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HOW ANCIENT WERE VITRUVIUS’  
*VETERES ARCHITECTI (DE ARCH. 1. 1. 12–13)?*

In book 1 *De architectura*, M. Vitruvius Pollio writes about the many – and varied – sciences that should be studied by future architects. In doing so, he mentions the most “radical” opinion of the Greek architect Pythius (with the Greek variant Pytheos in some translations) who lived in the fourth cent. BCE (1. 1. 12):

Ideoque de veteribus architectis Pythius, qui Prieni aedem Minervae nobiliter<sup>1</sup> est architectatus, ait in suis commentariis architectum omnibus artibus et doctrinis plus oportere posse facere, quam qui singulas res suis industriis et exercitationibus ad summam claritatem perduxerunt.

This is what led one of the ancient architects, Pytheos, the celebrated builder of the temple of Minerva at Priene, to say in his Commentaries that an architect ought to be able to accomplish much more in all the arts and sciences than the men who, by their own particular kinds of work and the practice of it, have brought each a single subject to the highest perfection.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the passage under consideration, the author’s attention was initially drawn to the expression *aedem Minervae nobiliter est architectatus*. It is not clear whether we are talking about the architect’s fame due to the construction of this temple (e.g. in Russian translations by F. Petrovskiy 1936 [Ф. А. Петровский, *Витрувий, Десять книг об архитектуре*]) or the aesthetic commendation of the temple (Granger 1995, 19: “Pythius, who was the designer of the noble temple of Minerva”). K. Fensterbusch’s translation comes closest to conveying the author’s ambivalence: “Pytheos, der in Priene den Bau des Minervatempel vortrefflich als Architekt geleitet hat”. (J. J. Pollitt’s *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History and Terminology* does not deal with adverbs, although the articles on the adjectives *felix*, *mirabilis*, etc. show that the peculiarities of meaning in an art historical context did exist. Of the adjective *nobilis* we are told that it also occurs frequently in Pliny the Elder, means ‘famous’ rather than ‘noble’, and can describe both the work of art and the author [Pollitt 1974, 409].)

<sup>2</sup> Morgan 1914, 11. Text quoted from the edition: Morgan 1914, if not otherwise stated.

So we are informed that in the lost to us *Notes*, Pythius<sup>3</sup> bestows on the architect a kind of “super-powers”: having studied many sciences and arts, he must inevitably (so in my opinion the verb *oportere* is to be understood here) surpass those who have studied only one – for example, painting or sculpture.<sup>4</sup> Vitruvius, however, briefly refutes such a possibility (*Id autem re non expeditur*, 1. 1. 13) and moves on to a series of examples of “good enough” skills: thus, although an architect need not be a painter like Apelles, it is required that he should be able to draw (*nec pictor ut Apelles, sed graphidos non imperitus*, etc., *ibid.*).

### I. The Preposition *de*

My attention was initially<sup>5</sup> drawn to the understanding of the preposition in the phrase *de veteribus architectis* – to my surprise, all available translations contained “one of the ancient architects” here.<sup>6</sup>

This raises two questions: (1) why was not *ex* used then, and (2) is this typical for Vitruvius?

Indeed, the preposition *e/ex* would not be quite the usual in this particular case: combined to *abl. pl.* (especially with *unus* and/or superlative), it was used for the most part if the singularity or exclusivity was emphasised (see e.g. Cic. *Att.* 3. 15. 7: ... *maxime laetere unus ex omnibus amicis*; Caes. *BG* 1. 41. 4: ... *itinere exquisito per Diviciacum, quod ex Gallis ei maximam fidem habebat*).

As we need another type of definition here (“some from the old masters”), the preposition *de* probably might seem to the translators to be the only possible expression for ‘of’, ‘of the category’.

However, in the whole work of Vitruvius<sup>7</sup> we find only one instance where *de* was used to single out a person from a particular group of people: in Book 2 (2. 8. 12: *Postea de colonis unus ad eum fontem propter bonitatem aquae quaestus causa tabernam omnibus copiis instruxit*) one

<sup>3</sup> Mentioned also also 1. 1. 15, 4. 3. 1 and 7 Praef. 12 (twice).

<sup>4</sup> Vitruvius also mentions mathematics, philosophy, medicine, grammar, music, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Egorova 2016 [С. К. Егорова, “Витрувий об образовании архитектора (Vitr. *De Arch.* I, 1, 12–13)”, *Индоевропейское языкознание и классическая филология. Материалы чтений, посвященных памяти профессора И. М. Тронского*].

<sup>6</sup> Morgan, see above; Granger 1995, 19: “... one of the old architects”; Fensterbusch 1964, 33: “Deshalb sagt einer von den alten Architekten...”; the same meaning is in Russian translations (e. g. Petrovskiy 1936, 23).

