

Book Review 1: Reitz-Joosse, Bettina. *Building in Words: The Process of Construction in Latin Literature* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021

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Architecture is a language. Buildings are “put together”; they can be “read” as texts. Texts in turn are “structured” or “put together” like buildings. Long embedded in everyday speech, such metaphors have endowed the reciprocal relation of texts and buildings with self-evidence that is close to axiomatic. “The *compositio* (putting together) of temples depends on symmetry,” writes Vitruvius at the beginning of *De architectura*, Book 3 (3.1.1). An orator, according to his mentor and older contemporary Cicero, must aim for an “*apta compositio*” in seeking to give his words a “well-fitted structure” (*De oratore*.3.200).

Neither Roman author figures with any importance in Bettina Reitz-Joosse’s recent *Building in Words: The Process of Construction in Latin Literature*. Cicero’s absence is understandable. More than a little surprising, however, is the author’s dismissal of Vitruvius on the strength of what she claims is his lack of interest in the processes of construction. Vitruvius’s explicit if somewhat gnomic claim to have “written the body of architecture” (2.1.8 and *passim*) would seem to invite serious consideration in this context, and (full disclosure) as the author of two books on Vitruvius I can only regret what appears to me as his undeserved exclusion from the book.

That said, there is much to recommend in this immensely erudite study of Roman construction and its textual representation in early imperial Rome. Of particular interest is how such representations focus far less on description of finished works as such than on what the author calls their “madness” – the money, manpower, material, skill and time that brought them into being – accounts, which for the most part amplify the rhetoric of power implicit in the works themselves and also enhance their memorability. Thus, for instance, the real *miraculum* of the obelisks Augustus Caesar raised at Rome, according to Pliny the Elder, was not their monumental presence in the city but the labour their transport from Egypt entailed and the effort needed to raise them.

Trajan’s column is among the monuments and inscriptions Reitz-Joose treats in her first chapter, the focus of which is epigraphy. Countless scenes of construction that punctuate the famous 200-meter relief wound around the column shaft like a scroll structure the chronicle of Trajan’s Dacian conquest, a narrative in which the omnipresent emperor (59 appearances, apparently) is also often figured as a builder. To this his victory monument was itself a testament. Originally flanked by Greek and Latin libraries, the triumphal column was the self-referential kingpin of the vast forum Trajan had built around it, with the entire complex an autarchic *mise en abîme* consisting of an endless interplay of text, construction and conquest in which, as Reitz-Joose points out, building is clearly the victor’s prerogative. So too, as multiple scenes of ruined Dacian villages attest, is destruction. There is no victory without evidence of defeat.

Not all displays of construction were vehicles of imperial rhetoric. The reliefs of the early second-century tomb of the Haterii represent a series of Roman buildings, along with an image of the tomb itself and, most remarkably, a giant crane that celebrates both the process of their construction and their builder Haterius’s success as a building contractor.

The next four of the book’s five constituent chapters turn from structures that describe, as it were, their own construction to literary accounts of architectural achievement. Panegyric prevails, yet such accounts are not uniformly encomiastic. In Chapter 2, Reitz-Joose examines the overlap of praise and censure in three different literary representations of the emperor Claudius’s attempt to drain the Fucine Lake in the mid first century CE. Pliny the Elder, ever the apologist for empire, expresses unmitigated enthusiasm considering the tunnel this required an invisible miracle, dug with “indescribable expense and a multitude of workmen over so many years” (*Natural History* 36.124, cited p. 79). Tacitus, typically acerbic, judges the undertaking reckless, ethically ambivalent, and essentially useless, but grants admiration for the spectacle of its inauguration.

Suetonius is even more ambivalent. Each of the three separate accounts in his life of Claudius leads to a different assessment, beginning with appreciation of the project’s usefulness. Further on, he derides the channel’s inauguration ceremony as a botched celebration, making fun of the presiding emperor’s disarray. His last brief mention has Claudius feasting above the newly opened channel and almost drowning in the rush of the outflow, a report Reitz-Joose interprets as a judgement of the emperor’s dangerously arrogant negligence.

