Peter Fane-Saunders  
**Pliny the Elder and the Emergence of Renaissance Architecture**  
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 491 pp., 8 color and 75 b/w illus. $142 (cloth), ISBN 9781107079861  

Although *De architectura* is celebrated as the only architectural treatise to have come down from antiquity, its author, Vitruvius, was not the most gifted of writers, and his text was challenging for Renaissance readers. Leon Battista Alberti famously criticized Vitruvius: “What he handed down was in any case not refined ... his very text is evidence that he wrote neither Latin nor Greek, so that as far as we are concerned he might just as well not have written at all, rather than write something that we cannot understand.”

In fact, Vitruvius was not the only ancient author to address architectural topics. Foremost among other ancient writers who discussed architecture was Pliny the Elder. As Peter Fane-Saunders reveals in his expansive study *Pliny the Elder and the Emergence of Renaissance Architecture*, originating from his doctoral dissertation, Pliny’s *Natural History* was also an invaluable source to Italian Renaissance investigators, second only to *De architectura* written a century earlier. Although Pliny’s writings have been long recognized as a key source for Renaissance artistic practice, the degree to which Pliny’s writings permeated the architectural culture of the period remains surprisingly unexplored. Fane-Saunders redresses this shortfall by surveying the key significance of Pliny for Renaissance authors and practitioners.

In his introduction and chapter 1, Fane-Saunders situates Pliny’s work among classical authors, introduces his encyclopedic text, and considers its early reception. Pliny completed his *Natural History* in 77 AD, just two years before he perished during the eruption of Vesuvius. In thirty-seven books, Pliny attempted a thorough discussion of the wonders of the natural world, including those of the Mediterranean as well as the Near East and India. The text remained well regarded throughout the Middle Ages, even when access to manuscripts was somewhat rare in Italy. Pliny’s work again became widely available with the advent of printing: the edition of 1469 was among the first classical texts to be printed in Italy, and an Italian translation soon followed in 1476. As Fane-Saunders notes, early printed editions of the *Natural History* preceded and outnumbered those of *De architectura*, which was first printed in 1486 and translated into Italian in 1521. His book includes two appendices that present the early publication histories of both texts.

Architecture was not Pliny’s principal focus, and his references to such topics as Rome’s topography, bronze column capitals, and bricks are scattered throughout books dedicated to geography, base metals, and uses of earth. Book XXXVI, devoted to stone, includes two sections of recurring interest to Renaissance readers, where Pliny reports on architectural marvels in Rome and beyond. These include “marvelous works in foreign lands” (“opera mirabilia in terris”), such as the Egyptian Pyramids and the Sphinx, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Etruscan tomb of Lars Porsena, the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, and the obelisk brought to Rome for the sundial of Emperor Augustus. Pliny also describes eighteen remarkable works at Rome (“Romae miracula operum”), among them the Circus Maximus, the Basilica Aemilia, the Forum of Augustus, the Temple of Peace, and the temporary theaters built by Scipio and Curio, as well as the city’s sewers and aqueducts.

Following the introduction and chapter 1, Fane-Saunders divides his book into three parts tracing parallel, chronologically arranged arcs between roughly 1430 and 1580. The four chapters of part I chart Pliny’s influence on antiquarian studies of Rome’s ruins. Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio are among early authors who relied on sources such as medieval pilgrim guides filled with fantastical legends regarding the city’s ancient remains. Flavio Biondo was the first to make use of Pliny’s architectural accounts for the topographical survey of the city in his *Roma instaurata* (1443–46, printed 1471). In the 1460s Pomponio Leto introduced a new approach by comparing Pliny’s accounts to the surviving physical evidence in Rome, and thus correctly identified the obelisk then recently discovered in the Campus Martius as that of the Augustan “horologium.” This method informed the subsequent investigations of Bernardo Rucellai as well as those of Andrea Fulvio and Bartolomeo Marliani in the sixteenth century. Yet architect-antiquarians such as Sebastiano Serlio, Pirro Ligorio, and Andrea Palladio, who consulted a broader range of sources, grew increasingly skeptical of Pliny’s accounts.

In the six chapters of part II, Fane-Saunders discusses Pliny in the context of architectural writing, beginning with Alberti, who around 1450 completed *De re aedificatoria*, the first architectural treatise...
since Vitruvius. Despite the fact that Alberti included no fewer than 128 citations of Pliny, as we learn only from an endnote, “Pliny has been largely ignored in studies of De re aedificatoria” (94). In accord with Pliny’s celebration of utilitarian public works, Alberti commended aqueducts and military roads as evidence of man’s capacity to tame nature. Alberti also chose to celebrate the luxurious private houses of ancient Rome. Like most of his contemporaries, however, he excluded Pliny’s moralizing condemnation of such magnificence, amending the text to suit his own arguments.

