

Vitruvius in the Sahara: Auguste Choisy's *philologie plafonnante*

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The historian «sans pardessus»

«Car il aimait le paradoxe; mais, bien entendu, le paradoxe plaisant, parfois caustique, jamais amer ni malveillant, le paradoxe en tant que support et assaisonnement d'une honnête et joyeuse conversation. N'était-il pas lui-même un vivant paradoxe, lui qui jamais ne lisait un journal et, par les temps les plus froids, sortait sans pardessus». (Dartein 1910, 44)

The portrait of Auguste Choisy that his friend and colleague Fernand de Dartein conveyed gives a glimpse of a unique character, prone to paradoxes and to a restrained form of eccentricity. One might be tempted to call it the moderate and habitual eccentricity of an engineer: out of the ordinary in a disciplined way.

The first impression one gets upon reading Choisy's works is that the paradoxes of Choisy's character go perfectly hand in hand with the contradictions of the *Choisy project*. «Contradictions» is the word that best sums up both the writings by the author of the renowned *Histoire de l'architecture* (Choisy 1899) and how historiography has dealt with them. These contradictions seemingly constitute an integral part of the work of an unconventional man, who obstinately did «everything by himself» (he went as far as to spend considerable sums to get his books published) and devoted all his energies to fulfilling a great cultural project: that of offering a new point of view, an original and innovative approach, to architectural historiography. In the introduction to the *Art de bâtir chez les Romains* (1873) Choisy described the approach that in his view needed to be overcome: «pendant trois siècles entiers les découvertes se sont multipliées avec une

extrême rapidité, mais l'esprit d'investigation ne s'est pas sensiblement modifié: on s'est arrêté à la surface des monuments sans en étudier le squelette, et le progrès consista surtout à mieux connaître et mieux apprécier les beautés extérieures de l'architecture antique». (Choisy 1873, 1; see also Reynaud 1874).

His was the ambitious aim of an apparently extremely coherent and solid life. Solitary work guarantees an intimate coherence in design, which Choisy pursued to such an extent that he prematurely retired from teaching to devote himself to his beloved research full time. He already showed extraordinary will and working power in his youth. It is not surprising that during his journey across the Sahara, he admired the moral energy and wisdom of camels («ne pas boire et porter l'eau pour autrui!»; «le chameau a l'heureux privilège d'être impassible, et c'est là peut-être le plus net de la philosophie que j'admire en lui», Choisy 1881, 122 and 277). These qualities gave substance to the *Choisy project* with surprising results: from the first work *Note sur la courbure dissymétrique des degrés qui limitent au couchant la plate-forme du Parthénon* (Choisy 1865), published when he was 24, to *Vitruve* (Choisy 1909), completed just before his death.

The leading thread running through his research is thus the interest for what flesh, skin and curves hide from the inexperienced eye. The proof lies in the beautiful illustrations that accompany the 1873 volume, which met no equal in the following works. Those drawings also constitute a research programme that was constantly, emphatically and obstinately reaffirmed (Bryon 2005).

The traps of conciseness

Histoire de l'architecture (Choisy 1899) enables one to estimate to the best of one's possibilities how ambitious and at the same time how limited and contradictory the project was. *Histoire*, its success and the influence it had on the architects of the following generations have often been talked about with admiration. At the same time, its *positivistic* framework and its limits were discussed.

The greatest merit of *Histoire* seems more than anything to have been that it gave Choisy a chance to complete a historiographical cycle that never saw the light in independent monographs. After the *Art de bâtir chez les Romains* (Choisy 1873) and the *Art de bâtir chez les Byzantins* (Choisy 1883), Egypt, Ancient Greece (which *Études épigraphiques*, 1883-1884, nevertheless focused on) and the Medieval Age were still missing amongst the main chapters of the history of western architecture. *Histoire* gives these three historical periods plenty of space, to such an extent that it can be said that they did enter, however late, the *Choisy project*. A monographic tale that can be seen as an extension of the parallel chapter belonging to the *Histoire* was later devoted to the subject of Ancient Egypt (Choisy 1904).

