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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESENTATION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECROLOGY: NORMAN HERZ (1923-2013) by Susan Kane</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. APPLICATIONS TO SPECIFIC ARCHEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS – USE OF MARBLE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermaphrodites and Sleeping or Reclining Maenads:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production Centres and Quarry Marks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrizio Pensabene</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Remarks about the Pavement of the Newly Discovered Mithraeum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the Colored Marbles at Ostia and New Investigations on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman and Late Roman White and Colored Marbles from Insula IV, IX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massimiliano David, Stefano Succi and Marcello Turci</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabaster. Quarrying and Trade in the Roman World:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon J. Barker and Simona Perna</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent Work on the Stone at the Villa Arianna and the Villa San Marco</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Castellammare di Stabia) and Their Context within the Vesuvian Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon J. Barker and J. Clayton Fant</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marble Wall Decorations from the Imperial Mausoleum (4th C.) and the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basilica of San Lorenzo (5th C.) in Milan: an Update on Colored</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marbles in Late Antique Milan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabetta Neri, Roberto Bugini and Silvia Gazzoli</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcophagus Lids Sawn from their Chests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy H. Abramitis and John J. Herrmann</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Re-Use of Monolithic Columns in the Invention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Persistence of Roman Architecture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter D. De Staebler</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trade in Small-Size Statues in the Roman Mediterranean:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a Case Study from Alexandria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrizio Pensabene and Eleonora Gasparini</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Marble Dedication of Komon, Son of Asklepiades, from Egypt:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material, Provenance, and Reinforcement of Meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia A. Butz</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Reuse of Imported Marble Pedestals at Caesarea Maritima in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Burrell</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iasos and Iasian Marble between the Late Antique and Early Byzantine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eras</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diego Peirano</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thassos, Known Inscriptions with New Data
Tony Kozelj and Manuela Wurch-Kozelj ................................................................. 131

The Value of Marble in Roman Hispalis: Contextual, Typological and Lithological Analysis of an Assemblage of Large Architectural Elements Recovered at Nº 17 Goyeneta Street (Seville, Spain)
Ruth Taylor, Oliva Rodriguez, Esther Ontiveros, Maria Luisa Loza, José Beltrán and Araceli Rodríguez ................................................................. 143

Giallo Antico in Context. Distribution, Use and Commercial Actors According to New Stratigraphic Data from the Western Mediterranean (2nd C. Bc – Late 1st C. Ad)
Stefan Ardeleanu ........................................................................................................ 155

Amethystus: Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection
Luigi Pedroni ........................................................................................................ 167

2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: (MARBLE)

Unraveling the Carrara – Göktepe Entanglement
Walter Prochaska, Donato Attanasio and Matthias Bruno ........................................ 175

The Marble of Roman Imperial Portraits
Donato Attanasio, Matthias Bruno, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadir Yavuz ........ 185

Tracing Alabaster (Gypsum or Anhydrite) Artwork Using Trace Element Analysis and a Multi-Isotope Approach (Sr, S, O)
Lise Leroux, Wolfram Kloppmann, Philippe Bromblet, Catherine Guerrot,
Anthony H. Cooper, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, Dominique Vingtain and Noel Worley ............................................................... 195

Roman Monolithic Fountains and Thasian Marble
Annewies van den Hoek, Donato Attanasio and John J. Herrmann ..................... 207

Archaeometric Analysis of the Alabaster Thresholds of Villa A, Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Italy) and New Sr and Pb Isotopic Data for Alabastro Ghiaccione del Circeo
Simon J. Barker, Simona Perna, J. Clayton Fant, Lorenzo Lazzarini and Igor M. Villa ................................................................. 215

Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy)
Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Elisabetta Roffia .................................................. 231

Calcitic Marble from Thasos in the North Adriatic Basin:
Ravenna, Aquileia, and Milan
John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek ......................... 239

Characterisation of White Marble Objects from the Temple of Apollo and the House of Augustus (Palatine Hill, Rome)
Francesca Giustini, Mauro Brilli, Enrico Gallochcio and Patrizio Pensabene .......... 247

