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The Arcuated Lintel and the ‘Serlian Motif’. Imperial Identity, Architectural and Symbolic Interactions in Ancient Rome

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Abstract

Essay on the origin, use and development of the arcuated lintel in ancient Rome and the configuration of the so-called ‘Serlian motif’. These architectural elements will be related to the architecture of prestige on its technical, functional, visual and symbolic sphere. Its depictions, in addition to buildings, can offer a rich repertory of images that speak about the relations between visual culture, religion and power. Furthermore, the analyzed motifs will become important elements of the Western cultural legacy for centuries. The analysis of these events will contribute to the comprehension of the role played by some resources of ancient Rome architecture of prestige and its success.

Keywords

Arcuated lintel, arcuated entablature, Serlian Motif, Serliana, Syrian pediment, Roman architecture, Roman iconography, classical heritage.

In this work we use the term ‘Serlian motif’ or ‘Serliana’ to refer to the vertical tripartite feature whose central opening is wider than the lateral ones, with a semi-circular arch, while its side openings are lintelled. In the cases analysed we will see that essentially two designs exist in order to resolve the combination of the arch and the lintel. The first is to support the base of the central arch on the lintels, or entablatures, of the lateral spaces. The second, to use a continuous lintel or entablature that curves upward forming an arch over the central intercolumniation: this is the so-called “arcuated lintel” (Brown 1942, 389).

The architect Serlio (1475-c.1554) was the great disseminator of the Serliana or Serlian Motif in his 4th Book of Architecture, *Regole generali di architettura* (1537). We use the term ‘Serliana’ because of its historiographical fortune (Willinski 1965; Zovatto 1958, 151–153; Willinski 1969; De Francovich 1970; Teasdale Smith 1970; S. Ferber 1971, 8–26; Crum 1989; Stiglmayr 2000, 140–148, 196–197; Thomas 2007, 61), despite the fact that Serlio referred to such a structure as a ‘*finestra*’ (window), ‘*pergolo*’ (colonnade, arcade), ‘*poggiuolo*’ (balcony) and when used in a series, as a ‘*loggia*’ or ‘*portico*’ (Willinski 1969, 407ss). Serlio’s treaty only refers to the arch supported on entablatures, although in his time the arcuated lintel was also used. The most significant examples of this second feature are the fresco (1523–24) by Giulio Romano in the Constantine Room in The Vatican, in which the Pope leans out from a ‘Serliana’ overlooking a flight of stairs inspired by

Bramante’s design for the Belvedere to read a document (**Figure 1**), the palace of the emperor Charles V (1527–35) at the Alhambra of Granada and the Vich palace (c. 1527) at Valencia (Stiglmayr 2000, 140–148, 196–197). In the Fire in the Borgo (1514–17), a fresco by Rafael and his workshop at The Vatican, the Pope leans out of a Serlian window, this time with an arch supported on entablatures and which acts as a *loggia* for the benedictions.

