

Filarete's 'Journey to the East'

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It has long been known that when Antonio Averlino, the Florentine sculptor-turned-architect called Filarete, left Milan in 1465, his destination was Constantinople. Despite the singularity and early date of this 'journey to the east', it has not been established why Filarete chose to relocate to a city whose conquest by Mehmed II had not long ago shocked European Christendom. This paper summarizes the concrete and circumstantial evidence for this move, but primarily it seeks an explanation in the much-neglected narrative of Filarete's untitled treatise. It identifies in the treatise Filarete's fantasy of winning the patronage of a great ruler for the construction of a new city, on the ancient model of Alexander, Darius, Cyrus, or especially Semiramis, builder of Babylon. It will show that Filarete, driven by frustration with the condottiere duke Francesco Sforza, sought in the person of Mehmed II, who was already renowned as a patron of the arts, a living example of the 'ancient eastern potentate'. In doing this, Filarete became the first humanist architect to perform the hermetic 'Journey to the East' in search of the ancient eastern roots of western classical architecture, with hope of reviving its greatness. The paper concludes by arguing that the Vitruvius manuscript MS Lat 32, now in Budapest, was the copy Filarete brought to Constantinople.

The most unusual aspect of Filarete's architectural treatise is that it is a narrative and contains an encrypted autobiography. Indeed, its greatest historical value may be that it offers a vivid account of the Renaissance by one of its early participants and advocates, but to date most historians have taken the treatise as a collection of propositions detachable from their context, useful only when distilled as Filarete's so-called 'theory of architecture', understood in limited formal and aesthetic terms. This approach disregards the text's historical-political engagement, considers the narrative disposable, and represses the class specificity of its address. John Spencer, the treatise's English translator, stated, "The treatise rests on the literary device of the construction of an ideal city, Sforzinda, and its port, Plusiapolis", but he also wrote, "the exposition of the new architecture Filarete advocates is the true core of the treatise. All the rest is only peripheral. However, the peripheral matter - the flights of fancy, the allegorical conundrums, and the digressions - tend to obscure the true aim of Filarete's treatise." (1) My 1993 master's thesis approached the treatise differently. Informed by nineteen-eighties textual theory, it sought to consider its narratives of power as the way to access Filarete's other, allegorical theory of architecture - that is to say, not this instrumental theory of how technically and aesthetically superior buildings might be made, but rather his idea of how architecture does its job, how it performs symbolically, if you like. Shifting the axes of architectural discourse in this way reveals stories previously occluded. For one, it permits Filarete's treatise to be seen as a development of the *Speculum Principium*, the genre of political writing that takes the form of instruction of a prince. It foregrounds certain aspects of Filarete's biography, such as his relations to Byzantine culture, to Cyriacus of Ancona, and his fantastic idea of the east. It also

makes it possible to see Filarete's journey to the east not just as a desperate personal gesture, but as the logical culmination of his clear cultural agenda.

There is very little concrete record of this late adventure in Filarete's life, which began when he was at least sixty-five years old. The primary evidence that Filarete intended to relocate to Constantinople is Francesco Filelfo's letter of July 30th 1465, which recommended Filarete to George Amirutzes, tutor to Mehmed II. This letter, which stresses that Filarete was a particularly excellent architect, was composed just two weeks before the official notice of Filarete's dismissal from the Ospedale Maggiore project on August 16th, 1465, which is the last concrete notice of his whereabouts. Marcell Restle has argued that there is a Florentine influence in the novel symmetry and measurements of the medresses (scholar's colleges) of the Fatih mosque complex in Istanbul, which was the focus of Mehmed's cultural activities during an extended rest of almost a year and a half beginning in the Fall of 1464. (2) Mehmed also built the first fortification of the new star-shaped type described by Alberti and Filarete. These innovations suggest Filarete was active in architectural design in Constantinople, but the evidence remains circumstantial. (3) The treatise explains Filarete's motive for relocating, which is ultimately as historically compelling as the few indisputable facts.

