The Rhetoric of Roman Monuments
Observations on an engraving by Maerten van Heemskerck

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In countless paintings and prints the keen eye may observe in the background an architectural scene of some kind or another. But such painted buildings are not always groundless fantasies, but frequently modelled on ancient Roman monuments. From medieval illuminations to the paintings by Poussin we recognise edifices such as the Pantheon, the Colosseum, the Castel San Angelo, and the Column of Trajan. They seem to have constituted a body of universal references, a canon of building archetypes, which makes it interesting to ask whether the artist chose at random any one of these monuments, or whether there were specific criteria determining his selection. One can argue that in the *cinquecento*, with an increasing interest in allegories and emblems, the ancient buildings of Rome became associated with certain meanings, and acquired a didactic function in representations. From this perspective we shall consider the application of Roman monuments as rhetorical devices, but we shall restrict ourselves to a few engravings by the Dutch 16th century artist Maerten van Heemskerck.

From the early Renaissance onwards artists went to Rome in order to acquire knowledge on classical antiquity, frequently by way of making sketches of the ancient remains for later use. Heemskerck arrived in Rome in 1532, and was immediately intoduced to Vasari who later described him as 'Martino

Heemskerck, buon maestro di figure e paese.'[1] Heemskerck's Roman sketchbook constitutes in fact a unique source for our knowledge on the appearance of the city and its monuments in the 1530s. For instance, on the basis of the drawings by Heemskerck, art historians are able to date certain phases in the construction of the new St. Peter.[2] It was not until his return to Holland in 1536 that Heemskerck fully ventured on a career as a painter and engraver. His biographer, Carel van Mander, tells us that Heemskerck was fond of repeating the saying:

> Any painter who desires to be eminent
> Avoids architectural and other embellishment.[3]

If that was Heemskerck's view, he must have regarded himself as the exception. His engravings and early paintings show an overwhelming display of Roman architectural motifs, and more or less fantastic interpretations of ancient edifices.[4] We shall examine how he employs the monuments of antiquity in a series of allegorical depictions from the mid 1560s.

Heemskerck designed a series of six illustrations to the 'Triumphs' of Petrarch.[5] The subject had been common since the

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[1] I. M. Veldman, *Maerten van Heemskerck and Dutch humanism in the sixteenth century*, Amsterdam 1977, p. 16.

[2] For instance Christof Thoenes writes: 'senza Maerten van Heemskerck, senza le sue vedute e quelle della sua cerchia non sarebbe stato possibile scrivere la storia dell'edificio nel Cinquecento.' ('San Pietro come rovina. Note su alcune vedute di Maerten van Heemskerck' in *Sostegno e adornamento. Saggi sull'architettura del Rinascimento: disegni, ordini, magnificenza*, Milan 1998, pp. 135 - 151, p. 135.

[3] Veldman, 1977, p. 15.

[4] Heemskerck's vast canvas, *The Rape of Helena*, 1535 - 36, The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, is one of his most stunning architectural fantasies.

[5] Heemskerck's complete engravings are published in the authoritative *The New Holstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450 - 1700. Maerten Van Heemskerck*, part I (1993) & part II (1994), eds., I. M. Veldman and G. Luijten. 'The

late 14th century, and several versions exist. But Heemskerck is singular in his emphasis on architecture. And he seems to select monuments which can support the central notions in Petrarch's poems.

In 'The Triumph of Chastity' Heemskerck shows the chariot with the allegorical figures, a motif in concordance with the poem (fig. 1). But the edifice in the background merits attention: a circular temple raised on a flight of four stairs, supported by a colonnade of Corinthian columns, and crowned with a low dome. We may interpret this architectural form as a symbol of chastity. This virtue was particularly associated with the Vestas; aristocratic, young virgins chosen to guard the sacred fire at the cost of remaining chaste. And in the poem Petrarch himself singles out the Vestas as examples of chastity.

