

The Re-Use of Monolithic Columns in the Invention and Persistence of Roman Architecture

De Staebler, Peter D.

Source / Izvornik: **ASMOSIA XI, Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone, Proceedings of the XI International Conference of ASMOSIA, 2018, 95 - 100**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.31534/XI.asmosia.2015/01.07>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:123:502815>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-11-27**



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ASMOSIA XI

Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone

PROCEEDINGS

of the XI ASMOSIA Conference, Split 2015

Edited by Daniela Matetić Poljak and Katja Marasović



Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone
Proceedings of the XI ASMOSIA Conference (Split 2015)

Publishers:

ARTS ACADEMY IN SPLIT
UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT

and

UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT
FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING,
ARCHITECTURE AND GEODESY

Technical editor:
Kate Bošković

English language editor:
Graham McMaster

Computer pre-press:
Nikola Križanac

Cover design:
Mladen Čulić

Cover page:

Sigma shaped mensa of pavonazzetto marble from Diocletian's palace in Split

ISBN 978-953-6617-49-4 (Arts Academy in Split)

ISBN 978-953-6116-75-1 (Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy)

e-ISBN 978-953-6617-51-7 (Arts Academy in Split)

e-ISBN 978-953-6116-79-9 (Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy)

CIP available at the digital catalogue of the University Library in Split, no 170529005

Association for the Study of Marble & Other Stones in Antiquity

ASMOSIA XI

Interdisciplinary Studies of Ancient Stone

Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of ASMOSIA,
Split, 18–22 May 2015

Edited by
Daniela Matetić Poljak
Katja Marasović



Split, 2018

Nota bene

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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

THE RE-USE OF MONOLITHIC COLUMNS IN THE INVENTION AND PERSISTENCE OF ROMAN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Monolithic columns played a central role in the formation of a distinctive Roman architecture, especially in the periods when they were not widely produced. First, the earliest monolithic columns used in Rome during the Republican period arrived as spoils of war taken from cities in the Hellenistic east. From the beginning, architects in Rome found ways to integrate these impressive blocks into their architecture and even to invent new building types in order to accommodate the vast number of columns on hand. Second, this idea of centering the design of a new building around an accumulated set of monolithic columns was revived in the late Roman period, and is seen at many Constantinian and later churches in Rome and the provinces. Remarkable is the persistence and wide spread of this habit, which extends through Medieval, Renaissance, and even Baroque times.

Keywords

spolia, republican, late antiquity

Monolithic columns are a hallmark of the so-called “marble-style” architecture of the imperial Roman period.¹ Each shaft represents a tremendous expenditure of effort and money to quarry, transport and install. Through the first and second centuries CE, columns were manufactured in an increasingly standardized range of sizes in order to facilitate their incorporation into grand civic and religious projects. The imperial administration sponsored much of the production, and columns and other large blocks flowed toward Rome or were destined for favored projects in the provinces;² many columns were also locally produced and consumed. As an example of a local economy, we determined as part of the Aphrodisias Regional Survey Project that virtually all of

the monolithic columns used in the city were quarried locally, and none are known to have been exported.³

In this paper, I look at the central role that monolithic columns played in the formation of a distinctively Roman architecture, and examine in greater depth the period before monolithic columns were being widely produced. In the “invention” period of my title, in the first century BCE, monolithic columns were a rare foreign novelty, and not commonly used at Rome. In the “persistence” period, or roughly from the later third century CE onward, new columns were created in ever-smaller numbers, requiring increasing efficiency in the re-use of what had already been quarried. In both of these periods, builders and patrons who wanted to use monolithic columns had to rely on precious recycled ones available from among the existing stock.

