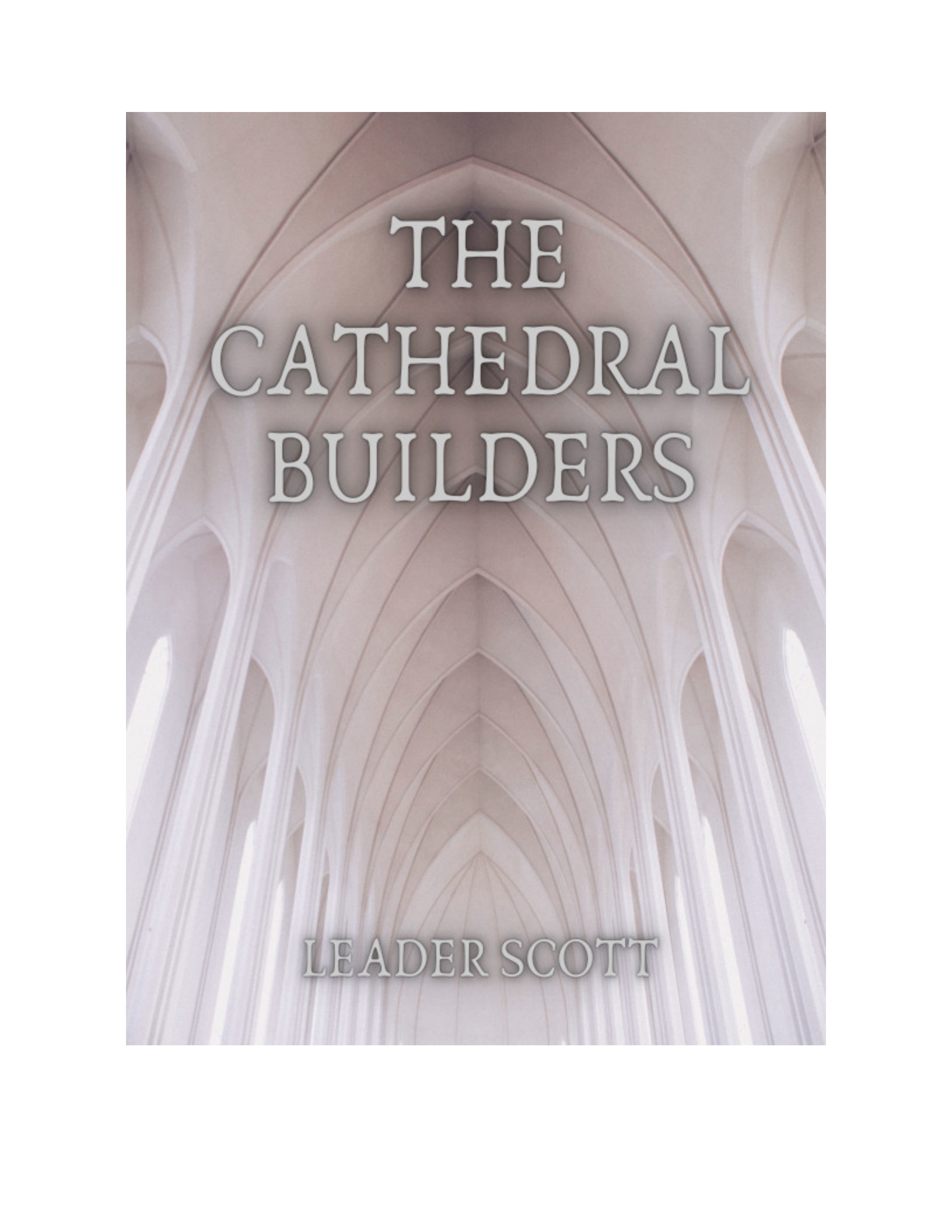


# THE CATHEDRAL BUILDERS

LEADER SCOTT



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*Leader Scott*

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# Table of contents

PROEM

BOOK I ROMANO-LOMBARD ARCHITECTS

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CHAPTER I THE GUILD OF THE COMACINE  
MASTERS

CHAPTER II THE COMACINES UNDER THE  
LONGOBARDS

CHAPTER III CIVIL ARCHITECTURE UNDER THE  
LONGOBARDS

CHAPTER IV COMACINE ORNAMENTATION IN  
THE LOMBARD ERA

CHAPTER V COMACINES UNDER CHARLEMAGNE

CHAPTER VI IN THE TROUBLOUS TIMES

BOOK II FIRST FOREIGN EMIGRATIONS OF THE COMACINES

---

CHAPTER I THE NORMAN LINK

CHAPTER II THE GERMAN LINK

CHAPTER III THE ORIGIN OF SAXON  
ARCHITECTURE (A SUGGESTION) BY THE REV. W.  
MILES BARNES[101]

