Vitruvius and His Sixteenth-Century Readers, in Latin and Vernacular

Ingrid D. Rowland

1 Ten Books on Architecture

For a long-dead author, the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius Pollio sparked a remarkable amount of excitement in sixteenth-century Italy. It was a hard-won excitement, for Vitruvius was neither easy to read nor easy to interpret. The elderly architect had dedicated his Ten Books on Architecture (De Architectura libri decem) to the Emperor Augustus in the first years of the principate, perhaps around 25 B.C., in a bold attempt to transform architecture from a manual craft into one of the liberal arts.1 He defined the field broadly, including not only the design of buildings and the planning of cities, but also a range of related activities like wall painting, hydraulics, astronomy, mechanics, and siegecraft. Readers of the Ten Books will learn how to lay out a new city, design temples and private houses in Greek and Roman style, lay floors, plaster walls, flute a column, build toys, timepieces, water wheels, and siege engines. Vitruvius turned this disparate mass of technical knowledge into a liberal art by supplying it with a consistent theoretical framework, showing, both by statement and by example, that the same principles governed good building (about which he knew a great deal), good writing (to which he devoted sincere effort), and good government (for which he looked to his patron Augustus).2

The ancient architect’s contributions may not have stopped there. According to the later Roman writer Sextus Julius Frontinus, Vitruvius also served the city of Rome as curator aquarum, head of waterworks, and in that capacity first instituted standard measures for lead water pipes.3 As an example of systematic thinking, the innovation meshes entirely with the broadly observant

---


3 Sextus Julius Frontinus, De Aquis Urbis Romae, 1, 25.
outlook of the *Ten Books*; characteristically, the discussion of water pipes in Book Eight also notes, for the first time in history, the perils of lead poisoning.⁴

Scholars debate the degree to which Vitruvius and his treatise influenced the practice of architecture in Roman times and in subsequent centuries, but this may not be the right question to ask about a work that so clearly addresses far broader social and intellectual concerns.⁵ Vitruvius offered his ideas about education, about craftsmanship, about the nature of civilization itself, and his readers seem to have paid attention to these as much as to his prescriptions about architecture *stricto sensu*. The surviving manuscript tradition of the *Ten Books*, along with related treatises on surveying, siegecraft, and mechanics, shows that Vitruvius was read steadily through the centuries, surviving what Leon Battista Alberti called the ‘shipwreck’ of classical antiquity because of its enduring value to readers for a wide and changing variety of reasons.⁶ *De Architectura* provided technical instructions for making a host of different buildings and machines, but more importantly, it provided an intellectual outlook on building, city planning, and technology, and a proposal for liberal education that may have exerted profound influence on the creators of the first universities.⁷ The earliest extant manuscript of the *Ten Books* dates from the time of Charlemagne, but Vitruvian influence is detectible in late antique surveying manuscripts drafted only a century or two earlier.⁸

One of the keys to the work’s enduring appeal (and to its enduringly ambiguous reception among scholars) is its ability to bridge the yawning social gap between the Roman patricians to whom Vitruvius explicitly addressed his

---

⁴ Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 8, 6, 10–11.
⁸ The oldest manuscript of Vitruvius is British Library, ms Harleianus 2767, from the ninth century. The next oldest manuscript may have been copied a century or so later, and belongs to the Herzog-August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, near Hannover in northern Germany (ms Gudianus 69); see Carol Herselle Krinsky, ‘Seventy-Eight Vitruvius Manuscripts’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), 36–70; Michael Reeve, ‘Vitruvius’, in L.D. Reynolds (ed.), *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).