Study and Archeometric Analysis of the Marble Elements Found in the Roman Theater at Aeclanum (Mirabella Eclano, Avellino - Italy)
Antonio Mesisca, Lorenzo Lazzarini, Stefano Cancelliere and Monica Salvadori ................................................................. 255
Two Imperial Monuments in Puteoli:
Use of Proconnesian Marble in the Domitianic and Trajanic Periods in Campania
Irene Bald Romano, Hans Rupprecht Goette, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska

Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16th And 17th Centuries):
the Church of Santi Severino e Sossio
Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Martino Solito

Roman and Early Byzantine Sarcophagi of Calcitic Marble from Thasos in Italy:
Ostia and Siracusa
Donato Attanasio, John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Anniewies van den Hoek

Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi
‘Church Wreck’ Cargo
Justin Leidwanger, Scott H. Pike and Andrew Donnelly

The Marbles of the Sculptures of Felix Romuliana in Serbia
Walter Prochaska and Maja Živić

Calcitic Marble from Thasos and Proconnesos in Nea Anchialos (Thessaly)
and Thessaloniki (Macedonia)
Vincent Barbin, John J. Herrmann, Aristotle Mentzos and Anniewies van den Hoek

Architectural Decoration of the Imperial Agora’s Porticoes at Iasos
Fulvia Bianchi, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska

The Winged Victory of Samothrace - New Data on the Different Marbles
Used for the Monument from the Sanctuary of the Great Gods
Annie Blanc, Philippe Blanc and Ludovic Laugier

Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios
in Gortyna (Crete)
Jacopo Bonetto, Nicolò Mareso and Michele Bueno

Paul the Silentiary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina
John J. Herrmann and Anniewies van den Hoek

Incrustations from Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Near Modern Xanten, Germany)
Vilma Ruppienė and Ulrich Schüssler

Stone Objects from Vindobona (Austria) – Petrological Characterization
and Provenance of Local Stone in a Historico-Economical Setting
Andreas Rohatsch, Michaela Kronberger, Sophie Insulander,
Martin Mosser and Barbara Hodits

Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France):
Preliminary Results
Elsa Roux, Jean-Marc Mignon, Philippe Blanc and Annie Blanc

Updated Characterisation of White Saint-Béat Marble. Discrimination Parameters
from Classical Marbles
Hernando Royo Plumed, Pilar Lapeunte, José Antonio Cuchi,
Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin
Grey and Greyish Banded Marbles from the Estremoz Anticline in Lusitania  
Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate, Hernando Royo Plumed,  
Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin ................................................................. 391

New Data on Spanish Marbles: the Case of Gallaecia (NW Spain)  
Anna Gutiérrez Garcia-M., Hernando Royo Plumed and Silvia González Soutelo .................................................. 401

A New Roman Imperial Relief Said to Be from Southern Spain:  
Problems of Style, Iconography, and Marble Type in Determining Provenance  
John Pollini, Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate and Jerry Podany .............................................................. 413

Reuse of the Marmora from the Late Roman Palatial Building at Carranque  
(Toledo, Spain) in the Visigothic Necropolis  
Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez Garcia-M. and Sergio Vidal Álvarez ............................................................. 427

Imperial Porphyry in Roman Britain  
David F. Williams .......................................................................................................................... 435

Recycling of Marble: Apollonia/Sozousa/Arsuf (Israel) as a Case Study  
Moshe Fischer, Dimitris Tambakopoulos and Yannis Maniatis ................................................................. 443

Thasian Connections Overseas: Sculpture in the Cyrene Museum (Libya)  
Made of Dolomitic Marble from Thasos  
John J. Herrmann and Donato Attanasio ......................................................................................... 457

Marble on Rome’s Southwestern Frontier: Thamugadi and Lambaesis  
Robert H. Tykot, Ouahiba Bouzidi, John J. Herrmann and Annevies van den Hoek ...................................................... 467

Marble and Sculpture at Lepcis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya):  
a Preliminary Study Concerning Origin and Workshops  
Luisa Musso, Laura Buccino, Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska .................................................. 481

The Pentelic Marble in the Carnegie Museum of Art Hall of Sculpture,  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
Albert D. Kollar ............................................................................................................................. 491

