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CONTENT

PRESENTATION	15
NECROLOGY: NORMAN HERZ (1923-2013) by Susan Kane	17
1. APPLICATIONS TO SPECIFIC ARCHEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS – USE OF MARBLE	
Hermaphrodites and Sleeping or Reclining Maenads: Production Centres and Quarry Marks <i>Patrizio Pensabene</i>	25
First Remarks about the Pavement of the Newly Discovered Mithraeum of the Colored Marbles at Ostia and New Investigations on Roman and Late Roman White and Colored Marbles from Insula IV, IX <i>Massimiliano David, Stefano Succi and Marcello Turci</i>	33
Alabaster. Quarrying and Trade in the Roman World: Evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum <i>Simon J. Barker and Simona Perna</i>	45
Recent Work on the Stone at the Villa Arianna and the Villa San Marco (Castellammare di Stabia) and Their Context within the Vesuvian Area <i>Simon J. Barker and J. Clayton Fant</i>	65
Marble Wall Decorations from the Imperial Mausoleum (4 th C.) and the Basilica of San Lorenzo (5 th C.) in Milan: an Update on Colored Marbles in Late Antique Milan <i>Elisabetta Neri, Roberto Bugini and Silvia Gazzoli</i>	79
Sarcophagus Lids Sawn from their Chests <i>Dorothy H. Abramitis and John J. Herrmann</i>	89
The Re-Use of Monolithic Columns in the Invention and Persistence of Roman Architecture <i>Peter D. De Staebler</i>	95
The Trade in Small-Size Statues in the Roman Mediterranean: a Case Study from Alexandria <i>Patrizio Pensabene and Eleonora Gasparini</i>	101
The Marble Dedication of Komon, Son of Asklepiades, from Egypt: Material, Provenance, and Reinforcement of Meaning <i>Patricia A. Butz</i>	109
Multiple Reuse of Imported Marble Pedestals at Caesarea Maritima in Israel <i>Barbara Burrell</i>	117
Iasos and Iasian Marble between the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Eras <i>Diego Peirano</i>	123

Thassos, Known Inscriptions with New Data <i>Tony Kozelj and Manuela Wurch-Kozelj</i>	131
The Value of Marble in Roman <i>Hispalis</i> : Contextual, Typological and Lithological Analysis of an Assemblage of Large Architectural Elements Recovered at N° 17 Goyeneta Street (Seville, Spain) <i>Ruth Taylor, Oliva Rodríguez, Esther Ontiveros, María Luisa Loza, José Beltrán and Araceli Rodríguez</i>	143
<i>Giallo Antico</i> in Context. Distribution, Use and Commercial Actors According to New Stratigraphic Data from the Western Mediterranean (2 nd C. Bc – Late 1 st C. Ad) <i>Stefan Ardeleanu</i>	155
<i>Amethystus</i> : Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection <i>Luigi Pedroni</i>	167
2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: (MARBLE)	
Unraveling the Carrara – Göktepe Entanglement <i>Walter Prochaska, Donato Attanasio and Matthias Bruno</i>	175
The Marble of Roman Imperial Portraits <i>Donato Attanasio, Matthias Bruno, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadir Yavuz</i>	185
Tracing Alabaster (Gypsum or Anhydrite) Artwork Using Trace Element Analysis and a Multi-Isotope Approach (Sr, S, O) <i>Lise Leroux, Wolfram Kloppmann, Philippe Bromblet, Catherine Guerrot, Anthony H. Cooper, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, Dominique Vingtain and Noel Worley</i>	195
Roman Monolithic Fountains and Thasian Marble <i>Annewies van den Hoek, Donato Attanasio and John J. Herrmann</i>	207
Archaeometric Analysis of the Alabaster Thresholds of Villa A, Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Italy) and New Sr and Pb Isotopic Data for <i>Alabastro Ghiaccione del Circeo</i> <i>Simon J. Barker, Simona Perna, J. Clayton Fant, Lorenzo Lazzarini and Igor M. Villa</i>	215
Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy) <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Elisabetta Roffia</i>	231
Calcitic Marble from Thasos in the North Adriatic Basin: Ravenna, Aquileia, and Milan <i>John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	239
Characterisation of White Marble Objects from the Temple of Apollo and the House of Augustus (Palatine Hill, Rome) <i>Francesca Giustini, Mauro Brilli, Enrico Gallochio and Patrizio Pensabene</i>	247
Study and Archeometric Analysis of the Marble Elements Found in the Roman Theater at Aeclanum (Mirabella Eclano, Avellino - Italy) <i>Antonio Mesisca, Lorenzo Lazzarini, Stefano Cancelliere and Monica Salvadori</i>	255