The decision to include recycled columns in a new building significantly affected the design of the structure. Rather than starting with a blank slate, the builders began with significant elements of their new structure already dictated. Unfortunately no built examples survive from this earliest period, but they are known to have existed because they are mentioned in literature, such as the stage of the theater of Scaurus (see further below). Some of its documented innovations may have also appeared in the near-contemporary theater of Pompey,⁴ however, and perhaps also in the theaters of Marcellus and Balbus. From the later period, numerous examples are well preserved, the nave of Santa Sabina providing a good example with its fine set of evenly matched fluted white marble columns together with many of their original capitals and some bases.⁵

Whether Republican or early Christian, these buildings were equally impacted by the number and dimensions of their pre-existing columns. In the case of

1 MacDONALD 1981.

2 WARD-PERKINS 1992; FANT 1993; PENSABENE 2002.

3 RATTE, De STAEBLER 2012; LONG 2012.

4 Only slightly later than the Theater of Pompey is the stage of the theater at Aphrodisias, which could serve as a reflection of the general design and decoration of the theaters in the city of Rome; see PHILLIPS 2006.

5 PENSABENE 1991.

the theater stage, I argue that the superimposed levels of columns arranged in aediculae originated as a way to reorganize and logically display collections of mismatched columns. For the church, the size and number of matching columns available for the nave colonnade influenced all other dimensions, of both the plan and elevation. As for “persistence,” the duration of this practice is long, since the similar influences seen at Santa Sabina are also, I believe, found at the Florentine Baptistery and Bramante’s Tempio. In all these examples, the existing dimensions of a set of ancient, (nearly) matching columns were a significant starting point for their designs. This is not limited to Rome and Central Italy, but also seen extensively at provincial sites, such as at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor.⁶

To return to “invention,” it is very important to remember the oft-forgotten detail that the earliest monolithic columns used in Rome during the Republican period arrived as spoils of war—as literal *spolia*—taken along with art, cash, weapons, captives and slaves from cities in the Hellenistic east.⁷ The columns were ready-made with set dimensions and had been removed from other structures. From the beginning, architects in Rome found ways to integrate these impressive blocks into their architectural schemes, and even, I suggest here, to invent new building types, such as the columnar *scaenae frons* mentioned above, in order to accommodate the vast number of columns on hand.

It is not clear when the first monolithic columns arrived in Rome, and no Republican period structures that used any have survived. Certainly, monolithic columns were fairly common by the late second and earlier first centuries BCE, however, for it is not unusual to find them as cargo on shipwrecks from this period.⁸ The famous Mahdia wreck, for example, carried approximately 70 monolithic column shafts, each between approximately 2.5 and 5.0 meters tall (so about 8 to 16 Roman feet), together weighing up to ca. 300 tons.⁹

The earliest recorded great display of reused *spolia* monolithic columns was in the stage building of a

temporary theater set up by M. Aemilius Scaurus in 58 BCE.¹⁰ Pliny reports that Scaurus’ stage building used 360 columns, in a mixture of materials including stone, gilded wood, and mosaic glass; although the number sounds large, the final version of Pompey’s stage may have used about 320 columns.¹¹ Both Republican stages may have displayed statues between the columns, analogous to the statues known to have been paraded in Republican-era triumphal processions.¹² Since all of the columns, like the earlier attested statues, would have been brought to Rome ready-made, the stage building was necessarily designed in such a way as to take their dimensions and number into account.

The next use of some of Scaurus’ columns is also documented. When the stage was taken down, four of the largest—38 feet tall, made of Lucullan marble—were installed in the atrium of Scaurus’ grand house on the Palatine Hill.¹³ Then, following Scaurus’ disgrace and exile, these same columns were removed for re-use in Augustus’ theater of Marcellus.¹⁴ Other of Scaurus’ columns are believed to have been repurposed for the elaborate interior decoration of the Temple of Apollo Sosianus, which was partly sponsored by Augustus.¹⁵ Each interior wall was screened in a double-story array of *Africano* columns, and additional smaller-scale *portasanta*, *giallo antico*, and *pavonazetto* columns were used as well. A kind of false gallery ran behind the columns of the upper level, and between the intercolumniations of the lower level were aediculae capped with alternating round and triangular pediments. A surviving *pavonazetto* column sized for an aedicula is 2.36 m high¹⁶ - exactly 8 Roman feet - so comparable in scale to the smaller columns recorded at the Mahdia wreck.

