

Auguste Choisy and the Architecture of Italian Renaissance

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The architecture of Italian Renaissance has not been a main topic in the work of Auguste Choisy (1841–1909). Among Choisy’s principal interests were the architecture from Byzantium, Asia Minor and especially from Greek as well as Roman Antiquity. Choisy’s work on these epochs as well as topics central to him like the investigation of construction techniques or the use of graphic methods for the analysis of buildings have been intensively studied especially in recent time. On the other hand, the work of Choisy has typically not been approached from its periphery. But «periphery», i.e. themes which were of minor interest to Choisy but which he dealt with all the same, are a vital part of his work and necessary to an integral understanding of Choisy. One of the engineers «minor topics» was the Italian Renaissance. Choisy dedicated a quite substantial chapter to this epoch in his *Histoire de l’architecture* (Choisy 1899, 2: 600–687). However, he did no research on Italian Renaissance —at least he did not publish articles or monographs on that epoch. How did Choisy approach Italian Renaissance? What was his understanding of it? In how far did he «borrow» approach and methods from other epochs which he knew better from his research work? How and on which basis did he arrive at his valuations and conclusions and what may this tell us about Choisy’s thinking?

Construction in Italian Renaissance

Choisy introduces the chapter on Italian Renaissance (Choisy 1899, 2: 600–603) with a praise of (non-Italian) Gothic architecture, which —in his opinion— had

brought a maximum of logic into building. Choisy says that form in Gothic architecture is nothing but the expression of its construction principles. In a deterministic approach Choisy describes the aim of Gothic architecture in the enhancement and optimisation of the load bearing structure, which finds its end in buildings reduced to a sort of skeleton based on highly complex shapes. Choisy sees the Renaissance as a necessary counter-movement to Gothic architecture. Renaissance rejuvenates architecture by introducing simple forms derived from Antiquity, obligating the builders to use architectural orders. From a structural point of view, however, Choisy does not see a fundamental difference between Italian architecture of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance. In Italian Middle Ages Gothic architecture was imported, Gothic forms were applied to buildings but its structural logic was never really understood. In fact, *structure* and *d cora-tion* were separate and distinct elements. With the introduction of Gothic forms just the decorative system of Italian architecture changed; with the Renaissance it changed again. Both times construction techniques were left unaltered and just the clothing (*v tement*) was modified.¹ Choisy concludes saying that the distinction between *structure* and *d coration* leads to a general transformability of architecture and favours individual expressiveness and the ups and downs of fashion. This valuation finds its logic counterpart in the introduction to the book *L'art de b tir chez le Romains*, where Choisy describes that architects from 15th century onwards —and thus Renaissance architects— studied ancient monuments, which were at the basis of their own architecture. Yet they were mainly looking for forms, proportions and ornaments and were at best mentioning the construction techniques behind the surface, not studying them nor giving them their own right (Choisy 1873, 2).

From the introduction to the chapter on Italian Renaissance emerges that Choisy does not see construction as the key to understand that epoch. In fact just eight of 88 pages in the chapter on Italian Renaissance deal with construction. This is few in comparison to the chapters on earlier epochs, where normally about a quarter or a third of the text deals with construction. As far as Italian Renaissance is concerned, Choisy explains different methods how the structural shell of buildings was prepared in a way, that in a second step decoration in natural stone could be added. In his comment to the left half of the image in figure 1 Choisy says: «Entre autre exemples, un palais   Plaisance, demeur  inachev , nous fait assister   toutes les phases de cette curieuse s rie d'op rations» (Choisy 1899, 2: 613; cfr. Mandoul 2007, 40, who cites this as an example for Choisy's predilection for direct observation of built examples). Plaisance is the French name for Piacenza and the palace in question is the Palazzo Farnese. The figures 2 and 3 show the precision of the engineer's observations. As Pagliara (2007, 72) states, the construction technique used for the Palazzo Farnese at Piacenza was

regional and differs from the techniques used in other parts of Italy. Choisy also declares in his text that this technique was used for palaces where the brickwork of the load bearing walls remained visible (typical for the Padan Plain region). Choisy describes new preferences for vault forms and the way of building a dome without scaffolding taking Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence as his example. It seems as if Choisy describes construction of Italian Renaissance just to the point he recognises it as the basis of architectural expression. He does not look at construction techniques of the Italian Renaissance in their own right.