Serlio was the great disseminator of the ‘Serliana’, ‘Serlian window’ or ‘Serlian motif’ (**Figure 2**), although he draws inspiration from his peers, especially Bramante (Willinski 1965, 116–118; Willinski 1969, 400–405), and relies on the important precedent set by the Pazzi Chapel, the work of Brunelleschi contracted in 1441. The ‘Serliana’ is also called a ‘Venetian window’ or ‘Palladian window’, due to its extensive use in the Veneto region and to the fact that it features extensively in Palladio’s work. However, the exact source of inspiration of Serlio and his peers is unknown. Maybe it was the niche of the Temple of Clitumnus near Spoleto, the Canopus at Villa Adriana, Diocletian’s Palace at Split, the pergola of many Italian churches such as Saint Prodocimo of Padua, some Roman coins or other depictions. Also, we do not know when the term ‘Serliana’ was first used. In Roman architecture, both the arcuated lintel and the arch supported on entablatures are usually set in a triangular pediment. In such cases the resultant arch is usually called a ‘Syrian arch’ and the pediment ‘Syrian pediment’ (Thomas 2007, 43) although is more correct to apply these terms to the continuous arcuated entablature (Crema 1961, 8–10; Ginouvès 1992, 128) or arched lintel (Drew-Bear 1974, 57–58). Such a terminology is used from the early 20th century, but it should be revised in future studies because the proposed Syrian origin of these structures is not sure. Mainly, the arch that rests directly on the column did not originate in Syria, but in buildings such as the Gymnasium of Delos (Vallois 1944, 635) and the arch on entablatures and framed by a pediment was used first in Hellenistic Alexandrian art, as testifies the gravestone of Lycodemus (**Figure 3**), from the 1st century BC (Pfuhl 1901, 289–290). In ancient sources no express mention to these types of crowning structures has ever been found, only generic terms relating to the frontispiece or other elements in the building, and none referring to the specific structures that we are concerned with. One of the terms used is ‘*fastigium*’, whose use is as widespread in Rome as the ‘*mihrab*’ in the Islamic world and which, like the ‘*mihrab*’, is a polysemic noun possessing architectural connotations of superiority, prestige and power (Khoury 1998, 11–18). In architecture ‘*fastigium*’ translates as ‘frontispiece’ or even ‘gable’. The *fastigium* had sacred and regal connotations, as testified by Vitruvius (*De Arch.* V, 6, 9) and Pliny (Fowler 1893,

381–387). The *fastigium* was also used as an element of prestige in the *tablinum* (Wallace–Hadrill 1988, 64). In the Spanish Renaissance Sagredo and Urrea used ‘*fastigio*’ as a synonym for frontispiece, gable or double-pitched roof (De la Plaza Escudero 2009, 261). It should be emphasised that the ‘Serliana’ in ancient times appeared on most occasions associated with the pediment, as occurs in its most well known examples, the Palace of Split and the Disc or *Missorium* of Theodosius. In general terms, in its application to the design of the façade, a greater interest is seen for the composition of the parts constituting the crown (entablature, arch, frontispiece), although the origin of the ‘Serliana’ can be seen as an attempt at a unified configuration of the façade, connecting all its parts harmoniously.

The possible origins of the ‘Serliana’ in Antiquity, more so than the thermal window, are associated with designs such as the arcuated lintels used in temple façades, triumphal arches and palaces. Its success seems to owe itself to the possibilities this structure offers from the point of view of composition, construction, visualisation and symbolism (Brown 1942; Baldwin Smith 1956, 118; Hommel 1957, 20–26; Arias 1960, 749; Swoboda 1961, 78–89; Yegül 1982; Thomas 2007, 63–69). It is held that, in terms of composition and construction, the ‘Serliana’ allows the trabeated system of Greek tradition to be combined with the Roman arcuated system. This is simplifying matters somewhat, since a variety of versions exist within Hellenism which combines both systems (Crema 1961, 3–6; Boyd 1978, 83–100; Lancaster 2010). Beyond the classical Greek and Roman tradition, influences from Mesopotamia, the Middle East and Egypt played a leading role in the transformation of the façade, such as the arcuated lintel and the arcuated pediment. With these, the classical façade adapts itself to new needs, namely: greater monumental character and hierarchical structuring of spaces, the visual reinforcement of the building’s axis, hierarchization of the façade which features a central opening resembling a halo or aureole emphasising the character or personality found within it, and reference to a domed space with corresponding celestial implications. In other words, the concept of the Greek temple was abandoned in order to impose a guided vision, thanks to the definition of the unitary visual axis created by refined constructional ‘liberties’ that break away from the standard ‘classical’ rigor. This had already been explored in the Pergamon Altar in the lower level and in the placing of the sculptural decoration, which takes in account the topographical determinants and the place through which the observer enters the monument. The ‘Serliana’ goes one step further and reinforces the visual axis by means of structural elements in the elevation. Particularly since the second century, the interest in establishing unifying visual axes is manifest in works such as the Rome Pantheon, whose rotunda was hidden from the exterior by colonnades, which focused the attention on the door. Likewise, as occurs in Palmira, the *cardo* and the *decumanus*, as ceremonial routes, are emphasised with mighty colonnades and *tetrapylon*, and impressive enclosures were built in the *temenos* of the temples.

