

The Restitution and Drawing of Lost Methods of Wood Construction in Auguste Choisy's *Histoire de L'Architecture*

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ABSTRACT: Each chapter of Choisy's *Histoire de l'architecture* describes the elementary methods of construction proper to a historical period or a specific culture. Especially in the first book of his *Histoire*, many of the drawings he devoted to this question offer seemingly factual views of wood construction that are in fact inferred from buildings in stone. When considered as a whole, they form a compelling historical panorama. They lead to believe that "fossilization" was almost a general trend in architectures of the past. Each time it proved right, this hypothesis gained credibility. Choisy regarded it as the more convenient approach to what initially appeared as decorative forms. In this paper, I shall study Choisy's particular position in relation to other historians. Secondly, I'll research on the originality and the reliability of his graphical representations. As Choisy's drawings usually stem from documents that we don't see, although we receive an elusive mention about them (a photograph, another drawing, a piece exhibited in a museum), a recovery and comparative study of their sources will elucidate this point.

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of Choisy's *Histoire de l'architecture*, devoted to the Ancient World, we frequently find interpretations of wood construction derived from architecture in stone. This presence, indeed very in some of the chapters, has not equivalent in other general histories of his time (as for example in Fletcher 1896). This is a surprising procedure that has remained unnoticed, except for a brief tangential comment in the last monography *Histoire de la architecture* (Mandoul 2008, pp. 84-86).

This fact arises several questions I will try to answer: what is the place of this contribution? Was it an isolated effort or were there some precedents for it? Where were the examples selected and collected from? What were the sources of the drawings and how reliable their reinterpretations are?

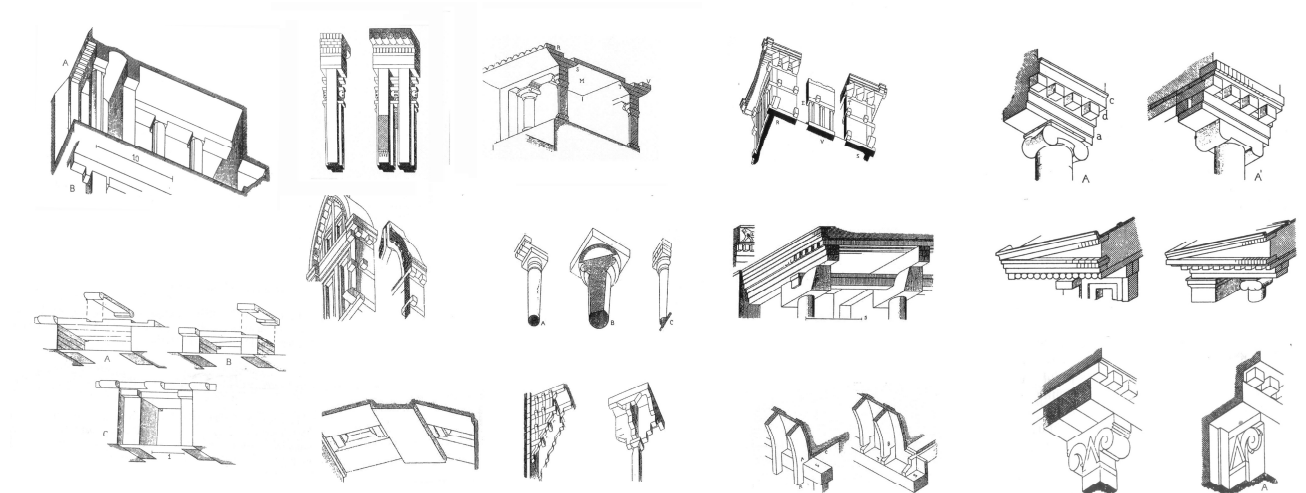


Figure 1: Several drawings in *Histoire de l'architecture* explain wood construction from its petrification

Choisy references for his drawings

A first recollection of the references cited –not allways fully- by Choisy can give us a preliminary, if lacunary background, for his drawings, to be completed at the end of this paper. Anyhow, some interesting conclusions can be already grasped. Since the 40's on, some travels and archeological expeditions had open for the History of Architecture new unexplored regions as Lycia, Phoenicia or ancient cultures as India or Etruria, showing here and there that the "petrification" process of primitive wood architecture was widespread. New expeditions undertaken in the 80's to Persia and Cyprus added new samples.

