

# The Green Schist Marble Stone of Jebel El Hairech (North West of Tunisia): a Multi-Analytical Approach and its Uses in Antiquity

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# CONTENT

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

Thassos, Known Inscriptions with New Data <i>Tony Kozelj and Manuela Wurch-Kozelj</i> .....	131
The Value of Marble in Roman <i>Hispalis</i> : Contextual, Typological and Lithological Analysis of an Assemblage of Large Architectural Elements Recovered at N° 17 Goyeneta Street (Seville, Spain) <i>Ruth Taylor, Oliva Rodríguez, Esther Ontiveros, María Luisa Loza, José Beltrán and Araceli Rodríguez</i> .....	143
<i>Giallo Antico</i> in Context. Distribution, Use and Commercial Actors According to New Stratigraphic Data from the Western Mediterranean (2 <sup>nd</sup> C. Bc – Late 1 <sup>st</sup> C. Ad) <i>Stefan Ardeleanu</i> .....	155
<i>Amethystus</i> : Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection <i>Luigi Pedroni</i> .....	167
<b>2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: (MARBLE)</b>	
Unraveling the Carrara – Göktepe Entanglement <i>Walter Prochaska, Donato Attanasio and Matthias Bruno</i> .....	175
The Marble of Roman Imperial Portraits <i>Donato Attanasio, Matthias Bruno, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadır Yavuz</i> .....	185
Tracing Alabaster (Gypsum or Anhydrite) Artwork Using Trace Element Analysis and a Multi-Isotope Approach (Sr, S, O) <i>Lise Leroux, Wolfram Kloppmann, Philippe Bromblet, Catherine Guerrot, Anthony H. Cooper, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, Dominique Vingtain and Noel Worley</i> .....	195
Roman Monolithic Fountains and Thasian Marble <i>Annewies van den Hoek, Donato Attanasio and John J. Herrmann</i> .....	207
Archaeometric Analysis of the Alabaster Thresholds of Villa A, Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Italy) and New Sr and Pb Isotopic Data for <i>Alabastro Ghiaccione del Circeo</i> <i>Simon J. Barker, Simona Perna, J. Clayton Fant, Lorenzo Lazzarini and Igor M. Villa</i> .....	215
Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy) <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Elisabetta Roffia</i> .....	231
Calcitic Marble from Thasos in the North Adriatic Basin: Ravenna, Aquileia, and Milan <i>John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	239
Characterisation of White Marble Objects from the Temple of Apollo and the House of Augustus (Palatine Hill, Rome) <i>Francesca Giustini, Mauro Brilli, Enrico Gallochio and Patrizio Pensabene</i> .....	247
Study and Archeometric Analysis of the Marble Elements Found in the Roman Theater at Aeclanum (Mirabella Eclano, Avellino - Italy) <i>Antonio Mesisca, Lorenzo Lazzarini, Stefano Cancelliere and Monica Salvadori</i> .....	255

Two Imperial Monuments in Puteoli: Use of Proconnesian Marble in the Domitianic and Trajanic Periods in Campania <i>Irene Bald Romano, Hans Rupprecht Goette, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	267
Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16 <sup>th</sup> And 17 <sup>th</sup> Centuries): the Church of <i>Santi Severino e Sossio</i> <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Martino Solito</i> .....	275
Roman and Early Byzantine Sarcophagi of Calcitic Marble from Thasos in Italy: Ostia and Siracusa <i>Donato Attanasio, John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	281
Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi 'Church Wreck' Cargo <i>Justin Leidwanger, Scott H. Pike and Andrew Donnelly</i> .....	291
The Marbles of the Sculptures of Felix Romuliana in Serbia <i>Walter Prochaska and Maja Živić</i> .....	301
Calcitic Marble from Thasos and Proconnesos in Nea Anchialos (Thessaly) and Thessaloniki (Macedonia) <i>Vincent Barbin, John J. Herrmann, Aristotle Mentzos and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	311
Architectural Decoration of the Imperial Agora's Porticoes at Iasos <i>Fulvia Bianchi, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	321
The Winged Victory of Samothrace - New Data on the Different Marbles Used for the Monument from the Sanctuary of the Great Gods <i>Annie Blanc, Philippe Blanc and Ludovic Laugier</i> .....	331
Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios in Gortyna (Crete) <i>Jacopo Bonetto, Nicolò Mareso and Michele Bueno</i> .....	337
Paul the Silentary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina <i>John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	345
Incrustations from Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Near Modern Xanten, Germany) <i>Vilma 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 García-M., Hernando Royo Plumed and Silvia González Soutelo</i> .....	401
A New Roman Imperial Relief Said to Be from Southern Spain: Problems of Style, Iconography, and Marble Type in Determining Provenance <i>John Pollini, Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate and Jerry Podany</i> .....	413
Reuse of the <i>Marmorata</i> from the Late Roman Palatial Building at Carranque (Toledo, Spain) in the Visigothic Necropolis <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M. and Sergio Vidal Álvarez</i> .....	427
Imperial Porphyry in Roman Britain <i>David F. Williams</i> .....	435
Recycling of Marble: Apollonia/Sozousa/Arsuf (Israel) as a Case Study <i>Moshe Fischer, Dimitris Tambakopoulos and Yannis Maniatis</i> .....	443
Thasian Connections Overseas: Sculpture in the Cyrene Museum (Libya) Made of Dolomitic Marble from Thasos <i>John J. Herrmann and Donato Attanasio</i> .....	457
Marble on Rome's Southwestern Frontier: Thamugadi and Lambaesis <i>Robert H. Tykot, Ouahiba Bouzidi, John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i> .....	467
Marble and Sculpture at Lepcis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya): a Preliminary Study Concerning Origin and Workshops <i>Luisa Musso, Laura Buccino, Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i> .....	481
The Pentelic Marble in the Carnegie Museum of Art Hall of Sculpture, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania <i>Albert D. Kollar</i> .....	491
Analysis of Classical Marble Sculptures in the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta <i>Robert H. Tykot, John J. Herrmann, Renée Stein, Jasper Gaunt, Susan Blevins and Anne R. Skinner</i> .....	501
<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