Two Imperial Monuments in Puteoli: Use of Proconnesian Marble in the Domitianic and Trajanic Periods in Campania <i>Irene Bald Romano, Hans Rupprecht Goette, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i>	267
Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16 th And 17 th Centuries): the Church of <i>Santi Severino e Sossio</i> <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Martino Solito</i>	275
Roman and Early Byzantine Sarcophagi of Calcitic Marble from Thasos in Italy: Ostia and Siracusa <i>Donato Attanasio, John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	281
Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi 'Church Wreck' Cargo <i>Justin Leidwanger, Scott H. Pike and Andrew Donnelly</i>	291
The Marbles of the Sculptures of Felix Romuliana in Serbia <i>Walter Prochaska and Maja Živić</i>	301
Calcitic Marble from Thasos and Proconnesos in Nea Anchialos (Thessaly) and Thessaloniki (Macedonia) <i>Vincent Barbin, John J. Herrmann, Aristotle Mentzos and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	311
Architectural Decoration of the Imperial Agora's Porticoes at Iasos <i>Fulvia Bianchi, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i>	321
The Winged Victory of Samothrace - New Data on the Different Marbles Used for the Monument from the Sanctuary of the Great Gods <i>Annie Blanc, Philippe Blanc and Ludovic Laugier</i>	331
Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios in Gortyna (Crete) <i>Jacopo Bonetto, Nicolò Mareso and Michele Bueno</i>	337
Paul the Silentiary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina <i>John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	345
Incrustations from Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Near Modern Xanten, Germany) <i>Vilma Ruppiniè and Ulrich Schüssler</i>	351
Stone Objects from Vindobona (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Provenance of Local Stone in a Historico-Economical Setting <i>Andreas Rohatsch, Michaela Kronberger, Sophie Insulander, Martin Mosser and Barbara Hodits</i>	363
Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France): Preliminary Results <i>Elsa Roux, Jean-Marc Mignon, Philippe Blanc and Annie Blanc</i>	373
Updated Characterisation of White Saint-Béat Marble. Discrimination Parameters from Classical Marbles <i>Hernando Royo Plumed, Pilar Lapeunte, José Antonio Cuchí, Mauro Brillì and Marie-Claire Savin</i>	379

Grey and Greyish Banded Marbles from the Estremoz Anticline in Lusitania <i>Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate, Hernando Royo Plumed, Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin</i>	391
New Data on Spanish Marbles: the Case of <i>Gallaecia</i> (NW Spain) <i>Anna Gutiérrez García-M., Hernando Royo Plumed and Silvia González Soutelo</i>	401
A New Roman Imperial Relief Said to Be from Southern Spain: Problems of Style, Iconography, and Marble Type in Determining Provenance <i>John Pollini, Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate and Jerry Podany</i>	413
Reuse of the <i>Marmorata</i> from the Late Roman Palatial Building at Carranque (Toledo, Spain) in the Visigothic Necropolis <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M. and Sergio Vidal Álvarez</i>	427
Imperial Porphyry in Roman Britain <i>David F. Williams</i>	435
Recycling of Marble: Apollonia/Sozousa/Arsuf (Israel) as a Case Study <i>Moshe Fischer, Dimitris Tambakopoulos and Yannis Maniatis</i>	443
Thasian Connections Overseas: Sculpture in the Cyrene Museum (Libya) Made of Dolomitic Marble from Thasos <i>John J. Herrmann and Donato Attanasio</i>	457
Marble on Rome's Southwestern Frontier: Thamugadi and Lambaesis <i>Robert H. Tykot, Ouahiba Bouzidi, John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	467
Marble and Sculpture at Lepcis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya): a Preliminary Study Concerning Origin and Workshops <i>Luisa Musso, Laura Buccino, Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i>	481
The Pentelic Marble in the Carnegie Museum of Art Hall of Sculpture, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania <i>Albert D. Kollar</i>	491
Analysis of Classical Marble Sculptures in the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta <i>Robert H. Tykot, John J. Herrmann, Renée Stein, Jasper Gaunt, Susan Blevins and Anne R. Skinner</i>	501
3. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION II: (OTHER STONES)	
Aphrodisias and the Regional Marble Trade. The <i>Scaenae Frons</i> of the Theatre at Nysa <i>Natalia Toma</i>	513
The Stones of Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad, Serbia) <i>Bojan Djurić, Divna Jovanović, Stefan Pop Lazić and Walter Prochaska</i>	523
Aspects of Characterisation of Stone Monuments from Southern Pannonia <i>Branka Migotti</i>	537