Choisy benefited largely from those publications during the long process of writing his *Histoire de l'architecture*, published in 1899 although probably started in 1884 (Dartein 1898, p. 312). The works of Fellows (1839, 1841) are mentioned as a main source for his drawings of Lycian monuments. Probably he first knew them through the reproductions of Texier 1862 (mentioned already in Choisy 1873), while Otto Benndorf, *Reisen in Lykien* 1884 is a supplementary source. His drawings of rock imitation of wood in Phrygian architecture are based on Georges Perrot and Edmond Guillaume, *Exploration archéologique de la Galatie et de la Bithynie*, 1862-1872. Drawings of petrified Indian architecture depend on James Fergusson, *The Rock-cut Temples of India*, 1845 or *A History of Architecture in all countries, from the earliest times to the present days*, 1865-67; and the illustration of the rock tombs of Persepolis relied on Dieulafoy, *L'art antique de la Perse*, 1884.

However, if such a recollection only allows us to trace a partial genealogy of Choisy's drawings, it cannot help us to explain why Choisy searched and collected those cases of petrification, why are they so prominent, in his *Histoire* and what was Choisy trying to do.

Carpentry history and petrified wood architecture: two bound narratives in *l'Histoire de l'architecture*

With those drawings as a tool, I suggest that Choisy was trying to answer two different questions, in his view, inextricably related. Firstly, is it possible to build a history of ancient carpentry, having in mind that such a perishable material leaves only scanty remains? And secondly, what is the historical role of petrification in ancient architecture, and specifically, what explains the Vitruvian temple?

Choisy was interested in building a history of ancient carpentry. He believed this study could be improved by making deductions on "petrified constructions". This, we can detect in his very early mentions of monuments in Lycia after Texier (Choisy 1873), in other works as in Choisy, 1883, where a short chapter is devoted to Byzantine carpentry, and again Lycian precedents after Fellows are mentioned; right until his latest works (Choisy 1904).

Although this interest may be rooted in a personal commitment, the second question is raised in the context of a collective narrative. By undertaking a deeper research on the construction of this narrative, we shall understand why Choisy's history of petrification is embedded in his *History*. Also, we shall discover the kind of "previous pack of samples" where many of his drawings came from. In addition to that, it shows how Choisy created a "graphical history of ancient carpentry" by redrawing them.

BACKGROUND

The French background for petrification as a theoretical and historical problem

The travels and expeditions so frequently mentioned by Choisy –when he was just a young engineer- had attracted the attention of some French theorists of architecture who were obsessed with the problem of the Doric temple. Klenze and Hübsch challenged the Vitruvian explanation –that the temple was an imitation of a primitive wood construction-. But recent findings of possible petrifications in other cultures forced the theorists to put the question in a new context. Little by little, a sort of "history of petrification" would be outlined.

In his *Entretiens* (I, 1863 deuxième entretien, pp. 33-68), Viollet-le-Duc made a first review of petrification examples in History (in India, Lycia, etc.). He considered petrification a vicious behaviour typical of non rational and "progressive" architectures. Accordingly, he could not tolerate the hypothesis of imitation of a primitive wood Doric temple. It was created and thought in stone from the very beginning. In the second part of his *Entretiens*, 1873 (quatrième entretien, pp. 177-216) he takes up again the argument. Those explanations surely impressed the young Choisy, then a kind of a "protégé" of Viollet-le-Duc as a promising engineer, as we can deduce from the latest *Entretiens*.

In 1876, Chipiez published what can be somehow considered the first specific history of petrification in France, the *Histoire critique des origines et de la formation des ordres grecs*. From the very beginning, the matter is stated: the "problem" of the Doric temple cannot be discussed without taking into account the recent discoveries of petrifications in Asia and Egypt. Can we find a common case behind those translations of forms from a mode of construction to another? Are they born independently or are they related? And how?

His aim is clearly defined : "remonter aux formes primordiales, en suivre le développement (...) tel est le plan". And in order to establish "l'ensemble des causes qui ont déterminé les formes grecques" (Chipiez introduction), he covers and illustrates examples from Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Phoenicia, Lycia, Phrygia, Mycenae ending with the Greek canonical orders.

His answer to this finalist history is neither simplistic, nor determinist. The reason why and how a form linked to a material is translated into another is the result of a balance between rational construction and optical sensibility, religious conceptions and formal preferences in each culture. At the end, he refuses, for different reasons than those of Viollet-le-Duc, the petrification of the Doric temple (Chipiez 1876, pp. 218-223).

Choisy's *Études épigraphiques* in 1884 and Dieulafoy's reinterpretation of the two narratives

Those precedents were undoubtedly in Choisy's mind when, after having published in 1883 *l'Art de Bâtir Chez les Byzantins*, is about to plot a great and complete History of Architecture. For the classical period, such a History should cope in some way or another with the problems settled by Chipiez and Viollet-le-Duc. Their influence on Choisy can be traced.