> Yet amonge other there sawe I more
> The meke vyrgyn of Vesta (there she was)
> That proved hyr chastice by such a case
> She bare fayre water in a large Seve,
> Where she voyded all and all repreve.[1]

Heemskerck seems to take the clue from this passage when he presents his edifice as a reconstruction of the ancient temple of the Vestas on the Forum Romanum. It is nearly identical to the reconstruction which Pierio Valeriano published in *Hieroglyphica*[2] (fig. 2), and similar to several later versions of the temple such as the one in Giacomo Lauro's *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*.[3] We may even suggest that the circular form, as such, constituted an idea of the morally good form in architecture: in

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Triumphs of Petrarch', ca. 1565, Philips Galle (engraver), plates 491 - 496, pp. 173 - 177.
[1] The quotation is taken from Lord Morley's *Tryumphes of Fraunces Petrarcke*, London, 1546 / 47, ed., D. D. Carnicelli, London, 1971, p. 114.
[2] Pierio Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica. Sive de Sacris Aegyptiorum literis Comentarii*, Basilea 1556 and 1567. See Reynaldo Perugino, Dell'Architettura Filosofica, Rome 1983, p. 21 and p. 61.
[3] Giacomo Lauro, *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*, Rome 1612, plate 29.

early representations the Temple of Solomon, for instance, was envisaged with a circular shape, such as in the image of Jersualem published by Hartmann Schedel in 1493.[1]

Other examples, too, may serve. In 'The Triumph of Fame' Heemskerck depicts, appropriately, a version of the Colosseum and columns with spiral friezes resembling the one of Trajan.[2] In 'The Triumph of Time' it is rather the condition of the monuments – ruined and overgrown – which conveys the notion. In other words, Heemskerck employs architecture in its capacity to illustrate ideas. On the whole, Roman monuments can be seen to form part of his rhetorical program.

I shall grant one engraving special attention, namely the 'Triumph of Pride'[3] (fig. 3). It is included in a series of nine 'Triumphs' in which Heemskerck fairly realistically illustrates an allegorical procession which took place in Antwerp in 1561, and where Heemskerck himself might have been present.[4] In any case, his depictions conform to the printed description of the procession which explained the various scenes. Also the vignette below the image restates the text from this 1561 program.

The figure of Superbia, or Pride, sits high on a chariot drawn by two horses, and she is accompanied by allegorical figures, such as her charming sisters Disobedience, Bragging, and Mockery. However, Heemskerck's Superbia does not pass through the streets of Antwerp, but through a Roman

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[1] The Woodcut of Jerusalem and its temple was made by Michael Wohgemuth and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, and appeared in Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum*, Nuremberg 1493.

[2] In the 16th century the Column of Trajan was specifically perceived as a symbol of Glory. Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, published in Rome in 1593, and republished in 1603 with illustrations, standardised the column as an emblem of 'Sublimità della Gloria'. (Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, ed., P. Buscaroli, Milan 1992. pp. 432 - 434.

[3] *The New Hollstein Edition*, 1994, 'The cycle of the vicissitudes of human affairs', 1564, Cornelis Cort (engraver). 'The Triumph of Pride', plate 484, p. 169. The preperatory drawing is signed 1563.

[4] Veldman, 1977, p. 133

landscape; we recognise monuments such as the Arch of Titus, the Column of Trajan, and two obelisques. But the most dominant monument in the engraving is not as easily identified. It consists of six diminishing stories of which the two lower are circular, divided in columns and arches, and the three upper stories are square and, crowned with a dome. In the following we shall make some observations on this edifice (fig. 4).

