

# Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy)

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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 Silentary, 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>Marmora</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

# ROMAN VILLAS OF LAKE GARDA AND THE OCCURRENCE OF COLOURED MARBLES IN THE WESTERN PART OF “REGIO X VENETIA ET HISTRIA” (NORTHERN ITALY)

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## Abstract

Important remains of Roman villas are preserved on the shores of Lake Garda, in the western part of “Regio X” (now Brescia province, Lombardy): Toscolano Maderno, Desenzano, Faustinella, Nuvolento. Each villa was developed over several centuries (1<sup>st</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> CE) and contains a lot of coloured marble fragments (slabs, listes etc.), mainly coming from the quarries of the Eastern Mediterranean basin.

The wide diffusion of coloured marbles in the western part of Regio X (Venetia et Histria) is then compared to the marbles found in the eastern part of the Regio XI (Transpadana), two territories today united in the region of Lombardy.

## Keywords

coloured marble, Roman architecture, Lombardy

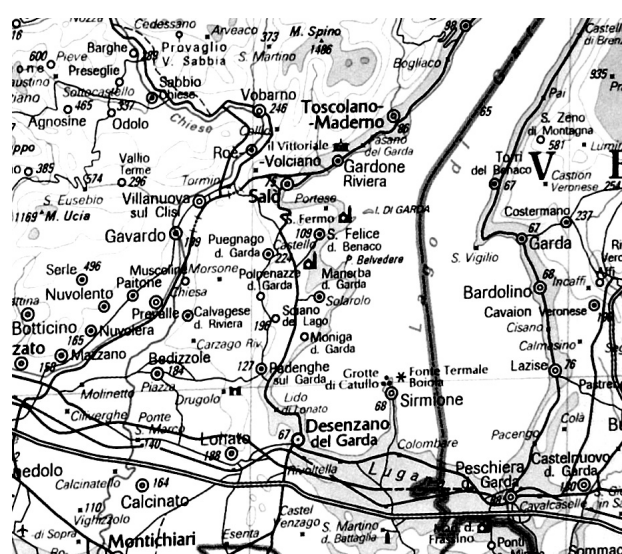


Fig. 1a. Map of the Lake Garda area (Toscolano, Desenzano and Nuvolento are indicated)

## 1. Introduction

The shores of Lake Garda (Benacus) host some of the richest and best preserved Roman villas of Northern Italy (Fig. 1a); they exhibit some architectural characteristics of the enchanting villae maritimae of Central Italy. Two villas, lying in Toscolano - Capra and in Desenzano - Borgo Regio, are the most interesting examples owing to the complexity of the architectural plans and the grandeur of the decorations with mosaic pavements, wall paintings and sculptures. These villas, built at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, were inhabited until the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE: in both cases the building schemes and the room decorations were significantly changed. Another residential villa lies a few kilometres south Desenzano (Faustinella - San Cipriano) near the Morainic Hills. Finally, a fourth villa (Nuvolento - Pieve) lies some kilometres west of Lake Garda between Brescia and Salò, and it was mainly devoted to the agriculture. Considerable amounts of pieces of coloured marble were found in these sites, pertaining to “opus sectile”

pavements, wall veneering and carved decorations. White marbles of different grain sizes or black veined or grey marbles are present in each site together with coloured ones.

## 2. Site description

### 2.1. Toscolano - Capra (Fig. 1b)

The villa was built near the western shore of Lake Garda and the remains occupy a length of about two hundred metres. A series of excavations since the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century unearthed some structures in the southern part: a lot of rooms with wall paintings and mosaic pavements; some structures in the northern part: three large rooms with a portico in front of a great water pool, 47 metres long and 6 metres wide (#52). A huge quantity of marble fragments, pertaining to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century phase, was found in a small repository dug in a niche of the water pool (ROFFIA 2015).

