

# Labour Forces at Imperial Quarries

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# LABOUR FORCES AT IMPERIAL QUARRIES

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## Abstract

This contribution focuses on manpower at imperially-administered quarries. Drawing on the evidence provided by the Mons Claudianus *ostraka* the range of workers at this site, their working practices and labour organization will be examined. These data will then be compared with what is known of quarrying elsewhere, notably at the major quarries at Dokimeion in Phrygia. While direct evidence for the individuals involved in the extraction of stone at these sites is not as forthcoming as for the Eastern Desert sites, certain conclusions can be drawn from the surviving quarry inscriptions and, in particular, the references to *officinae* and *caesurae*. This contribution touches on questions of quarry organization and the cost of the labour force at imperially administered quarries.

## Keywords

imperial quarries, manpower, Mons Claudianus

The Roman imperial state invested heavily in securing supplies of prestigious marbles from a range of major quarries around the Mediterranean. This investment was both financial and logistical, involving an extensive administrative framework and various forms of direct and indirect exploitation.<sup>1</sup> The *raison d'être* of imperial involvement in quarrying remains debated, as does the extent to which the quarried material was an imperial monopoly.<sup>2</sup> However, one key question relating to this issue that deserves to be explored in more detail is that of labour forces: how many individuals (quarrymen, carvers and others) did the state have to employ at these various marble quarries to ensure that sufficient supplies were produced? How did this financial investment compare with other demands on the imperial administration's resources? At most quarries we have no data about work forces, but at Mons Claudianus there is good evidence, albeit patchy, for the total number of individuals employed at different points in time. Although this site was clearly exceptional in many ways, the information provided by the Mons Claudianus *ostraka* offers

an insight into the functioning of a major quarry that can help us think about questions of manpower elsewhere. This contribution presents some thoughts on how we might go about calculating labour forces at imperial quarries.

## Workforce size and composition

Our best evidence for the workforces at imperial quarries is provided by the *ostraka* from Mons Claudianus, in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Of the approximately 9,000 *ostraka* recovered during excavations at this site between 1987 and 1993, the most important for our purposes is a water list (*O.Claud. inv. 1538*), published in full by H el ene Cuvigny, who dates it to the middle Trajanic period, c. AD 110.<sup>4</sup> This list documents all of the workers at the quarries on a single day, a total of 917, which Cuvigny breaks down into a series of groups (Table 1).

The other workers listed comprise a diverse band: a surveyor of stone, two doctors, two cobblers, a barber, a priest, assorted doormen and guards, a vet, a steward, camel- and donkey-handlers, among others. The exact status of the two main groups of workers at the quarries – παγανοί (*pagani*) and φαμελιάριοι (*familiares*) – remains obscure; the παγανοί are freeborn Egyptians mainly involved in quarrying, while the φαμελιάριοι were involved in auxiliary tasks and specialist jobs, only sometimes related to quarrying.<sup>5</sup> But all of these workers were paid employees.

This water list does not distinguish between types of stoneworkers (they are all described as σκληρουργοί or quarrymen/stoneworkers), nor does it tell us what the 400 φαμελιάριοι did, but other *ostraka* show that specialist quarrymen existed: quarry-pick wielders (ἀκισκλάριοι) and wedge-/feathers-men (παρασφενάριοι), for instance. Metalworking assistants are also attested, as are so-called 'hammer-men' (σφυροκόποι), some apparently working in quarrying, others at the furnaces, and stone-carriers/-transporters (λιθοφόροι).<sup>6</sup> These technical specialists were φαμελιάριοι not παγανοί like most of the other stoneworkers and metalworkers.

1 HIRT 2010, 290-331; RUSSELL 2013, 38-52.

2 FANT 1993; PENSABENE 2013, 197-218.

3 PEACOCK, MAXFIELD 1997.

4 CUVIGNY 2005.

5 CUVIGNY 2000, 331-333.

6 B ULOW-JACOBSEN 2009, 11-12.



Profession	Total
Architect	1
-----	
παγανοί	
Stoneworkers	349
Supervisors	7
Blacksmiths	40
Bellowsmen	25
-----	
φαμελιάριοι	400
-----	
Soldiers	
Officers	2
Infantry	29
Recruit	22
Cavalry	6
Unknown role	1
-----	
Other workers	35

Table 1.  
Groups of workers  
recorded on *O. Claud.*  
inv. 1538

As well as simply listing all the workers needing water, the water list recorded on *O. Claud.* inv. 1538 also gives breakdowns for the numbers of workers per extraction site (Table 2).<sup>7</sup> These can be supplemented by data from additional *ostraka* from Mons Claudianus published by Adam Bülow-Jacobsen (Table 3).<sup>8</sup> Among the individuals who are not classed as either stoneworkers or metalworkers in Tables 2 and 3 are soldiers, guards of various types of supplies, foremen, carpenters, knot-makers and sawyers, all attested in small numbers.

