

Painting and Sculpture Conservation in Two Gallo-Roman Temples in Picardy (France): Champlieu and Pont-Sainte-Maxence

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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 Bahadır 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

PAINTING AND SCULPTURE CONSERVATION IN TWO GALLO-ROMAN TEMPLES IN PICARDY (FRANCE): CHAMPLIEU AND PONT-SAINTE-MAXENCE

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Abstract

This paper is about two Gallo-Roman archaeological sites of France, in Picardy (Oise). Champlieu Temple and Pont-Sainte-Maxence Sanctuary reveal decorated buildings dated to between the Antonines and the Severans. Made in local Lutetian rocks, all the colours were enhanced when they were first discovered. The sculptures have a specific Hellenistic Greek sculptural expression and special mythological themes. Both border on an important road. Champlieu shows the vicissitudes of time since its discovery in the nineteenth century, and Pont has collapsed because of problems with the foundations. At Pont, the very fresh sculpture seems to have suffered very little erosion, suggesting that the façade had a limited lifetime.

Keywords

painting conservation, sculptures, Gallo-Roman temple

An “EXCEPTIONAL DISCOVERY”

Between March and July 2014, in France, in Picardy, in the city of Pont-Sainte-Maxence, an enormous Roman religious sanctuary was discovered beneath an abandoned soccer field, thirty miles north of Paris. An archaeological survey was conducted by the National Institute of Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP) before the construction of a big shopping plaza. The archaeological authorities of France classified the place of Pont-Sainte-Maxence as an “exceptional discovery” for its very well conservation and its major interest for the Roman architecture.

Archeological environment

The two places are in Gallia Belgica: Pont-Sainte-Maxence “le Champs Lahyre” is near the intersection of the River Oise – which is connected with the Lutetian stone carrier — and an important Gallo-Roman road; and the ruins of the city of Champlieu (Orrouy) lies 15

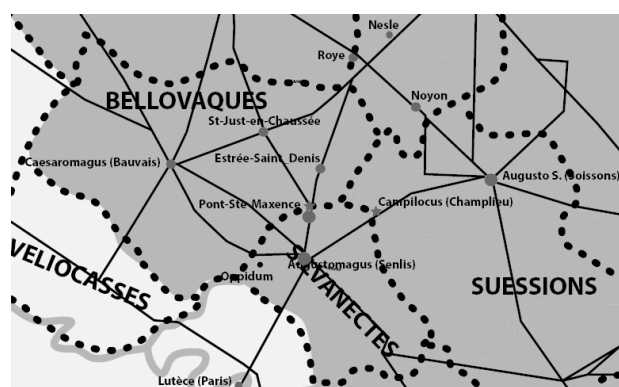


Fig. 1. Map of the strategic position in the center of the three territories (© V. Brunet-Gaston)

miles (twenty five km) to the east. Pont-Sainte-Maxence is near the border between Bellovaques and Silvanectes and Champlieu is on the border of Silvanectes and Sussions. Both seem to be in a strategic position in the center of the three territories (Fig. 1). The building of Pont-Sainte-Maxence was totally unknown to archaeologist, but lies just a short distance from the main road connecting the town of Senlis (Augustomagus) and Beauvais (Caesaromagus) or far away Bavay (Bagacum). The old ruins of Champlieu lie along the big Senlis (Augustomagus) – Soissons (Augusta Sussionum) – Reims (Durocortorum) road.

Dimensions

The precinct of Pont-Sainte-Maxence is a massive second century AD structure measuring about 345 roman feet long by 230 wide (105 x 70 m). It is two times as large as the precinct of the temple of Champlieu¹ (74 x 53 m); however, the temple is bigger (23 x 24 m, Figs. 2 - 3). The monumental entrance of Pont-Sainte-Maxence consisted of seventeen or more stone arcades, more than thirty-four feet high (10.50 m) (Fig. 4).