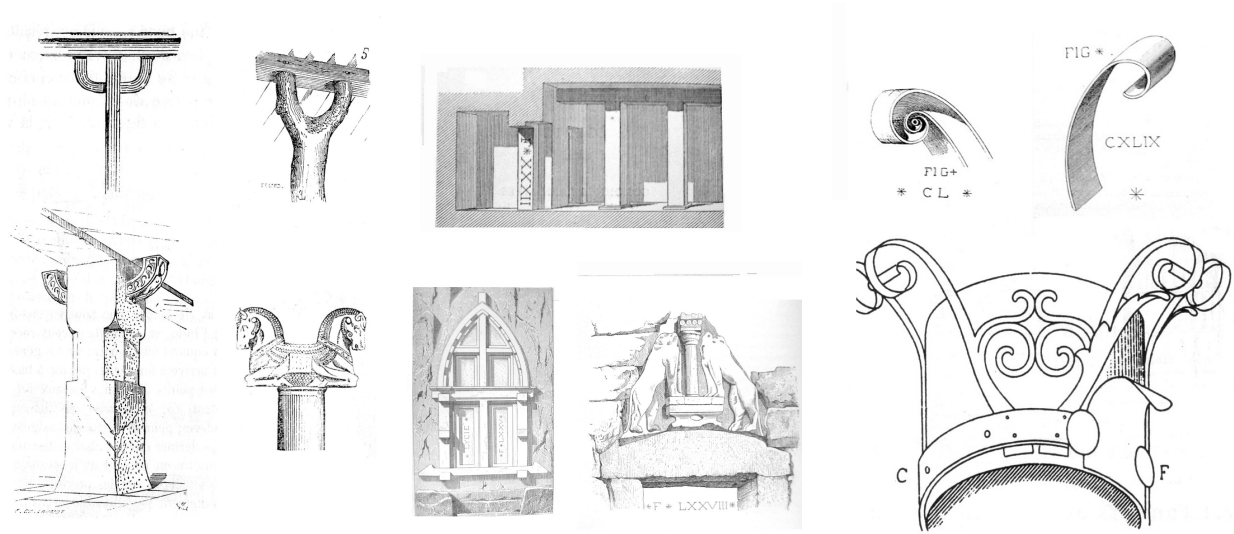


Figure 2: Petrification examples in (left) Viollet-le-Duc (1863, pp.38, 40) and (middle) Chipiez (1876, pp. 42, 132, 146). On the right, genesis of the Corinthian capital in Chipiez (1876, p.316) and in Choisy (1899, p.371) from a metallic decorative covering

It seems not casual that the structure of their chapters will follow in some way the path of Chipiez -that Egypt, Persia or Assyria took up distinctive chapters could be expected, but the fact that he devoted one to Phoenicia and another one to Lycia, with Phrygia and Etruria, just to culminate in the extremely long chapter of Greece, is not so obvious. It does not seem casual either that he inserted chapters on Indian and Chinese architecture, both mentioned in Viollet-le-Duc *Entretiens*.

In addition to that, some Chipiez particular points of view may have been relevant for Choisy's later specific explanations. Chipiez remarked and attributed some importance to the petrification of metal decorative coverings, a feature that also played its role in the *Histoire*. Choisy does not cite any authority for his genesis of the Corinthian capital from bronze leaves (1899, drawing p. 371). Instead, it is a proposal we find just illustrated by Chipiez (1876, pp. 315-316). Choisy's idea that the Doric forms originated as an imitation of decorative coverings in terracotta may be not alien to Chipiez arguments.

Above all, as we will see later on, those authorities offer Choisy a recollection of "sample board" of cases to be discussed and analyzed by drawings. Choisy then had to follow the track: the passing of forms from one material to another should have an important role in the narrative of a rationalistic history. As we have said, at the same time Choisy was interested in creating a history of carpentry. So he probably saw that making a history of petrifications should bring out also the materials for the former one.

Choisy's role in this narrative will be anything but passive. It is as a historian of carpentry and just before beginning with his History, in 1883-4, that Choisy made a decisive contribution by publishing his *Études épigraphiques sur l'architecture grecque*. Based in Egger's transcription of a recent discovery (1882), his interpretation and graphical reconstruction of the Pireo's arsenal, the Athenians walls and the Erechtheion, gave to him and his French contemporaries an almost incontestable proof that Greek architects did not use, as Romans did, truss roofing. Instead, they used a prop and lintel solution not capable of resisting tension forces (criticized in his time by Durm, pp.176-7, pp.192-3) and revisited by Hellman 1999.

That step forward in the knowledge of Greek roofing represented, on the other hand, that for the "other" Choisy, the historian of architecture, the history of petrification should in some important points be rewritten - Vitruvian temple included-. In order to build up the implications of this discovery, the assistance of his friend and old mate at the *École de Ponts et Chaussées*, Dieulafoy, will be invaluable.