Analysis of Classical Marble Sculptures in the Michael C. Carlos Museum,  
Emory University, Atlanta  
Robert H. Tykot, John J. Herrmann, Renée Stein, Jasper Gaunt,  
Susan Blevins and Anne R. Skinner ................................................................................................. 501

3. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION II: (OTHER STONES)

Aphrodisias and the Regional Marble Trade. The Scaenae Frons of the Theatre at Nysa  
Natalia Toma ................................................................................................................................. 513

The Stones of Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad, Serbia)  
Bojan Djurić, Divna Jovanović, Stefan Pop Lazić and Walter Prochaska ................................................. 523

Aspects of Characterisation of Stone Monuments from Southern Pannonia  
Branka Migotti ................................................................................................................................. 537
The Budakalász Travertine Production
Bojan Djurić, Sándor Kele and Igor Rižnar ................................................................. 545

Stone Monuments from Carnuntum and Surrounding Areas (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Quarry Location in a Historical Context
Gabrielle Kremer, Isabella Kitz, Beatrice Moshammer, Maria Heinrich and Erich Draganits ............. 557

Espéjón Limestone and Conglomerate (Soria, Spain): Archaeometric Characterization, Quarrying and Use in Roman Times
Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M., Sergio Vidal Álvarez, María J. Peréz Agorreta and Eva Zarco Martínez ................................................................. 567

The Use of Alcover Stone in Roman Times (Tarraco, Hispania Citerior). Contributions to the Officina Lapidaria Tarracensis
Diana Gorostidi Pi, Jordi López Vilar and Anna Gutiérrez García-M. ............................................. 577

4. ADVANCES IN PROVENANCE TECHNIQUES, METHODOLOGIES AND DATABASES

Grain Outline – a Supervised Grain Boundary Extraction Tool
Supported by Image Processing and Pattern Recognition
Kristóf Csorba, Lilla Barancsuk, Balázs Székely and Judit Zöldföldi ........................................... 587

A Database and GIS Project about Quarrying, Circulation and Use of Stone During the Roman Age in Regio X - Venetia et Histria.
The Case Study of the Euganean Trachyte
Caterine Previato and Arturo Zara .................................................................................................. 597

5. QUARRIES AND GEOLOGY

The Distribution of Troad Granite Columns as Evidence for Reconstructing the Management of Their Production
Patrizio Pensabene, Javier Á. Domingo and Isabel Rodà .......................................................... 613

Ancient Quarries and Stonemasonry in Northern Choria Considiana
Hale Güney ..................................................................................................................................... 621

Polychromy in Larisaean Quarries and its Relation to Architectural Conception
Gizem Mater and Ertunç Denktaş .................................................................................................. 633

Euromos of Caria: the Origin of an Hitherto Unknown Grey Veined Stepped Marble of Roman Antiquity
Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadir Yavuz .................................. 639

Unknown Painted Quarry Inscriptions from Bacakale at Docimium (Turkey)
Matthias Bruno ............................................................................................................................ 651

The Green Schist Marble Stone of Jebel El Hairech (North West of Tunisia): a Multi-Analytical Approach and its Uses in Antiquity
Ameur Younès, Mohamed Gaied and Wissem Gallala ..................................................................... 659

Building Materials and the Ancient Quarries at Thamugadi (East of Algeria), Case Study: Sandstone and Limestone
Younès Rezkallah and Ramdane Marmi .......................................................................................... 673
The Local Quarries of the Ancient Roman City of Valeria (Cuenca, Spain)
Javier Atienza Fuente .................................................................................................................. 683

The Stone and Ancient Quarries of Montjuïc Mountain (Barcelona, Spain)
Aureli Álvarez ............................................................................................................................ 693

Notae Lapicidinarum: Preliminary Considerations about the Quarry Marks from the Provincial Forum of Tarraco
Maria Serena Vinci ..................................................................................................................... 699

The Different Steps of the Rough-Hewing on a Monumental Sculpture at the Greek Archaic Period: the Unfinished Kouros of Thasos
Danièle Braunstein ..................................................................................................................... 711

A Review of Copying Techniques in Greco-Roman Sculpture
Séverine Moureaud .................................................................................................................... 717

Labour Forces at Imperial Quarries
Ben Russell .................................................................................................................................. 733