1 BRUNET-GASTON 2000, 143.

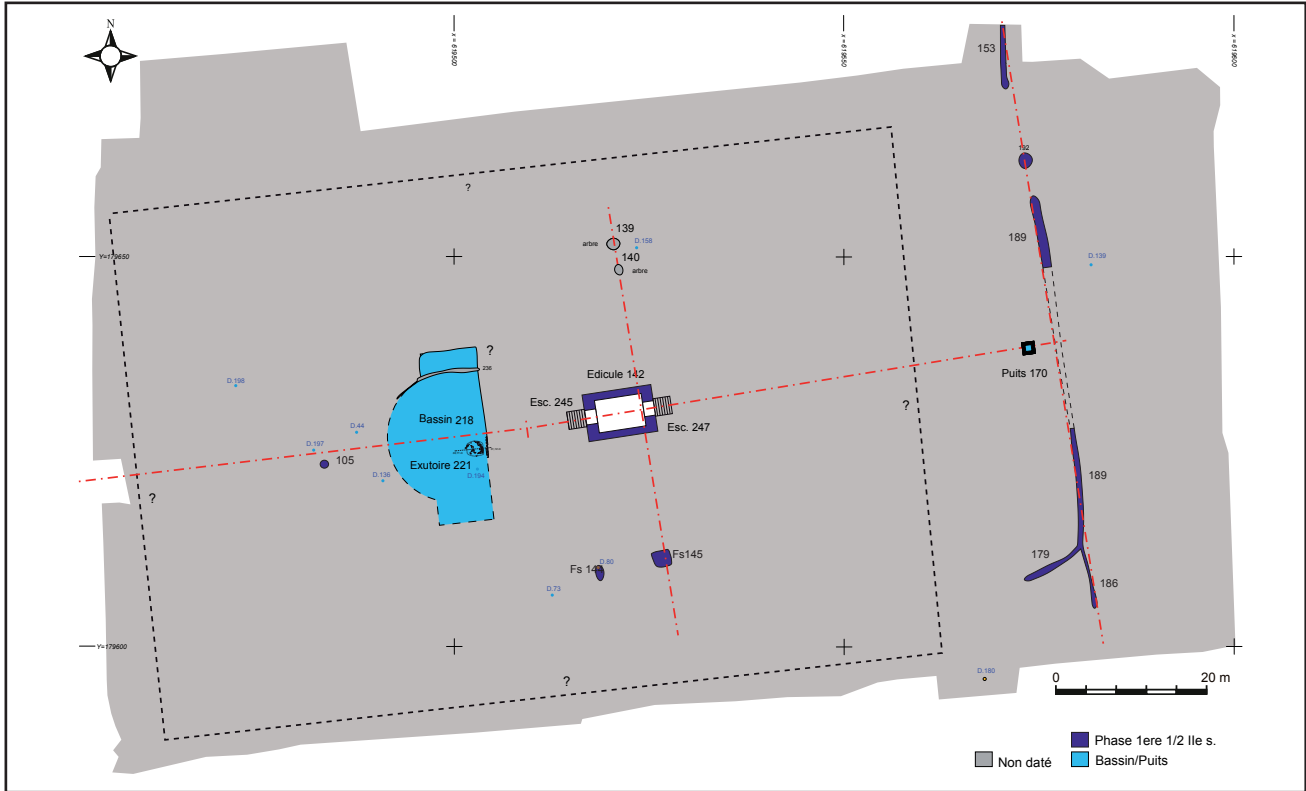


Fig. 2. Map of the site of Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© C. Gaston and V. Brunet-Gaston)