Drawing the Doric Vitruvian temple

Dieulafoy reacted immediately. In *La Perse* (1884, pp. 40-79), he stated that, according to Choisy's interpretations, the "Greek empilement" solved all the objections that could be raised by a rationalistic point of view, such as Viollet-le-Duc's, to a primitive wood Doric temple: the Greek did not see any contradiction nor logical incoherence in passing from a "piled up" construction in wood to a "piled up" construction in stone. His proposal owed much to Choisy's Athenian walls version with a double pitched roof over rammed earth.

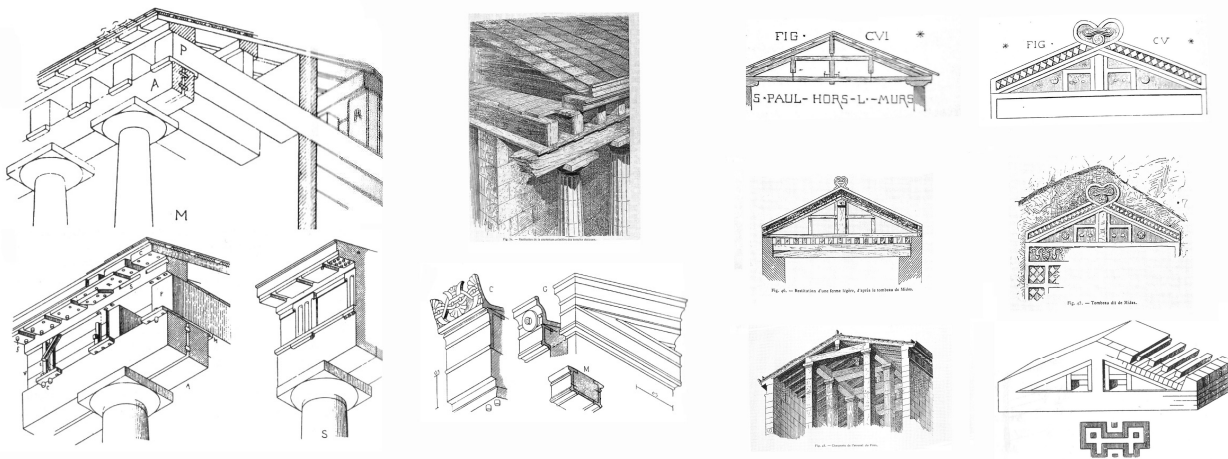


Figure 3: On the left, the Doric temple as a petrification of a "coffrage" in wood (Choisy, 1899, pp.280, 288, 286) compared to Dieulafoy 1884 version (p.65). On the right, from top to bottom: opposed lectures of wood roofing from Midas tomb (Chipiez 1876, p. 216, and Dieulafoy 1884, p.58), and its interpretation in Choisy (1899, p. 253) compared to Pireo's restitution in Dieulafoy (*Id.*, p.60)

In a review of his friend's work (*Gazette Archéologique*, 1887), Choisy will acknowledge the Dieulafoy's contribution on this point. They still shared opinions: "s'il est vrai, que les charpentes grecques soient, suivant une expression que j'emprunte à M. Dieulafoy, «des maçonneries de bois», rien d'étonnant à ce qu'on puisse faire dériver à volonté les formes, soit de la maçonnerie, soit de la charpente» (Choisy 1899 p. 301).

Fifteen years later, Choisy produced in his *Histoire* (p. 288) a very singular version. What was translated into stone in the Doric temple was a primitive "coffrage", a decorative covering over a strong wood structure with large beams and prop and lintel roofing (Choisy 1899, p. 280). The solution ingeniously saved the conflicts others had faced when anchoring every detail in the logic of wood construction. As specific proofs of this practice in ancient temples, he argued the terracotta of the Gela Treasure of Selinonte (Choisy 1899, p. 286). But as we have seen, that decorative coatings over wood elements may petrify together was an idea already existing in Chipiez (1876). This shows how logic had to be twisted in order to reach this reconstruction and how it depended on the "history of petrification".

Tracing back the history of petrification

Also clearly emerging from Dieulafoy (1884) is that the history of ancient carpentry has to bifurcate in two branches: truss constructions (in Egypt, Rome and eventually in India) and "empiled" ones (Lycia, Phrygia, Persia and Greece). So the "readings" from the history of petrifications that will be instrumental must be revised. As in all previous petrification histories, Dieulafoy retraces, back from the Vitruvian temple, the history of transitions from wood to stone. Assisted by his own versions of Choisy's Pireo drawings, he showed Chipiez was wrong in important instances, such as the interpretation of petrification of the Phrygian roofing. Chipiez had seen in this tomb a roofing construction similar to that present in Roman San Paolo Fuori le Mura while at that time it was considered a new link in the chain running from the Egyptian to the Roman truss (see fig. 3, at right on the top), for him it represented just a link but in a different chain: a construction analogous to the prop and lintel Pireo solution.