# THE GREEN SCHIST MARBLE STONE OF JEBEL EL HAIRECH (NORTH WEST OF TUNISIA): A MULTI-ANALYTICAL APPROACH AND ITS USES IN ANTIQUITY

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## Abstract

Green schist marble stone was used in Antiquity both as a building stone for private and public constructions, and as an ornamental stone for sculpting funeral monuments and for engraving epigraphic texts. Three quarries that once provided green schist blocks have been located to the Eastern part of Jebel el Hairech situated in the governorate of Jendouba (North-West of Tunisia). The preserved cutting marks left on the quarry fronts led to the identification of the quarrying techniques and the determination of the sizes of some cut blocks. The results of petro-mineralogical and chemical analyses, together with physico-mechanical tests, revealed the green schist marble stones to be of high quality with physical and mechanical properties that are fully adapted for construction as well as for the sculpture of architectural and funeral structures.

## Keywords

Jebel el Hairech, Tunisia, green schist

## Introduction

Marble stones<sup>1</sup> have been considered since ancient times as “select stones” both for the production of their art and for the construction of various public and private buildings, because of their physical and aesthetic properties. In the African Roman cities, various and numerous constructions were made and decorated with marble stones, but no inventory study has been made to list their different varieties, excepting an attempt to

identify the ancient marble stones located to the North of the Tunisian Dorsale<sup>2</sup>. This study led to the identification of 8 varieties of marble stone used for both building and decorating public and private constructions, and for engraving texts of different types in the Roman cities of northern *Africa Proconsularis*. Among the identified marble stones, green schist stone was located in Jebel el Hairech in the governorate of Jendouba situated in the northwest region of Tunisia (Fig. 1). Jebel el Hairech covers a much wider area of the el Hairech massif than Jebel Chemtou which provided the Antique Yellow marble (*Marmor Numidicum*). Green schist marble stone was widely used in Antiquity in the ancient cities of *Simitthus* (Chemtou) and *Thunusuda* (Borj Hellal?), both located near Jebel el Hairech. Yet very few studies have been made of green schist marble, stone, in contrast to Yellow Numidian marble (*Marmor Numidicum*) which caught the attention of several researchers in geology, archaeology and history.<sup>3</sup>

The present paper aims at increasing the previous geological and archaeological knowledge in the light of new data collected during field prospecting in Jebel el Hairech and in the archaeological sites of Chemtou, Borj Hellal, Bulla Regia and Dougga, together with further analytical analyses performed on the green schist marble stone.

1 The term “marble stone” used both by geologists and geoarchaeologists was preferred to the word “marble” used by ancient authors, because the majority of these marbles are hard limestones with various colours able to take a very high polish, and used both for building and ornamenting constructions.

2 YOUNES 2014, 161-192.

3 These important geological researches (3 doctoral theses and 1 mémoire) were made on the el Hairech massif (see ROUVIER 1985; ALOUANI 1988; *ibid*, 1991; SOUSSI 2002). Only two preliminary studies concerned green schist marble stone (YOUNES 2014(a), 231-248; WEDERNI 2014). For safety reasons, the student who wrote the mémoire that I supervised was unable to conduct surveys in Jebel el Hairech. I provided her the necessary documents (photos, schemes, samples of the rock, etc.) which she used in the redaction of her mémoire. The results of the analyses she performed on the green schist stone have been deepened and reused in this present paper.