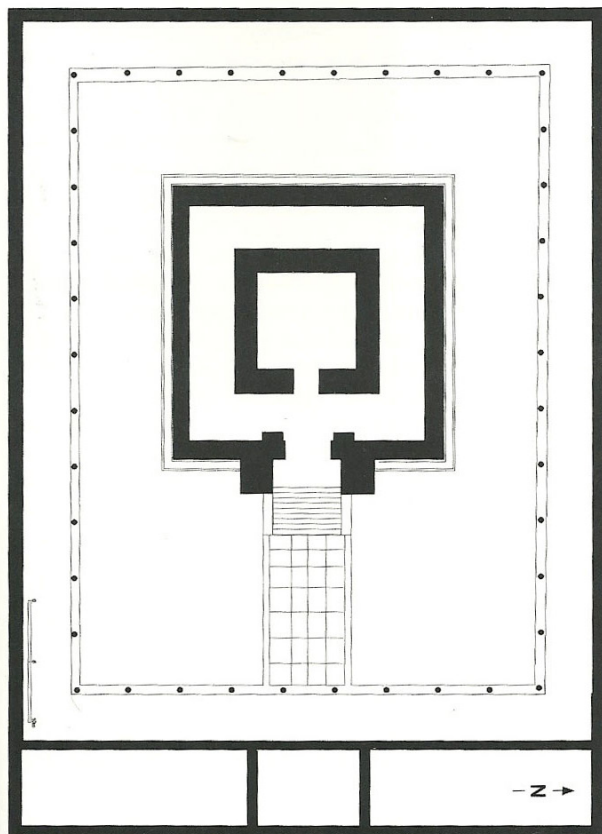


Fig. 3. Map of Champlieu Temple (© V. Brunet-Gaston after Viollet-le-Duc and G.-P. Woimant)

The limestones²

A petrographic examination of 73 samples taken from the carved blocks, revealed the use of four Lutetian limestone types:

Number of samples	Type	Fossils	Quarry region
27/73	Limestone with <i>Miliolidea</i>	<i>Miliolidea</i> & <i>Orbitolites</i> , <i>Alveolina</i>	Middle Lutetian Oise Quarries
37/73	Limestone with <i>Ditrupa</i>	<i>Ditrupa</i>	Middle Lutetian Oise Quarries
5/73	Limestone with shells	<i>Ditrupa</i> & <i>Orbitolites</i>	Middle Lutetian Quarries Valois region
	'Liais floor' "s-slabs, balustrade...	<i>Miliolidea</i>	Middle Lutetian Quarries from Senlis

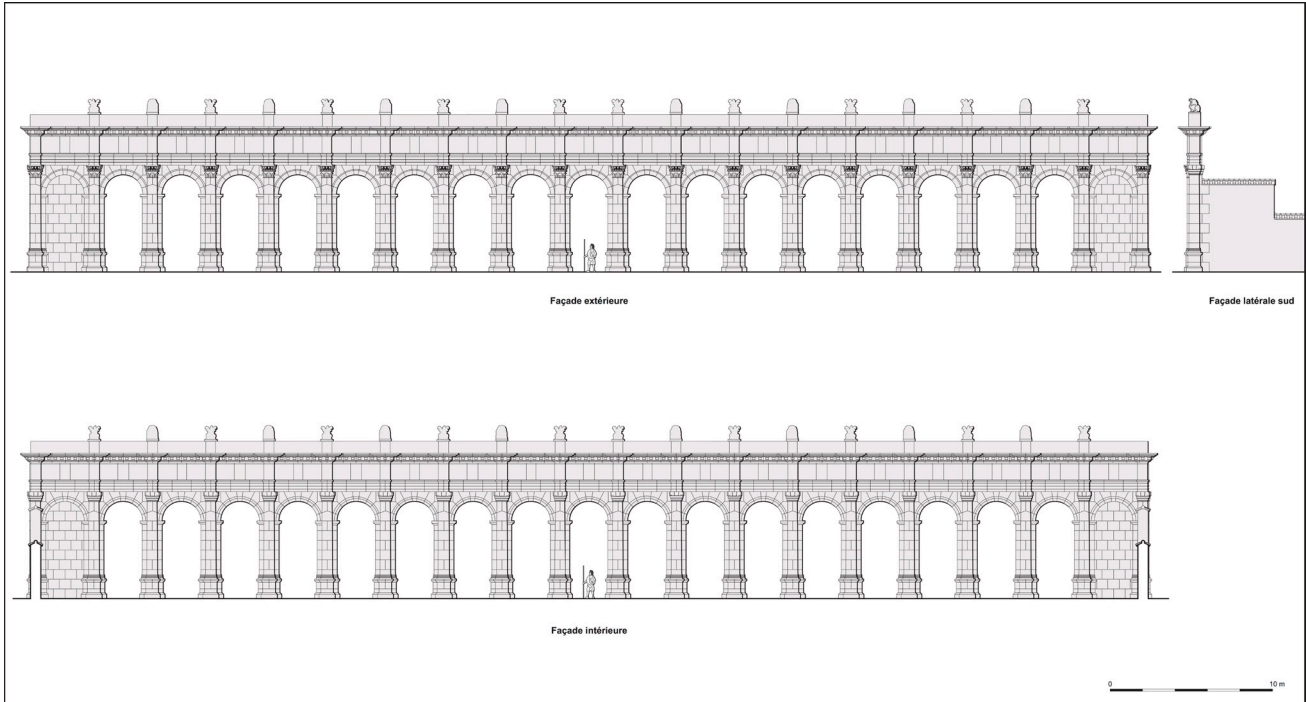


Fig. 4. Restitution of the monumental facade (© C. Gaston)

