

Painting and Sculpture Conservation in Two Gallo-Roman Temples in Picardy (France): Champlieu and Pont-Sainte-Maxence

Brunet-Gaston, Véronique; Gaston, Christophe

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PAINTING AND SCULPTURE CONSERVATION IN TWO GALLO-ROMAN TEMPLES IN PICARDY (FRANCE): CHAMPLIEU AND PONT-SAINTE-MAXENCE

Véronique Brunet-Gaston^{1,2} and Christophe Gaston¹

¹ Institut national pour les recherches archéologiques préventives (Inrap), Centre Archéologique de Besançon, Besançon, France (veronique.gaston@inrap.fr; christophe.gaston@inrap.fr)

² Institut de Recherche sur l'Architecture Antique, Aix-en-Provence, France

Abstract

This paper is about two Gallo-Roman archaeological sites of France, in Picardy (Oise). Champlieu Temple and Pont-Sainte-Maxence Sanctuary reveal decorated buildings dated to between the Antonines and the Severans. Made in local Lutetian rocks, all the colours were enhanced when they were first discovered. The sculptures have a specific Hellenistic Greek sculptural expression and special mythological themes. Both border on an important road. Champlieu shows the vicissitudes of time since its discovery in the nineteenth century, and Pont has collapsed because of problems with the foundations. At Pont, the very fresh sculpture seems to have suffered very little erosion, suggesting that the façade had a limited lifetime.

Keywords

painting conservation, sculptures, Gallo-Roman temple

An “EXCEPTIONAL DISCOVERY”

Between March and July 2014, in France, in Picardy, in the city of Pont-Sainte-Maxence, an enormous Roman religious sanctuary was discovered beneath an abandoned soccer field, thirty miles north of Paris. An archaeological survey was conducted by the National Institute of Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP) before the construction of a big shopping plaza. The archaeological authorities of France classified the place of Pont-Sainte-Maxence as an “exceptional discovery” for its very well conservation and its major interest for the Roman architecture.

Archeological environment

The two places are in Gallia Belgica: Pont-Sainte-Maxence “le Champs Lahyre” is near the intersection of the River Oise – which is connected with the Lutetian stone carrier — and an important Gallo-Roman road; and the ruins of the city of Champlieu (Orrouy) lies 15

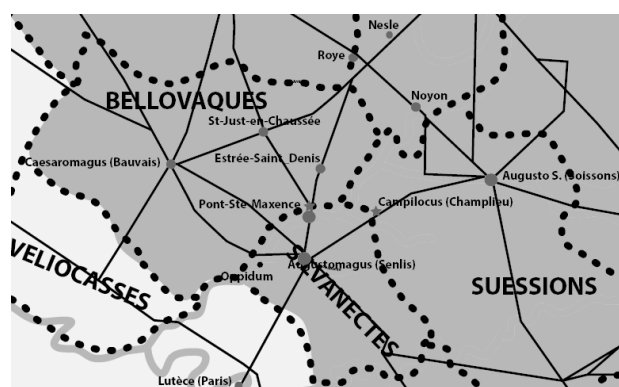


Fig. 1. Map of the strategic position in the center of the three territories (© V. Brunet-Gaston)

miles (twenty five km) to the east. Pont-Sainte-Maxence is near the border between Bellovaques and Silvanectes and Champlieu is on the border of Silvanectes and Sussions. Both seem to be in a strategic position in the center of the three territories (Fig. 1). The building of Pont-Sainte-Maxence was totally unknown to archaeologist, but lies just a short distance from the main road connecting the town of Senlis (Augustomagus) and Beauvais (Caesaromagus) or far away Bavay (Bagacum). The old ruins of Champlieu lie along the big Senlis (Augustomagus) – Soissons (Augusta Sussionum) – Reims (Durocortorum) road.

Dimensions

The precinct of Pont-Sainte-Maxence is a massive second century AD structure measuring about 345 roman feet long by 230 wide (105 x 70 m). It is two times as large as the precinct of the temple of Champlieu¹ (74 x 53 m); however, the temple is bigger (23 x 24 m, Figs. 2 - 3). The monumental entrance of Pont-Sainte-Maxence consisted of seventeen or more stone arcades, more than thirty-four feet high (10.50 m) (Fig. 4).

