

# The “online glossary of historical italian building terms”: its context and some examples of entries

Hermann Schlimme

A number of studies have focused on the creation of an Italian dictionary of architectural terms in the Renaissance. Scholars have looked at Filarete's treatise (Finoli 1983) and at translations of Vitruvius by Cesariano (Cartago 1983, Maffei 1993-1994) and by Francesco di Giorgio Martini (Biffi 2001, Francesco di Giorgio Martini 2002). These studies stressed the strong influence of Vitruvius' Latin treatise on Renaissance architectural culture and its crucial role as a starting point for creating a dictionary of architectural terms. Renaissance architects put a lot of effort into fusing antique building concepts with the Italian building terminology of their time, even making the effort to include regional terms. The aim of these Renaissance authors was not, however, to include the entire spoken language of builders. They wanted to emphasise the dignity of architecture as a discipline and to single it out among other forms of practical training. Construction techniques and how they were implemented, the preparation and transportation of materials as well as building site logistics remained for the most part unwritten knowledge, which was passed on both by practical example and orally. Even Filippo Baldinucci, who published the first list of Italian architectural terms in 1681, specifically using a dictionary format, did not include the detailed terminology of building practitioners. Finally Grisellini's 18 volume dictionary (1768-1778) and Milizia (1797), following the Encyclopédie model (Diderot/d'Alembert 1751-1777), created dictionaries that were explicitly concerned with the terminol-

ogy of craftsmanship. In the 19th century there are even some dictionaries that include local terminology, such as Agostino Fantastici's (1782-1845) did for Siena (Fantastici 1991)<sup>1</sup>. However, an adequate dictionary for the Renaissance and Baroque period is still lacking. Anyone who studies the history of architecture and construction in the Italy of that time will repeatedly stumble on unfamiliar terminology in the sources. These terms have often not been used for centuries, or else they describe forgotten building techniques. The language of the sources varies from region to region and over time, and often includes words from the local dialect. In order to understand all the implications of the sources, it is essential to fully comprehend the applied building terminology. This awareness produced the idea of creating a Glossary through the joint effort of scholars who study these issues, which could be an instrument for studying topics related to the history of building. It will be a constantly growing glossary, where all scholars may contribute the results of their research, and it will not only expedite understanding of the sources for monographic studies on the History of Architecture, but will also add greatly to a more general history of practical building knowledge.

For example, the Glossary includes expressions from building contracts such as “a tutta robba” or “a maniffatura”, which at first sight are misleading. The first phrase means that the contractor had to provide the building materials, while the second phrase means that the client was required to do so. These

expressions show clearly how common language was re-utilised more specifically on construction sites. Other terms in the Glossary describe historical materials and techniques: “acqua di colla”, for example, means mixing lime and milk in plaster. “Colla di carbone” contained charcoal and was used for the darker plaster layer of “sgraffito”. A “piede” (foot) was not only a measurement unit, it also described the larger end of a wooden beam. Other terms derive from common speech or from local dialects: “mazzabeco” indicates a device used to drive in pales, but also means literally “to beat one’s mouth” (Figure 1).

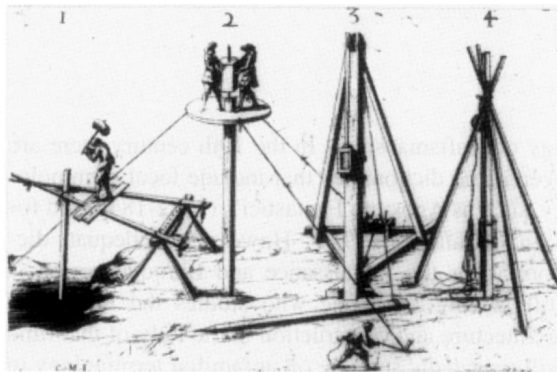


Figure 1  
From the entry for “mazzabeco”: Cornelio Meyer, *L'arte di restituire a Roma la tralasciata navigazione del suo Tevere*. Roma 1683/1685, plate 24.

The word “orso” (bear) is an example of how language developed through metaphors (cf. Biffi 2001). Modern-day readers would be unlikely to associate it with a large, stone roller that was used to finish brick floors. When sources describe how and when inside and outside surfaces were finished, they provide extremely valuable information to historians, enabling them to deduce how far the building site had progressed at a specific time. On the other hand, when building restorers know what a particular surface treatment looks like, they are better able to identify original surfaces. While Baldinucci (1681) and Milizia (1797) were not familiar with the term “orso”, Fantastici (1994, pg.227) lists it with exactly the same meaning<sup>2</sup>.

