Chapter 6
Meaning in the Geometry and Ornament of Imperial Roman Architecture

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ABSTRACT

The architecture of Imperial Rome occupies an important place in our social imagination, yet the meaning it held for its citizens remains a bit of a mystery. Little written information from that period has survived. It is unfortunate that Vitruvius – perhaps our best source – wrote his treatise two centuries before Roman architecture reached its apogee. Nonetheless, many scholars have tried to gain a greater understanding through empirical evidence. While some have contributed valuable insights regarding individual buildings or the organization of the towns and cities, few have speculated on the more intimate aspects of the architecture. This paper offers suggestions for why elemental geometry was used in Imperial Roman architecture and how its meaning may be interpreted.

The future depends on man’s transcending the limits of individual cultures. To do so, however, he must first recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of the nonverbal side of life. (Hall, 1976, p. 2)

We look upon the past with twenty-first century eyes. Perhaps another culture cannot be completely known unless one is born and raised in it; however, the desire to see the world from other people’s viewpoints is valuable, for it lends insights into our own condition. The architecture of Imperial Rome occupies an important place in our collective imagination, yet the meaning it had for its ancient citizens remains a bit of a mystery. Little written information has survived. It is unfortunate that Vitruvius, considered by many as the best source, wrote his treatise two centuries before the empire reached its apogee. Nonetheless, many have tried to gain a greater understanding through empirical observation. While some have contributed insights into the meaning of ancient Roman architecture, few have continued their inquiries past the typologies of the buildings and cities to examine its more intimate aspects.

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Figure 1. The Ruins of the House of the Vestals, Temple of Romulus and the Basilica Maxentius

Figure 2. Nature / God?

NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL

In many ancient cultures, God and nature were intimately connected if not one in the same. The success of an individual, extended family, or city-state was perceived to be directly linked to the support of one or more favored gods. Still, even the most fervent devotion could not always prevent natural disasters or defeats by foreign invaders. While human settlements may have had their own challenges; at least