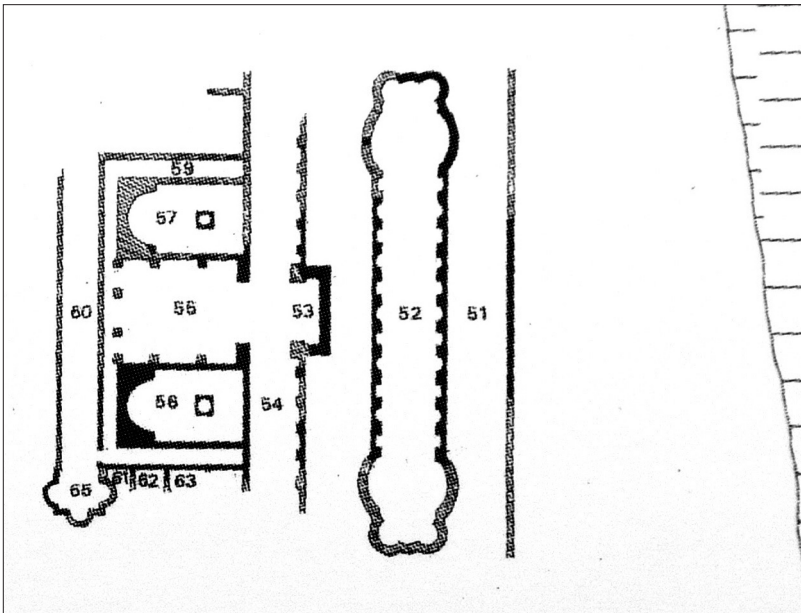


Fig. 1b.  
Plan of the Toscolano - Capra (marbles from the basin #52, northern part of the villa)

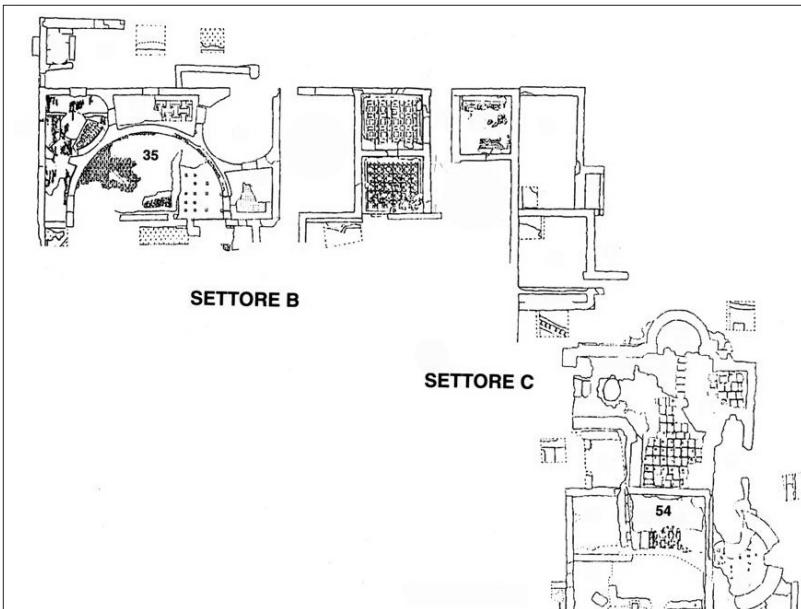


Fig. 1c.  
Plan of Desenzano - Borgo Regio (marbles linked to rooms #35 and #54)

## 2.2. Desenzano - Borgo regio (Fig. 1c)

The villa was built close to the south-western shore of Lake Garda and the remains occupy an L-shaped area surrounded by modern buildings. Series of excavations since the second quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century have unearthed three sectors including an octogonal vestibule, a peristyle, a tricora with mosaic pavements and a viridarium (sector A); some residential rooms (sector B); a thermal complex with mosaic and *opus sectile* pavements (sector C). Marble fragments were mainly found in sectors B and C during ancient and unscientific excavations: they are probably referred to the building phase marked by *opus sectile* pavements (rooms #35 and #54; late 4<sup>th</sup> - early 5<sup>th</sup> century) (ROFFIA 1994).

## 2.3. Faustinella - San Cipriano (Fig. 1d)

The villa was built near the Morainic Hills, a few kilometres south of Desenzano and the remains occupy a rectangular area (about 50x35 metres) put at risk by some commercial buildings linked to the Desenzano exit of the motorway A4 Torino-Trieste.

The excavations of the 1990s unearthed some structures around a rectangular yard pertaining to the southern and to the western parts of the villa (first half 4<sup>th</sup> century). Rooms C, D and E contain mosaic or "*opus sectile*" pavements, wall paintings and a lot of fragments of coloured marbles were discovered in a debris layer (US134) (ROFFIA 2007).



