PART 6

Britain, Scotland, and Ireland

Writing about Romano-British Architecture in the Late Seventeenth Century

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In* the preface to his 1707 reissue of his *Account of Architects and Architecture*, the English writer John Evelyn made the following observation:

Those who are a little Conversant in the *Saxon* Writers, clearly discovered by what they find Innovated, or now grown Obsolete, that we have lost more than we have gain'd; and as to *Terms* of useful *Arts* in particular, forgotten and lost a World of most apt and proper Expressions which our Forefathers made use of, without being Oblig'd to other *Nations*.¹

The context for these remarks was Evelyn's attempts to educate English readers in the Vitruvian architectural lexicon; the language of classical architecture that had, Evelyn thought, once been known about in Britain during the Roman occupation and, apparently, in the years of Saxon rule that followed, but had been largely 'forgotten' during the later Middle Ages.

Evelyn's characterisation of the development of British architectural understanding was, then, a narrative that began with a golden age of Roman rule followed by a period of relative Saxon enlightenment in which Roman knowledge was, to some degree, retained. This was then superseded by a Dark Age of the Gothic, presumably coinciding with what we now call the High and Late Middle Ages in Britain. The English, said Evelyn, had now 'lost more than we

* This chapter, on late seventeenth-century intellectual writing on Romano-British architectural remains, builds on research recently published in my book *Architects and Intellectual Culture in Post-Restoration England* (Oxford: 2017). The discussion of Martin Lister in this chapter repeats some of the material in the book, though here it is reconsidered within the context of writing specifically about Britain.

1 Evelyn John, "An Account of Architects and Architecture", in Fréart de Chambray Roland, *A parallel of the antient architecture with the modern*, trans. J. Evelyn, 2nd ed. (London, D. Brown et al.: 1707) preface.

have gain'd' and were 'Oblig'd' to rely on editions of Vitruvius produced by 'other Nations' of Europe in order to resurrect that forgotten culture.²

Inherent in this narrative of loss was the assumption that the Roman period was as much of an arcadia in Britain as it had been in the Mediterranean. This was common for the period, particularly in writing about architecture, where the recent introduction of classical architectural form in Britain was generally seen as a revival of the superior types of buildings that had been built in England and lowland Scotland between the invasion of AD 43 and the collapse of Roman rule in the Fifth Century. In the text that followed this preface, it was clear that Evelyn saw himself as an active participant in this re-discovery of Roman architectural culture in Britain and it is important to stress that late seventeenth-century intellectuals did not see the recent introduction of Roman architecture as a moment of novel conception, rather it was seen as being as much of a rebirth as it had been in Quattrocento Italy. The result of this renascent intellectual formulation was that the late seventeenth century witnessed the development of a serious antiquarian project dedicated to the investigation of Romano-British buildings.³ This, crucially, was methodologically different from the treatment of the architectural legacy of Roman Britain in earlier chorographic texts such as William Camden's *Britannia*.⁴ As I will ultimately argue in this chapter, this shift, from a chorographic treatment to an antiquarian one, was marked by a disavowal of the local nature of Romano-British ruins in favour of placing them within a broader context of the Roman Empire as a whole.

But the casting, and subsequent scholarly investigation of the Roman period in England as being one of high built culture, when Britain, as an imperial province, participated in a Europe-wide flourishing of architecture was problematic. This was for the reason that there was next to no evidence for it. The Romans had not left any substantial ruins in their wake. As we shall see, Roman buildings that did survive were heavily damaged fragments and/or rather utilitarian military structures. So, English writers interested in the

2 Evelyn had just cited Walther Hermann Ryff's 1548 German translation and Claude Perrault's 1673 French translation of *De architectura* as examples of European scholarship on Roman architecture.

3 For general accounts of writing on Roman Britain in the early modern period see: Hingley R., *The Recovery of Roman Britain 1586–1906, a Colony so Fertile* (Oxford: 2008), and Sweet R., *Antiquaries, the Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Hambledon – London: 2004).

4 As Anne M. Myers has shown, description of historical architecture, whether Roman or otherwise, in chorographic writing from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, tended to prioritise social and familial stories over architectural description; cf. Myers A.M., *Literature and Architecture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore, MD: 2013), chapter 1.

fabric of British antiquity had very little to go on. For example, when suggesting to the 'Home-Traveller' which buildings they might want to study to get an idea of the 'ancient manner' of architecture Evelyn was forced to recommend recent works by Christopher Wren and Inigo Jones rather than anything actually ancient.⁵ Architects keen to emulate the architecture of ancient Rome had next to nothing in the way of local source material to integrate into their designs. If Italian authors could claim the Pantheon as their greatest ancient survival and French authors the Maison Carrée, the British had to settle for long but largely ruined walls.⁶

This paucity of surviving structures did not stop antiquarians and architects from trying to write about and understand the architectural legacy of the Roman period in Britain though. In some cases their attempts smack of desperation. This might be one possible context for the most famous (or infamous) piece of writing on Romano-British architecture produced in the seventeenth century: Inigo Jones's posthumously published *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly called Stone-Heng*, in which he argued that Stonehenge was a Roman Temple. This was an argument that was widely rejected in the period and, as Caroline van Eck has convincingly argued, was probably the result of Royal pressure rather than individual scholarly conviction on Jones's part.⁷ Nonetheless, the text demonstrates a desire by both British authorities and scholars to establish actual built evidence of the Roman period in Britain that went beyond the mundane and fragmentary and, instead, had a claim to both monumentality and architectural refinement. Indeed, Jones saw Stonehenge as being simply too good to have been built by anyone else but the Romans. The ancient native Britons, said Jones, had such 'small experience [...] in knowledge of what ever *Arts*, much lesse of building, with like elegancy and proportion, such goodly works as *Stoneheng*'.⁸ Instead, Jones argued, it was 'of as beautifull *Proportions*, as elegant in *Order*, and as stately in *Aspect*, as any'⁹ of the ancient monuments of Italy, which, he reminded his readers, he had seen first-hand.

