

# Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France): Preliminary Results

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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 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 <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

# MARBLES DISCOVERED ON THE SITE OF THE FORUM OF VAISON-LA-ROMAINE (VAUCLUSE, FRANCE): PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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## Abstract

Since May 2013, during the new archaeological excavations at the forum of Vasio Vocontiorum, archaeologists have discovered a large amount of slabs and fragments made of coloured marble, ornamental and architectural elements made of white marble and limestone, as well as many inscriptions on white marble slabs, and fragments of sculptures. The decoration is currently under study; it includes the main marbles of the Mediterranean basin and some local stones. The main bulk of white marble has also been analysed. Four sources of white marble have been identified: Carrara, Penteli, Proconnesus and Thassos. The dolomitic marble of Thassos is very rarely used in Gaul for architectural elements, but in Vaison, it was used for some inscriptions as well as for wall decoration – the slabs were either left unornamented or sculpted slabs, such as the bas-relief with lionesses. The rich decoration of the forum fits in harmoniously with those of the Roman villae and thermal baths of the city.

## Keywords

white marble, coloured marble, slabs, ornamental elements, forum, Vaison

study. By presenting other Vaison sites and in comparison with Orange, we can understand better the particularity of marble use in Vaison and the role of local limestone. In the following we will present the first results of the research.

## The archaeological context

The site was occupied from the first century B.C. to the Middle Ages, six principal phases of occupation having been established.

The site was probably a residential neighbourhood at first (phase I), until the construction of the forum in the course of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (phase II). The newly discovered remains belong in fact to the western portico, which includes a stylobate<sup>2</sup> and five large columns<sup>3</sup>. The size of the remains indicates that this was once a monumental building<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 1). The pillaging and destruction of the monumental complex seem to begin in the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and continue all throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> century, until the early 5<sup>th</sup> century (phase III). The looting phase is characterized by the layer of unused material, accumulated in the northwest corner of the esplanade. It is within these very abundant discharges that the numerous fragments of *opus sectile* wall decoration made with coloured marbles were found, as well as various fragments of inscriptions carved on white marble slabs or on limestone steles.

## Introduction

During the preventive archaeological evaluation that took place along Avenue Jules Ferry (La Merci 17-22 Merci Jules Ferry), prior to the construction of an accommodation center for the disabled, archaeologists discovered some remains, monumental in size, that might have been a part of the antique forum<sup>1</sup>. Since 2013, three excavation campaigns have been carried out. An important set of marble fragments was discovered and was the starting point of this

## Construction material used in the Forum and other buildings in Vaison-la-Romaine

The Roman and medieval buildings of Vaison are primarily made of small ashlar of fine grained cretaceous (Barrémien-Bédoulien) white-beige limestone.

1 MIGNON, DORAY 2011, 49.

2 Width: 1.50 m.

3 87 centimeters in diameter.

4 MIGNON, DORAY 2011, 49.



Fig. 1.  
Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum,  
stylobate and columns on the  
portico carved in local limestone  
(photo: J. M. Mignon)

The quarries were situated near the city – one west of it, the Théos hill (colline de Théos), three in the south-west – Les Roussillons, Ravin de Mars, Sainte-Catherine, and one east of Vaison – by the road to Malaucène. These quarries were exploited until the 19<sup>th</sup> century; nevertheless, due to the layer thickness (15-20 cm), they provided only small blocks. For the bigger dimension stones, a shelly limestone was imported from the quarries situated at Beaumont-du-Ventoux. These quarries, exploited until the 1950s, contained a Burdigalian limestone deposit.

Numerous fragments found at the site of the forum are carved in Beaumont-du-Ventoux limestone, but we have also found some elements carved in fine-grained cretaceous limestones. We could presume that at the moment this building was made, the layer thickness in the quarries was much more important, thus providing stone blocks for the large-dimensioned bases and cornices<sup>5</sup>.