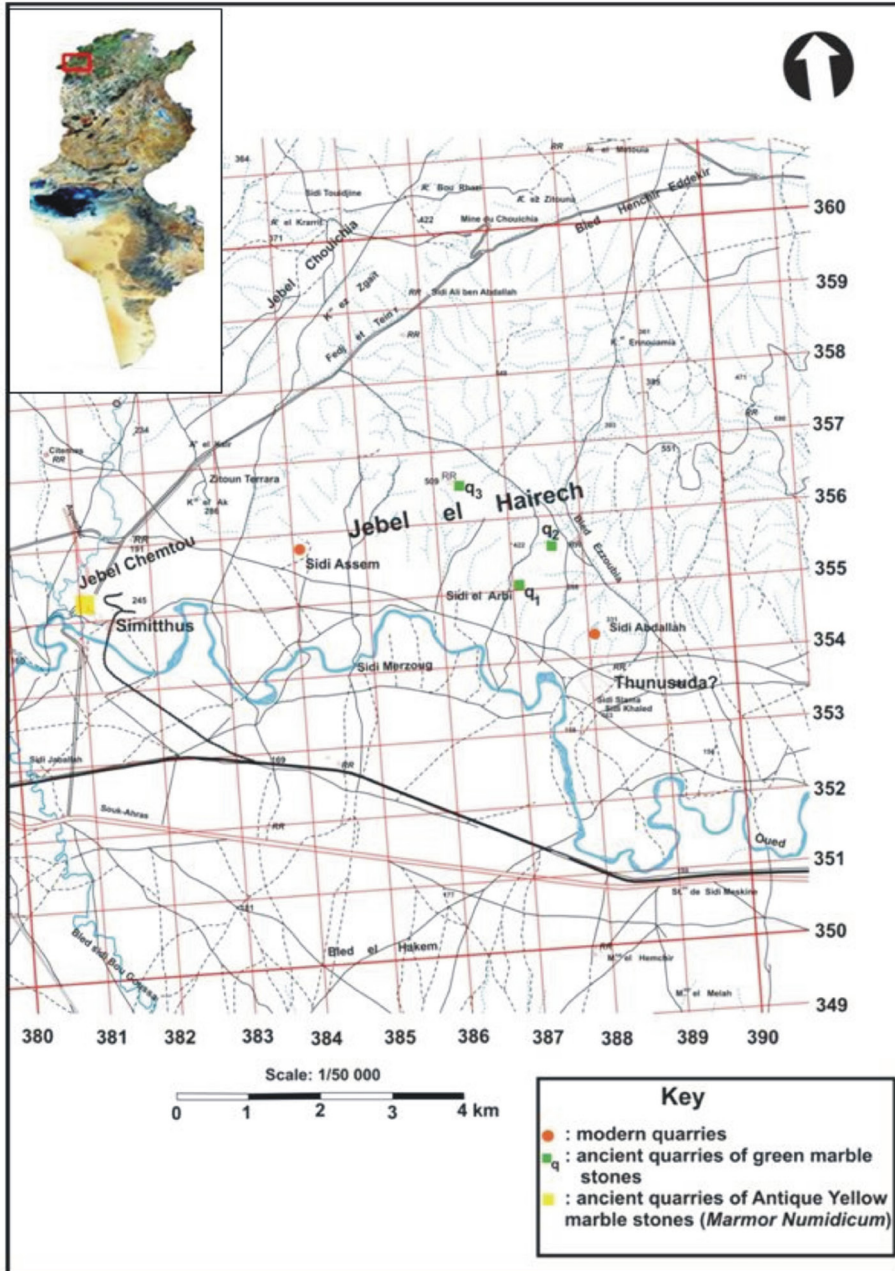


Fig. 1. Location of Jebel el Hairech massif and the green schist marble stone quarries (map: A. Younès)

**I) Geological setting**

The massif of Jebel el Hairech, culminating at 690 m, is situated 8 km north-west of the town of Jendouba (Fig. 1). The two anticlinal structures constituting the massif are made of Permo-Triassic oolitic sandstone cores. These structures oriented ENE-WSW are separated by an intensely brecciated Syncline<sup>4</sup>.

From a stratigraphic point of view, Jebel el Hairech is known for having the same name as its geological formation (el Hairech Formation); it is characterized by a strong sandstone oolitic sequence with ripple marks and

is rich in plant fossils (especially Equisetites). The top of the sequence is defined by grey to black dolomites and dolomitic sandstones about 50 m thick.

Jurassic outcrops occur to the south and to the east of the massif, and consist of grey-beige, blackish and pink-whitish dolomites mainly invaded by iron oxide mineralization caused by fractures. The dolomites are strongly recrystallized and are characterized by albite porphyroblasts showing simple and polysynthetic twinning<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2).

4 ROUVIER 1985, *op. cit.*; ALOUANI 1988, *op. cit.*; GHARBI, HENRY 1992, 187-194.

5 SOUSSI 2002, *op. cit.*



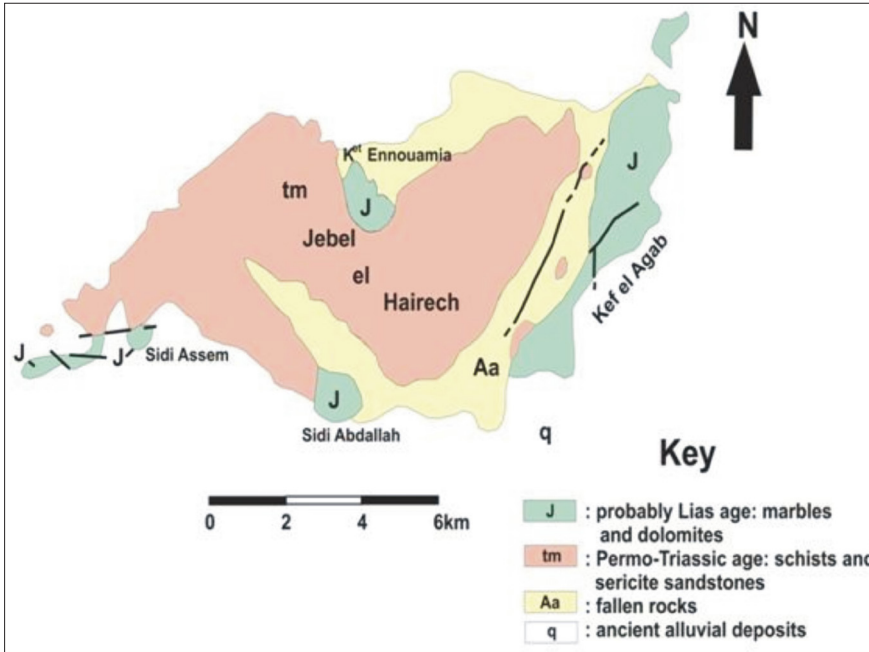


Fig. 2. Geological map of the studied area (from the geological map of Ghardimaou, 1/50000) (map: A. Younès)

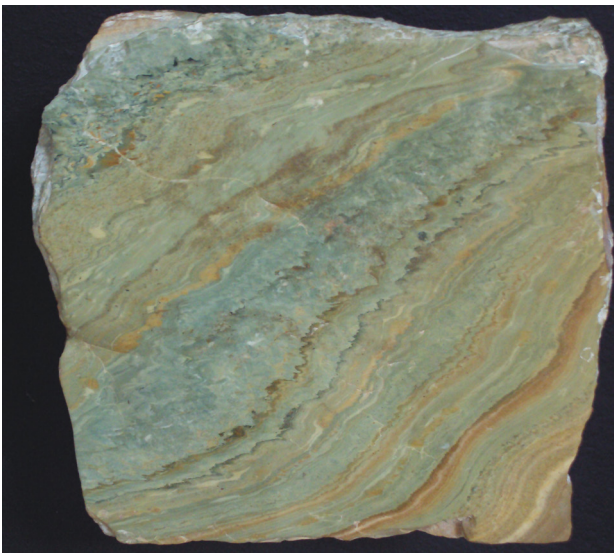


Fig. 3. Picture showing green schist marble stone (photo: A. Younès)

## II) Characterization of the green schist marble stone

### 1) Material and methods

#### Sampling

Several fragments of the green schist rock were analyzed macroscopically to identify the colour and the texture. Then, small homogeneous samples of about 7cm x 7cm x 7cm were obtained from these green schist fragments. Part of these samples was powdered for analysis with powder X-ray diffraction (XRD), and the remaining part of each sample was used to produce thin sections to be viewed using a microscope. Chemical analyses, together with physico-mechanical tests, were also performed.