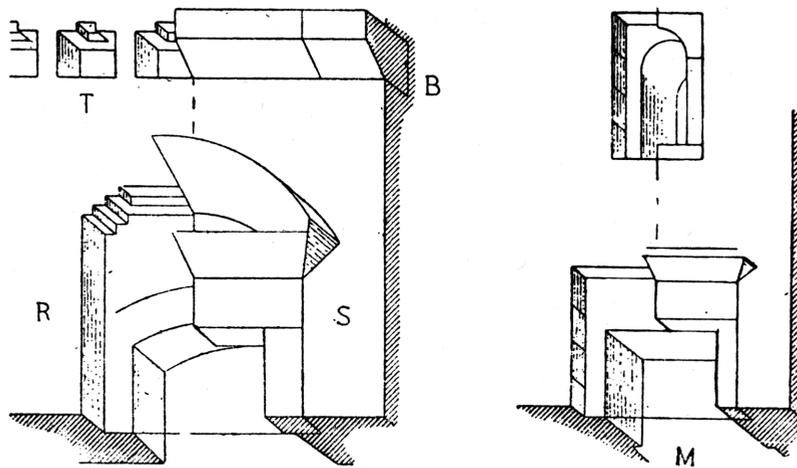


Figure 1
Auguste Choisy, joining of decoration and load-bearing wall (from: Choisy 1899, 2: 613)

For other epochs, Choisy was more interested in, construction instead has been a research topic in its own right and distinct from the valuation of architecture as a whole. This approach was the basis for Choisy's *L'art de bâtir* book series: *L'art de bâtir chez les Romains* (1873), *L'art de bâtir chez les Byzantins* (1883) and *L'art de bâtir chez les Egyptiens* (1904).² Choisy declares in the introduction to the volume on Roman Antiquity: «Les édifices de l'antiquité ont été bien de fois décrits au point de vue de l'architecture, mais les détails de leur construction sont encore très-vaguement connues» (Choisy 1873, 1; cfr. Mandoul 2005 on Choisy's methods in the *L'art de bâtir* book series). The distinction between architecture (form, proportion, decoration) and construction in Roman Antiquity, which appears between the lines of this citation, becomes even decisive



Figure 2
Piacenza, Palazzo Farnese, unfinished facade (from: Pagliara 2007, fig. 43)

on the following pages of Choisy's introduction: He explicitly announces to study the construction techniques from Antiquity through the Romans because they were not very careful with decoration and neatly distinguished it from the structure of a building (Choisy 1873, 2). Differently in Greece: «Chez les Grecs, l'analyse de la construction se m lerait tellement   celle de l'architecture, qu'il serait difficile de l'isoler pour l'envisager   part» (Choisy 1873, 2). The distinction between decoration and construction in Roman Antiquity, a valuation which Choisy repeats in his *Histoire de l'architecture* (Choisy 1899, 2: 602), thus facili-



Figure 3
Piacenza, Palazzo Farnese, unfinished aade, detail (from: Pagliara 2007, fig. 44)

tates the study of construction in its own right. To write an explicit construction history as a history a part was evidently one of the aims of Choisy. Italian Renaissance, where structure and decoration were distinct discourses too, would have—in this logic—offered the possibility to study construction techniques in their own right. Yet Choisy did not take the chance to do research in that field. He probably had other interests. And the often perfectly intact buildings from Renaissance gave, in contrast to the ruins of Roman Antiquity, just few first hand information on construction. Construction remained mostly invisible under the surface. In the rather compiled Italian Renaissance chapter in the *Histoire de l'architecture* Choisy then reduced the description of construction techniques to the point where it was decisive for Renaissance architecture and its expressiveness (thus visible parts like acades, domes, vault forms etc.).

