

# Eyewitness MEDIEVAL LIFE



Emblem of the  
Virgin Mary



Medieval badge  
of Christ

Written by  
ANDREW LANGLEY

Photographed by  
GEOFF BRIGHTLING & GEOFF DANN



Trestle table

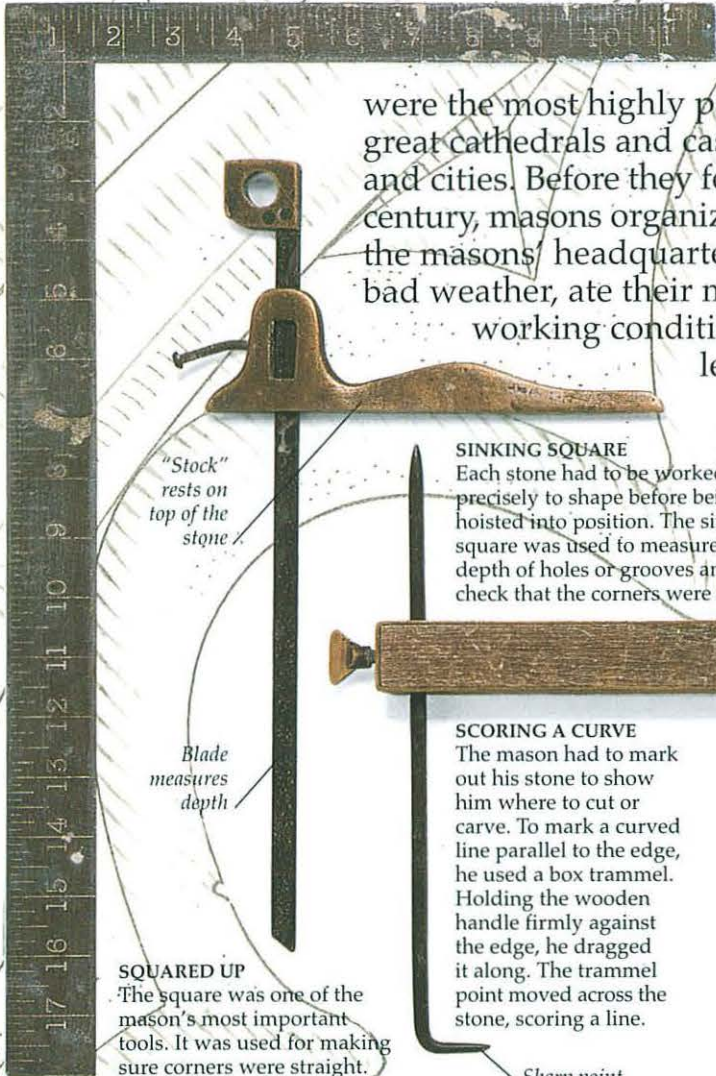
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# The stonemasons

OF ALL MEDIEVAL CRAFTSMEN, skilled masons were the most highly paid and respected. It was they who built the great cathedrals and castles that still rise above many European towns and cities. Before they formed exclusive guilds (pp. 50–51) in the 14th century, masons organized their trade from their lodges. These were the masons' headquarters on the building site where they worked in bad weather, ate their meals, and discussed trade secrets. Rules and working conditions were set out by the lodge leaders. Masons learned their craft on the site itself, often serving an apprenticeship of up to seven years. The most talented might go on to become master masons, with the responsibility for designing and overseeing the building of an entire cathedral.



"Stock" rests on top of the stone

Blade measures depth

**SQUARED UP**  
The square was one of the mason's most important tools. It was used for making sure corners were straight.

**SINKING SQUARE**  
Each stone had to be worked precisely to shape before being hoisted into position. The sinking square was used to measure the depth of holes or grooves and to check that the corners were square.



**SCORING A CURVE**  
The mason had to mark out his stone to show him where to cut or carve. To mark a curved line parallel to the edge, he used a box trammel. Holding the wooden handle firmly against the edge, he dragged it along. The trammel point moved across the stone, scoring a line.

