

A.D. 517, in a decree which is headed "*ut altaria nisi lapidea chrismatis unctione non sacrentur.*"

Wooden altars also were in use, by exception, in England up to the Reformation. They had been common from time immemorial in the Anglo-Saxon Church; for the altars which St Wulstan (1062-1095) ordered to be destroyed in his diocese of Worcester are spoken of as "*altaria lignea jam inde a prisca diebus in Anglia.*" In the Constitutions attributed to Egbert, Archbishop of York, A.D. 750, was one that no altars should be consecrated with chrism except such as were built of stone. At the Norman Conquest they must still have been common, for Lanfranc had to issue an edict against their use in 1076. A wooden altar was bequeathed in 1432 to Aldwerk chapel. And a bequest was made in 1435, "*quod unum altare fiat bene et effectualiter de tabulis,*" in St John's church, Hungate, York. Erasmus mentions seeing an altar in the Martyrdom in Canterbury cathedral; it was a wooden one, sacred to the Virgin: "there the holy man is said to have uttered a last farewell to the Virgin when death was nigh at hand." At St John, Hungate, York, in 1435, there was a wooden altar contrived "a double debt to pay," for it was also a chest containing books and vestments. It is significant also that before the Conquest the common appellation for "altar" was "God's Table" or "God's Board," terms which lingered in use long after stone altars had become general. Moreover, the technical term for the slab of an altar, though it was stone, has always been *mensa*. And at the Reformation the term "table" is used quite indifferently in the rubrics, alike of a table of wood and of an altar of stone. Rigoley, therefore, by virtue of its double descent, says Fleury, "*l'autel chrétien est une table et un tombeau.*"¹

Even when the stone altar was adopted, the form of the wooden table was often preserved; *i.e.*, the altar was not of the form of a sarcophagus, but was a rectangular slab on columns. Synesius (350-431) says: "Sacras columnas amplector quæ puram et incontaminatam a terra mensam sustinent"; and the saint and patriarch, Alexander: "Secum sub sacra mensa prorum in os prostravit et lacrymans oravit"; *i.e.*, he "prostrated himself underneath the altar and prayed for guidance, before arguing with Arius." In a sixth-century mosaic at S. Vitale,

¹ *La Messe*, i. 239. M. de Rossi recognised four varieties of altars in the Roman catacombs: (1) those that were portable; (2) isolated altars; (3) those backing on a wall; (4) those placed in the arched recess of an *arcicolum*.