THE INHERITED PETRIFICATION SAMPLES AND THEIR GRAPHICAL INTERPRETATION AS WOOD CONSTRUCTION

With the contributions by Viollet-le-Duc, Chipiez and Dieulafoy as a background, he will weave his narrative. Now we can see how many of his exemplary cases of petrification were picked up from a shared "sample board" collected by those French architects interested in tracing its history. We can also see how Choisy's "primary" sources identified at the beginning of this paper were probably inherited references, known by several participants in the debate.

Nevertheless, the *Histoire* contain two major singularities. Firstly, Choisy deliberately tried to deduce and develop an original "history of ancient carpentry". All chapters include sections such as "Emplois du bois et des métaux" (Egypte), "Emplois du bois et de la pierre" (Chaldée, Assyrie), or "Charpentes" (Perse), "Traditions de la construction en charpente" (Inde), "Charpentes et toitures" (Chine, Japon), "Construction en charpente" (l'Art préhellénique), "Charpentes et toitures" (Architecture grecque) and "Charpentes romaines". Every section is mainly illustrated with drawings explicitly showing the primitive wood construction.

Secondly, he devises smart graphical procedures to deal with the buildings as if they were in fact real wood constructions, which could be anatomized. When he illustrates (Choisy 1899, p. 250) the Lycian carpentry, he dissects what Fellows designated as an "elizabethan tomb" (Fellows 1841, p. 104). By doing so, Choisy attempts to show the wood framework and the masonry fillings. In addition to that, in the previous page he displays a graphical explanation of the hooked form of some elements, which according to him, derived from the form

adopted by the stem of the tress on the Taurus slopes. With great confidence, he also shows how they were assembled: "les tombeaux taillés dans le roc en reproduisent jusqu'aux moindres assemblages" (Choisy 1899, p. 248). A striking confidence that ignores other hypothesis, such as those which stated that the hooked termination "ne s'explique pas par les exigences de la matière" (Perrot; Chipiez 1890, p. 363).

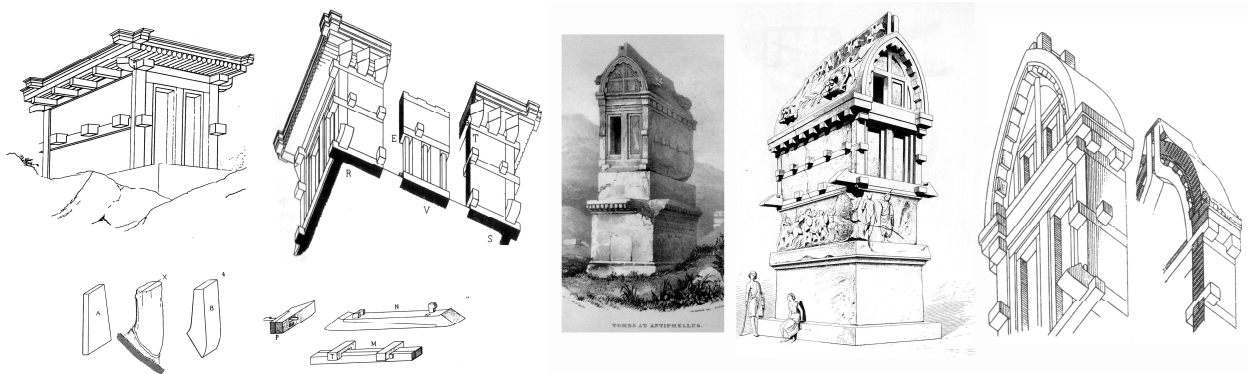


Figure 4: Choisy's (1899, pp.249, 250, 250) anatomies of Lycian wood methods compared (left) to drawings from Fellows (1841, p.170); and, (right), to drawings from Fellows (1839, p. 218) and Viollet-le-Duc (1863, pl. 1)

LYCIA AND PHRYGIA

In (1899, p. 251), Choisy gives us the section of a Fellows "Gothic" sarcophagus in the British Museum as if it were a house with a "toiture en ogive". This is one of the most commented cases of petrification (Fellows 1841, pp 130-1, Viollet-le-Duc 1863, pp. 42-43, pl I, Dieulafoy 1884, p. 59, fig. 47, similar monuments in Beulé, 1860) Choisy boldly demonstrates how its wood structure imitates an inverted boat hull, covered by mud bricks and protected with furs. In p. 253, Choisy imagined the assemblage of wood components from a rock-tomb (Delikli-Tach) in Mysia, described in Perrot, 1872, an expedition mentioned too in Chipiez, 1876.