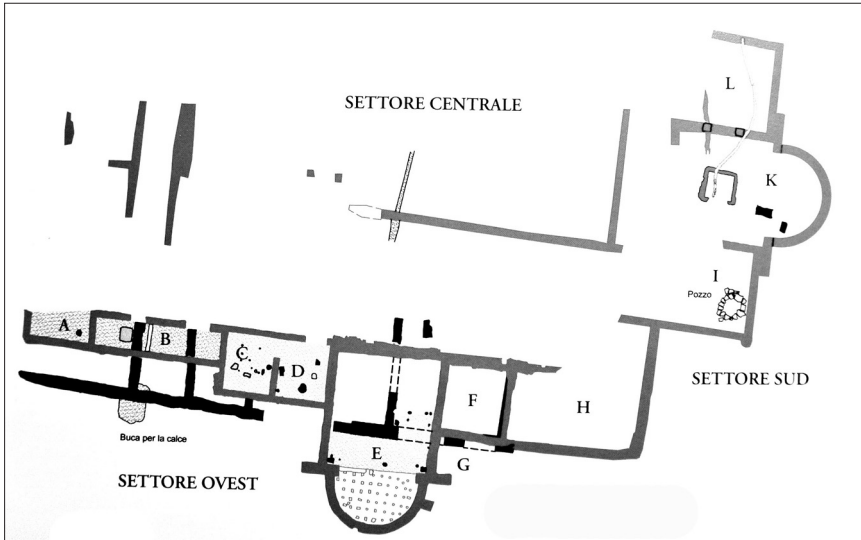


Fig. 1d.  
Plan of Faustinella - San Cipriano  
(marbles from rooms C, D and E)

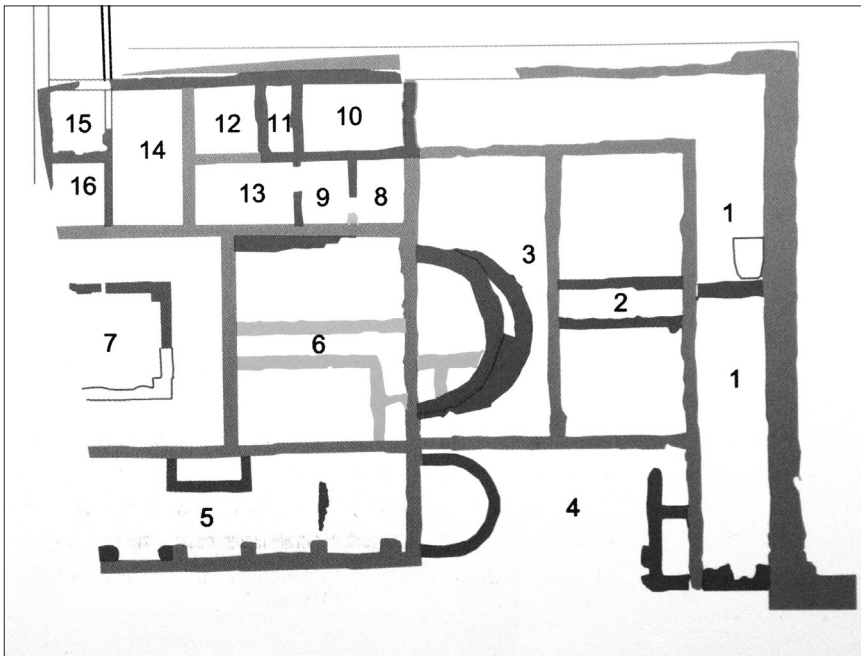


Fig. 1e.  
Plan of Nuvolento - Pieve  
(marbles from room #6)

#### 2.4. Nuvolento - Pieve (Fig. 1e)

The villa lies in the agricultural plain between Brescia and Salò, near the River Chiese and the hills of Serle plateau (renowned for the quarries of “Botticino” limestone) and the remains occupy a rectangular area (about 40x30 metres), also put at risk, by an industrial area. The residential sector with baths (room #6) was developed around a square yard at short distance from the rustic sector devoted to agriculture. The excavations of the 1980s unearthed several pieces of the ornamental arrangement pertaining to the bath rooms (third period of the building, 3<sup>rd</sup> century) (ROSSI 2012).