Choisy and the valuation of Italian Renaissance

Auguste Choisy recognises in Italian Renaissance a lack of construction logic. But this does not mean that he did not appreciate that epoch. It would not seem either, that Choisy had an indifferent attitude towards Italian Renaissance (Kruft ([1985] 1991, 328). At the contrary. Once Choisy found out and accepted the



Figure 4
 Auguste Choisy, Palazzo della Cancelleria, Rome, elevation (from: Choisy 1899, 2: 669)

specific bases and starting points for the Renaissance, that is the application of a new decoration system based on the architectural orders, Choisy values how on the basis of this precondition a specific architectural quality could be achieved. Choisy thus looks at the detailing and proportioning of architectural orders and their use for the organisation of elevations (façades and courtyards). In the chap-

ter on Italian Renaissance we find 85 figures. No less than 40 of them are pure elevations. On top of that there are three more elevations in combination with a section.

Choisy praises Filippo Brunelleschi, who applied the corinthian order with «une grâce que l'antiquité avait ignorée» (Choisy 1899, 2: 620). Leon Battista Alberti's Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini is applauded by Choisy for its use of architectural orders, too: «Elle joint à la pureté d'une ordonnance antique un charme de détail que la Renaissance seule a connu» (Choisy 1899, 2: 647). The Renaissance is valued for having a higher quality in decoration than the antique model. In fact, Choisy did not admire Roman Antiquity for its decoration skills. In contrast to Greek Antiquity, the Romans did not manage to understand architecture in all its components (from construction to decoration) as an integral whole. Choisy states that the Romans mistreated «la décoration pour laquelle ils affectaient une indifférence dédaigneuse» (Choisy 1873, 2). This judgement shines up again in valuations on the different projects for St. Peter's: Choisy likes Donato Bramante's Project. In the designs of his successors Baldassarre Peruzzi and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger he misses the «charme de jeunesse» (in the eyes of Choisy Renaissance rejuvenated architecture, cfr. above), which is substituted by a «gravité toute romaine» (Choisy 1899, 2: 609). These examples show that Choisy for his valuation of Renaissance architecture starts from his experience with and valuation of Roman Antiquity. But his experience with the architecture from Greek Antiquity was used by Choisy to come to terms with Italian Renaissance, too.

Pienza and Athens

Pope Pius II (Piccolomini), after having been elected in 1458, transformed his native village, Corsignano, following the principles of Renaissance architecture and urbanism and renamed it Pienza.³ Choisy recognizes in the main square in Pienza a series of characteristics which are comparable with those of the sites from Greek Antiquity: «Constatons aussi à l'époque de la première Renaissance un trait commun avec la belle antiquité grecque, la symétrie dans chaque édifice et, dans chaque groupe d'édifices, une simple pondération des masses: La grande place de Pienza fut exécutée d'un seul jet; et l'architecte, maître d'adopter un plan général absolument symétrique, s'est contenté d'un ensemble où chaque édifice a sa physionomie à part e sa symétrie individuelle» (Choisy 1899, 2: 642). Choisy bases his valuation on the new understanding of architecture from Greek Antiquity, which had developed around the middle of 19th century. Etlin (1987, 266–271 and 2005, 368–370) describes this re-evaluation: New studies had revealed that the Parthenon beyond the entasis of its columns was full of curved lines (stylobate, entablature etc.) and inclinations (columns, entablature). This was not just

explained as further visual adjustments but imparted «an elastic aspect, a life to the inert stone. . . . Greek architecture now appeared to reflect an indissoluble union between reason and poetry, with the most exacting application of reason being employed to create the most beautiful example of poetry in architectural art. Thus the Greek temple, which had been considered the epitome of classical regularity and symmetry, now seemed to have greater affinity with the picturesque» (Etlin 1987, 168). Crucial is James Fergusson's statement, that in Greek Antiquity the single buildings or parts of them are symmetrical but that the ensemble is asymmetrical. This observation was taken up by many others (Fergusson 1849, 397–398 and 1859, 280–281, cfr. Etlin 1987, 269 and Etlin 2005, 368) and was one of the bases of Choisy's valuation of the square in Pienza.

