

# Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios in Gortyna (Crete)

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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 Bahadir 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 Ruppinić 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 Garcia-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 Garcia-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

# POLYCHROME MARBLES FROM THE THEATRE OF THE SANCTUARY OF APOLLO PYTHIOS IN GORTYNA (CRETE)

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## Abstract

Since 2001, the Italian Archaeological School of Athens and the University of Padua have carried out archaeological excavations at the theatre near the temple of Apollo Pythios in Gortyna (Crete), identifying five main archaeological phases of the building. Based on macroscopic characterization, the fragments of coloured marbles recovered during the excavations have been archived in a database describing their fundamental features (lithotype, function, and traces of workmanship). Moreover, the fragments have been studied stratigraphically to understand the development of the architectural decorations and the use of the marbles in the theatre. This paper discusses the results of the study, highlighting the use of a wide range of coloured marbles from the Mediterranean and the richness of the decorations during the restoration phase of the theatre in the Severan age.

## Keywords

marbles, Gortyna, Theatre

## Introduction

The city of Gortyna is located in Messara Valley in the southern part of the island of Crete. Probably already inhabited in the Minoan period, it is reported to have been the most powerful Cretan city in the Hellenistic age, and during the Roman period it became the capital of the province of *Creta et Cyrenaica*.

In 1894 the forerunners of the Italian Archaeological School of Athens began an archaeological survey of the city, aiming to improve the knowledge of its historical development.

As a part of this long-lasting research activity, the Italian Archaeological School of Athens and the University of Padua have carried out archaeological excavations at the theatre near the temple of Apollo Pythios since 2001;

several campaigns of fieldwork<sup>1</sup> make it possible to identify the theatre's main phases of architectural and functional activity<sup>2</sup>, beginning with its construction, which dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and continuing with the renovation of the orchestra (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century, through periods in which it was abandoned (end of 3<sup>rd</sup> century) and reuse (first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century), up to the final collapse due to the earthquake of 365 (Fig. 1). As a result of the excavations, a great many coloured marble fragments have been collected; in this paper we present the results of a study of these fragments, showing the development and the richness of the theatre's marble decorations.

## Studies on the marble of Crete

Because of its position in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, the island of Crete may be considered an important case study for understanding the dynamics of the distribution of marble during the Roman age.

Marble studies in Crete were slow in emerging due to the shortage of well-studied Roman buildings, and in studies of the 70s and 80s, the presence of marble was underestimated<sup>3</sup>. Some attention, however, was dedicated to the study of local Cretan quarry sites<sup>4</sup>.

In 1984 Lorenzo Lazzarini was invited to Crete by A. Di Vita to develop the studies of marbles in the island; his efforts produced a series of papers regarding both the spread of marbles<sup>5</sup> and their use in the Roman age<sup>6</sup>.

1 BONETTO, GHEDINI, RINALDI 2003; BONETTO, GHEDINI, VERONESE 2003; BONETTO 2004; BONETTO, GHEDINI, RINALDI 2005; BONETTO *et al.* 2008.