The friendly appeal that Jean Darcel addressed to Choisy in his review of the *Art de bâtir chez les Byzantins* seems to find in *Histoire* a complete answer: «M. Choisy . . . nous rend exigeants. Il nous doit un autre volume qui servira d'introduction aux deux autres et qui nous indiquera l'art de bâtir chez les peuples de la haute antiquité et chez les Grecs, dont l'architecture si étudiée au point de vue du style est si ignorée au point de vue pratique de la construction. . . . Il aurait, croyons-nous, bien peu de travaux et de courses nouvelles à faire pour terminer une oeuvre si brillamment commencée». (Darcel 1884, 258)

In 1930 Maurice d'Ocagne praised this achievement enthusiastically: «Malgré l'abus qui se fait parfois de ce vocable, il ne faut pas hésiter à proclamer que c'est là un pur chef-d'oeuvre... Cette histoire embrasse tous les temps, depuis ceux où se sont produits les premiers balbutiements de l'art de bâtir jusqu'à nos jours. Rien n'y manque; mais, à l'encontre des simples ouvrages de compilation où tout se présente, en quelque sorte, sur le même plan, ici, le développement donné à chaque partie est exactement proportionné à son importance, avec une mesure, avec une justesse qui sont du grand art» (Ocagne 1930, 19). More recently, Annie Jacques put herself on the same wavelength: «En 1899, après plus de vingt ans d'enseignement et de recherche, paraît son oeuvre majeure, synthèse et achèvement de tous ses ouvrages précédents, l'*Histoire de l'architecture*. Cet ouvrage, somme des connaissances de Choisy, couvre l'ensemble de l'histoire de l'architecture depuis la préhistoire jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle» (Jacques 1991, *Présentation*). These are hasty remarks, which seem to deny what upon reading those pages is immediately evident. Hearing such judgments is bewildering, even when one takes into account that certain historiographical choices («proportionné à son importance») were obvious (considering the times).

In *Histoire*, upon reaching the Renaissance, Choisy is no longer at ease. Unfortunately, nor is the reader. Somehow it becomes impossible to judge what he wrote about the period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries on the same level as his treatment of previous historical periods. A deep breach opened between the two storylines, and the author does not even try to hide it. Although the title appears to suggest an all-round research of the *whole* History, the striking lack of balance between the two stories fastidiously makes the closing part of the book read out of place. The telling loses its bearings and contradicts its own initial assumptions: its tone becomes hasty and categorical, while its images lose their persuasiveness and become vague and arbitrary, and at times undoubtedly mediocre. Viewers can only be bewildered by the graphic and conceptual poor-ness of these depictions, whether related to Caprarola or to the Chiesa del Gesù.

Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos understood better than others the significance of Choisy's initial purposes, most of which could still be shared a century later, and has already pointed his finger at these blatant contradictions. In his

L'architecture à la française (Pérouse de Montclos 1982), he seems to resume an interrupted conversation and his opening lines are dedicated to whom at the same time had both started and interrupted that discourse: «L'architecture serait-elle morte avec le Moyen Age comme l'affirmait Victor Hugo? Pour ceux qui prétendent écrire l'histoire *post-mortem* de cet art, il n'y aurait d'autres solution que d'adopter les idées des historiens de la peinture. Bien caractéristique à cet égard est la grande *Histoire de l'architecture* d'Auguste Choisy, vieille de près d'un siècle e toujours rééditée (1899). De la plus haute Antiquité jusqu'à la fin du Moyen Age, l'architecture est décrite par cet ingénieur en termes de matériaux, de techniques, de structures; mais avec le dernier chapitre où l'auteur consacre quelques développements embarrassés à l'architecture européenne des Temps modernes, le ton change brusquement: il n'est plus question que de compositions, de proportions; l'édifice d'après 1500 est décrit comme un tableau!» (Pérouse de Montclos 1982, 9). Although Choisy «l'alchimiste» (Dartein 1910, 43) had spellbound his public, in those pages he seems to uncover the limits of his own art.

