

PHILOLOGY INSTEAD OF RHETORIC?

The Study of Antique Architecture in the Renaissance and Early Baroque

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Abstract

The study of antique architecture from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries usually followed the idea that architecture possessed a system of rules, mostly derived from Vitruvius. This belief led to attempts to uncover these rules in archeological surveys, even if this approach demanded that precise measurement be made. Architecture could thus be compared with rhetoric insofar as both disciplines rested on precepts to guide the invention and the judgment of artifacts. Architects largely accepted the idea of a pre-established system. They studied architecture by trying to find the principles that derived from a building's purpose or its topographical situation.

This presentation will suggest that this approach can be related to another tradition in humanism, to that of philology. By measuring antique architecture 'as it was', architects used the very same methods that competent philologists employed to clarify a text from several corrupted versions. The parallel between the philological reconstruction of texts and the precise, unbiased survey of architecture is not incidental: it could result from actual collaborations between philologists and architects in the Renaissance and the Baroque. This little-known tradition in the history of architecture, one that stemmed from these collaborations, has important implications for the study of architectural history. Examples of such endeavors, the Berlin Codex Destailleur D and the program of the sixteenth-century *Accademia della Virtù*, will be examined and compared with Desgodetz's late seventeenth-century studies of Roman buildings.

1 Introduction

Rhetoric's importance in historical studies can hardly be over-estimated: The rules for the invention and construction of discourse laid out by ancient authors have been used as models since the Renaissance — not only for the invention and construction of new texts or works of art, architecture and music, but also to describe and analyze these artifacts and the process of their creation. Vitruvius himself gives an early example of the use of rhetorical categories in the discussion of architecture by referring to linguistic modes and their appropriate use according to *decorum*:

*Minervae et Marti et Herculi aedes doricae fient; his enim diis propter virtutem sine deliciis aedificia constitui decet.*¹

Rhetorical rules also constituted guidelines in the creative process itself.

Particularly in historical research, the identification and reconstruction of their objects often have to follow these first steps — though it should be kept in mind, of course, that the scientific process already involves model-based interpretation.

Despite my title, I do not want to suggest here that rhetoric should be replaced by philology in our research of architecture. Instead, I want to show that philology should be taken into account, especially in the study of architectural history.

Since the early Renaissance, philologists such as Petrarch had been developing highly sophisticated tools and methods for the identification and analysis of literary artifacts. They reconstructed their content, the various versions of a text and their derivatives. In many ways, contemporary architectural historians make use of these 'philological' methods and tools when they examine sources like buildings, drawings, descriptions, or accounts.

In this paper I would like to suggest:

- a) that philological methods have been in use since early on in architectural studies, that is ever since the High Renaissance, and
- b) that the introduction of these methods was not accidental but deliberate.

¹Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Liber I, cap. 2.5

2 Antoine Desgodetz

When the young French architect Antoine Desgodetz returned to Paris from Rome in 1677, he brought back with him accurately measured drawings of almost 50 antique buildings that he had made there on behalf of the *Académie d'Architecture*. Five years later, in 1682, Desgodetz published these drawings, which — because of their extremely accurate and complete representation of the buildings — have been described as the ‘foundation of modern archaeology’. The reason for the delay in publication seems to have been due to the opposition of the *Académie*’s director, François Blondel: In an earlier discussion with Claude Perrault, Blondel had strongly upheld his position that the differences between the real measurements of antique buildings and their supposed ideal proportions — those derived from Vitruvius and antique theories on proportion (particularly from the theory of music) — were due to refinements made by architects with regard to the viewer’s perspective or other problems. The implicit basis of this argument was the idea of a certain ‘eternal’ or ‘ideal architecture’, which could and would have to be reconstructed from antique buildings to achieve a modern and perfect architecture that would follow the supposed eternal laws of beauty. A project such as Desgodetz’s could only serve as a basis for such a reconstruction, helping to identify the intended ideal measurements and proportions of architecture. Yet the real measurements of antique buildings were not to be (mis-) taken as perfect in themselves and therefore as indisputable examples. The differences between measurements and the ideal needed to be suppressed.