These totals provide an insight into the size and composition of different working parties. Some of the workforces in specific quarries are enormous (higher totals appear in some of the incomplete *ostraka*), presumably reflecting the importance of the project being worked on: the so-called Trajan quarry was the largest, with the Mese and Myrismos quarries following. Of the workers employed in the quarries, 70-80% of them can be identified as quarrymen or other types of stoneworkers. Most of the rest of the workers present were employed at the

furnaces, each operated by a three-man team comprising blacksmith (χαλκεύς), bellowsman (φουσητής) and temperer (φαρμαζάριος). The ratio between stoneworkers and those involved in tool sharpening averages out at about 4:1, with one blacksmith for every twelve stoneworkers.<sup>9</sup> This high ratio is probably not representative: the granodiorite (*granito del Foro*) is exceptionally hard and evidence from more recent periods suggests that carvers working it could go through six chisels in an hour.<sup>10</sup>

#### Fluctuations in the size of the workforce

The Trajanic *O. Claud.* inv. 1538 provides a glimpse of the quarries at the height of their operation but other *ostraka* show that these enormous numbers were not maintained. Using the names of individuals requiring chisels recorded on a series of documents from the early 140s AD (*O. Claud.* 832-6), Bülow-Jacobsen proposes that around 110 stoneworkers were active in the quarries in this period, equivalent to a possible total

7 CUVIGNY 2005, 314-315, 322.

8 BÜLOW-JACOBSEN 2009.

9 BÜLOW-JACOBSEN 2009, 14.

10 *Pers. comm.* Stephen Cox.



Quarry name	Stoneworkers	Smiths	Others	Total
'Trajan'	137 total		?	>137
'Mese'	105-111?	11	?	>116/122?
'Myrismos'	36 total		8	44
'Large platform'	30	2	?	>32
'Oracle-Sarapis'	18	2	5	25
'Apis'	12	1	3	16
'Hera'	33 total		6	39
'Dioscuri'	16 total		2	18
'Platform of Hera'	23 total		3	26

Table 2.  
Labour groups at  
particular quarries listed  
on *O. Claud. inv.* 1538

Quarry name (with <i>O. Claud. no.</i> )	Stoneworkers	Specialist stoneworkers	Smiths	Other metalworkers	Others	Total
Apollo (634)	17	1	2	4	2	26
Dios (638)	11	3	1	2	3	20
Kanopos (641)	7?	7	1?	2	1	18
Mese (644)	36	1	3	6?	3?	49
Myrismos (647)	30	2	3	6	4	45
Myrismos (648)	70	2	4	8	5	89
Column of Chresmoserapis (657)	25		2	4		31
? (652)	-	78?	-	?	?	78
? (659)	61	1	4	4	7	77
? (660)	61	1	4	8	5	79
? (673)	25		2	2	3	32
? (686)	60	4	4	8	5	81

Table 3.  
Labour groups at  
particular quarries  
listed on other *ostraka*  
from Mons Claudianus  
(complete lists only)

workforce of 286.<sup>11</sup> Using a different set of documents, Bülow-Jacobsen and Cuvigny identify 150 or so *παγῶν* at the site in the late 130s and early 140s AD, though this total evidently includes stoneworkers and most metalworkers too.<sup>12</sup> Year to year, in practice, the workforce could have been very different depending on the nature of demand.

By the later Antonine period there are suggestions that the workforce dropped to very low numbers. Complaints about insufficient supplies become more common, as does evidence for staff shortages.<sup>13</sup> In a letter addressed to the prefect Antonius Flavianus (*O. Claud.* 850), dating to the late Antonine period, a group of quarrymen working on a pair of columns request both more supplies and protection from harassment by nomads so that they can finish the job more quickly.