### Marbles and decorative stones used in the decoration of the forum

The identification of marbles was made by microscopic observation of the grain size and the minerals. The decoration is currently under study; it includes the main coloured marbles of the Mediterranean basin and Gallic and local stones. The study of the marble revealed the use of fifteen varieties of coloured marble (Fig.2), which we will present according to their geographical origin, and four different kinds of white marble.

Three of the varieties come from quarries located in the territory of modern France: micritic fine grains limestone (Quarry near Vaison), **schist from Autun**

(Saône-et-Loire, France) and **yellow breccia** (maybe breccia of Lez, Pyrénées, France).

One type comes from Italy: **Bardiglio from Carrara** (Quarry from Luni)

Six are from Greece and the Greek Islands: **Antique green porphyry**<sup>6</sup> (Laconia, Peloponnese Greece), **Rosso antico**<sup>7</sup> (Peninsula of Mani, Southern Peloponnese, Greece), **Fior de pesce**<sup>8</sup> (Eretria, Euboea, Greece), **Cipollino verde**<sup>9</sup> (quarry from Karistos and Styra, Euboea, Greece), **Semesanto**<sup>10</sup> (breccia from Sciro) and **Verde antico**<sup>11</sup> (Thessaly, Greece).

Three are from Africa: **Giallo antico**<sup>12</sup> (Tunisia Chemtou), **red and black porphyries**<sup>13</sup> (Egypt) and **Granito dell'foro (?)**<sup>14</sup> (Egypt).

6 *Marmor lacedaemonium, lapis iacedaemonius, krokeatis lithos.* GNOLI 1992, 279-280, n° 121; LAZZARINI 2002, 254-25; LAZZARINI 2007, 45-69.

7 *Marmor taenarum.* GNOLI 1992, 288, n° 126; LAZZARINI 2007, 71-96.

8 *Marmor Chalcidicum.* GNOLI 1992, 212, n° 63; LAZZARINI 2002, 260-261.

9 *Marmor carychium, Marmor styrium.* GNOLI 1992, 202-203; LAZZARINI 2002, 257-258.

10 *Marmor scyreticum.* GNOLI 1992, 290, n° 128.

11 *Marmor thessalicum, lapis atracius.* GNOLI 1992, 292-293, n° 130; LAZZARINI 2002, 261-262.

12 *Marmor numidicum.* GNOLI 1992, 214-215 n° 65; LAZZARINI 2002, 243-244.

13 *Lapis porphyrites, lithos romaion.* GNOLI 1992, 274, n° 116; LAZZARINI 2002, 233-235.

14 *Marmor claudianum.* GNOLI 1992, 222-223; LAZZARINI 2002, 235-236.

