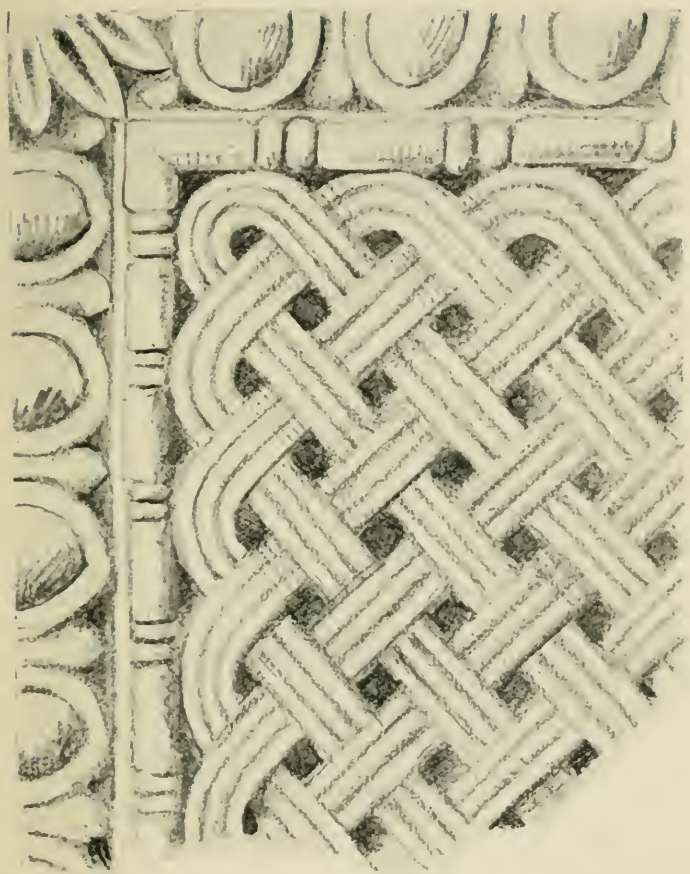
ritual to the extent of giving to their working tools moral, and even spiritual, significance. That may be a not unlikely outcome of their system, but whether so or not, they had their symbols, without doubt. This is illustrated in a house at Assisi having the date on its door 1405, but perhaps of greater antiquity, shown to this day as that of the Comacini,

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and on the keystone to the entrance is still to be seen carved the open compasses containing a rose. This badge also, together with a masonic square, the Comacini have left on the castle at Assisi, where also they worked.

But the great distinguishing badges of the order are the endless knot and the Lion of Judah. The endless knot appears to mark off the work of the earlier age, the Lion appearing when the more elaborate carvings and the richer details of later centuries prevailed. This endless knot is to this day one of the most beautiful and interesting of ornamental details in connection with the carving of stone, and while its pattern is varied in many ways, its 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 end; sometimes, however, it has a beginning and end, but without a break, and its interlacings are so intricate as to give it the name of "Intreccia."

It is to this day known in Italy as King Solomon's Knot, and finds its place on the surface of arches, in the capitals of columns, on altars, tympana, arcades and panels, but perhaps in its most beautiful development, in screens. Those in S. Clemente at Rome are wonderfully fine, and, be it remembered, as we shall see presently, this ornament comes home to us in our Celtic crosses and monumental slabs. It is not disjointed like some Byzantine surface decorations, but consistent



KNOT-WORK, S. CLEMENTE, ROME.

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to its character throughout. It is everywhere the badge of the same Brotherhood—the sign-manual of the same Guild of Craftsmen. The symbolic allusion in this remarkable badge would appear to be the inscrutable character of the Divine Being whose ways are past finding out, and whose existence is without beginning or end—an unbroken unity. Whether the threefold strands have reference to the Trinity in such unity or not, it is impossible to say, but such would be by no means an unlikely thing ; or the allusion may have been to the threefold cord which is not quickly broken.

