The Great Structures in Architecture

Antiquity to Baroque

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The Great Structures in Architecture

Antiquity to Baroque

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INTRODUCTION

I have always found amazing the fact that someone in the past spent his time piling stones up to mark or to delimit an area. But I get even more astonished when I come to think that somebody dared to live within that pile of stones and, in addition, felt safer inside it than outside. That leads me to the conclusion that in those days people had to have a great faith in their own skill to take shelter in the shade of a wall of rough stones and that they fully relied on the physical laws to dare to live under a slab canopy.

You could think that to build a dolmen, people only needed enough energy to move the huge stones it was made of, its stability being guaranteed by the inertia of those colossal masses. But when someone first succeeded in making a ceiling of pebbles, supported by a material as weak as mud, that represented a step forward as great as the control of fire. Nevertheless, that must have happened so long ago that no mythology tells about a God owning the power to keep stones floating in the air. The Bible considers so obvious the existence of domes that not only does not mention it, but when an arch or a temple is to be made, wooden architraves are used, choosing the noble building way instead of the popular brick based architecture. Neither do the Babylonian legends mention anything referring to architecture. And the Egyptians either, since they deified the human architect that constructed Zoser's pyramids. Greek mythology makes reference to all the forces of nature and to all the human passions and liking, but not to architecture. The Nordic ancient cultures, more primitive, can deify the axe because it is an instrument for wood building, which they never do with architecture itself. And we could go on with the Oriental mythologies with similar results.

Why something so important stays outside the consideration of men? In my previous book *Towers and Domes* I advanced some hypotheses, but I must insist on the instrumental character of the domestic architecture and on the symbolic character of the great architecture as a means to achieve other objectives.

We could also think that architecture is something so recent that appeared when the legendary corpus of tradition was already finished, so that everything to be added to tradition would show an unmistakably human character.

In case that is right, this book tries to start from the origins without fearing to ignore undocumented precedents. In the opposite case, the historical sequence reveals itself as tricky. In any case, what is left is the proof of the existence of these works, which have evolved in a progressive and sequential order as mentioned.

The story that I tell, which starts in the antiquity and finishes in the Baroque in this first volume, reaching the present time in the following one, intends to reflect on the great adventure of architecture. Every matter is open to opinions and everything is objectionable. That is settled. But from the viewpoint of someone who practices architecture, this text will possibly serve to understand better the monuments, to get closer to them and find out whether they should be conserved or modified, and to be humbler when thinking that our tools are all-powerful. If we realised that our advantage is based in the fact that we have new materials invented by chemists and that using sun-cooked bricks our results would not be different to those of Babylonian craftsmen, we would be more modest. Instead of committing outrages favoured by the resistance of concrete and steel, we could study the importance of the forms and its optimisation.