In origin, the step towards this type of façade which would give rise to the ‘Serliana’ could have arisen from two distinct but convergent paths. From the point of view of the construction, it could have arisen via designs such as the Temple of Diana in Mérida (De la Barrera 2000, 182); in this example (**Figure 4**), the arch on the lintel, actually hidden by the pediment, was a relieving arch (Álvarez Martínez 1992, 90). A similar example can be found in the temple or curia of Augustobriga, now Talavera la Vieja, which, like the Emeritan example, possesses an arch on an entablature (De la Barrera 2000, 144). In terms of the formation of an image or architectural iconography, the arcuated pediment could have arisen from depictions in perspective from temples in the form of *tholos* which appear on coins at least since the Augustus era and which associate the imperial figure with religious and celestial contexts. On the same theme, the grand opening formed in the central intercolumniation of the façade could be a transposition or an allusion to the niche that accommodates the cult statue inside the temple. The intermediate step between versions such as that in Mérida (end of 1st century BC – beginning of the 1st century AD) and the design of the ‘Serliana’ seems to have arisen in works such as the Triumphal Arch of Orange (c. 20 AD), whose laterals are of a tetrastyle design topped by a triangular pediment containing a visible arch. The central intercolumniation is emphasised by a broken back entablature so that it looks like a unified, lateral façade, although unity is not achieved because the arch span does not match that of the setback of the entablature. It stresses the idea of a test run or an intermediate step towards the formation of the unified façade thanks to the arcuated lintel, or the arch supported on entablatures, designed with consistency with the lower parts (since the broken lintel favours unification) and not just with the pediment, as occurs in Orange, in mind. In the case of the Arch of Orange, the original decoration preserved on the east side could indicate the possible symbolic, cosmic even, content of the design described, since the intrados has an astral decoration similar to that used in Egypt, and the gable features a bust with a radiated crown (**Figure 5**).

Finally, the façade with the ‘Serliana’ clearly defined, though with a mismatch in the composition, is used in early examples such as the Sword of Tiberius (c. 15 AD) on which the ‘Serliana’ is applied to a temple containing trophies and places itself in a iconographic stage of military character alluding to the emperor (**Figure 6**). Also it is used in the lararium in the house of the Prince of Naples and the *purgatorium* of Isis Temple, both in Pompeii (before 79 AD). According to H. C. Butler (1909, 85–86; 1916, 385, 389), the exterior façade of the Temple of Dushara in Seeia or Sī’ (Hauran, Syria, 30 BC – AD 1) had an ‘arcuated architrave’ set in a triangular pediment and the inner side of the *theatron* gate had the same motif but without pediment. These possibilities are surprising for its precociousness. Nevertheless, Butler’s reconstruction of the temple and the *theatron* raises serious doubts (Crema 1961, 1), fundamentally because of the lack of sufficient material evidence according to Butler’s sketches (Butler 1909, plates I–II; Butler 1916, figures 329–330). But, if correct, this does not invalidate

the sequence in the technical process, which we have just suggested; rather, it makes one think that this took place earlier in eastern territories, such as Egypt, Anatolia and Syria. As we see, in Roman architecture the exploration of new architectural formulas culminating in the ‘Serliana’ was carried out in a short period of time dating back to the era of Augustus, motivated by the development characteristic of Roman architecture and oriental trends which enriched their structural and symbolic designs. Among the most distant sources of the arcuated lintel are monumental entrances such as the Gate of Ishtar in Babylonia or that of the Palace of Sargon in Khorsabad and those depicted in the bronze reliefs from the Balawat doors (Weigand 1928, 112–114; Brown 1942, 389–391). The chronological jump between these examples and the Roman ones is considerable, for which one would have to think of the influence of Hellenistic works and of the combination of the Egyptian broken lintel with the classical triangular pediment (Lytelton 1974, 199). The Alexandrian influence is evident at the arcuated niche topped by a pediment at the *Palazzo delle Colonne* in Ptolemais (1st century BC) and also it has associated to the Pompeian 2nd style and Petra architecture (Kraeling 1962, 120; Lauter 1971–1972; Schefold 1975, 53–59; Gros 1976, 202–203; De Vos 1980; Barbet 1985, 49–51; McKenzie 1990, 85–104, 125; Kuttner 1998, 103–104; McKenzie 2007, 96–112). The influence of similar structures to those which we are analysing reached even works of Greco Buddhist art of Gandhara (Vallois 1944, 369–370), such as the Maitreya flanked by his Kushan devotees and enthroned under a structure very similar to the ‘Serliana’ (3rd – 4th century, Tokyo National Museum). Do we find ourselves faced with diverse versions in answer to the Hellenistic legacy or to contemporary Roman influences?