6 An interesting example from Aphrodisias is the conversion of the temple of Aphrodite into a cathedral, in the 5th c CE. The columns involved are not monolithic, though they are re-used in the nave colonnade at their full height with their original bases and capitals in a new arrangement; see HEBERT 2000, CHANIOTIS 2008.

7 For the purposes of this discussion where columns continue as columns, I prefer “recycled” and “re-used” rather than “spolia,” by which I mean “spoils of war”. See also KINNEY 2001, and WARD PERKINS 1999.

8 See RUSSELL 2013, with earlier bibliography.

9 SALIES 1996.

10 Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 36.24; some of the columns may have been pilasters.

11 PACKER, BURGE, GAGLIARDO 2007.

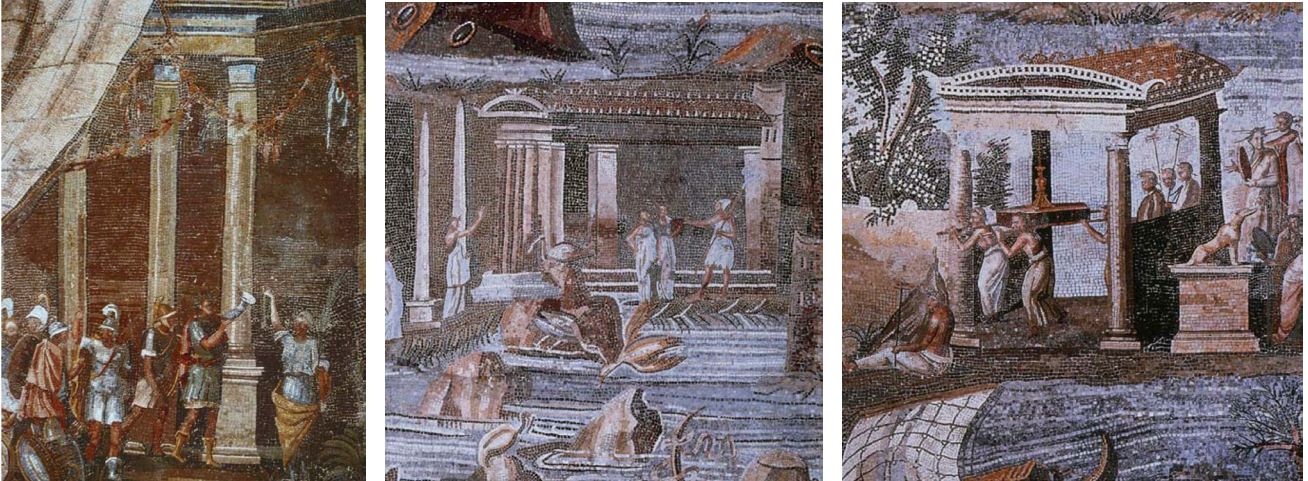
12 Examples include: M. Claudius Marcellus, Livy 24.21.8-10 and L. Annaeus Florus, 1.13.28; T. Quinctius Flamininus, Livy 34.52.4-5; M. Fulvius Nobilior, Livy 39.5.13-17; L. Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus, Plutarch 32.2-37.2.

13 Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 36.5-6.

14 The columns were re-used in the *regia* of the theater of Marcellus; see BURRELL 2015. Other Lucullan/*Africano* marble columns were used by Augustus in the Basilica Aemilia (restored in 34 BCE), and the second tier of the exedrae of the Temple of Mars Ultor, above Numidian/*giallo antico* columns in drums (dedicated 2 BCE).

15 VISCOGLIOSI 1996. This interior likely mixed *spolia* columns with new production.

16 VISCOGLIOSI 1988, 144, no. 36.



Figs. 1–3. Details of columnar structures, Nile Mosaic, Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, Palestrina (Italy), ca. 80 BCE Museo Nazionale Prenestino

To recap, some of these individual columns may have seen as many as four uses in as few as about forty years: (1) their original context, (2) Scaurus' temporary theater, (3) Scaurus' house, and (4) Augustus' new theater and perhaps temple. I argue that in all of the instances of re-use, the dimensions of the existing columns informed the design of each new structure.