CHAPTER IV THE TOWERS AND CROSSES OF  
IRELAND

BOOK III ROMANESQUE ARCHITECTS

---

CHAPTER I TRANSITION PERIOD

CHAPTER II THE MODENA-FERRARA LINK

CHAPTER III THE TUSCAN LINK

CHAPTER IV ROMANESQUE AND GOTHIC  
ORNAMENTATION

CHAPTER V CIVIL ARCHITECTURE OF THE  
ROMANESQUE ERA

BOOK IV ITALIAN-GOTHIC, AND RENAISSANCE ARCHITECTS

---

CHAPTER I THE SECESSION OF THE PAINTERS

CHAPTER II THE SIENA AND ORVIETO LODGES

CHAPTER III THE FLORENTINE LODGE

CHAPTER IV THE MILAN LODGE

CHAPTER V THE VENETIAN LINK

CHAPTER VI THE ROMAN LODGE

EPILOGUE

FOOTNOTES:

COLOPHON



Cloister of S. John Lateran, Rome, 12th century.



# PROEM



In most histories of Italian art we are conscious of a vast hiatus of several centuries, between the ancient classic art of Rome—which was in its decadence when the Western Empire ceased in the fifth century after Christ—and that early rise of art in the twelfth century which led to the Renaissance.

This hiatus is generally supposed to be a time when Art was utterly dead and buried, its corpse in Byzantine dress lying embalmed in its tomb at Ravenna. But all death is nothing but the germ of new life. Art was not a corpse, it was only a seed, laid in Italian soil to germinate, and it bore several plants before the great reflowering period of the Renaissance.

The seed sown by the Classic schools formed the link between them and the Renaissance, just as the Romance Languages of Provence and Languedoc form the link between the dying out of the classic Latin and the rise of modern languages.

Now where are we to look for this link?

In language we find it just between the Roman and Gallic Empires.

In Art it seems also to be on that borderland—Lombardy—where the *Magistri Comacini*, a mediæval Guild of *Liberi Muratori* (Freemasons), kept alive in their traditions the seed of classic art, slowly training it through Romanesque forms up to the Gothic, and hence to the full Renaissance. It is a significant coincidence that this obscure link in Art, like the link-languages, is styled by many writers Provençal or Romance style, for the Gothic influence spread in France even before it expanded so gloriously in Germany.

I think if we study these obscure Comacine Masters we shall find that they form a firm, perfect, and consistent link between the old and the new, filling completely that ugly gap in the History of Art. So fully that all the different Italian styles, whose names are legion—being Lombard-Byzantine at Ravenna and Venice, Romanesque at Pisa and Lucca, Lombard-Gothic at Milan, Norman-Saracen in Sicily and the south,—are nothing more than the different developments in differing climates and ages, of the art of one powerful guild of sculptor-builders, who nursed the seed of Roman art on the border-land of the falling Roman Empire, and spread the growth in far-off countries.

We shall see that all that was architecturally good in Italy

during the dark centuries between 500 and 1200 A.D. was due to the Comacine Masters, or to their influence. To them can be traced the building of those fine Lombard Basilicas of S. Ambrogio at Milan, Theodolinda's church at Monza, S. Fedele at Como, San Michele at Pavia, and San Vitale at Ravenna; as well as the florid cathedrals of Pisa, Lucca, Milan, Arezzo, Brescia, etc. Their hand was in the grand Basilicas of S. Agnese, S. Lorenzo, S. Clemente, and others in Rome, and in the wondrous cloisters and aisles of Monreale and Palermo.

Through them architecture and sculpture were carried into foreign lands, France, Spain, Germany, and England, and there developed into new and varied styles according to the exigencies of the climate, and the tone of the people. The flat roofs, horizontal architraves, and low arches of the Romanesque, which suited a warm climate, gradually changed as they went northward into the pointed arches and sharp gables of the Gothic; the steep sloping lines being a necessity in a land where snow and rain were frequent.