5 See the geological map, 1/50 000 Vaison-la-Romaine, n°915, BRGM, Orléans, 1991.



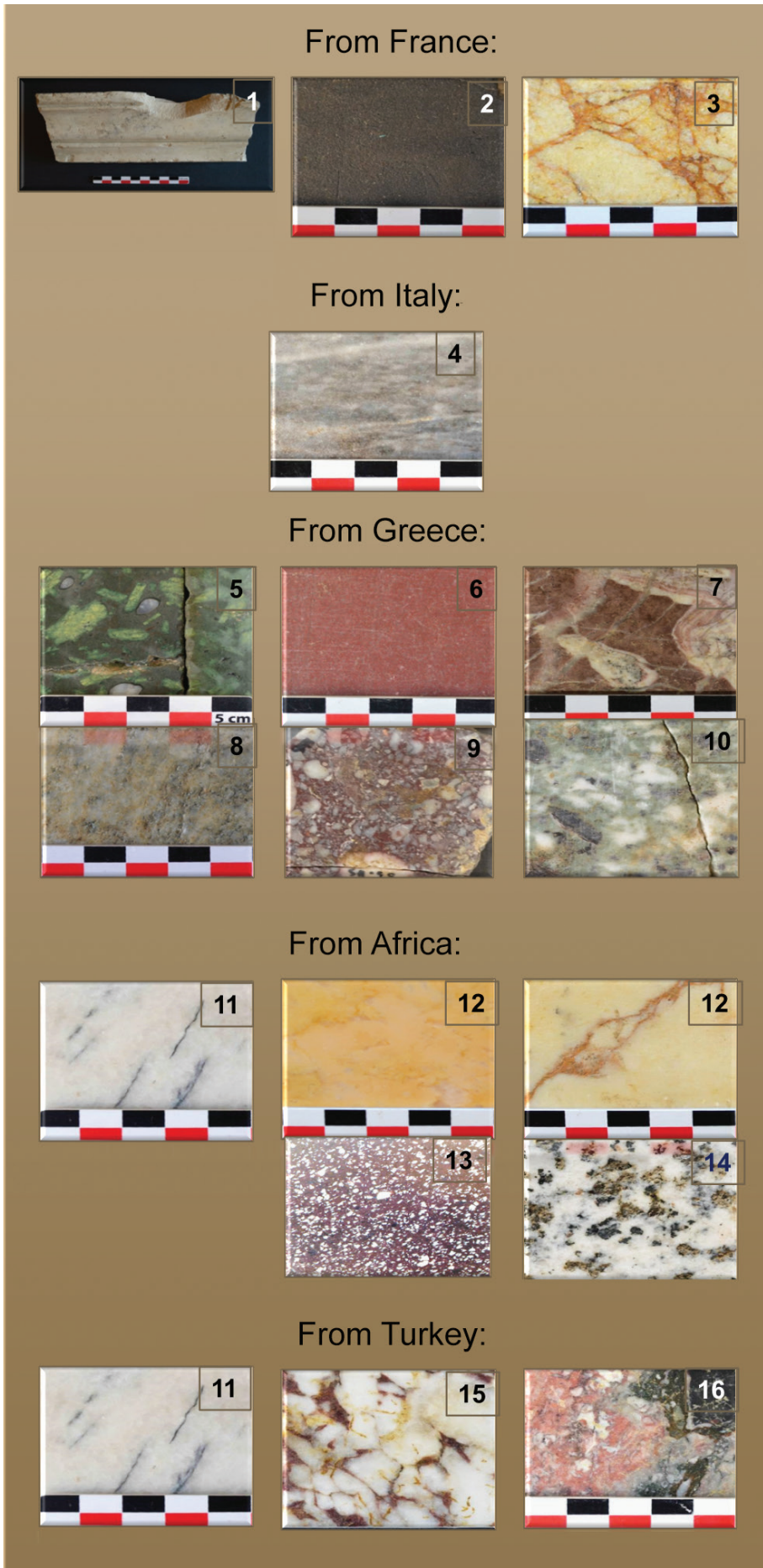


Fig. 2. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, different examples of coloured marbles used for the decoration. 1: micritic fine grained limestone (quarry near Vaison); 2: Schist from Autun (Saône-et-Loire, France); 3: Yellow breccia (may be breccia of Lez, Pyrénées, France); 4: *Bardiglio* from Carrara (quarry from Luni); 5: Antique green porphyry (Laconia, Peloponnese Greece); 6: *Rosso antico* (Peninsula of Mani, Southern Peloponnese, Greece); 7: *Fior de pesco* (Eretria, Euboea, Greece); 8: *Cipollino verde* (Quarry from Karistos and Styra, Euboea, Greece); 9: *Semesanto* (Breccia from Sciro); 10: *Verde antico* (Thessaly, Greece); 11: *Greco scritto* (near Ephesus, Turkey); 12: *Giallo antico* (Tunisia Chemtou); 13: Red and black porphyries (Egypt); 14: Granito dell'foro? (Egypt); 15: *Breccia pavonazzetto* (Afyon, Synnada, Dokimeion, Turkey); 16: *Africano* (near Teos, Turkey). (DAO E. Roux)



Fig. 3. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, cornice, white Carrara marble (photo: E. Roux)



Fig. 4. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, cornice, white Pentelic marble (photo: E. Roux)

Three come from Turkey: *Greco scritto*<sup>15</sup> (near Ephesus, Turkey), *Breccia pavonazzetto*<sup>16</sup> (Afyon, Synnada, Dokimeion, Turkey) and *Africano*<sup>17</sup> (Teos, Turkey).