The Lutetian limestone was deposited in a warm sea that covered almost whole of the Paris region, 45 millions years ago. The Lutetian limestone is subdivided into several layers, among which the Middle Lutetian limestone, extracted from quarries in the valley of the Oise river³. These quarries produced different building stones that can be distinguished based on their fossil content. The Middle Lutetian limestone beds contains the key fossil *Ditrupa* strangulate, allowing to distinguish them from another Lutetian limestone bed, characterized by the presence of *Miliolidea*. The latter limestone produces a quality of stone called the 'Vergelé' stone by the local quarrymen. It is a rather soft limestone rich in *Miliolidea*. Other limestone beds contain large foraminifera, such as *Orbitolites complanatus* and *Alveolina*. Other limestone beds finally consist solely of fine bioclasts in a porous micritic matrix or they are quite rich in fossil shells (coquinas).

The Gallo-Roman quarries of all these limestone varieties were situated on the banks of the Oise river, near Saint-Leu-d'Esserent⁴. The fourth limestone type is the so-called 'Liais'. This variety is petrographically characterized by the presence of small bioclasts (about 0.1 mm) and of *Miliolidea* in a nonporous matrix. The latter limestone bed is more resistant to weathering than the soft limestones mentioned above. It was extracted from ancient quarries near Senlis.

3 MERLE 2008, 76-94, 240-243.

4 GELY, LORENZ, TARDY 2008.

The supply of limestone in the sanctuary of Pont Sainte Maxence is different from that of other Roman monuments that were built in the same region: here, only the Lutetian limestone with *Ditrupa* was used e. g. in Champlieu (located 30 km East of our site).

Polychromes

Some old drawing and watercolors show us the excavations of the temple of Champlieu at the end of the nineteenth century. We can see some capitals, mythological reliefs of gods like Mithras, Apollo, as well as atlantes and the griffins of the marine cortege. The watercolors are an exceptional testimony to the original colors of the building (Figs. 5 - 6). The stones are ribbed with a white distemper brush and the fonds are ocher or dark red and the reliefs are underlined with dark red. Pont-Sainte-Maxence is a monumental jigsaw puzzle; you can see a section of the fallen and smashed architectural remains of the monumental façade (Fig. 7); in different colors you can see the different architectural parts : a monumental head and griffin in dark blue, the attic in violet, cornice in pink, a frieze in ocher, and yellow for the arches (Fig. 8). The details of the anastylosis of the entrance façade (by Christophe Gaston – Fig. 9) show pilasters and arches topped by a rich entablature bearing a frieze of mythological reliefs, and may bear an inscription (one part of a bronze letter has survived). The attic is crowned with alternate monumental heads and seated griffins ready to take off. We can also see the modular layout of two



Fig. 5. Watercolors of Champlieu (© Vivenel Museum, Compiègne)

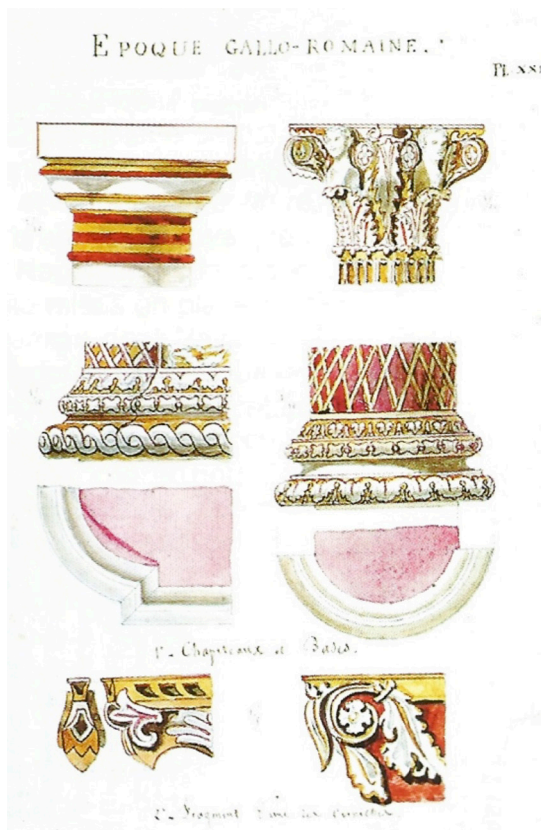


Fig. 6. Watercolors of Champlieu (© Vivenel Museum, Compiègne)



