



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Iain Gordon Brown, 'Atavism and Ideas of Architectural Progress in Robert Adam's Vitruvian Seal', *The Georgian Group Journal*, Vol. IV, 1994, pp. 70-73

ATAVISM AND IDEAS OF ARCHITECTURAL PROGRESS IN ROBERT ADAM'S VITRUVIAN SEAL

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In the Preface to their *Works in Architecture* the brothers Adam stated: "We intended to have prefixed to our designs a dissertation concerning the rise and progress of architecture in Great Britain; and to have pointed out the various stages of its improvements from the time, that our ancestors, relinquishing the gothick style, began to aim at an imitation of the Grecian manner, until it attained that degree of perfection at which it has now arrived." This, they said, would be a "curious and entertaining subject", but the pressures of a busy practice prevented the "digestion and arrangement" of their thoughts on the matter.¹

The fact is that Robert Adam had, at the outset of his career, succinctly summed up the idea of the "rise and progress" of architecture in the form of an allusive and emblematic seal which, when decoded, can be shown to have an atavistic meaning at once ingenious and witty. Although the matrix is lost, impressions of the seal survive on Adam's letters from the period of his Grand Tour (Fig. 1). He began to use the seal in November 1754, and continued to employ it regularly until February 1756. The device it bore is exceedingly interesting, and the opportunity is taken in this article to consider it in detail. The very existence of the seal, let alone

its significance, has escaped previous writers on Robert Adam: I have discussed it briefly in the context of a study of the Adam family's adoption of certain other allusive seals or devices and ultimately of a legitimate shield of arms and a crest. The Adam brothers followed their father William in a liking for seals rich in architectural symbolism, and before one turns to a detailed consideration of this particular intaglio it is necessary only to direct the reader to my other studies of related matters.²

It should be said straight away that, though the seal is not unconnected — however eccentrically and obscurely — with the acquisition by John Adam of legally-granted armorial bearings, Robert's seal is a bogus piece of heraldry: it appears to be an armorial seal, but one element only is actually connected with any charge borne subsequently on the Adam shield. But if a spurious concoction in heraldic



Fig. 1. Impression of Robert Adam's seal which bore devices of a column and primitive huts as described by Vitruvius. Enlarged photograph. (Reproduced by courtesy of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Bt.)