#### 3. Coloured marbles identification

Coloured marbles were identified in each site using traditional investigations according to the literature published in the last decades (BORGHINI 1989; DOLCI, NISTA 1992; GNOLI 1988; LAZZARINI 2004; LAZZARINI 2007; MIELSCH 1985; NAPOLEONE 2001; PENSABENE; BRUNO 1998; PRICE 2007) and were compared to coloured marble samples specifically kept in different quarries around the Mediterranean basin.

**3.1. Toscolano (Capra)**

Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)	Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)
Africano	3.5 – 16.5	Palombino	2.3 – 15.0
Breccia corallina	8.0 – 13.0	Pavonazzetto	1.9 – 12.6
Breccia Settebasi	7.8 – 16.0	Porfido rosso antico	5.0 – 14.2
Cipollino	5.0 – 24.3	Por. serpentino verde	2.4 – 32.0
Fior di Pesco	16.0	Portasanta	-
Giallo antico	2.9 – 21.9	Rosso antico	8.6 – 13.8
Greco scritto	8.0 – 15.0	Verde antico	-

**3.2. Desenzano (Borgo Regio)**

Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)	Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)
Africano	6.9 – 25.0	Greco scritto	9.0 – 21.6
Breccia pavonazza	9.0 – 19.7	Pavonazzetto	6.5 – 26.6
Breccia Settebasi	8.5 – 16.5	Por. serpentino verde	7.4 – 23.7
Cipollino	7.0 – 35.5	Portasanta	7.1 – 19.8
Fior di Pesco	6.8 – 30.5	Rosso antico	8.9 – 25.1
Giallo antico	7.5 – 32.5	Verde antico	11.0 – 16.9

**3.3. Faustinella (San Cipriano)**

Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)	Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)
Africano	4.0 – 15.2	Giallo antico	4.– 19.0
Bigio antico	9.0 – 14.3	Greco scritto	4.0
Breccia corallina	11.0 – 18.0	Pavonazzetto	6,3 – 17.8
Breccia Settebasi	9.0 – 17.5	Por. serpentino verde	11.4
Cipollino	7.2 – 15.0	Portasanta	14.0
Fior di Pesco	24.5	Rosso antico	5.0 – 17.5

**3.4. Nuvolento (Pieve)**

Stone or marble name	Thickness (mm)
Alabaster	15.2 – 21.0
Bigio antico	14.8 – 21.5
Cipollino	15.0
Greco scritto	15.0
Pavonazzetto	15.5 – 20.0



Fig. 2.  
Shaped pieces of  
Palombino from a Roman  
villa (Toscolano - Capra)



Fig. 3. Porfido Rosso Antico: upside-down view of a thin slab (thickness 10 mm) with oblique edges



Fig. 4. Porfido Serpentino Verde: listel with trapezoidal section (thickness 14 mm)

#### 4. Categories of marble fragments

The categories classified after the examination of marble fragments concerning the whole marble fragments from villas of “Regio X”, are listed below.

The thickness is almost always variable in each lithologic group, as shown by high value of standard deviation measured on the fragments of the Toscolano villa:

Africano: 70 measurements, average thickness 9.87 mm, standard dev. 2.6.

Cipollino: 180 measurements, average thickness 10.0 mm, standard dev. 3.08.

Giallo antico: 84 measurements, average thickness 8.15 mm, standard dev. 3.33.

Palombino: 125 measurements, average thickness 5.48 mm, standard dev. 1.95.

Pavonazzetto: 55 measurements, average thickness 7.25 mm, standard dev. 2.85.

Porfido Serpentino: 103 measurements, average thickness 9.27 mm, standard dev. 4.64.

1. Slab: element with two parallel faces, the profile mainly shows two right angles; in some cases a small strip rises above the surrounding surface near the corner on the rear of the slab as evidence of the sawing operation; it is worth noting the reduced thickness (lower than 3 mm) of some lithotypes (Giallo antico, Pavonazzetto) recalling an excerpt from Seneca’s “De Beneficiis” (SENECA 1928, 4.6.2): “(...) a house in which you see, not flimsy veneers, thinner than the very blade by which they are cut, but virgin masses of most precious stone (...)”.