### Minero-petrographic analyses

#### Petrographic analyses

Samples have been studied mineralogically in thin sections under the polarizing microscope Leica DM 500 MP and their mineralogical composition evaluated by means of a swift point counter. Thin sections observations permit the determination of the fabric of the green schist marble stone and the identification of the accessory and secondary minerals.

#### XRD analyses

XRD measurements were also performed on powdered samples in order to obtain semi-quantitative information about the mineral phases present in the samples.

#### Chemical analyses

The samples were also been subjected to chemical analyses and their chemical compositions were performed under Atomic Absorption Spectroscopy (AAS).

#### Physico-mechanical tests

A series of physico-mechanical tests were performed on approximately 7cm x 7cm x 7cm homogeneous samples to determine the density, porosity, water absorption and simple strength of the studied rock.

### 2) Results

#### Macroscopic results

The texture of the green schist marble stone is fine grained with a light to dark green background containing light or dark brown streaks and rare white spots (Fig. 3).

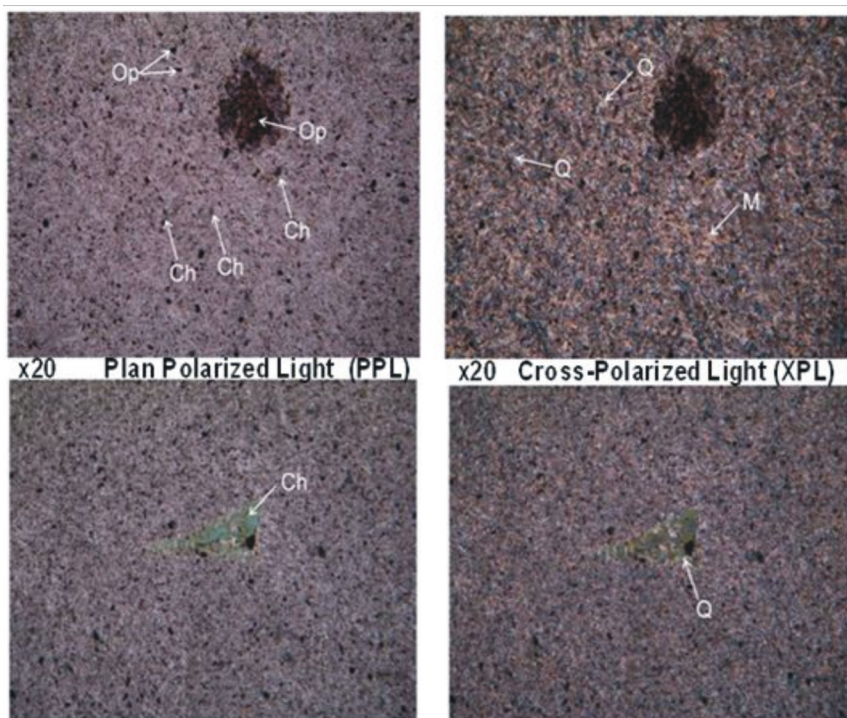


Fig. 4. Thin-section micrographs of green schist stone (photos: M. Gaied, W. Gallala)

Minerals	Quartz	Muscovite	Chlorite	Chloritoïde	Albite
%	60%	23%	10%	4%	2%

Table 1. Mineralogical composition of the green schist stone

Oxides	CaO	SiO <sub>2</sub>	Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	Fe <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	K <sub>2</sub> O	Na <sub>2</sub> O	Cl	MgO	TiO <sub>2</sub>	Total
Average in %	0,20	59,15	22,02	6,10	3,75	0,12	2,9	3,38	0,03	98,26

Table 2. Chemical composition of the green schist marble stone

Absorption rate	Density	Porosity	Compressive strength
0.427%	2.71 g/cm <sup>3</sup>	2.64%	95.4 MPa

Table 3. Physico-mechanical results of the green schist marble stone

### Minero-petrographic results

The minero-petrographic analyses of thin sections performed on the green schist samples reveal a lepidoblastic, slightly schistose texture constituted of chlorites and chloritoïdes dominating the coloured background. The small light coloured quartz and plagioclase crystals, together with dark muscovites are irregularly disseminated (Fig. 4 and Table 1).

XRD analyses, in agreement with petrographic analyses reveal that the samples contain large amounts of quartz with picks ranging from 4.23Å to 1.81Å (diffractograms, Fig. 5)<sup>6</sup>, abundance of phyllosilicates (muscovite, chlorite and chloritoïdes), and a small amount of albite (Table 1).

### Chemical results

The chemical results confirm the minero-petrographic and XRD results. Indeed, the ACF diagram (Fig. 6) shows that green schist marble stone has a pelite composition, characterized by a high content in Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> essentially due to the presence of aluminosilicates (muscovite, chloritoïdes and chlorites) (Table 2)<sup>7</sup>.