2 BONETTO, FRANCISCI 2014.

3 DI VITA 1988.

4 DURKIN, LISTER 1983; HARRISON 1990.

5 LAZZARINI 2001.

6 PENSABENE, LAZZARINI 2004; ANTONELLI *et al.* [In press].

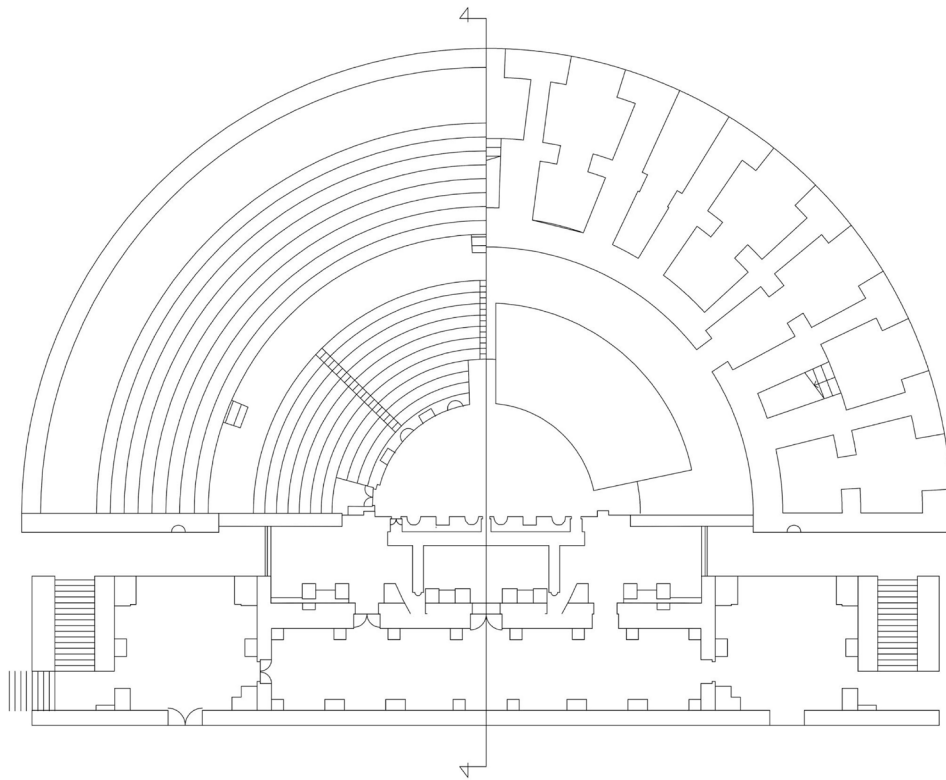


Fig. 1.  
Plan of the theatre  
at the end of the  
excavation project  
(2002-2010)

In 1999 a paper by Paton-Scheider<sup>7</sup> addressed the role of imported marbles in Roman Crete, and in 2002 another paper by Lazzarini<sup>8</sup> focused on a light grey Cretan marble, for which the author proposed the name “Marmo Gortinio”. The presence of local limestone was also investigated in a new paper<sup>9</sup>.

According to these papers, the use of exotic marbles in Crete can be dated back with certainty only to the time of the Emperor Hadrian; yet there are clues indicating that the introduction of exotic marble might have been as early as the beginning of the first century BC<sup>10</sup>. In the island some local lithotypes of good quality were also quarried in Roman times, but, as is confirmed by the finds from this study, they were used less commonly than imported marble.

### The study of the theatre’s marbles

The excavation of the theatre at the Pythion led to the discovery of a great number of marble fragments in part relevant to the architectural decoration of the building.

7 PATON, SCHNEIDER 1999.

8 LAZZARINI 2002.

9 LAZZARINI 2004.

10 PENSABENE, LAZZARINI 2004.

Based on macroscopic characterization, all coloured marble fragments have been archived in a database where the fundamental features (lithotypes, function, and traces of workmanship) and the stratigraphic context of the provenance of each fragment were recorded. Proconnesian marble has also been included in this study even though it is normally classed as white marble, a category of stone for which, as is generally recognized, macroscopic identifications are less reliable. In many cases, however, markings and grain size can give strong indications of the source. Accordingly, we count slabs with strong grey banding and medium-to-coarse grain as Proconnesian marble.

Thanks to a stratigraphic study of the archaeological deposits, it was possible to ascribe individual marble fragments to almost five archaeological phases of the theatre, making it possible to grasp the evolution of the architectural decoration.

A total of 1054 marble scraps have been studied, including 1015 fragments of slabs and 39 slabs still in situ belonging to a floor of the orchestra built between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Only with respect to the slabs of the orchestra can the connection with the theatre be considered certain; the other fragments on the contrary belong mainly to fill layers, and their connection with decorations of the theatre will be analysed separately for each phase.