Social Position of Craftsmen inside the Stone and Marble Processing Trades in the Light of Diocletian's Edict on Prices
Krešimir Bosnić and Branko Matulić ........................................................................................ 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
Maria Apostolopoulou, Elissavet Drakopoulou, Maria Karoglou and Asterios Bakolas .................. 749

7. PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS ON MARBLE

Painting and Sculpture Conservation in Two Gallo-Roman Temples in Picardy (France): Champlieu and Pont-Sainte-Maxence
Véronique Brunet-Gaston and Christophe Gaston ........................................................................ 763

The Use of Colour on Roman Marble Sarcophagi
Eliana Siotto .................................................................................................................................. 773

New Evidence for Ancient Gilding and Historic Restorations on a Portrait of Antinous in the San Antonio Museum of Art
Jessica Powers, Mark Abbe, Michelle Bushey and Scott H. Pike .................................................. 783

Schists and Pigments from Ancient Swat (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, Pakistan)
Francesco Mariottini, Gianluca Vignaroli, Maurizio Mariottini and Mauro Roma ......................... 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
Guntram Koch .................................................................................................................................. 809
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funerary Monuments and Quarry Management in Middle Dalmatia</td>
<td>827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nenad Cambi</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marble Revetments of Diocletian’s Palace</td>
<td>839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Katja Marasović and Vinka Marinković</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Use of Limestones as Construction Materials for the Mosaics of Diocletian’s Palace</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Branko Matulić, Domagoj Mudronja and Krešimir Bosnić</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoration of the Peristyle of Diocletian’s Palace in Split</td>
<td>863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Goran Nikšić</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marble Slabs Used at the Archaeological Site of Sorna near Poreč Istria – Croatia</td>
<td>871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Đeni Gobić-Bravar</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Marbles from the Villa in Verige Bay, Brijuni Island, Croatia</td>
<td>879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mira Pavletić and Đeni Gobić-Bravar</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Early Christian Ambos and Altars in the Light of some Fragments from the Islands of Pag and Rab</td>
<td>887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mirja Jarak</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Marbles in the Chapel of the Blessed John of Trogir</td>
<td>899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the Cathedral of St. Lawrence at Trogir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Đeni Gobić-Bravar and Daniela Matetić Poljak</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Use of Limestone in the Roman Province of Dalmatia</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Edisa Lozić and Igor Rižnar</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Extraction and Use of Limestone in Istria in Antiquity</td>
<td>925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Klara Buršić-Matijašić and Robert Matijašić</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurisina Limestone in the Roman Age: from Karst Quarries to the Cities of the Adriatic Basin</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Caterina Previato</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Remains of Infrastructural Facilities</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the Ancient Quarries on Zadar Islands (Croatia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mate Parica</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Local Geomorphological and Geological Features of the Area for the Construction of the Burnum Amphitheatre</td>
<td>951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Miroslav Glavičić and Uroš Stepišnik</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Quarry Klis Kosa near Salona</td>
<td>957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ivan Alduk</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marmore Lavdata Brattia</td>
<td>963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Miona Miliša and Vinka Marinković</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarries of the Lumbarda Archipelago</td>
<td>979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ivka Lipanović and Vinka Marinković</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Island of Korčula – Importer and Exporter of Stone in Antiquity
Mate Parica and Igor Borzić ................................................................. 985

Faux Marbling Motifs in Early Christian Frescoes
in Central and South Dalmatia: Preliminary Report
Tonči Borovac, Antonija Gluhan and Nikola Radošević .................................................. 995

INDEX OF AUTHORS ............................................................................. 1009
CHARACTERISATION OF WHITE MARBLE OBJECTS FROM THE TEMPLE OF APOLLO AND THE HOUSE OF AUGUSTUS (PALATINE HILL, ROME)

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Abstract

The provenance of the marbles of eleven artefacts collected in the temple of Apollo and the house of Augustus at the Palatine Hill archaeological excavations in Rome has been determined using a multi-method approach that includes petrography and isotopes of carbon and oxygen. Two samples are from fragments of statues, one of which is likely the Apollo statuary representation; the other samples are from architectural elements (columns, capitals, plates and cornices). The marbles of the Augustan complex represent the first example of a change in the taste for building materials of monumental architecture at the Palatine Hill in the Augustan age; their introduction started the “marmorisation” process in the area. In this transition, it is especially important to determine if the marble artefacts that were subjects of a religious cult were originals from Greece or copies that were carved during the building of the Augustan complex. In order to discriminate between these two possibilities, it is necessary to identify the geographic location at which the marbles considered were quarried.