1 BRUNET-GASTON 2000, 143.

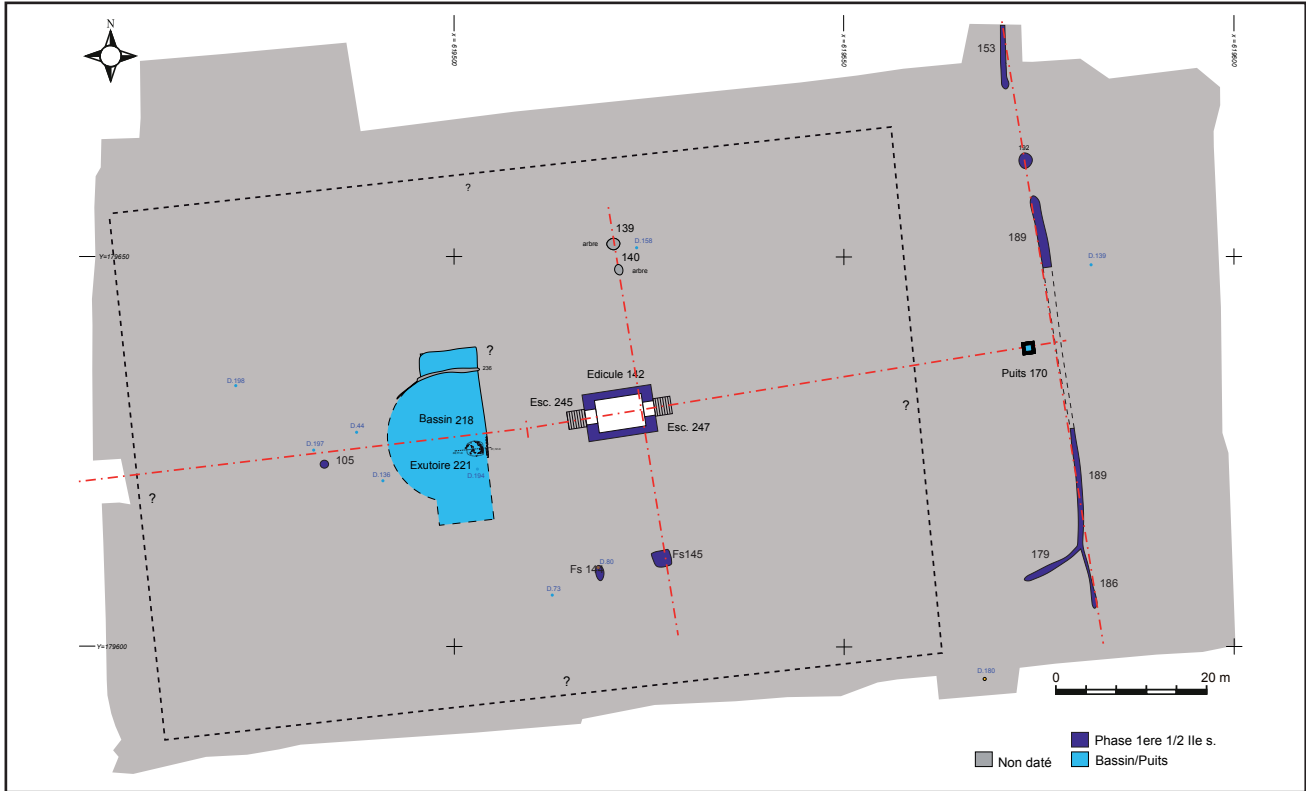


Fig. 2. Map of the site of Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© C. Gaston and V. Brunet-Gaston)