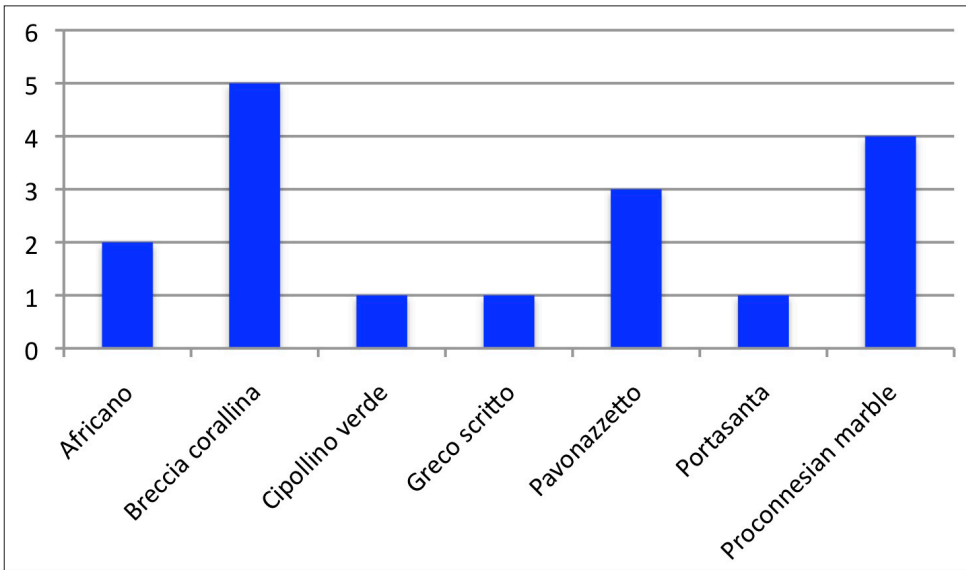


Fig. 2. Histogram of the lithotypes in first archaeological phase of the Pythion Theatre (100-150 AD)



Fig. 3. The Pavement was covered a few days after the discovery because of preservation requirements and safety of the excavation site. Therefore a complete study and documentation of the marble fragments wasn't possible. This photo should be considered such a working instrument that cannot let us a definitive identification for all slabs. When the characterization is very uncertain we signed the lithotype with a question mark, the slabs are listed as follows:

1 Proconnesian marble; 2 Portasanta (Marmor Chium); 3 Proconnesian marble; 4 Cipollino Verde (Marmor Carystium); 5 Cipollino verde (Marmor Carystium); 6 Pavonazzetto (Marmor Phrygium) (?); 7 Pavonazzetto (Marmor Phrygium); 8 Cipollino Verde (Marmor Carystium); 9 White marble (not presented in the text); 10 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium) (?); 11 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium) (?); 12 Pavonazzetto (Marmor Phrygium); 13 Breccia Corallina

(Marmor Sagarium) (?); 14 Proconnesian marble; 15 Proconnesian marble; 16 Proconnesian marble; 17 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium); 18 Pavonazzetto (Marmor Phrygium); 19 Proconnesian marble; 20 Bigio Antico from Lesbos (Marmor Lesbium); 21 Pavonazzetto (Marmor Phrygium); 22 Greco Scritto (?); 23 Pavonazzetto (Marmor Phrygium); 24 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium); 25 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium); 26 Cipollino Rosso (Marmor Iassense); 27 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium); 28 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium); 29 Cipollino Verde (Marmor Carystium); 30 Cipollino Verde (Marmor Carystium); 31 Cipollino Rosso (Marmor Iassense); 32 Greco Scritto (?); 33 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium); 34 Greco Scritto (?); 35 Breccia Corallina (Marmor Sagarium) (?); 36 Proconnesian marble (?); 37 White marble (not presented in the text); 38 Proconnesian marble (?); 39 Cipollino Verde (Marmor Carystium).

