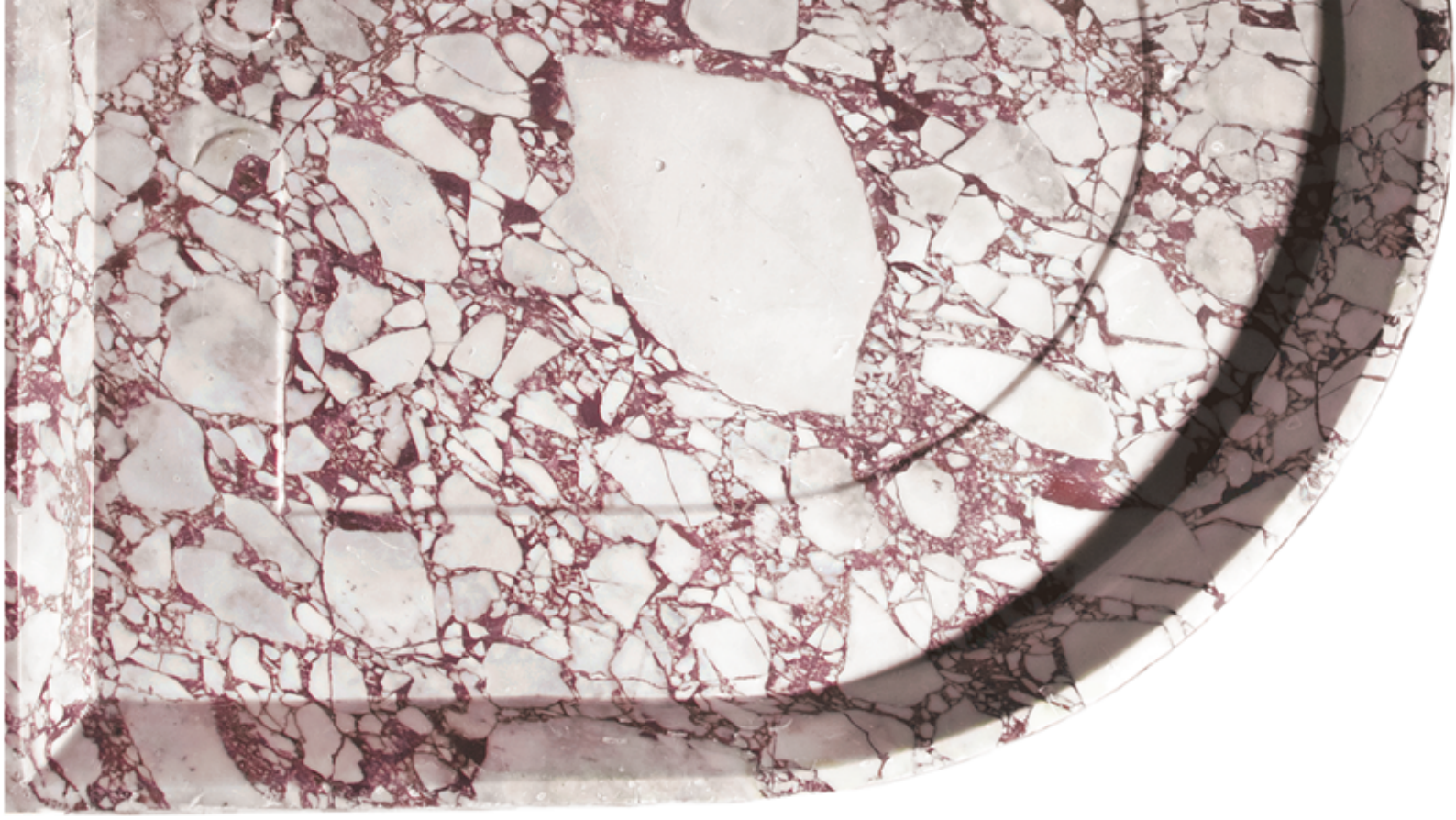
Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy)

Bugini, Roberto; Folli, Luisa; Roffia, Elisabetta



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CONTENT

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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 (1st - 5th 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