It may be that by the later first century BCE Rome had already imported as many existing columns as were readily available. Since there was a demand for still more, new production for the Roman market was started, a supply and demand problem comparable to the production of new copies and versions of original Greek statues. Through the first and second centuries CE, complex systems developed within the imperial administration and regionally to manage quarries and supply columns.¹⁷ Since the columns were critical to the designs, but were difficult to make and took time to deliver, their production—and the architecture they were designed for—became increasingly standardized,¹⁸ thus making them easier to recycle. The high imperial situation is the one so familiar to us: huge monolithic columns, in distinctive colored marbles, all of similar sizes and proportions, from limited sources in Rome, Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, and North Africa.

This all raises two fundamental questions: Where did the Romans get the original monolithic columns? And why did they expend so much effort and treasure to make and distribute even more of them?

One hint to the origin of monolithic columns comes from the beginnings of the large-scale import of

marble to Rome, and Suetonius' prologue to the famous quote of Augustus, that he had found Rome a city of brick, and left it a city of marble. Augustus did this in part because: “the city was not adorned as the dignity of the empire demanded.”¹⁹ From this we may assume that capitals of other empires were appropriately adorned, and the most logical contenders are Antioch or Alexandria, each the seat of an intensely luxury-aware culture. Unfortunately, relatively little is directly known of either site from this period, but luckily, Roman interest in their building habits is reflected in their own decorative arts.

But first, some parameters. The monolithic columns brought to Rome as war booty in the first century BCE were not singled out as especially notable, but warranted only secondary mention. Therefore they may have been relatively small scale and numerous. Scaurus had perhaps 100 or so at his disposal, and among the larger were the four 38-footers. These could have been among the largest and heaviest blocks of stone ever moved through the city, however, since when they were brought from the Campus Martius up to his house on the Palatine, a sewer contractor forced a security deposit from Scaurus against possible damage to the drains under the streets.²⁰ Presumably the majority of his columns were smaller than these.

The question, then, is where could a relatively large number of relatively small monolithic columns have come from? Since Scaurus' columns were re-used first in a secular building, then in a private residence, they likely did not originate from temples, or at least not temples dedicated to gods also venerated by the Romans. In contrast, when Sulla took column drums from the

17 See WARD-PERKINS 1992; FANT 1989; FISCHER 1998.

18 See especially WILSON JONES 2000.

19 Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 28.3.

20 Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 36.25; EVANS 2007.



Fig. 4. Detail of columnar structures, red cubiculum (room 16), Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase, ca. 10 BCE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

unfinished temple to Olympian Zeus at Athens, it was to use them in his rebuilding of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline, nominally in the same context, then. Materials originating from non-religious contexts would have been free from this restriction.

One option for the origin of these monolithic columns is from smaller scale pavilions, local shrine buildings, or most likely luxuriously appointed tombs. This type of building appears with some frequency in the “Nile Mosaic” at Palestrina (Figs. 1–3). Accounting for some vertical exaggerations, the column shafts on the façades of these structures could be somewhere between 8 and 12 feet tall—like the Mahdia columns and the Temple of Apollo Sosianus aediculae—and the bright highlight running down each one may suggest an un-fluted monolithic shaft. Each structure could have been the source of an even number of matched columns, and therefore Scaurus’ four 38-footers could represent the total number of columns from the façade of one original structure, and his roughly 100 columns could have come from perhaps 25 to 40 structures. The symmetrically arranged, alternating aediculae of the theater stage building could then essentially be stacked-up and packed-together luxury tomb façades. Even high imperial columnar façades made of all new materials maintained significant allegiance to this mix-and-match aesthetic.

