

THE CATHEDRAL OF PISA.

By J. H. PARKER, C.B.

Few Cathedral Churches are more celebrated or better known than that of PISA, and not without reason, for it is in many respects a remarkable building, and plays an important part in the history of art. Nor are there many of which the history can be so well ascertained by the numerous inscriptions upon different parts of it, and yet unfortunately, there are few of which the real architectural history is so much misunderstood by the public in general; even persons generally supposed to be well informed on such subjects follow each other blindly in a palpable and important error, as to the real date of the beautiful west front with its series of light arcades, and what the French call *colonnnettes*, one of the most beautiful examples of the Italian Gothic: but what is that period? This is the point which I wish to point out. This very beautiful example of the lightest and most elegant style is constantly quoted as belonging to the *twelfth* century, and therefore as a proof that Italy was in advance of any other country in architecture at that period; and as architecture is one of the best marks of civilization, therefore the Italians were the most highly civilized nation in Europe in the twelfth century.

This is altogether a popular delusion arising from the fact that no one well acquainted with architectural history has ever published a history of this building in an accessible form. No doubt many well informed architects have made it out for themselves, but they have kept their knowledge to themselves, or have only slightly alluded to it, and have been afraid of being thought ignorant if they ventured to differ from the received opinion.

The number of persons really acquainted with architectural history is still but a small minority of the educated classes. We must remember that it is only thirty years ago since the very able works of Professor Willis first brought the system into such thorough order, that it became quite undeniable to any educated person who

takes the trouble to follow his steps and examine his evidence. His admirable history of Canterbury Cathedral was the first work in which architectural history was fully developed, he wisely and properly adopted the system of Rickman, as far as it went. Rickman had been "the first to reduce chaos into order," as long ago as 1810, but he was not a learned man, not well acquainted with history, nor the use of records. Willis added these to Rickman's system, and thereby made architectural history complete, thorough, and undeniable. Unfortunately Willis's excellent notes on Italian buildings are comparatively slight, little known, and not illustrated by engravings, which are indispensable for the proper understanding of this subject. It can only be understood by the eye. Either we must take the historical notes to the spot and compare them with the building, or have accurate representations of it. Plans, sections, and drawings, or photographs are all necessary for the proper understanding of the subject, consequently the number of those who really understand it is comparatively small; and, although Willis's *History of Canterbury Cathedral* was published as long ago as 1845, and he explained it then on the spot to more than one hundred people, and in the same manner for about twenty years afterwards he fully explained the real history of many other cathedrals and churches in each succeeding year, at the meetings of the Archæological Institute, still the number of persons whose minds have become fully imbued with this true and important branch of history, is comparatively small.

Unfortunately the book which all English people take in their hands when they go to see the Cathedral of Pisa is one of Murray's excellent handbooks, and in these, generally useful volumes, architectural history has always been a *muddle*. The opinions of Gally Knight, in 1830, are constantly given, as if just of the same value as those of Willis in 1860, or of his pupils, as if architectural history had been standing still for half a century. Many ignorant people, taking Murray's handbook as their guide, suppose the actual cathedral which they see to be that begun by Pope Gelasius II in 1067, and consecrated 1118, the truth being that there is

scarcely a single stone of that building now *visible*. The foundations of the eastern part probably belonged to it, but that is all.

The interior of this great building was almost entirely destroyed by the great fire in 1596. The present vault and the clere-storey (which belongs to the vault) are part of the restorations of the Medici. The arches and the side walls of the aisles, and the exterior have fortunately escaped, and are, to a great extent, in a genuine state. The choir and apse being vaulted have also escaped to a great extent, and these are important for the history of the building. They do not belong to the building of Pope Gelasius, excepting perhaps the materials, which, being antique, were probably collected in his time, but the construction belongs to the same time as the Campanile, or leaning tower, which forms part of the same plan. This was begun in 1174, and was carried on for more than half a century; the extraordinary leaning over of this tower is caused by the bad character of the soil it is built upon, which would not bear the weight, and gave way under it to a considerable extent, though not sufficient to make it fall.

There is an external arcade round the upper part of the apse, but it is built of classical materials, and the construction is the same as that of the lower part of the tower,—that is, of the end of the twelfth century,—comparatively clumsy work, quite unlike the light and elegant arcades of the west front. And now we come to the point of the date of that west front. It is true that there are inscriptions upon it of the twelfth century, but to any one whose eyes are accustomed to the study of architectural history it is quite evident that these inscriptions are not in their original place; they have all been used before and are replaced, and one of them is upside down. A few years ago when the floor of the nave was repaved, it became evident that it had been lengthened about one fourth at the west end. The foundations of the wall of the old west front were visible, and my friend, M. Rohault de Fleury of Paris, made a plan of it, of which he gave me a tracing.

The Baptistery is distinctly a building of the fourteenth century. It was indeed *begun* in the twelfth, but on too

great a scale for the means provided. It was begun again in 1278, as recorded by another inscription ; but so great a work must have gone on slowly, and probably took more than half a century to complete.

It is much to be regretted that my excellent friend Mr. Ruskin, notwithstanding his enthusiastic love for art, his great ability, and his wonderful flow of words, has never studied architectural history, and consequently misleads himself first, and thousands of others after his example by following the ideas of the time of Gally Knight, and not being conscious of the great *revolution* that Willis has produced. There will always be ignorant people, and we must make allowance for their ignorance, but Mr. Ruskin ought not to be one of them, and would not be if he had given any attention to the subject. At the time that Willis gave his admirable lecture at Canterbury in 1844, there was a small clique of ignorant persons who set up poor old John Britton as a rival to Willis, and afterwards seceded from the Society because Willis's friends and pupils could not stand such nonsense. Let any man of common sense and decent education, at the present time, compare the rubbish of which the *letterpress* of Britton's Architectural Antiquities consists, with Willis's admirable histories of the Cathedrals, and ask himself whether it was possible that any one could be so absurd as to place the two upon a level. It seems incredible that this could have been done, yet such was the fact.

I fear that Mr. Murray will never find a Willis to edit his handbooks for the histories of the foreign Cathedrals ; but Willis's system, which is the system of common sense and accurate observation, ought to permeate the whole series in the same manner that it has done Mr. Murray's series of the English Cathedrals. According to the system of Willis, the west front of Pisa cannot be much earlier than A.D. 1250. This is the most probable date for it, and the elegant light arcades round the apses of the Rhine churches are a branch of the Pisan style, and later rather than earlier than the west front of the Cathedral ; and yet they are commonly set down to the twelfth century, the period of heavy clumsy work, before the light and elegant styles of the thirteenth century were invented, of which the west front of Pisa is one of the finest examples.