Fig. 7. Fallen and shattered architectural remains of the monumental facade (© C. Gaston)

Roman feet. On some blocks representing a griffin on a stone arcade, or another block with painted peltes, the shields of the Amazons, we can see the highlighted lines of dark red, like a little fragment of a scroll on an architrave. In fact, several fragments of the architrave preserve the traces of the incisions for carving and some colors like yellow or red (Fig. 10). However, the architraves are less ornate at Champlieu⁵. On another arcade with an allegory of victory, the face was white and the fond is red (Fig. 11); and on another face, the nostrils are painted in red! (Fig. 12). On the last block of the arcade, we can see a restitution of the red fund and highlighted details (Fig. 13). The colors are more and more visible in the recent excavations, as in the “Mediathèque Rockefeller” of Reims⁶, while the watercolors of Champlieu are also a good testimony⁷!

Fresh sculpture and bad conservation

For the theme of sculpture conservation, we have at Pont-Sainte-Maxence an exceptional figure presumed to be Venus (Fig. 14). Based on the famous statue of the crouching goddess decorating the frieze, an expressive head of an old woman appears behind the goddess. The

5 BRUNET-GASTON 2000, 149.

6 BRUNET-GASTON 2008.

7 Napoléon III et l'archéologie en forêt de Compiègne sous le second empire. Compiègne 2000.

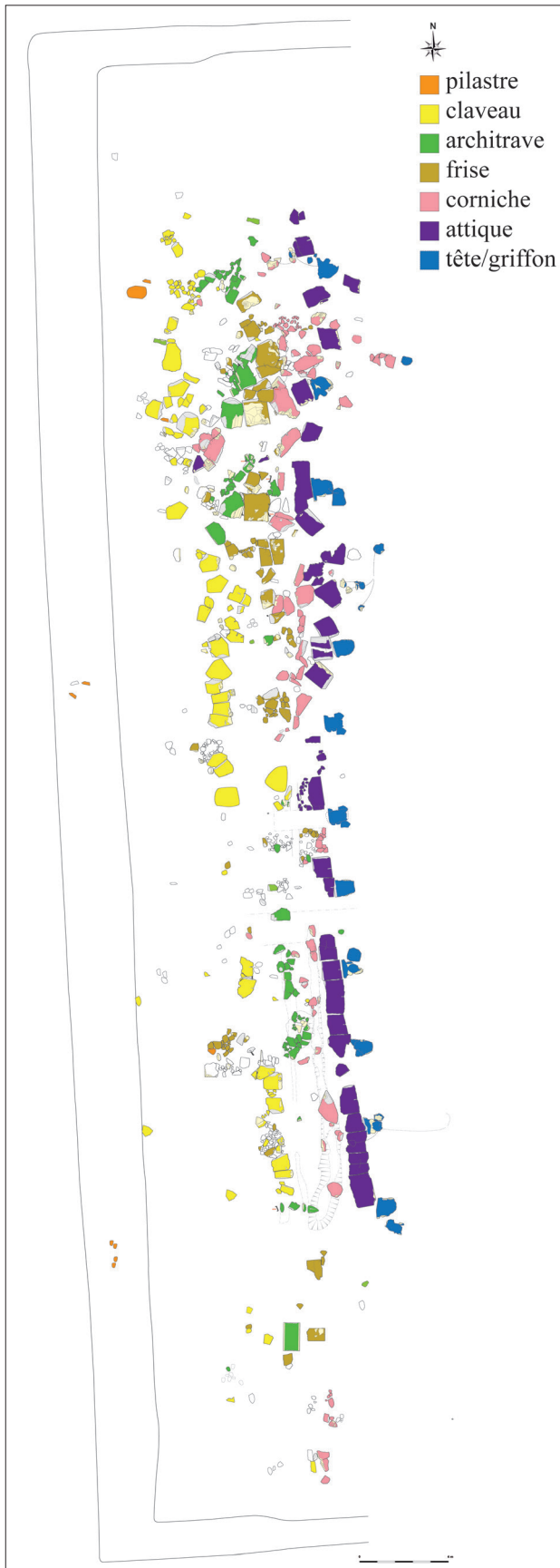


Fig. 8. Map of the monumental facade: monumental head and griffon in dark blue, attic in violet, cornice in pink, frieze in ochre and yellow for the arches (© C. Gaston)

