

The Expositor Series

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The Comacine Master

Written by:

Robert Strader

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And

Silas Shepherd Lodge of Research #1843



Welcome

My Brothers,

Education on Masonic topics can be divided into two general categories. The first is an understanding of the meaning and application of the symbols and working tools presented to each Mason in his degrees. The second is a deeper and more thorough understanding of the meaning, origins and history of not only the symbols of Freemasonry but also of other topics that are directly or indirectly related to our craft. While most Masons crave the former, more and more Masons also seek the later.

The 'Masonic Study Series', developed in 2015, is intended to help the Mason increase his understanding of the application of our symbols by encouraging discussion about these symbols. The intention of the 'Expositor Series' is to help provide our Brothers that seek that deeper understanding of our mysteries with topics and papers that written and prepared with that level of understanding in mind.

In jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge F&AM of Wisconsin we have a unique opportunity as it is the home of Silas Shepherd Lodge of Research #1843, one of the premier research Lodges in the nation. By partnering with Silas Shepherd, the 'Expositor Series' not only gained access to more than 30 years of papers that have been written with the Mason seeking that deeper understanding in mind, but also the cooperation of some of the best writers and researchers this jurisdiction has to offer.

While the papers contained within the 'Expositor Series' are presented with the education of the individual Mason in mind, they can be presented within or to a Lodge. Care should be taken, however, to observe the interest of those present at a presentation of the series, and that the members present have obtained the degree in Masonry that the paper applies to.

We hope you enjoy these papers and that they help you attain the level of knowledge and understanding you are looking for.

Fraternally,

Grand Lodge F&AM of Wisconsin Education Committee
Silas Shepherd Lodge of Research #1843

The Comacine Masters

A talk by Bob Strader for Silas Shepherd Research Lodge #1843 on March 12, 2011

(Compiled from many Masonic Sources, cited at the end of the talk)

Freemasonry, as we know it today, became public in 1717 in England when cathedral building was on the decline and the "operative masons" or "free masons," as they were known, started to accept as members those who were not members of the masons' craft, calling them "speculative masons" or "accepted masons". Freemasonry was brought to the United States by our early settlers with the earliest Lodge of Freemasons in existence in Philadelphia in 1730.

Now that we have heard the public version of the story, what about our roots? Where did we really come from? Well, there are many flavors of the story. National Treasure is a 2004 adventure film from Walt Disney Pictures that starred Nicolas Cage, and was an adventure movie about a search for lost treasure, involving stealing the Declaration of Independence, which led to a trail of clues and a back-story intertwined with the Knights Templar and the Freemasons. Many think that a more intriguing story about the beginnings of Masonry is synonymous with the history of the Templars. Even Masons themselves spice up our beginnings by using the setting of King Solomon and the temple in Jerusalem in our ritual work, but remember it is only symbolic. Others try to trace our beginnings back to Egypt and the Pharaohs.

Although maybe there are some threads of reality to these historical possibilities, and maybe there was even some merging of ideas and practices in many of these ancient stories into modern practices that become parts of Freemasonry, but the real history and truth is never as exciting. What was so special about stonemasons? They possessed great skill to create the castles, cathedrals and palaces and the necessary sculpted works and ornaments demanded of their masters. Skill like these must have seemed almost magical to the mostly illiterate masses. They were clearly the elite of the labor force, had secret customs and marks and would have attracted some of the brightest non-educated recruits.

Books written by Mrs. Lucy Baxter , *The Cathedral Builders* , in 1899, and W. RAVENSCROFT, ENGLAND, *The Comacines, Their Predecessors and Their Successors* , around 1910, presented new theories:

1. Centuries before Christ and the foundation of Rome, a race of Hametic descent spread along the Mediterranean shores and afterward became known in Syria and Asia Minor as Hittites, in Greece as Pelasgoi, and in Italy as Etruscans.
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 the Collegia of Artificers, and in early Christian days these had traditions of King Solomon.
5. At the downfall of Rome the Gild of Artificers left and settled in the district of Como, holding as their centre the Island of Comacina.
6. Afterwards they spread their influence over all Western Europe.
7. Then they merged into the great Masonic Gilds of the Middle Ages.
8. As these Gilds died out, their forms and ceremonies were preserved to a great extent in our Masonic lodges; especially those of the English and American Constitutions.

