

# **FREEMASONRY AND THE CATHEDRAL BUILDERS**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

The paper below is the first of a new series of Study Club articles to cover, chapter by chapter, the more important periods and features of Masonic history. I have condensed and simplified to the limit of my ability but even so I know that beginners may find some passages difficult. This difficulty lies in the subject matter, which is stubborn and complicated to a degree, and therefore means that readers themselves must cooperate by a willingness to read and re-read, and to study. Surely the subject is worth it! Vibert's "Freemasonry Before the Existence of Grand Lodges," Vibert's "Story of the Craft," Newton's "The Builders," and Gould's "Concise History of Freemasonry" may be read in conjunction with these papers.

## *I – WHAT GOTHIC WAS*

THE WORD Gothic has become associated in our minds with much that is most beautiful in the world - cathedrals, churches, spires and an old manner of decoration - but to the Italian artists of the Renaissance who gave the world its currency it had quite a different meaning, and was used by them as a term of reproach to signify the culture of the northern barbarians, especially of German blood, who had broken off from classical traditions. Vasari appears to have been responsible above any other individual for this usage.

Gothic was at first applied to the whole barbarian (I use the word here in its Renaissance sense) culture; but later, and after men had begun to understand and to appreciate it, was more narrowly applied to that which was most distinctive in barbarian culture, the architecture; and at a still later period, and through popular usage, it became associated almost entirely with religious architecture, and more especially with the cathedrals, so that we find the great New English Dictionary giving it the following definition:

"The term for the style of architecture prevalent in Western Europe from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century, of which the chief characteristic is the pointed arch; applied also to buildings, architectural details, and ornamentation. The most usual names for the successive periods in this style in England are Early English, Decorative, and Perpendicular."

This definition is not as accurate as it might be. Many authorities on the history of architecture would not agree with the statement that "the chief characteristic is the pointed arch"; they have other theories of the matter. Nor is it safe to apply the word only to architecture, because there were Gothic styles in dress, in bridges, in walls, in furniture, in ornamentation, in manners, and even in household utensils. It happens that little is left of Gothic save church edifices, but that is because war has destroyed everything else.

Some of the best writers on the subject, Lethaby for example, whose work is to be recommended for its energy, interest and scholarliness, make Gothic to be equivalent to everything specifically medieval in art, which would include stained glass, manuscripts, poetry, etc. These writers point out that it was not until the nineteenth century archaeologists had come, under the leadership of De Caumont and his fellows, that men began to give a narrow usage to the word. "The word," writes Arthur Kingsley Porter, "first applied as an epithet of approbrium to all medieval buildings by the architects of the Renaissance, was given a technical meaning by De Caumont and the archaeologists of the nineteenth century, who employed it to distinguish buildings with pointed arches from those with round arches, which were called Romanesque." Some writers continue to refuse to use the word at all; Rickman prefers "English Architecture"; and Britton, "Christian Architecture." Dr. Albert G. Mackey says, "that Gothic architecture has therefore very justly been called 'The Architecture of Freemasonry,'" but of that more anon.

The old Roman style of building, on which all subsequent styles in Western Europe were based until the coming of Gothic, and which came to be called Romanesque, was organized on a very simple principle, and had its beginnings, at least so far as temples, churches, and cathedrals were concerned, in the ancient basilica. A flat roof was laid across four walls, like the lid on a box. If the roof was ridged or arched the walls had to be thickened in order to take care of the side thrust, so that in the largest buildings, where

much interior space was needed, the walls were necessarily given a massive thickness; and this thickness in turn made it necessary to use small windows lest the anchorage furnished by the walls be weakened and the building collapse. In consequence of this, Romanesque buildings were like military fortifications in their squatness, their ponderousness, and their interior gloom. The Gothic architects escaped from these unfortunate results by employing the pointed arch which enabled them greatly to increase their interior heights; and they learned how to take up the side thrusts of these arches by means of flying buttresses, rather than by heavy pier-like walls. This removed the great weight from the side walls and enabled the builders to substitute glass for stone, thus destroying at once the old unpleasant gloominess. In the course of time the system of pillars, arches and flying buttresses became a kind of thing in itself, like the frame-work of a machine, so that the skeleton of a building became self-sufficient, and might be said to dispense with walls altogether. It is this frame-work, so organized as to be self-supporting, that most distinguishes Gothic as a whole from its predecessor, Romanesque; such features as made this feat possible - the arch, rib vaulting, and the buttress - being secondary.