In opposition to this point of view, Perrault, a friend and mentor of Desgodetz, denied the possibility of such an ‘eternally perfect architecture’: For Perrault, the real gestalt — or form — of antique buildings was not the result of divergencies from an ideal, but followed technical, often even casual, circumstances. This did not diminish their value, importance, and beauty, but instead offered a chance to view every building as a work of art *sui generis*. As a consequence, the purpose of Desgodetz’s project could only be to take the measurements with the greatest possible accuracy, and to record as many details as possible, even those that might be incompatible with Blondel’s reconstruction of an ideal architecture. Desgodetz adopted that point of view and did not change his drawings or prints — even if this meant that the publication of his work would be postponed.

Another practical consequence from Perrault’s (and Desgodetz’s) position was the clear difference that had to be made in the drawings (and prints) between those parts of the buildings still in existence and those that had to be (graphically) reconstructed.²

²*Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding, entry “Architektur”, vol. 1, col. 862

In his preface, Desgodetz clearly states that the buildings are shown as he found them, and he emphasizes that he did not – like other authors – reconstruct any sections. This results from a philological decision which differentiates between surviving and reconstructed parts in the critical study or edition of a text.

In addition, Desgodetz mentions another basic working procedure of philologists: He declares that he compared very carefully his findings with the measurements and forms he found in the prints of Palladio, Serlio, and Labacco. Of course, unlike the many versions that may exist of a text, these are not different versions of a building, but this comparison of different representations can be seen as equivalent to the philological comparison of texts: In both cases, careful comparison serves as a tool to evaluate the importance of a source, to exclude errors in order to achieve the best result possible for a better understanding of the intentions of its author. Desgodetz also realized that sixteenth-century authors had seen the buildings in a better state of preservation than he did, and that, therefore, the measurements they took could be more exact and closer to the original buildings than his own.

These two aspects demonstrate that Desgodetz used — and in my opinion intentionally used — methods that can be called ‘philologic’ because of their historical origin. But, even if Desgodetz did not reflect on his methods (and their origin and history), it seems reasonable to assume that the ideas of Claude Perrault and — possibly — of his brother, the poet, philologist and author Charles Perrault, influenced Desgodetz’s methods and his understanding of how to study antique remains in general.

Earlier instances in architectural history that can also be characterized as ‘philologic’ — and that were derived even more clearly from that science because of a possible documented influence of philologists — can be found in High Renaissance Rome.

3 The *Accademia della Virtù* or *Vitruviana*

From 1537 a circle of humanists, clerics, philologists, antiquarians and architects regularly came together in Rome to study Vitruvius. The participation of different professions was intended to provide the most comprehensive understanding of the classical text.

This idea had also been formulated by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger in his draft of a preface for a new edition of Vitruvius: All earlier editions and translations, he claims, lacked a sufficient understanding of the text because they were either the works of architects — who did not know enough about philology — or of philologists — who, on the other hand, did not know enough about architecture. Sangallo proposed that — together with learned colleagues in different disciplines including philologists — he would prepare

the first adequate edition of the classical text. Unfortunately, we do not know if this work ever came into being — but some elements point to a collaboration between Sangallo and the *Accademia*, corroborated by the contact he had with its members.

One of the leading members of the *Accademia* was Cardinal Marcello Cervini, later Pope Marcellus II, who was president of the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* and a remarkable philologist with a strong interest in antique as well as contemporary architecture.

Another member of the *Accademia* was Guillaume Philandrier, secretary to the French ambassador in Rome and a student of Serlio in Venice.

A third member of the *Accademia*, also from France, has to be mentioned: Ludovico (Louis) Budé, the son of Guillaume Budé, the most important French philologist of his time and founder of the *École française*. Ludovico took part in the documentation of Latin inscriptions for the *Accademia* in Rome and Naples, and it may be supposed that he closely followed the intentions and ideas of his father with regard to scientific research: Guillaume once called philology the “orbicularis doctrina”, a methodological *conditio sine qua non* for the study of Antiquity and for all arts and sciences based on antique sources.