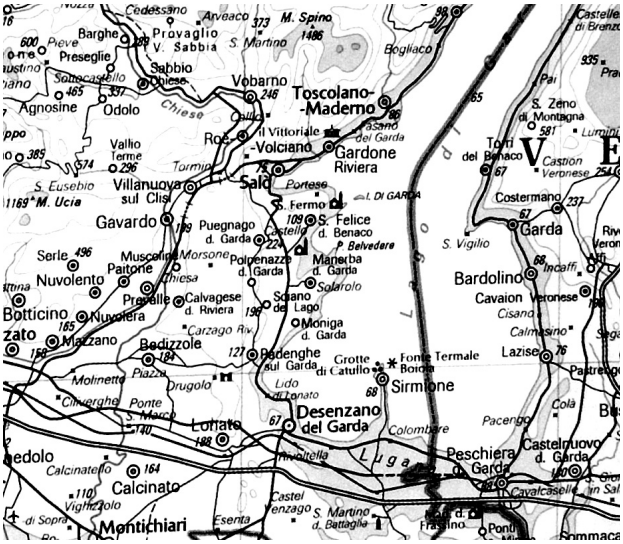

Fig. 1a. Map of the Lake Garda area
(Toscolano, Desenzano and Nuvolento are indicated)

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 1st century BCE, were inhabited until the beginning of the 5th 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 20th 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 2nd century phase, was found in a small repository dug in a niche of the water pool (ROFFIA 2015).

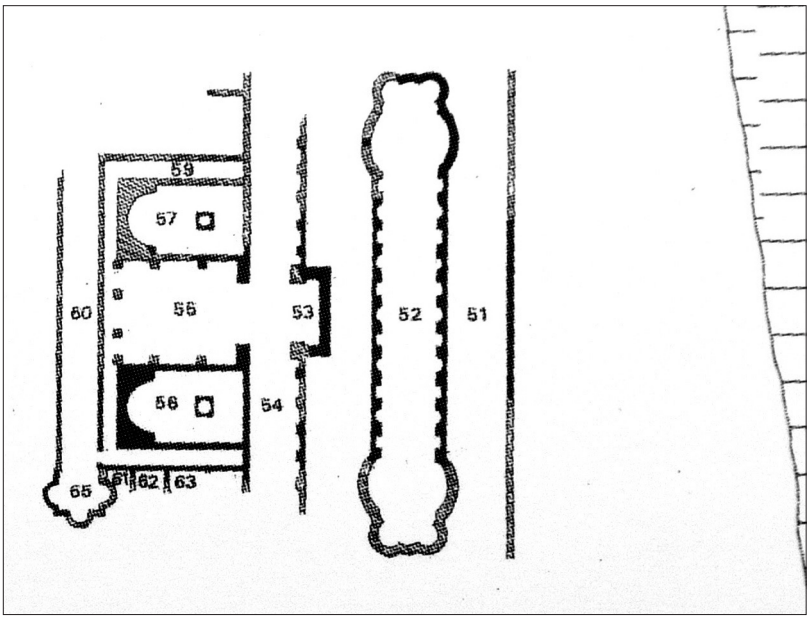

Fig. 1b.
Plan of the Toscolano - Capra (marbles from the basin #52, northern part of the villa)

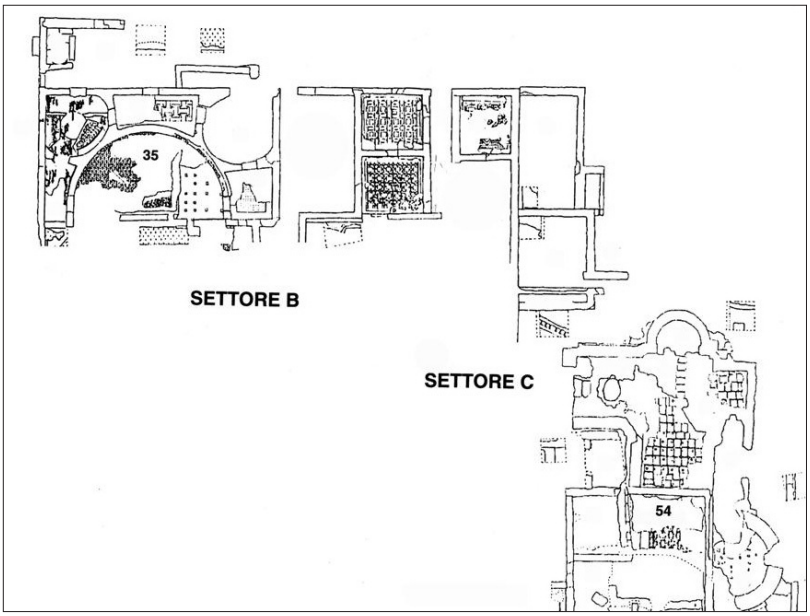

Fig. 1c.
Plan of Desenzano - Borgo Regio (marbles linked to rooms #35 and #54)