This is the point of Violet-le-Duc's famous description of Gothic, ably summarized by C. H. Moore in these words: "A system which was a gradual evolution out of Romanesque; and one whose distinctive characteristic is that the whole character of the building is determined by, and its whole strength is made to reside in, a finely organized and frankly confessed, frame-work, rather than in walls."

Moore has himself furnished a definition yet more famous, and easily comprehended:

"In fine, then, Gothic architecture may be shortly defined as a system of construction in which vaulting on an independent system of ribs is sustained by piers and buttresses whose equilibrium is maintained by the opposing action of thrust and counterthrust. This system is adorned by sculptures whose motives are drawn from organic nature, conventionalized in obedience to architectural conditions, and governed by the appropriate forms established by the ancient art, supplemented by colour designs on opaque ground and more largely in glass. It is a popular church architecture - the product of secular craftsmen working under the stimulus of national and municipal aspiration and inspired by religious faith."

Moore finds the key to Gothic in the flying buttress. Other authorities have other theories. Porter finds it in the rib vault; Phillips in the pointed arch, which he makes to be the alpha and omega of the whole system; Gould believes that stone-vaulting is paramount; while Lethaby appears to find the quintessence of Gothic not in this one feature or in that but in the general medieval character of it as a whole.

## *II – WHO INVENTED GOTHIC?*

There has been a great deal of difference of opinion among the historians of architecture as to where and when Gothic began. English writers, who have a very natural desire to claim for their own land the glory of the discovery of the art, date it at 1100 A.D. or earlier, and find its first manifestations at Durham; whereas French writers almost unanimously hold that Gothic began first of all in the region round about Paris, in what was once called the Ile de France, and say that the Abbey Church of St. Denis, begun in 1140, is to be regarded as the first known Gothic monument. It appears that a majority of the more modern writers incline to agree with the French theory. Porter dates the new style as beginning in Paris about 1163, and says that it reached its culmination in the year 1220, with the nave of Amiens.

Goodyear, in his *Roman and Medieval Art*, gives a fairly accurate and quite condensed account of the origin and growth of Gothic in a paragraph very suitable for quotation in this connection. He says that "the late Gothic is known in France as the 'flamboyant'; i.e., the florid (or flaming). Otherwise the designation of 'early,' 'middle' and 'late' Gothic are accepted. It must be understood that there are no definite limits between these periods. Speaking generally, the late twelfth century was the time of Gothic beginnings in France, and it is rarely found in other countries before the thirteenth century; the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are both periods of great perfection, and the fifteenth century is the time of relative decadence. Both in Germany and in England the thirteenth century was the time of the introduction of Gothic. In Italy it was never fully or generally accepted. Within the field of the Gothic proper (i.e., excluding Italy), England is the country where local and national modifications are most obvious, many showing that the style was practised more or less at second hand. In picturesque beauty and general attractiveness the English cathedrals may be compared with any, but preference must be given to the French in the study of the evolution of the style." (Page 283.)

Whence did the Gothic architects derive the secret of their new art? Theories are as numerous as they are various, and they range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Lascelles believed that the builders had learned their pointed arches from cross-sections of Noah's ark! Stukeley and Warburton held that they stumbled upon their new principle while trying to imitate the secret groves of the Druids. Ranking argued that Gothic is Gnostic in character, and brings to bear a great mass of data. Christopher Wren argued that it had been borrowed from the Saracens. Findel and Fort both attribute the discovery of the art to the Germans; with this Leader Scott agrees in her now famous *Cathedral Builders*, except that she seems to hold that the Comacine Masters were the missionaries who carried it into France and into England. Dr Milner believed Gothic to have been a modification of Romanesque arches, a theory with which many agree. In a contribution to *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* that made much of a stir at the time, Hayter Lewis urged that such a definite and clearly articulated principle must have been the work of one man, and suggested Suger, the minister of King Louis le Gros of France, which country was at that date a little strip about Paris not much larger than Ireland. Governor Pownall believed that Gothic was derived from timber work practices; whereas some Scotch theorists have believed it derived from wicker work. Gilbert Scott, a writer of great authority in his day, rejected all these particular derivations and argued that Gothic evolved gradually, orally, and

inevitably out of conditions already existing in architecture and in society; with this Gould agreed, as do a majority of present day writers. Gould is the whole matter up in a sentence: "The researches of later and better informed writers, however, have made it clear that the Gothic was no imitation or importation, but an indigenous style, which arose gradually but almost simultaneously in various parts of Europe." (History of Freemasonry, Vol. I, p. 255.)