The ‘Serliana’ is used preferably in religious and court contexts associated with the imperial figure, with his patronage and representatives. The formula is introduced into the visual culture and constitutes a resource in the artistic repertoire associated with the emperor from examples such as the Sword of Tiberius and the Canopus of Hadrian’s villa. This work, like the *purgatorium* of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii, poses the question asking if the arcuated lintel could be used to characterise ‘orientalising’ architectures, in both cases taken from Hellenistic Egypt. One of the possible explanations of the ‘Serliana’ in monumental façades is that it permits access to a greater amount of light and could be associated with solar rituals, as has been suggested for the Egyptian broken pediment developed in the Hellenistic and Roman era. The connection with oriental ideology is reinforced in the silver plaque from Hedderheim (c. 3rd–4th century, British Museum, Silver 226), which represents Jupiter Dolichenus and Juno Dolichena in a sacrificial context under an aedicula with an arcuated lintel featuring stars and the moon. Among Roman monumental structures the so-called Temple of Hadrian at Ephesus (c. 118 AD) stands out. It is probably the first to use the arcuated lintel topped by a triangular pediment. In this monumental landscape the Temple of Termessus in Pisidia, the Temple of Atil, the Temple of Zeus in Qanawat, the propylaea of the Temple of Jupiter in

Baalbek, the *tetrapylon* of the entrance to the Temple of Venus in Aphrodisias, the Triumphal Arch of Hadrian in Ephesus, the Triumphal Arch of Theodosius in Constantinople, as well as the nymphaeums of Amman and Jerash, should also be cited, among many others. Diocleian’s palace or fortified villa in Split offers the greatest range of ‘Serlianas’ in just one building; these emphasise axes, spaces and key points of the building such as the so-called *perystilum*.

In the Antonine Age the concept of public space was redefined and private houses were enriched with monumental and representative structures (Thomas 2007, 124). It could explain the proliferation of the ‘Serliana’ applied to domestic architecture at Cyrenaica (Stucchi 1975, 321–322). It was used at the 2nd–3rd centuries at the Jason Magnus House (Mingazzini 1966, 96–97) and the House of the Stellar Mosaic in Cyrene, the House of the Triconchos, the House of the Four Seasons, the Roman Villa (Kraeling 1962, 129) and the House of Leukaktios in Ptolemais (Mikocki 2010, 190–192). In this region it seems the arcuated lintel was not used in temples except the Temple of the Muses at Cyrene (Luni, Mei 2007, 44–45). In some occasions it would be used as a monumental framing of the triclinium. The west exedra of the hypogeum of Iarhai in Palmyra (early 2nd century AD), now preserved at the National Museum of Damascus (Seyrig, Amy 1936, 243–256), is composed as a triclinium and suggests that possibility (**Figure 7**). The significance of the ‘Serliana’ as a sign of sacredness and its association with the upper social echelons has been proposed specially for the Late Antiquity (Brown 1942), specially for the Disc of Theodosius (388), through to series such as the David Plates (c. 629–630 AD) in the reign of Heraclius. In this regard, the atrium of Saint Lawrence of Milan, a Palatine church from the Theodosian Age, is relevant (Lewis 1973). It is use also in Judaism from the 4th to 6th centuries in synagogue mosaics such as that of Susiya, which depicts the *sancta sanctorum* and the Ark of the Covenant, and in sarcophagi of royals and the elite at the necropolis of Beth Shearim, catacombs 4 and 20. The ‘Serliana’ was also depicted in many Roman coins. On the obverse of them the effigy of the monarch or a member of his family was printed, whilst the reverse depicts temples whose ‘Serliana’ frames the statue of the emperor or a god connected to him or the territory in concern. Also propylaea, nymphaeum, arches, *acquae* and other public monuments result of magnificence and evergetism are represented. Such images of prestige and authority guarantee the value of the coin, substitute the imperial ‘presence’ and spread his image throughout the Mediterranean area. The earliest example of this motif in Roman numismatic is a coin minted in Nicea in the reign of Claudius (41–54 AC) that depicts a building with an arched pediment (Donaldson 1859, n. LXX, 264–266; Weigand 1928, fig. 25). The arcuated lintel is used later. It is represented framed by a pediment in a coin minted in Ancyra (Galatia, 98–117 AC) that depicts the Temple of Men (Price, Trell 1977, n. 524, fig. 399) and topping a niche in a coin from Caesarea Maritima (Samaria, 98–161 AC) that depicts the Temple of Astarte (Price, Trell 1977, n. 778, fig. 367). These depictions were common in

