

Introduction

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When he set out to teach the Emperor Augustus “all the principles of the discipline” of *architectura* (a word with a broader meaning than its English descendant, “architecture,” Vitruvius may never have imagined that his *praescriptiones terminatas* would still be guiding his colleagues in the profession two thousand years later. His fortunes have varied over the millennia, though he has never entirely disappeared; his suggestions have sometimes carried the force of rules, and as often have been ignored—certainly his tirade against modern painting in his seventh book convinced neither his contemporaries nor the artists of the sixteenth century to change their frivolous ways. To Francesco Petrarca in the fourteenth century, Vitruvius had no need to apologize for his Latin style (although he did); six centuries later, the English classicist H. J. Rose spoke for most of his colleagues in the classics when he begged to differ in his *Handbook of Latin Literature*:

The style is very obscure, the half-Greek jargon of technicians. Vitruvius honestly acknowledges that he is no stylist, though a lover of reading as well as of his own speciality; it is unfortunate that he tried to be rhetorician in his preparatory remarks, for the result is wretched. Apart from this, he is a man to respect, as one must respect a master of a craft which he exalts and delights in.¹

As a master of his discipline (*not* simply a craft, as he is at pains to show), Vitruvius has been read widely for centuries in a fairly consistent manner, consulted for useful information about building materials, water, sundials, and machines well into the Christian era. Medieval and early modern readers were no longer building temples to the ancient Roman gods or laying out fora, but they still knew where to go for advice about the best wood to use for different kinds of projects, instructions about setting up a sundial, or sensible guidelines for solid construction. For the founders of the first universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and again for the humanist scholars of the Italian Renaissance, the first book of Vitruvius, with its carefully detailed program of learning, provided the valid outline for a liberal education in any field.

1 For Petrarch's notes on Vitruvius, see Ciapponi (1960). For Vitruvius as a “wretched” stylist, Rose (1966), 433. Frank Granger (1932, 58) wryly noted that Cicero (*De Officiis* 1.121) regarded architects, physicians and professors as joint members of an inferior club.

In fifteenth-century Rome, Vitruvius took on a new urgency for a series of popes who saw no better way to create a new Christian Roman Empire than to apply the aesthetic principles of the ancient city's grand, durable ruins to Christian spirituality and Christian belief. The sponsors, designers, and builders of papal Rome took their spiritual guidance from Saint Augustine, the last great ancient Roman author, but for deciding how their new earthly Jerusalem ought to look, they turned to Vitruvius, and their new style swept first the continent of Europe and then spread globally. It is this passage through the papacy, and the close relationship between the study of Vitruvius and the construction of a new version of St Peter's Basilica, that turned the reading of Vitruvius from the wide-ranging and often highly personal engagement that characterized interactions with authors like Cicero or Augustine (who also talked about themselves enough to establish vivid personalities), to the creation of a distinct "received" interpretation, based on what Raphael was first to describe as "the orders" of classical architecture in 1519. Vitruvius often states that *auctoritas*, authority, is an essential quality of successful architecture (aside from the basic values of *firmitas*, *commoditas*, and *venustas*), and the style that evolved in papal Rome in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used its religious sanction to garner *auctoritas* as definitely as the builders who scattered the style of ancient Rome to the margins of the Empire and beyond.

Writing at the moment when an ancient republic turned definitively to one-man rule, Vitruvius has been a touchstone for monarchs who modeled themselves on Augustus—from Charlemagne, to the Renaissance popes, to Italian warlords, to the "Sun King" Louis XIV and the imperialists of the British Empire—but readers like Andrea Palladio or Thomas Jefferson responded equally to his roots in republican traditions.

Like the sponsors at whom he aimed his treatise, Augustus and, implicitly, the emperor's sister Octavia, Vitruvius is bilingual, well aware of peoples and cultures beyond his own sphere (one of his friends is the African prince Juba), though he points out proudly that Italy is uniquely favored by its location with a healthy climate that exerts a particularly positive effect on the people who live beneath its temperate sun. He pays close attention to the environment, and stresses incessantly that architecture is always an art of adaptation: adjusting designs to real circumstances, using local construction materials, adapting architectural forms to local climatic conditions, regulating exposure to light and the flow of air. We can still appreciate these qualities in the surviving architecture of ancient Rome, along with drawbacks like latrines sited next to kitchens and cesspools near cisterns, work carried out by teams of slaves, and lavish buildings dedicated to cruel games and brutal horse races.

Roman architecture, especially of the imperial period, also played a fundamental role in the development of Islamic architecture, but it is not clear what part the reading of Vitruvius has had in that development; in Jerash, Petra, Lepcis Magna, and Baalbek, as in Rome, the discrepancies between the fantastic architecture of the second, third, and fourth centuries CE and the centuries-old treatise of Vitruvius are significant. But the stories of influence told in these pages suggest that it is precisely the unbridgeable gulf between the Vitruvian text and surviving monuments that makes reading the *Ten Books* so endlessly compelling.

To that end, the twenty-five contributors to this twenty-six-chapter volume offer their own readings of Vitruvius, which we have organized here into the following five sections: transmission; translation; reception; practice; and Vitruvian topics. We encourage readers to discover the many points of convergence between these chapters, many of which we have signposted in the notes throughout.

Bibliography

- Ciapponi, L. A. (1960) "Il *De architectura* di Vitruvio nel primo umanesimo," *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 3: 59–99.
- Granger, F. (1932) "The Text of the Loeb Vitruvius: A Reply," *The Classical Review* 46.2: 58–61.
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