### ***III – WERE GOTHIC ARCHITECTS THE FIRST FREEMASONS?***

At the time that Gothic made its appearance almost all art, including architecture, was still under control by the monastic orders; but with the development of the cathedrals art passed into lay control. It [is] believed by some that the scarcity of records concerning the builders themselves is due to the pride of chroniclers, almost always ecclesiastic, who disdained to mention the workmen except in the most general way. These workmen, like almost all other craftsmen of their period, were organized into guilds. Guilds differed among themselves very much with time and place but through all their various changes retained well defined characteristics. Each guild was a stationary organization which usually possessed a monopoly of trade in its own community, the laws of which were binding on the craftsmen. The guilds of one trade wielded no control over those of another, but all together agreed on certain rules and practices, such as those that appertained to apprenticeship, buying raw materials, marketing, and all that. In some communities, the guilds became so powerful that a few historians have confused their government with that of their city, but it is probable that this never happened frequently, if at all.

It is believed that, owing to peculiarities in their art, the guilds that had cathedral building in charge became differentiated from others in some very important particulars. If this really happened it was a most natural result of the circumstances under which the cathedral builders laboured. Theirs was a unique calling. All other buildings were wholly unlike cathedrals, and it was not often that cities were able to afford the luxury of one, so that there never was a great plenty of work for them to do. Also, their craft was peculiarly difficult, and involved the possession and learning of many uncommon trade secrets, so that the very nature of the work differentiated the cathedral building craftsman from other guild members. It is believed by cautious historians that after a while the authorities, recognizing the uniqueness of the cathedral builders' art, granted them certain privileges and immunities, and permitted them to move about at will from place to place, which in itself set them sharply apart from the stationary guilds, each of which was not permitted to do work outside its own incorporated limits; and many writers believe that because of this freedom to move about unrestricted by the usual medieval curtailments of privilege, that these guilds, or Masons (the word means "builders"), came at last to be called "Freemasons." Governor Pownall wrote a page once to prove that even the popes granted these builders special privileges, but subsequent researches in the Vatican library never enabled him, or other researchers after him, to unearth the papal bulls.

#### ***IV – DID GOTHIC BUILDERS COMPRISE ONE BIG FRATERNITY?***

Writers of the old school used to believe, almost unanimously, that these medieval Freemasons were bound together into one great unified fraternity operating under single control from some center, such as London, Paris, York, and they argued that this it "one big fraternity," with certain important but not revolutionary changes, existed right down to our own time, and that the Freemasonry of today is virtually that same organization that it was then. R. F. Gould, (see note) who spoke for a whole group of first-class English Masonic scholars as well as for himself, flatly denied this whole theory in the most sweeping and unequivocal manner. "I have shown," he said, on page 295 of the first volume of his History of Freemasonry, 'that the idea of a universal body of men working with one impulse and after one set fashion, at the instigation of a cosmopolitan body acting under a certain direction..... is a myth.'" On page 262 of the same volume he remarks that the theory of a universal brotherhood "is contradicted by the absolute silence of all history." With this verdict, Arthur Kingsley Porter, who wrote solely as a historian of medieval architecture, and not with any of the problems of Freemasonry in mind, agrees, and on very much the same grounds.

Gould bases his negation almost entirely on the testimony of the buildings themselves, and argues that whereas a writer here and there might be mistaken the buildings cannot be, and he holds that they one and all offer a united testimony that they were not the work of "one big fraternity" but represent local peculiarities not to be overlooked. His examination of the Gothic architecture of the various countries, with the purpose in view of revealing their testimony on this important point, is one of the most magnificent achievements in his monumental History. It is probable that the great majority of present day historians of medieval architecture would agree with him.

The history of the various arts and devices that made Gothic possible seems to corroborate this position. Every fact known concerning the evolution of Gothic proves that it came into existence gradually, and that no organization ever possessed its secrets at any one time, and that the arch, the flying buttress, the rib vault, and the other features so characteristic, were learned through painful experience, and independently of each other. Porter speaks of the flying buttress as "a new principle" and one "that more than any other assured the triumph of the rib vault and a principle whose discovery marks the moment when Gothic architecture first came into existence." On page 92 of Volume II of his great work, Medieval Architecture, a masterly production the reading of which is urged upon every student of Freemasonry, he writes as follows: "Hence it is probable that the advantages and possibilities of the flying buttress were not immediately appreciated at their full value, and, while the new construction was freely applied in cases where the threatened fall of the vault demanded its application, edifices even of considerable dimensions still continued to be erected without its aid." This important feature, without which Gothic could never have come into being, was the work of gradual experiment, and builders learned about it slowly, here a little, there a little, and in some places they never mastered it at all: had the secret of the flying buttress been known in advance to any one big fraternity of craftsmen, all this painful and costly evolution would have been unnecessary.