One is struck by the extraordinary amount of this ornamentation to be found in Italy, much still *in situ*, and one would almost say still more in fragments, built into walls and varied in character to a remarkable degree. The churches about Como, chiefly, perhaps, that of S. Abbondio, have some rich illustrations of the Comacine knot-work. When we remember that the two great pillars which stood at the entrance to King Solomon's Temple were adorned with *network* as well as other devices, we get at least a suggestion that here may be the origin of King Solomon's knot, and this is emphasized by the fact that there stands in the court of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem a pillar having a basketwork capital with this identical interlaced pattern. Does it not look very much as if the traditions of the network had lingered and found expression again in this product of a later age?

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It is interesting in passing to note that the Romans had a similar, but less intricate, pattern in a great deal of their paving, and



CHURCH OF S. ABBONDIO, COMO.

might not that have been in their day the working out of a "Temple tradition" received through the Etruscans, and the type of the fuller knot developed by the Coma-

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cines? As regards the Lion of Judah, there is more difficulty; indeed, there is here the mystery which enshrouds all the grotesque work of the Middle Ages, whether lions, griffins, or other monsters. Leader Scott would have us believe the lion here is the



ROMAN PAVEMENT, SILCHESTER, HANTS.

type of Christ, and that when columns are on the backs of lions, as at Pisa and Siena, they represent our Lord as the Pillar of Faith, springing from the tribe of Judah; while, when surmounting the column, He is figured as the Door, the latter being the earlier form—viz., that which prevailed

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from before A.D. 1000 to 1200, while the former held from A.D. 1200 to 1500. This all fits in with such representations as at Monza, where the lion is nursing a lamb; but when, as at Assisi or Siena, the lion is eating man or animals one wonders how this



PULPIT OF BAPTISTERY, PISA.

symbol applies. This wonder is increased by finding lionesses and cubs, as at Siena. True, it may be that some such representations in a rough and coarse way may suggest the absorbing power of Christianity, or convey something akin to what we read in the

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Apocalypse about the "wrath of the Lamb." But if Ruskin and others who have studied the subject can only guess at a meaning for these strange creatures, we must be content to leave the mystery unsolved.

One wonders, however, why, if the association with King Solomon's Temple is so manifest in the knot, the lions should not have their relation to the same beasts which adorned the approach to King Solomon's throne. And it must not be forgotten, again, that the Hittites' influence is in the oldest piece of sculpture in Europe—viz., the lions at Mykenæ; while the Etruscans also attempted representations of the king of beasts, generally as guardians of a gate. Slate tablets also found some years since at Abydos represent lions devouring captives. Tolerably certain, however, it is that the lion of the later Comacines' work had some reference to Christ, and found its way, as the badge of the Brotherhood in some form or other, into most of their more important buildings.

Other ancient badges (for the Comacines were full of symbolism, whether in planning or decorating their buildings), such as the pentalpha and the hexalpha, they had, and these can be traced back to centuries before Christ. And then there are the mason marks, which from their position can only have been for the identification of work with workmen, and which we find to be identical in churches as far apart as Cefalu, in Sicily, and Canterbury, Lincoln, etc.

CHAPTER VI

COMACINE INFLUENCE IN THE BRITISH ISLES

ND now, before we reach the closing part of our theme, let us refer again to the influence of the Comacines on the architecture of the British Isles, for I think it can be demonstrated that such really did exist, and to a quite remarkable degree.

Let us keep in memory a few facts :