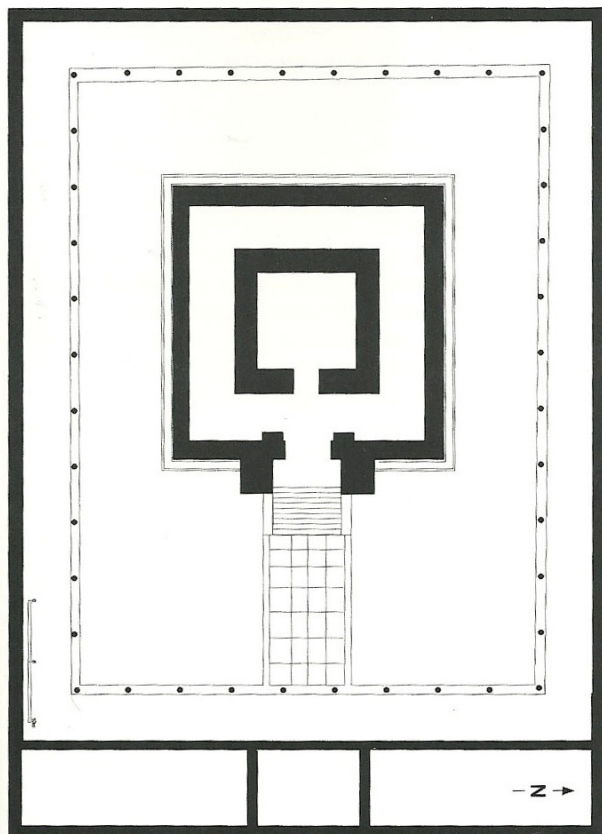


Fig. 3. Map of Champlieu Temple (© V. Brunet-Gaston after Viollet-le-Duc and G.-P. Woimant)

The limestones²

A petrographic examination of 73 samples taken from the carved blocks, revealed the use of four Lutetian limestone types:

| Number of samples | Type | Fossils | Quarry region |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| 27/73 | Limestone with <i>Miliolidea</i> | <i>Miliolidea</i> & <i>Orbitolites</i> , <i>Alveolina</i> | Middle Lutetian Oise Quarries |
| 37/73 | Limestone with <i>Ditrupa</i> | <i>Ditrupa</i> | Middle Lutetian Oise Quarries |
| 5/73 | Limestone with shells | <i>Ditrupa</i> & <i>Orbitolites</i> | Middle Lutetian Quarries Valois region |
| | 'Liais floor' "s-slabs, balustrade... | <i>Miliolidea</i> | Middle Lutetian Quarries from Senlis |