### Productivity and potential output

*O. Claud.* inv. 1538 dates to the middle Trajanic period, and if to AD 110, as has been proposed, to exactly halfway through the building of the Forum of Trajan. This project made use of *granito del Foro* for a total of 108 column shafts in the lower order of the Basilica Ulpia (8.84 m in height (c. 30 Roman feet))<sup>14</sup>. Further material was used for wall revetment and paving, a total of no more than 40 m<sup>3</sup>. Indeed *granito del Foro* use at Rome reached its zenith in the Trajanic and Hadrianic periods and is also used in abundance in the Pantheon, Temple of the Divine Trajan, Temple of Venus and Roma, as well as at Hadrian's Villa.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere I have used the water list *ostrakon* from Mons Claudianus (*O. Claud.* inv. 1538) in conjunction with later nineteenth-century building manuals to estimate the potential output of the Mons Claudianus quarries at the peak of their operation.<sup>16</sup> Pegoretti's labour figures for the working 'Dioriti della massima durezza'/'Granito duro', suggest that to quarry and rough-out just one of the shafts used in the Basilica Ulpia would take 1115 man-days.<sup>17</sup> For the 108 shafts required we are looking at a total of roughly 120,420 man-days, to which a further 3000 man-days for the blocks for paving should be added. What these totals indicate is that the

workforce of 349 stoneworkers (comprising quarrymen and carvers) attested in *O. Claud.* inv. 1538 would have required approximately 350 days to produce all of the *granito del Foro* required for the Forum of Trajan. An excess of material would always have been produced to cover any damage during transport so this total should be pushed up slightly, but since, as argued above, the actual total number of stoneworkers (including specialist members of the *φραμελιάριοι*) was probably closer to 400, the overall figure does not change significantly. Turning these totals around, a workforce comprising 350-400 stoneworkers could probably have quarried and roughed-out 94-108 shafts of c. 30 Roman feet in a working year (i.e. of c. 300 days) or a total of around 1500 blocks of 1 m<sup>3</sup>.

These totals relate to the quarries operating at their peak. The use of *granito del Foro* drops off after the Hadrianic period, even if it is found in the Antonine theatre at Sessa Aurunca, the later second-century phase of the theatre at Teano, the Baths of Caracalla, the Baths of Diocletian and his palace at Split.<sup>18</sup> Reduced demand led to the situation outlined above, in which far fewer workers were employed at Mons Claudianus.

### Calculations for the quarries at Dokimeion

Detailed evidence of the kind provided by these *ostraka* is limited to the Eastern Desert, but some of the evidence outlined above is relevant to understanding potential workforce totals at other quarries under imperial oversight.

Like the quarries at Mons Claudianus, the Dokimeian quarries were placed under enormous strain in the early second century AD, even if their peak production probably occurred in the Hadrianic and Antonine periods.<sup>19</sup> *Pavonazzetto* from the site was again used extensively in Trajanic building projects at Rome, notably the Forum of Trajan. This structure used 184 *pavonazzetto* column shafts, in five different sizes ranging in length between 3.53 and 8.83 m, as well as 40 pilaster shafts of 7.05 m and a total of approximately 70 m<sup>3</sup> of material for sawing into veneer (enough to cover 2788 m<sup>2</sup>).<sup>20</sup> Using Pegoretti's totals for the working of a hard marble, we can estimate that to prepare all of this material at the quarries would have required 19,055 man-days for the column shafts, 1986 man-days for the pilaster shafts, and 1890 man-days for the additional blocks. To extract and rough-out all of this material in the same timeframe in which the Mons Claudianus quarries

11 BÜLOW-JACOBSEN 2009, 263.

12 BÜLOW-JACOBSEN 2009, 264.

13 *O. Claud.* 876-8, 882, 887, 889, 890-1, 895; BÜLOW-JACOBSEN 2009, 257-259.

14 PACKER 1997.

15 PEACOCK *et al.* 1994, 214-15, table 1; CLARIDGE 2007, 74; CASSATELLA, PANELLA 1990.

16 RUSSELL 2013, 228-232.

17 PEGORETTI 1843-1844, 78, 240-245.

18 CASCELLA 2009, 39; SIRANO, BESTE 1999; DELAINE 1997, 259-263; PEACOCK *et al.* 1994, 214-15, table 1.

19 FANT 1989.

20 PACKER 1997; MILELLA 2002.

were able to turn around their allocation, would have required a total of at least 65 stoneworkers. In addition to these, further stoneworkers would have been needed to work on any additional columns or blocks needed as spares (10% in excess would have been sensible) and on the material used for the series of statues of Dacian captives that adorned the Forum of Trajan. An overall total, therefore, of up to 80 stoneworkers is more reasonable.