### Physico-mechanical results

The results of the physico-mechanical tests are shown on Table 3. A low density rate is observed (2.71g/cm<sup>3</sup>) and this result is very close to the density of each of the main constituents of the rock (quartz: 2.65 g/cm<sup>3</sup>;

6 WEDERNI 2014, *op. cit.*, 29.

7 WEDERNI 2014, *op. cit.*, 31.

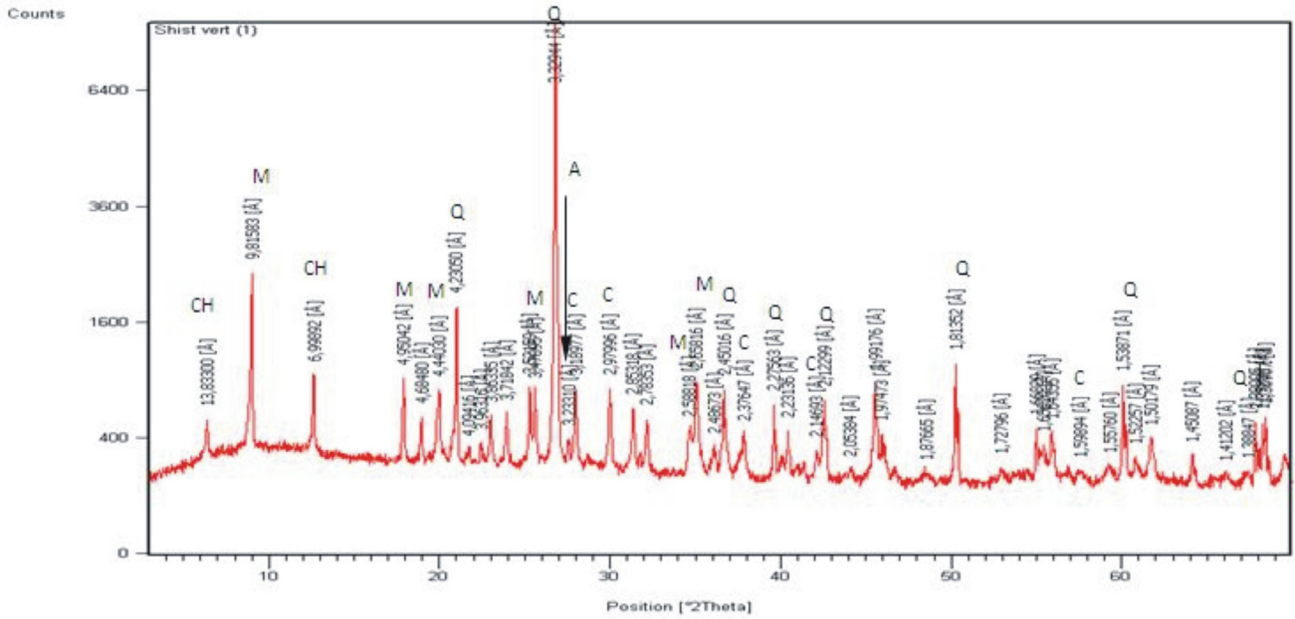


Fig. 5. X-ray diffraction pattern of the green schist (scheme: D. Wederni)

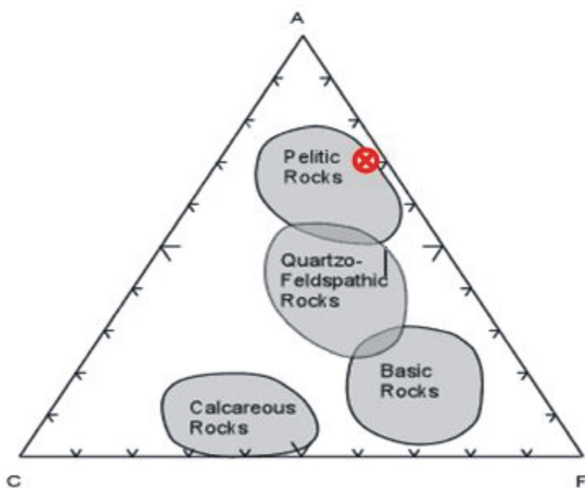


Fig. 6. ACF diagram (scheme: W. Gallala)

micas: 2.7 to 3.3 g/cm<sup>3</sup>; chlorite: 2.6 to 3.3 g/cm<sup>3</sup>; feldspaths: 2.55 to 2.76 g/cm<sup>3</sup>). Porosity is also low (2.64%) due to the size and shapes of the grains, together with the little space that is free. This low porosity results in low permeability (0.427%) (Fig. 7)<sup>8</sup>.

From a mechanical point of view, the green schist stone shows a high compressive strength higher than 95MPa (Table 3 and Fig. 7). This indicates that this stone is a hard marble rock according to AFNOR norms situating marble stones between 92 and 100 MPa. This high resistance is due to its high compaction and hardness.

### III) Exploitation of the ancient quarries

#### 1) Location of the quarries

Three ancient quarries situated in close proximity to each other were found during two archaeological surveys<sup>9</sup> in the south eastern area of Jebel el Hairech. The first one, identified during the 2009 survey<sup>10</sup> is located downhill from Jebel el Hairech, north-north-east of Sidi el Arbi Marabout. The other two quarries were found during the 2014 and 2015 surveys. They are situated respectively 600 m north-east and 1700 m north-north-west of the first quarry<sup>11</sup> (Figs. 1, 8a, 8b and 8c).

The three quarries are situated in close proximity from the archaeological site of Borj Hellal<sup>12</sup> (the first quarry is approximately 1.5 km north-north-west of Borj Hellal), and not very far from *Simitthus* site (the third quarry is about 5 km from *Simitthus* site) (Fig. 1).

Nowadays, a little path linked to the asphalted Tunis-Ghardimaou road leads down to the quarries (Fig. 1).