5 Specifically, Evelyn recommended Banqueting House by Jones and Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral, the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford, Trinity College Library in Cambridge, and Greenwich Hospital; cf. Evelyn, "Account" 10.

6 In fairness to early modern British writers, there was a rich literary and scholarly body of work on Hadrian's Wall that began as early as the sixteenth century. See Hingley, *Recovery of Roman Britain* 85–156.

7 Eck C. van, *Inigo Jones on Stonehenge: Architectural Representation, Memory and Narrative* (Amsterdam: 2009).

8 Jones Inigo, *The most notable Antiquity of Great Britain vulgarly called Stone-Heng on Salisbury Plain* (London, James Flesher for Daniel Pakeman: 1655) 2.

9 Ibidem 1.

By the late seventeenth century, Jones's theory was largely discredited. Stonehenge did not, of course, resemble any ancient Roman temple. Instead English writers decided that they had to make do with the structures that survived from Roman Britain that they could conclusively prove to have been built under the ancient empire, even if none of those ruins were in any way as substantial as the great monument on Salisbury Plain. So, the antiquarian culture of the post-Restoration period saw a number of attempts to analyse rather smaller and less impressive survivals from the Roman occupation. For the rest of this chapter, I will explore a sample of these texts and, in particular, emphasise the consciously erudite approach that these authors took in their investigation of Roman Britain. Ultimately I will argue that by frequent recourse to textual authority, these authors were able to position the rather unimpressive built fabric of Roman Britain within European-wide debates about ancient architecture that were normally focused on much more substantial architectural survivals.

Take, for example, a 1702 account of the Roman fort of Burgodunum in the village of Adel near Leeds written by the Yorkshire based antiquarian Ralph Thoresby.¹⁰ This was published, like so many accounts of Romano-British antiquities, in the *Philosophical Transactions*, the journal of the Royal Society. The *Transactions* was the principal forum for the sharing of antiquarian material in late the seventeenth and early eighteenth century and most writing about Romano-British architecture can be found in its pages.¹¹ Thoresby's account was fairly typical of antiquarian material in the journal in that it used textual sources to attempt to explain the material evidence of Britain's Roman past. The remains of the fort at Adel consisted of foundations only, but that did not stop Thoresby citing numerous authors in his account of the structure. For example, he used the inscriptions found on the site alongside William Camden's *Britannia* to propose that the fort dated from the Severan era and he consulted a manuscript copy of William Leland's 'Itinerary' to locate the Roman military road that the settlement once sat upon. Thoresby also argued that the small millstones that he had found on the site were evidence of the presence of slave quarters in the fort (they were used in the ancient practice of restraining slaves

10 Thoresby Ralph, "A Letter from Mr Thoresby, F.R.S. to the Publisher, concerning the Vestigia of a Roman Town lately discovered near Leedes in Yorkshire", *Philosophical Transactions* 23, 282 (1702) 1285–1289.

11 For antiquarian material in the *Philosophical Transactions* see Hunter M.C.W., "The Royal Society and the Origins of British Archaeology", in idem (ed.), *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge: 1995) 181–200; and, specifically relating to architecture: Walker M. *Architects and Intellectual Culture in Post-Restoration England* (Oxford: 2017), chapter 3.

by tying them to stones). In doing so he cited Scripture (*Exodus* 11, 5; *Judges* 16, 21 and *Matthew* 18, 6), as well as the writings of two English scholars: the early seventeenth-century clergyman Thomas Gataker, and the contemporaneous Oxford-based Classicist and Anglo-Saxonist Edward Thwaites.¹² But Thoresby's use of such sources is still rather provincial and focussed exclusively on the site itself. For a more consciously European approach to the analysis of Roman Britain we must go elsewhere.

Christopher Wren's *Notes on Roman antiquities in London* are amongst the more important writings on the subject in the late Seventeenth Century, although they were actually written by his son – based on either notes by, or conversations with, his father. They were published in *Parentalia* in 1750 and record discoveries made by Wren during the rebuilding of the Cathedral and parish churches in the City after the Great Fire.¹³ Like Thoresby, Wren made frequent use of documentary sources, ancient, medieval or modern, to further understand the various remains of Roman roads and structures that were unearthed in the years following 1666. For example, he began the *Notes* by citing Lucan and Tacitus (in a historical context rather than in an architectural one). Later in the text he cited other sources in connection with the so-called *London Stone*. This was a block of limestone, probably dating to the Roman occupation and surviving today [Fig. 23.1].¹⁴ Through its unremarkable and fragmentary nature it is rather typical of surviving architecture from British antiquity. But that did not stop the antiquarians in Wren's time from placing this lump of masonry within no less a context than that of the *Forum Romanum*:

London-stone, as generally suppos'd, was a Pillar, in the Manner of the *Milliarium Aureum*, at Rome, from whence the Account of their Miles began; but the Surveyor was of Opinion, by Reason of the large Foundation, it was rather some more considerable Monument in the *Forum*; for in the adjoining Ground on the South Side [...] were discovered some *tessellated Pavements*, and other extensive Remains of Roman Workmanship, and Buildings.¹⁵

12 The texts were Gataker's 1657 annotations on *Isaiah* and Thwaites's 1698 edition of the Old English Heptateuch; cf. Thoresby, "A Letter" 1287.