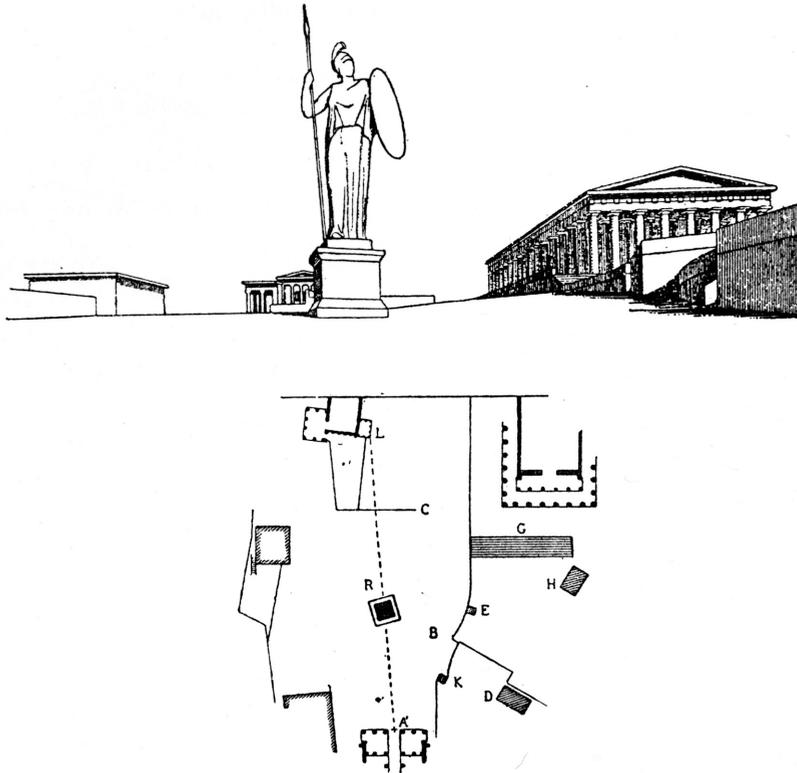


Figure 5
 Auguste Choisy, Acropolis, view of the platform with Minerva Promachos and Parthenon
 (from: Choisy 1899, I: 415)



Figure 6
Pienza, main square (From: Adams 1998, 319)

Choisy's own research concerning the Acropolis in Athens contributed to give more precision to Fergusson's thought. He observed that the highest point of the curved line of the steps in front of the Parthenon was not in the middle axis of the temple but was moved 7,50 m towards the main street on the Acropolis. Choisy says that this was made in order to visually adjust the temple for an angled view, thus for an observer who walks on the main street (Choisy 1865, 414). Choisy finds other examples on the Acropolis for the enhancement of asymmetrical situations, like the area in front of the Propylaea and the view the visitor has, when he just has passed the Propylaea: The monumental statue of the Minerva Promachos on the left is positioned closer to the observer in order to counterweigh the huge Parthenon on the right (figure 5). The statue is furthermore slightly rotated out of the longitudinal axis and towards the Parthenon in order to dialogue with the temple it has to counterbalance (Choisy 1865, 415). A seemingly casual view is aesthetically upgraded by a well-conceived distribution of masses. Choisy dedicates a long paragraph to this topic in the *Histoire de l'architecture*: «Le pittoresque dans l'art Grec: Partis dissymtriques, pondration des masses» (Choisy 1899, 1: 409–422). When Choisy speaks about «simple

pond ration des masses» in the valuation of the square in Pienza, he directly applies his own experience of Greek architecture to Italian Renaissance, in order to come to terms with it. He, however, does not explain why he thinks the comparison is valid, or what has to be taken into account to make the comparison work. He simply extrapolates. Greek Architecture figures a second time in the chapter on Italian Renaissance, when Choisy deals with the Palazzo della Cancelleria and the Palazzo Giraud (the latter today better known as Palazzo Castellési or Castellési-Torlonia).