But however the architecture developed in after times, it was the Comacine Masters who carried the classic germs and planted them in foreign soils; it was the brethren of the *Liberi Muratori* who, from their head-quarters at Como, were sent by Gregory the Great to England with Saint Augustine, to build churches for his converts; by Gregory II. to Germany with Boniface on a similar

mission; and were by Charlemagne taken to France to build his church at Aix-la-Chapelle, the prototype of French Gothic.

How and why such a powerful and influential guild seemed to spring from a little island in Lake Como, and how their world-wide reputation grew, the following scraps of history, borrowed from many an ancient source, will, I hope, explain.

It is strange that Art historians hitherto have made so little of the Comacine Masters. I do not think that Cattaneo mentions them at all. Hope, although divining a universal Masonic Guild, enlarges on all their work as Lombard; Fergusson disposes of them in a single unimportant sentence; and Symonds is not much more diffuse; while Marchese Ricci gives them the credit of the early Lombard work and no more. I was led at length to a closer study of them by the two ponderous tomes on the *Maestri Comacini* [\[1\]](#)—by Professor Merzario, who has got together a huge amount of material from old writers, old deeds, and old stones. But valuable as the material is, Merzario is bewildering in his redundancy, confusing in his arrangement, and not sufficiently clear in his deductions, his chief aim being to show how many famous artists came from Lombardy.

I wrote to ask Signor Merzario if I might associate his name with mine in preparing a work for the English public, in which his research would furnish me with so

much that is valuable to the history of art, but to my regret I found he had died since the book was written, so I never received his permission; though his publisher was very kind in permitting me to use the book as a chief work of reference. With Merzario I have collated many other recognized authorities on architecture and archæology, besides archival documents, and old chronicles. I have tried to make some slight chronological arrangement, and some intelligible lists of the names of the Masters at different eras. The researches of the great archivist Milanesi in his *Documenti per la Storia dell' Arte Senese* , and Cesare Guasti in his lately published collection of documents relating to the building of the Duomo of Florence, have been of immense service in throwing a light on the organization of the Lodges and their government. All that Signor Merzario dimly guessed from the more fragmentary earlier records of Parma, Modena, and Verona, shines out clear and well-defined under the fuller light of these later records, and helps us to read many a dark saying of the older times.

My thanks for much kind assistance in supplying me with facts or authorities, are due to the Rev. Canonico Pietro Tonarelli of Parma cathedral; the Rev. Vincenzo Rossi, Priore of Settignano; Commendatore John Temple Leader of Florence; and to my brother, the Rev. William Miles Barnes, Rector of Monkton, who has written the

"English link" for me. Acknowledgments are also due to Signor Alinari and Signor Brogi of Florence, and to Signor Ongania of Venice, for permitting the use of their photographs as illustrations.

# BOOK I ROMANO-LOMBARD ARCHITECTS

# CHAPTER I THE GUILD OF THE COMACINE MASTERS



In looking back to the great church-building era, *i.e.* to the centuries between 1100 and 1500, do not the questions arise in one's mind, "How did all these great and noble buildings spring up simultaneously in all countries and all climates?" and "How comes it that in all cases they were similar to each other at similar times?"

In the twelfth century, when the Italian buildings, such as the churches at Verona, Bergamo, Como, etc., were built with round arches, the German Domkirchen at Bonn, Mayence, Treves, Lubeck, Freiburg, etc.; the French churches at Aix, Tournus, Caen, Dijon, etc.; and the English cathedrals at Canterbury, Bristol, Chichester, St. Bartholomew's in London—in fact, all those built at the same time—were not only round-arched, but had an almost identical style, and that style was Lombard.

In the thirteenth century, when pointed arches mingled



with the round in Italy, the same mixture is found contemporaneously in all the other countries.

Again in the fourteenth century, when Cologne, Strasburg, and Magdeburg cathedrals were built in pure Gothic; then those of Westminster, York, Salisbury, etc., arose in England; the Domes of Milan, Assisi, and Florence in Italy; and the churches of Beauvais, Laon, and Rouen in France. These all came, almost simultaneously, like sister buildings with one *impronto* on them all.