<sup>7</sup> *Index Vitruvianus* (= Nohl 1965) 41–42.

of the settlers is opposed to the local population who considered the spring water harmful, i.e. *de* denotes a categorisation of a person, rather than singling out one person from a group.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile Vitruvius is fond of using *de* meaning ‘about’, ‘concerning’, ‘with regard to’,<sup>9</sup> and it can be noticed that he does not seek stylistic perfection (as he himself often admits) and puts prepositional constructions depending on the most different verbs and expressions, for example:

Non enim de architectura sic scribitur uti historia aut poemata (5 Praef. 1).

Itaque primum de lateribus, qua de terra duci eos oporteat, dicam (2. 3. 1).

Id autem licet animadvertere etiam de nonnullis monumentis ... (2. 8. 3).

Non minus est admirandum de cupresso et pinu... (1. 9. 12).

Explicatis aedium sacrarum compositionibus in hoc libro insequenti de communium operum reddemus distributionibus explicationes (4. 9. 1).

Although there are no parallels with the verb *aio*, it seems quite possible to assume that in this case, along with the usual infinitive construction, there is also an indication of *the group* to whom this statement refers. Then the translation will be as follows:

So (through the study of many arts as a system)<sup>10</sup> about ancient architects / concerning ancient architects, Pythius says that an architect should have been able to achieve in all sciences and arts <even> more than those who studied only one art.

<sup>8</sup> In the preface to Book 8 (*De septem sapientibus Thales Milesius omnium rerum principium aquam est professus, Heraclitus ignem, Magorum sacerdotes aquam et ignem...*, 8 Praef. 1) we also see a strictly limited group of persons, but the enumeration of all its members leaves no doubt about the meaning of the preposition: of the Seven Wise Men one ... the second ... etc. Thus, a parallel to our place would be: of the ancient architects Pythius affirmed ..., Philo ..., Satyros ... etc.

<sup>9</sup> Along with the spatial sense ‘from what’, ‘of what’ (*OLD* 1, 2) and to denote material (*OLD* 8, ‘made of ...’). Some cases can be used to detect the significance of prepositions *de* and *ex*: *Sin autem non erunt harenaria, unde fodiat, tum de fluminibus aut e glareis erit excernenda, non minus etiam de litore marino* (2. 4. 2), while other show that they were used quite freely: <lateres> *faciendi autem sunt ex terra albida cretosa sive de rubrica* [a sort of clay, prob. the modern *terra rossa* *OLD* 4] (2. 3. 1); ...*ita conlocanda, uti, ex tepidario in caldarium quantum aquae caldae exierit, influat de frigidario in tepidarium ad eundem modum* (5. 10. 1).

<sup>10</sup> Vitruvius argues above that the seemingly disparate sciences form a unified structure that helps in learning.

The word order of the sentence in question may suggest the same: the words *de veteribus architectis* are placed at the beginning of the sentence – immediately after *ideoque* that connects it to the previous phrase – and can be understood as denoting a topic or section within which a further statement will be valid, which type of transition was used by Vitruvius quite often (6. 6. 1: *Primum de salubritatibus, uti in primo volumine de moenibus conlocandis scriptum est, regiones aspiciantur et ita villae conlocentur*; 8. 5. 1: *Nunc de perdustionibus ad habitationes moeniaque, ut fieri oporteat, explicabo*).<sup>11</sup>

## II. Who Were *veteres architecti*?

However, it seems to me now that the main support for the proposed understanding should be sought in the field of meaning: can it not be supposed that, in referring to the work of Pythius, Vitruvius has in mind some old masters who were characterised by what is now recognised as impossible (*re non expeditur*)?

Then how old were these masters? In other words, were they Pythius' contemporaries (*veteres* to Vitruvius) or lived earlier (*veteres* to both)?

Although many experts on the history of ancient architecture note in this place a kind of dispute between Vitruvius and Pythius,<sup>12</sup> I see no oppositional markers here, and we get the impression that the author cites the predecessor's opinion as an example of comparable reasoning. Then the words *de veteribus architectis* possibly refer to Greek architects, *ancient* both for Vitruvius and Pythius.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This standard type of phrase construction was called “theme versus prepositional phrases with *de*” (Spevak 2010, 109–110). For pointing out works on word order, I thank my colleague Anna Kormilina.

<sup>12</sup> Vitruvius stood in favour of a long-term, but pragmatic and practically oriented training of those wishing to ascend to the sanctuary of architecture (*his gradibus scandendo ... pervenerint ad summum templum architecturae*, 1. 1. 11), whereas Pythius in his treatises had attributed to the Hellenic ideal a knowledge beyond anyone's reach (e. g. Lebedeva 2015 [Г. С. Лебедева, *Новейший комментарий к трактату Витрувия “Десять книг об архитектуре”*], 81).

<sup>13</sup> A possible argument against this interpretation is that then the infinitive (*oportere*) would be perfect one (*oportuisse*). But in three instances this verb form indicates some discrepancy between reality and what might have been necessary: 2. 1. 8 (“that this book should have come first” i. e. not second, as it is now); 3. Praef. 1; 3. Praef. 3 (of Socrates' idea of visible human thoughts).