Choisy was and still is appreciated for his conciseness (*Histoire's* success is amongst other reasons attributable to the 'pocketable' and economical nature of his books, an obvious consequence of their conciseness), but in some parts of the *Histoire* conciseness becomes a convenient excuse, a means of moving on towards the completion of a story that as far as personal taste was concerned should perhaps have stopped at the Medieval Age. Although, as it has already been pointed out, this tendency was typical of those days, we are not merely dealing with a product of its times. In those pages Choisy makes a weapon of his conciseness, and his original intention «je moins songé à faire une histoire de la construction chez les Anciens, qu'à fournir des documents pour cette histoire» (Choisy 1873, 39) is contradicted in the worst of ways. Documents and facts are lacking: the reader is only given impressions, predilections and idiosyncracies. One does not only witness illustrations in which «une seule image mouvementée et animée comme l'édifice lui-même, tient lieu de la figuration abstraite, fractionnée par plan, coupe et élévation» (Choisy 1904, *Note sur le mode de présentation...*), but often bad sketches that do not, in any way, manage to convey the design concept, let alone the constructive concept.

This very conciseness always manifested itself as a two-faced virtue in Choisy's writing, and with time it became more and more arid and arbitrary. Once again de Dartein cunningly noticed this and underlined the reader's difficulty in front of some overly abridged passages (Dartein 1904, 268): in balancing between the intent of not boring the reader with useless details and that of humiliating him with overly concise considerations, his interpretations sometimes impose themselves instead of serving as a means to clarify concepts.

Vitruvius à la Choisy

Although we are dealing with a great project, it is necessary to overcome the limits created by its myth, both because of its magnification and because of its gutting, at times just as rough and arbitrary, which still today, a century after his death, keep blurring Choisy's persona.

Choisy entered the teaching and research programme Léonce Reynaud had started off and Fernand de Dartein had consolidated by organising his investigation strategies meticulously. His researches on the *Arts de bâtir* kept aiming at shedding light on some of the *Art's* noteworthy aspects under study. The synthesis went through a very deep analysis of a single subject, which leaves no room for all-encompassing erudition. The way Choisy dealt with the subject of vaults in the case of Roman architecture and that of walls («allure ondulée des lits») in the case of Egyptian architecture are exemplary for the purposes of this discussion. Choisy's eye focuses on a detail and it develops in depth argumentations around that point, widening the view to encompass historical period and geographical area, thus conveying a generalised picture. Viollet-le-Duc is known to have intended to write a history of architecture, which as he went on researching ended up becoming a *Dictionnaire*. By way of slightly forcing an analogy, one could say that Choisy started off with a step-by-step study to then land on the *Histoire* (or *Histoires*), which maintains unmistakable traces of the dictionary-style character of his initial intent. It is not by chance that Choisy found a precocious consecration in Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française*, in a note referring to the construction of vaults (Viollet-le-Duc 1868, 477).

When a search for a clarifying element or a turning point invention is performed, built architecture lends itself better than the texts that deal with that architecture. Although Choisy was well aware of the importance of written sources and dedicated two monographs to them (Choisy 1883–1884 and Choisy 1909), he must have immediately realised that the work of synthesis he had initiated, made up of inclusions and exclusions, did not have as good an outcome when based on written sources.

It becomes harder to find, amongst the words, the conclusive *squelette*, that is the hidden structure that gives rise to the interpretative revelation. Texts need to be analysed word by word, and often they do not deal with what one would hope for. And this is why the Vitruvian treaty plays no part whatsoever in the *Art de bâtir chez les Romains*. In this case, Choisy favoured built architecture, «built-up» documents. *De architectura* awakened little interest and did not find its place in the storyline. Choisy only decided to pay his dues to the Roman author many years later, after retiring from teaching. An ideal research counterpart on Greek

epigraphy, the monumental work on *De architectura* fulfilled a passion for architecture and its construction, which had originated in the Greek-Roman realm and had found its accomplishment in the Roman realm.