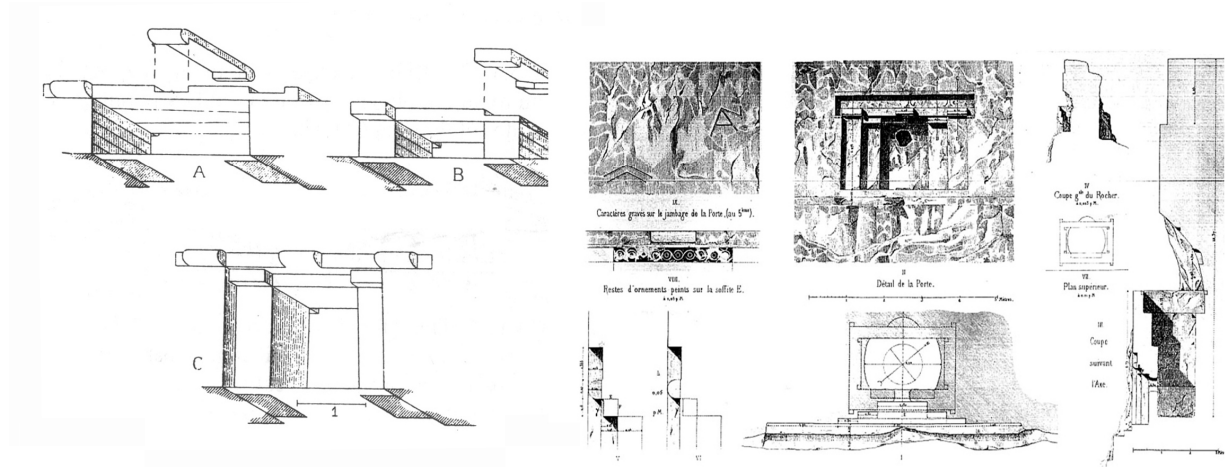


Figure 5: Assemblage of a Mysian tomb according to Choisy (1899, p. 253), and the drawings in its source (Perrot 1872, vol. II p.6)

Cyprus and Mycenae

The drawings from Cyprus (Choisy 1891, p. 211) allowed ascertaining an idea of the Phoenician wood construction otherwise impossible to reach, except for some literary descriptions in the Bible. It was a recent incorporation to the "sample board" as the Insel was open to archeological research only after the British administration (1878). The source cited by Choisy is Ohnefalsch- Richter (1895, probable). The Lion Gate of Mycenae (Choisy, 1899, p 233) gives Choisy an occasion to take up again a very well known and established case of "petrification". He mentioned no specific reference, but Chipiez (1876, p. 146), Dieulafoy (1884, p. 43) had dealt with it.

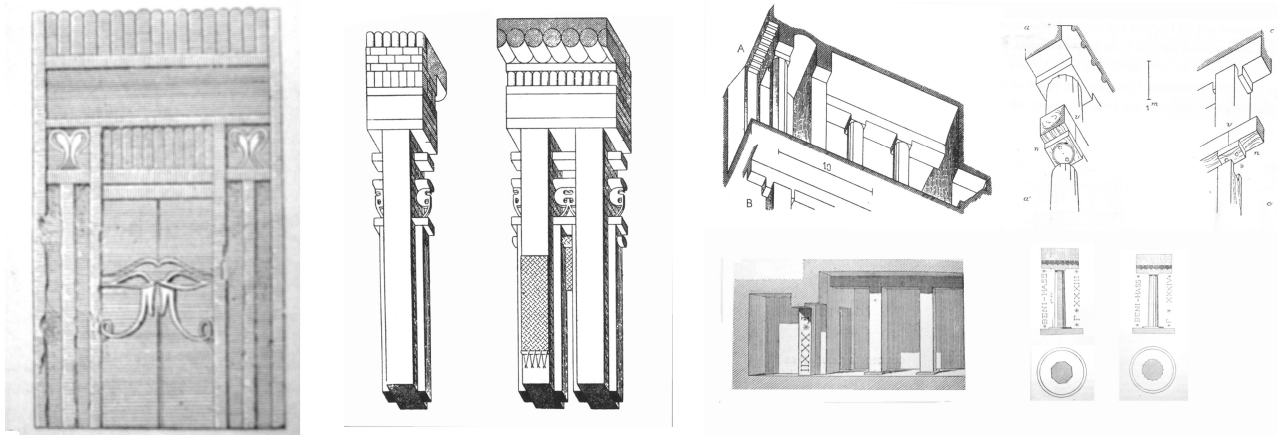


Figure 6: On the left are compared *Chipiez* 1876 (p. 4) and *Choisy's* 1899 (p.24) illustrations of light wood construction from Egyptian temple-hypoge paintings. On the right, Beni-Hassan case in *Choisy* 1899 (p. 40) and 1904 (p.5) compared to *Chipiez* 1876 drawings at the bottom (pp. 42, 44) .