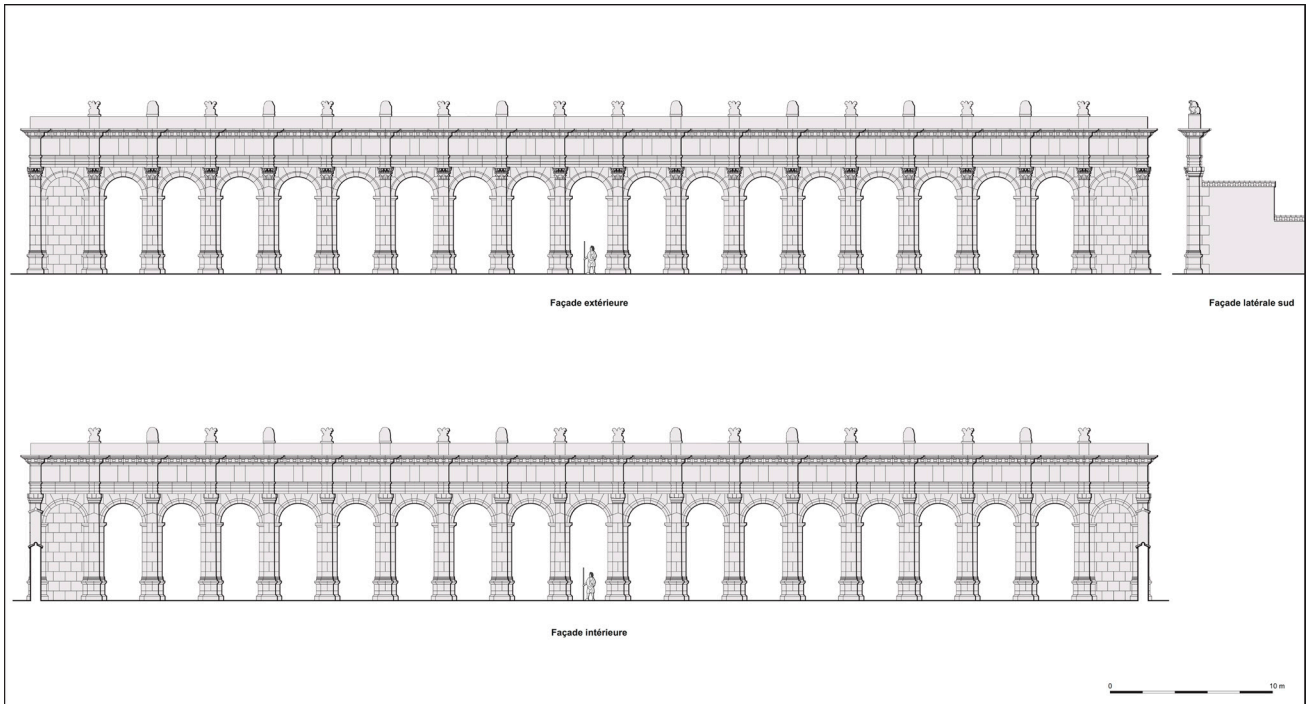


Fig. 4. Restitution of the monumental facade (© C. Gaston)

The Lutetian limestone was deposited in a warm sea that covered almost whole of the Paris region, 45 millions years ago. The Lutetian limestone is subdivided into several layers, among which the Middle Lutetian limestone, extracted from quarries in the valley of the Oise river³. These quarries produced different building stones that can be distinguished based on their fossil content. The Middle Lutetian limestone beds contains the key fossil *Ditrupea* strangulate, allowing to distinguish them from another Lutetian limestone bed, characterized by the presence of *Miliolidea*. The latter limestone produces a quality of stone called the 'Vergelé' stone by the local quarrymen. It is a rather soft limestone rich in *Miliolidea*. Other limestone beds contain large foraminifera, such as *Orbitolites complanatus* and *Alveolina*. Other limestone beds finally consist solely of fine bioclasts in a porous micritic matrix or they are quite rich in fossil shells (coquinas).

The Gallo-Roman quarries of all these limestone varieties were situated on the banks of the Oise river, near Saint-Leu-d'Esserent⁴. The fourth limestone type is the so-called 'Liais'. This variety is petrographically characterized by the presence of small bioclasts (about 0.1 mm) and of *Miliolidea* in a nonporous matrix. The latter limestone bed is more resistant to weathering than the soft limestones mentioned above. It was extracted from ancient quarries near Senlis.

3 MERLE 2008, 76-94, 240-243.

4 GELY, LORENZ, TARDY 2008.

The supply of limestone in the sanctuary of Pont Sainte Maxence is different from that of other Roman monuments that were built in the same region: here, only the Lutetian limestone with *Ditrupea* was used e. g. in Champlieu (located 30 km East of our site).

Polychromes

Some old drawing and watercolors show us the excavations of the temple of Champlieu at the end of the nineteenth century. We can see some capitals, mythological reliefs of gods like Mithras, Apollo, as well as atlantes and the griffins of the marine cortege. The watercolors are an exceptional testimony to the original colors of the building (Figs. 5 - 6). The stones are ribbed with a white distemper brush and the fonds are ocher or dark red and the reliefs are underlined with dark red. Pont-Sainte-Maxence is a monumental jigsaw puzzle; you can see a section of the fallen and smashed architectural remains of the monumental facade (Fig. 7); in different colors you can see the different architectural parts : a monumental head and griffin in dark blue, the attic in violet, cornice in pink, a frieze in ocher, and yellow for the arches (Fig. 8). The details of the anastylosis of the entrance facade (by Christophe Gaston – Fig. 9) show pilasters and arches topped by a rich entablature bearing a frieze of mythological reliefs, and may bear an inscription (one part of a bronze letter has survived). The attic is crowned with alternate monumental heads and seated griffins ready to take off. We can also see the modular layout of two



Fig. 5. Watercolors of Champlieu (© Vivenel Museum, Compiègne)