Sharp point scores the stone

Pitching tool for making clean breaks in rough stone



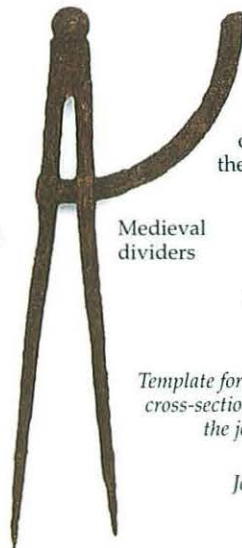
Hammer-headed chisels

Punch for chipping off large bits of stone

**PITCHER THIS**  
Every single stone in a cathedral would have taken about a day to cut and finish. Because it was heavy and expensive to transport, the stone was cut approximately to size at the quarry. At the building site, the mason's first job was to finish cutting the rough stone with a big curved saw. Then he used a hammer, a heavy, blunt chisel called a pitching tool, and a punch (right) to chip off the larger lumps and produce nearly straight edges.



**HEAVY LUMP**  
The lump hammer was used for hitting hammer-headed chisels in the rough shaping work.



Medieval dividers

**UNITED BY DIVIDERS**  
Dividers, or wing compasses, became the mason's special emblem. They were used mainly to measure a distance on a template, and then transfer the measurement to a piece of stone.



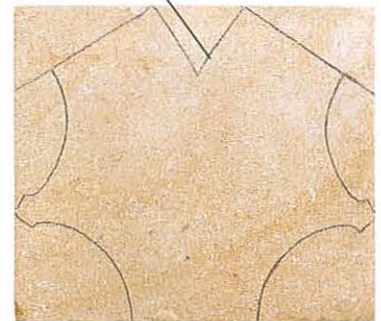
Template for the cross-section of the joint

Joint



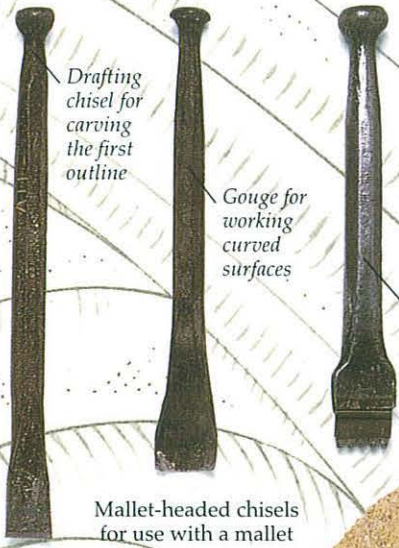
Paper template for a piece of window tracery

Modern masons mark out a block with pencil lines



**MARKING OUT**  
The mason selected a block of stone that had been trimmed square and smooth on which to mark out the template. He then scribed, or scratched, around the edges.

**ACCORDING TO PLAN**  
The template, or pattern, for each stone was cut out of board, leather, or parchment and laid over the stone for the mason to copy.



Drafting chisel for carving the first outline

Gouge for working curved surfaces

Claw chisel for scraping away stone

Mallet-headed chisels for use with a mallet



Stone relief (left) dedicated to the Stonemasons' Guild from the church of Or San Michele in Florence



**MASTER MIND**

The master mason was in charge of everything on the building site, from designing the building to hiring workers and ordering stone from the quarry. His job was that of an architect and a foreman all rolled into one – he set out plans and templates for his workers, but was also expected to work alongside them on occasion.

**CHOOSING A CHISEL**  
An apprentice mason had to learn to handle a bewildering array of chisels. Each mason owned his own tools, all of which bore his personal mark. They were usually passed down from generation to generation. The design of modern masonry tools like these has changed little since medieval times.

**WORKS OF ART**  
Some stonemasons became specialist sculptors. Intricate carvings such as the figures, foliage, and animals that decorated the great cathedrals were created by highly skilled "imaginators."



Cusp (from the Latin cuspis which means "spearhead")



**SHAPING THE STONE**  
The final shaping of the stone was the job of a banker mason who worked on a bank, or bench. Using chisels, gouges, and saws, he cut the stone to the scribed pattern.



Masons rub away tool marks on soft stone with a toothed iron plate called a cock's comb, or drag



**MASONS' MARK**

A mason "signed" each finished stone with his personal mark to show how much work he had completed.

**THE FINISHED ARTICLE**  
The carving of ornamental stonework, such as the stone ribs, or tracery, that supported stained-glass windows, took many years to master. Experienced stonemasons could carve any number of complex pieces. This section of tracery links the delicate ribs in the upper part of a window.



**WORKING IN THE LODGE**

Outside building work was only done in the good weather of the summer months. In winter, stonemasons labored on under cover in their lodge, designing, marking out, and cutting pieces of stone.