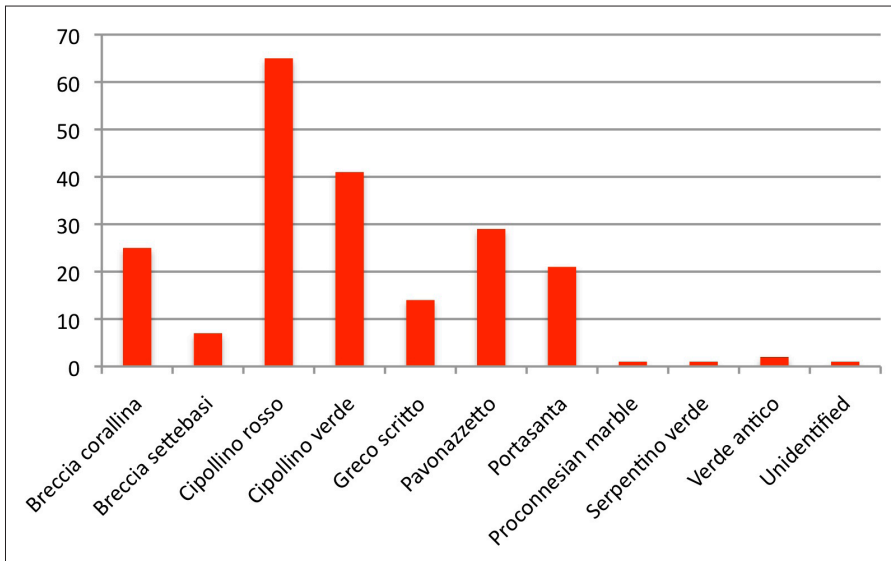


Fig. 4.  
Histogram of the lithotypes  
in the second archaeological  
phase of the Pythion Theatre  
(175-225 AD)

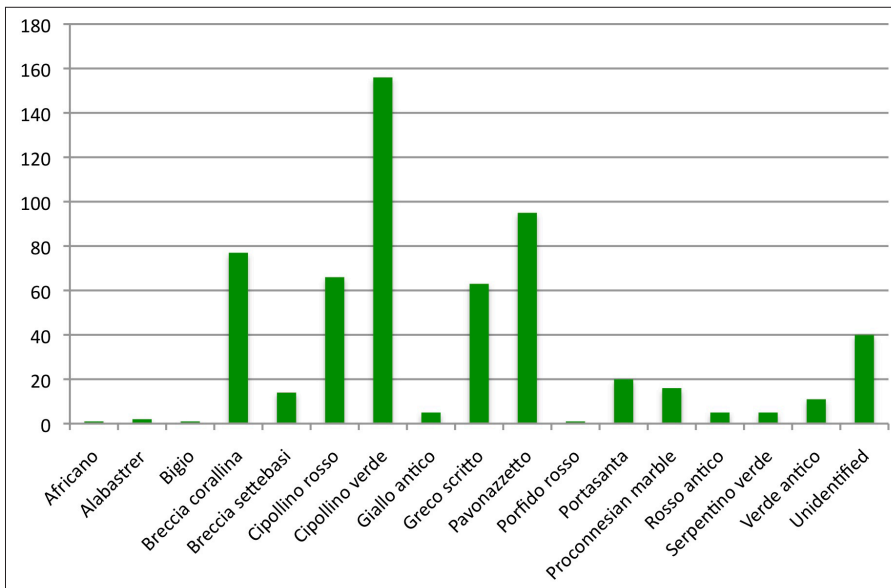


Fig. 5.  
Histogram of the lithotypes  
in the third archaeological  
phase of the Pythion Theatre  
(275-365 AD)

### The Pythion Theatre's archaeological phases

After to the stratigraphic study of the archaeological deposits, it was possible to identify almost five phases of the theatre with different distribution of marble as summarized below:

#### 1) Construction phase (first half of the second century).

This phase produced 22 fragments belonging to 8 different lithotypes (Fig. 2). From the stratigraphic point of view, however, their connection to the marble decoration of the theatre cannot be considered certain, but only probable. Greek marbles appear (*Cipollino Verde*, *Portasanta*), but Anatolian marbles predominate (*Africano*, *Breccia Corallina*, *Greco Scritto*, *Proconnesian marble*, *Pavonazzetto*).

#### 2) Restoration phase (175-225)

The theatre was subjected to a radical restoration between the second and the third centuries.

