The historical record tends to concentrate, for obvious reasons, on the many spectacular successes of Roman architectural design, engineering, and materials. The structures that remain for us to study, however, although numerous, represent the survivors of an intense, ongoing process of natural selection. How frequent in ancient Rome and the empire were construction problems or disasters caused by incompetent design or construction, poor materials, fraud, or unanticipated stresses? How many structures have been completely lost because of these and other factors? Are we in fact studying a sample of structures atypical in both their design and the quality of materials? This paper reviews the literary and archaeological evidence for construction failures in the Roman Empire in an attempt to answer these questions. The author is co-director of a project involving the analysis of cores of hydraulic concrete from Roman maritime structures.

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