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Book Review

La decorazione architettonica di Brescia romana: Edifici pubblici e monumenti funerari dall'Età repubblicana alla tarda antichità

By Antonio Dell'Acqua (Costruire nel mondo antico 2). Rome: Edizioni Quasar 2020. Pp. 481. €60. ISBN 978-88-5491-024-9 (paper).

Reviewed by [Niccolò Mugnai](#)

Urban archaeology is a particularly fascinating field of research, but it is also challenging because of the patchy nature of the available datasets, like a puzzle of which one can only glimpse the pieces. It is especially rewarding, therefore, when researchers manage to draw a good picture of a site lying underneath urban stratigraphy that accumulated over the centuries. The town of Brescia (the Roman *colonia civica Augusta Brixia*) is a case in point. In this monograph, Dell'Acqua presents the results of painstaking work developed out of his doctoral dissertation, with a main focus on the architectural decoration of Brixia's public and funerary monuments. Past and recent archaeological excavations, architectural studies, and historical testimonies going back to the 17th century are taken into account to reconstruct a history of the town across the Roman Republican and Imperial eras. This approach is evidently inspired by recent works on other sites of the Italian peninsula (e.g., F. Demma, *Monumenti pubblici di Puteoli: Per un'archeologia dell'architettura*, L'Erma di Bretschneider 2007; G. Mesolella, *La decorazione architettonica di Minturnae, Formiae, Tarracina: Letà augustea e giulio-claudia*, L'Erma di Bretschneider 2012).

The book is presented in two parts: an examination of the evidence (17–258) and a catalogue of the recorded architectural elements (261–379). Chapter 1 (17–37) offers a useful topographic overview of the ancient town, engaging also with types of buildings that are not included in the subsequent chapters, particularly Brixia's private architecture, as well as important edifices that unfortunately have not provided sufficient architectural evidence for a detailed discussion, such as the theater and the amphitheater (the existence of the latter is only documented by epigraphic sources).

The principal civic and religious complexes known in the town are analyzed in chapter 2 (39–158), with particular attention paid to the area of the Capitolium. This sacred complex is part of the Parco Archeologico di Brescia Romana, which has witnessed appreciable efforts of musealization since 2013 to become more accessible to the public (it is definitely worth a visit in post-COVID 19 times). The Capitolium was investigated recently through systematic excavations that allowed a comprehensive reconstruction of its building phases. The author's observations draw on his earlier contributions and those of other scholars as collected in F. Rossi's edited volume, *Un luogo per gli dei: L'area del Capitolium a Brescia* (All'Insegna del Giglio 2014). The first phase corresponds to the construction of a sanctuary with four aligned cellae during the first half of the first century BCE. Unfortunately, no evidence survives to identify the respective cults. Significant remains of painted stucco wall decorations are preserved (visitors can see them on display in the museum on the site), along with architectural members such as friezes with garlands and capitals in the so-called Italic-Corinthian style that was popular in the Italian and Iberian peninsulas in this period. The sanctuary underwent a first series of modifications in the Augustan era. The fourth cella to the west was obliterated behind a portico, and the fulcrum of the sanctuary shifted toward the three cellae that remained visible—a clue pointing to the likely introduction of the Capitoline cult at this stage. There are also traces of the reworking of elements of architectural ornament through the use of stucco—a rather inexpensive, yet functional, way of updating them to the more current decorative trends. The aspect of the Capitolium as we see it today (the result of the 1930s–1940s anastylosis) corresponds to the new layout the temple acquired in the Flavian period. The dedicatory inscription on the frieze records its inauguration in 73 CE. A complete transformation of the earlier sanctuary occurred: three newly built cellae were laid out crossways with a frontal hexastyle pronaos provided with a monumental Corinthian colonnade, on the model of metropolitan

buildings like the Temple of Concordia in the Roman Forum and the Temple of Veiovis on the Capitoline. The extent of this Flavian monumentalization can also be appreciated in the porticoes of the forum piazza, in the civic basilica that closed the south side of the forum, and in other sacred buildings, in particular the temple in Vicolo San Clemente and the temple on the Colle Cidneo.

Chapter 3 (159–210) engages with funerary architecture. In the first pages, the author outlines the topographic setting of the known cemeteries, which were located rather unsurprisingly along the main roads leading into the town. A series of architectural elements can be attributed to monumental tombs, showing a range of types throughout the period under examination. In the Augustan and Julio-Claudian eras, for instance, there is evidence that suggests reconstruction of aedicula- and altar-type funerary monuments. A frieze decorated with shields and weapons might be attributed to a tomb of the latter type, which was perhaps set up for the centurion L. Antonius Quadratus under the reign of Tiberius. Another altar-type monument is the one from Via Mantova, which featured a central decoration with depictions of gryphons flanked by reliefs with garlands hanging from ox skulls (*bucrania*)—a recurring imagery as a whole that has its echoes in Augustan Rome.

In chapter 4 (211–39), Dell'Acqua discusses building materials, carving techniques, workshop activity, and stylistic models that influenced the architectural decoration of Brixia. Stone employed was primarily local, with “pietra di Botticino” being the most common material for carving out architectural elements. With regard to marble, in the absence of archaeometric analyses, the Proconnesian variety is the only one among the white stones that can be easily recognized due to its typical grayish veins and medium-sized grains. Its diffusion at Brescia coincided with the spread of Asiatic-style capitals (unfortunately only known through spolia recycled in later buildings) from the late second century CE onward. Colored marbles, on the other hand, appear to have been employed only in the form of wall veneer and paving slabs. The *decor* and *dignitas* of public buildings were related to their patronage. It has been argued that the reconstruction of the Capitolium in the latter half of the first century CE might have been sponsored by Emperor Vespasian himself, while the previous Augustan restyling should probably be assigned to private euergetism. Overall, decorative repertoires and stylistic motifs followed the patterns one can identify in the rest of the Italian peninsula, although some specific characteristics can be pinned down. For example, the Corinthian capitals of the pronaos and porticoes of the Flavian Capitolium show a continuity of Julio-Claudian features, especially the carving of the acanthus leaves and the oblique *cauliculi* above them. This might find different explanations: a delay in the arrival of the metropolitan, Flavian-era decorative forms; a long span of time that occurred between the beginning and completion of this monumental building project; or an intentional adoption of earlier, more classicizing decorative styles. There is also a marked contrast with the capitals of the forum porticoes, which present carving features that are typically Flavian in style, in particular the flatness of the surface and the deep vertical channels on the leaves that were obtained through an intensive (and speedy) use of the drill.

The catalogue of architectural elements in the second part of the book is well organized and easy to use; all entries follow a consistent format and provide detailed information. The first part of the catalogue lists the materials from public and funerary contexts (261–312), while the second part describes pieces of unknown provenance that are recycled in later edifices (313–79). The book is suitably illustrated, although some images reproduced in plates separate from the text could have been larger in size, and, it should also be noted, some photographs of architectural elements are not provided with a scale. Moreover, readers will regret the absence of a general index that would have been useful to locate subjects of interest. These shortcomings, however, do not diminish the value of the volume, which is an essential resource for the study of ancient Brescia, its urbanism, and its architecture. The combined use of architectural, art historical, archaeological, and historical approaches is particularly appreciated, as it allows a careful reconstruction of the urban history of this site, especially when single datasets would be too fragmentary to provide useful information on their own. Beyond its relevance to the local history and archaeology, this study offers a rich collection of materials that can be put to use by scholars who engage with broader research topics, such as the diffusion of imperial architectural styles in the regions of northern Italy and in the European provinces of the Roman empire.

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