9 Our activity has been limited to a small area of Jebel el Hairech due to the lack of security in the sector.

10 YOUNES 2014(a), *op. cit.*

11 The third quarry was found near the place indicated by the letters "RR" in the topographic map at scale 1/50000 and in the Archaeological Atlas, sheet N° 31, Ghardimaou. According to the team who carried out the topographic surveys the letters "RR" indicate the presence of Roman archaeological remains.

12 See *infra*, footnote n° 14.



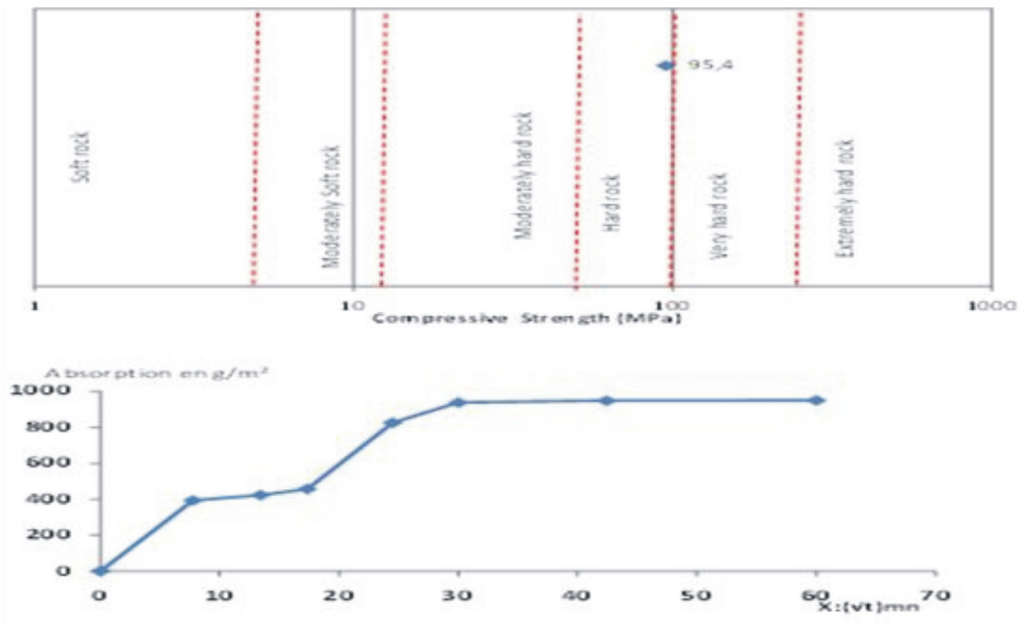


Fig. 7. Absorption rate coefficient and compressive strength diagrams (scheme: D. Wederni)



Fig. 8a. View of quarry 1 (photo: A. Younès)



Fig. 8c. View of quarry 3 (photo: A. Younès)



Fig. 8b. View of quarry 2 (photo: A. Younès)

## 2) Ancient quarrying techniques

Nowadays, the extraction areas of the quarries that were exploited in the open-air are not well preserved, being partially filled up with alluvium brought by runoffs and soil (Figs. 8a and 8b). Nevertheless, the cutting marks still visible on the quarry fronts provide us with very useful information concerning the extraction techniques and the sizes of the cut blocks. Hence, two methods of extraction could be observed.

The first strategy consisted in exploiting the natural fissures of the rock. Indeed, when the green schist rock did not provide a compact and solid block, but only bedded large-sized blocks separated horizontally and vertically by fissures (*diaklasis* and stratigraphic levels) (Fig. 9), the quarry workers outlined the schist block to be cut by widening these natural planes of weakness



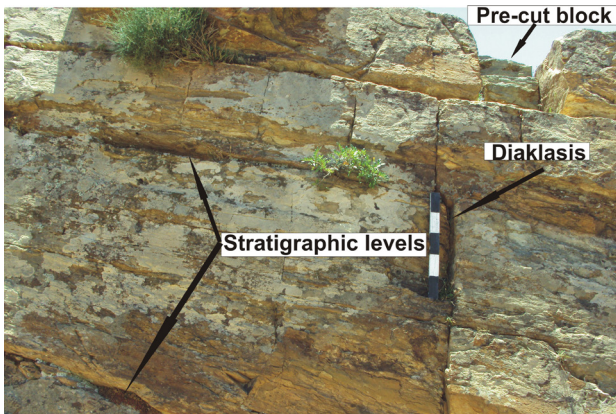


Fig. 9. Diaklasis and stratigraphic levels on the front of quarry 1 (photo: A. Younès)



Fig. 11a. Green schist and antique yellow rubble stones used to build the *cavea* substructions in the Roman theatre (photo: A. Younès)

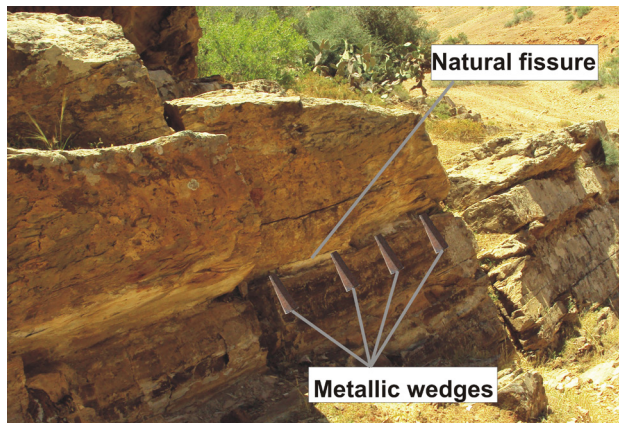


Fig. 10. Extraction technique following the natural fissures in quarry 1 (photo: A. Younès)



Fig. 11b. Green schist and antique yellow rubble stones used to build construction walls (photo: A. Younès)