This requires some biography. Filarete's career, while not illustrious, is significant because it describes the complete trajectory of architecture's fortunes across a massive paradigmatic change. Antonio Averlino, as he was first known, began in Florence as a goldsmith and was probably an assistant to Ghiberti on the new bronze doors of the Baptistery. He left Florence in 1433, and found work in Rome as an assistant in the coronation festivities of the Emperor Sigismondo. He thus came to the attention of Pope Eugenius IV, who commissioned him to execute a set of bronze doors for the old Basilica of St. Peter's. This prestigious commission, obviously intended to rival Ghiberti's great work, propelled Filarete to the forefront of a project of classical instauration conceived by the powerful humanists in the papal curia. Filarete was not an insider like Alberti, but he was a culturally astute practitioner privileged to observe the attitudes and opinions that prevailed in Rome in the 1430s and 40s. Despite the poor literary form of his treatise, of which Filarete was acutely conscious, many of its rhetorical tropes and topoi can be recognized as adaptations from the sophisticated writings of Poggio Bracciolini, Cencius Rustici, Leonardo Bruni, Flavio Biondo, and Lorenzo Valla. Mostly these were transmitted through Alberti, whose own treatise on architecture was the culmination of the literary humanist lament for antiquity, framed as a grand programme for reforming building design and practice.

Filarete's bronze doors were to commemorate the reconciliation of the eastern and western churches and he may have had assistance from eastern craftsmen on this large project and was introduced to philo-byzantine circles. Filarete's portrait bust of the Greek emperor

John Paleologus (c.1439), was likely an extension of his work on the doors, which contain several scenes recording the emperor's meeting with the pope in the Council of Florence. In Rome, Filarete also certainly met the extravagant traveller and epigraphist, Cyriacus d'Ancona. The two had a common associate in Eugenius IV, who before his elevation had been the Cardinal Gabriel Condulmieri of Ancona. Filarete and Cyriacus also shared antique enthusiasms and strongly anti-republican sentiments.

Filarete's sojourn in Rome ended when he was tried and tortured for an obscure plot to steal the head of John the Baptist from the church of San Silvestro. Little is known of the period before Filarete arrived in Milan, other than that he spent time in Venice. How he became associated with the Sforzas is not entirely clear, but Vasari states that Francesco Sforza had seen Filarete's work while in Rome. In Milan, Filarete was reunited with Filelfo, the foremost Greek scholar in Italy, who had been the secretary of the Venetian delegation to Emperor John Paleologus in Constantinople in 1420, had acted as his envoy in 1423-24, and was also close to Cyriacus d'Ancona.

When Filarete arrived in Milan he had no experience in large scale building projects. Repairs to the castello appear to have been his first building commission. Filarete's major work for the Sforzas was the design and construction of the immense *Ospedale Maggiore*, but his design was hampered by the resistance of the Milanese workers and interfered with by the semi-autonomous Board of Commissioners. In 1459, as the Ospedale job spun out of his control, the Board reduced Filarete's wages by one sixth; Filarete, his pride stung, feared that this punitive action would ruin his reputation. This grievance, addressed to Francesco Sforza, was the base of his decision to write the treatise, which contains a barely veiled account of his ordeal. And yet, because Filarete took these gestures not just personally but as a massive insult to the virtues of architecture itself, his narrative became something of a cosmic defence of the still far from victorious humanist movement. His accusation, craftily put as circumstances required, was that Francesco Sforza had neglected the liberality required of a Prince. Indeed the *Speculum* genre he appropriated traditionally contained advice for the leader to build cities and marvellous buildings. Filarete cleverly manipulated this topos through reference to Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History*, extensive parts of which describe the great building achievements of ancient kings. Taking this as his model, Filarete exhorts his patron to emulate the ancient kings and queens who built great things to ensure their glory, and as a consequence, the fame of the architect.

Much of Filarete's treatise is devoted to negotiating the distinct role of the architect. His adulation of the great eastern despots threatens a reversion to that long Roman and Byzantine tradition in which each Emperor was regarded as the direct source and origin of all the public building operations executed during his reign. Filarete wards off this threat by sublimating the patron's role into symbolic foundation rituals, such as he describes for the creation of his fictional Sforzinda. That grandiose undertakings jeopardize the architect's recognition concerned Alberti more than it did Filarete, or at least they handled this threat differently. Alberti spoke for republican moderation, while Filarete approved of an Emperor as long as he undertook grand projects. This difference can be seen in their responses to Vitruvius' story of Dinocrates, the Macedonian architect who presented Alexander with his design for a city. Alberti asked, "Who would praise Dinocrates who proposed to carve mount Athos into an effigy of Alexander and in its hand to place a city capable of holding ten thousand people?" Of course Vitruvius' story did not identify the carved figure as Alexander; Alberti, a man of prudence secure in his humanist autonomy, exaggerated the flattery of the architect's proposal in order to condemn it, and by extension all princely arrogance, all the more harshly. He advised, "Let such projects be for the amusement of powerful kings. Let them join sea to sea by cutting through intervening land; let them level mountains and valleys; let them create new islands, and again join existing ones to the mainland; let them leave behind feats that could never be imitated, and in doing so

