

THE ROMAN COLLEGIA

The Roman Colleges of Artificers - the *Collegia Fabrorum* - are said to have been instituted by Numa, the successor of Romulus, and therefore the second king of Rome in the year 686 B.C.

Before he came to the throne the various craftsmen had no laws or regulations to maintain their rights or to secure their skill from the rivalry of inexperienced workers and tradesmen.

Numa divided the several trades into distinct and independent companies, which were known as *Collegia* or *Colleges*. Plutarch names but eight of these colleges; namely, musicians, goldsmiths, masons, dyers, shoemakers, tanners, braziers, and potters, but adds that the other artificers were also divided into companies. If we suppose that the other artificers included all the remaining crafts, which were united in another college, the whole number, which according to Plutarch were originally instituted by Numa, would amount to nine.

Among the Romans a college generally signified any association which, being permitted by the state and recognized as an independent association, devoted itself to some determined object. Its recognition by the state gave to the college the character of a legal person, such as is now called a corporation.

The laws made for the establishment and the government of the colleges are very similar to those which have always existed among the Masonic Lodges, both Operative and Speculative. The identity of regulations are amply sufficient to warrant us in believing the regulations of the one were derived from, or at least had been suggested by, the other.

It was required by the Roman law that a college should not consist of less than three members. It is hardly necessary to remind us that a Lodge cannot be composed of less than three freemasons. There were legal colleges - *Collegia licita* - which were formed by authority of the government, and illegal colleges - *Collegia illicita* - which assembled under no color of law and which were strictly forbidden.

No college of any kind was permitted to assemble unless by an act of the senate or a decree of the Emperor. Illicit colleges, when discovered, were forced to dissolve by virtue of a decree of the Senate.

Each college was permitted to make its own internal regulations, provided that they were not contrary to the laws of the state. The regulations were proposed by the officers, and after a due study adopted or rejected by a vote of the members, in which a majority ruled.

The colleges also had the right of electing their officers, and of receiving members by a vote of the body on their application. The applicants were required to be freemen, but the Justinian code permitted slaves to be received into a college if it was done with the consent of their masters.

Noted persons, not belonging to the craft, were sometimes admitted. The law granted the privilege of selecting the most honorable of the Roman families as patrons and honorary members.

Each college had its arca, or common chest, in which the funds were kept. These funds were collected from the monthly contributions of the members, and were, of course, devoted to defraying the expenses of the college.

The meetings of a college were held in a private, probably tiled, hall called a Curia, which was the name originally given to the senate-house, but afterwards came to signify any building in which societies met for the transaction of business or for performance of religious rites.

The officer who presided was called the Magister or Master. There were seven Decuriones, corresponding in some sense to our Masonic Wardens. A Decurio denoted, as the word meant among the Romans, one who commanded or ruled over ten men. Other officers are as follows: an Haruspex, a soothsayer and diviner, who may be considered as about the same as our modern chaplain, and whose duty it was to attend to the sacrifices and conduct the religious services of the college; a Medicus, or physician; a Sciba, or secretary.

The officers originally were chosen annually, and later every five years.

The Patrons, selected from the most wealthy and powerful families of Rome, and who were not craftsmen, seemed to have exercised important influence. Chosen that they might protect the interests of the society, no regulation was enacted, no contracts made, and no work undertaken without their consent.

There was a distinction of rank among the members of a college. It is in the nature of things that in every trade or craft there should be some well skilled and experienced who will take the highest place; others with less knowledge who must be subordinate to these; and finally apprentices who are only beginning to learn the principle of their art.

It is interesting to note that in the Lodges of operative freemasons in the Middle Ages, there were masters, journeymen, and apprentices.

As previously mentioned, slaves could be received into the colleges only with the consent of their masters. This shows that in the Roman colleges, the distinction of bond and free, so much insisted on in the modern Masonic system, was not recognized quite in the same way among the craftsmen of Rome. It must be remembered that among the Romans, a condition of slavery did not always mean the chains of ignorance. Slaves were sometimes instructed in literature and the liberal arts, and many of them were employed in trade and in various handicrafts. It was these last who were to be conditionally admitted into the Colleges of Artificers.

It is evident that with the practice of their craft, the members of the colleges connected the observance of certain religious rites. Hence, every college had its patron god, called its Genius, under whose divine protection it was placed. The Curia, or hall of the college, was as a rule built in the near vicinity of the temple of this god, and meetings were sometimes held in the body of the temple. Sacrifices were offered to him; festival days were kept in his honor, and were often celebrated by public parades.

The colleges made use of symbols taken from the tools and the customs of their craft. Their mythology, which was their religion, was made up out of a great system of symbolism.

It is interesting to trace the architectural symbolism of the medieval builders to influences exerted upon them by the old builders of Rome, and which they in turn gave to their successors, the speculative freemasons of the 18th century.

This is one of the most important links in the chain that connects the Roman colleges with modern Freemasonry.

The most important of these colleges are the Collegia Fabrorum, a phrase which has generally been translated as the colleges of artificers, and designates those who are employed in building - stone cutters or masons.

It is apparent that the usages of Freemasonry bear a far closer resemblance to those Roman colleges than they do to the Jewish workmen at the Temple. The Jews rejected as vainly superstitious the use of painting and sculpture in their worship. Though we find among them a few symbols of the simplest kind, symbolism was not treated by them as an intellectual science.

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Reference:

Mackey's Revised History of Freemasonry