The Superbia edifice as a mausoleum

At first glance it seems to be modelled on the ancient Roman mausoleums. Rome offered two noteworthy structures of this type: the Mausoleums of the Emperors Augustus and Hadrian. In the Renaissance, however, there were only remains left of Augustus' mausoleum, and Hadrian's had been heavily rebuilt into the fortification known as Castel San Angelo. Yet, cinquecento and seicento artists ventured to evoke the vanished splendor of ancient Rome, and artists such as Dupérac, Lafrèry, Montano and Lauro published reconstructions of the ancient mausoleums, all of them presenting almost identical solutions.[1] Heemskerck's edifice appears to refer to this established convention of mausoleum interpretations. Lauro's version of the Mausoleum of Augustus may serve as an example, showing the same circular stories, and the bays divided by columns[2] (fig. 5). But Heemskerck made drawings of the Castel San Angelo, too, during his Roman period, and the

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[1] Artists heavily relied on the antiquarian Pirro Ligorio who reconstructed a wealth of ancient monuments in his vast manuscript *Antichità Romane*, written mainly during the 1560s, but which was based on material he compiled since the early 1530s. Ligorio's manuscripts soon became well known in antiquarian circles. His reconstruction of the Mausoleum of Augustus appears in the Naples manuscript of Libro XLIX. See Federico Rausa, *Pirro Ligorio. Tombe e mausolei dei Romani, in Studi Ligoriani / 1*, Rome 1997, pp. 114 - 123. Also other artists reconstructed the Roman mausoleums at a relatively early date. Ibid., pp. 115 - 116.

[2] Lauro, 1612, plate 115.

upper square stories of his Superbia-monument recalls Hadrian's tomb as it appeared in the Renaissance.

The notion of 'Superbia'

Undoubtedly we are presented with a mausoleum, but why does it illustrate Superbia? Perhaps the customary act of deifying the Roman Emperors, after their deaths, could be perceived as a manifestation of Pride. But in the Renaissance such an association was never made explicitly. With Heemskerck's precise, almost overstated, use of monuments as rhetorical devices we shall credit him with being more specific in his reference.

A translation of 'Superbia' reads 'Pride.' Christian thought, however, soon defined it as the vice of man aspiring to equal God in power and knowledge. Accordingly, it is a vice easily associated with earthly rulers. The Greek author Philostratus, as early as at the beginning of the third century, relates this meaning of Pride to Babylonian rule. He writes of a room in a Babylonian palace:

> And it is here that the king gives judgement, and golden wrynecks are hung from the ceiling, four in the number, to remind him of Adrastea, the goddess of justice, and to engage him not to exalt himself above humanity.[1]

It is the danger of Pride that finds reminders in the wrynecks. But they do not seem to have had much effect; from a Christian point of view Babylon emerged as the very manifestation of Pride. In *Genesis* the king of Babylon, Nimrod, is described as the first to build an empire. But he was not only a builder of empires. Nimrod began the construction of a tower that was intended to reach into heaven. God intervened, and punished the act of arrogance by destroying the city of Babylon and

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[1] Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, book I, chap. XXV, The Loeb Classical Library.

separating the tongues of men, thus creating different languages.[1] Augustine takes his clue fom the *Genesis* description, and in the *City of God* he writes:

> Hence we must understand that Nimrod was 'a hunter against the Lord'. For what does this hunter mean but the deceiver, opressor and destroyer of earthbound creatures? Therefore he, with his subjects, erected a tower against the Lord, which is the symbol of his impious pride.[2]

In the original text Augustine applies the word 'superbia'. The tower Augustine refers to is of course the legendary Tower of Babylon. On this basis we can argue that in contrast to the Roman mausoleum, the Tower of Babylon relates specifically to 'Superbia', and consequently provided Heemskerck with an edifice lending the accurate and appropriate architectural form for the vice.

The Superbia edifice as the Tower of Babylon

Of course, the Babylonian tower itself was not known to the Renaissance artist. However, an idea of its appearance was provided by Herodotus, who in the 5th century B.C. described it during a visit to Babylon. In his words it consisted of eight diminishing storeys with a spiral ascent.[3] On the basis of Herodotus' description artists since the Middle ages have attempted to visualise the legendary building. The popularity of the tower motif reached a height in the latter half of the 16th century, and Dutch and German artists almost monopolised

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[1] *Genesis*, 11:1 - 11:10.

