

# Paul the Silentiary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina

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# ASMOSIA XI

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# CONTENT

<b>PRESENTATION</b> .....	15
<b>NECROLOGY: NORMAN HERZ (1923-2013) by Susan Kane</b> .....	17
<b>1. APPLICATIONS TO SPECIFIC ARCHEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS – USE OF MARBLE</b>	
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 <sup>th</sup> C.) and the Basilica of San Lorenzo (5 <sup>th</sup> 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 <sup>nd</sup> C. Bc – Late 1 <sup>st</sup> C. Ad) <i>Stefan Ardeleanu</i> .....	155
<i>Amethystus</i> : Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection <i>Luigi Pedroni</i> .....	167
<b>2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: (MARBLE)</b>	
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 <sup>th</sup> And 17 <sup>th</sup> 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
<b>3. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION II: (OTHER STONES)</b>	
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
<b>4. ADVANCES IN PROVENANCE TECHNIQUES, METHODOLOGIES AND DATABASES</b>	
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
<b>5. QUARRIES AND GEOLOGY</b>	
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
<b>6. STONE PROPERTIES, WEATHERING EFFECTS AND RESTORATION, AS RELATED TO DIAGNOSIS PROBLEMS, MATCHING OF STONE FRAGMENTS AND AUTHENTICITY</b>	
Methods of Consolidation and Protection of Pentelic Marble <i>Maria Apostolopoulou, Elissavet Drakopoulou, Maria Karoglou and Asterios Bakolas</i> .....	749
<b>7. PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS ON MARBLE</b>	
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
<b>8. SPECIAL THEME SESSION: „THE USE OF MARBLE AND LIMESTONE IN THE ADRIATIC BASIN IN ANTIQUITY”</b>	
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
<b>INDEX OF AUTHORS</b> .....	1009

## PAUL THE SILENTIARY, HAGIA SOPHIA, ONYX, LYDIA, AND BRECCIA CORALLINA

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### Abstract

In 562 Paul the Silentiary described ten different types of colored stone on the walls of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. Eight of them can be clearly identified optically, but two of them, “onyx” and “Lydian,” are problematic. “Onyx” is puzzling because Paul gives no geographic origin for it, as he does for the others, but this can be explained by the use of alabaster/banded travertine from a variety of sources. The “pale yellow with swirling red” stone from Lydia listed by the Silentiary has not previously been identified in the building, but it can be recognized in a group of breccia panels on the main piers; the panels are rather similar to marble from sources that have recently been identified on the Karaburun peninsula near Izmir. Paul surely refers to this peninsula as the source of the Lydian stone; his term for the promontory corresponds perfectly to the shape of the peninsula.

### Keywords

Egyptian alabaster, Hierapolis alabaster, *giallo antico*, Lydian marble, Karaburun peninsula

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Scholars of ancient marble have frequently drawn on the poetic description of Hagia Sophia by Paul the Silentiary, composed on the occasion of the rededication of the great church of Constantinople in 562. Paul devotes a section of his text to the marbles used on the walls and pavement, giving their geographic associations and a brief visual description of them:

“Yet who, even in the thundering strains of Homer, shall sing the marble meadows gathered upon the mighty walls and spreading pavement of the lofty church? Mining (tools of) toothed steel have cut these from the green flanks of Carystus and have cleft the speckled Phrygian stone, sometimes rosy mixed with white, sometimes gleaming with purple and silver flowers. There is a wealth of porphyry stone too, besprinkled with little bright stars that had laden the river-boat on the broad Nile. You may see the bright green stone of Laconia and the glittering marble with wavy veins found in the deep gullies of the Iasian peaks, exhibiting slanting streaks of blood-red and

livid white; the pale yellow with swirling red from the Lydian headland; the glittering crocus-like golden stone which the Libyan sun, warming it with its gold light, has produced on the steep flanks of the Moorish hills; that of glittering black upon which the Celtic crags, deep in ice, have poured here and there an abundance of milk; the pale onyx with glint of precious metals; and that which the land of Atrax yields, not from some upland glen, but from the level plain: in parts vivid green not unlike emerald, in others of a darker green, almost blue. It has spots resembling snow next to flashes of black so that in one stone various beauties mingle.” (lines 617-646; transl. MANGO 1972).