1.1. Polygonal tile: this category concerns white or coloured marbles together with black limestones as part of pavements with geometric patterns: triangle, rhombus, square or hexagon; many slabs or fragments maintain scraps of mortar along the edges. This kind of pattern,

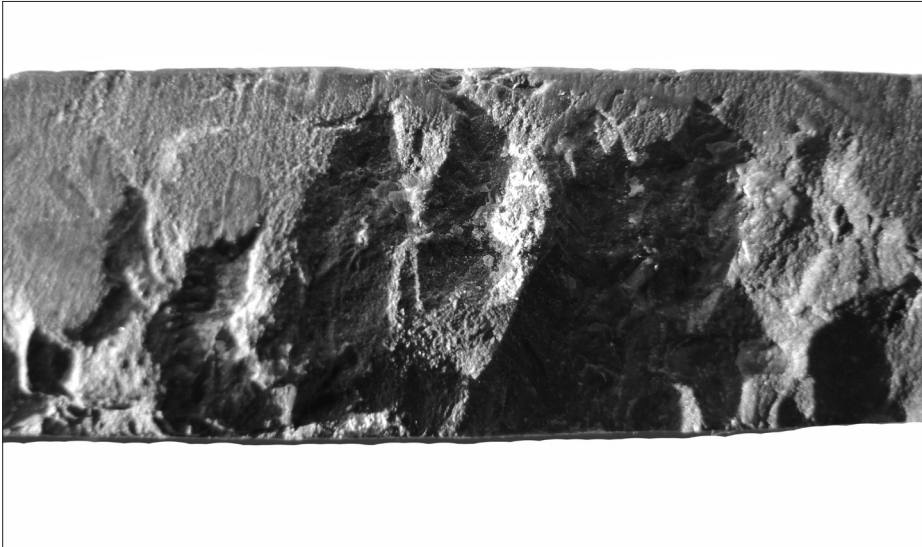


Fig. 5.  
Porfido Serpentino  
Verde: listel edge  
(thickness 12 mm) with  
smooth cut (above) and  
rough cut (below)

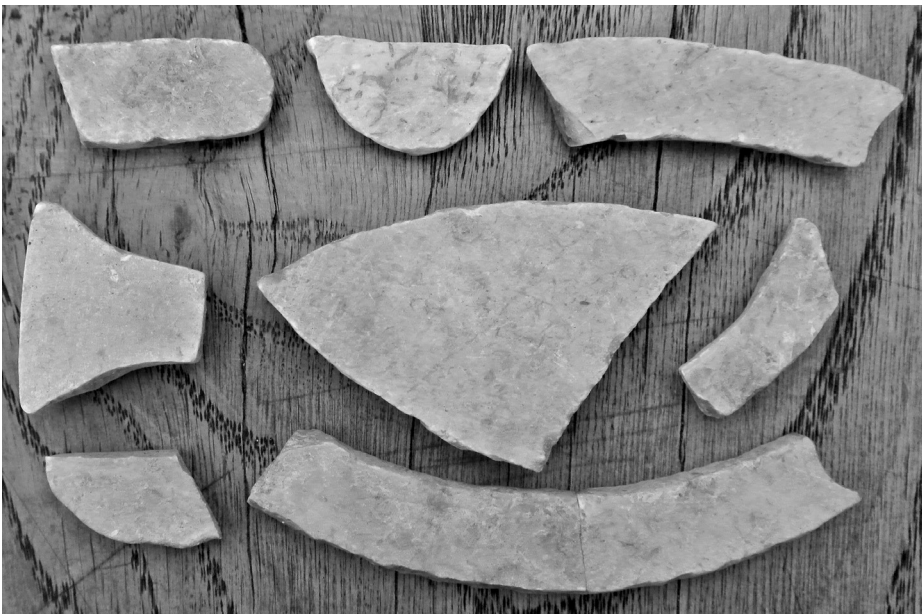


Fig. 6.  
Giallo Antico:  
shaped pieces and  
curvilinear listels

based on the repetition of geometric figures, is widely documented in the Roman territory now included in the region of Lombardy. These patterns are also documented in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages when the ancient materials were reused (BUGINI, FOLLI 2009).