The arts and crafts of the Roman Empire were rigidly organized into guilds, or collegia, each of which had monopolistic control of its business, profession or handicraft. These were destroyed by the barbarians along with the towns and communities in which they were located, but a few of them, at Constantinople and in Rome particularly, survived the holocaust. It is believed that a collegium, or a few collegia, of architects and their workmen took refuge on a fortified island in Lake Como, situated in the Lombard kingdom of Northern Italy. This region remained their seat and center for centuries; hence, their name, "Comacini." The Comacine guilds were made free and independent of medieval restraints by their Lombardi rulers and set at liberty to travel about at will,

and extended their influence and activities in the same way as other guilds, by invitation and contract, and by organization of lodges in new towns.

The Lombards, who had come from northern Germany and settled in northern Italy in 568 A.D., were good business men, but not architects or builders and they employed the Comacines for this kind of work and it was the Comacines who developed what is known today as Lombard architecture, covering a period that we may roughly put as from the seventh century to the Renaissance.

After some time, the Masters from Como, with abundant Papal Bulls, or diplomas, were granted the right of holding directly and solely under the Pope alone. Popes gave them their benediction, monarchs protected them, and the most powerful thought it an honor to be inscribed in their ranks; they with the utmost jealousy practiced all the arts connected with building, and by severe laws and penalties (perhaps also with bloodshed) prohibited others from the practice of building important edifices. They acquired the power to fix the price of their labor and to regulate their own internal government, exclusively in their own general chapter, prohibiting all native artists not admitted into their Society from entering with it unto any sort of competition.... Wherever they came, they appeared headed by a chief surveyor, who governed the whole troop, and named one man out of every ten, under the name of warden, to overlook the nine others.

The first mention of Comacine masters was in an edict of 643 of the Lombard king Rothari, which by the Code of Rothari declared the indemnity that would be due should a house collapse which had been built by a magister comacinus for a patron ad opera dictandi ("commissioning the works"). The reference has been interpreted as granting certain privileges to magistri comacini. The code of Luitprand, eighty years later, contains further provisions regulating the practice of Comacini, which had now become much more numerous and important. Fixed rates of payment were established for their services, varying according to the kind of building on which they were engaged; definite prices being allowed for walls of various thicknesses, for arches and vaults, for

chimneys, plastering and joiners' work. The difficulty which these early builders found in the construction of vaults is indicated by the allowance of a charge per superficial foot, from fifteen to eighteen times as great as in the case of a wall. The price of provisions and wine furnished to the workmen is also determined and is counted as part of their pay. The works of art between A. D. 800 and 1000, are greatly due to the brotherhood—always faithful and often secret—of the Magistri Comacini.

In the Comacine ranks we find the three grades of novices or apprentices, operatori or craftsmen, and magistri. An Italian writer Cesare di Como, referring to these guilds, said: "They were called together in the Loggie (hence Lodge) by a grand master to hear of affairs common to the order, to accept novices, and confer superior degrees on others. The chief Lodge had other dependencies, 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."

So, the Comacines had lodges, Grand Masters, secrets which they kept in a secret book called L'Arcano Magistero, they wore aprons, dispensed charity, possessed means of identification, and employed much symbolism, some familiar to us, as King Solomon's knot, the Lion of Judah, the two Great Pillars "J" and "B"; square, compasses, mosaic pavement, etc. It is claimed that from this company of travelling masons is derived "the fraternity of adopted masons, accepted masons or free masons."

Finally, toward the end of the eleventh century, the Comacine brotherhoods began to relax their bonds of union, to make room gradually for personality, and for artistic and scientific individuality, till they vanished at the close of the fifteenth century, with the

disappearance of the Lombardic style which they had created, and the rise of the architecture of the Renaissance.

It seems we have a chain extending from the Hittites, through the Roman Collegia, through the Comacines to the Medieval Gilds of the Middle Ages, and our speculative lodges of today, with traditions and associations clearly handed on unbroken. We publically trace our present organization back to the medieval cathedral builders. So if the Comacines were the parent body of these medieval cathedral builders, then are they really the grandparents of Masonry? We can only speculate on this. Whatever course Freemasonry actually followed, it has inspired millions of people across many countries for centuries and has attracted famous personalities from Europe, United States of America and the other Continents. Providing that Freemasonry adapts to future times, explains its positive purposes and learns how to handle the media and its opponents, it will doubtless continue to endure for centuries.

Thank you.

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