13 They have now been transcribed and published in Soo L., *Wren's "Tracts" on Architecture and Other Writings* (Cambridge: 1998) 22–30.

14 For the London Stone in general see Clark J., "London Stone: Stone of Brutus or Fetish Stone – Making the Myth", *Folklore* 121, 1 (2010) 38–60.

15 Soo, *Wren's Tracts* 26.

FIGURE 23.1
The London Stone (currently on display
in the Museum of London)
IMAGE © AUTHOR

By rejecting the ‘generally’ accepted hypothesis, Wren (or his son, following the opinion of ‘the Surveyor’) by no means makes the object less spectacular. Quite on the contrary, as an explanatory footnote to his own theory makes clear:

Probably this might in some degree, have imitated the *Milliarium Aureum* at *Constantinople*, which was not in the Form of a Pillar, as at *Rome*, but an eminent Building, for under its Roof (according to *Cedrenus* and *Suidas*) stood the Statues of *Constantine* and *Helena*; *Trajan*; an equestrian statue of *Hadrian*; a Statue of *Fortune*, and many other Figures and Decorations.¹⁶

Assuming these were the thoughts of Wren, he had used textual sources to argue that the London Stone was once a very substantial structure in the same way that the architectural fragment in Constantinople, known as the Milion, had once been part of a much larger building. Wren referred to two Byzantine authorities: Georgius Cedrenus, whose eleventh-century *Compendium Historiarum* contained an account of the ruins of the forum in Constantinople; and the *Souda*, a tenth-century encyclopaedia of the ancient world. So, Wren had used the Roman remains of London to engage with European scholarship and to draw parallels between English archaeological survivals and more substantial ruins on the continent. But again, Wren’s notes on the Roman antiquities of London have their limits. They were not published in his lifetime and they are not particularly substantial. For more impressive feats of scholarship on the remains of Roman Britain, we must go elsewhere.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

Interest in Britain's Roman buildings was not limited to England. North of the border there was much antiquarian activity focused on the remains of the ancient empire that had tentatively occupied the southern parts of Lowland Scotland. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Edinburgh-based physician, geographer, and antiquarian Robert Sibbald was the principal investigator of this material.¹⁷ His 1707 *Historical inquiries concerning the Roman monuments and antiquities in the north-part of Britain called Scotland* represented the summation of many year's research on the subject. Sibbald's text was enormously erudite and, in it, he made repeated reference to ancient, medieval and modern authors. The ancient sources he used tended to be, firstly, historical works and, secondly, those relating directly to Britain. So, he cited Tacitus's *Agricola* and the *Augustan History* (on the reigns of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Septimius Severus), above all other ancient writers. He also made repeated use of Ptolemy when discussing the locations of Roman settlements and, to a lesser extent, cited later writers from the Anglo-Saxon period (principally Bede and Nennius) when appropriate.¹⁸ The use of these sources reflects the fact that Sibbald's text was, principally, historical. On the whole he used the ruins as a means to an end: namely for establishing the nature of Roman rule in the far north of England and lowland Scotland rather than examining its architectural legacy with any degree of focus. There was, however, one section of the work dedicated to a single building and, in this, Sibbald shifted both his approach and the terms of his textual reference. This was his discussion of the single most substantial survival of the Roman period in Scotland. This was the structure that gave its name to the central Lowlands town of Stenhousemuir, a round, domed object with an oculus in its apex that was, by Sibbald's day, known as Arthur's O'on (or oven), presumably due to its passing resemblance to a klin.¹⁹ It was probably a Roman temple or triumphal

17 For Sibbald, and his architectural interests in particular see Walker M., "Architecture, Improvement and the 'New Science' in Early Modern Scotland", *Architectural Heritage* 23, 1 (2012) 41–55.

18 For example, Sibbald referred to Bede in the context of the ancient city of Guidi described by the Anglo-Saxon writer in his *Ecclesiastical History*, and both Bede and Nennius in the context of the revolt of Carausius (third century AD); cf. Sibbald Robert, *Historical inquiries concerning the Roman monuments and antiquities in the north-part of Britain called Scotland* (Edinburgh: 1707) 16, 20–21.

19 For archaeological research on Arthur's O'on see: Steer K.A., "Arthur's O'On: A Lost Shrine of Roman Britain", *Archaeological Journal* 115, 1 (1958) 99–110; Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Stirlingshire, an Inventory of the Ancient Monuments* (Edinburgh: 1963) 117–118; Lewis M.J.T., *Temples in Roman Britain* (Cambridge: 1966) 78–79.

FIGURE 23.2

Arthur's O'on, from: Robert Gordon, *Itinerarium septentrionale: or, A journey thro' most of the counties of Scotland* (London: 1726)

IMAGE © AUTHOR

monument (a *tropaeum*) from the Antonine period.²⁰ It was demolished in the eighteenth century but numerous illustrations of it exist [Fig. 23.2].²¹

Sibbald began his discussion of the building by quoting Hector Boece's 1527 *Scotorum historia*, in which it was argued that the structure was a Roman temple.²² And then he turned to another recent writer, Henry Sinclair, who

20 Sibbald's text had a very rudimentary illustration of the O'on, but I show here a later, much more informative eighteenth-century illustration from Gordon Robert, *Itinerarium septentrionale: or, A journey thro' most of the counties of Scotland* (London: 1726), plate 4.

