

Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France): Preliminary Results

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MARBLES DISCOVERED ON THE SITE OF THE FORUM OF VAISON-LA-ROMAINE (VAUCLUSE, FRANCE): PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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Abstract

Since May 2013, during the new archaeological excavations at the forum of Vasio Vocontiorum, archaeologists have discovered a large amount of slabs and fragments made of coloured marble, ornamental and architectural elements made of white marble and limestone, as well as many inscriptions on white marble slabs, and fragments of sculptures. The decoration is currently under study; it includes the main marbles of the Mediterranean basin and some local stones. The main bulk of white marble has also been analysed. Four sources of white marble have been identified: Carrara, Penteli, Proconnesus and Thassos. The dolomitic marble of Thassos is very rarely used in Gaul for architectural elements, but in Vaison, it was used for some inscriptions as well as for wall decoration – the slabs were either left unornamented or sculpted slabs, such as the bas-relief with lionesses. The rich decoration of the forum fits in harmoniously with those of the Roman villae and thermal baths of the city.

Keywords

white marble, coloured marble, slabs, ornamental elements, forum, Vaison

study. By presenting other Vaison sites and in comparison with Orange, we can understand better the particularity of marble use in Vaison and the role of local limestone. In the following we will present the first results of the research.

The archaeological context

The site was occupied from the first century B.C. to the Middle Ages, six principal phases of occupation having been established.

The site was probably a residential neighbourhood at first (phase I), until the construction of the forum in the course of the 1st century AD (phase II). The newly discovered remains belong in fact to the western portico, which includes a stylobate² and five large columns³. The size of the remains indicates that this was once a monumental building⁴ (Fig. 1). The pillaging and destruction of the monumental complex seem to begin in the end of the 3rd century, and continue all throughout the 4th century, until the early 5th century (phase III). The looting phase is characterized by the layer of unused material, accumulated in the northwest corner of the esplanade. It is within these very abundant discharges that the numerous fragments of *opus sectile* wall decoration made with coloured marbles were found, as well as various fragments of inscriptions carved on white marble slabs or on limestone steles.

Introduction

During the preventive archaeological evaluation that took place along Avenue Jules Ferry (La Merci 17-22 Merci Jules Ferry), prior to the construction of an accommodation center for the disabled, archaeologists discovered some remains, monumental in size, that might have been a part of the antique forum¹. Since 2013, three excavation campaigns have been carried out. An important set of marble fragments was discovered and was the starting point of this

Construction material used in the Forum and other buildings in Vaison-la-Romaine

The Roman and medieval buildings of Vaison are primarily made of small ashlar of fine grained cretaceous (Barrémien-Bédoulien) white-beige limestone.

1 MIGNON, DORAY 2011, 49.

2 Width: 1.50 m.

3 87 centimeters in diameter.

4 MIGNON, DORAY 2011, 49.



Fig. 1.
Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum,
stylobate and columns on the
portico carved in local limestone
(photo: J. M. Mignon)

The quarries were situated near the city – one west of it, the Théos hill (colline de Théos), three in the south-west – Les Roussillons, Ravin de Mars, Sainte-Catherine, and one east of Vaison – by the road to Malaucène. These quarries were exploited until the 19th century; nevertheless, due to the layer thickness (15-20 cm), they provided only small blocks. For the bigger dimension stones, a shelly limestone was imported from the quarries situated at Beaumont-du-Ventoux. These quarries, exploited until the 1950s, contained a Burdigalian limestone deposit.

Numerous fragments found at the site of the forum are carved in Beaumont-du-Ventoux limestone, but we have also found some elements carved in fine-grained cretaceous limestones. We could presume that at the moment this building was made, the layer thickness in the quarries was much more important, thus providing stone blocks for the large-dimensioned bases and cornices⁵.

Marbles and decorative stones used in the decoration of the forum

The identification of marbles was made by microscopic observation of the grain size and the minerals. The decoration is currently under study; it includes the main coloured marbles of the Mediterranean basin and Gallic and local stones. The study of the marble revealed the use of fifteen varieties of coloured marble (Fig.2), which we will present according to their geographical origin, and four different kinds of white marble.

Three of the varieties come from quarries located in the territory of modern France: micritic fine grains limestone (Quarry near Vaison), **schist from Autun**

(Saône-et-Loire, France) and **yellow breccia** (maybe breccia of Lez, Pyrénées, France).

One type comes from Italy: **Bardiglio from Carrara** (Quarry from Luni)

Six are from Greece and the Greek Islands: **Antique green porphyry**⁶ (Laconia, Peloponnese Greece), **Rosso antico**⁷ (Peninsula of Mani, Southern Peloponnese, Greece), **Fior de pesce**⁸ (Eretria, Euboea, Greece), **Cipollino verde**⁹ (quarry from Karistos and Styra, Euboea, Greece), **Semesanto**¹⁰ (breccia from Sciro) and **Verde antico**¹¹ (Thessaly, Greece).