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 20th 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 4th - early 5th 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 4th 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).

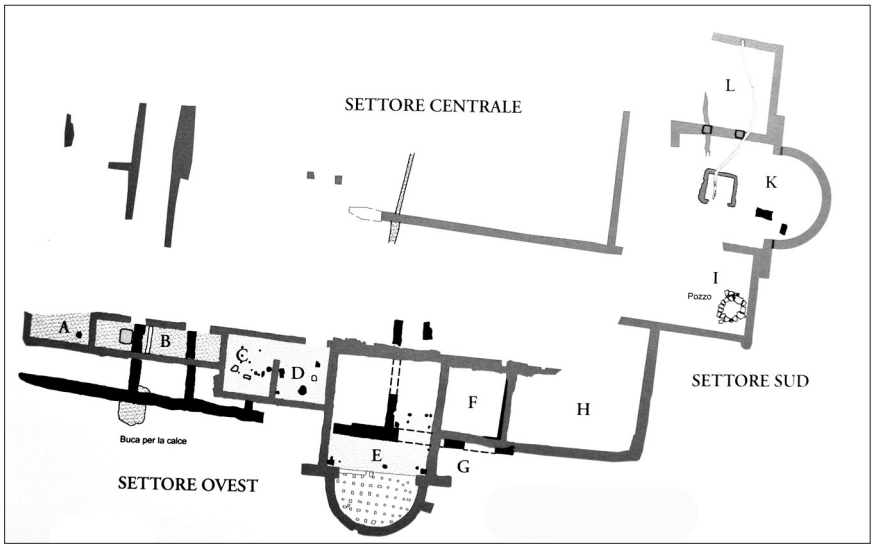

Fig. 1d.
Plan of Faustinella - San Cipriano
(marbles from rooms C, D and E)

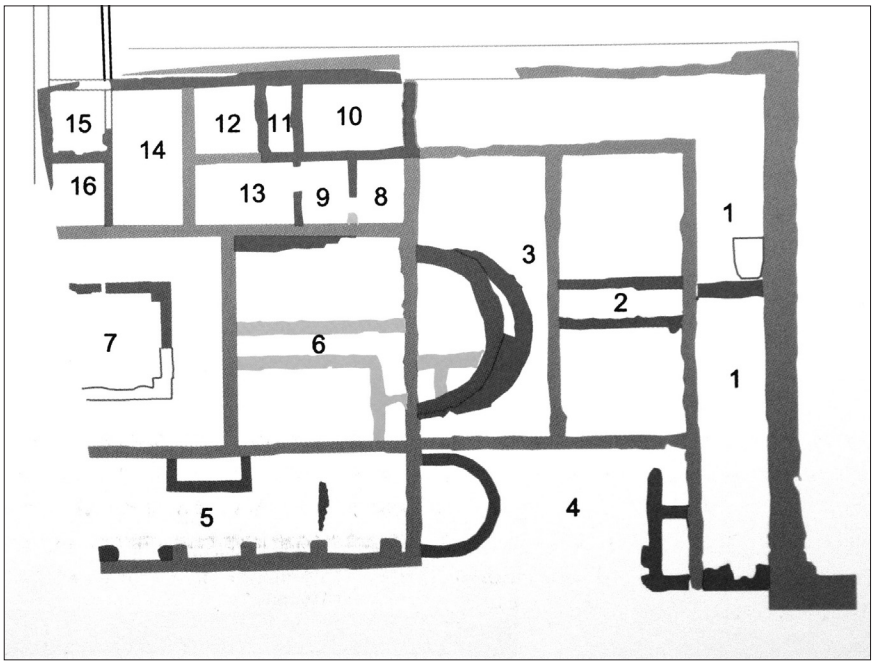

Fig. 1e.
Plan of Nuvolento - Pieve
(marbles from room #6)