The Palazzi della Cancelleria and Castellési in Rome

Auguste Choisy praises the Palazzo della Cancelleria, which he attributes to Donato Bramante (Choisy, 2: 1899, 609, 623, 628, 640, 668–670). This attribution was initially made by Giorgio Vasari and was state of research at Choisy’s time. Jacob Burckhardt, Eug ne Muntz and Heinrich von Geym ller, who Choisy cites in his Renaissance chapter, attribute the palace to Bramante and date it 1500 or shortly afterwards. Today the palace is cancelled from Bramante’s work and has an unclear attribution. The start of construction work is dated to the year 1489.⁴ Choisy applauds the Palazzo della Cancelleria for the «trav es d’in gales largeurs» and the «vari t  rythm e» which results from it (Choisy 1899, 2: 609, 623). Choisy indicates the *avant-corps* as novelty. The use of stylobates was exceptional before Bramante. In the Palazzo della Cancelleria instead the stylobates clarify the division of the floors and thus the whole architecture (Choisy 1899, 2: 623). The Cancelleria offers also a solution to a problem concerning the fa ade of the multistorey palace. As the last cornice has to balance not only the last floor but the whole palace, it has to be «reinforced» optically. Bramante uses a frieze in form of a row of supporting consoles (*Konsolfries*) to give more «weight» to the last cornice (Choisy 1899, 2: 628). Choisy sums up and puts the fa ade of the Palazzo della Cancelleria and the best built examples from Greek Antiquity to the same level in terms of architectural quality: «Sur toute cette ordonnance plane une harmonie calme qu’on ne peut comparer qu’  celle des monuments les plus achev s de l’art grec» (Choisy 1899, 2: 670). The architecture from Greek Antiquity was the most estimated at the time of Choisy. Even Eug ne Viollet-le-Duc in the end gave the primacy no longer to French Gothic but to Greek Antiquity (Etl n 1987, 271). Choisy on the other hand had contributed personally to that esteem. To put a building on a level with the best from Greek Antiquity was the maximum esteem possible. That the Palazzo della Cancelleria received this praise seems at first sight astonishing because the fa ade of the palace visibly shows an *opus isodomum* with joints chiseled just superficially into the much larger stone blocks which are applied like clothing to the load-bearing walls (figure 7).⁵ Thus Choisy

gives highest votes to an architecture where structure and decoration are evidently separated. This means that Choisy not only accepted the preconditions of Italian Renaissance architecture but felt free to give it highest votes even if he preferred an architecture where decoration is the expression of construction. That the Palazzo della Cancelleria got this esteem shows all the contrary but Choisy's indifference (Kruft 1991, 328) in respect to Italian Renaissance.

The Palazzo Castellesi, built from about 1504 onwards, was attributed to Bramante by Giorgio Vasari and this was state of research at Choisy's time. Today the palace is only in part attributed to Bramante.⁶ Choisy says that Bramante copied his own Palazzo della Cancelleria and used its design for the Palazzo Castellesi (at



Figure 7
Palazzo della Cancelleria, Rome, detail of the facade (photo author)

Choisy's time called Palazzo Giraud): «Charg  vers 1504 du palais Giraud, il n'imagina rien de mieux que de reproduire les donn es g n rales et jusqu'aux profils de la Chancellerie» (Choisy 1899, 2: 670). Choisy justifies Bramante's choice to make a copy of his own work as he finds a parallel in Ancient Greece: «ainsi les Grecs se sont imit s d s qu'ils eurent fix  les types canoniques de leurs ordres» (Choisy 1899, 2: 670). Choisy's work proves to be very coherent. In fact, in the chapter on Greek architecture in the *Histoire de l'architecture* he gives as example the Propylaea in Athens which were copied in Hellenistic time: «Plus tard, l'ordre des Propyl es fut copi , mais ces d licatesses  chapp rent aux imitateurs. Vers l' poque d'Adrien, temps d'ind cision o  l'on cherchait, faute d'id es nouvelles,   faire revivre le pass , on imagina de reproduire    leusis les propyl es d'Ath nes» (Choisy 1899, 1: 369, 482). Greek Antiquity seems to be the decisive authority for valuations made by Choisy on Italian Renaissance. It was him who introduced Greece into this context. Burckhardt and M ntz, who were cited by Choisy as a basis of his work (Choisy 1899, 2: 604), did not refer to Greece in their valuations (Burckhardt 1868, 33–35; Burckhardt 1878, 33–34; M ntz 1891), as Greek Antiquity had very little influence on Italian Renaissance.