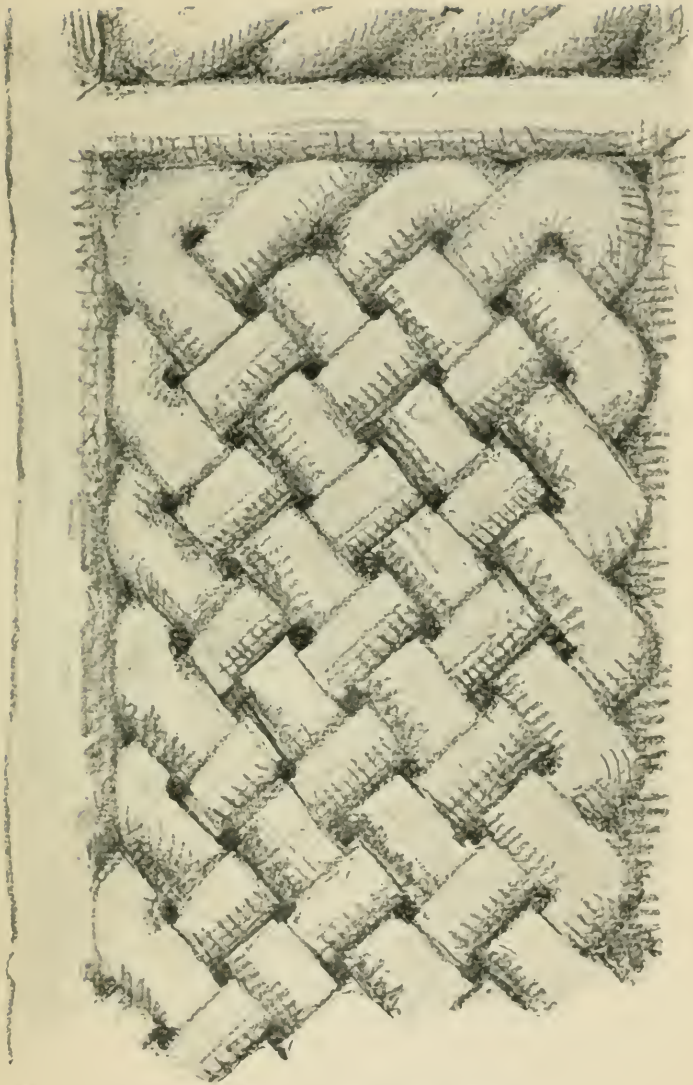
First, that with the Roman legions there came to our shores Lodges of Artificers. They in time became Christian, and probably built the Romano-British churches, of which we have already seen there were a considerable number in our land—one, as is well known, at Silchester. Then we get a slackening off in many directions when the Romans left our shores, and after that the inroads of Pagan Saxons gradually obliterating, although not wholly destroying, the influence of Christianity—at any rate, driving it westward until it was almost extinct in the Saxon kingdom. Then, be it remembered, the trend of the Christian migration was to Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland, where in all these districts the Christian faith was kept alive, but cut off from intercourse with Europe, and especially with Italy, except by the open sea.

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Then we know that such communication by sea was maintained, and, indeed, existed at least 700 years before the time of Christ. We further find that the Christian Church of Ireland sent the Culdees to Scotland, and thence Christianity spread to the Northern Kingdom, quite before the time of St. Augustine. These Culdees, by the way, are said (Gould's *Freemasonry*) to have had connection with the Romans in Britain, and to have learned the art of building from their Collegia. They also had the endless cord.

Now all this being so—and let it be emphasized that the districts we are now considering were practically cut off from the civilized world, except by the open sea, by the Pagan Saxons—what do we find? In every one of these countries, even to Northumbria, but practically nowhere else in Great Britain, the Comacine knots, in some cases of two, in some of one, strand only. Also in a few instances the Chi Rho, so abundant in Italy; while in Ireland we get the round towers, about which so much has been speculated, and which are so strikingly similar to those of Ravenna.

It may be said that the surface ornament, of which we are chiefly speaking now, was but the development of the Runic ornament of the Scandinavian, the answer to which is: These are Christian; and while similar ideas may have been carried to the Scandinavians by the Phœnicians, with whom they had early intercourse (and these latter held traditions of Solomon's Temple), it is far more



KNOT-WORK, ST. NEOT'S, CORNWALL.

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likely it came to our western shores by direct intercourse with Italy.

With regard to the question as to how the Round Towers came into Ireland, Leader Scott's book says : "In the first place, where can similar towers be found dating from times contemporary? The answer is decided in Italy : in Ravenna and Lombardy, from the date A.D. 300 to the fifth and sixth centuries ; and they show just that Eastern touch which distinguishes the Byzantine Roman Architecture of Ravenna, and has caused authors to seek the origin of the Round Towers farther east than Italy." Again, with reference to the Solomon's knot, the same author says : "By the ninth and tenth centuries the Irish Cross had reached its full development—it was no longer a sign or slab, but a beautiful upright sculptured Cross, with a circle crowning it like a halo, and suggesting the eternity of the human Cross of our Saviour." St. Patrick, Ireland's great missionary, too, A.D. 375-464, was of continental origin on his mother's side, and Miss Margaret Stokes tells us a great deal about the intercourse between Italy and Ireland — enough to show that it was very direct and complete. Indeed, in her interesting book entitled *Six Months in the Apennines*, she seems to have renounced the theory that the interlaced work on the Irish crosses and other such devices originated with the Irish or their predecessors, and is forced to the conclusion that from the number of Irish saints who