The same thing may be said of the pointed arch which was so essential to Gothic that it has often given its own name to the style. Porter shows that the arch as a unit of construction was very old, and used long before the Crusaders took Jerusalem; and that it was adopted by Gothic builders slowly and only under compulsion; its use for ornamental purposes alone came late, and in the beginnings of Gothic the builders clung to their use of the old-time round arch as long as possible.

There is no need to multiply instances. Geometry, which was sometimes used as being synonymous with the art of building itself, and more particularly with Gothic, and which was of such obvious importance, was never known as a merely abstract science, and came gradually to hand after countless experiments and trials of failure and success. There is no evidence that any body of men ever possessed it at once and in its entirety, which is what would have been necessary to "one big fraternity" having the enterprise of medieval building in hand. The history of Romanesque ornamentation in Gothic structures tells a similar tale; and so also the use of stained glass, which Porter traces to the Ile de France, and which came into existence gradually and by slow degrees.

In short, the history of the art verifies the testimony of the buildings themselves; all was a gradual evolution, and after the usual fashion, out of contemporaneous conditions and from pre-existing methods and customs. When one casually glances back on medieval history from the ease of his armchair, and looks upon it as a spectacle hanging in the air, Gothic may appear to have come into existence almost at once, like the goddess rising from the head of Zeus; but a more careful examination of the facts proves that the old theory of one big fraternity bestowing on the world a whole new art and a whole new culture to be a pleasant delusion.

One could also add to the argument the testimony of history, which is the testimony of silence. If Gothic art was the possession of one big fraternity, then that astonishing society must have had also in hand the building of highways, bridges, walls, private dwellings, fortresses, miles, and it must also have taught the people how to make their garments and to ornament their residences because, as has already been said, Gothic art was continuous with medieval art it society endowed with such wisdom, and working in every center in Europe, would have been as universal as the Catholic Church of those days, and would have left as voluminous a record; but as the fact stands there is such a lack of records, even of the cathedral builders, that even now, and after a century of constant research on the ground by experts, very little is known of the cathedral builders, so that it is necessary to feel one's way in the dark whenever one sets out to learn something about them.

Gothic architecture was not the outcome of the labours of any one group but of all the groups and classes that made up the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries in Europe and in England. In the latter country one need only recall the reigns of Henry II and of King John, from whom Magna Charta was wrested to remember what a ferment everything was in, and how vigorous was the communal life. In Western Europe it was the same. The successors to the Capets created in the Frankish territories, and with Paris as its center, an empire comparable to old Rome itself. It was the time when cities arose to independency, when kings became powerful monarchs as against the divisive rule of feudal lords and barons; when the papacy extended its power to the limits of Christendom, with the consequence that something like unity was affected in the moral and religious life of the peaces; and this moral and religious life became powerful enough to send the crusaders

into Palestine for the capture of Jerusalem. "The greatest of all the marvels of the Gothic cathedral is the age which produced it. Amid the broils of robber-barons, amid the clamour of communes and contending factions, amid the ignorance and superstition of the Church, this lovely art, at once so intellectual and so ideal, suddenly burst into flower. It seems almost like an anachronism, that this architecture should have arisen in the turbulent Middle Ages. Yet Gothic architecture, although in a sense so distinctly opposed to the spirit of the times, was none the less deeply imbued with that spirit of the times, and can be understood only when considered in relation to contemporary political, ecclesiastical, economic, and social conditions. For the XII century, despite its darkness, was yet a period far in advance of what had gone before - so far that M. Luchaire does not hesitate to name it 'la Renaissance Française.'.....

"The intellectual revolution was accompanied by an economic upheaval no less radical. Herr Schmoller has even compared it to that which took place in the XIX century. In the cities the workmen were freed from serfdom, and commenced to unite themselves into free corporations; and the same process was at work in a less degree among the villeins or serfs of the country. The economic advantages of this emancipation were incalculable. The pilgrimages, the journeys of the French chivalry into all parts of Europe, above all, the crusades, opened to the merchants a field of activity undreamed of heretofore. The guilds of merchants, which ever became more numerous and stronger; the commercial relations that were established between Normandy and England; the redoubled prosperity of Montpellier and Marseille; the multiplication of markets; the increasing importance of the great fairs Champagne - all these conditions betray a radical transformation in the material condition of the population. Everywhere the condition of the labourer was made easier; everywhere the cities increased their economic productions, and extended their traffic; everywhere bridges were rebuilt and repaired; everywhere new roads were opened. And with commerce, came wealth." (Pages 145, 147, Porter's Medieval Architecture Vol. II)

This new life also manifested itself in theological speculation, some of which was so audacious that men were martyred at the stake for the sake of their opinions; in philosophy and the study of law; in politics and in art. A new life broke forth everywhere, and out of its richness there came, as its consummate blossom, the Gothic cathedral.