21 For the demolition, by a local landowner, and the subsequent antiquarian reaction see Brown I.G., "Gothicism, ignorance and a bad taste: the destruction of Arthur's O'on", *Antiquity* 48 (1974) 283–287. The O'on was the subject of some scholarly attention in the twentieth century, but it remains an under-researched building. The circumstances of its demolition would certainly be worthy of future investigation.

22 Sibbald, *Historical inquiries* 43.

had written a manuscript account of Arthur's O'on in the 1560s.²³ Sinclair had also been of the opinion that it was a temple dating from the Roman period. Additionally, both Boece and Sinclair had reported seeing an altar in it, but this had been removed by Sibbald's time. Sibbald himself was convinced that it was a Roman structure, for the same reasons that Jones had claimed Roman provenance for Stonehenge: namely, that it was too good to be by the ancient Britons. Their temples, said Sibbald, 'were only Stones set in Circles', whereas this kind of structure was 'far beyond the Art of the *Britains* in these times'.²⁴

Sibbald then set out to prove, conclusively, that it was a Roman temple and to do so he turned not to a local or historical source, but to the greatest of all authorities on Roman temple construction: Vitruvius. He began, logically, with the discussion of round temples in the fourth book of *De architectura*, via the commentary of the sixteenth-century French humanist Guillaume Philandrier:

Philander in his Notes upon the 7th Chap. of *Vitruvius*' fourth Book, furnishes us with a convincing Argument that it was a Temple thus, *Templorum quanquam alia sexangula, alia multorum angulorum, caeli naturam imitati veteres, imprimis rotundis sunt delectati* [although some temples had six or more angles, the ancients, imitating the nature of the sky, were particularly delighted in round temples].²⁵

Sibbald then applied Philandrier's Vitruvian gloss to the O'on, noting that 'The round Figure is the most perfect, which commendeth this: and the Elegancy and Magnificence of this Work, appeareth in the agreeable Pulchritude of it'. So, Sibbald, following Philandrier, saw the structure's perfectly round and (apparently) beautiful shape as evidence of its Roman origin. He then cut out the French middleman and went straight to the original text of *De architectura*, picking out a passage from chapter two of the first book to, firstly, confirm this

23 Sibbald had found Sinclair's account in the Advocates Library in Edinburgh, on a loose sheet inserted into in an abbreviated manuscript transcription of the *Scotichronicon*, a medieval account of the history of Scotland: Sibbald, *Historical inquiries*. The manuscript has subsequently been transcribed and published by Turnbull W.B., *Extracta e variis cronis Scocie: from the ancient manuscript in the Advocates Library at Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: 1842).

24 Sibbald, *Historical inquiries* 42–43, 45.

25 Sibbald, *Historical inquiries* 45. The passage from Philandrier that Sibbald quotes is: Philandrier Guillaume, *In decem libros M. Vitruvii Pollionis de architectura annotationes* (Rome, Giovanni Andrea Dossena: 1544) 143. Philandrier's commentary included this observation in his commentary on chapter seven, as Sibbald observed, rather than chapter eight, where it can be found in Vitruvius's original text.

provenance, secondly, to explain the aperture at the apex of the O'on's dome, and, thirdly, to ascribe a deity to the temple:

The opening in the top, likewise proveth it to be a Temple; for as *Vitruvius* sheweth, the *Decor est emendatus operis aspectus, probatis rebus compositi cum auctoritate*, and the first part of this *perficitur statione, quae Graece Θεματισμός dicitur cum Iovi, Fulguri, et Caelo et Soli et Lunae, aedificia sub divo, hypaethraque constituuntur, horum enim deorum, et species et effectus in aperto mundo atque lucenti praesentes vidimus*. It is very like that this Temple was dedicated to *Caelus*, a Deity of the *Romans*, for it is situated in a Plain, and is open to the Air, and uncovered, is of a Circular Figure [...].²⁶

Thus Sibbald was able to use *Vitruvius* to prove, as he saw it, that the O'on was a hypaethral Roman temple dedicated to *Caelus* on account of its situation and the oculus that left it open to the elements.²⁷ He then turned to issues of dating and patronage and after refuting, firstly, Camden's claim that the O'on was built by Agricola and, secondly, Nennius's attribution of it to Carausius, he used Cassius Dio and Herodian's accounts of Septimius Severus's building programs in the north of Britain to argue that it has been that emperor who had erected Arthur's O'on during the time he spent in the county between 208 and his death in York in 211.²⁸ Sibbald then, somewhat audaciously, claimed that the structure was a conscious emulation of the Pantheon in Rome on account of the fact that, according to the *Historia Augusta*, Septimius Severus had also repaired that famous temple and would thus, Sibbald reasoned, want to build a similar shaped monument in Britain. After all, said Sibbald, 'It agrees with the *Pantheum* in this, that the Roof, even of this here, hath no Pillar to support it, and that tho it be a Vault, it hath no Key-Stone, or Navil Stone to bind it in the middle, but in place of that, a round Hole in the middle, being open as the *Pantheum* in the Top'.²⁹ It is difficult to fault Sibbald's logic at least.