Is it likely that many single architects in different countries would have had the same ideas at the same time? Could any single architect, indeed, have designed every detail of even one of those marvellous complex buildings? or have executed or modelled one-tenth of the wealth of sculpture lavished on one of those glorious cathedrals? I think not.

The existence of one of these churches argues a plurality of workers under one governing influence; the existence of them all argues a huge universal brotherhood of architects and sculptors with different branches in each country, and the same aims, technique, knowledge and principles permeating through all, while each conforms in detail to local influences and national taste.

If we once realize that such a Guild must have existed, and that under the united hands of the grand brotherhood, the great age of church-building was

endowed with monuments which have been the glory of all ages, then much that has been obscure in Art History becomes clear; and what was before a marvel is now shown to be a natural result.

There is another point also to be considered. The great age of church-building flourished at a time when other arts and commerce were but just beginning. Whence, out of the dark ages, sprang the skill and knowledge to build such fine and sculpturesque edifices, when other trades were in their infancy, and civic and communal life scarcely organized?

It is indeed a subject of wonder how the artists of the early period of the rise of Art were trained. Here we find men almost in the dark ages, who were the most splendid architects, and at the same time sculptors, painters, and even poets. How, for instance, did Giotto, a boy taken from the sheep-folds, learn to be a painter, sculptor, and architect of such rank that the city of Florence chose him to be the builder of the Campanile? Did he learn it all from old Cimabue's frescoes, and half Byzantine *tavole*? and how did he prove to the city that he was a qualified architect? We find him written in the archives as *Magister* Giotto, consequently he must have passed through the school and *laborerium* of some guild where every branch of the arts was taught, and have graduated in it as a master.

All these things will become more and more clear as we

follow up the traces of the Comacine Guild from the chrysalis state, in which Roman art hybernated during the dark winter of the Middle Ages, through the grub state of the Lombard period, to the glorious winged flights of the full Gothic of the Renaissance.

And first as to the chrysalis, at little Como. The origin of the name *Comacine Masters* has caused a great deal of argument amongst Italian writers new and old. Some think it merely a place-name referring to the island of Comacina, in Lake Lario or Como; others take a wider significance, and say it means not only the city of Como, but all the province, which was once a Roman colony of great extension. Others again, among whom is Grotius, suggest that it is not a place-name at all, but comes from the Teutonic word *Gemachin* or house-builders. As the Longobards afterwards called them in Italian *Maestri Casarii*, which means the same thing, there is perhaps something to be said for this hypothesis.

The first to draw attention to the name *Magistri Comacini*, was the erudite Muratori, that searcher out of ancient MSS., who unearthed from the archives an edict, dated November 22, 643, signed by King Rotharis, in which are included two clauses treating of the *Magistri Comacini* and their colleagues. The two clauses, Nos. 143 and 144, out of the 388 inscribed in crabbed Latin, are, when anglicized, to the following intent—

"Art. 143. Of the *Magister Comacinus*. If the Comacine

Master with his *colliganti* (colleagues) shall have contracted to restore or build the house of any person whatsoever, the contract for payment being made, and it chances that some one shall die by the fall of the said house, or any material or stones from it, the owner of the said house shall not be cited by the *Magister Comacinus* or his brethren to compensate them for homicide or injury; because having for their own gain contracted for the payment of the building, they must sustain the risks and injuries thereof." [2]

"Art. 144. Of the engaging or hiring of *Magistri* . If any person has engaged or hired one or more of the Comacine Masters to design a work ( *conduxerit ad operam dictandum* ), or to daily assist his workmen in building a palace or a house, and it should happen that by reason of the house some Comacine should be killed, the owner of the house is not considered responsible; but if a pole or a stone shall kill or injure any extraneous person, the Master builder shall not bear the blame, but the person who hired him shall make compensation." [3]

These laws prove that in the seventh century the *Magistri Comacini* were a compact and powerful guild, capable of asserting their rights, and that the guild was properly organized, having degrees of different ranks; that the higher orders were entitled *Magistri* , and could "design" or "undertake" a work;— *i.e.* act as architects; and that the *colligantes* worked under, or with, them. In fact, a

powerful organization altogether;—so powerful and so solid, that it speaks of a very ancient foundation.

But when and how did it originate?