Most of these stones can be clearly identified in the building. Nadine Schibille has conveniently discussed and listed the ten different types described by Paul, giving their ancient and modern names, and their applications in the church (SCHIBILLE 2014, 97-109, 241-243). Useful color illustrations are provided by Bente Kiilerich (KIILERICH 2012, Figs. 2-8). Six of the ten stones are not only unambiguously recognizable but also are used in great quantity: Carystan (*cipollino*) from Euboea, Phrygian (*pavonazzetto*) from Docimium, Asia Minor; porphyry (*porfido rosso*) from Egypt; Iasian (*rosso brecciato/cipollino rosso*) from Iasos, Caria; Celtic (*bianco e nero antico*) from the Pyrenees; and Atrax (*verde antico*) from Thessaly. Two types of stone are used less abundantly. Laconian (*serpentino*) from the Peloponnesus appears in relatively small quantities in intarsia panels mounted on the walls (Fig. 1). Mauretanian/Libyan (*giallo antico*) from Tunisia is used around an intarsia panel in the north side aisle and as broad framing bands in the narthex (KIILERICH 2012, Fig. 2) (Fig. 2). Generally the *giallo antico* is a more-or-less uniform pale yellow, but a more vivid variety with conspicuous red veins (*giallo antico brecciato*) was used in three panels in the nave on either side of the main door (Fig. 1). Another slab was reused in the pavement of the apse. The Silentiary does not call it by its familiar Latin name of Numidian marble (*marmor numidicum*); Byzantine writers of the time considered all Africa west of Egypt to be Libya, as is seen in Procopius, *Buildings*, VI.

More serious problems appear with two of Paul’s stones, “onyx” and “Lydian”. He does not mention



Fig. 1. Hagia Sophia, to left of main entrance in nave: above, “Mauretanian/Libyan” marble (*giallo antico brecciato*); below, intarsia panel of Laconian (*serpentino*) and Egyptian porphyry



Fig. 3. Hagia Sophia, nave piers, onyx band; at center and right, Egyptian alabaster; at left, white marble?



Fig. 2. Hagia Sophia, narthex, “Mauretanian/Libyan” marble (*giallo antico*) surrounding panels of “Celtic” marble (*bianco e nero antico*)



Fig. 4. Hagia Sophia, nave pier, *alabastro fiorito* (from Hierapolis?); above, Carystos marble (*cipollino*); below, Atrax marble (*verde antico*)

a geographical origin for “onyx”, although this yellow-brown, white-banded travertine can be clearly identified in the building (Figs. 3-6). The onyx or alabaster may have multiple geographic origins, making a simple definition impossible. The stone has been called both Cappadocian (GNOLI 1988, 45, note 6, 220-221) and Egyptian (SCHIBILLE 2014, 103, 243). Either identification could be correct. The onyx in the building displays a great variety of color and pattern; it ranges from brown to reddish brown to orange to honey-colored to yellow to white, and it may display elaborate cloud-patterns, mild veining, or bland, uniform fields. Much of it is honey-colored with white bands and seems compatible with an Egyptian origin (Fig. 3) (KIILERICH 2012, Fig. 4; <http://www.stonecontact.com/products-216005/aalabaster-onyx-slabs-tiles>). Turkey itself has many quarries of alabaster/onyx/travertine. Those at Thyatira, Lydia (ÇOLAK, LAZZARINI 2002) and Hierapolis (BRUNO M., 2002) were demonstrably used in antiquity, but the surviving material there does not seem to match the

Hagia Sophia onyx closely. The Silentiary speaks of the onyx of Hierapolis in his description of the ambo (pulpit) of Hagia Sophia, but he makes no mention of it in the building proper (PAUL SILENTIARY, Descr. Amb. 76-104: GNOLI 1988, 46-48). Some panels, however, seem to be the more reddish *alabastro fiorito* ascribed to Hierapolis/Pamukkale (Fig. 4); compare examples in the Corsi Collection at Oxford (slab 316) (<http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk/corsi/stones/view/316>). Some of the variety at Hagia Sophia could be due to 19<sup>th</sup> century repairs; the onyx friezes contain several slabs of whitish or yellow and white banded marble (rather than layered travertine), and at least one slab appears to be yellow and black *giallo di Siena* and thus probably from the 19<sup>th</sup> century restorations (Fig. 5). At least some of the pieces of alabaster used in sixth-century Hagia Sophia must have been second-hand since some onyx panels have moldings (Fig. 6), but most do not. The inclusion of multiple onyxes and reused stones may have contributed to the Silentiary’s reticence about the origin of the onyx.