Three are from Africa: **Giallo antico**¹² (Tunisia Chemtou), **red and black porphyries**¹³ (Egypt) and **Granito dell'foro (?)**¹⁴ (Egypt).

6 *Marmor lacedaemonium, lapis iacedaemonius, krokeatis lithos.* GNOLI 1992, 279-280, n° 121; LAZZARINI 2002, 254-25; LAZZARINI 2007, 45-69.

7 *Marmor taenarum.* GNOLI 1992, 288, n° 126; LAZZARINI 2007, 71-96.

8 *Marmor Chalcidicum.* GNOLI 1992, 212, n° 63; LAZZARINI 2002, 260-261.

9 *Marmor carychium, Marmor styrium.* GNOLI 1992, 202-203; LAZZARINI 2002, 257-258.

10 *Marmor scyreticum.* GNOLI 1992, 290, n° 128.

11 *Marmor thessalicum, lapis atracius.* GNOLI 1992, 292-293, n° 130; LAZZARINI 2002, 261-262.

12 *Marmor numidicum.* GNOLI 1992, 214-215 n° 65; LAZZARINI 2002, 243-244.

13 *Lapis porphyrites, lithos romaion.* GNOLI 1992, 274, n° 116; LAZZARINI 2002, 233-235.

14 *Marmor claudianum.* GNOLI 1992, 222-223; LAZZARINI 2002, 235-236.