1.2. Shaped piece: this category concerns coloured lithotypes for pavement and wall veneering: the form is variable from semicircular to almond-shaped etc. Small pieces of Palombino are noticeable: the stone is present in Toscolano and it is lacking in other villas. The shape of the pieces reproduces leaves, petals, fishes etc. and the curvilinear contour is very sharp avoiding the use of sealing mortar between two pieces fitted together (Fig. 2). Some thin slabs of Porfido Rosso Antico show oblique edges with rough cut (Fig. 3). Slabs of Porfido Serpentino Verde show irregular shape, sometimes with a straight side; they were used to make a dark background to light

coloured patterns or figures of wall veneering as shown in Rome (Basilica of Jiunius Bassus) and in Ostia antica (Edificio fuori Porta Marina)(ENSOLI, LA ROCCA 2000).

2. Listel: this element shows two very smooth parallel sides and a quadrangular section (square, rectangle or trapeze).

#### 2.1. Rectilinear listels

Listels with rectangular or square sections often show two worked edges with right angles; they were employed in wall veneerings to make frames around the panels of the central register; some listels show an inclined cut (45°), corresponding to the corners of these frames.

Listels with trapezoidal sections were employed as frames for rectangular panels, this kind of section facilitating insertion on the mortar bedding (Fig. 4). In particular, Porfido Serpentino listels show a specific cut of

the edge: the cut is straight and the edge is smooth near of the upper surface, the cut is irregular with rough edge in the remaining thickness (Fig. 5).

Listels sometimes show a toric surface as contour; they were employed in wall veneering to separate the lower from the central register.

#### 2.2. Curvilinear listels

These elements, showing two parallel and curvilinear sides with rectangular section, were a part of circular crowns employed as the frame of circular panels made of other coloured marbles (Fig. 6).

#### 3. Moulding

In these elements, length prevails over other dimensions; the section is quite triangular and the carving produces a concave section or with double curves.

They were employed as skirting boards where the wall veneering joins the pavement or to emphasize the passage between the lower and the central register of the wall veneering, as reported above in connection with the listels.

#### 4. Architectural element

This category involves thin pilasters with bases and capitals used in wall veneerings.

The categorization of the pieces seems to change in accordance with the lithology.

Slabs were made of carbonate stones such as Cipollino, Giallo antico, Palombino, Pavonazzetto, Portasanta etc.; rectilinear listels were made using Africano, Cipollino, Giallo antico, Pavonazzetto, Porfido rosso antico, Porfido serpentino verde and Rosso antico; curvilinear listels were mainly made of Porphyries or Giallo antico; mouldings and skirting boards were mainly made of white marbles, but Porphyries are also noticeable. Architectural elements are infrequent: a capital made of Rosso Antico was found in the villa of Toscolano (thickness from 8.6 to 13.8 mm).

The arrangement of these different categories on a wall veneering is confirmed by a several sites: i.e. the marble storage in the rooms of the imperial domus of Gianicolo Hill in Rome (FILIPPI 2005) or the marble Hall 31 in the Hang house 2 of Ephesos (THÜR, RATHMAYR 2014). Furthermore, some wall paintings of the Toscolano Villa (room 1 and room 2b referred to the 2nd century; room 28 referred to 4<sup>th</sup> century) give a good representation of the coloured marble arrangement: Pavonazzetto slabs in the central register (room 1); Proconnesian slabs in the low register and Pavonazzetto slabs in the central one separated by a listel of Rosso antico (room 2b); one panel made of Porfido rosso antico flanked by two rectangular panels made of Pavonazzetto, these panels are framed by listels of red, yellow and black marble (room 28).

### Coloured marbles in Regio X and Regio XI

The comparison involves several sites of Lombardy (Regio X and Regio XI) showing coloured marbles and is based on direct observations made by the authors on behalf of Soprintendenza Archeologica della Lombardia (BUGINI, FOLLI 2005). The number of fragments of each marble is not considered. Marble fragments of each site are heterogeneous, ranging from a single pavement made of "crustae" to wide excavations spanning a great period of time: wider sites show, obviously, greater lithological variety. The most diffused category is the slab from "opus sectile" pavement or wall veneering.