LENGTH (m)	WIDTH (m)	HEIGHT (m)
1.25	0.50	0.45
1.22	0.50	0.45
1.20	0.50	0.45
1.15	0.55	0.50
1.08	0.55	0.50
1.02	0.47	0.45
0.98	0.75	0.55
0.97	0.77	0.55
0.96	0.50	0.45
0.90	0.50	0.45
0.83	0.47	0.45
0.75	0.47	0.45
0.60	0.45	0.45
0.52	0.45	0.45
0.50	0.45	0.45
0.42	0.35	0.30

Table 4. Sizes of extracted blocks according to the marks left on the quarry fronts

using the *escoude* or the awl in order to get extraction slits (trenches) whose depth depended on the height of the *diaklasis*. Then, they inserted metallic wedges only in the horizontal natural fractures, for it was useless to create a line of fracture in the lower upright side of the rock. Finally, they hammered the wedges in order to break the rock apart (Fig. 10). This quarrying technique, consisting in following the natural fissures of the rock, did not allow the extraction of equal sized-blocks. That's why the large-sized blocks extracted in the quarry site were then cut into small and medium-sized blocks to be then carried to the building sites.

The second strategy concerned rock that did not show any fissures. The quarry workers first outlined the blocks to be extracted on three sides (two vertical and the lower horizontal, because the upper horizontal side of the block has already been detached). Then, with a pick or an *escoude*, they made extraction trenches whose width ranged from 8 to 15 cm allowing the awl or the *escoude* to move in easily. The depth of these extraction trenches depended on the height of the block to be cut.





Fig. 12. Green schist squared blocks used to build a Byzantine tower (photo: A. Younès)

Finally, the quarry workers made a line of fracture and wedge holes on the lower horizontal side of the rock in order to insert metallic wedges on which they hammered to detach the schist block from the bedrock. The extracted blocks were small and medium-sized, and required just a little adjustment to be used in the constructions<sup>13</sup> (Table 4).

#### IV) The uses of the green schist marble stones

The different archaeological field excursions organized with colleagues, archaeologists and students in the ancient archaeological sites situated in the region of Jendouba (*Simitthus*, *Thunusuda*<sup>14</sup>, *Bulla Regia* and *Thugga*) allowed us to identify, even if only partially, the different uses of the green schist marble stones. Indeed, this

13 These two types of extraction techniques were observed in other ancient Tunisian quarries. See YOUNES, OUAJA 2008, 55-82; GAIED *et al.* 2010, 531-549.

14 The ancient town of *Thunusuda* was mentioned through ancient literary and epigraphic sources, but its location in the site of Borj Hellal, situated about 7.5 km East-South-East of *Simitthus* (Chemtou) remains uncertain. This ancient town may correspond to the archaeological site of *sidi Mesquine* located 11 km South-East of ancient *Simitthus* (see CIL, VIII, 22194; SAUMAGNE 1950, 130, note 20; Pline l'ancien, V, 29, . 293; LANCEL 1991, 1493; VICTOR DE VITA, 292-293, note 93; DESANGES *et al.* 2010, 262-263).



Fig. 13. Remaining parts of column shafts (photo: A. Younès)

marble stone was used both as a building stone (building of walls), and an ornamental stone (sculpting columns and funerary monuments, engraving texts).

##### 1) Building stone

In both archaeological sites of Borj Hellal and Chemtou, a number of public constructions and unidentified structures were partially built with green schist squared stones and rubble stones. In Chemtou, the substructures of the theatre *cavea* were constructed with green schist and antique yellow rubble stones, and in both sites the walls of the non identified structures were made of green schist rubble stones (Figs. 11a and 11b). In the site of Borj Hellal, the fortifications and a Byzantine tower were built with medium and large-sized green schist squared blocks (Fig. 12). The sizes of these squared blocks are reported on Table 5<sup>15</sup> and most of these sizes are different from the ancient Roman and Punic units of measurements (cubit and foot)<sup>16</sup>.

##### 2) Ornamental stone

###### a) Sculptured columns

At the site of Borj Hellal several columns were found; some are still in place while others are scattered on the archaeological ground. The bases and the shafts of the columns still in place are partially filled with soil, whereas

15 Some of the squared blocks reported on this table have been mentioned in a previous article (See YOUNES 2014a).

16 The Punic cubit used at Carthage during the Roman period: 50 cm; the Punic cubit used at Lepcis Magna during the Roman period: 51.5 cm; the Roman cubit: 44.4 cm; the Punic foot: 34.3-34.5 cm; the Roman foot used in Africa: 29.4 cm (see HALLIER 1993, paragraphs 2112 and 2116).



Block N°	LENGTH (cm)	WIDTH (cm)	HEIGHT (cm)
1	188	50	38
2	170	65	43
3	130	50	50
4	125	53	50
5	125	50	43
6	122	45	42
7	120	53	41
8	113	53	53
9	110	50	53
10	95	53	45
11	93	75	55
12	91	75	50
13	90	75	53
14	90	50	65
15	80	70	50
16	80	50	30
17	75	60	50
18	70	55	55
19	70	50	50
20	70	50	32

Table 5.  
Sizes of the measured squared  
blocks from the site of Borj Hellal



Fig. 14. Votive stele (photo: A. Younès)

their capitals have disappeared (Fig. 13). The circumferences of the smooth shafts range between 57 cm and 45 cm, and their remaining heights vary from 285 cm to 97 cm. These columns might have been employed for the decoration of an important civic building. A number of the column shafts were measured and their sizes are reported in Table 6<sup>17</sup>.

#### b) Ornamented and inscribed funerary monuments

Schist marble stone was also used in the decoration of funerary monuments such as the bas-reliefs, steles and funerary cupules.

Thus, in the site of Borj-Hellal a marble bas-relief, representing 8 Moorish divinities aligned in profile with thick hair, was discovered.