5 See the geological map, 1/50 000 Vaison-la-Romaine, n°915, BRGM, Orléans, 1991.

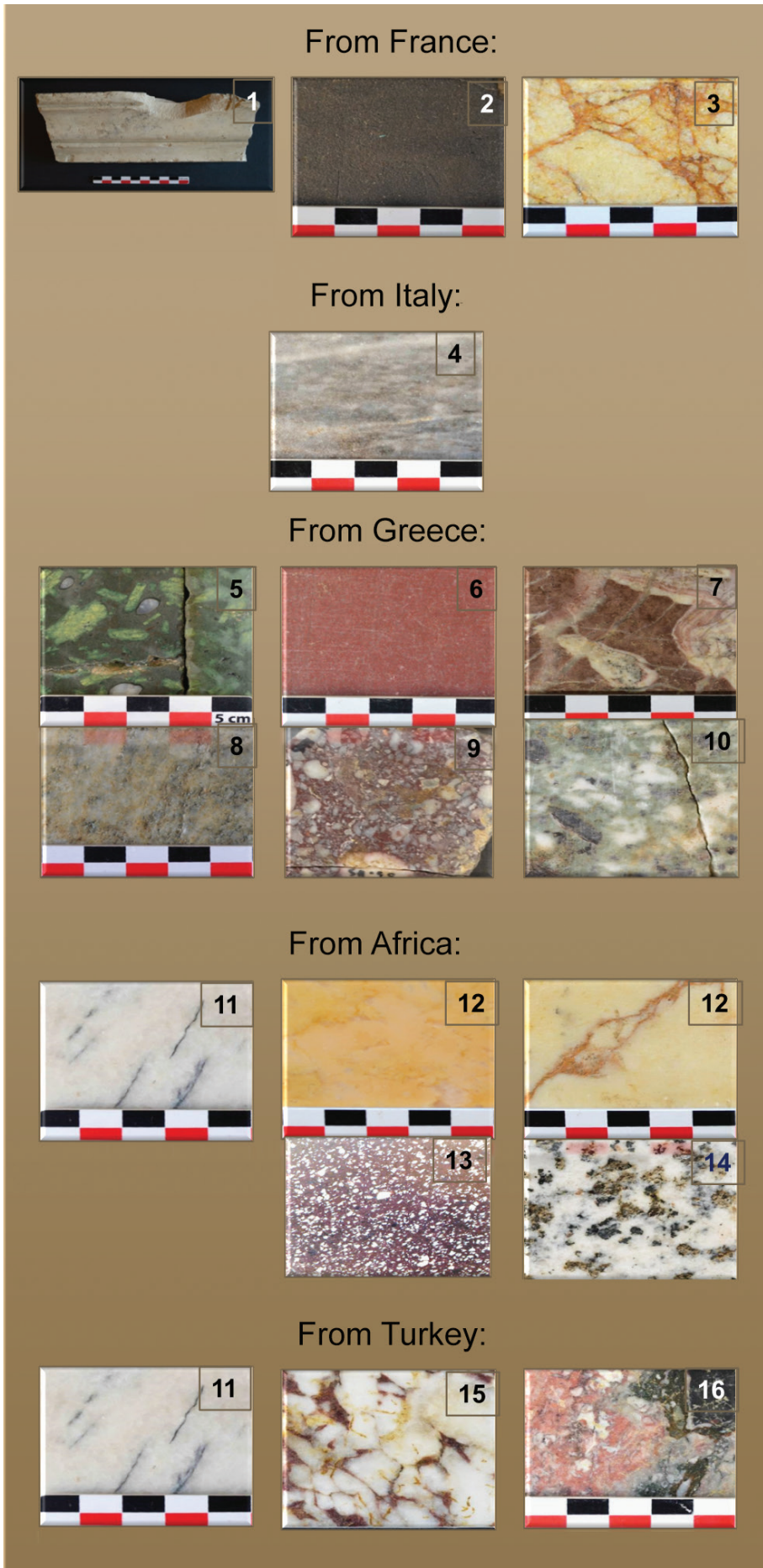


Fig. 2. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, different examples of coloured marbles used for the decoration. 1: micritic fine grained limestone (quarry near Vaison); 2: Schist from Autun (Saône-et-Loire, France); 3: Yellow breccia (may be breccia of Lez, Pyrénées, France); 4: *Bardiglio* from Carrara (quarry from Luni); 5: Antique green porphyry (Laconia, Peloponnese Greece); 6: *Rosso antico* (Peninsula of Mani, Southern Peloponnese, Greece); 7: *Fior de pesco* (Eretria, Euboea, Greece); 8: *Cipollino verde* (Quarry from Karistos and Styra, Euboea, Greece); 9: *Semesanto* (Breccia from Sciro); 10: *Verde antico* (Thessaly, Greece); 11: *Greco scritto* (near Ephesus, Turkey); 12: *Giallo antico* (Tunisia Chemtou); 13: Red and black porphyries (Egypt); 14: *Granito dell'foro?* (Egypt); 15: *Breccia pavonazzetto* (Afyon, Synnada, Dokimeion, Turkey); 16: *Africano* (near Teos, Turkey). (DAO E. Roux)



Fig. 3. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, cornice, white Carrara marble (photo: E. Roux)



Fig. 4. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, cornice, white Pentelic marble (photo: E. Roux)

Three come from Turkey: *Greco scritto*¹⁵ (near Ephesus, Turkey), *Breccia pavonazzetto*¹⁶ (Afyon, Synnada, Dokimeion, Turkey) and *Africano*¹⁷ (Teos, Turkey).

Only *fior de pesco*, *rosso antico*, pavonazzetto and micritic fine grained limestone were used to carve cyma mouldings. The other types of marble were cut in slabs of variable thickness. All the plates were arranged in wall decorations. Many holes for fixing the clamps are still visible. For now, we have not identified any elements that would have been a part of a floor decoration.

As for white marbles, we have examined the size of the grains and the minerals through a magnifying glass. We had to examine a great number of slabs without decoration on them, it was impossible to undertake a careful study of each single element. So we choose to sort them in four main types, according to some simple characteristics.

Carrara type¹⁸: white marble with fine grain, pure white or finely veined (53 kg)

Penteli type¹⁹: white marble with fine grain containing fine veins or white flakes of mica (45 kg)

Proconnesus type²⁰: bluish-white marble with medium grain, which gives off an odour when struck (8 kg)

Thassos type²¹: white marble with large and shiny grains, dolomitic (not reactive to the test with dilute hydrochloric acid) (77 kg)

White marbles were used to make slabs, the most common being Thassos dolomite marble, then Carrara and Pentelic marbles, and very rarely Proconnesian marble. Decorative elements are mainly made of Carrara marble, especially statuary and applied architecture, like cornices with modillions (Fig. 3). Pentelic marble was used for some large cornices (Fig. 4), similar to those made of Carrara marble.

White dolomitic Thassos marble is employed for engraving inscriptions and decorated slabs like, for instance, the relief with lionesses (Fig. 5). Some architectural appliques, such as archivolts or fluted pilasters, are also made of white Thassos marble.

Preliminary study of the decorations and inscription on white marble slabs

The whole batch of marble is under study, in order to provide an exhaustive inventory of the decorative elements and classify all the types of decoration found in this set of marble. The first observations have shown us the presence of various decorative sets made of marble slabs bearing reliefs from a monumental architectural order,

15 GNOLI 1992, 237, n° 83; PENSABENE 2002, 220-221.

16 *Marmor docimium; Syndicus; phrygium*. GNOLI 1992, 264-265, n° 109; PENSABENE 2002, 205-207.

17 *Marmor Lucullum*. GNOLI 1992, 133-135, n° 1; LAZZARINI 2002, 250-251.

18 *Marmo Lunense, lapis lunensis*. PENSABENE 2002, 112-114.

19 *Marmo pentelico*. GNOLI 1992, 251, n° 98; PENSABENE 2002, 207-208.