Fig. 5. Hagia Sophia, nave pier: left, *giallo di Siena* marble; right, onyx; below, Carystos marble (*cipollino*)



Fig. 8. Hagia Sophia, main pier, rosy breccia panel (Lydian marble?) with Phrygian marble (*pavonazzetto*) patch



Fig. 6. Hagia Sophia, SW main pier, Atrax marble (*verde antico*) framed by panels of *alabastro fiorito* (from Hierapolis?) and reused panels with moldings



Fig. 9. Hagia Sophia, narthex gallery, bluish and reddish Phrygian marble (*pavonazzetto*)



Fig. 7. Hagia Sophia, main pier, rosy breccia panel (Lydian marble?); surrounded by Atrax marble (*verde antico*) and Iasian marble (*cipollino rosso*)

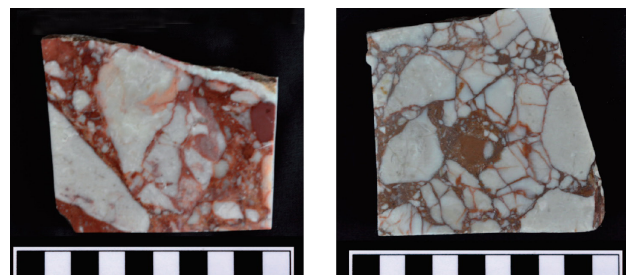


Fig. 10. Breccia corallina samples from recently identified ancient quarries in Lydia: left, Toprak Alınmış (Karaburun peninsula); right, Çakmakli (Manisa). From BRUNO *et al.* 2012, figs. 7-8

Only one of Paul's marbles, Lydian, cannot be readily identified in Hagia Sophia. From his description ("the color of pale yellow mixed with red"), it is generally accepted that the stone is *breccia corallina* (GNOLI 1988, 239; KIILERICH 2012, 10; BRUNO, BIANCHI, 2015, 62). This is a type of colorful marble that was widely used throughout the Mediterranean (AA, 64, Fig. 14; LAZZARINI 2009, 472, Fig. 12). The best-known source of the stone is at Vezirhan, Bithynia (LAZZARINI 2002). *Breccia corallina* from Vezirhan, however, does not seem



Fig. 11. Justinian's provinces. From JONES 1964, 1451, map 6

to be present on the walls of Hagia Sophia. Lorenzo Lazzarini has identified it in a roundel (which is not currently visible) in the pavement (LAZZARINI 2002, 64, Fig. 14), but the roundel probably stemmed from a 14<sup>th</sup> century Cosmatesque-style addition. The stone, in fact, seems to be very rare in Constantinople in general. Lazzarini could identify only one other example, a column shaft in Hagia Irene (LAZZARINI 2002, 64, Fig. 14). Not only is *breccia corallina* from Vezirhan absent from the sixth-century structures of Hagia Sophia, but it also is unlikely that the stone ever had a significant presence there. The church's paneling is complete enough for it to be said that there is really no place for it. Much of the marble paneling of the outer walls of the side aisles has been replaced with painting, but it is hard to believe that the Silentiary would have put so much emphasis on a marble confined to this peripheral position. Furthermore, Vezirhan lies in Bythynia across the Bosphorus from Constantinople (Fig. 11), and it is hard to believe Paul would have placed it in Lydia.

Since the other nine marbles the Silentiary describes have a significant presence on the walls of the church, it is very likely that Lydian marble is also present in Hagia Sophia and that it has simply been overlooked. It therefore seems legitimate to pick the most likely candidate for the "pale yellow mixed with red" from Lydia among the surviving marble panels of the church. A prime candidate is a group of breccia panels in the wainscoting of the main piers at ground level; these panels have faintly yellow clasts in a light pink or lilac-colored cement, and at first glance they appear to be a kind of *pavonazzetto* (Fig. 7). The yellowish tone of the clasts, however, emerges in comparison with the white clasts of