Vitruve (Choisy 1909) is not only the work of Choisy's maturity and his last published work, but also the only work that he never saw printed. The volume was already at the publisher's when he slipped on the step of a tram and broke his femur. One might think that *animal de Vitruve*, that like a loyal but too impetuous four legged follower had accompanied him until his last hour, should also be held responsible for that fall: «j'ai tâché de trouver une matinée où mon animal de Vitruve me laisserait à peu près en paix pour que nous ayons le temps de causer à l'aise» (letter to Henri Proust, quoted in Mandoul 2008, 34). That *animal* can undoubtedly help us better than other evidence in understanding Choisy and his project.

One should not forget that at the time that Choisy decided to focus his energies on *De architectura*, Vitruvian studies had just gone through one of their most fruitful and significant seasons. With J. Gottlob Schneider's (Schneider 1807–1808) and Valentin Rose's (Rose 1899) editions, the philological work on the many manuscripts making up the *De architectura* had led to a new interpretation of the text. Between the first translation into Italian, edited by Cesare Cesariano (Cesariano 1521), and Claude Perrault's French translation (Perrault 1673), dozens of editions, translations and commentaries were published one after the other. In the 18th century Giovanni Poleni's *Exercitationes Vitruvianae* (Poleni 1739–1741) made a turning point: an accurate investigation of the existing manuscripts was presented and the critical work on *De architectura* was interpreted as inevitably critical-anthological. Poleni, the renowned physicist-mathematician whom the Pope Benedict XIV summoned some years later to investigate the stability of St. Peter's Dome, studied papers, gathered information, put events in order and used his critical insight to study the documents available to him. He made this body of evidence available to his readers in the three volumes of the *Exercitationes*. Nearly a century later, this body of evidence proved so important that it tempted the engineer and mathematician Simone Stratico into resuming the work, by improving and completing what Poleni had not been able to finish. This is how *Exercitationes Vitruvianae* by Stratico (1825–1830) came into being. The last French translation dated back to Charles Louis Maufras (Maufras 1826, reprinted many times), but Perrault's one kept exercising a significant influence, mostly thanks to its original critical apparatus and the refined images accompanying the text.

This was the background that Choisy was facing when he set about battling his *animal*. In his *Études* from 1883–1884, he had already preannounced a possible commitment on this front: «Que d'erreurs circulent sous l'autorité de Vitruve,

dont la critique grammaticale ferait justice!» (Choisy 1883–1884, II). Once again, his engineering background imposed certain working conditions: starting again from the beginning with a new translation, which was accompanied by new images and a critical apparatus that distanced itself from all previous works. The result was no commentary following the text book-for-book, note-for-note. Instead, his *Analyse* broke all norms and reads as a *companion* to Vitruvius' work.

Hence the title *Vitruve*, rather than *L'Architecture de Vitruve* or anything similar on the path of the long tradition which preceded. The subjects of major interest are listed meticulously, obscure points are discussed and the technical scientific context is analysed in depth. Whoever might be looking for a straightforward relation between Vitruvian text and comment can only find it indirectly, and anyone wanting to study an original passage in depth would have to retrace the corresponding theme in the general index of the *Analyse*. The task at hand is just as likely to be difficult as it is likely to be easy. What Choisy offered was a tool that enables one to discover Vitruvian themes in their own complexity and to get an answer to the *vexatae quaestiones*.