Only *fior de pesco*, *rosso antico*, pavonazzetto and micritic fine grained limestone were used to carve cyma mouldings. The other types of marble were cut in slabs of variable thickness. All the plates were arranged in wall decorations. Many holes for fixing the clamps are still visible. For now, we have not identified any elements that would have been a part of a floor decoration.

As for white marbles, we have examined the size of the grains and the minerals through a magnifying glass. We had to examine a great number of slabs without decoration on them, it was impossible to undertake a careful study of each single element. So we choose to sort them in four main types, according to some simple characteristics.

**Carrara type**<sup>18</sup>: white marble with fine grain, pure white or finely veined (53 kg)

**Penteli type**<sup>19</sup>: white marble with fine grain containing fine veins or white flakes of mica (45 kg)

**Proconnesus type**<sup>20</sup>: bluish-white marble with medium grain, which gives off an odour when struck (8 kg)

**Thassos type**<sup>21</sup>: white marble with large and shiny grains, dolomitic (not reactive to the test with dilute hydrochloric acid) (77 kg)

White marbles were used to make slabs, the most common being Thassos dolomite marble, then Carrara and Pentelic marbles, and very rarely Proconnesian marble. Decorative elements are mainly made of Carrara marble, especially statuary and applied architecture, like cornices with modillions (Fig. 3). Pentelic marble was used for some large cornices (Fig. 4), similar to those made of Carrara marble.

White dolomitic Thassos marble is employed for engraving inscriptions and decorated slabs like, for instance, the relief with lionesses (Fig. 5). Some architectural appliques, such as archivolts or fluted pilasters, are also made of white Thassos marble.

#### Preliminary study of the decorations and inscription on white marble slabs

The whole batch of marble is under study, in order to provide an exhaustive inventory of the decorative elements and classify all the types of decoration found in this set of marble. The first observations have shown us the presence of various decorative sets made of marble slabs bearing reliefs from a monumental architectural order,

15 GNOLI 1992, 237, n° 83; PENSABENE 2002, 220-221.

16 *Marmor docimium; Syndicus; phrygium*. GNOLI 1992, 264-265, n° 109; PENSABENE 2002, 205-207.

17 *Marmor Lucullum*. GNOLI 1992, 133-135, n° 1; LAZZARINI 2002, 250-251.

18 *Marmo Lunense, lapis lunensis*. PENSABENE 2002, 112-114.

19 *Marmo pentelico*. GNOLI 1992, 251, n° 98; PENSABENE 2002, 207-208.

20 *Marmor proconnesium*. GNOLI 1992, 252, n° 99; PENSABENE 2002, 203-204.

21 *Marmo Greco duro*. GNOLI 1992, 253; PENSABENE 2002, 208-212.



Fig. 5. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, the Lioness relief, white dolomitic Thassos marble (photo: E. Roux)

and then elements of bay decoration and a smaller architectural order, that belong to some additional architecture.

Most of the fragments in the batch are in fact slabs of coloured marbles, used in various types of decoration, including elements belonging to a wall-decorating *opus sectile* (small pieces), to a great ornamental set with large geometric slabs, and very thin plates, which were probably part of an *opus interrasiles*.

Many inscriptions and fragments have been found, and they are currently being studied by Benoît Rossignol. Four writings are carved on white marble plaques (Penteli, Carrara, Thassos and Proconnesus). One of the biggest and most beautiful (2.14 m) is made of Proconnesus marble. It is an honorary inscription bearing the name of Marcus Titius Lustricus Bruttianus, celebrating his *cursus honorum*. With a width more important than its height, it may have adorned the pedestal of an equestrian statue. However, at this time, we still do not know which building it comes from.

