Du Bellay’s *Les Antiquitez de Rome* has been viewed frequently as the first *poésie des ruines* in French. Critics have differed sharply in their evaluation of whether the sonnets represent a personal *sentiment des ruines* or whether they are inspired by a long tradition of classical, neo-Latin, and Italian Renaissance literature centered on the meditation of Rome’s former glory and present decay. In the ensuing discussion of the sources and philosophy of the sonnets, little attention was paid to their value as a literary work of art. Recent criticism has rectified this neglect by concentrating on those aspects of the sonnets which unify them. In this study I shall continue these investigations by specifically discussing the role of the ruins motif and related themes in *Les Antiquitez*. The term ruins motif is used to indicate not only the visual image of the fragmentary remains of ancient Roman architecture but their symbolic and structural functions within the sonnet sequence.

From the careful source studies by Chamard, Saulnier, Screech, Vianey and others it is evident that the ruins referred to in *Les Antiquitez* are of literary origin rather than objects of actual observation. The mention of “Les sept costaux Romains, sept miracles du monde” in sonnet 2, for example, is an allusion both to one of Propertius’ *Elegies* (III, xi, 57), “Septem urbs alta jugis, totoquae praesidet orbi” and to Horace’s account of the famous seven wonders of the world in *Carmine* (I, vii). The poetical comparison is certainly not based on observation of Rome’s geography. Montaigne’s *Journal de Voyage* and Guez de Balzac’s letter to Monsieur Bourbon on March 25, 1621 state that the Palatine and the Capitoline were the only two hills discernible in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Buried remains of palaces, temples, other structures, and the construction of modern buildings above the mounds of ruins had long since leveled out the valleys between the other hills.

The frequent inclusion of the demonstrative adjective *ces* when referring to the still visible fragments of Roman architecture also suggests an assumption by Du Bellay that his audience was already acquainted with the Roman ruins. There were two ways for a Frenchman at home to achieve such an acquaintance in Du Bellay’s time: he could have viewed the starkly realistic sketches or engravings of the Roman ruins created particularly by artists of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, or he could have read classical Latin literature describing the former appearance of Rome’s monuments and neo-Latin and Italian literature describing their decay. A study of the presentation of the Roman remains in *Les Antiquitez* confirms that Du Bellay was far more interested in the latter than in the former means. Despite the promise to Henri II to present in...
his sonnet sequence “ces ouvrages antiques . . . en ce petit tableau/Peint, le mieux que j’ay peu, de couleurs poëtiques”, the familiar components of Roman architecture, the palaces, temples, baths, arches, and walls are often simply enumerated in series (sonnets 3, 7, 18, 27) and generally described as old or dusty. Only twice, in sonnets 7 and 27, are the ruins portrayed as astounding the spectator by their majestic proportions. This rather abstract summarization contrasts sharply with the pictorial treatment of some of the extended metaphors appearing in Les Antiquitez, borrowed from classical literature; the raincloud in sonnet 20, the Horatian ship of state in sonnet 21, or the dead oak tree in sonnet 28 (based on Lucan’s simile for Pompey).

The deliberately nonvisual treatment of ruins suggests that symbolic and literary functions of the motif are far more important to Du Bellay than the external appearance of the debris. Particularly revealing in this respect is the use of the verb voir and its cognates which appear in over half of the sonnets. The act of actual perception is frequently either negated (sonnets 1, 3, 31) or disparaged (sonnets 3, 5, 15, 18), for what remains of the monuments of ancient Rome is old, dusty, broken, and by implication, undistinguished in comparison with their former state (sonnets 6, 12, 18, 31). Furthermore, they are seen as lifeless, a “dead painting”, “tomb”, or “shadow” of the living Rome of ancient times (sonnets 5, 15, 29). At times the poet overlooks the ruins entirely and describes Rome as an empty, dusty plain (sonnets 15, 31).

If the ruins give a poor visual image of Rome in Les Antiquitez, they nevertheless possess the power to evoke a vast and complex past, reaching back to the mythological founding of Rome, including its history as a pastoral community, republic, empire, and late empire. Here the verb voir assumes a visionary rather than visual meaning, for the spectator of the present-day ruins, aware of their historical role, can gain a vision of their past by contemplating them through the intermediary of Du Bellay’s sonnets. Sonnet 6, based on Virgil’s Aeneid VI, 781–877, presents perhaps the most joyous and lively vision of ancient Rome’s fertility and growth. The march of time from a mythological past through a historical past to the present can be traced in sonnet 12 by the changing tenses of the verb voir and the progression of the adverbs of time. Some visions introduced by a form of voir are similes or metaphors, notably the ones of the once cowardly animals gathering around the dying lion in sonnet 14, the Germanic crow conquering the Roman eagle in sonnet 17, the raincloud in sonnet 20, and the venerable oak tree in sonnet 28.

The use of the verb voir to introduce purely literary comparisons and metaphors evoked by the ruins motif is particularly interesting, for it reveals Du Bellay’s wish to reconstruct through his sonnet sequence a vision of the former majesty of Rome which the actual Roman ruins no longer give. If his pen can achieve “Ce que les mains ne peuvent maçonner” (sonnet 25), then the position of literature and of the poet