[2] Augustin, *City of God*, book XVI, chap. IV, The Loeb Classical Library.

[3] Herodotus writes on Babylon: 'In the centre [...] a solid tower has been built, of one furlong's length and breadth; a second tower rises from this, and from it yet another, till at last there are eight. The way up to them mounts spirally outside all the towers; about halfway in the ascent is a halting place, with seats for repose, where those who ascend sit down and rest.' Herodotus, *History*, book I, p. 183, The Loeb Classical Library.

representations of it.[1] Hans Holbein introduced the cylindrical form, rising in terraced elevations, and it is not hard to recall the famous painting by Peter Brueghel the elder from 1563. Apart from the obvious typological similiarity between the tower depictions and the one by Heemskerck, the sheer scale of Heemskerck's monument makes it even take on the proportions of a Babylonian tower. Three of the stories are in fact of such a size that they support smaller buildings, as if it were a mountain scattered with villages; this is a feature we also observe in explicit versions of the tower.

We are now presented with two possible models for Heemskerck's edifice. Is he disguising a mausoleum as a Babylonian tower, or the tower as a mausoleum? Or, then again, does an accurate answer really matter? It might be sufficient to point to the Roman-Babylonian paragons, as such.

Rome as the second Babylon

When Augustine repeatedly compares Rome with Babylon it is as a debased, corrupt den of vices: 'the city of Rome,' he writes, 'was founded as the second Babylon and as the daughter of the former Babylon...'[2] Babylon and Rome are interlinked as the antithesis to the Heavenly City, where the inhabitants: 'presume upon their own strength, glorifying in themselves, not in the Lord.'[3] Historically, Rome will of course have to be the second Babylon, but for artists, when depicting the long vanished Mesopotamian city, Babylon emerges as the second Rome.

In the century prior to Heemskerck, the Florentine painter Benozzo Gozzoli, for example, painted the city of Babylon in the Camposanto in Pisa. But he envisaged the legendary city with very familiar buildings, such as the Pantheon and the

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[1] For a thorough history of the Tower of Babylon in representations, see Helmut Minkowski, 'Turris Babel. Mille anni di rappresentazioni' in *Rassegna*, anno V, 16/4, Milan 1983.

[2] Augustine, *City of God*, book XVIII, chap. XXII.

[3] Ibid., book XVII, chap. IV.

Column of Trajan. In succeeding periods, single representations of the Tower of Babylon evoked Roman monuments, and the Roman mausoleums in particular. Thus, in Monsù Desiderio's painting from 1622 the tower emerges triumphantly in its virtual completion (fig. 6). The imposing substructure recalls the brickwork of Roman ruins. There are corinthian columns and garlands, and an abundance of statues and other classical motifs. It conveys both the architectural elements and the majestic confidence of the reconstructed mausoleums. Athanasius Kircher's tower from 1679 even refers explicitly to Augustus' mausoleum.[1] He flanks the entrance to the tower with two obelisques; a well known feature of the Emperor's tomb. With Giovanni Battista Piranesi the inter-dependence between the two monuments finds an interesting turn (fig. 7). The prominent edifice in the etching of Campus Martius conveys the dimensions and formal features of a Tower of Babylon. But this time the dependence is reversed, as Piranesi in fact reconstructs a part of ancient Rome.[2] The Mausoleum of Hadrian is modelled on an idea of Babylonian grandeur, rather than on the evidence of its own remains.

In Heemskerck's own days, and on his homeground, the portrayal of Rome as the second Babylon achieved an acute relevance. The reformation ventured on a full-scale campaign against Rome as the seat of the corrupt Papacy. And the comparison with Babylon served as an effectful part in desanctifying the Papal city. Heemskerck arrived in Rome sixteen years after Martin Luther put up his proclamation in Wittenberg, and seven years after his ex-communication. We do not know to which degree Heemskerck himself was involved in the Protestant movement, but he could not have failed to notice the revolution it implied of the function and nature of

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[1] Athanasius Kircher, *Turris Babel*, Amsterdam 1679, p. 40. The etching is signed Lievin Cruyl and dated 1670
[2] Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Campus Martius*, 1762, titlepage.

prints. They became a rhetorical weapon with which Dutch and German artists created anti-Roman propaganda.