20 *Marmor proconnesium*. GNOLI 1992, 252, n° 99; PENSABENE 2002, 203-204.

21 *Marmo Greco duro*. GNOLI 1992, 253; PENSABENE 2002, 208-212.



Fig. 5. Vaison-la-Romaine, Forum, the Lioness relief, white dolomitic Thassos marble (photo: E. Roux)

and then elements of bay decoration and a smaller architectural order, that belong to some additional architecture.

Most of the fragments in the batch are in fact slabs of coloured marbles, used in various types of decoration, including elements belonging to a wall-decorating *opus sectile* (small pieces), to a great ornamental set with large geometric slabs, and very thin plates, which were probably part of an *opus interrasiles*.

Many inscriptions and fragments have been found, and they are currently being studied by Benoît Rossignol. Four writings are carved on white marble plaques (Penteli, Carrara, Thassos and Proconnesus). One of the biggest and most beautiful (2.14 m) is made of Proconnesus marble. It is an honorary inscription bearing the name of Marcus Titius Lustricus Bruttianus, celebrating his *cursus honorum*. With a width more important than its height, it may have adorned the pedestal of an equestrian statue. However, at this time, we still do not know which building it comes from.

Comparison with some other buildings in Vaison

The marbles discovered elsewhere in Vaison have been, or are currently being studied. The petrographic analysis of the marbles in the north *Thermae* and the *Maison du Paon* gives us an example of the broad range of stones used in this city. Many of the wall facings in the north public baths include imported marbles, such as *Cipollino verde*, *Giallo antico*, *Fior de pesco*, *Africano*, *Pavonazzetto*, *Greco scritto*, *Verde antico*, *Semesanto*, Antique green porphyry, *Rosso antico* and *Bardiglio* from Carrara. We have two types coming from France – schist from Autun, Guillestre's pink marble, and micritic limestone, and, in a very small quantity, red griotte from the

Pyrenees. Unlike what we see in the forum, only two types of white marble are used in the *Thermae*, either as wall facings or mouldings. The Penteli type can be found in great quantities (over 500 kg), whereas the Proconnesus type was used in smaller amounts (about 70 kg).

In the *Maison du Paon*, we can find some similar choices, with the exception of *Africano*, *Verde antico*, red porphyry and *Portasanta*. As for the various white marbles, we have identified three types in the marble batch – Penteli, Proconnesus, and Carrara, the last one being the most frequently used.

This comparative study allowed us to draw attention to the great variety of marble types used in these three buildings. According to our statistics, Carrara white marble was frequently used all over the city, as well as for the decoration of the Forum and the *Maison du Paon*. The Penteli type has been found on all three sites and is the main component in the decoration of the public baths. The Proconnesus type is present on every site, but was used in much smaller quantities. This marble type was later reused in the cloister of the cathedral. The Thassos type was only found on the Forum. Could this possibly indicate the desire to enhance the prestige of the decoration of the Forum?

The use of marble in Vaison seems quite unique: marble plates are mostly used as veneer and to this day, we have found no large monolithic columns. This specificity is even more particular if we compare Vaison with the nearby town of Orange.

Comparison with the theatre of Orange

The decoration of the Roman theatre of Orange is particularly rich and varied. All the existing elements are kept in the museum and its store rooms. The analysis of the white marbles, published by F. Antonelli, L. Lazzarini and B. Turi²², has shown that Carrara marble was used for the ornaments and sculptures. As for the columns, the researchers have identified at least seven different varieties of granite, marble and breccia. Many column shafts are made of fine-grained gray granite.

This large number of column shafts coming from North Africa or Asia Minor could be explained by the geographical position of Orange. The city is situated near the Rhône, and the heavy and cumbersome shafts could be brought by ship. Vaison-la-Romaine, on the other hand, is more than 25 km east of the Rhône, crossed by a much smaller river, which made the transport of heavy material difficult, if not impossible. Nonetheless, in Vaison we do find a large array of coloured marbles, as well as elements made of dolomitic marble coming from Thassos.

22 ANTONELLI, LAZZARINI, TURI 2002, 265-270.

Conclusion

This study shows clearly that Vaison-la-Romaine may have been influenced by the Mediterranean and Italian uses of marble. The most prestigious and widely used marbles in the Empire are present. However, in Vaison, unlike in Orange, the marbles were used only for decoration, while the structural parts are of local limestone. Moreover this kind of use of Thassos marble is exceptional for Roman Gaul; as a matter of fact, white Thassos marble is very rare, and is absent in Narbonne and Orange, for example. It was used for statuary in Arles²³ and a few fragments of marble facing have been found in the 2nd-century domus of La Verrerie at Trinquetaille (Arles). Therefore, the forum of Vaison shows us a very original decoration.

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23 BROMBLET, BLANC 2012; BLANC, BROMBLET, LEROUX 2012, 401- 406.