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, 3rd 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,

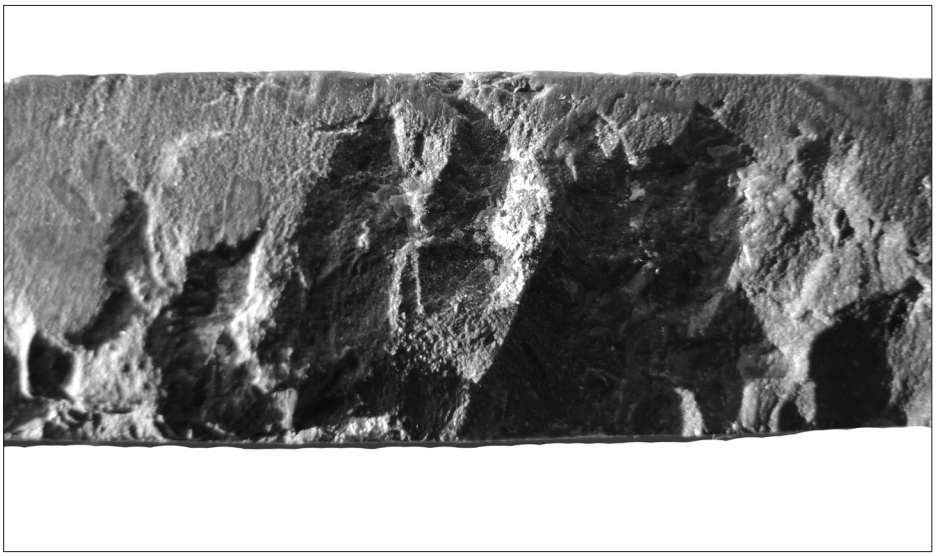

Fig. 5.
Porfido Serpentino Verde: listel edge (thickness 12 mm) with smooth cut (above) and rough cut (below)

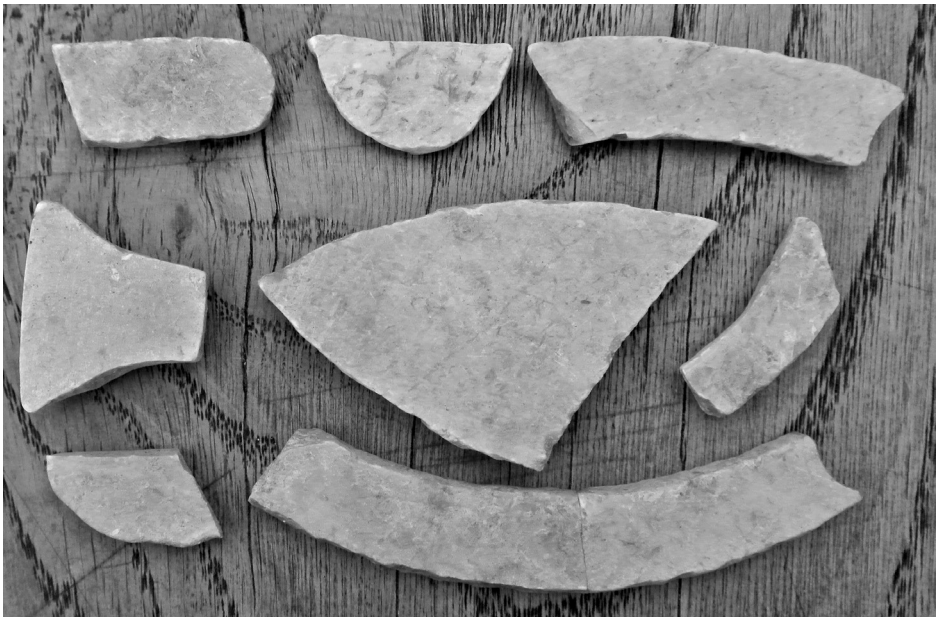

Fig. 6.
Giallo Antico: shaped pieces and curvilinear listels

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 4th 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, Faustinella, Nuvolento). 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, Pavonazzetto, 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 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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