In 1541 one of the *Accademia's* members, the Sienese humanist Claudio Tolomei wrote a letter to Conte Agostino Landi in Venice, which was reproduced in the writings of Tolomei in 1547. It describes in great detail the intentions of the *Accademia* and its astonishing working program for a 24-volume set of printed books. This work centered around the study, edition, commentary and translation of Vitruvius, a very large project in itself. Furthermore, it comprised several other aspects that make it the first attempt to document the *entire* material culture of Roman Antiquity. Among the volumes to be published, one was to contain measured drawings of *all* surviving antique buildings in Rome and elsewhere, complete with historical commentaries and comparisons with other buildings, with written sources, and with representations in coins, medals or reliefs. The program also comprised the study of all the technical aspects of construction in Antiquity.³

Until some 20 years ago, this program had received only little interest among scholars — even though it could be characterized as a methodological milestone in the history of science, in archaeology and in architectural history in particular. And it still remains unknown to many researchers today. Those who knew about it did not believe that any material traces of it remained — the only exception being a small book by Philandrier, with explanations of problematic parts in Vitruvius' text, which was published for the first time in Rome in 1544.⁴

³See a list of the *Accademia's* program in the appendix, page 8. Obviously, some of the planned volumes would have to consist of several volumes to contain all the material gathered.

⁴Philandrier, Guillaume: *Gulielmi Philandri Castilionii Galli Civis Ro. in decem libros M. Vitruvii Pollionis de Architectura Annotationes*. Roma: Andrea Dossena, 1544

During the preparation of an exhibition of the so-called Codex Coburgensis (from Coburg, Germany) this collection of very accurate drawings of antique reliefs and sculptures was identified as the preparatory collection for one of the volumes from the *Accademia*'s program. In addition, it was also observed that the Codex Pighianus in the Berlin State Library — named after Pighius, a sixteenth-century humanist from the Netherlands who worked in Rome around 1550 — not only copies parts of the Codex Coburgensis but also adds to it new material. In both codices, the surviving fragments are carefully arranged and documented in their actual state of preservation. Therefore, the editors Richard Harprath and Henning Wrede called it “the first systematic archaeological book”.⁵

Furthermore, a pair of codices in the Vatican Library was identified as the *Accademia*'s collection of antique inscriptions, another aspect of its program. These volumes document the inscriptions in a philological manner by showing the material condition of the stones as well as the form and arrangement of letters.⁶

4 The Berlin Codex Destailleur D

In an addition to the Life of Taddeo Zuccari, Giorgio Vasari gives an overview of the biography of his close friend Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola. He mentions that, in the early 1540s, Vignola “measured all the Antiquities of Rome” for the *Accademia*. Because of the close relationship between Vasari and Vignola we may conclude that this information is correct. Vasari also notes the importance that this work had for Vignola in his development as an architect and author. These measured drawings by Vignola, showing antique buildings according to the standards of the *Accademia*, seem to have been lost.

The following might be hypothetical, but I believe that the preliminary collection of drawings for the *Accademia*'s volume(s) on antique buildings might survive in several drawing collections held in Berlin, Vienna, and New York — perhaps also in London, Paris, Vicenza, and other places. The so-called Codex Destailleur D at the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin seems to be its largest single section currently known. Originally a three-volume codex, it was created in Rome between 1537 and 1547 and contains more than a thousand single drawings of antique buildings, 41 sheets with drawings of contemporary buildings and projects, such as Antonio da Sangallo's last project for Saint Peter's.