Columns also appear frequently in sacro-idyllic landscapes in Third Style wall painting, inspired by a Golden-Age peace and luxury and perhaps also by a reflection of real landscapes encountered in the Hellenistic east. Landscapes from the red and black rooms of the



Fig. 5. Details of columnar structures, black cubiculum (room 15), Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase, ca. 10 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art

villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase of ca. 10 BCE illustrate this (Figs. 4-5).²¹ In addition to columns used on porches or small temple-like buildings, the paintings include a number of freestanding column monuments, each supporting a statue or an urn, and these painted columns could also be read as monolithic shafts of colored marble. Column monuments could have been a valid source for *spolia* columns, especially since the Romans likely took the statues as well.

Column monuments were used as funerary markers throughout the Hellenistic east, and also at Rome. The most famous are the historiated columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, but an earlier example is the 20-foot monolithic Numidian marble shaft for the column that marked the location of Julius Caesar’s funeral pyre. A massive interpretation of the same type of monument could have been the Column of Antoninus Pius; the plinth is scaled for a column with at least a 60-foot shaft, along the lines of one still in the quarry at Mons Claudianus.²²

Then next question is: Why? In what way and for what reasons did this expense and effort make sense to the Romans?

The Roman taste for monolithic columns coincided with a change in building technology. Through the Republican period, Roman builders developed and perfected the use of concrete, in sharp contrast to continuing Hellenistic Greek practices that still preferred to use carefully cut blocks of solid stone joined directly to one another with no intervening mortar. Earlier Greek buildings were essentially post and lintel structures, and this continued to be the practice in most Roman religious buildings, especially the façades. For most other

21 ANDERSON 1987. Columnar buildings also appear in mythological scenes.

22 PEACOCK, MAXFIELD 1997.

large buildings, though, Romans used concrete, usually faced with smaller stones or brick, or cast and molded using formwork. Concrete was initially used in utilitarian structures that needed additional protection from water or fire, but later came to be used in private and public buildings, and eventually temples.²³ The Pantheon is a defining example of the capacity of molded concrete, with its soaring coffered dome encompassing a vast volume. The interior was decorated with monolithic columns, but they do not play a significant structural role. I suggest that as building technology came to rely more heavily on the plasticity of concrete, the structurally obsolete columns became increasingly fetishized.

Large-scale imported stones symbolized the organization of the empire and the over-reaching power of Rome, and prestige accrued to a stone in proportion to the effort expended to quarry and transport it.²⁴ This is the logic behind Cicero's belittling reply to the citizens of Chios when they proudly showed him their city walls made of the internationally valued, but locally produced, *portasanta* marble: "I would be more impressed if you had made them of travertine."²⁵ His intention was not to suggest that travertine was a more suitable material—it was weak and ugly by comparison—but huge amounts of it would have had to be brought from far away, and that would have been a feat worth boasting about.

The appeal of monoliths was in part a factor of their sheer mass. To the Roman patron, the more resources that were expended in construction, the greater the potential impact on popular opinion could be. In many projects, megalithic construction should be understood as part of an orchestrated show of bravado. The transport of the elements was daunting, and the arrival of columns at their destination must have been a public spectacle. In fact, the atavistic urge to move and display large rocks continues to present day Los Angeles, where a 340-ton limestone boulder-sculpture was transported to great fanfare and internet documentation, from the quarry to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, through the streets for nine nights.²⁶

Rome had a long history of importing building stone, starting with *grotta oscura* tufa from Veii in the fourth century BCE for the Servian walls, and continuing through Greek marble for manubial temples in the second century BCE. They also had a long history of disguising baser building materials used for columns, including stucco over tufa and travertine at the Temple

of Portunus, and stucco over elaborately shaped bricks at the Basilica at Pompeii.

Rome produced monolithic columns at a break-neck pace for about 300 years. Both before and after this period, though, the Romans' desire to build monumental columnar structures was strong, so they made impressive use of the best columns that they could gather together. Some were re-used multiple times in a tight chronology, like Scaurus' original set. Others had longer periods of installation, like the corkscrew columns still at Saint Peter's Church. The continual re-use of the same precious columns persisted for generations, as a rooted means of maintaining a material link with an increasingly distant past.

23 LANCASTER 2005.

24 WILSON JONES 2000, 211.

25 Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 36.46; WARD-PERKINS 1992, 72.

26 HEIZER 2012.

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