Egypt

Here Choisy picked-up again other examples from the "sample board". Although the original source mentioned for Beni-Hassan and Speos Atemidos (*Choisy* 1899, p. 40) is the well known napoleonic expedition (see *Description de l'Égypte*, vol IV, pl. 64), this was a frequently visited case. In *l'Histoire*, although he does not agree with other's points of view (it is not a prototype of Doric, as for *Dieulafoy* (1884, pp. 48-99) or *Chipiez* (1876), Choisy, agrees in seeing them as a petrification. But not of a previous wood temple, but of a gallery akin to those present in mines (observation indebted to Darcel). Here his illustration only shows the factual appearances, while in his latest *L'art de bâtir chez les Égyptiens* (1904, p. 5) he gives instead (and only) the wood interpretation separating its pieces (for both pilastres) .

In Egyptian temple-hypoge in Memphis (*Choisy* 1899, p. 22), he detected the vaulted ceilings made with palm trunks, a solution that interested him so as to reproduce it again (in *Choisy* 1904, p. 6.). Again, no source is given, but a similar observation is made in *Chipiez*, (1876, p. 16-17), citing *Lepsius* as a reference.

Light Egyptian woodwork inferred from paintings and sculpted sarcophagues was another common place (see text in *Viollet-le-Duc* 1863, pp. 178-9; *Chipiez* 1874, in many instances, alluding also to *Lepsius*). Choisy takes here he opportunity to give a tridimensional version from Phtah-Hotep tomb (*Choisy* 189, p. 24; 1904, p. 5; we can find a similar case in *Chipiez* 1876, elevation drawings pp. 1-2). This time, Choisy cited as a source the subsequent version in *Perrot*, *Chipiez* (1882) that could compete when visualizing the construction.

India

In the chapter devoted to India, somewhat misleadingly, Choisy's drawings represent only his interpretation in wood, avoiding any possible confrontation with the real construction. Surprisingly, if we compare his drawings to their alleged sources, we will find long deductive jumps. From an unidentified photograph of Madura, he is capable of conceiving a solution which follows "exactement le principe des fermes modernes dites à la Philibert Delorme" (*Choisy* 1899, p. 155). From a coloured perspective in *Fergusson* (1845, probably, pl. 9.), he can also describe a wood vault's details of the temple cave of Ajunta. Also, , he is able to show the way a corbelled wood construction was made (*Choisy* 1899, p. 159) from a photograph of a stone gallery in Dabhoi in *Le Bon* (1887, fig. 160). From another photograph of "mont Abou" in *Le Bon* Choisy, he derives an important example for the History of carpentry, as it reveals that the thought of "décomposer une charpente en triangles pour la rendre indéformable... est presque entièrement étranger à l'antiquité" was hardly envisaged by the Egyptians and unthinkable for the Greeks, while it was known in India (*Choisy* 1899, p. 160).

I want to consider one last effect of Choisy's drawings. He created a coherent graphical language through all of his book, a discourse analogue to the text, dry and direct. A great amount of drawings from many other hands a graphical codes have been translated into this graphical language. Often, we see not the real object, but its construction. This graphical "esperanto" invites us to make comparisons not so easy to achieve through all the ancient history of carpentry.

Sometimes, Choisy himself traced and made clear those similarities across many cultures: in (*Choisy* 1899, p. 252) he related the Phtah-Hotep (*Id.* 1899, p. 24) constructive solution with that of a Lycian tomb (*Id.*, p. 250) and the details of the ensembled hooked pieces in this last case to a Syrian sleigh (*Id.*, p. 94). Elsewhere, very long chains of correlations are described: this Egyptian terrace (*Id.*, p. 24) is similar to the Persian ones (*Id.*, 128), and the latter, similar to Ionic terraces. These are compared with Lycian cornices (*Id.*, p. 338) (contrast those drawings and text in *Choisy* 1899 pp. 338-339 with *Dieulafoy* 1884).