Figure 8
Palazzo della Cancelleria, Rome (from: Frommel 1998, 412)

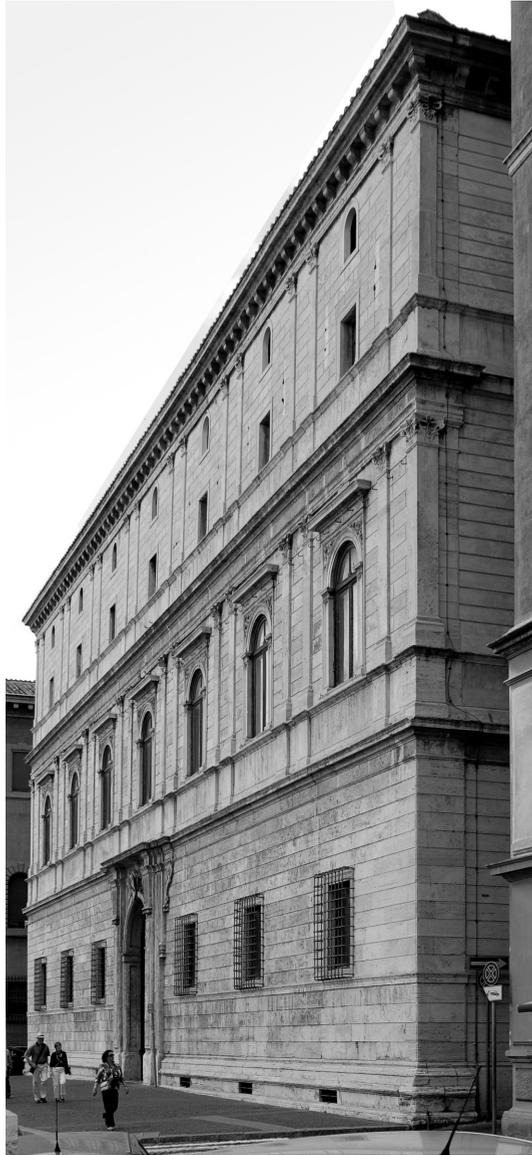


Figure 9
Palazzo Castellesi, Rome (photo author)

The Palazzo della Cancelleria is also an example for the courtyards of Renaissance palaces. Choisy extracts a specific construction problem as far as the courtyards are concerned: The open arcade at the ground floor carries the heavy wall of the closed upper floor. The Palazzi Medici-Riccardi, Gondi and Strozzi in Florence are examples for this. Choisy says that this superposition was criticised and that the Palazzo San Marco in Rome therefore shows two floors of open arcades. Later the superposition of arcade and closed upper floor was re-admitted: In the Ducal Palace in Urbino Luciano Laurana used brickwork for the upper storey so that it seemed lighter. The Palazzo della Cancelleria with two superimposed open arcades and a third floor with walls in brickwork is another example for this solution (Choisy 1899, 2: 675–676). However this historical development



Figure 10
Palazzo della Cancelleria, Rome, courtyard (photo author)

is based on too few examples, is one-sidedly explained with considerations on construction, implies a logic where it probably did never exist and is not at all a valid argument. But it is interesting for the thought of Choisy. It seems as if Choisy took the list of examples of Renaissance courtyards (with exception of the Palazzo Strozzi) from Burckhardt's chapter on the arrangement of palaces. Yet the development described above was an invention of Choisy. Burckhardt did not at all force the phenomena in that way (chapter *Die Composition des Palastbaus*, Burckhardt 1868, 143–177; Burckhardt 1878, 164–203). The engineer divides a complex situation like the development of Renaissance courtyards into simpler single problems, which —as he simply assumes— had to be resolved with a certain logic by the architects of the time. The method to divide a complex problem into simpler, more manageable ones had become in 19th century a main procedure taught to the pupils of the *École des Ponts et chaussées*. Choisy follows this method in the *L'art de bâtir* book series as well as in the *Histoire de l'architecture* (Picon 1992; Mandoul 2008b, 214–215). The above-mentioned problem that the last cornice of a multistorey palace façade has to be «reinforced» optically in order to balance not only the last floor but the whole palace façade is a further example for this approach. As far as the courtyard question is concerned it seems, on the other hand, that Choisy found it satisfactory to approach a theme which is —in contrast with the façades— again linked to construction problems. Form and construction are reconciliated in the courtyards. The material (brick) and thus the expression of the architecture is chosen in order to give visual expression to a necessity of construction, i.e. to have a lightweight wall on top of the arcade. The solution with the visible application of brickwork not casually culminates in Choisy's favourite palace, the Cancelleria!