Let us turn to the word usage. The adjective *vetus* in Vitruvius is less frequent than the adjective *antiquus*<sup>14</sup> and occurs mainly in the opposition *former – new*:

- a. *Salpia Vetus* of a settlement relocated because of bad location (1. 4. 12: *Salpia Vetus... progressi ab oppido veteri habitant in salubro loco*);\_
- b. *vetus ratio* (1. 4. 9) vel sim. as a practice distinct from modern;<sup>15</sup>
- c. *ex veteribus tegulis tecta structa*: of a brick that was already weathered by ice (2. 8. 19).

If the reference is to some epochs, then however we see no specific reference to the period; in one case it refers to the Classical period: *testimonium poetae veteris* of Euripides (9. 1. 14).

In one instance Vitruvius describes the habits of the primitive era: when men lived in forests and caves (*vetere more ut ferae in silvis et speluncis et nemoribus*, 2. 1. 1).

The most interesting example (5. 3. 8) is where the words *veteres architecti* denote the constructors of the first theatres:

*Ergo veteres architecti naturae vestigia persecuti indagacionibus vocis scandentis theatrorum perfecerunt gradationes...*

Hence<sup>16</sup> the ancient architects, following in the footsteps of nature, perfected the ascending rows of seats in theatres from their investigations of the ascending voice...<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that in this case what is important is not so much the exact chronological definition of this event, but the picture of the

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<sup>14</sup> It is the basic word for the Greek architects, whereas the Roman architects are called *antiqui nostri* (e.g. 7 Praef. 18). The derived nouns *vetustas* and *antiquitas* have no difference (see e.g. 2. 1. 5).

<sup>15</sup> The expression *veteribus parietibus* (7. 3. 10) is to be taken as referring to an old technique.

<sup>16</sup> Preceded by a discourse on the properties of sound as a wave: “Therefore, as in the case of the waves formed in the water, so it is in the case of the voice: the first wave, when there is no obstruction to interrupt it, does not break up the second or the following waves, but they all reach the ears of the lowest and highest spectators without an echo” (5. 3. 7, tr. Morgan 1914, 139).

<sup>17</sup> Tr. Morgan 1914, 139. Corso–Romano 1997, 670 understand it as calculation of the curvature.

construction of the very first theatres on the hill “by trial and error” and above all – the observation of nature. So, the opposition “*vetus* – modern” shows the difference between pathfinders and jack-of-all-trades of old times and nowadays specialists who, when necessary, can use experts’ advice along with written sources.

The same expression in the passage of the education may denote masters of the Classical period or even earlier: when the architect had to be responsible for all aspects of construction and studied a lot of things by necessity.<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to note that in this case Pythius cannot be among these ancient architects: he lived and worked in second half of the fourth cent. BCE and his buildings were considered the pinnacle of the Ionic style,<sup>19</sup> but were not part of the formation of classical order architecture.

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<sup>18</sup> Note also that the discourse “about the old days” often contains a certain amount of idealisation, which is also common to us when we speak of the titans of the past. No one of our contemporaries is surprised by the diverse talents of Avicenna, Leonardo or Lomonosov. For the ancient mind, Phidias and Aristotle could have been an unreachable model of this kind.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson 1929, 45.

- H. Nohl, *Index Vitruvianus* (Stuttgart 1965).  
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The modern translations of the Vetruvian *On Architecture* 1. 1. 12 translate *de veteribus architectis Pythius ... ait* as “one of the old architects Pythius ... says”. Meanwhile, some considerations of the usage of the preposition *de* offer an opportunity to understand it as *concerning* or *about*, the whole phrase being as follows: “That is why concerning the old architects Pythius – who designed brilliantly the temple of Athena in Priene – states in his work that an architect should be able to be <even> better in all kinds of art and science than those who reached with all diligence and practice an excellence in a single form of art”. Another argument is that the adjective *vetus*, as opposed to the closely related *antiquus*, means in Vitruvius not just ‘remote in chronology’, but ‘belonging to the concluded period’, ‘former’. Comparison with the passage 5. 3. 8 shows that the ancient architects mentioned here may be masters of the Classical or Archaic period, i.e. the predecessors of both Vitruvius and Pythius (4<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE).

Для Vitr. *De arch.* I, 1, 12 предлагается следующее понимание: “Поэтому относительно древних архитекторов (de veteribus architectis) Пифей, который великолепно выстроил храм Минервы в Приене, утверждает в своих *Записках*, что архитектор должен быть способен во всех искусствах и науках <даже> превзойти тех, кто довел изучением и трудолюбием одно дело до величайшего блеска”. Такой перевод предлога *de* соответствует особенностям словоупотребления Витрувия; кроме этого, прилагательное *vetus* в отличие от близкого по значению *antiquus* означает у Витрувия не просто “хронологически отдаленный”, а “относящийся к завершённому периоду”, “прежний”. Сопоставление с пассажем V, 3, 8 показывает, что упомянутые здесь *древние архитекторы* – это, весьма возможно, мастера классического или архаического периодов, т. е. предшественники как Витрувия, так и Пифея (IV в. до н. э.).

## CONSPECTUS

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