Andrè Chastel has pointed out in what way printed views of Rome, the so called *imago urbis*, were manipulated to serve the Lutheran campaign.[1] These views, denoting the main sights of the city, were often made by Northern artists, and widely distributed. And precisely as such, they contributed to affirm Rome's supreme position in the Christian world, thus offering a convenient target for the Lutherans. The woodcut printed by Hartmann Schedel is typical.[2] (fig. 8) It focuses on the Papal palace, the Belvedere and the ancient Mausoleum of Hadrian. Some years later Lucas Cranach illustrated Luther's German Bible, and one of the woodcuts depicts the Judgement of Babylon[3] (fig. 9). We observe the terrified inhabitants, the angels of destruction, and a city in flames – Babylon apparently. But the image of the city is taken from Schedel's woodcut of Rome.[4]

Chastel's observation leaves us with a problem of definition: how shall we interpret the tall monument rising in diminishing stories? If we pretend to believe in Cranach's portrayal of Babylon, it can hardly represent anything but the Babylonian tower, but no one can ignore that the monument in reality represents the Castel San Angelo. In this instance the Tower of Babylon and the ancient mausoleum are more than comparable. They are identical.

We may now attempt a final conclusion. In Heemskercks's engraving Superbia, on her chariot, passes through an ambiguous urban scene: through the first city of Babylon, but

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[1] Andrè Chastel, *The Sack of Rome*, 1527, Princeton 1983, chap. II, pp. 49 - 90.

[2] Like the image of Jerusalem, mentioned above, the view of Rome was also executed by Michael Wohgemuth and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, and appeared in Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum* from 1493.

[3] Luther's *September Testament* was published in 1522, and included 21 plates by Cranach. See Chastel, 1983, p. 72.

[4] Ibid., pp. 72 - 73.

also through the second – the city of Rome. The two cities where Pride reigns find a point of convergence, as it were, in one monument. Precisely by focusing on the ambivalence of appearance, and playing on the similarity of types, the rhetorical dimension of Heemskerck's edifice becomes clear. It is based on the architecture of Rome, modified by the moral idea of Babylon, and sanctioned by Lutheran propaganda.

Illustrations

Fig. 1:
Maerte van Heemskreck/Philips Galle, "The Triumph of Chastity",
engraving, ca. 1565.

Fig. 2:
Pierio Valeriano, reconstruction of the Temple of the Vestas, from
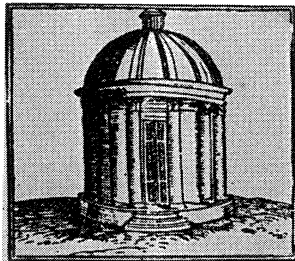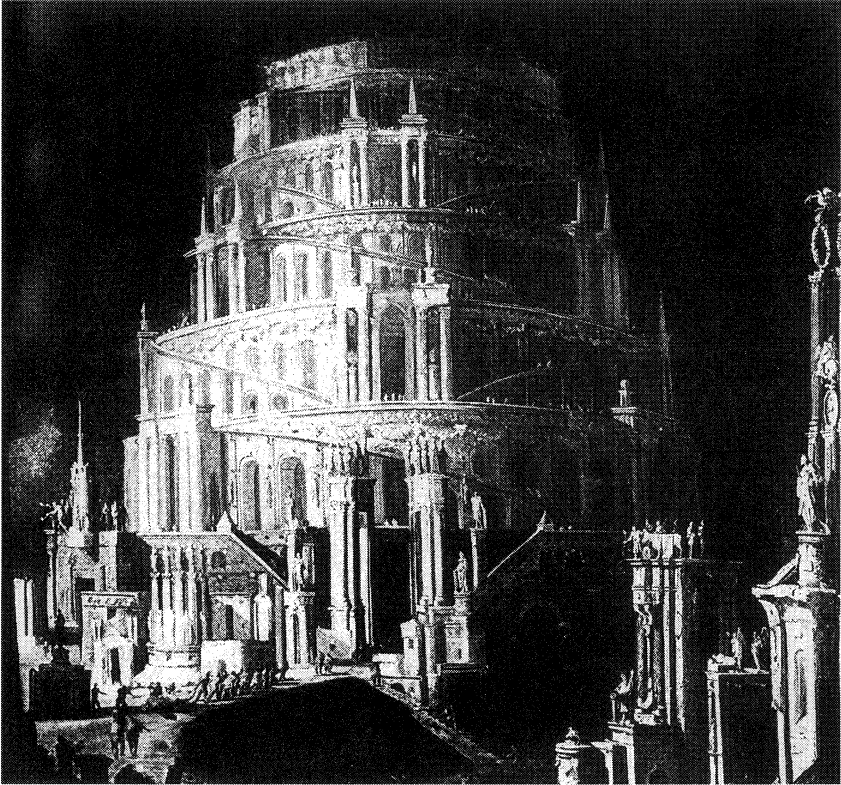*Hieroglyphica*, 1567.