In our selection of samples, isotopic and petrographic results indicate that most of the architectural elements are quite unambiguously made of marble of Italic provenance (i.e. Carrara marble), while the fragments of statues, which have a relation to a religious cult, seem to have Greek origin.

Keywords
white marble, provenance, Palatine Hill

Introduction

The complex of Augustus on the Palatine Hill has been the subject of many recent studies that have aimed at reconstructing the changes of the first house of Augustus, also known as the house of Octavian (41–36 BC), and the renovation of the whole area at the time of the construction of the Temple of Apollo (36–28 BC). Augustus, in his 50 years of uninterrupted government, carried out a policy of nova magnificentia, which consisted of the construction of new buildings in marble or the use of marble as a decoration applied to a Roman concrete construction (the “marmorisation” process of the main monuments of Rome). The new buildings’ exterior let Augustus say before his death, “I found Rome brick, and left it marble” (“Urbem … sit glorius marmoream se relinquere, quam latericiam accepisset”; Svetonio, Libro 2 (Divus Augustus) Paragrafo 28). However, in addition to the use of marbles for the public buildings (publica magnificentia), Augustus directed his aspirations to privata luxuria, expressed not least by the use of marbles.

During the archaeological excavations between 1957 and 1974 on the complex of Augustus at the Palatine Hill, several items, most of them in white marble, were unearthed. Many objects are architectural elements such as columns, capitals, plates and cornices in different states of preservation. A certain number are fragments of statues, and one of them may be the representation of Apollo Palatinus.

The Carrara provenance of the marbles of the Augustan complex was previously determined by several authors on the basis of ancient classical texts; Servius (ad Aen. 8.720: "de solido marmore effecto, quod adlatum fuerat de portu Lunae") informs us that the temple was built in Carrara marble. An archaeometric characterisation of the main monuments of the Augustan period, including a few samples from the house of Augustus and the temple of Apollo, has actually documented the extensive use of Carrara marble.

3 BRUNO et al. 2002.
Other historical sources inform us of the origin of the great statue of Apollo Palatinus, probably placed inside the cella of the temple, which was probably brought to Rome by Octavian after the victory of Actium (31 BC); the sculpture was attributed to Scopas “the Parian” and, therefore, must have been carved in a Greek marble. No archaeometric data of this marble existed previously in the relevant literature.

The present study aims to characterise a selection of white marble artefacts collected in the temple of Apollo and the house of Augustus at the Palatine Hill archaeological excavations. The identification of the marble provenance was carried out using a multi-method approach that includes petrography and carbon and oxygen stable isotope analysis, which is considered an effective way for determining the origin of ancient marbles, as the relevant archaeometric literature has largely demonstrated. The results shed light on the use of marble during the beginning of the “marmorisation” process in Rome.

The complex of Augustus on the Palatine Hill: historical setting

Recently, the Augustus Complex in the Palatine Hill has been the subject of much research aimed at distinguishing the stages of development of the first house of Augustus, the so-called house of Octavian (41–36 BC), and the restructuring of the area as a whole at the time of construction of the temple of Apollo (36–28 BC). The archaeological study of this area during the great excavations of Carettoni (about 1957–1974) revealed four groups of white marble items, whose sampling was designed to show the use of the marble in private/public contexts, such as the house of Octavian, and public ones, such as the Temple of Apollo and the Portico of the Danaids.

The first group of remains found in excavations consists of small architectural elements, belonging to a mixed Corinthian-Doric architectural order, which we have attributed to the facade of the house of Augustus in its first realisation. The facade of the Octavian house was organised around three main doors and two minor doors in the typical patterns of the late-Hellenistic theatre scenes. It was possible to reconstruct an architectural prospect articulated in indentations, in correspondence with the doors, and in ledges, in correspondence with the pilasters and columns to the sides of the door. It has two floors; the first, with Doric cornices and Ionic elements, and the second, with only Ionic cornices. The walls had to be covered with slabs on which was engraved an isodomic structure. The excavations brought to light small entablature elements that likely belong to this feature. Of these, we have sampled an element of an Ionic frame (CA_4 and CA_5), a ceiling plate with a rhombus-shaped decoration (CA_3), a cladding slab with an engraved isodomic structure (CA_7) and a covering plate with a lintel (CA_9).