26 Sibbald, *Historical inquiries* 45. The passage in *Vitruvius* is 1, 2, 5 and reads in translation: 'Appropriateness consists in the perfect appearance of a work composed using the correct elements in accordance with precedence. This is achieved by following a rule, *thematismos* in Greek, or a custom or nature. One follows a rule when roofless buildings open to the sky [*hypaethra*] are built to Jupiter, Creator of Lightning, *Caelus* and the Sun and Moon: for the appearances and manifestations of these deities are visible to us in the sky when it is clear and bright'. Trans. R. Schofield *On Architecture* (London: 2009).

27 In fact, the aperture was probably the result of damage to the building rather than part of the original design: Royal Commission, *Stirlingshire* 119.

28 Sibbald, *Historical inquiries* 46.

29 Ibidem.

Even if his positing of a direct link between the Pantheon and Arthur's O'on seems a little far-fetched, it nonetheless served the same purpose as Sibbald's use of Philandrier and Vitruvius earlier in the account: to demonstrate to his readers that the buildings of Roman Britain, no matter how ruined or unimpressive, could be understood and located within the context of the ancient empire as a whole, rather than just viewed as local curiosities or as historical evidence of Roman military and political activity. He used the fact that the O'on, in form, resembled buildings that were described by Vitruvius and analysed by Philandrier to place it, intellectually, in the same bracket as the greatest of all Roman architectural survivals.

Of all the late seventeenth-century interpreters of Romano-British architecture, none were as thorough and committed as the York antiquarian and physician Martin Lister. In 1683 he published an account of the largest surviving Roman ruin in his native city, the Multangular Tower: a ten-sided fortification of Roman masonry and brickwork with a layer of medieval stonework above [Fig. 23.3].³⁰ It was originally part of the considerable fortifications around the Roman town of Eboracum.³¹ Again, this was published in the *Philosophical Transactions*. It had been Lister himself who had correctly identified the lower sections of the structure as Roman and he also supplied an illustration of the ruin, which was subsequently engraved by John Savage and published in the journal [Fig. 23.4].³² As he set out in the account and emphasised in the illustration, Lister recognised that there were two different stages of building work and that the top half of the structure was 'modern' and, therefore 'imperfect'. He then gave a basic description of the tower with an emphasis on the materials and construction. In doing so he turned, like Sibbald, to Vitruvius:

But the out-side, towards the River, is most worth taking notice of, it is faced with a very small *Saxum quadratum* [square stone] of about 4 inches thick, and laid in levels like our modern Brick-work: This sort of building *Vitruvius* (*lib. 2. cap. 8.*) calls after the Greeks, *Isodomum*, *cum omnia Choria aequa crassitudine fuerint structa*; but the length of the stones is

30 Lister Martin, "Some Observations upon the Ruins of a Roman Wall and Multangular-Tower at York", *Philosophical Transactions* 13, 149 (1683) 238–242.

31 For modern archaeological analysis of the tower see: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of York, Volume 1, Eboracum, Roman York* (Leicester, HMSO: 1962) 13–14.

32 For a fuller account of Lister's exploration of the Multangular Tower see Walker, *Architects and Intellectual Culture* 107–119. Here I contextualise Lister's account within antiquarian writing on Roman Britain rather than within intellectual architectural writing more generally.

FIGURE 23.3 The Multangular Tower, York
IMAGE © AUTHOR

FIGURE 23.4 John Savage, Illustration of the Multangular Tower, York. From Martin Lister, "Some Observations upon the Ruins of a Roman Wall and Multangular-Tower at York", *Philosophical Transactions* 13, 149 (1683)
IMAGE © AUTHOR

not observed, but are as they fell out in hewing: From the foundation 20 courses of this small squared stone are laid, and over them 5 courses of Roman Brick; these Bricks are laid some length waies, and some end-waies in the wall, and were called *lateres Diatoni*: After these 5 courses of Brick, other 22 courses of small square stone (as before described) are laid [...].³³

Thus, Lister identified the technique used in the construction of the tower from the pages of the Roman author. He noted that the height (though not the length) of the stones was uniform and, therefore, corresponded to Vitruvius's definition of isodomic masonry construction.³⁴ Lister also highlighted the strip of brickwork that divided the masonry roughly halfway up the Roman section of the tower, which was, again, described in the pages of *de Architectura*. This feature interested him and he went further in analysing it. In the process, though, he departed from the structure itself and initiated a discussion – informed by Vitruvius – of Roman brickwork in general:

The reason of this order of Brick-work intermixt with stone, the same *Vitruvius* gives, and in this particular the Romans after his time, and upon his admonition, and recommendation (in all probability) did imitate the Greeks, '*longitudines Coriorum* (saies he) *alternis coagmentis in crassitudinem instruentes*: And a little further, *interponunt singulos perpetua crassitudine utraque parte Frontatos* (*lateres*) *quos Diatonos appellant, qui maxime religando confirmant parietum soliditatem*: These Bricks were to be as *Throughs*, or as it were so many new Foundations to that which was to be superstructed; and to bind the Two sides together firmly, for the wall it self is only faced with small square stone, and the middle thereof filled with Morter and Peble; *frontibus serviunt* (saies the same Author) *et medio farciunt*; which *Vitruvius* discommends in the Romans of his time, and therefore the later Romans (the builders of our wall) did as I said, correct this Error, and imitate the Greeks.³⁵

33 Lister, "Some Observations" 238.

34 Vitruvius's description of isodomic construction, that Lister quoted, is from *De architectura* 11, 8, 6 and reads: 'A wall is called isodomum when all the courses are equal in height'.