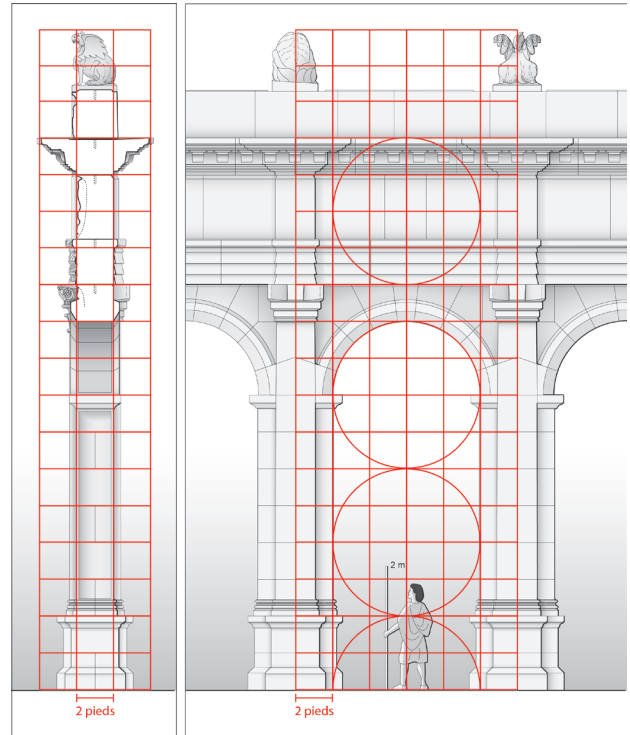


Fig. 9. Details of the anastylosis of the entrance façade (© C. Gaston)

old woman, it is a recurrent representation of a servant talking to someone as in, for example, the sarcophagus of Phaedra and Hipolytus⁸ at Istanbul (Turkey) (Fig. 15). The relief of Tethys and Achilles of Champlieu⁹ seems quite similar but there is no old woman (Fig. 16). Tethys is also representing crouching on several reliefs, but at Pont-Sainte-Maxence, there are no traces of a baby...

Workshops

A uncommon Greek meander shows the implication of an easter workshop for the architecture, such as a Rhenish workshop. We have seen this meander at Pont-Sainte-Maxence, Champlieu and also at Neumagen¹⁰. At Neumagen, we see a very similar vegetal ornament. At Reims, the meander is slightly different (Fig. 17).

Also the representation of Prometheus, from Champlieu, is very interesting: we have the same figure in Asia Minor (Turkey). We can see the Heracles freeing Prometheus panel of the southern building of Aphrodisias, at the Sebasteion (c. 20 AD – 60 AD)¹¹. It is a very rare picture of the mythological theme and I think the

8 <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/gruppen/402726>.

9 BRUNET-GASTON 2000, 146.

10 NUMRICH 1997.

11 <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/explore/monuments/180>.



Fig. 10.
Fragments of
architrave with colors,
Pont-Sainte-Maxence
(© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 11. Relief of an arcade with an allegory of victory, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 13. Restitution of the colors of a block of the arcade, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 12. Head, with nostrils painted in red, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 14. Relief of Venus, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)