The second group consists of hundreds of fragments of statues; this collection includes two fragments of heads (one of which is 44 cm high, and retains the left eye and part of the hair), a foot and many fragments of drapery (one of which belongs to a left shoulder). We know from the literature (Prop. 2.31.15-16) that in the temple of Apollo there were three cult statues clothed in a long chiton: the statue of Apollo (work by Scopas – Plin., Nat. Hist., 36.25, perhaps coming from the sanctuary of Apollo Rhamnus in Attica), the statue of Diana with the torch (by Thimoteos) and their mother Leto (by Kephisodotos). These were gigantic sculptures, around 4.80 m high, which were brought to Rome as spoils of war. There were other statues in the temple; one of Sybilla squatting in front of Latona, another of Apollo behind the altar and probably many more, including sculptures from the fronton (according to Pliny, Nat. Hist., 36.13, Parian marble works of the archaic sculptors Bupalos and Athenis from Chios) and acroterion (including the quadriga del Sol), probably made of different materials, marble or gilded bronze. The temple was gigantic – pseudo-peripteral with six columns on the front 14 m high, built on a high podium. The ancient sources inform us that that Luni marble was used for such a temple. This can provide evidence that the extraction of gigantic blocks in the quarries for the construction of temples occurred from the first Augustan period. So we are able to contend that the management of the quarries of Luni was under the control of the state in the early Augustan age. The largest fragment of the head and the fragment of the foot, which may belong to the statue of Apollo, are exhibited in the Museo Palatino. Their marble has been identified in the history of the studies as Parian and Pentelic, respectively. Hundreds more fragments of statues lie piled in a warehouse under the projecting foot of the temple.

Large fragments of the third group (17 at least) come from the filling of the subterranean compartments of the temple of Apollo and from neighbouring areas. They belong to the higher part of the architecture: fragments of bases, capitals, grooved drums, a large cornice with shelves, a lintel and the portal frame; they were attributed to the temple. We sampled an element of an angular column from this group (CA_1).

The fourth group is related to a few large fragments of fluted columns in Giallo Antico and fragments of Ionic capitals that we can attribute to the Portico of the Danaids. Furthermore, a fragment of large cornice, which probably comes from the Aedes Caesarum on the west side of the temple of Apollo, may be considered part of this group. A
large colonnaded square adjoined the temple, on whose eastern flank faced the Greek and Latin libraries. In the square, we recognised the porticus Danaidum known by sources and reproduced in the Sorrento Base, from which we know that it was equipped with Ionic colonnades. We attributed to the portico one fragment of fluted shaft in Giallo Antico and two fragments of ancient Ionic capitals, which we found in the warehouses (CA_10, CA_11).

Materials and methods

A total of 11 white marble objects representing the four groups mentioned were sampled (Figs. 1 and 2). A multi-method approach based on petrography and isotopes was applied to characterise these samples. Petrography, carbon and oxygen isotopes are the most frequently used and useful techniques for discriminating the provenance of white marble. A diffractometer Bruker model Advance D8 operating in Bragg-Brentano geometry and equipped with a solid-state detector Sol-X was used to determine the mineralogical composition of the samples. Marble samples were thin sectioned to study the texture and the crystal boundary shape and to determine the maximum grain size under a polarising microscope (Nikon Mod. Eclipse LV 100 POL). Carbon ($\delta^{13}$C) and oxygen ($\delta^{18}$O) isotope ratios of marble were obtained from ~0.2 mg powder samples using the modified phosphoric acid method$^6$. A Finnigan Kiel II Carbonate Device interfaced with a Finnigan MAT 252 mass spectrometer was used for the analysis. Isotope analyses on calcite are reported in the usual delta (δ) notation, which represents the relative deviation in part per mil (‰) with respect to an international standard (VPDB for both the carbon and oxygen isotopes). The analytical error is ± 0.1‰.