Was it a surviving branch of the Roman *Collegium* ? a decadent group of Byzantine artists stranded in Italy? or was it of older Eastern origin? A clever logician could prove it to be all three.

For the Roman theory, he could base his arguments on the Latin nomenclature of officials, and the Latin form of the churches.

For the Byzantine theory, he would have the style of certain ornamentations, and the assertions of German writers, such as Müller, and Stieglitz.

For the ancient Eastern theory, he might plead their Hebrew and Oriental symbolism.

We will take the Byzantine theory first. Müller (*Archaeologie der Kunst* , p. 224) says that: "From Constantinople as the centre of mechanical skill, a knowledge of art radiated to distant countries, corporations of builders of Grecian birth were permitted to exercise a judicial government among themselves according to the laws of the country to which they owed allegiance;" and Stieglitz, in his *History of Architecture* , records a *tradition* that at the time the Lombards were in possession of Northern Italy, *i.e.* from the sixth to the eighth century, the Byzantine builders formed themselves into guilds and associations, and that on

account of having received from the Popes the privilege of living according to their own laws and ordinances, they were called Freemasons. [4] Italian and Latin writers, however, place the advent of these Greek artists at a later period; they are supposed to have been sculptors, who, rebelling against the strict Iconoclasm of Leo, the Isaurian—718 A.D. to 741—came over to Italy where art was more free, and joined the *Collegia* there.

But at this time most of the chief Longobardic churches were already built by the Comacine Masters, and were Roman in form, mediæval in ornamentation, and full of ancient symbolism. Herr Stieglitz must have pre-dated his tradition. Besides this I can find no sign in Italian buildings, or writers about them, of any lasting Byzantine influence. Indeed pure Byzantine architecture in Italy seems sporadic and isolated, not only in regard to site, but in regard to time. The Ravenna mosaics, a few in Rome, a little work in Venice, is all one can call absolutely Byzantine; and the influence never spread far. The Comacine ornamentation indeed has qualities utterly distinct in spirit, though in some of its forms allied to Byzantine. It is possible that some of these Eastern exiles joined the Comacine Guild, but there is quite enough in the communications of Como with the Greeks, to account for their having imbibed as much as they did of Byzantine style. Some of the Bishops who were rulers of Como before and after Lombard times were Greeks;

notably Amantius the fourth, who was translated there from Thessalonica, and his successor, S. Abbondio. Also through the Patriarch of Aquileja, under whose jurisdiction they were brought later, the guild was put into contact with the Greek sculptors then at Venice, Grado, and Ravenna.



Comacine Panel from the Church of San Clemente, Rome. The Lattice-work is made of a single strand interlaced. Date, 6th century.

We will leave the Oriental theory aside as too vague and traditional for proof, depending as it does on a few Oriental symbols, and certain forms of decoration, and will look nearer home—even to Rome, with which a connection may certainly be found, and that in a form visible to our modern eyes.

Rome is almost as full of remains of what is now styled Comacine architecture, as it is of classic and pagan ruins, and they are nearly as deeply buried. Go where you will, and in the vestibules or crypts of churches, now of gaudy Renaissance style, you will find the sign and seal of the ancient guild. Investigate any church which has a Lombard tower—and they are many—and you will discover that the hands which built that many-windowed tower have left their mark on the church. In that wonderful third-century basilica, which was discovered beneath the thirteenth-century one of S. Clemente; in the almost subterranean basilica of *S. Agnese fuori le mura* ; in the vestibule of the florid modern SS. Apostoli; in Santa Maria in Cosmedin; and various other buildings, are wonderful old slabs of marble with complicated Comacine knots on them. Our illustration is from a slab in San Clemente, which was evidently from the buried



church, though used as a panel in the parapet of the existing choir. A marvellous piece of basket-work in marble, which, if studied, will be found composed of a single cord, twined and intertwined. An almost identical panel is preserved in the wall of the staircase to S. Agnese, another has just been found reversed, and the back of it used for the thirteenth-century mosaic decoration of the pulpit in S. Maria in Cosmedin.

Then in the later Lombard churches of S. Lorenzo in Lucina, SS. Giovanni e Paolo, S. John Lateran, etc., one may see the crouching Comacine lions, now mostly minus their pillars, and shoved under square door-lintels, or built into walls, where they remain to tell of the ancient builders whose sign and seal they were.