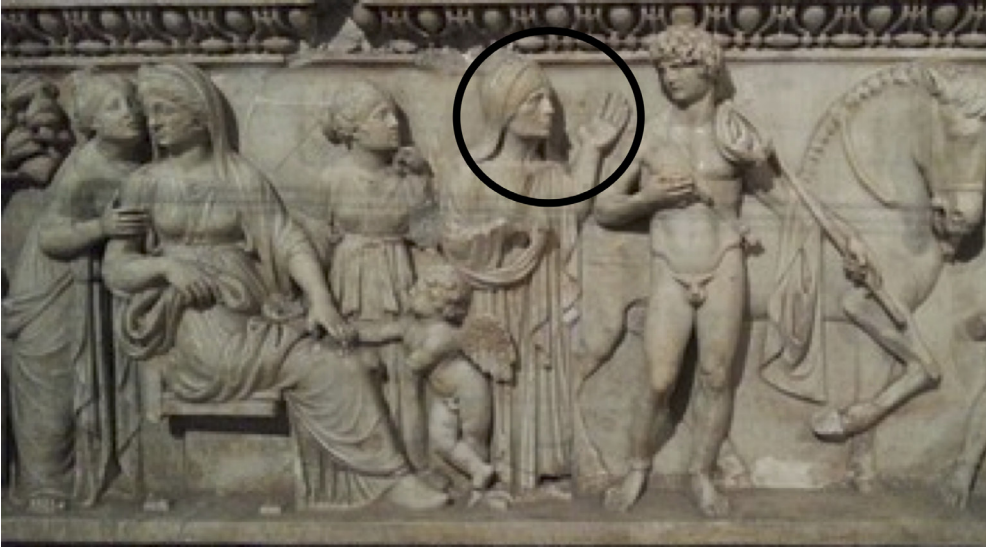


Fig. 15. Detail of old woman, sarcophagus of Phaedra and Hippolytus (© Roman sarcophagus 2nd century AD, Istanbul Archeological Museum (Turkey) inv. 18)



Fig. 16. Tethys and Achilles, Champlieu (© Vivenel Museum, Compiègne)

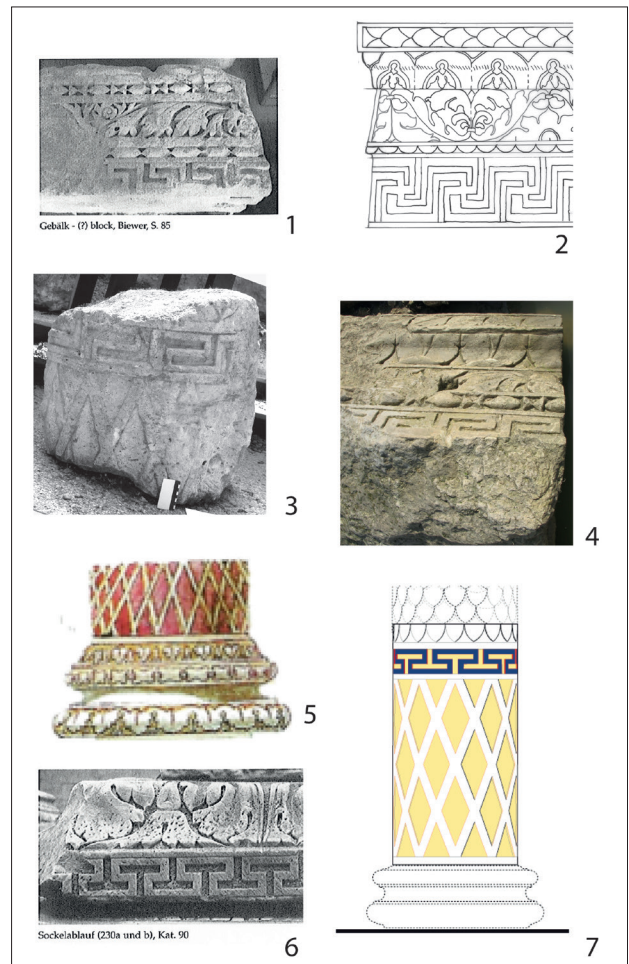


Fig. 17. Meander of Neumagen (1-6), Lutèce (2), Champlieu (3-5), Pont (4), Reims “Médiathèque” (7) (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 18. Heracles freeing Prometheus: Champlieu and panel of southern building of the Sebasteion (Aphrodisias)
 (© V. Brunet-Gaston)

sculptors came from Asia Minor with their specific “cartoons” at Champlieu in the second AD and also at Pont-Sainte-Maxence. (Fig. 18).

As a conclusion

With the study and the drawing of all the blocks of Pont-Sainte-Maxence (600 blocks and 6000 fragments), we can see the traces of painting and polychromes – however, at Champlieu all traces have disappeared with the conservation at the inclement weather on the site. Actually there is nothing remaining of the sanctuary under the temple of shopping; and the forgotten temple of Champlieu lies alone in the forest.

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