The coloured marbles identified in sites of Regio X are part of the main group of coloured marbles used in Rome and in countless sites in the whole territory of the Roman Empire (LAZZARINI 2004).

### LEGEND

Af = Africano, Al = calcite Alabaster, BC = Breccia corallina, BS = Breccia di Sciro, Cip = Cipollino, CR = Cipollino rosso, Gra = Egyptian granites, FdP = Fior di Pesco, GA = Giallo antico, GS = Greco scritto, Pal = Palombino, Pav = Pavonazzetto, PRA = Porfido rosso antico, PSV = Porfido serpentino verde, Por = Portasanta, RA = Rosso antico, Sem = Semesanto, VA = Verde antico.

### REGIO X

#### TOSCOLANO (Capra)

-Villa (fragments): Af, BC, BS, Cip, GA, GS, Pal, Pav, PRA, PSV, Por, RA.

#### DESENZANO (Borgo Regio)

-Villa (fragments): Af, BC, BS, Cip, FdP, GA, GS, Pav, PSV, Por, RA.

#### FAUSTINELLA (San Cipriano)

-Villa (fragments): Af, BC, BS, Cip, FdP, GA, GS, Pav, PSV, Por, RA.

#### NUVOLENTO (Pieve)

-Villa Pieve(fragments): Al, Cip, GS, Pav.

#### BRESCIA

-Ortaglia S. Giulia (fragments): Af, BC, Cip, FdP, Pav, PRA, PSV, RA.

-via Musei (palazzo Martinengo - fragments): Af, Al, Cip, FdP, GA, Pav, PSV.

-via Trieste (Istituto Arici - fragments): Af, FdP, Pav.

#### BERGAMO

-Palazzo del Podestà (fragments): Cip, Pav, RA.

#### CREMONA

-p.zza Marconi (fragments): Af, Al, BC, BS, Cip, FdP, GA, Gra, GS, Pav, PRA, PSV, Por, RA, Sem, VA.

-via Cadolini (crustae pavement): Af, Al, BS, Cip, FdP, GA, Gra, Pav, PRA, PSV, Por, RA, Sem.

**REGIO XI****MILANO**

-via Moneta (fragments): Af, Al, BC, BS, Cip, FdP, GA, Pav, PRA, PSV, Por, RA, VA.

-via Correnti (*opus sectile*): Af, BS, Cip, GA, Pav, PRA, Por.

-Archaeological Museum (fragments): Cip, Pav, Por.

-Chiesa Rossa (fragments): Af, BC, Cip, PSV.

-via Gorani (crustae pavement): Af, Al, BC, GA, Por.

-San Giovanni baptistery (fragments): Af, BC, BS, Cip, CR, FdP, GA, GS, Pav, PRA, PSV, RA.

-Imperial mausoleum (fragments): Af, Cip, FdP, GA, Pal, Pav, PRA, PSV, RA.

**COMO**

-via Parini (fragments): Af, Al, BC, Cip, FdP, GA, Pav.

**GARLATE**

-Santo Stefano (fragments): GS, Pav, PRA, PSV, Por.

**Conclusion**

Coloured marble fragments coming from pavements and wall veneering were found in some villas located in the western part of "Regio X" (now the eastern part of Lombardy) near Lake Garda (Toscolano, Desenzano, Faustina, Nuvoletto). The marbles are equally well documented in Rome, in Italy and all around the Roman world. Carbonate rocks (Africano, Alabaster, Breccia Corallina, Breccia di Sciro, Cipollino, Fior di Pesco, Giallo antico, Greco scritto, Palombino, Pavonazetto, Portasanta) form the great majority of the examined marble fragments, a low fraction only pertaining to porphyries (Porfido rosso antico, Porfido serpentino verde), with other silicate rocks totally lacking. The classification of marble fragments selected different use: slab (mainly carbonate stones), listel (mainly porphyries), moulding (white marbles), architectural element (Rosso antico). The homogeneous diffusion of coloured marbles, both in residential and in rustic buildings, witnesses the importance attained by these materials in the territory of Lombardy. The diffusion of coloured marbles in northern Italy is also confirmed in comparison with other Roman sites located in the adjacent Regio XI (now the western part of Lombardy).

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