⁵*Der Codex Coburgensis: das erste systematische Archäologiebuch — Römischen Antiken-Nachzeichnungen aus der Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts.* Hrsg. von Henning Wrede und Richard Harprath. Coburg: Coburger Landesstiftung, 1986

⁶Daly Davis, Margaret: *Wissenschaftliche Bearbeitung und Entwicklung einer Systematik: Archäologische und antiquarische Studien antiker Reste in der Accademia Vitruviana in Rom.* In: Archäologie der Antike. Ausstellungskatalog der Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel. Wolfenbüttel: 1994, S. 11–19

The method chosen for the representation of both types of buildings was remarkably modern and unique not only for its time but for centuries to come: The buildings are shown in overview drawings with letters marking individual sections, which are depicted in separate drawings. Surprisingly, although the draftsmen took a large number of measurements directly from the monuments — i.e. not from previously existing drawings — the drawings do not depict the correct proportions of the buildings. The most remarkable drawings are those depicting technical details such as the construction of roofs, the stairs on top of roofs and domes, basement rooms and systems for the supply of water and heating. The authors indicate precisely which drawings have been developed from original observation or which they are merely reconstructions based on these findings.

None of the drawings depict the buildings' sculptural decoration — when it cannot be clearly identified as 'architectural' in a strict sense — such as reliefs, sculptures, and inscriptions. Furthermore, the size of letters of inscriptions and their forms are recorded, but not their full texts; capitals and cornices are shown with every single ornamental detail in the most accurately measured drawings, although there are no sketches of the sculptural elements located just beside them. If the codex was created on behalf of the *Accademia*, this characteristic would not be surprising: Other groups of draftsmen were responsible for recording the sculptural decoration of the buildings or their inscriptions: Their work survives in the Codices Coburgensis and Pighianus or in the Vatican codices.

Because of the accuracy of the detailed measurements, the systematic approach to the buildings' documentation, the inclusion of technical aspects and the sharp differentiation between existing and reconstructed sections in the drawings, the Codex Destailleur D (and its accompanying drawings) clearly fulfil the expectations formulated by the *Accademia's* program. These drawings could easily serve the purpose of a comparison between the buildings and the rules given by Vitruvius and other descriptions and representations. Since the *Accademia's* program was formulated under the supervision of some of the best philologists of the time, the program and its physical manifestation in the Berlin Codex seem to be the first known transfers of philological methods to another scientific field.

Unfortunately, the Codex Destailleur D, as well as the *Accademia's* program, had little impact on the history of architecture until the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, Desgodetz's book was reprinted several times and acted as a model for archaeology and architectural history. Therefore, Desgodetz should be acclaimed for having (re-) introduced scientific methods to the study of antique architecture — even if it might be difficult to *prove* that he derived these principles from philology: No connection between Desgodetz and the *Accademia's* program or the Codex Destailleur D has yet been found — though it might open up interesting avenues for future research.

LIST OF VOLUMES TO BE PRINTED FROM THE ACCADEMIA'S PROGRAM

1. Latin comments on difficult passages of Vitruvius = Philandrier, Annotationes
2. a critical register of all surviving versions of Vitruvius' text
3. a new edition of Vitruvius with emendated text and reconstructed illustrations
4. a dictionary of Latin words used by Vitruvius
5. a dictionary of Greek words used by Vitruvius
6. a critical commentary on Vitruvius' Latin compared to other antique authors
7. a new edition of Vitruvius in 'corrected' Latin
8. a new translation of Vitruvius into Tuscan Italian
9. a Tuscan-Italian dictionary of architectural terms
10. a Tuscan-Italian dictionary or lexicon of tools and other objects
11. a comparison of the rules given by Vitruvius with antique architecture
12. a commented chronological survey of the architecture and urbanistic development of Rome in Antiquity
13. *a complete representation of antique buildings in plan, elevation and section, measured in Roman feet*
14. a commented representation of all tomb stones and sarcophagi = Codices Coburgensis/Pighianus
15. a commented representation of all statues
16. a commented representation of all reliefs = Codices Coburgensis/Pighianus
17. a representation of architectural elements (doors, cornices etc.) surviving from their original context
18. a representation of all vases and other objects of daily life
19. a representation of antique tools, instruments and machines
20. a collection of (all) antique inscriptions = Codices Vat. lat. 6038 + 6039
21. a list of all (surviving) antique paintings
22. a list of all medals and coins with historical comments
23. a reconstruction of antique building machines
24. a survey of buildings for the supply of water