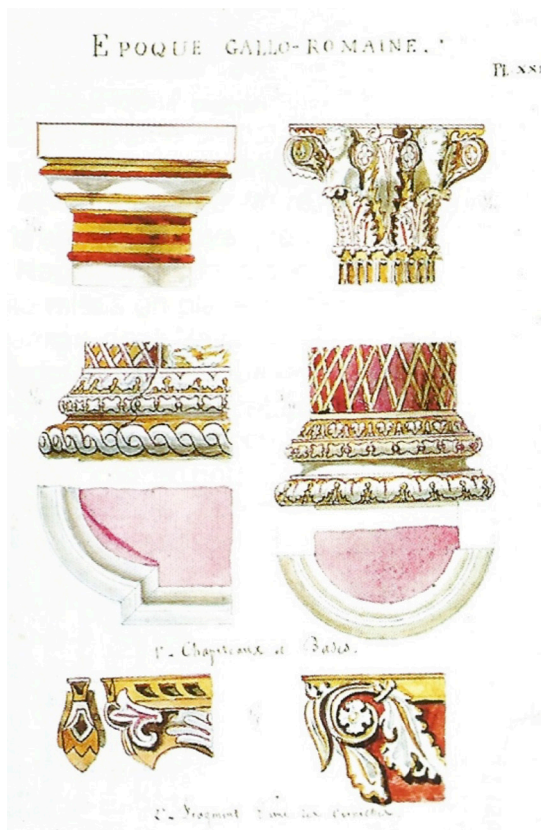


Fig. 6. Watercolors of Champlieu (© Vivenel Museum, Compiègne)



Fig. 7. Fallen and shattered architectural remains of the monumental facade (© C. Gaston)

Roman feet. On some blocks representing a griffin on a stone arcade, or another block with painted peltes, the shields of the Amazons, we can see the highlighted lines of dark red, like a little fragment of a scroll on an architrave. In fact, several fragments of the architrave preserve the traces of the incisions for carving and some colors like yellow or red (Fig. 10). However, the architraves are less ornate at Champlieu⁵. On another arcade with an allegory of victory, the face was white and the fond is red (Fig. 11); and on another face, the nostrils are painted in red! (Fig. 12). On the last block of the arcade, we can see a restitution of the red fund and highlighted details (Fig. 13). The colors are more and more visible in the recent excavations, as in the “Mediathèque Rockefeller” of Reims⁶, while the watercolors of Champlieu are also a good testimony⁷!

Fresh sculpture and bad conservation

For the theme of sculpture conservation, we have at Pont-Sainte-Maxence an exceptional figure presumed to be Venus (Fig. 14). Based on the famous statue of the crouching goddess decorating the frieze, an expressive head of an old woman appears behind the goddess. The