Fig. 3:
Maerten van Heemskreck/Cornelis Cort, "The Triumph of Pride", engraving, 1564.

Fig. 4:
Detail from "The Triumph of Pride".

Fig. 5:
Giacomo Lauro, reconstruction of the Mausoleum of Augustus, from
Antiqua Urbis Splendor, 1612.

Fig. 6:
Monsù Desiderio, *The Tower of Babylon*, oil painting, 1622.

Fig. 7:
Giovanni Battista Piranesi, detail from the titlepage of *Campus Martius*, etching, 1762.
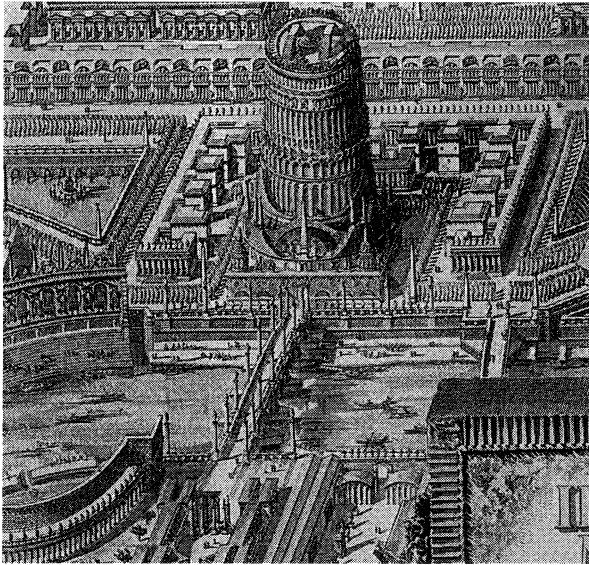

Fig. 8:
Michael Wohgemuth and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, detail from the woodcut of Rome, from Harmann Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum*, 1493.
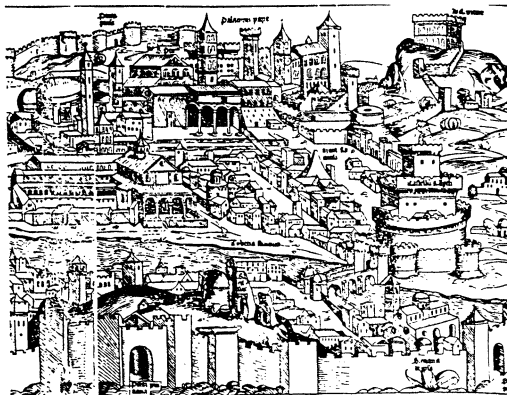
Fig. 9:
Luchas Cranach, "The Judgement of Babylon", woodcut from Martin
Luther's *September Testament*, 1522.