The Budakalász Travertine Production <i>Bojan Djurić, Sándor Kele and Igor Rižnar</i>	545
Stone Monuments from Carnuntum and Surrounding Areas (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Quarry Location in a Historical Context <i>Gabrielle Kremer, Isabella Kitz, Beatrix Moshhammer, Maria Heinrich and Erich Draganits</i>	557
Espejón Limestone and Conglomerate (Soria, Spain): Archaeometric Characterization, Quarrying and Use in Roman Times <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M, Sergio Vidal Álvarez, María J. Peréx Agorreta and Eva Zarco Martínez</i>	567
The Use of Alcover Stone in Roman Times (<i>Tarraco, Hispania Citerior</i>). Contributions to the <i>Officina Lapidaria Tarraconensis</i> <i>Diana Gorostidi Pi, Jordi López Vilar and Anna Gutiérrez García-M.</i>	577
4. ADVANCES IN PROVENANCE TECHNIQUES, METHODOLOGIES AND DATABASES	
Grainautline – a Supervised Grain Boundary Extraction Tool Supported by Image Processing and Pattern Recognition <i>Kristóf Csorba, Lilla Barancsuk, Balázs Székely and Judit Zöldföldi</i>	587
A Database and GIS Project about Quarrying, Circulation and Use of Stone During the Roman Age in <i>Regio X - Venetia et Histria</i> . The Case Study of the Euganean Trachyte <i>Caterine Previato and Arturo Zara</i>	597
5. QUARRIES AND GEOLOGY	
The Distribution of Troad Granite Columns as Evidence for Reconstructing the Management of Their Production <i>Patrizio Pensabene, Javier Á. Domingo and Isabel Rodà</i>	613
Ancient Quarries and Stonemasonry in Northern Choria Considiana <i>Hale Güney</i>	621
Polychromy in Larisaeon Quarries and its Relation to Architectural Conception <i>Gizem Mater and Ertunç Denктаş</i>	633
Euromos of Caria: the Origin of an Hitherto Unknown Grey Veined Stepped Marble of Roman Antiquity <i>Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadır Yavuz</i>	639
Unknown Painted Quarry Inscriptions from Bacakale at <i>Docimium</i> (Turkey) <i>Matthias Bruno</i>	651
The Green Schist Marble Stone of Jebel El Hairech (North West of Tunisia): a Multi-Analytical Approach and its Uses in Antiquity <i>Ameur Younès, Mohamed Gaied and Wissem Gallala</i>	659
Building Materials and the Ancient Quarries at <i>Thamugadi</i> (East of Algeria), Case Study: Sandstone and Limestone <i>Younès Rezkallah and Ramdane Marmi</i>	673

The Local Quarries of the Ancient Roman City of <i>Valeria</i> (Cuenca, Spain) <i>Javier Atienza Fuente</i>	683
The Stone and Ancient Quarries of Montjuïc Mountain (Barcelona, Spain) <i>Aureli Álvarez</i>	693
<i>Notae Lapidinarum</i> : Preliminary Considerations about the Quarry Marks from the Provincial Forum of <i>Tarraco</i> <i>Maria Serena Vinci</i>	699
The Different Steps of the Rough-Hewing on a Monumental Sculpture at the Greek Archaic Period: the Unfinished Kouros of Thasos <i>Danièle Braunstein</i>	711
A Review of Copying Techniques in Greco-Roman Sculpture <i>Séverine Moureaud</i>	717
Labour Forces at Imperial Quarries <i>Ben Russell</i>	733
Social Position of Craftsmen inside the Stone and Marble Processing Trades in the Light of Diocletian's Edict on Prices <i>Krešimir Bosnić and Branko Matulić</i>	741
6. STONE PROPERTIES, WEATHERING EFFECTS AND RESTORATION, AS RELATED TO DIAGNOSIS PROBLEMS, MATCHING OF STONE FRAGMENTS AND AUTHENTICITY	
Methods of Consolidation and Protection of Pentelic Marble <i>Maria Apostolopoulou, Elissavet Drakopoulou, Maria Karoglou and Asterios Bakolas</i>	749
7. PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS ON MARBLE	
Painting and Sculpture Conservation in Two Gallo-Roman Temples in Picardy (France): Champlieu and Pont-Sainte-Maxence <i>Véronique Brunet-Gaston and Christophe Gaston</i>	763
The Use of Colour on Roman Marble Sarcophagi <i>Eliana Siotto</i>	773
New Evidence for Ancient Gilding and Historic Restorations on a Portrait of Antinous in the San Antonio Museum of Art <i>Jessica Powers, Mark Abbe, Michelle Bushey and Scott H. Pike</i>	783
Schists and Pigments from Ancient Swat (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, Pakistan) <i>Francesco Mariottini, Gianluca Vignaroli, Maurizio Mariottini and Mauro Roma</i>	793
8. SPECIAL THEME SESSION: „THE USE OF MARBLE AND LIMESTONE IN THE ADRIATIC BASIN IN ANTIQUITY”	
Marble Sarcophagi of Roman Dalmatia Material – Provenance – Workmanship <i>Guntram Koch</i>	809