But how, it may be reasonably inquired, are we to amount for the unity of Gothic art at a time when the world was very much divided, and intercommunication among countries very difficult? The question is well taken, but it can be easily answered. The unity of the craft was due to the unity of the work done by the craft; Gothic technique imposed its own unity upon the workmen and their activities as such things always do. Phillips has shown that if one will lay out a chart showing the building of each French cathedral in succession the sites will begin thickly about Paris and then widen out in concentric curves, thus proving that the new architectural knowledge learned at the center radiated itself out, as knowledge is apt to do.

We have in our midst abundant examples of such a progress. The world is now full of steam engines of various kinds, but not for that reason do we believe that the secret of steam has even been the private property of a secret organization; we know that the steam engine began with Watt in 1789 and that each inventor has copied the work of his predecessor and added improvements and modifications of his own. There are hundreds of medical schools over this land and in other countries which use the same technical

terminology (comparable to the "secret language" of the old cults); they employ the same types of instruments; have similar rules; and one and all furnish their students such an education as is formally recognized in other schools across the world. We know that this unity of medical organization was never brought about in the beginning by "one big fraternity"; it grew out of the nature of the technique employed; the formal unity now possessed by national medical associations is not the cause, but the result, of the unity imposed by the profession itself.

I believe that a similar thing happened as regards Masonic guilds in the Middle Ages. Those bodies had a unity, but it was due to the nature of the work, and came about inevitably. They exchanged memberships, as medical, or law, or art societies now do, and that because the work done was everywhere pretty much the same. They developed an ethic of their own profession and held all guilds strictly thereto, as did the stationary guilds, and as do local medical and similar societies, always self-governing, in our own day. The unity which thus developed out of the nature of the work itself gradually crystallised into constitutions and traditions; and this unity finally, in England of the eighteenth century, and owing to profound changes in the conditions under which the guilds, or lodges, operated, became transformed into the formal unity that is represented by the authority and power of Grand Lodges. From the time early in the twelfth century when the cathedral building guilds first began to be, until Speculative Freemasonry was born in 1717 as a formally organized society, there was never a break in the historical continuity but there were very important evolutionary changes. Legally and technically our present Freemasonry began in London in 1717; historically, and in a wider view, it began in Europe in the eleventh or twelfth centuries.

But even in those early days the builders did not begin from the beginning. They had predecessors and ancestors upon whose shoulders they stood, and out of whose art they evolved their own. It will be necessary to take these into account, in order to complete the picture; this will be done in a few chapters to follow, and as introductory to a further development of the theme presented in this.

Note: Gould's "History of Freemasonry" was in reality the work of a group of men and it was the original intention to have the names of all appear on the title page. I have this information direct from one of the members of the group. H. L. H.

I What did the word Gothic originally mean? What is the definition given by the New English Dictionary? How does Lethaby define Gothic ? Give substance of Porter's description of Gothic. What was the principle upon which Romanesque architecture was based ? Describe the general principle of Gothic architecture as explained by Brother Haywood. Give Moore's explanation in your own words. Can you name any specimen of Gothic architecture in your own community? Can you name any Gothic cathedrals in the United States? Why is Gothic architecture deemed particularly appropriate for church buildings? Have you ever in your own mind connected Gothic architecture with Freemasonry? If so, what has been your theory of that connection?

Where and when did Gothic begin? Give in your own words a sketch of Gothic history. What are some of the various theories of the origin of Gothic? What has all this to do with the history of Freemasonry?

What was a Guild? Why were the Gothic buildings different from others? What is the meaning of the word Mason? How did the word "Freemasonry" come into existence?

What was the theory of "one great fraternity"? What is Gould's verdict concerning this theory? In what way does the history of Gothic art tend to disprove the "one great fraternity theory"? Give examples to show that Gothic architecture developed gradually. Tell something about the age in which Gothic came into existence. How do you account for the unity of the Craft in the Middle Ages? Give some modern examples. The majority of historians of "Freemasonry" agree that our fraternity had its rise among Guilds of the Middle Ages: how would you state that theory in your own words? What bearing has this theory on our interpretations and obligations of present day Freemasonry?

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***End of 'Freemasonry and the Cathedral Builders' – By H. L. Haywood***