The illustrations, once again and for the last time, are called upon to play an active role. The *Avertissement* explains this clearly: «Nous résumons ici sous forme graphique le traité de Vitruve» (Choisy 1909, IV). One could set off understanding the limits and the contradictions of the *Choisy project* applied to *De architectura* by starting from the iconographic apparatus. Its illustrations are purposely schematic, so that the pattern sometimes seems to leave the reader behind. Conciseness, once again, seems to be used for inappropriate purposes. Even when strong analogies with illustrations attached to previous works are found - Perrault's for instance - one longs for the reference model that was able to represent the core of the issue in a picturesque frame (see, for instance, Perrault 1673, pl. LX, and Choisy 1909, IV: pl. 67).

Choisy's inappropriate use of conciseness can be found throughout the *Vitruve*, in the translation, the *Analyse* and the illustrations. Due to space limitations, only one of the most significant examples of this aspect shall hereby be mentioned.

It is well known that Choisy had shown a great interest for *refinements* of classical architecture. In the *Analyse* this passion emerges with remarkable clarity and outcome. In the section entitled *Le tracé des courbures* (Choisy 1909, I: 146) the issue is described in general terms. Part of the original text is hereby transcribed, and the original page is shown in Figure 3. It is important to read the words while, in the same instance, observing the typographical appearance, the layout of sentences, the lapidary character that Choisy wants his commentary to have (short sentences, wide white spaces between each paragraph and the next):

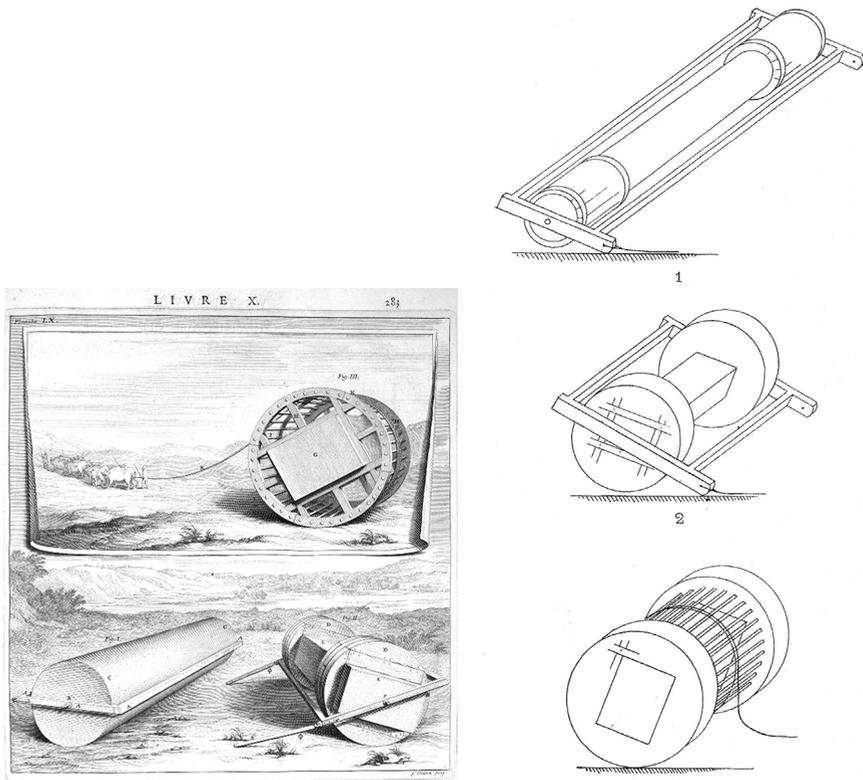


Figure 1 and 2

From Perrault (1673, pl. LX) and Choisy (1909, IV: pl. 67)

«Vitruve avait donné, pour les courbes des stylobates et des entablements, un diagramme explicatif. Le diagramme est perdu; et, de la légende qui l'accompagnait, il ne reste qu'un mot, mais dont l'importance ressort de l'insistance même avec laquelle il le répète [note 1: «III iv 21 et V ix 21»]: La courbure, dit-il consiste en un bombement '*per scamillos impares*'. Il est une courbe dont le tracé même semble le commentaire du mot de Vitruve; cette courbe est la parabole (pl. 34, fig. 1)». (Choisy 1909, I: 146; for the figure see above Figure 4, from Choisy 1909, IV: pl. 34)