5 BRUNET-GASTON 2000, 149.

6 BRUNET-GASTON 2008.

7 Napoléon III et l'archéologie en forêt de Compiègne sous le second empire. Compiègne 2000.

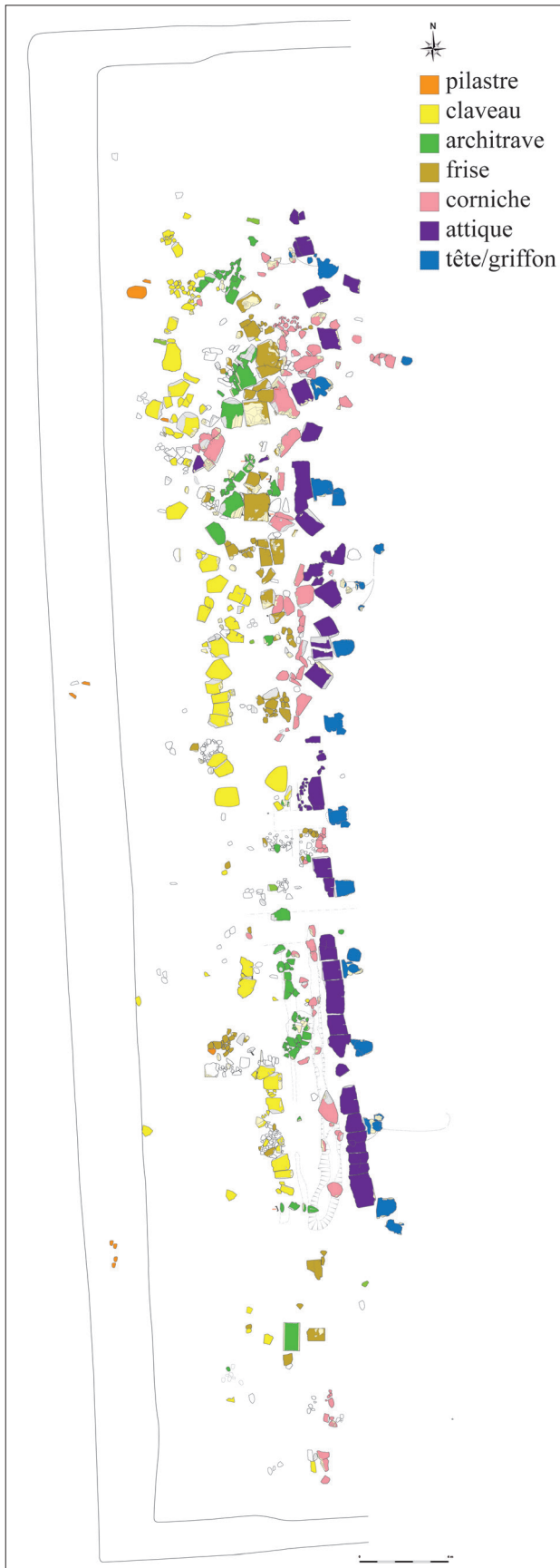


Fig. 8. Map of the monumental facade: monumental head and griffon in dark blue, attic in violet, cornice in pink, frieze in ochre and yellow for the arches (© C. Gaston)

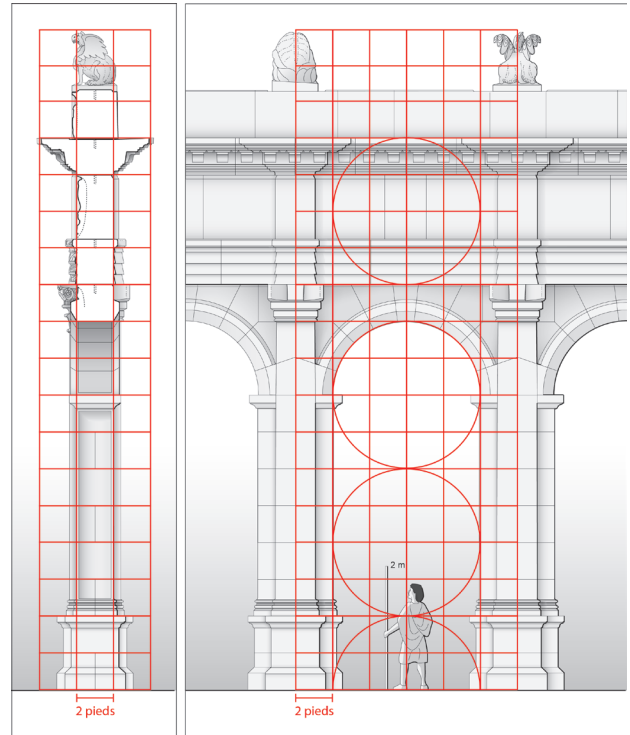


Fig. 9. Details of the anastylosis of the entrance façade (© C. Gaston)

old woman, it is a recurrent representation of a servant talking to someone as in, for example, the sarcophagus of Phaedra and Hippolytus⁸ at Istanbul (Turkey) (Fig. 15). The relief of Tethys and Achilles of Champlieu⁹ seems quite similar but there is no old woman (Fig. 16). Tethys is also representing crouching on several reliefs, but at Pont-Sainte-Maxence, there are no traces of a baby...

Workshops

A uncommon Greek meander shows the implication of an easter workshop for the architecture, such as a Rhenish workshop. We have seen this meander at Pont-Sainte-Maxence, Champlieu and also at Neumagen¹⁰. At Neumagen, we see a very similar vegetal ornament. At Reims, the meander is slightly different (Fig. 17).