This restoration led to the construction of a new floor of the orchestra, in which many marble slabs were used. Because of the irregular shapes of the marble slabs, the pavement seems to be the result of restoration work, in which slabs from an earlier period were reused. Almost 39 of these slabs, which are still *in situ*, have been studied, allowing us to recognize 8 marble types: *Breccia Corallina*, *Cipollino Rosso*, *Cipollino Verde*, *Greco Scritto*, *Bigio antico*, *Pavonazzetto*, *Portasanta* and *Proconnesian marble* (Fig. 3).

The archaeological layers of this phase produced a total amount of 207 marble fragments representing 11 different lithotypes (Fig. 4); the provenance of these fragments from layers marking some building makes their connection with the theatre very probable. These fragments seem to reflect a marble decoration based mainly on Anatolian lithotypes (*Breccia Corallina*, *Greco Scritto*,

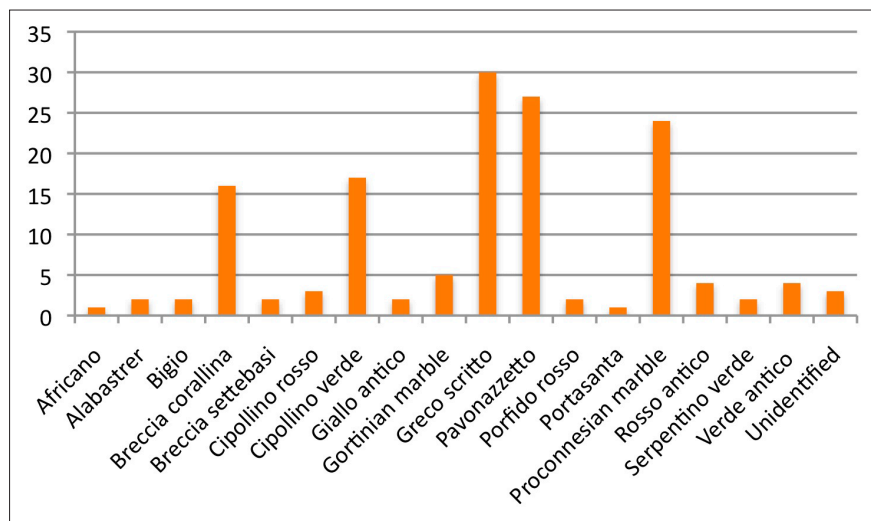


Fig. 6. Histogram of the lithotypes in the fourth archaeological phase of the Pythion Theatre (365-425 AD)

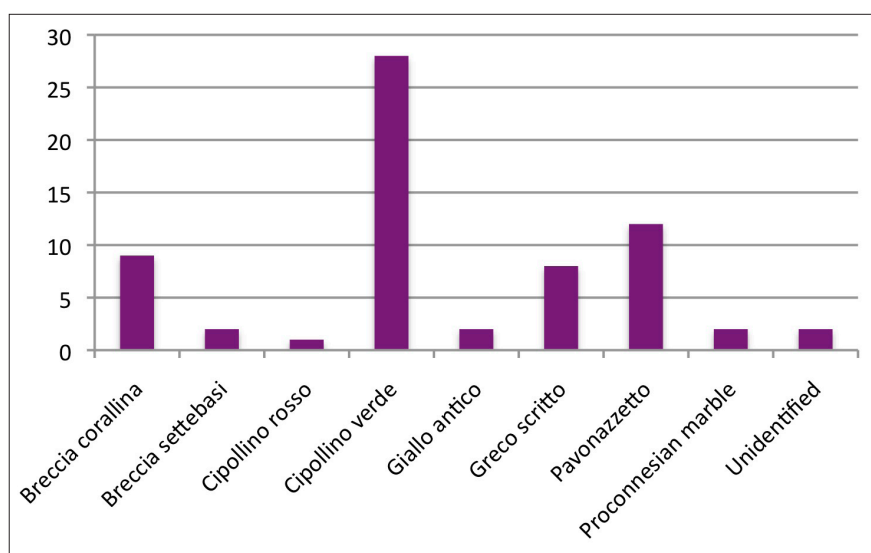


Fig. 7. Histogram of the lithotypes in the fifth archaeological phase of the Pythion Theatre

*Pavonazzetto* and *Proconnesian marble*) used together with a scattering of Greek marbles (*Cipollino Verde*, *Portasanta* and *Breccia Settebasi*). In this phase some lithotypes from newly exploited quarry sites (*Verde Antico* and *Cipollino Rosso*) are also used. The prevalent use of Anatolian marbles seems to confirm the hypothesis of the crucial role played by craftsmen of Anatolian workshops in the diffusion of marble through Crete during the Antonine-Severan age<sup>11</sup>.