Suetonius was born after the events he describes, as indeed was Tacitus, so theirs were obviously not eye-witness accounts. This points to another of Reitz-Joosse's themes: that textual representations of construction processes often acquired a literary life of their own as constructions quite independent of the processes represented.

Chapter 3, "Writing Cities, Founding Texts," is where Reitz-Joosse allows Vitruvius a single brief cameo appearance, invoking his treatise as "the earliest text which suggests and exploits a sustained identification between the composition of a literary work and the foundation and construction of a city" (p. 107). Finding Vitruvius of little apparent interest in his own right, however, she limits his role to that of precursor, quickly turning her attention to detailed examination of passages in three works whose thematic content she thinks *De architectura* as city-text anticipated: Propertius's *Elegies*, Manilius's *Astronomica* and Vergil's *Aeneid*. Vitruvius, who wrote his inaugural "body of architecture" for Augustus Caesar at the very beginning of the Augustan building boom Reitz-Joosse points to in the conclusion of this chapter as the context for the sudden emergence of the city-text metaphor deserves better.

In Chapter 4, three laudatory poems by the late first-century poet Statius from his *Silvae* ("woods" or "forests") are the occasion for an in-depth examination of poetry about construction being self-consciously presented as *compositio*, a "putting together" that reflects the construction process itself. Statius's poems, individual "trees" brought together in these "woods" in turn recall that the chief property of wood construction is a question, paradigmatically, of the fitting together of parts the Greeks called *harmonia* – the "harmony" that also defines the success of a lyric poem.

Lyric poetry raised the walls of Thebes, the stones of which, according to Greek myth, Amphion magically lifted into place with the power of his song. Statius reappears in Chapter 5 as the author of another work, the *Thebaid*. In Book 7 of that epic he writes of the city's destruction, bringing down its walls "built by an unmanly lyre" with the power of his own verse, (*Thebaid* 10.876, cited p. 195) and showing, as Reitz-Joosse would have it, how architectural destruction can be performed by both deeds and words. A discussion of how representations of construction and destruction depend on one another concludes the book.

However, *Building in Words* does not end there. An epilogue follows which, in casting fresh light on everything that goes before, makes it the most historiographically consequential of all the book's chapters. It concerns an obelisk raised in the Foro Mussolini, a sports complex in Rome now known as the Foro Italico where it still stands. From the time the stone for the monument was selected at Carrara in 1928 to when, gold tipped and inscribed MUSSOLINI DUX, the 300-ton white marble monolith was erected four years later, not only did every detail of the superhuman effort entailed by its quarrying, transport and installation receive enthusiastic media coverage complete with countless photographs often featuring the *Duce* himself (a selection is included in the book). The entire enterprise was also recorded in a 1,200-word illuminated manuscript, the so-called *Codex fori Mussolini*, written in classical Latin and entombed in the obelisk's base where disinterment would one day astonish posterity with the immensity of Fascist

achievement and the greatness of its leader. The manuscript has remained inaccessible but reprints of it which appeared in various publications during the 1930's provided the source for its partial transcription and translation here.

In her book, Reitz-Joose shows how much appreciation of Roman architectural achievement has been fuelled by its literary representation – principally of the construction processes entailed. That the two-way street between the arts of building and literary composition flourished in the early imperial period underscores the role of architecture in the Roman imperial project. Though less so now than in the past, it remains distressingly common to glorify the achievements of Roman builders as exemplary and to find inspiration in the spectacle of Roman conquest. But there can of course be no glorifying Mussolini's parody of such grandeur, and the self-defeating sequel to his attempted "construction of *Romanità*", as the author puts it in her admirable epilogue, is to render reverence for its Roman original indefensible. In this, Mussolini (with Bettina Reitz-Joose) has, paradoxically, called the inappropriate idealization of ancient Rome into serious question and urged on would-be Romanophiles the adoption of a more sharply critical stance.

About the Author

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