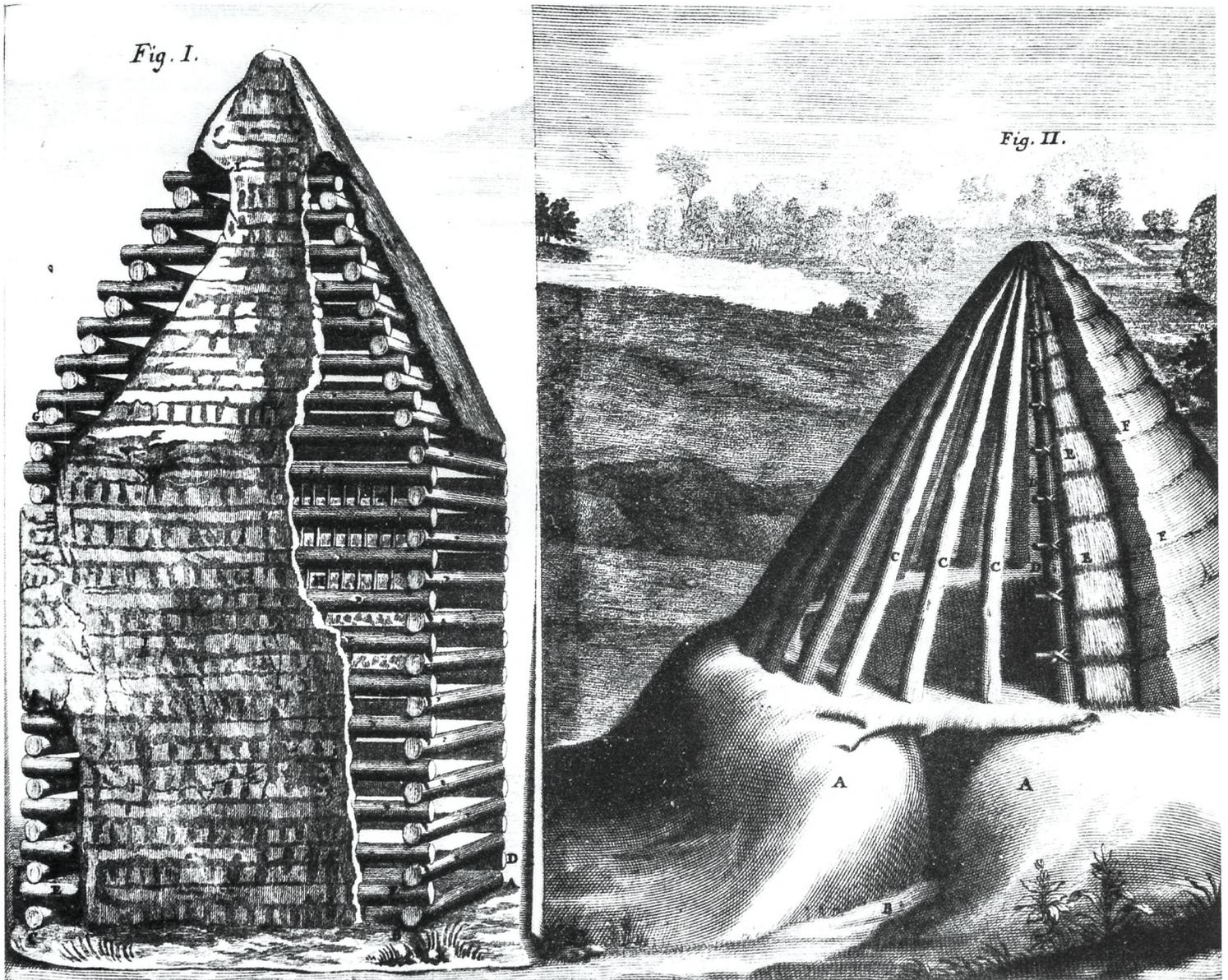


Fig. 2. The Phrygian hut (right) as described by Vitruvius and illustrated in Claude Perrault's edition of *The Ten Books of Architecture*, 1673. (Reproduced by courtesy of Edinburgh University Library.)

terms, it is nevertheless deeply significant in terms of architectural pretension.

The central motif of the design — a Corinthian column — was to be adopted in 1756 as the most distinctive of the charges of the Adam arms. A star or comet sheds its beam on the column capital. On either side of the column appear two objects which are representations of the Phrygian huts described by Vitruvius in Bk. II, Chap. 1.5. Adam's seal reproduces in miniature the illustration of Vitruvius's verbal description which Claude Perrault had included in his translation of *The Ten Books of Architecture* (Fig. 2). All the detail of Plate V, Fig. ii of Perrault's great edition³ is to be found exactly in the two minute representations of tepees on Adam's tiny seal. The natural hillock mentioned by Vitruvius is there, and the trench by which the Phrygians made an entrance to the burrows within. Above is the pyramidal log roof with its covering of reeds, straw and brushwood. The astonishingly accurate "translation" from engraved plate to intaglio seal comprehends even the cut-away presentation of the source illustration.

So much for the "shield". Other elements of this bogus display of armory are the "crest" and motto. The "crest" is a pyramid, in shape resembling the Cestius monument in Rome, rather than the true Egyptian pyramid. The motto is taken from Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI. 663: *Qui vitam excoluere per artes* ("those who had given life an added graciousness by inventions of skill" is a rough translation). A Rococo cartouche and foliage surrounds the "heraldry".

The seal surely has three meanings. The first is as a metaphor of architectural progress

from savagery to civilisation. As Laugier had so recently demonstrated, the origins of architecture lay in the primitive hut: the little rustic cabin was “the model upon which all the magnificences of architecture have been imagined”.⁴ (The devices on Adam’s seal show an even more primitive form of hut.) The progress towards that magnificence is symbolised by the juxtaposition of rude hut (mere construction) and elegant column (the sophistication of architecture), and also perhaps by the contrast between the crudity of the pyramidal poles-and-brushwood hut and the polished ashlar of the monumental pyramid itself as represented in the “crest”. The notion of progress from the huts of barbarians to the temples of the classical world, as illustrated on the intaglio, is an emblematic expression of Vitruvius’s idea⁵ that mankind’s advance, as demonstrated by increasing sophistication in building, was succeeded by a corresponding development in other arts and sciences, and “so passed from a rude and barbarous mode of life to civilisation and refinement”. The Vitruvian idea of progress from the primitive to the polished is otherwise expressed in Adam’s choice of Virgilian motto. If the column is taken as a symbol of a life improved by graciousness — Adam was later to say of the column that it is “not only one of the noblest and most graceful pieces of decoration, but in all round bodies, & expressly such as stand insulated, there is a delicacy of proportion to be observed, that those of another form, and in other situations, do not require”⁶ — it was also, as Laugier affirmed, a derivative of the posts of the more sophisticated type of hut.⁷ By taking the primitive hut as a device — though why he should want two must remain a mystery, unless the reason is simply a desire for symmetry — Adam seems to be displaying particularly close devotion to Laugier’s dictum “Let us never lose sight of our little cabin.”⁸