The collected data suggest that during this phase the previous lithotypes were still utilized; the predominance of marble from Asia Minor appears clearly, but a good quantity of lithotypes from Greece is also attested. Most of the latter, it could be noted, provide the colour green (*Cipollino Verde*, *Verde Antico*, and *Serpentino*), a colour that is missing from Anatolian quarries.

### 3) Reuse phase (275-365)

After being briefly abandoned, the theatre was partially reused both as a stable and as a workshop.

In total, 578 fragments of 17 different marble types (Fig. 5) have been ascribed at this phase; the connection with the theatre can be considered probable for the majority of these fragments, but there are also fragments unrelated to the theatre. The huge quantity of fragments and the variety of lithotypes belonging to this phase allows the clarification of the importance of spoliation activities probably connected to commercialization of scavenged fragments. In this phase a furnace was built to produce lime from marble fragments, other fragments were probably collected to be reused or to be sold as scavenged materials. In this collection some new lithotypes joined the deposit, as the presence of *Porfido Rosso* from Egypt and *Bigio Antico* from Lesbos off the Anatolian coast demonstrate.

11 PENSABENE, LAZZARINI 2004.

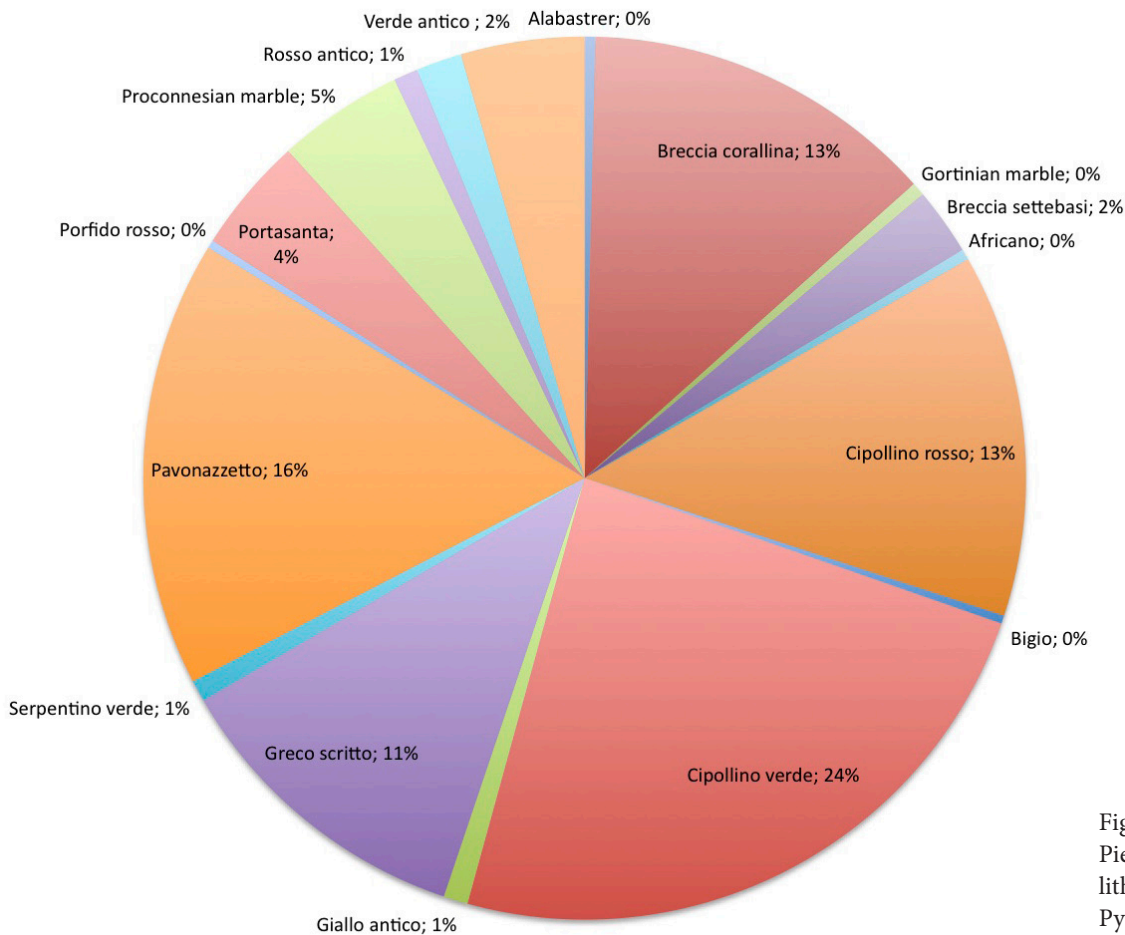


Fig. 8.  
Pie chart of the lithotypes from the Python Theatre

#### 4) Collapse phase (365-425)

The fourth phase shows the collapse of the building: a first extensive collapse was caused by an earthquake in July 365, while the definitive destruction of the theatre can be dated to the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century after an intermediate period of occupation of the theatre.

Almost 66 fragments of nine different marble types have been ascribed to this phase: *Cipollino Verde*, *Pavonazzetto* and *Breccia Corallina* are the most numerous lithotypes, but their connection with the theatre's decoration is doubtful (Fig. 6).