preserve their name for posterity."⁽⁴⁾ Filarete's position under Sforza did not permit Alberti's sophisticated irony and scorn, and he clearly identified with Dinocrates. Addressing the self-serving question, "What should be done for the architect", he presents Alexander and Dinocrates as exempla of patronal magnificence and the proper regard for the architect.⁽⁵⁾ This passes from citation to model when the architect in Filarete's treatise proclaims, "I have had an idea about undertaking to construct a city. I think the idea will please him (the king, ie. Francesco Sforza) as much as the one Zenocrates did for Alexander the Great." fol.11r. In an anecdote that for Alberti had been an opportunity to counsel moderation, Filarete found the full expression of his situation and the image of his wishes fulfilled.

Filarete refers to numerous ancient rulers, but his architect has a specific female model. The inscription on an ancient cup found at the arsenal is a message from Semiramis, the Queen who built Babylon. In Diodorus' account, Semiramis is characterized as having formidable virtue that repeatedly elevates and then displaces that of her male partner. She is discovered by the army leader Onnes for her beauty, "And since the other qualities of Semiramis were in keeping with the beauty of her countenance, it turned out that her husband became completely enslaved by her, and since he would do nothing without her advice he prospered in everything." fol 106v. Semiramis thus comes to the attention of King Ninus; Onnes is offered no choice but suicide, and Semiramis attains the position of Queen. Semiramis, "Whose nature made her eager for great exploits and ambitions to surpass the fame of her predecessors on the throne," then, "set her mind upon founding a city in Babylonia, and after securing the architects of all the world and skilled artisans and making all the other necessary preparations, she gathered together from her entire kingdom two million men to complete the work." fol. 106v. This description resembles the army of workers assembled to build the walls of Sforzinda. Semiramis, the city builder of great virtue, ultimately functions as the model of both the architect and the patron. In her cohere all the roles required to create a great city, and her example is sufficient to overcome the painful loss of the great ancient cities.

Filarete's situation in Milan was likely hopeless long before he undertook to write the treatise and there is no evidence it did his cause any good. An undated letter reminds Francesco Sforza of Filarete's fourteen years of service and pleas for him to intervene in the situation with the Ospedale Maggiore. Evidently Sforza did not do so. In growing desperation, Filarete sought a new patron. He clearly hoped to return to Florence and his earliest patrons, the Medici, to which end he made a second redaction of his treatise (Florence, Bib. Naz., Magliabecchianus II, IV, 140), appending a book lauding the building activities of Cosimo and Piero di Medici. In addition to the treatise, Filarete sent a small equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. Like the treatise, this was an existing piece he re-dedicated. The treatise's strenuous rhetoric in favour of the new building mode might well have seemed incongruous to the enlightened Medici; in any case no response is recorded.

Two other small bronzes, a portrait medal of Filelfo and a self-portrait medal, are likely connected to Filarete's pursuit of work further afield. Julian Raby has detailed Mehmed's desire at exactly this time to have made a portrait medal of himself.⁽⁶⁾ Filelfo and Filarete could have known of this project through envoys Mehmed sent to neighbouring Mantua. Filarete's medals would simultaneously identify him, establish his association with Filelfo, and display his professional qualification to realize this particular ambition. The self-portrait is inscribed with an obvious plea for employment: "As the Sun begets bees, This Noble Accommodates Princes." In preparation to go to Constantinople, Filarete would have certainly arranged to take a copy of his newly authored treatise, which would have advertised his command of the new humanist mode of building. A copy of Vitruvius would also have been a practical necessity for such a move. I will conclude by arguing that the Vitruvius MS Lat. 32, now in the University Library of Budapest, was the copy Filarete brought to Constantinople.