Funerary Monuments and Quarry Management in Middle Dalmatia <i>Nenad Cambi</i>	827
Marble Revetments of Diocletian's Palace <i>Katja Marasović and Vinka Marinković</i>	839
The Use of Limestones as Construction Materials for the Mosaics of Diocletian's Palace <i>Branko Matulić, Domagoj Mudronja and Krešimir Bosnić</i>	855
Restoration of the Peristyle of Diocletian's Palace in Split <i>Goran Nikšić</i>	863
Marble Slabs Used at the Archaeological Site of Sorna near Poreč Istria – Croatia <i>Đeni Gobić-Bravar</i>	871
Ancient Marbles from the Villa in Verige Bay, Brijuni Island, Croatia <i>Mira Pavletić and Đeni Gobić-Bravar</i>	879
Notes on Early Christian Ambos and Altars in the Light of some Fragments from the Islands of Pag and Rab <i>Mirja Jarak</i>	887
The Marbles in the Chapel of the Blessed John of Trogir in the Cathedral of St. Lawrence at Trogir <i>Đeni Gobić-Bravar and Daniela Matetić Poljak</i>	899
The Use of Limestone in the Roman Province of Dalmatia <i>Edisa Lozić and Igor Rižnar</i>	915
The Extraction and Use of Limestone in Istria in Antiquity <i>Klara Buršić-Matijašić and Robert Matijašić</i>	925
Aurisina Limestone in the Roman Age: from Karst Quarries to the Cities of the Adriatic Basin <i>Caterina Previato</i>	933
The Remains of Infrastructural Facilities of the Ancient Quarries on Zadar Islands (Croatia) <i>Mate Parica</i>	941
The Impact of Local Geomorphological and Geological Features of the Area for the Construction of the Burnum Amphitheatre <i>Miroslav Glavičić and Uroš Stepišnik</i>	951
Roman Quarry Klis Kosa near Salona <i>Ivan Alduk</i>	957
Marmore Lavdata Brattia <i>Miona Miliša and Vinka Marinković</i>	963
Quarries of the Lumbarda Archipelago <i>Ivka Lipanović and Vinka Marinković</i>	979

Island of Korčula – Importer and Exporter of Stone in Antiquity <i>Mate Parica and Igor Borzić</i>	985
Faux Marbling Motifs in Early Christian Frescoes in Central and South Dalmatia: Preliminary Report <i>Tonči Borovac, Antonija Gluhan and Nikola Radošević</i>	995
INDEX OF AUTHORS	1009

THE TRADE IN SMALL-SIZE STATUES IN THE ROMAN MEDITERRANEAN: A CASE STUDY FROM ALEXANDRIA

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Abstract

A group of sculptures found in the eastern suburbs of Alexandria, Egypt, allows us to analyse the production, trade and display of statuary in domestic contexts.

This collection is composed of 13 statues and statuettes. Eight of these are reduced in size, belonging to the well-attested types of mythological statuettes which decorated Late Antique domus and villas. Two female portrait sculptures can be associated with the owner's family and, finally, three objects – which are the only ones not made of white marble – consist of a table stand, a sphinx, and a small statuette of Isis.

The analysis of marbles in relation to sculptural technique allows the identification of two groups and two different production processes and trade patterns. Nevertheless, their archaeological context reveals that these artefacts were part of a single assemblage and decorative programme.

