

**Évelyne Bukowiecki** – It's unbelievable, how much we can learn about imperial Rome just by looking at the brick facings of its buildings. Firstly, by assessing the quality of the bricks (for example their colour, their thickness or their uniformity), we can straightaway work out the economic and cultural level of whoever had the building erected. Then, by studying the workmanship involved in making the bricks, we may determine the technical skill of those who actually constructed the building. This allows us to suggest dates for Roman buildings that end up being quite precise. For example, identifying the type of joint between two brick courses tells us the difference between a wall constructed in Rome in the Flavian period versus a wall constructed under the Severian emperors - simply by recognizing the fine layer of mortar left by the mason's gesture as he smoothed each joint. Variations in the bricks' thicknesses are also a good chronological witness. Roman bricks were notably quite thick, 3.8 to 4 cm, until they were gradually thinned down to around 3.2 to 3.6 cm between the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the early second century. Such thinning continued in the late second century and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, down to thicknesses between 2.3 and 2.8 cm. On the other hand, average brick thicknesses rose again to around 3.5 cm in the second part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

It's interesting to note that in ancient Rome, builders didn't use present-day rectangular bricks, that are easy to catch single-handed; they always used square bricks that had been reduced into triangular or trapezoidal fragments, which were then fashioned into wall facings. In fact, the Romans' brick construction technique consisted in casting a compound of lime and stuff called *cæmenta* - a random mixture of stones or brick tailings - between two walls or panels. The method allowed joining the facings to the wall's core, leading to a single, strong and consolidated structure.

Another very useful feature is the Romans' brickworks habit of putting their stamp on their produce. By finding and analyzing these stamps on a wall we can find out, for example, by whom - or for whom - the brick was made; sometimes we can even date it, if we're lucky and find a consular date or an emperor's name.

It's interesting, by the way, to note that the gradual decline of the Empire immediately led to a decline in Roman style brickworking. The latter disappeared around the mid-5th century, and was replaced by a novel operating sequence based on its systematic reuse. For over five centuries following the imperial period, municipal Rome's brick architecture was mainly based on the organised plundering of ancient monuments and a constant reuse of terracotta materials. The first and second lives of the Roman brick thus spanned more than ten centuries of Roman architecture's prestigious history.

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