Also the representation of Prometheus, from Champlieu, is very interesting: we have the same figure in Asia Minor (Turkey). We can see the Heracles freeing Prometheus panel of the southern building of Aphrodisias, at the Sebasteion (c. 20 AD – 60 AD)¹¹. It is a very rare picture of the mythological theme and I think the

8 <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/gruppen/402726>.

9 BRUNET-GASTON 2000, 146.

10 NUMRICH 1997.

11 <http://www.artofmaking.ac.uk/explore/monuments/180>.



Fig. 10.
Fragments of
architrave with colors,
Pont-Sainte-Maxence
(© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 11. Relief of an arcade with an allegory of victory, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 13. Restitution of the colors of a block of the arcade, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 12. Head, with nostrils painted in red, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 14. Relief of Venus, Pont-Sainte-Maxence (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 15. Detail of old woman, sarcophagus of Phaedra and Hippolytus (© Roman sarcophagus 2nd century AD, Istanbul Archeological Museum (Turkey) inv. 18)



Fig. 16. Tethys and Achilles, Champlieu (© Vivenel Museum, Compiègne)

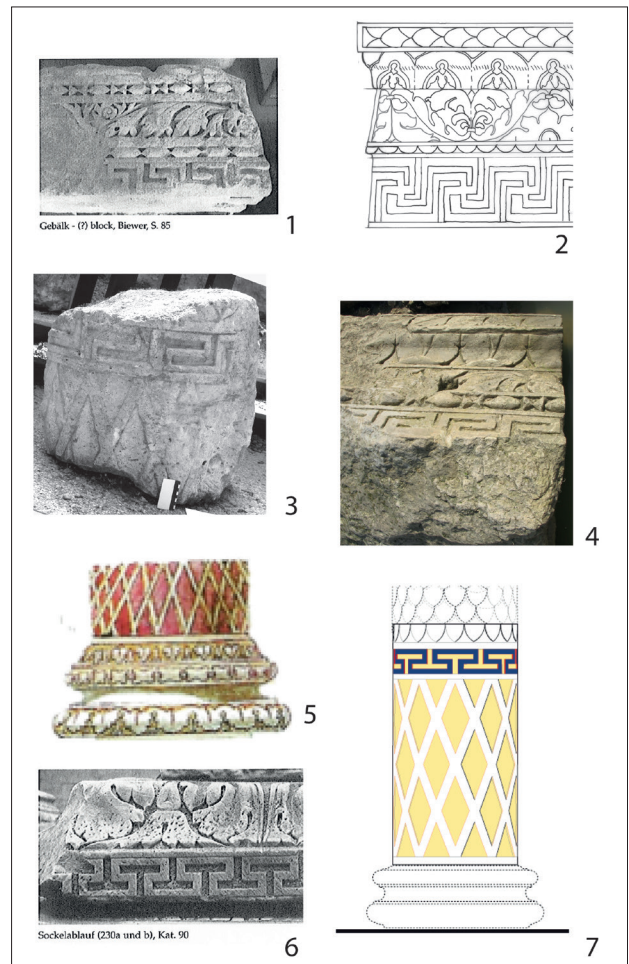


Fig. 17. Meander of Neumagen (1-6), Lutèce (2), Champlieu (3-5), Pont (4), Reims “Médiathèque” (7) (© V. Brunet-Gaston)



Fig. 18. Heracles freeing Prometheus: Champlieu and panel of southern building of the Sebasteion (Aphrodisias) (© V. Brunet-Gaston)

sculptors came from Asia Minor with their specific “cartoons” at Champlieu in the second AD and also at Pont-Sainte-Maxence. (Fig. 18).

As a conclusion

With the study and the drawing of all the blocks of Pont-Sainte-Maxence (600 blocks and 6000 fragments), we can see the traces of painting and polychromes – however, at Champlieu all traces have disappeared with the conservation at the inclement weather on the site. Actually there is nothing remaining of the sanctuary under the temple of shopping; and the forgotten temple of Champlieu lies alone in the forest.

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