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visited or settled in Italy were transmitted to Ireland that which they already found to be in existence in the country of their adoption. St. Patrick, moreover, obscure as in many respects his doings may be, undoubtedly travelled in Italy, and was for some time in the monastery on Lerinus, an island just off

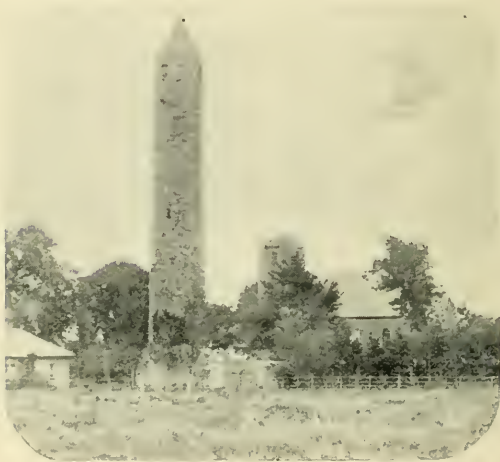


ROUND TOWER AND CHURCH OF S. APOLLINARE IN CLASSE,
RAVENNA.

Cannes, in the Mediterranean. St. Columbanus also was an Irish saint, and about 613 came to Italy, where he became a very important person, both as a Churchman and a scholar. In *Old Cornish Crosses* Romilly Allen remarks the connection between Italian and Cornish details.

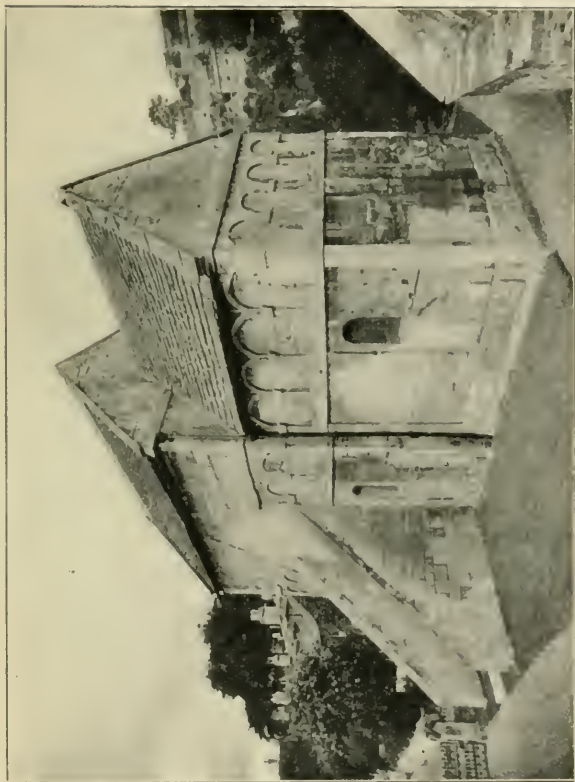
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So much, then, for our western shores. We turn to Saxon England, and have already seen that St. Augustine in A.D. 598 brought over with him several of the community of the *Liberi Muratori*, and to this it may be added that in 604 he wrote to the Pope asking for more architects and workmen, and



ROUND TOWER, CLONDALKIN, IRELAND.

these Gregory sent him. Further, it is remarked by the Rev. W. Miles Barnes that the Saxon font in Toller Fratrum Church, Dorset, and the eighth-century well-head at the office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Rome, are decorated with precisely similar interlacing bands in three strands, bordered by a cable moulding. Again, in 601 Pope



SAXON CHURCH, BRADFORD-ON-AVON.