The broad subject of *scamilli impares* (or *impares*) that had kept translators, commentators, archaeologists and architects busy for centuries, in the hands of Choisy «l'alchimiste» suddenly found a solution. Choisy did not claim his fatherhood on the solution and stated to have drawn on Auguste Aurès' studies, which he quotes at

LE TRACÉ DES COURBURES

a. — COURBURES DES STYLOBATES ET DES ENTABLEMENTS

Vitruve avait donné, pour les courbes des stylobates et des entablements, un diagramme explicatif.

Le diagramme est perdu; et, de la légende qui l'accompagnait, il ne reste qu'un mot, mais dont l'importance ressort de l'insistance même avec laquelle il le répète¹:

La courbure, dit-il consiste en un bombement « *per scamillos impares* ».

Il est une courbe dont le tracé même semble le commentaire du mot de Vitruve; cette courbe est la parabole (pl. 54, fig. 1):

Soit *o* le sommet.

Mémoins par ce sommet *o* une horizontale sur laquelle nous marquerons, à droite et à gauche, des points 1, 2, 3, ... uniformément espacés:

Prenez les longueurs *o 1*, *o 2*, *o 3* ... comme des abscisses auxquelles nous ferons correspondre des ordonnées exprimées respectivement par les nombres 1, 1+3, 1+3+5, 1+3+5+7...:

Nous obtiendrons une courbe dont les points s'échelonnent par degrés ou « *scamilli* » inégaux:

Et les hauteurs des « *scamilli* », respectivement égales à 1, 5, 9, 16, 25, 36, 49 ... seront toutes exprimées par des nombres *impairs*.

Que l'on traduise le mot *impares* par « impairs » ou par « inégaux », la condition est remplie: nous sommes, suivant toutes les vraisemblances, en possession de la courbe même à laquelle Vitruve consacre une allusion si sommaire.

C'est à Aurès qu'est due cette ingénieuse interprétation.

1. III iv 21 et V ix 21.

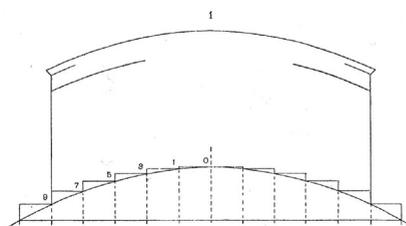
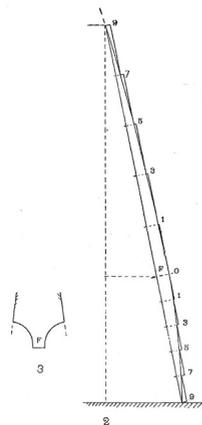


Figure 3 and 4

Text and drawings describing *Le tracé des courbures* (Choisy 1909, I: 146; IV: pl. 34)

the end of that section: «Que l'on traduise le mot *impares* par 'impairs' ou par 'inégaux', la condition est remplie: nous sommes, suivant toutes les vraisemblances, en possession de la courbe même à laquelle Vitruve consacre une allusion si sommaire. C'est à Aurès qu'est due cette ingénieuse interprétation». (Choisy 1909, I: 146)

The words Choisy uses leave little room for doubt and do not hint at the secular labour that ran from the first comments to the Vitruvian text, through Philandrier's and Bertano's works, to Stratico's *Exercitationes*, where Bernardino Baldi's monography on *scamilli impares* (published in 1612, more than two centuries earlier; see Baldi 1612) was presented to the attention of researchers once again. Choisy shows no interest in bringing back the historical authenticity of this debate: to him the direct contact with the original text (finalised by philologists in the course of the 19th century) and the modern technical-scientific observations (also refined in the same years) suffice. By then, in his eyes, old commentaries

belonged to the past, and were not even worthy of the slightest acknowledgment. History is *progressive*: the issue finally found a solution, a clear and concise answer without useless frills.