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$^6$ MCCREA 1950.
Results and discussion

Table 1 summarises the experimental results by listing, for each sample, the macroscopic description, mineralogical-petrographical features, and oxygen and carbon isotope data of marble archaeological samples. Petrographic and mineralogical characterisation is displayed according to the commonly used indicators that facilitate provenance discrimination among white marbles. A selection of microphotographs in crossed polarised light is also shown in Fig. 3. All samples are pure calcitic white marbles with the presence, revealed in just a few samples, of traces of quartz as the main accessory mineral. The petrographic observation on the thin sections reveals that the artefacts are fine-grained marbles (MGS generally lower than or around 1 mm) with both a heteroblastic and homeoblastic grain-size distribution. The boundaries between grains are curved to straight or embayed, and four samples show some triple junctions. The marble presents a mosaic fabric, lineated or weakly lineated in the samples from the fragments of statues (CA_2 and CA_12). In these samples, some mica flakes were observed with the naked eye, but they were not observed in the thin sections. The stable isotope data are plotted in the diagram of Fig. 4, including the 90% probability ellipses of the most relevant quarries exploited in antiquity with fine grain size (<2mm). Carbon isotope compositions of the samples are relatively homogeneous, varying from +1.89 and +2.79‰ VPDB, whereas the oxygen isotopes display a wider range of values, from −4.77 to −1.13‰ VPDB. In particular, in the scatterplot diagram, the samples split into two different groups; one is located on the right part of the diagram, falling into the isotopic field of Carrara marble and consisting of the samples from the architectural elements. The second group consists of the samples from the fragments of statues; they show an oxygen isotope composition that is more negative than the other samples, falling into the isotopic fields of Docimian and Pentelic marbles.

It is evident that the architectural elements and the fragments of the statue have a different provenance; the former show the isotopic values and the petrographic features typical of Carrara marble; the archaeometric analyses, therefore, seem to confirm the previous attribution that

Fig. 2. Pictures of the archaeological objects examined in this study: CA_1 Column of the eastern peristyle; CA_2 Fragment of statue; CA_3 Ceiling slab; CA_4 Frieze; CA_5 Frieze; CA_7 Imitation of opus sectile; CA_8 Moulding; CA_9 Erratic; CA_10 Capital; CA_11 Capital; CA_12 Fragment of statue (of Apollo)

ATTANASIO, BRILLI, OGLE 2006.
was based on historical considerations. The latter marbles, the fragments of statues (samples CA_2 and CA_12), are ambiguously identified as Pentelic and Docimian marbles; the overlap between the isotopic signature of such marbles can be partially solved taking into account petrographic data and historical-archaeological context; Docimian marble is fine-grained, as is Pentelic, but its fabric is completely different; the crystal boundaries are often sutured and include strained, often kinked, crystals indicating unstable conditions reached after quite brief metamorphic events. However, the lineated or weakly-lineated fabric and the mica flakes observed in our samples are typical features of Pentelic marble and point to such an origin.

**Conclusion**

The elements of the entablature in white marble of the facade of the house of Octavian, petrographically and isotopically characterised in the present paper, and the columns in coloured marble placed in the peristyle of the house, offer one of the most ancient archaeological testimonies of marble use in residential construction, which is, so far, only documented for the 1st century BC by the relevant literature.

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8 GORGONI et al. 2002a.

9 STEINBY 1999; GORGONI et al. 2002b.

10 AMADORI et al. 1988.
also confirms the hypothesis of direct imperial management of the quarries\textsuperscript{11}, which had probably been set up since the beginning of the Augustan period, on the basis of our findings.

The samples collected from the fragments of statues are probably composed of Pentelic marble.

During the Augustan period, both Pentelic and Docimian marbles seem to have been employed in Rome for propaganda purposes. As a consequence, the Greek origin for the fragments of statues may be more consistent with the archaeological information because, as previously mentioned, the statue of Apollo was perhaps considered a work by Scopas coming from the sanctuary of Apollo Rhamnus in Attica and brought to Rome as spoils of war.

\textsuperscript{11} Pensabene 1998.
REFERENCES


STEINBY E. M. 1999: Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae. 4, Edizioni Quasar, Roma, 278.