Keywords

small-size sculpture, trade, Alexandria

1. Methodology

The identification of the stones was based on examination of their macroscopic features, since archaeometric analyses were not permitted. This is also based on parallels with known marbles commonly employed at Alexandria. The identification of Proconnesian marble was possible through parallels with numerous groups of artefacts found at this city (statues, sarcophagi, and architectural elements). Recognition of other marble types is more hypothetical, being fundamentally based on historical patterns and parallels with sculptures kept in museums in Athens, Afyon and Aphrodisias. A significant parallel is represented by a small statuary group of Aphrodite and Pan in the museum at Afyon, showing similar features to the Aphrodite and Eros of Mehamara.



Fig. 1. Alexandria city map with an indication of the Mehamara area (Google Maps)

2. Previous research on the sculptures

During the 1973 excavations in the Mehamara area at Alexandria, near Sidi Bishr (Fig. 1), a group of sculptures was found approximately 1 m below the present ground level hidden in a hoard¹. The group consists of 13 sculptures made of white marble, except for one object made of basanite, a limestone sphinx, and a pavonazetto table stand. The height of most objects is between 30 and 140 cm².

The area of Sidi Bishr is known for the discovery of private houses of the Roman period³. Due to their small sizes, it has been hypothesized that these sculptures were part of the decoration of a private building in Alexandria. The poorly preserved structures that formed the original Mehamara complex may have been destroyed after its abandonment, perhaps around the late fourth or fifth century AD. At that time the statues may have been hidden to prevent their destruction by Christians⁴.

1 GASSOWSKA 1977, 99-118.

2 SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 148-161.

3 DASZEWSKI, EL SHEIKH, MEDESKZA, 1990, 100.

4 KISS 2007, 187-206; KRISTENSEN 2009, 158-175; POLLINI 2013, 1-29.



Fig. 2.
Alexandria
National Museum,
standing female
figure (photo:
P. Pensabene)

It has been recently observed that this ensemble of statues was part of a collection composed of pieces with different chronologies, following a Late Antique fashion⁵. This phenomenon can be recognized inside villas, where it could be significantly widespread, as in the case of Chiragan in Aquitania⁶, but also in urban or suburban contexts, as in the Villa of Theseus at Nea Paphos in Cyprus⁷, and in a residence in the outskirts of Antiochia⁸. Some examples from Late Antique mid- and small-sized urban

houses can be identified at Ostia too⁹. Since this group was found as part of a hoard, it closely recalls other Late Antique contexts of the same kind and poses the same challenges to an attempt at a correct interpretation.

Despite the significant number of sculptures belonging to this group, the attention of scholars has been mainly focused on two or three specific sculptures only, while most of them have been almost entirely neglected. Moreover, these pieces have not been considered as part of a collection that reflects the cultural and religious trends of the building's owners. Even if other interpretations are possible, one cannot discard the possibility that these statues were all stored together at the same time. For this reason, the hypothesis that they came from the same context remains the most probable one.

3. Analysis of the group: various workshops and marbles

Among the Mehamara sculptures there is only one life-sized statue (1.76 m high), which portrayed one member of the family owning the residence¹⁰ (Fig. 2). In contrast, the other statues consist of small-size depictions of deities (Aphrodite¹¹, Dionysus¹², Harpocrates¹³, Asclepius¹⁴, and Hygeia¹⁵), a pastiche reproducing the god Mars or the portrait of a Hellenistic king in a retrospective style¹⁶, and personifications (Nilus¹⁷ and Euthenia¹⁸).

5 BONFANTE, CARTER 1987, 247-257; BERGMANN 1999; KRISTENSEN 2010, 265-288; GAZDA 2015, 386.

6 HANNESTAD 1994, 117-123, 128-141, 144-149, 152; *ead.* 2007, 273-305; STIRLING 2007, 304-321. *ead.* 2008, 89-161.

7 MAIER, KARAGEORGHIS 1984, 234-236; GRIMM 1989, 168-181.

8 BRINKERHOFF 1970; HANNESTAD 1994, 117-123.

9 BOIN 2013, 247-277.

10 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102, n. 7; HANNESTAD 2007, 292.

11 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102, n. 6; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 1994, 125-126; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 156-159.

12 GASSOWSKA 1977, 100, n. 2; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; MARCADE' 2009, 135-155; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 152-153.

13 GASSOWSKA 1977, 100, n. 1 and fig. 1; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 152.

14 GASSOWSKA 1977, 101, n. 3; GRIMM 1989, 168-181; DASZEWSKI 1991, 62; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 154-155.