It is not surprising that Lothar Haselberger recently wrote that «when, in 1909, the extensively illustrated Vitruvius edition of A. Choisy appeared, the *scamilli* became even more elusive» and that Aurès-Choisy's solution is «an entirely non-concrete interpretation» (Haselberger 1999, 45). Once again the *Note sur le mode de présentation des documents graphiques* comes to mind: «Les documents graphiques, quelquefois simplifiés par la suppression de détails superflus...» (Choisy 1904). The centuries-old interpretations of the *scamilli impares* belonged to the *détails superflus* and were thus removed from the *Analyse* on the grounds that they were of no interest. We are no longer dealing with *Exercitationes Vitruvianae*, but with an *Analyse* taken forward boldly, by means of modern instruments of *métrologie archéologique* with the intent, whenever possible, of eliminating any doubts.

The most surprising thing is that on the page after the one that has just been quoted, Choisy proceeds with the same apodictic tone and applies Aurès' *ingénieuse interprétation* (without quoting him again) to the issue of the entasis (or bulging) of columns. Here is the full text:

«La convexité des arêtes de colonnes avait son sommet non à mi-hauteur, mais en une position vaguement indiquée par l'expression 'per medias columnas', et que précisait un diagramme. Ce diagramme était sans nul doute fort analogue au précédent. Les renvois de Vitruve aux deux diagrammes se suivent [note 2: «III iii 76 et iv 23».]; et, entre l'un et l'autre renvoi se place le mot 'item', qui implique sinon l'identité, tout au moins une étroite ressemblance. Les deux courbes doivent être de même famille. Or, imaginons (pl. 34, fig. 2) *deux* arcs de parabole ayant pour sommet commun le point culminant du galbe: le tracé 'par scamillos impares' s'applique immédiatement à chacun de ces arcs, et fournit une solution. De sorte que tout paraît se résumer ainsi: La courbure des stylobates et des entablements est *un* arc de parabole; Le galbe des colonnes se compose de *deux* arcs de parabole ayant un sommet commun o». (Choisy 1909, I: 147; for the figure, see above Figure 4, from Choisy 1909, IV: pl. 34)

These lines do not require much commenting. Reading the story of the interpretations of the entasis between the fifteenth and the twenty-first centuries (Becchi 2008) is enough to notice the ingenuity of Choisy's approach immediately. The issue had by no means been resolved and the solution outlined in the *Analyse* did not benefit of any particular reputation, but the conclusion was easily available to «le polytechnicien latiniste» (Dieulafoy 1910, 345).

The *projection axonométrique plafonnante* had become the staple of the *Choisy project*, of the «constructeur doublé d'un erudite» (Dartein 1910, 45).

CHAPITRE II.

47

II

EX QUIBUS REBUS
ARCHITECTURA CONSTET

- 1 Architectura autem constat :
Ex ordinatione, quae graece τάξις
dicitur;
Et ex dispositione : hanc autem
Graeci διάθεσις vocitant;
Et :
Eurythmia;
Et symmetria;
Et decore;
Et distributione, quae graece οἰκο-
νομία dicitur.
- 2 Ordinatio :
Est modica membrorum operis com-
moditas separatim, universaeque pro-
portionis ad symmetriam comparatio.
- Haec componitur ex quantitate, quae
graece ποσότης dicitur :
- 3 Quantitas autem est
Modulorum ex ipsius operis [mem-
bris] sumptio¹,
E singulisque membrorum partibus
universi operis conveniens effectus
- 4 Dispositio autem :
Est rerum apta conlocatio,