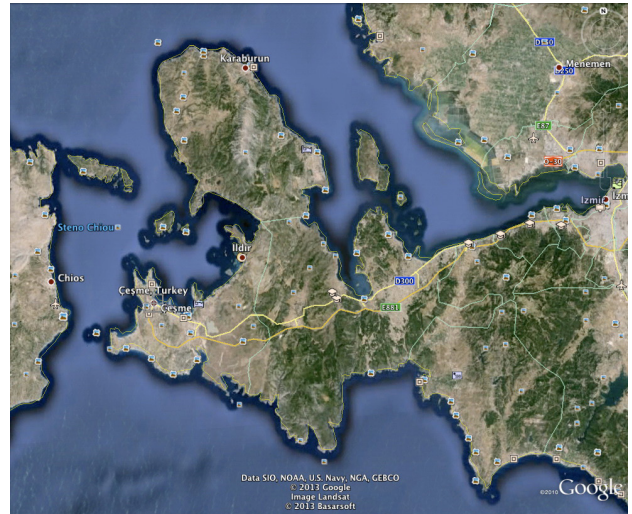


Fig. 12. Air view of the Karaburun peninsula. From Basarsoft; <http://ercaninal.blogspot.com/2013/02/karaburun.html>

the surrounding *verde antico*. These panels form a distinct group, being used on the sides of the main piers facing one another, and were not seen elsewhere. Although the panels resemble *pavonazzetto*, they are distinctly different from the Phrygian *pavonazzetto*, quarried at Afyon or the *pavonazzetto* of Aphrodisias (BRUNO *et al.* 2012, 564, fig. 2). The difference is particularly evident in places where these panels were repaired with Phrygian *pavonazzetto* (Fig. 8). The Silentiary speaks of different varieties of Phrygian marble in the church: "sometimes rosy mixed with white, sometimes gleaming with purple and silver flowers" (line 624), but distinctions between relatively red and relatively blue *pavonazzetto* can be seen elsewhere in the church among unmistakably Phrygian panels (Fig. 9, gallery narthex). The panels on the main piers stand apart for their rosier and yellower tones.

Recent exploration of Turkish quarries provides some further confirmation for the idea that this pale yellow and lilac breccia on the main piers of Hagia Sophia came from Lydia. Quarries of new varieties of *breccia corallina* have recently been found at Manisa in Lydia and at Toprak *Alınmış* on the Karaburun peninsula, on the seaward side of Lydia (BRUNO *et al.* 2012) (Fig. 10). Although published illustrations of these newly discovered breccias seem to show a somewhat redder matrix than the Hagia Sophia panels, the stones are otherwise very similar in appearance. The similarities are strong enough to leave open the possibility that the panels on the main piers of Hagia Sophia come from one of these two areas.

Of the two new areas, the Karaburun peninsula is by far the more likely source for the Hagia Sophia pier panels; the peninsula projects into the Aegean and fits perfectly the Silentiary's term of the "Lydian headland" (Ἀύδιος ἀγκών). A linguistic detail makes the reference clear: the word Paul uses for promontory, ὁ ἀγκών (ho

ankón), can mean either the bend of an arm or the headlands that form a bay. The metaphor of a bent arm corresponds well with the shape of the Karaburun peninsula as it appears on maps and in aerial views (Figs. 11, 12). The word also lies at the root of the name for the Italian city of Ancona, founded by Greek settlers from Syracuse in 387 BCE, with the name ἀγκών, which it was likewise given because of its promontory shaped like a bent arm.

The Silentiary's inclusion of the Karaburun peninsula in Lydia is somewhat puzzling since throughout the Roman Imperial and early Byzantine periods, Lydia was an inland province separated from the Aegean by the coastal province of Asia. This was true both in the Diocletianic reorganization of the provinces (DEMANDT 1998, 216) and in Justinianic times (JONES 1964, 1451, map 6) (Fig. 11). The coexistence of the provinces of Lydia and Asia is confirmed by a *novella* of Justinian in 535, which mentions the two together (MAIER no date, 2, 17). In referring to the "Lydian headland," Paul must be making a poetic and learned allusion to Lydia's control of the Aegean coast during the time of Croesus in the sixth century B.C. In a comparable way, he refers to the "Celtic crags" (Κελτικὴ ἐρίπνη), which in his day belonged to the kingdom of the Franks or the Visigoths and whose days as Gallia Celtica lay back in the time of Julius Caesar. It therefore seems highly probable that the Hagia Sophia pier panels come from Toprak Alınmış or some unknown quarry on the Karaburun peninsula and can, in modern terms, be considered *breccia corallina*.

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