All in all, the idea of progress as expressed in miniature emblematic form on the seal is an epitome of what Chambers was to write at length in 1759. Adam’s great rival associated the business of dwelling in “miserable huts” with the inconvenience that went with such a life, and with characters “indolent, stupid and abject”, having “faculties benumbed . . . views limited”. By contrast, Chambers argued, a life led in “commodious dwellings”, with facilities for easy living, secure sleeping and unmolested study, and for tasting “the sweets of every social enjoyment”—life “active, inventive and enterprising” in a community where the arts flourish and where “pride and pleasure give birth to a thousand refinements” — led to the triumphs of architecture, and to all social and intellectual progress.⁹ A plate illustrating huts of a “Conic Figure”, of branches covered with leaves, reeds and clay, the image derived likewise from Perrault, was then included by Chambers to illustrate his point. Young Robert Adam had said it all, subtly, allusively and concisely, five years before.

But he had implied more than that. For the second cryptic meaning of the seal is connected with what was then, probably had been throughout the youth of the Adam brothers, and was to continue even into the years of Robert’s later middle age: the idea that in the name “Adam” lay the opportunity for architectural jokes and puns, and for the expression of a jocularly atavistic pride in the Adam architectural dynasty. The Biblical Adam was the first man and so, presumably, the first builder: his was the primitive hut. Vitruvius was the architect’s Bible, and therein (in Perrault’s edition) was pictured a primitive man’s dwelling. Biblical Adam was the first architect, his hut the prototype of all buildings. Robert Adam, as his early letters give ample testimony, saw himself as first among architects. In his punning seal — the devices having the same function as canting arms — he made the most of a family joke. This was the man who would talk of his rivals in architecture as mere “reptiles”, and of himself as “God’s begetting”.¹⁰ The atavistic joke retained its currency up to at least the 1770s, when Robert’s brother-in-law, close companion and fellow-artist, John Clerk of Eldin, built a rustic cottage in Midlothian to which he gave the name Adam’s Hut.¹¹

The third and final meaning, growing out of the second’s subtext of conceit and self-evaluation, is certainly one of self-congratulation: an attempt to suggest promise of greatness. The

star lights a column, which itself symbolises the talent of the young prodigy. This motif — it is probable that John Adam (perhaps acting under Robert’s influence) had already determined to make a column the principal charge of a contingent coat of arms — carried the implication of the talent and taste of an Adam rising among the huts of barbarians. Adam’s architecture will be a thing of a different calibre from that of his contemporaries. With the idea in mind of hoped-for, or rather expected, supremacy over fellow practitioners, one looks again at the line from the *Aeneid*. Adam, in taking as his motto a tag about elevating human life to new heights by discovered art, is directing us to recall the context of this quotation, and by doing so, the suggestion of self-congratulation is further heightened. For Virgil was writing of “the home of the blest”, where the “spirits have their own sun and their own stars”; and one cannot but think of Adam registering a recognition of the sentiment, and of applying it to himself.

NOTES

1. Robert and James Adam, *The Works in Architecture*, London, 1773, Preface, 6.
2. Iain Gordon Brown, “William Adam’s Seal: Palladio, Inigo Jones and the Image of Vitruvius Scoticus”, *Architectural Heritage I: William Adam*, Edinburgh, 1990, 91-103; *ibid.*, “Architects or Gentlemen: Adam Heraldry and its Implications”, *Architectural Heritage IV: Robert Adam*, Edinburgh, 1993, 82–92.
3. Claude Perrault, *Les Dix Livres D’Architecture de Vitruve, corrigez et traduits nouvellement en Francois, avec des notes et figures*, Paris, 1673. The treatment of Plate V, Fig. 1 (the Colchian hut of Bk II, Chap. 1.4) is simpler in the first edition than in the second edition of 1684 (p. 33), but the illustration of the Phrygian hut is the same in both. The Adam family owned a copy of the 1684 edition: see *Blair Adam Library catalogue*, London, 1883, 69.
4. Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l’Architecture*, second edition, Paris, 1755, 9-10. A copy of this book was in the Blair Adam library (*Catalogue*, 62).
5. Bk II, Chap. 1. 6.
6. *Works in Architecture*, no. ii, 4.
7. Laugier, *op.cit.*, 10-11.
8. *Ibid.*, 2.
9. William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture*, London, 1759, Preface.
10. Quoted in Margaret H.B. Sanderson, *Robert Adam and Scotland: Portrait of an Architect*, Edinburgh, 1992, 40.
11. On Adam’s Hut at Eldin see A.A.Tait, *The Landscape Garden in Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1980, 117-18; and Richard Emerson, “Robert Adam and John Clerk of Eldin: from Primitive Hut to Temple of Religion”, in Alistair Rowan and Ian Gow, eds, *Scottish Country Houses*, Edinburgh, 1994, forthcoming.