35 Lister, "Some Observations" 239. The lines from Vitruvius are from Book 11, 8, 7 and read respectively: '[the Greeks] lay the stones horizontally and set alternate stones lengthwise into the thickness of the wall' and 'they insert single stones through the whole thickness of the wall with faces at either end, called διατονοι [*diatonoi*; cross-pieces, through-pieces], and these, binding the walls together powerfully reinforce their stability'. The lines 'frontibus serviunt' ('concentrate only on the vertical outer faces') and 'medio farciunt'

Here, he used the tower as evidence to point to a broader chronology of developments in ancient masonry and brickwork techniques. The tower, noted Lister, employed a construction technique used by the Greeks and approved of by Vitruvius, whereby alternate stones (or in this case bricks) were inserted lengthwise into walls to reinforce the superstructure. This technique was not widely used amongst the builders of Vitruvius's time (to the disapproval of the Roman author) and Lister, aware that the Multangular tower post-dated the writing of *de Architectura* by at least 300 years, was able to conclude that the builders of the structure (and Roman builders in general) had improved their methods according to Vitruvius's prescription in the intervening centuries. His concern with the Multangular Tower in this passage was to place it within a broader architectural movement in the ancient world rather than attempt to understand it at a local level. It represented a test case for an exploration of Vitruvian theory and the subsequent development of that theory in the period after *de Architectura*.

In fact, Lister's Multangular Tower account does not really provide, at any point, a lengthy or locally contextualised discussion of the building itself. Unlike Sibbald, he seemed uninterested in the historical or political context of the tower and, at no point in his account, did he attempt to place it within the usual catalogue of visiting emperors, internecine imperial conflict, and Pict-bashing that represented the staple Romano-British diet for seventeenth-century antiquarians. Instead, Lister had ambitions that were much broader, culturally: he wanted to use the Multangular Tower as a starting point for a discussion of the nature of Roman architectural technique, and specifically that relating to brickwork.³⁶

So, his analysis of the tower's brickwork quickly turned into a much more general discussion of the reasons why brick construction was discouraged in Rome in spite of Roman architects' overall preference for it over stonework (according to Vitruvius). This was 'a thing not of choice, but necessity' noted Lister. And he gave a précis of the Roman author's explanation 'at large' for 'why the Romans suffered not brick buildings to be made within the City of Rome'. The reason, Lister ascertained, was that:

('and fill up the space between') that Lister referenced are from the same passage of text and refer to a technique of building (condemned by Vitruvius) whereby upright facing stones are placed in front of rubble and mortar behind.

36 English antiquarian interest in Roman bricks was widespread in this period, see Harris O.D., "John Leland and the 'Briton Brykes'", *The Antiquaries Journal* 87 (2007) 346–356.

The Law (sais he [i.e. Vitruvius]) suffers not a wall to be made to the street-ward (for so give me leave to interpret *communi loco*) above a foot and a half thick, and partition walls the same, least they should take up too much roome. Now brick walls of a foot and a half thick [...] cannot bear up above one Story; but in so vast and Majestick a City (as old *Rome*) there ought to be innumerable habitations, therefore when a plain Area, or building of one Story could not receive such a multitude to dwell in the City, therefore the thing it self did compel them to it [i.e. use masonry construction].³⁷

Here, Lister, paraphrasing the eighth chapter of Vitruvius's second book, departed entirely from the Multangular Tower and again concerned himself with much broader questions of ancient architectural history.

Following this he returned, briefly, to the York ruin, but only to use it as a catalyst for another lengthy discussion of broader Roman architectural matters, this time concerning a discrepancy in ancient accounts of the standard measurements of Roman bricks. Lister began this discussion by giving the measurements of the bricks in the Multangular Tower and was able to establish with the help of a modern text (John Greaves's 1647 *A Discourse of the Romane Foot*), that they were roughly one and half Roman feet long and a foot wide:

Those Bricks are about seventeenth Inches of our measure long, and about eleven Inches broad, and two Inches and half thick. This (having caused several of them to be carefully measured) I give in round numbers, and do find them to agree very well with the notion of the *Roman* foot, which the learned Antiquary *Greaves* has left us; viz. of its being about half an Inch less than ours; they seem to have shrunk in the baking, more in the breadth then in the length; which is but reasonable, because of its easier yeilding that way [...].³⁸

These measurements, Lister then observed, were consistent with the account of Roman brick sizes in Pliny's *Natural History*, as well as in other Roman ruins that he had observed. They were, however, inconsistent with the account of

37 Lister, "Some Observations" 239–240. The passage of Vitruvius that Lister précised was Book II, 8, 16–18.

38 Lister, "Some Observations" 240. Greaves had calculated the Roman foot using a plethora of ancient sources and then compared to the contemporary English foot: Greaves John, *A Discourse of the Romane Foot and the Denarius: From whence, as from two principles; The Measures and Weights used by the Ancients, may be deduced* (London, William Lee: 1647) 40.