In 1862 the remains of the Biblioteca Corviniana, the great Renaissance library of Mathias Corvinus, were discovered in the Serai, or Imperial library of Istanbul, and in a diplomatic gesture, returned to Hungary by Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Included with this material was a codex of Vitruvius' *De Architectura* designated MS Lat. 32. This is an unadorned codex written on paper in a simple script with numerous errors. The very modesty of the work led Élisabeth Pellegrin, the leading Sforza bibliographer, to hesitate in attributing it to Francesco Sforza's library. This manuscript was the subject of a 1991 article by Gábor Hajnóczy. (7) He presents an early catalogue unknown to Pellegrin, that described the codice as bearing a stamp of Francesco Sforza. He proposes that the codice arrived in Budapest through an exchange between Lodovico Sforza and John Corvinus in 1488. I want to suggest that it took an entirely different route to Budapest; that it was first brought to Constantinople by Filarete. If this could be proved, it would furnish proof of his elusive presence in Constantinople.

Through a close textual examination, Hajnóczy traced the model of MS Lat. 32 to a lost manuscript presented before 1443 by the humanist Pier Candido Decembrio to the archbishop of Milan, Francesco Pizolpasso. A list of Pizolpasso's books records that the lost work contained, along with Vitruvius, two of Decembrio's works, his *Peregrina Historia* and *Grammaticon*, copies of which are also bound with MS Lat. 32. Hajnóczy then compared the manuscript with another Vitruvius in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MSA 137 Sup.; finding the script different, he came to no conclusion as to who made the transcription. The other part of Hajnóczy's conjecture rests on a letter of 10 November 1488 from Ludovico Sforza to John Corvinus, which accompanied the return of a work Sforza had earlier borrowed. Sforza's letter tells us that along with the book returned, he sent three other unidentified manuscripts. Hajnóczy speculates that MS Lat 32 was one of these other codices. He seems tempted to see a correspondence between these four codices and four codices catalogued among the Corviniana returned to Hungary (MSS Lat. 21, 22, 27, and 32 [Vitruvius], Budapest, University Library). He mentions Filarete only to say "It is not a forced assumption to see a connection between Vitruvius studies in Milan and Filarete's treatise on architecture."

Filarete's obvious need to use Vitruvius in preparing his own treatise and the copy's modesty, appropriate to a working architect of humanist tendency, both support Filarete as its instigator. The most convincing evidence of a connection between MS Lat. 32 and Filarete is the closeness of its date with that of the Medici redaction of his treatise. This is complicated by the curious fact that two Vitruvius manuscripts were made in Milan during the time Filarete wrote his treatise. Could they both be connected to Filarete? To decide this requires the sequence and timing of Filarete's treatise be closely examined in conjunction with the manuscripts.

Of the two redactions of Filarete's treatise only the second is dated. John Spencer has dated the initial composition of the treatise on the basis of its internal events. (8) Spencer establishes that Filarete's visit to an iron mine with the famous engineer Aristotele da Bologna was made in March of 1461 or after. He also points out that the treatise refers to Galeazzo Sforza as the son-in-law of a visiting Lord that can be confidently identified as Ludovico Gonzaga. In September of 1463 the engagement of Galeazzo Sforza to Dorotea Gonzaga was called off. The treatise must thus have been written after March of either 1461, 1462 or 1463, and before September of the last year. The second Medici-dedicated redaction bears the partial date: *Die ultimo mensis Januarii*. The missing year can be easily deduced since the book refers to the death of Giovanni de' Medici, which occurred in November 1463, but is dedicated to Cosimo, who died in August 1464: thus the date can be fixed as January 31st, 1464.

Fortunately, both Vitruvius manuscripts are dated. MSA 137 Sup. is inscribed: *Finit L. Vitruvii de architectura liber X^{us} per me Bonninum Mombrinium 1462 luce decima martii*, that is, March 10th, 1462. MS Lat. 32 is inscribed on folio 191r: *Finitus die ultimo Novembris MCCCCLXIII*,

that is, the end of November, 1463. MS Lat. 32 thus antedates the final date for the first redaction of Filarete's treatise, September of 1463, and could not have been used in its composition. We can conclude that the earlier of the two copies of Vitruvius, MSA 137 Sup., was the one prepared for Filarete's use in writing his treatise. Its date of March 1462 agrees with Spencer's research and assuming it was made in preparation for Filarete's writing, could even be used as a new terminus post quo for the treatise's composition.