eastern provinces, especially Syria and Asia, but disappear about AD 268 (Drew–Bear 1974; Thomas 2007, 265–267). The Disc of Theodosius can be viewed as a summary of the two sides of a coin, as it unites the imperial portrait and the façade of state featuring a ‘Serliana’. The simplification of this composition is preserved at least until the 6th century, as the David Plates testify.

In conclusion, we can suggest that the ‘Serliana’, as a notable monumental feature, had an important presence in representative and sacred contexts of Roman architecture. It is difficult to assign it a specific meaning, but it played an important role in the monumentality of the Roman Empire and its renovation from Augustus to the Antonine emperors, based on the common Hellenistic legacy rich on decorative and anticlassical experiences, and the combination of trabeated and arcuated systems with a new sense. As a result it can be considered as a transformation and systematization of different Hellenistic architectural solutions developed at the Empire, with versatile architectural and iconographic implications.

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Figure 1: Giulio Romano, Room of Constantine (detail), Vatican City (photo by author).

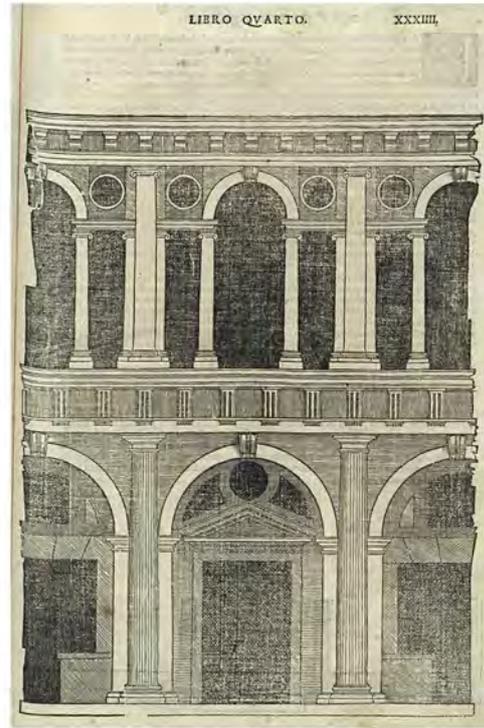


Figure 2: Serlio, palace façade, Fourth Book.



Figure 3: Lycomedes gravestone, Alexandria (after Pfuhl 1901).



Figure 4: 'Temple of Diana', Mérida (photo by author).



Figure 5: Triumphal arch of Orange (east side) (photo by author).



*Figure 6: Sword of Tiberius (detail).
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Figure 7: Hypogeum of Iarhai (west exedra), National Museum of Damascus (after Seyrig 1950).