The Glossary is a joint effort of Claudia Conforti, Chair of Architectural History, Department of Civil

Engineering at the Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, and of her team (Maria Grazia D’Amelio, Nicoletta Marconi, Micaela Antonucci) collaborating with Elisabeth Kieven, Director of the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max Planck Institut for Art History in Rome and with the author of this article, who co-directs the “Epistemic History of Architecture” research project with Elisabeth Kieven. The latter research project deals with the technical and logistic knowledge of building practitioners, how that knowledge evolved, its tradition and discontinuities<sup>3</sup>.

The Glossary is already functioning (see Figure 2), is freely accessible online and currently includes more than 700 entries, of which about 200 are illustrated [4]. The Glossary follows three principles:

(1) The system is based on free, open source software, and uses ZOPE (Z Object Publishing Environment), a pre-configured web-publishing tool that can host specific databases like the Glossary. By using open source software we can avoid depending on a private commercial company, which usually keeps the source code. We can therefore develop the programme ourselves, allowing it to evolve with the input of the content.

(2) The Glossary is to be kept very simple. The web address gives immediate access without channelling visitors through various introduction pages. The Glossary works with a simple alphabetic list of articles and interlinks. There are just two levels of access: the anonymous visitor can read everything. Scholars in possession of a password, however, have the option of contributing directly to the Glossary from their workplaces. There is no need for users to install any software, they only need to have a computer with access to the internet.

(3) The Glossary is based on tried and trusted standards for editing dictionaries, and offers the option of inserting citations from sources, treatises, secondary literature, images and their respective captions.

At the moment, the dictionary incorporates two printed glossaries and a long series of entries concerning hoists and machinery used on building sites (Nicoletta Marconi). A lot of entries are the result of a careful analysis of about twenty service descriptions (“capitolati”) from 17th century Rome (Micaela Antonucci). The Glossary also includes a wide range of entries regarding the drawing and surveying instruments used by architects (Filippo Camerota).

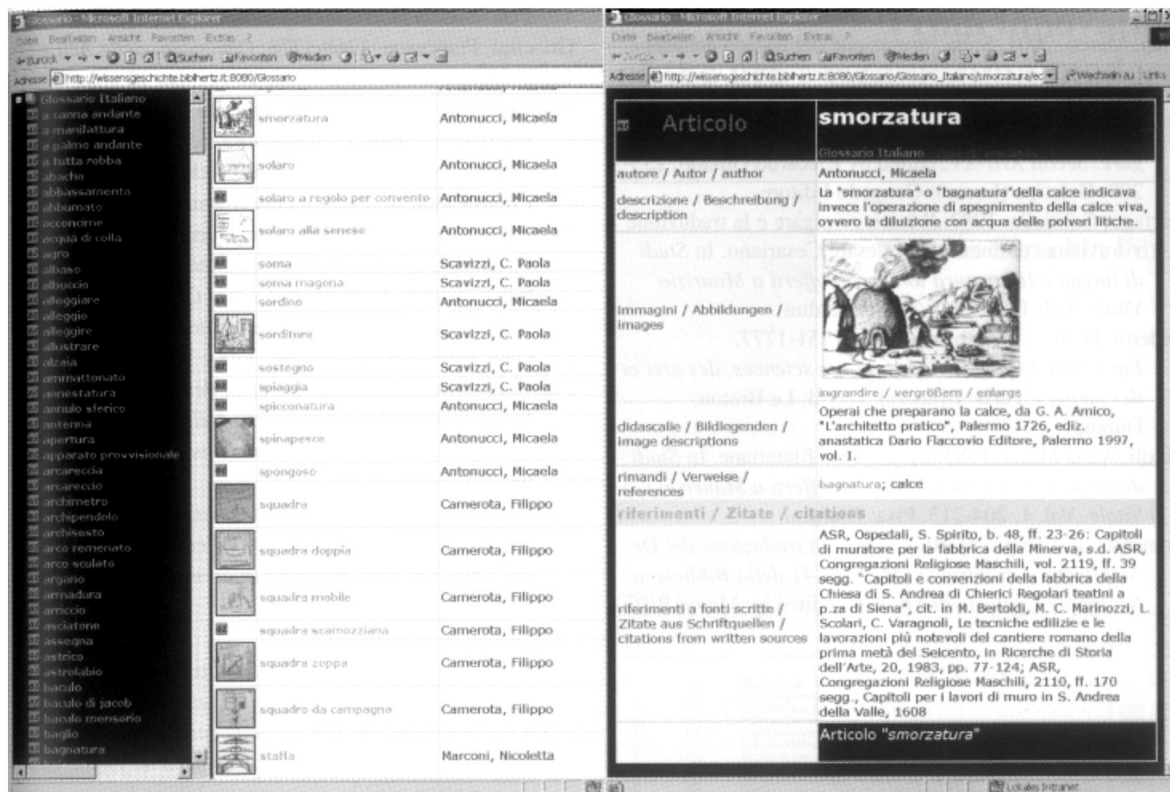


Figure 2  
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Other groups of entries will follow. At the moment, the Glossary deals mainly with the building sector in Rome during the Renaissance and the Baroque period. The plan is to incorporate other regions of Italy. Thus the Glossary offers the possibility of indicating the region where a specific term was used most and providing the option of organising entries according to this criterion. This will provide distinguishable regional word lists within one single glossary.