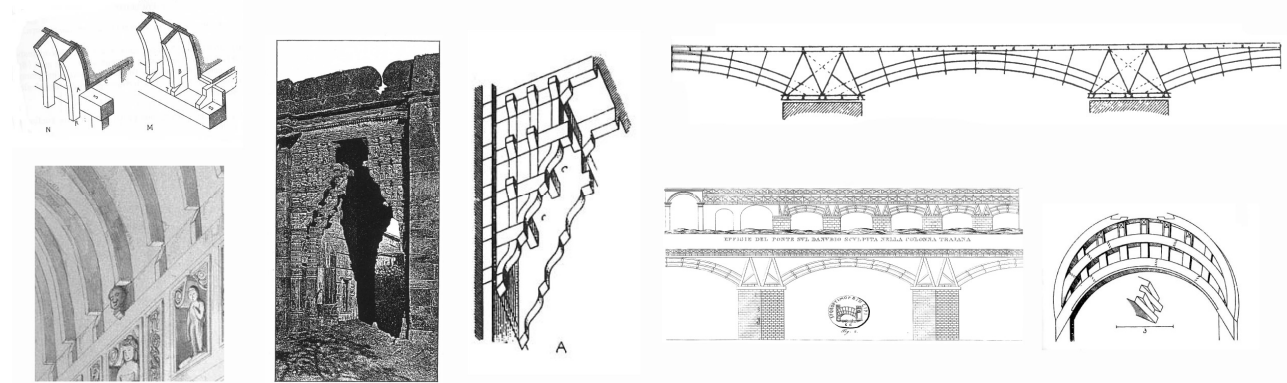


Figure 7: On the left some details of Indian wood construction Choisy (1899, p.156) deduced from Fergusson drawings (1845, p. 9) and Le Bon photographies (1887, p.391). On the right Choisy's Trajan Bridge (1899, p. 533) compared to Canina's version (1847, pl.182), and the Indian parallel wood arches pointed out as a possible influence; (Choisy 1899, p.157)

In a very unique way, he dared to make cross references with Oriental architecture: the Chinese scheme of roofing (Choisy 1899, p. 185 and p. 186) seems similar to that of the Greeks. The Chinese capital is compared to Persian capitals (Id., pp. 164-5, text).

The most striking argument is the explanation of the Trajan's Bridge over the Danube illustration. In this case -in a version that stylized considerably the original reproduction but akin to other elanced precedents (Canina 1840, pl. 182)- he suggested some influence coming from India, taking into account the resemblance of the three parallel wood arches to that of Karli cave (Choisy, 1899, p. 157). His friend Dieulafoy will go beyond in his commentary to Choisy Vitruvius, asserting that the "truss framing" originated in India: "j'ai montré que la triangulation des charpentes, inusitée en Chaldée et en Perse, était originaire de l'Inde". Choisy reckoned that "l'Inde le pratiqua, mais les applications datées remontent à peine au 8e siècle" (Choisy 1899, p. 160, fig. p. 161).

CONCLUSIONS

In Choisy's *Histoire de l'architecture* of 1899, embedded are the rudiments of a history of carpentry in the Ancient world. This history is in many instances based on his interpretation of petrification cases pointed out by many different precedent archeological expeditions or architectural travels from 1840's on.

His knowledge and recollection of those sources was not the result of an isolated effort. There was in France a precedent narrative around the problem of petrification in the history of architecture, echoed in *l'Histoire*. Authors as Viollet-le-Duc and Chipiez had defined the theoretical issues involved, had suggested or articulated the relevant chapters to be investigated (giving a new leading role to Lycia, Phrygia or Phoenicia, or introducing exotic referents to be linked as India) and had offered a recollection of significant samples usually revisited by Choisy.

This narrative probably was in mind when he was about to plot his *Histoire de l'architecture* around 1884. At that moment, he made a contribution -Greek roofing was different to Roman truss and akin to masonry- that had to impact this narrative. In that same year, Dieulafoy brings to light how this affected the history of petrification. It meant that some wood reconstructions had to be reinterpreted, that some filiations had to be re-traced, including now Persian examples, and that the Vitruvian Doric temple could have a legitimate reinterpretation and the correlative history of carpentry.

This is the legacy (with some recent additions to the "sample board") that Choisy's *Histoire* assumed in order to trace from then the outline of a history of carpentry.

His drawings illustrated the wood constructions implicit in the petrified models. Sometimes, they even dissected them or described how their components were assembled. But by comparing them with the original drawings, he confidently often stated as a fact what seem to be ingenious but speculative deductions. No doubt that nowadays, after more archeological findings, better chronology and filiations, many of his interpretations are questionable (Hellman 2002, 2006).

But his graphical strategy is still a lesson: to set under a graphical coherent discourse, dry and direct, a large collection of interpretations allow us to make comparisons between many solutions and raise questions to explore not offered by mere factual representations.

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