#### 5) Abandonment (475-present)

The last phase of the theatre is characterized by occasional activity through Early Byzantine times (475-625) ending with the definitive abandonment of the building in or around the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In this phase the theatre seems to have been a collection point for scavenged fragments coming from the last spoliations of the building. This phase has produced 147 fragments belonging to 17 lithotypes, of which *Greco Scritto*, *Pavonazzetto* and Proconnesian marble are the most attested (Fig. 7). Again, the majority of the fragments have a very uncertain connection with the decoration of the theatre

because of their provenience from the most superficial layers of the deposit. Their alien origin is confirmed by the presence of some lithotypes (*Porfido Rosso* and *Rosso Antico*) probably unrelated to the theatre.

#### General remarks and conclusions

The study of the 1015 fragments of coloured marble recovered from the theatre near the temple of the Python Apollo has made it possible to identify at least 16 of the most widespread lithotypes in the Roman period (Fig. 8) including *Cipollino Verde* (Carystus, Evvia, Greece) with 24% of the total fragments, *Pavonazzetto* (*Marmor Docimium*, Iscehisar, Turkey) 17%, *Greco Scritto* (Hasançavuslar, Turkey or Cap de Gard, Algeria) 13%, *Breccia corallina* (*Marmor Sagarium*, Vezirhan, Turkey) 13%, *Cipollino Rosso* (*Marmor Iassense*, Kiyikislacik, Turkey) 9%, Proconnesian marble (*Marmor Proconnesium*, Marmara island, Turkey) 6%, *Breccia di Settebasi* (Skyros Island, Greece) 2%, *Portasanta* (*Marmor Chium*, Chios Island, Greece) 2%, *Verde Antico* (*Marmor Thessalicum*, Thessaly, Greece) 2%, *Alabaster* (Pamukkale, Turkey) 1%, *Giallo Antico* (*Marmor Numidicum*, Chemtou, Tunisia) 1%, *Rosso Antico* (*Marmor Tenarium*, Cape Tenarion,