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Gregory sent Paulinus and others to England to assist in missionary work, and this Paulinus is called Magister, implying he was an experienced architect as well as a missionary, and he had his hand in Lincoln and York, the latter a church of basilican type. About this time also the crosses of England began to have interlaced ornamentation, and the Church of St. Andrew at Hexham, built by Wilfred of York, was basilican in its character, with its apse at its west end. More might be said as to phrases and words which indicate Comacine influence on Saxon work, as also to striking similarities in the character of such work—*e.g.*, the round arched external arcades with shafts, capitals and bases, as at Comacina and Bradford-on-Avon—but time and space will not permit; and, in concluding this part of our subject, we may well ask the question: If the Christianized Saxons did not get the ideas of building from Romano-British traditions—and that is not at all likely—whence did they receive them? Surely from the Continent; and if from there, especially during the time when Gregory was Pope, the only conclusion we can regard as reasonable is that either men of a guild who were in favour with him were employed, or Saxon ecclesiastics who had graduated in their schools executed the important works of their day in England. Probably both conclusions are correct, and similar arguments might be applied to the connection between the later developments of architecture in England and Italy.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION



WE have reached the last part of our study. Can we claim that the great masonic body of to-day in England, America, and the Colonies and Dependencies of the British Isles, are legitimately descended from the Comacines? Through the building guilds of the Later Middle Ages we can, for they were the offspring of that body; and notwithstanding that in 1717, as already stated, our modern Freemasonry was remodelled largely on the regulations of the German Steinmetzen (themselves descendants of the Comacines), yet this by no means proves that it grew out of it. On the contrary, we claim that what happened was an existing corporation or corporations, growing yearly less and less operative and more and more speculative, was finally recast in 1717. This is borne out by the following:

In the Aubrey MS. we find: "Sir William Dugdale told me many yeares since that about Henry the third's time the Pope gave a bull of diploma to an company of Italian architects to travell up and downe over all Europe to build churches. From those are derived the

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fraternity of Freemasons. They are known to one another by certain signes and markes and watchwords; it continues to this day. They have severall lodges in several countres for their reception, and when any of them fall into decay the brotherhood is to relieve him, etc. The manner of their adoption is formall and with an oath of secrecy." Again, in the year 1375 the term Freemason first appears in the records of the City of London, and this is meant to apply to operative masons who were free of certain taxes, restrictions etc., and free to travel in time of feudal bondage.

An Italian book, quoted by Leader Scott, 1788, describes the institutions, rules, and ceremonies of Freemasons, and begins with Adoniram, who had so many men to pay at the building of the Temple that he had to divide them into three classes—novices, operatori, and magistri—each of which class had secret signs and pass words, so that wages could be fixed and imposture avoided. It is significant that these classes existed in the Roman Collegium and the Comacine Guilds, the latter of whom are described in an ancient MS. as *Libera Muratori* (Free Wall-builders).

Let us briefly sum up our argument.

1. Centuries before Christ and the founding of Rome, a race of Hametic descent spread along the Mediterranean shores, and afterwards became known in Syria and Asia Minor as Hittites, in Greece as Pelasgoi, and in Italy as Etruscans.

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2. Hittites were engaged in building the Temple at Jerusalem, the fame of which spread far and wide.

3. The Romans learned their arts of building, decoration and pottery, etc., from the Etruscans, who were the same race as the Hittites, and carried with them some at least of their traditions.

4. In Rome developed Collegia of Artificers, and in early Christian days these had traditions of King Solomon.

5. At the downfall of Rome the Guild of Artificers left and settled in the district of Como, holding as their centre the island of Comacina.

6. That thence they spread their influence over all Western Europe, and even to our own shores.

7. That they merged into the great Masonic Guilds of the Middle Ages.

8. That, as these guilds died out, their forms and ceremonies were preserved to a great extent in our masonic lodges—at any rate, under those of the English and American constitutions.

One word in conclusion. Masons more than others will be able to judge adequately the similarity between ancient rite and modern practice. This is inevitable in a subject such as this.

Surely the bidding prayer of English and American Freemasonry must put into prominent rank those grand originals, the Quatuor Coronati, and close upon them, in order of merit, the Comacines.

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