Pliny’s multifaceted text inspired authors with a variety of interests. Filarete, writing in the 1460s, employed the Natural History to illustrate the ideal patron, while the unknown author of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (generally thought to be Francesco Colonna), published in 1499, drew upon Pliny for many of the marvels that populate his sensory architectural narrative. The architect Francesco di Giorgio Martini and the humanist Ermeto Barbaro the Younger each sought out practical information in Pliny on construction methods, materials, and engineering. Both Fra Giovanni Giocondo, responsible for the first illustrated edition of Vitruvius (1511), and Cesare Cesariano, responsible for its first Italian translation (1521), used Pliny to elucidate Vitruvius’s cryptic terminology and confusing passages. Fane-Saunders offers a clear treatment of Pliny’s book as a fascinating yet elusive text while also conveying the richness of Pliny’s original writings.

Pliny remained important into the sixteenth century, although after two decades of working with Andrea Palladio to produce an illustrated commentary on Vitruvius, Daniele Barbaro ultimately argued that it was Vitruvius who should be considered “the true authority” (201). Nevertheless, in the absence of archaeological evidence, Pliny provided Barbaro with the critical means to reconstruct the ancient Roman house. Pliny was also the ultimate source for the re-created ancient atrium of the Farnese Palace by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger in Rome and the atria of the Vicentine palaces illustrated by Palladio in his Four Books on Architecture.

In the three chapters of part III, Fane-Saunders examines architectural drawings and built works after Pliny’s descriptions. Pliny’s passages on the marvels of the eastern Mediterranean captured the attention of architects and humanists, including Ciriaco d’Ancona, who traveled east to study the region’s ancient monuments using Pliny as a guide. Copies of Ciriaco’s lost drawings include views of the Parthenon and a temple at Cyzicus, said by Pliny to have contained gold filaments set within the masonry joints. Leonardo da Vinci’s reconstruction of the marvelous rotating double theaters built by Curio in Rome reveal his acquaintance with Pliny’s text. But it was the extended Sangallo family of architects, Antonio the Younger in particular, who examined Pliny’s text with the greatest care, reconstructing the monuments he described in more than forty drawings. Antonio’s drawings reveal his struggle to reconcile the conflicting accounts of Pliny and Vitruvius, and he translated Pliny’s descriptions of foreign wonders into graphic reconstructions inflected by more familiar Roman remains. Fare-Saunders’s detailed discussion of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger’s investigations is a particularly valuable contribution in the absence of the yet-to-be-published volume on Antonio’s drawings of antiquity.1 While buildings described by Pliny appeared first in drawings, some achieved built form later in the sixteenth century. The grouped pyramids of the Perséa tomb are among the multiple visual allusions to Pliny in the enormous wooden model of Saint Peter’s completed under Antonio da Sangallo the Younger in 1539. The stepped pyramidal form topping the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus became a recurring motif in sixteenth-century tomb designs, from unbuilt projects by Raphael and members of the Sangallo circle to realized works in northern Italy.

Winner of a Society of Architectural Historians/Mellon Award and the 2018 Phyllis Goodhart Gordan Book Prize from the Renaissance Society of America, Fane-Saunders’s book provides a comprehensive guide to the Renaissance afterlife of Pliny, demonstrating the ubiquity of Pliny’s text in Renaissance architectural investigations. This fascinating and engaging study reveals how eager investigators of differing backgrounds and intentions mined Pliny’s limited architectural references throughout the Renaissance in their efforts to make sense of and revive the monuments of a distant past that was never entirely lost.

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Notes

Bissera V. Pentcheva
Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium
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Over the past decades, art and architectural historians have shown ever-increasing interest in how users of monuments and cities have historically experienced these spaces sensually. Especially for premodern contexts, this is a challenging endeavor: first-person accounts are virtually absent, and scholars are often limited to textual sources that need to be mined and read against the grain. Many sensory studies in architectural history focus on sound, eschewing other sensory modalities and ways in which sound, sight, smell, touch, and taste interlink. This focus can be explained by the availability of technological aids such as acoustic modeling software for reconstructing historical soundscapes and geographic information systems for creating sound maps that visualize auditory relationships. Within this literature, Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti’s Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice, which examines music in Counter-Reformation churches, is by now a classic, while Niall Atkinson’s The Noisy Renaissance, investigating how Florence’s residents experienced their city’s acoustic topography, provides a more recent example.3

To this literature, Bissera V. Pentcheva’s Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium brings a welcome addition that considers how sonic, visual, and, to a more limited extent, olfactory phenomena worked together to convey a dense