The majority of the well preserved funeral steles were discovered in the site of *Simitthus* and are held in the exhibition hall of the Chemtou Museum. A few of them are anepigraphic, only ornamented with decorations, whereas the majority contain epigraphic texts and are sometimes accompanied by decorations<sup>18</sup>. The ane-

17 Some of these column shafts have been mentioned in a previous article (YOUNES 2014a, 241-243).

18 A detailed study on the overall steles exhibited in the Chemtou Museum will give us an invaluable source of information concerning the epigraphic materials, the decorations used and the life of the deceased person.

	Ø x preserved height (cm)
Column shafts still in place partially filled with soil.	50 x 116
	45 x 117
	45 x 97
	40 x 200
	35 x 130
Column shafts scattered on the archaeological ground.	50 x 144
	50 x 136
	45 x 97
Column shafts re-employed in the Byzantine fortification.	57 x 285
Column shafts re-employed in the <u>marabout</u> of <u>sidi Slama</u> .	Non measured

Table 6.  
Sizes of the measured column shafts



Fig. 15. Epitaph of the *Stabillii* family (photo: A. Younès)

epigraphic steles ornamented with decorations date back to the Roman period, such as the votive steles dedicated to Baal Saturne (2<sup>nd</sup> century - 3<sup>rd</sup> century) (Fig. 14). Among the inscribed steles sculpted during the Roman period (from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), there is the Gargilius stele (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century), the stele of the slave Musunia (end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century - 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century), and the stele dedicated to the Stabillii family (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century) (Fig. 15).

The stone-cutters did not only engrave texts on steles (epitaphs), but also on marble slabs such as the inscription dedicated in honour of Trajan and on columns such as the milestone discovered in the site of *Simitthus* dating back to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century - 2<sup>nd</sup> century (Fig. 16).

The epigraphs inscribed on the green schist marble steles, inscriptions and milestone were painted in red colour so as to make the engraved letters more visible and more readable<sup>19</sup>.

Finally, green schist marble blocks were also used for the sculpting of funerary cupules such as the Gargillii family cupule dating back to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century - first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (Fig. 17).

19 Further analyses will be made to determine the nature and the components of this red product.





Fig. 16. Honoric inscription of Trajan (photo: A. Younès)



Fig. 17. Funerary cupules (photo: A. Younès)

#### V) Attempts to date the quarries and their administration

The green schist archaeological remains discovered at the ancient sites of Chemtou, Borj Hellal, Bulla Regia and Dougga, together with the cutting marks left on the quarry fronts provide only few datable elements concerning the quarrying exploitation and the use of this material.

Indeed, to date the columns still in place, an archaeological excavation is necessary in order to identify the nature and the building date of the monument for which they served as decorations. Moreover, the squared blocks, and the column shaft reused in the Byzantine fortifications in the site of Borj Hellal do not provide any evidence concerning the exact period of their use in the previous constructions. Yet, both the epigraphic (epitaphs) and the anepigraphic steles, together with the

inscriptions, give evidence that this green schist marble stone was used during the Roman period (1<sup>st</sup> century – 3<sup>rd</sup> century), allowing us to assert that at least one quarry was exploited during the Roman Empire.

Concerning the administration of these quarries no data are available to clarify this question, but their proximity to the Antique Yellow marble quarries in Chemtou (*Marmor Numidicum*) which were an imperial property may lead us to make a link between these quarries. Indeed, according to ancient texts, the exploitation of Numidian marble was under the control of the imperial administration from the rule of the Julio-Claudians to the rule of the Severan Dynasty (14 AD – 235 AD)<sup>20</sup>. Thus, the hypothesis that the green schist marble stone quarries were exploited under the Imperial administration, like the Antique Yellow marble quarries, is probable.

#### Conclusions

The green schist marble stone from Jebel el Hairech was very well appreciated by builders, sculptors and stone-cutters who used it as building and ornamental stone in the ancient cities of *Thunusuda* (Borj Hellal or sidi Mes-kine) and *Simitthus* (Chemtou) during the Roman period.

The minero-petrographic analyses, together with chemical analyses and physico-mechanical tests performed on the green schist stone led to the identification of its colour, texture, chemical and mineralogical

20 KRAUS 1993, 55-59; KHANNOUSSI 1993, 65-68; same author 1993(a), 69; RAKOB 1995, 65; KHANNOUSSI 1998, 997-1016; YOUNES 2014, *op. cit.*

composition, as well as its physical properties. The results reveal that this rock is a good construction material as well as a good ornamental stone.

Three quarries were found in the surveyed area of Jebel el Hairech and the preserved cutting marks left on the quarry fronts enabled the identification of the quarrying technique (percussion technique by exploiting the natural planes of weakness of the rock when visible), and the determination of the sizes of the extracted blocks, which vary according to the natural features of the rock face. Indeed, when the rock presented natural fracturing (*diaklasis*), the majority of the extracted blocks were large sized, whereas when the rock face did not show any fissures, the extracted blocks were medium-sized. The large-sized blocks were then cut into small and medium-sized blocks very likely at the quarry site. However, because the three quarries were filled with soil, it was impossible to evaluate the volume of the extracted blocks without making archaeological excavations.

Rubble stones, together with small and medium-sized green schist marble blocks were used in Roman and Byzantine structures. Most sizes of the measured blocks are different from the ancient units of measurements used during the Roman period (Roman Cubit/foot).

Because of the lack of epigraphic texts it is difficult to date the exploitation of the quarries, and to know how they were administered. Nevertheless, other important data such as the periods of use of the green schist marble stone can allow us to assert that these quarries were exploited during the Roman period (1<sup>st</sup> century AD - 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD).

Concerning their administration, the hypothesis that these quarries could have been under imperial administration, just like the nearby *Marmor Numidicum* quarries, is plausible.

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