II

DE QUELLES CHOSES
EST CONSTITUÉE L'ARCHITECTURE⁴

- Or l'Architecture est constituée :
Par l'Ordonnance, qui s'appelle en
grec τάξις,
Et par la Disposition : or celle-ci,
les Grecs l'appellent διάθεσις;
Et :
Par l'Eurythmie,
Et par la Symmétrie,
Et par la Convenance,
Et par la Distribution, qui en grec
s'appelle οἰκονομία.
L'Ordonnance :
Est l'établissement méthodique de
relations de mesure entre les membres
de l'œuvre (envisagés) individuelle-
ment, et d'une proportion d'ensemble
(tendant) à la symmétrie :
C'est une combinaison (faite) d'après
la « quantité », qui s'appelle en grec
ποσότης.
Or la Quantité est :
Un choix d'unités modulaires em-
pruntées aux [membres] de l'œuvre;
Et un effet harmonieux de l'en-
semble de l'œuvre, (résultant) des
parties du (module assignées) à chacun
de (ces) membres.
Quant à la Disposition :
C'est un ajustement adapté des
choses,

1. Voir tome I, page 1.

2. Éd. Rose. Les manuscrits portent : « ex ipsius operis sumptione ».

Figure 5

Vitruvius, *De architectura*, book 1, chapter 2. From Choisy (1909, II: 17)

In *Vitruve*, what becomes *plafonnante* is the philology: even when the *document* is ambiguous and insidious, the reader is provided with unexpected visuals, tempting syntheses, categorical interpretations. Better still, Choisy does so especially when the *document* is ambiguous. He had already been forced to change his opinion on some interpretations published in the *Histoire*, as William Henry Goodyear reminds us by quoting his correspondence with the French colleague (Goodyear 1912, 52, note «a»), but the knowledge of his own mistakes was limited.

The contradictions of the *Choisy project* are always waiting in ambush. His passion for *documents positifs, archives de marbres, faits* and the *photography* of reality (Choisy 1881, 4) are taken over by an unmentionable passion for definitive sentences, for an ingenious and whenever possible unambiguous resolution, for sentences that are aphoristically limited to themselves. The translation of the *De architectura* reveals this with plastic clarity, and imposes the way for word-for-word relation (underlined by the typographic composition of the text, see Figure 5), as if the original text were able mirror itself in the translation without mediation: «nous croyons que la traduction doit être un calque où la grammaire prime la théorie. C'est à ce point de vue que nous nous plaçons». (Choisy 1909, I: vi).

The analogies between this approach and the one adopted by the architectonic avant-gardes of the 20th century are evident and the passion of some of its protagonists for Choisy's work should be seen in the light of a natural, though bizarre, coincidence of intents.

In the new edition of *Vitruve*, wanted by Fernand Pouillon in 1971, Pouillon himself signed a beautiful and enthusiastic preface. In it is written: «Averti de l'œuvre des structuralistes du XIX^e siècle, pressant le rationalisme des temps modernes, Auguste Choisy a voulu donner à ce livre sa forme définitive, figer en quelque sorte le dangereux document qui, par de nombreuses interprétations fâcheuses, faussa quatre siècles de recherches et d'invention. Rendons-lui hommage pour la dernière traduction de *Vitruve*, la meilleure et la seule qui, si elle avait existé au début de la Renaissance, aurait eu certainement un autre retentissement» (Pouillon 1971, 1: XII-XIII). Pouillon's words are the best tribute to Choisy's *Vitruve*: a passionate, out of the ordinary, partisan tribute belonging shamelessly outside the historical context, but in any case worthy of great respect and admiration. Like the work of the *historien sans pardessus*, who in front of the silent planes of the Sahara had remarked «chacun a son Sahara».

Indeed, «chacun a son Sahara», like «chacun a son Vitruve». But Choisy could not have admitted this: it would have been like wearing a *pardessus* on a cold winter day, it would not have been *à la Choisy*. He had actually found an *ingénieuse solution* to keep his contradictions warm.

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