That a second Vitruvius manuscript was made so soon after the first may reflect Filarete's uncertain situation in Milan. It is also notable that the second Vitruvius was finished only two months before Filarete's second, rededicated copy of his treatise. Where the first Vitruvius manuscript was copied by Mombrizio, a humanist disciple of Decembrio, the second copy was made by a simple scribe. Filarete's declining position in the court may have meant that he was no longer able to command the labours of an important scribe. In any case, it would have been an indispensable text if he was planning to relocate, whether to Florence or to a new land. The route of transmission I propose suggests that the Vitruvius codex was not originally part of Mathias Corvinus' library, but that as material from essentially the same milieu and era, it was mistaken in the nineteenth century as belonging to it. This explains its origin in Milan under Francesco Sforza without also requiring an explanation for how it might have been brought to Budapest prior to the plundering of Corvinus' library.

It is becoming possible to say with certainty that Filarete arrived in Constantinople after the collapse of his position in Milan. This is more than the sentimental question of the fate of an individual; it concludes a movement of cultural reciprocity that started with Filarete's induction to the circle of philo-byzantine humanists around Eugenius IV's union of the eastern and western churches. Most surprisingly, it shows Filarete's persistence with this idea after Mehmed's conquest. His idea of the east transcended vastly changed 'geo-political' circumstances. Much more than a unification of the church, Filarete was dedicated to the unification of east and west. His fascination with Egypt and Byzantium parallels that of Cyriacus of Ancona and he proved almost as adventurous in pursuing it. His tenacious vision of Francesco Sforza as a new despotic city-builder on the ancient models of Alexander, Darius, Cyrus and Semiramis shows the absolute domination of his imagination by historical accounts. As an eager reader of Diodorus, Filarete longed for comparable majesty. When Sforza failed to live up to the ambitions Filarete held for him, Filarete sought out a living example of the sort of virtuous historical potentate that had inspired him. In Mehmed the Conqueror he found an enlightened patron ready for his vision of building a great city. There can be little doubt that Filarete would also have taken a copy of his splendid new book as a gift for Mehmed, even if being written in Italian, it would have been illegible to him. It is not difficult to surmise that along with Filarete's Vitruvius, the Serai also must have once contained a now-lost copy of Filarete's ill-fortuned treatise.

NOTES

¹Antonio Averlino, *Tratatto di Architettura*. Filarete's Treatise on Architecture: Being the Treatise by Antonio di Piero Averlino, known as Filarete, trans. John R. Spencer, 2 vols, with facsimile of Bib. Naz., Magl. II, I, 140. (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1965): xix. All further references to Filarete's treatise are marked in the text with folio numbers from this edition.

²Marcell Restle, "Bauplanung und Baugesinnung unter Mehmet II Fatih: Filarete in Konstantinopel." *Pantheon* 39 (1981): 361-367

³For the argument that Filarete's work already incorporated Islamic influences, see Ralph Quadflieg, *Filarete's Ospedale Maggiore in Mailand: Zur Rezeption Islamischen Hospital Wesens in der Italienischen Frührenaissance*. (Köln: Kleinkamp, 1981); and Gülru Necipollu-Kafadar, "Plans and models in 15th and 16th Century Ottoman Architectural Practice" *JSAH* XLV (Sept. 1986): 224-243

⁴Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach and Robert Tavernor. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988): 160

⁵Cyriacus d'Ancona claimed to have discovered the names Dinocrates and Alexander on the great column at Alexandria. See Phyllis Williams Lehmann, *Cyriacus of Ancona's Egyptian Visit* (Locust Valley: J.J. Augustin Publisher, n.d.): 12

⁶Julian Raby, "Pride and Prejudice: Mehmed the Conqueror and the Italian Portrait Medal" *Studies in the History of Art*, 21 (1987): 171-194

⁷Gábor Hajnóczy. "Vitruvius, De Architectura (MS Lat 32) in the University Library, Budapest, and the Milanese Court of Humanists" *Arte Lombarda*, Vol. 96/97 (1991): 98-104

⁸John R. Spencer "La Datazione del Trattato del Filarete Desunta dal suo Esame Interno" *Revista D'arte* V. 31 (1956): 93-103.