Conclusion

Topic of the present paper was Auguste Choisy's work on the Italian Renaissance. Construction techniques are not the key to understand the architecture of that epoch. Choisy describes them insofar they are basis for architectural expression and tackles domes, courtyards or the joining of decoration with the load bearing wall. Choisy describes Italian Renaissance according to its specific preconditions, especially to the use of architectural orders. Choisy has a deterministic approach and tries to apply (or better to impose) logic structures to historic developments in order to come to terms with them. Main topic of the paper was Choisy's valuation of Italian Renaissance architecture. Choisy uses his experience with Roman Antiquity and evaluates Renaissance in comparison to it. In general he prefers the graceful, charming and youthful use Renaissance makes of architectural orders to the heavy and clumsy Roman decoration. Greek Antiquity,

which enjoyed in contrast to Roman Antiquity the highest esteem at Choisy's time, was even more important for the engineer's valuation of the Renaissance. He introduced comparisons between Italian Renaissance and Greek Antiquity. Choisy recognised the main square in Pienza as a Renaissance counterpart to the Acropolis in Athens to whose understanding Choisy himself had made substantial contributions. The Palazzo della Cancelleria is for him the culmination point of Renaissance and he compares it with the best examples of the architecture of Greek Antiquity. This was the highest praise Choisy could give. Greek Antiquity had an unquestioned authority. Choisy even approves the copying of Palazzo della Cancelleria because similar episodes had happened in Ancient Greece. The engineer's valuation of Italian Renaissance seems to be extrapolated from his experience with Antiquity. The comparisons across epochs give evidence of one of the aims Choisy pursued: To find universal criteria in order to determine what quality in architecture is about.

Notes

1. For the theory of clothing (*v tement, rivestimento*), its origins in Gottfried Semper, the controversies about it and its large impact on the architectural discourse around and after 1900, see Fanelli / Gargiani 1994. Cfr. Mandoul 2007.
2. For a history of origin of this book series cfr. Mandoul 2008b.
3. Cfr. Adams 1998 for a detailed overview.
4. For the attribution of the Palazzo della Cancelleria to Bramante cfr. Vasari [1568] 1878–1892, vol. 4, 155, Burckhardt 1868, 57, 156 and 160, who dates it after 1500, and Muntz 1891, 323–327 and 375–378. On page 376 Muntz refers to Geym ller, who also attributes the palace to Bramante. Frommel 1998, 411–414 attributes the palace to Baccio Pontelli; bibliography on the palace in Frommel 1998, 432, note 122; cfr. also Frommel 2009, 114–117 where Frommel attributes the palace still to Pontelli, but where he is sure that Giuliano da Sangallo, Mantegna and Melozzo da Forl  were involved in the design process. Bruschi 1969, 846 recognises a lot of «Bramante» in the Palazzo della Cancelleria. Valtieri 1982, 17–19 suspects that Bramante was a consultant in the design process of the palace. Valtieri supposes that an * quipe* of architects designed the palace: besides Bramante she names Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, Fra Giocondo and Andrea Bregno.
5. For the simulated *opus isodomum* on the fa ade of the Palazzo della Cancelleria see Pagliara 1998/1999. Bentivoglio 1982 already mentioned this.
6. For the attribution of the Palazzo Castellani to Bramante cfr. Vasari [1568] 1878–1892, vol. 4, 155, Burckhardt 1868, 57 and Muntz 1891, 378–379. Bruschi 1989, 9, is almost certain that Bramante was the author of the initial project of the palace. Frommel 1973, vol.2, 213–214 assumes that the two palaces (Palazzo della Cancelleria and Palazzo Castellani) in spite of stylistic similarities could not have the same author. In contrast to Bruschi he says that the first architect of the Palazzo Castellani remains unknown, while Bramante is the author of the courtyard. In 2009 Frommel (2009, 118) attributes the outside of the palace to Antonio da Sangallo the Elder.

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