Roman brick sizes in the text of Vitruvius that he was using, which was the 1567 Latin edition of Daniele Barbaro:³⁹

Now that this was properly the *Roman Brick* we have the Testimony of *Vitruvius*, and *Pliny*: of *Vitruvius*, '*fiunt Laterum tria genera, unum quod Graece Didoron appellatur quo nostri utuntur* etc.'; And of *Pliny*, *genera eorum tria; Didoron, quo utimur, longum sesqui pede, latum pede*.⁴⁰

The Vitruvius passage Lister quotes continues in Barbaro's edition: 'longum pede, latum semipede', 'a foot long, half a foot wide' – which is a clear contradiction to the measures as described by Pliny and as seen in reality.

But we are to note, that the Coppy of *Vitruvius*; where it describes the measures of the Didoron is vicious; and is to be corrected by *Pliny*, and, had not *Vitruvius*'s Commentatour been more a friend to his Author than to truth, he had not perswaded the contrary, for the Bricks themselves do demonstrate at this day, *Pliny*'s measures to be right, and not those of *Vitruvius*, as they are extant; which makes me much wonder at the confidence of *Daniel Barbarus* affirming the Bricks now to be found, are all according to *Vitruvius* and not *Pliny*'s measures; for all that I have yet seen with us in *England* are of *Pliny*'s measures as at *Leister* in the *Roman Ruine* there, called the *Jews Wall*; at *St. Albans*, as I remember, and here with us at *York*.

For Lister, therefore, the evidence was stacked up against the Barbaro edition. Pliny's account, all of Lister's observations of the Multangular Tower, as well as his knowledge of the Jewry Wall in Leicester and the Roman ruins in St. Albans, pointed to an error in the Italian edition. This came in spite of Barbaro's claim that he had checked the measurements in his manuscript of Vitruvius against surviving Roman ruins in Italy.⁴¹ Lister, however, was not

39 Vitruvius, *De Architectura libri decem, cum commentariis Danielis Barbari*, ed. Daniele Barbaro (Venice, F. De Franceschi – J. Criegher: 1567) 53.

40 Lister, "Some Observations" 240–241. The Vitruvius passage (II, 3, 3), which Lister quotes via Barbaro, reads in translation: 'Now, three kinds of bricks are produced. The first, called the Lydian [Didoron in Barbaro] in Greek, is the one our people use'. The text of Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia* xxxv, 49) reads in translation: 'Three kinds of bricks are made: the *didoron*, the one we use, one foot and a half a foot long and a foot wide'.

41 Although Barbaro frequently used archaeological evidence in his commentaries on Vitruvius, much of his knowledge of the ancient ruins had come from his collaborator and illustrator Palladio, as he admitted; see Cellauro L., "Palladio e le illustrazioni delle edizioni del 1556 e del 1567 di Vitruvio", *Saggi e Memorie di Storia dell'Arte* 22 (1998) 57–128.

finished in his critique. As far as the York antiquarian was concerned, the decisive blow was provided by Vitruvius himself who, later in the treatise (including in the Barbaro edition) appeared to contradict the passage: 'And to go no farther for Arguments' wrote Lister, 'than this very Chapter of *Vitruvius*, the *Diplinthii Parietes* in Rome were against law, and the single Brick Wall was onely allowed as Standard, viz, a foot and half thick Wall, or one *Roman* Brick a length, as was above noted'.⁴² Lister here was again referring to the passage in Chapter 8,17 of Book II of *de Architectura* which read: 'Leges publicae non patiuntur maiores crassitudines quam sesquipedales constitui loco communi' or 'Public laws forbid that walls thicker than a foot and a half should be built on public land'.⁴³ Lister surmised that if a wall with the width of single standard brick was a foot and a half wide then that was the standard size of a Roman brick. Those were the measurements given in his copy of Pliny rather than in the earlier passage of the Barbaro Vitruvius.

Starting with the ruins and, with the help of other sources, both documentary and archaeological, Lister had managed to establish that there was something amiss with the Barbaro edition of Vitruvius. The Italian editor gave the measurement of the standard Roman brick as a foot long and a half a foot wide, all other sources available to Lister suggested that these measurements should be wider by half in each dimension. Lister was then able to demonstrate that the original Roman author was not to blame. To do this, he returned to Pliny:

Pliny lived sometime after *Vitruvius*, and being a professed Transcriber, and as it appears from this very place, having taken the whole business of Brick almost *verbatim* out of him and not differing in any one thing in the whole Chapter, but in this, or the measure of the *Didoron*. And the Bricks demonstrating the truth of that difference, it is reasonable we should make *Vitruvius's longum pede latum semipede*, a fault of *Vitruvius* Copyers.⁴⁴

Assuming, therefore, that Pliny had copied, accurately, a true version of Vitruvius's text, then that original also gave the bricks sizes as one and half Roman feet long and a foot wide. As Barbaro had been aware of the discrepancy between Vitruvius and Pliny – he had acknowledged as much in his

42 Lister, "Some Observations" 241.

43 The original text here comes from the Vitruvius manuscript in the British Library (BL Harley MS 2767); see Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, edited from the *Harleian Manuscript 2767 and translated in English* [...], trans. F. Granger, vol. I (London: 1931) 126. The translation is from Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 55.

44 Lister, "Some Observations" 241.

commentary on the Latin text – Lister realised that the mistake did not lie with the Italian editor either: he was only guilty of repeating the error and attempting to corroborate it with erroneous observations of Roman ruins.⁴⁵ Instead, Lister guessed that Barbaro had used a deficient manuscript of the ancient source and that ultimate blame lay at the feet of a medieval copyist.