15 GASSOWSKA 1977, 101-102, n. 4; GRIMM 1989, 176 fig. 3; DASZEWSKI 1991, 62; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 154-155.

16 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102, n. 5; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; HANNESTAD 2007, 293; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 156-157.

17 GASSOWSKA 1977, 103-104, fig. 3; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 150-151, n. 47a.

18 In 1936, before the excavations at Sidi Bishr, the statue of Euthenia was acquired by the Graeco-Roman



Fig. 3. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Mars; B Aphrodite and Eros (photo: P. Pensabene)

On the basis of both the subjects portrayed and their size, these eight sculptures can be divided into four groups: Aphrodite and Mars (Fig. 3); Dionysus and Harpocrates (Fig. 4); Asclepius and Hygeia (Fig. 5); Nilus and Euthenia (Fig. 6). This division was probably intended to reproduce a symmetrical setting, perhaps inside niches in an open space, in connection with fountains.

Moreover, the collection includes a reclining female portrait¹⁹, interpreted as part of a sarcophagus lid,

Museum of Alexandria as a private donation from Baron Charles de Menasce. ADRIANI 1961, II, n. 204; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 150-151.

19 GASSOWSKA 1977, 102-103, nn. 8-9, fig. 2; SAID MAHMOUD 1995, 412-414. Several mistakes were made in the past studies, which resulted in an incorrect list of pieces of the Mehamara Collection. In particular, confusion reigned with regard to the reclining female portrait. This was primarily due to the fact that the head and body were published separately on different occasions in GASSOWSKA 1977, p. 102, cat. 8, fig. 2 and cat. 9, and also in DASZEWSKI 1990, 100, where the author follows the list of 13 objects by Gassowska adding the word “standing” to the mention of the headless female statue, which, in reality, corresponds to the reclining figure described in Gassowska. In SAVVOPOULOS BIANCHI 2012, 148 the reclining woman is missing, while two additional pieces - in fact corresponding to this single statue - are mentioned: “a headless statue of a female figure” and “a head of a young woman”. Moreover, in HANNESTAD 2007, 292-293 a list of 13 objects is indicated, but only nine of them



Fig. 4. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Harpocrates; B Infant Dionysus (photo: P. Pensabene)

showing facial features similar to those of the standing woman (Fig. 7). It can be attributed to a mausoleum that was included in the property, as testified by a passage of Strabo (17, 1, 16-17) mentioning that gardens of rich Alexandrians, often including family tombs, were present in this area.

The Mehamara group would primarily testify to the presence at Alexandria of blocks coming from Proconnesos and used by local workshops, as demonstrated by the statues of Asclepius, Hygeia, Nilus, Euthenia, the female portrait, and the sarcophagus lid. However, this collection also attests to the importation of small-size, half-polished statues (Fig. 10b). These are represented by the statue of Harpocrates, made of a white, translucent marble with a blackish-blue surface and medium and small crystals, perhaps to be identified as a white marble from Docimium (Fig. 4a); Dionysus, also made of a white, translucent marble with fine grains (probably Pentelic, even if Göktepe marble cannot be excluded) (Fig. 4b); Aphrodite taking off her sandal, part of a group with two erotes and

correspond to Gassowska’s description (the female portrait, Asclepius Hygeia, Harpocrates, Dionysus, Mars, a female personification lying down on a sphinx (Euthenia), Nilus, and Aphrodite with Eros), while the other four sculptures do not belong to the Mehamara group. These later are: “a headless, swaying female, her right arm attached, a broken and restored torso of an old fisherman, two reclining statuettes apparently from a nymphaeum”. On the other hand, in the same paper the reclining female portrait, the table stand, the sphinx and Isis are not mentioned.