And here and there we get a name.

In the vestibule of the SS. Apostoli is a red marble lion, on the base of which in Gothic letters is the name BASSALECTI. Beneath it is an old inscription, "Opus magister Bassalecti Marmorari Romano sec, XIII." This same Magister's name, spelt *Vassalecti*, has lately been discovered inscribed on the capitals of some columns in the nave of S. John Lateran.

In the under church of S. Clemente, an ancient fresco of the eighth century takes us further back than this. Here we see a veritable Roman *Magister* directing his men. He stands in magisterial toga (and surely one may descry a masonic apron beneath it!), directing his men in the

moving of a marble column, and with the naïve simplicity of the primitive artist each man's name is written beside him. Albertel and Cosmaris are dragging up the column with a rope, the sons of Pute, who are possibly novices, are helping them, while Carvoncelle is lifting it from behind with a lever. These men are all in short jerkins, but the master, Sisinius, is standing in his toga, directing them with outstretched hand.

Here is the Magister of a Roman *Collegium* embalmed and preserved for us, that we may see him and his men at work as they were in the early centuries after Christ. We know that Masonic *Collegia* were still existing in Rome in the time of Constantine and Theodosius; we know that Constantine built the basilica of S. Agnese, afterwards restored by Pope Symmachus; also those of S. Lorenzo—at least the round-arched part of it—enlarged by Galla Placidia in the fifth century; S. Paolo *fuori le Mura*, and other ancient churches. We see from remains recently brought to light, that these were originally of the exact plan of the churches built "in the Roman manner" at Hexham and York in England, and of the Ravenna churches, and S. Pietro in Grado at Pisa, also nearly contemporary. We further realize that all of these were identical in style with the finer specimens of Lombard building some centuries later. There is only the natural decline of art which would have taken place in the century or two of barbarian invasion, between the two

epochs, but the traditional forms, methods, etc., are all reproduced in the Lombard-Comacine churches. Compare the fourth-century door of the church of S. Marcello at Capua with the eighth-century one of S. Michele at Pavia, and you will find precisely the same style of art. Compare the Roman capitals of the church of Santa Costanza, built by Constantine, with the capitals in any Comacine church up to 1200, and you will see the same mixture of Ionic and a species of Corinthian with upstanding volutes. Some of the Comacine buildings have these upright volutes plain instead of foliated. The effect is rude, but I think these plainer capitals were not a sign of incapacity in the architects of the guild, for one sees richly ornate ones on the same building. It was only the stock design of the inferior masters, when funds did not allow of payment for richer work.



Frescoes in the Subterranean Church of San Clemente, Rome. Upper line, Byzantine, 4th century; under ones,

Comacine, 8th century.

Therefore it may be inferred: (1) That architects of the same guild worked in Rome and in Ravenna in the early centuries after Christ; (2) that though the architects were Roman, the decorators up to the fourth century were chiefly Byzantine, or had imbibed that style as their paintings show; (3) that in the time when Rome lay a heap of ruins under the barbarians, *the Collegium* , or a *Collegium* , I know not which, fled to independent Como; and there in after centuries they were employed by the Longobards, and ended in again becoming a powerful guild.

Hope, the author of an historical Essay on Architecture, had a keen prevision of this guild, although he had no documents or archives, but only the testimony of old stones and buildings to prove it. After sketching the formation of the Roman *Collegia* , and the employment of their members as Christian architects under the early Popes, he says "that a number of these, finding their work in Rome gone in the times of invasion, banded together to do such work in other parts of the world." He seems to think that the nucleus of this union was Lombardy, where the superiority of the architecture, under the Lombard kings, was such that the term *Magistri Comacini* became almost a generic name for architects. He says that builders and sculptors formed a single grand fraternity, whose scope was to find work outside Italy.

Indeed distance and obstacles were nothing to them; they travelled to England under Augustine, to Germany with St. Boniface, to France with Charlemagne, and again to Germany with their brother *magister* , Albertus Magnus; they went to the east under the Eastern Emperors, to the south under the Lombard Dukes, and in fact are found everywhere through many centuries. The Popes, one after another, gave them privileges. Indeed the builders may be considered an army of artisans working in the interest of the Popes, in all places where the missionaries who preceded them had prepared the ground for them.