## NOTES

1. Biffi (2001) compiles an extensive bibliography for the development of the Italian architecture dictionary from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards.
2. Both Baldinucci (1681) and Milizia (1797) know the term "sgraffito", which stands for a well known technique within the *Arti del Disegno*. All the other terms mentioned in the text, which concern directly the building site, are ignored by both dictionaries.

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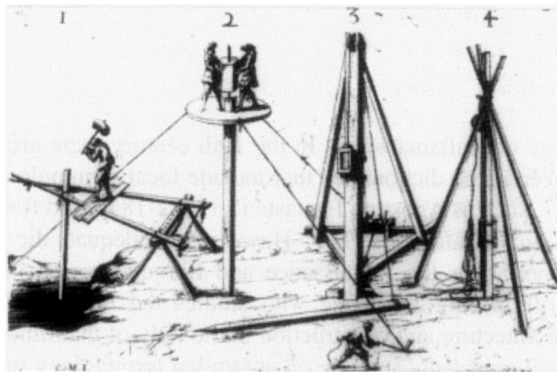


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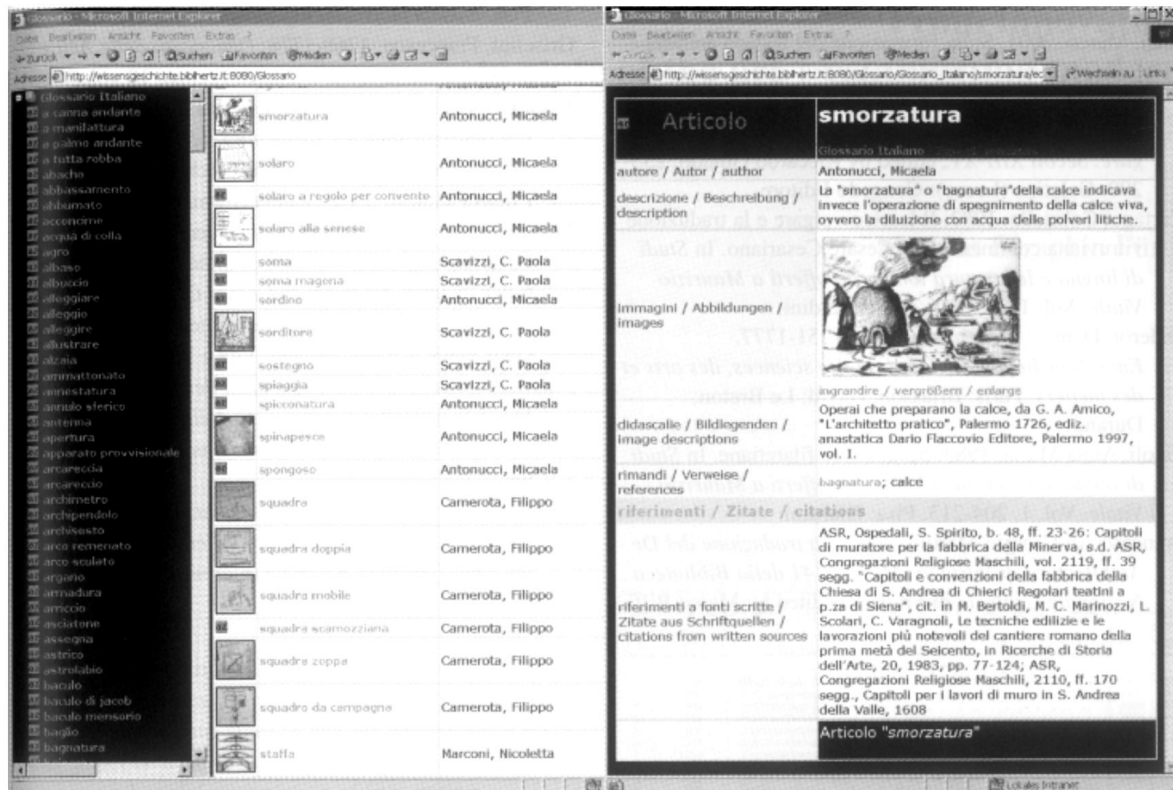


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