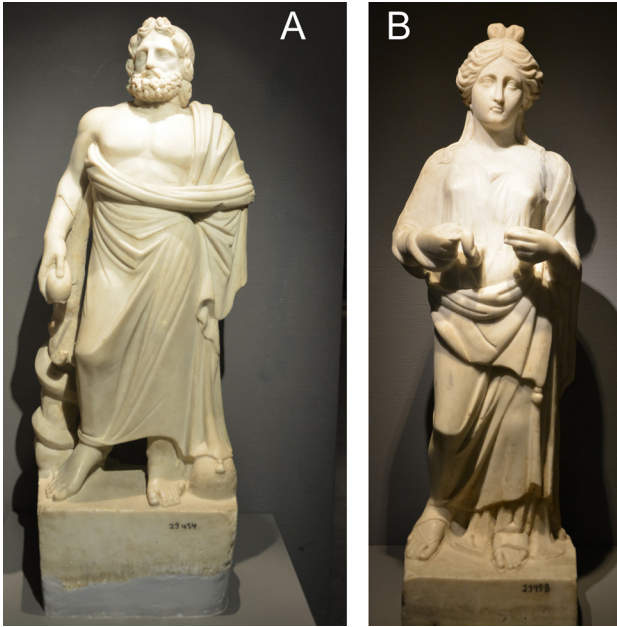


Fig. 5. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Asclepius; B Hygeia (photo: P. Pensabene)

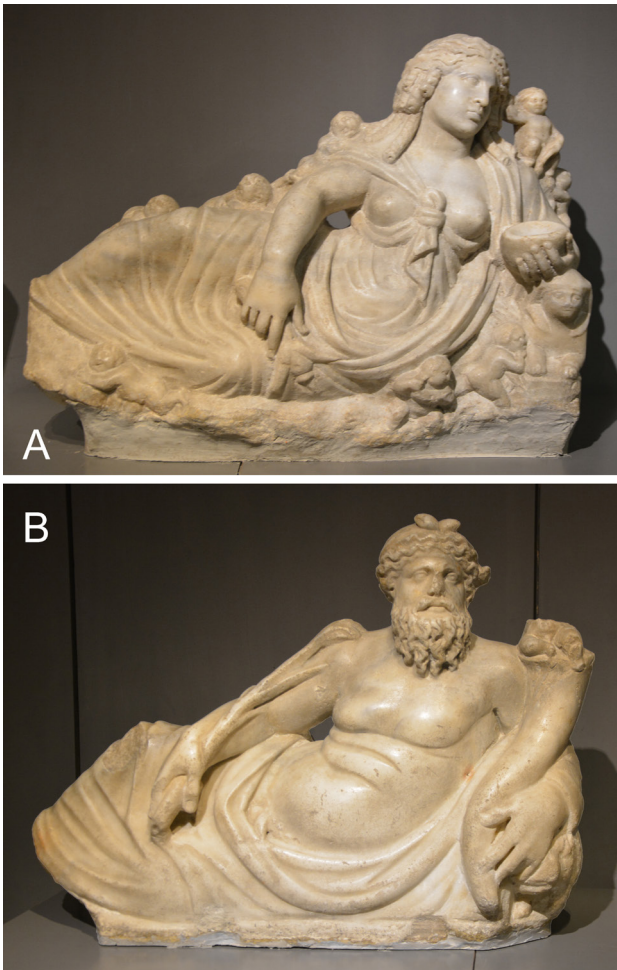


Fig. 6. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, A Euthenia; B Nilus (photo: P. Pensabene)



Fig. 7. Alexandria National Museum, reclining woman on a sarcophagus lid (photo: P. Pensabene)

Pan, made of a white transparent marble with medium and large crystals, either a white marble from Docimium or Parian marble (Fig. 3b); “Mars”, made of fine-grained marble, maybe Pentelic or white Docimium (Fig. 3a).

Finally, we would like to point out the difference in style and carving techniques between the group that can be assigned to local workshops and the group of imports. In the first group the carving of the bodies appears to be not naturalistic and only roughly worked. The rear is plain and simplified: drill grooves that could have better highlighted the folds of the drapery are not present here. The carving of the drapery shows only sporadic folds obtained with a chisel, simply by cutting the marble surface or incising triangular-shaped grooves on it.

In the second group, in contrast, one can notice a more naturalistic shape of the bodies, with an emphasis on their anatomic details, a smooth plasticity, and a careful attention to the shadows that softly fall on the bodies, according to the tradition of the Hellenistic “sfumato” style.

A particular case is represented by the Mars statue, which shows stylistic features typical of the locally-produced group. Unlike the other statues of the group, however, it is made of fine-grained marble and shows a moulded pedestal similar to the imported examples. We can thus assume this was a statue with a precise meaning. Given the subject portrayed and the identical height, it is possible that the statue was produced at Alexandria following the local style, with the purpose of being displayed together with the imported statue of Aphrodite. This would also explain the use of a similar marble.

Finally, the only objects which are not made of white marbles are a table stand with a lion head²⁰ (Fig. 8), a limestone sphinx²¹ and a rough basanite statuette of Isis

20 PPM I, Regio I parte prima, 367-371.

21 It was not possible to observe this object directly (length cm 26), since it is currently stored in the storehouse of the former Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria.