As it transpires, Lister was right. In most manuscripts of Vitruvius the line in question reads: 'longum sesquipedē, latum pedē' ('a foot and a half long and a foot wide'), which were the measurements recorded by Pliny and were, indeed, the standard length and width of Roman bricks. The eighth-century manuscript of Vitruvius in the British Library, perhaps the oldest transcription of the text, does not contain the discrepancy.⁴⁶ Thus, Lister was able to confidently censure the original transcriber of Barbaro's Vitruvius manuscript for mistranscription and Barbaro himself for using seemingly false archaeological evidence to compound the mistake. Lister's method had been to make a series of objective analyses of key ancient texts and combine those with archaeological observations. It had resulted in him resolving a problem that he had identified in the wider community's knowledge of ancient architecture and, in particular, in the pages of its most valued surviving source on that subject.

What are we make of all this? Well, what is immediately striking is that Lister does not, at any point, provide a lengthy discussion of the Multangular Tower itself. After a brief description of the structure on the first page, He made no further attempt to understand it at a local level. Instead the rest of publication is given over to a discussion of Roman construction techniques in general and their treatment in Vitruvius in particular. Evidently, the analysis of a newly found ancient structure was an appropriate moment to start a debate about the textuary history of *De architectura*. This was because, for Lister, there was an accordant relationship between any Roman building and the one surviving textual source on ancient architecture. Even though Lister would have been aware that the Multangular Tower lay on the very margins of the Roman Empire, and must have been built at least a hundred years after Vitruvius's death, it was part of the same architectural culture as Vitruvius and should, by rights, correspond to the text. That architectural culture was perceived of as a homogeneous one, whose very homogeneity was insured by Vitruvian doctrine – Vitruvius being the paradigmatic Roman architect and theorist. Any inconsistencies in the text – and any inconsistencies between the text and surviving examples of ancient architecture – had to be, and in this case were, the fault of subsequent transcribers and translators. But his account also demonstrates that Lister saw

45 Vitruvius, *De Architectura* (ed. Barbaro) 53–54.

46 Vitruvius, *On Architecture* (trans. Granger) 36.

the Tower as being able to play a role in European debates about architecture that were normally reserved for the temples and basilicas of Italy and Southern France. He did this by using it to directly confront one of the most respected European interpreters of ancient architecture: Barbaro. And, again, Lister was able to use his erudition to achieve this, using Vitruvius, Pliny, and Greaves in his challenging of the Italian edition. This was typical of his approach to Roman antiquities of the North East and in other writings on the subject Lister frequently cited textual authority both ancient and modern.⁴⁷ It was, in fact, one of the most prominent attributes of his scholarship.

So, the inadequacy of Britain's Roman ruins did not stop British writers trying to use them to engage with and, (in Lister's case) challenge, better-resourced European writers on the subject. But what is also striking about the accounts that I have looked at is that none of them (not even Jones's writings on Stonehenge) attempted to cast these ruins as being uniquely British in any way. Instead, they repeatedly emphasised their similarity to continental Roman buildings and saw them as being very much part of the perceived uniform architectural culture of the Roman world. This meant that these texts seem to lack any overtly nationalist, or proto-nationalist claims for the architecture of Roman Britain. At no point did Thoresby, Wren, Sibbald, or Lister claim that any of these buildings were more importantly structurally or stylistically than any Roman ruin on the continent. Instead, I think that these writers used the remains of Roman Britain to make a claim for the independence and quality of British scholarship rather than its ruins. It was certainly felt in this period that British authors were underrepresented within wider European discourses concerning ancient architecture, but that they had, in theory, much to offer in that arena. This much is confirmed by another British writer on architecture, Joseph Moxon, who produced a series of English editions of Vignola in the 1650s, 60s, and 70s. In the preface to the 1673 third edition of his translation Moxon wrote that:

there being few Nations of any note, that have not his [Vignola's] works translated into their own Language: onely we here in *England* (I know not whether it be through carelesness in Artists, or else covetousness) mind not those things which make other Countries (that have nothing else to boast of) so famous amongst their Neighbours. Certain I am that *England*

47 See for example his account of a Roman altar: Lister Martin, "An Account of a Roman Monument found in the Bishoprick of Durham, and of some Roman Antiquities at York", *Philosophical Transactions* 13, 145 (1683) 70–74. See Walker, *Architects and Intellectual Culture* 108–109.

breeds as good wits as other Lands do, and would they but shew themselves more forward in commendable Studies, would doubtless share with them in their Praises.⁴⁸

Although these remarks were somewhat focussed on the act of translating Vignola, Moxon made clear his belief that the British (or English) were perfectly capable of engaging with European scholarship on architecture and could match the achievements of writers from countries that, in Moxon's view, had nothing else going for them. As a result there is a degree of quasi-nationalism in Moxon's remarks: he was proud of the 'wits' that English writers possessed and he made claims for the superiority of English scholarly identity. The English, argued Moxon, had it in their nature to become the best interpreters of built form in Europe.

In many respects, Sibbald's exploration of Arthur's O'on and Lister's analysis of the Multangular Tower took up Moxon's challenge. They used these apparently unprepossessing buildings not to argue for the importance of the architectural legacy of Roman England or Scotland, but to showcase contemporary British antiquarianism and to demonstrate that British scholars could play a leading role in the debates about ancient architecture that were such a feature of European scholarship at the time. In this instance, scholarly erudition, rather than architectural style, was the measure of national identity.

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