### Comparison with some other buildings in Vaison

The marbles discovered elsewhere in Vaison have been, or are currently being studied. The petrographic analysis of the marbles in the north Thermae and the Maison du Paon gives us an example of the broad range of stones used in this city. Many of the wall facings in the north public baths include imported marbles, such as *Cipollino verde*, *Giallo antico*, *Fior de pesco*, *Africano*, *Pavonazzetto*, *Greco scritto*, *Verde antico*, *Semesanto*, Antique green porphyry, *Rosso antico* and *Bardiglio* from Carrara. We have two types coming from France – schist from Autun, Guillestre's pink marble, and micritic limestone, and, in a very small quantity, red griotte from the

Pyrenees. Unlike what we see in the forum, only two types of white marble are used in the Thermae, either as wall facings or mouldings. The Penteli type can be found in great quantities (over 500 kg), whereas the Proconnesus type was used in smaller amounts (about 70 kg).

In the Maison du Paon, we can find some similar choices, with the exception of *Africano*, *Verde antico*, red porphyry and *Portasanta*. As for the various white marbles, we have identified three types in the marble batch – Penteli, Proconnesus, and Carrara, the last one being the most frequently used.

This comparative study allowed us to draw attention to the great variety of marble types used in these three buildings. According to our statistics, Carrara white marble was frequently used all over the city, as well as for the decoration of the Forum and the Maison du Paon. The Penteli type has been found on all three sites and is the main component in the decoration of the public baths. The Proconnesus type is present on every site, but was used in much smaller quantities. This marble type was later reused in the cloister of the cathedral. The Thassos type was only found on the Forum. Could this possibly indicate the desire to enhance the prestige of the decoration of the Forum?

The use of marble in Vaison seems quite unique: marble plates are mostly used as veneer and to this day, we have found no large monolithic columns. This specificity is even more particular if we compare Vaison with the nearby town of Orange.

### Comparison with the theatre of Orange

The decoration of the Roman theatre of Orange is particularly rich and varied. All the existing elements are kept in the museum and its store rooms. The analysis of the white marbles, published by F. Antonelli, L. Lazzarini and B. Turi<sup>22</sup>, has shown that Carrara marble was used for the ornaments and sculptures. As for the columns, the researchers have identified at least seven different varieties of granite, marble and breccia. Many column shafts are made of fine-grained gray granite.

This large number of column shafts coming from North Africa or Asia Minor could be explained by the geographical position of Orange. The city is situated near the Rhône, and the heavy and cumbersome shafts could be brought by ship. Vaison-la-Romaine, on the other hand, is more than 25 km east of the Rhône, crossed by a much smaller river, which made the transport of heavy material difficult, if not impossible. Nonetheless, in Vaison we do find a large array of coloured marbles, as well as elements made of dolomitic marble coming from Thassos.

22 ANTONELLI, LAZZARINI, TURI 2002, 265-270.

## Conclusion

This study shows clearly that Vaison-la-Romaine may have been influenced by the Mediterranean and Italian uses of marble. The most prestigious and widely used marbles in the Empire are present. However, in Vaison, unlike in Orange, the marbles were used only for decoration, while the structural parts are of local limestone. Moreover this kind of use of Thassos marble is exceptional for Roman Gaul; as a matter of fact, white Thassos marble is very rare, and is absent in Narbonne and Orange, for example. It was used for statuary in Arles<sup>23</sup> and a few fragments of marble facing have been found in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century domus of La Verrerie at Trinquetaille (Arles). Therefore, the forum of Vaison shows us a very original decoration.

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23 BROMBLET, BLANC 2012; BLANC, BROMBLET, LEROUX 2012, 401- 406.