Fig. 8.
Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Antiquities Museum,
table support
(photo: P. Pensabene)



Fig. 9.
Former Graeco-
Roman Museum,
Isis (SAVVOPOULOS,
BIANCHI 2012, 161)

maybe belonging to the *lararium* of the *domus*²² (Fig. 9).

Some scholars proposed that the statues of Aphrodite, Dionysus and Harpocrates (both portrayed as infants) were Alexandrian products. This assumption was solely based on the fact that Alexandria was a metropolis in which many specialized workshops could have been based²³.

In contrast, we prefer to consider these statues as part of the activity of Late Antique workshops specialized in polishing small-size and good quality idealized statues. Their work was probably inspired by the presence of imported products coming from Aphrodisias and Docimium (Fig. 10 b). There is indeed a strong formal and stylistic connection between the Mehamara statues and a series of small statues of deities, heroes and other mythological figures that were inspired - rather than being mere copies - by Classical and Hellenistic models. All of them also feature a similar base moulding, with two thin tori and in some cases a shallow plinth underneath, as shown by the statues of Aphrodite, Dionysus, Harpocrates and Mars. The bases supporting the statues of Asclepius, Hygeia, Nilus and Euthenia present instead undecorated plinths of varying thickness, which were probably carved from the same marble blocks as the

figures above them (Fig. 10a). It has been ascertained that the moulded bases can be dated from the Hadrianic period, when close parallels can be identified in various Attic sarcophagi, then continuing to be documented throughout the third and fourth centuries²⁴.

4. Parallels elsewhere in the Mediterranean and the later Roman sculpture market

The purchase of small-size sculptures within the Roman market is a topic to which scholars have recently dedicated much attention²⁵. The discussion mainly focuses on two different models: according to the first model, one can hypothesize the existence of a standardized production in the quarries, which was independent of demand; in the other case, emphasis is put on the on-demand production of these objects. On a general scale, it must be stressed that production and sale mechanisms were also connected to the role played by the *mercatores marmorum* in distributing these artefacts.

Objects arrived in Egypt either as finished products or as roughed-out blocks. If one looks at the typical

GASSOWSKA 1977, 104, n. 13; DASZEWSKI 1990, 100; SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 148.

22 SAVVOPOULOS, BIANCHI 2012, 160-161. The statue is currently under study by Mervet Seif el Din. We would like to thank her, as well as Mona Haggag, for providing helpful suggestions.

23 HANNESTAD 2007, 293.

24 MARCADE' 2009, 137-140.

25 PENSABENE 2013, 540-563, 580-585; for the exports from Aphrodisias: *Ibid.*, 348-358; RUSSELL 2013, 311-344; *idem*, 2015, 192-199. See also the case of Thasian exports of prefabricated statuettes in HERRMANN, ATTANASIO, VAN DEN HOEK 2015, 155-161, that includes also a sculpture from Alexandria (fig. 8).



Fig. 10. Mehamara Collection, A Locally carved products from imports of Proconnesian blocks; B Locally finished products from imports of half-polished statues from several quarries

Aphrodisian sarcophagi found at several sites within the Egyptian metropolis, it is clear that these were roughed out at the quarry and finished once they reached their destination.

Being Egypt's main harbour, Alexandria was a crucial reception point for much of the imported marble and it easily supported a number of thriving sculptors' workshops. In smaller towns, sculptors may have produced objects made of a variety of stones, especially the abundant Egyptian limestone. The existence of itinerant sculptors is also possible, perhaps following requests in co-ordination with the supply of adequate marble²⁶.

Another point we wish to stress concerns the size of the blocks the statues were carved from. With

the exception of Aphrodite, Dionysus and Harpocrates, the sculptures seem to have been carved from very thin blocks, so that the figures appear more developed in width rather than in depth. This is particularly evident in the case of the female portrait, the sarcophagus lid, and the lying figures of Nilus and Euthenia (Fig. 10 a).

The same phenomenon has been observed at Cyrene, where it has been proposed that the Parian and Pentelic marble blocks²⁷, which were employed for small-size statues, were cut from larger imported blocks originally intended to be used for larger honorary statues²⁸.

26 RIGGS 2015, 564-565.

27 ATTANASIO, KANE, HERZ 2009, 352.

28 KANE, CARRIER 1988, 204.

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