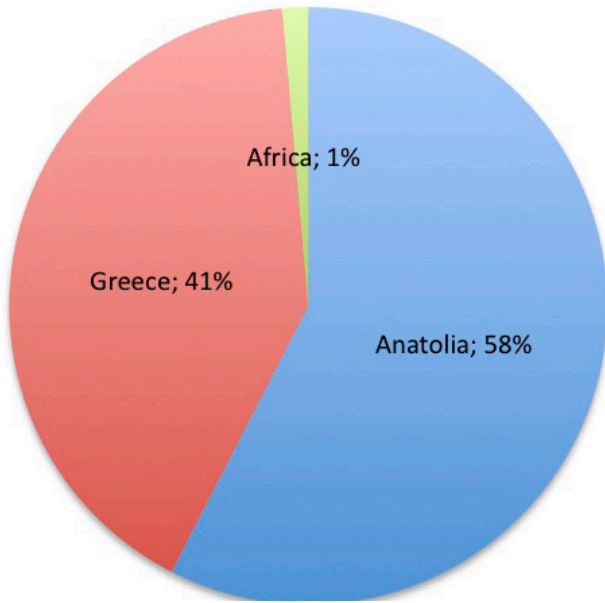


Fig. 9. Pie chart of the provenances of the recognized lithotypes

Greece) 1%, *Serpentino Verde* or *Porfido Verde di Grecia* (*Marmor Lacedaemonicum*, Krokea, Greece) 1%, *Africano* (*Marmor Luculleum*, Salgacik, Turkey), *Bigio Antico*, Gortinian marble (Gortyna, Crete, Greece) and *Porfido Rosso* (*Lapis Porphirites*, Jebel Dokham, Egypt).

If the focus is placed on the provenance of lithotypes, the use of a wide range of coloured marbles from the Mediterranean appears well demonstrated (Fig. 9); in particular, Anatolian marbles are prevalent (45%). Greek lithotypes are also well-attested (32%), while marbles from Africa are less common (2%). In addition, some fragments cannot be identified (8%). Moreover, *Greco Scritto* (13%) could come from both Africa<sup>12</sup> and Anatolia<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore the *Portasanta* marble was quarried in the island of Chios, which is within the border of the modern nation of Greece but is also very close to the Anatolian mainland. So, it could be listed both with the Anatolian and Greek marble. We listed it with Greek marbles according to Lazzarini's classification<sup>14</sup>.

The reconstruction of the marble decorations of the first phase of the theatre cannot be presented because of the uncertain relationship of the fragments to the building's decoration. In this phase some Anatolian lithotypes (*Greco Scritto*, *Pavonazetto* Proconnesian marble) were

probably used in decorations of the theatre but the framework of the decorative program cannot be understood entirely.

Indeed the stratigraphic study of the archaeological deposits suggest that only the fragments recovered from the layers related to the second archaeological phase may be confidently connected with the architectural decoration of the theatre. Consequently we can propose a realistic reconstruction only for the marble decorations used in the restoration phase of the theatre (175/225).

In this phase the architectural decoration of the theatre appears to be based largely on the presence of Anatolian lithotypes used together with several Greek stones; the use of an African lithotype (*Giallo Antico*) remains very uncertain.

The prevalence of Anatolian marbles makes clear the importance of this region as a source for marble in Gortyna. Moreover, in a recent paper<sup>15</sup> some close links with Anatolian craftsmen's traditions are identified in architectural elements belonging to several Gortinian archaeological contexts; it is the case of the Great Theatre where Lesbian *kymatia* have strong similarities with *kymatia* used in the Theatre of Ephesus (Turkey). This evidence allows scholars to postulate the presence in the city of a micro-Asiatic atelier during the late Antonine-Severan age.

It is also possible that these craftsmen could be employed also in the Theatre of the Pythion using mainly Anatolian stones in combination with the most prestigious Greek lithotypes, perhaps primarily to provide the colour green, which was missing from Anatolian quarries.

The very small attestations of the local *Marmo Gortinio* seem to indicate that the marble was not heavily used, even in its native area. This supposed rarity contrast with the scholars' reports that it was widely used "in Roman and Byzantine times"<sup>16</sup>. However, the absence of the *Marmo Gortinio* from all but the latest layers of the theatre do not allow us to estimate the real attestation of this local stone in the theatre because of the modest reliability of these latest layers in defining the architectural decoration of the theatre.

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12 PENSABENE 1976; ANTONELLI, LAZZARINI, CANCELLIERE. 2009.

13 ATTANASIO *et al.* 2012.

14 LAZZARINI 2007; LAZZARINI 2009, 464.

15 PENSABENE, LAZZARINI 2004, 777.

16 LAZZARINI 2002, 228.

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