

Symbolism in the Geometry and Ornament of Imperial Roman Architecture

The architecture of Imperial Rome occupies an important place in our social imagination, yet the meaning it held for its citizens continues to be an enigma. Little written information from that period has survived. It is unfortunate that Vitruvius, who is considered by many as the 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 remarkably perceptive insights into the meaning of ancient Roman architecture, few have continued their inquiries past the typologies and organization of the buildings and cities.

This paper will consider the more intimate aspects of the buildings, and offer suggestions for what meaning the geometry and ornament may have had for slave and emperor alike, and why it was created.