To this total we should add all of the additional workers that the Mons Claudianus *ostraka* reveal were involved in quarrying. At Mons Claudianus these other individuals outnumbered the listed stoneworkers at a ratio of roughly 2:1 but at Dokimeion their numbers would not have needed to be so great, partly because the sites was not nearly so remote.<sup>21</sup> Administrators would have been required, as well as workmen for carrying water, clearing rubble and transporting quarried material. Metalworkers would also have been needed, albeit in lower numbers given the relative softness of the marble being extracted; a total of perhaps one for every 12 stoneworkers is more plausible. Fewer soldiers would have been present, however, while the infrastructure needed to supply the site with food and equipment would not have been as complicated as in the Eastern Desert. Nevertheless, it seems likely that in order to complete their task, this team of 65 stoneworkers would have required at least the same number again of support staff. In addition, it is crucial to remember that while a significant portion of the workforce at Dokimeion might have been allocated to a single project for an entire year, *pavonazetto* was used so widely and in such a range of projects that it seems more likely that further projects were being catered for at the same time as the material for the Forum of Trajan was being produced. This being said, there are few major building projects of the same date as the Forum of Trajan that employ *pavonazetto* in substantial quantities: the earlier Forum of Nerva used *pavonazetto* columns as do a range of Hadrianic buildings in Ephesos, Smyrna and Athens, while elsewhere in Asia Minor and in North Africa much of the *pavonazetto* belongs to Antonine or later projects.<sup>22</sup> It does not seem unreasonable, therefore, to argue that a total workforce at the quarries of 150-200 individuals in the Trajanic period could have handled most of the demand placed on them.

Considering the pattern of demand for *pavonazetto* observed in building projects it is possible this workforce increased later in the second century AD, but this is also a period when private contractors become visible at the site. These individuals paid for the right to quarry stone (probably white marble in the main) by extracting a certain

amount of material for the state.<sup>23</sup> The inventory numbers on quarried blocks dating to after the 130s, therefore, provide some vague indication of output, but only of material belonging to the state, which must have been under 50% of the total output. The highest of these inventory numbers from the quarries is 433, on a block dated to AD 147.<sup>24</sup> The average size of the quarried blocks recovered from the Dokimeian quarries is roughly 0.8 m<sup>3</sup> and to quarry and square even 450 such blocks in a year would have necessitated a workforce of only around 30 stoneworkers. Since, in practice, the inventory number provides a minimum total for the imperial products, and in any case should be doubled to account for non-imperial output, a labour force of 70-100 stoneworkers could be reconstructed. The way in which the quarry personnel were divided after the 130s into groups working in the quarries (*caesurae*) and workshops (*officinae*) also suggests a relatively large and highly articulated workforce.<sup>25</sup> The numbers of these groups varies annually but in AD 198, for instance, the directors of four *caesurae* are named (Iulius Neophytus, Ostillius Elpidophorus, Ulpus Yacinthus, and Aurelius Theophilus) alongside five *officinae* (Urania, Bassiana, Herculiana, Severiana, Mart(is/ialis)).<sup>26</sup> At Mons Claudianus, most of the teams assigned to specific quarries consisted of 30 or more individuals, and even though the situation at Dokimeion is likely to be different, it is conceivable that this number of working groups indicates a workforce of again at least 70-80 stoneworkers.

### Wages

How much did those stoneworkers who needed to be directly employed (i.e. who were not contractors) cost the state? A series of *ostraka* from Mons Claudianus dated to AD 136 and 146 show that most of the *παγανοί* (88% on the relevant *ostraka*) were paid 47 drachmas per month, though some junior workers were paid either 37 drachmas and 4 obols or 28 drachmas.<sup>27</sup> Rations were paid on top of this. The *παγανοί* received 1 artaba of wheat per worker plus wine, while they had to buy other goods from the Nile valley, the cost of which was deducted from their wages. The *φαμελιάριοι* received a more generous ration of lentils, oil and clothes but it is not clear what wage they received. Considering the average market price for 1 artaba (c. 39.5 litres) of wheat in Egypt in this period was 9.2 drachmas and, when the other rations are taken into account, this could mean that the *παγανοί* at the top end of the scale

21 RÖDER 1971.

22 PENSABENE 2010, 79.

23 HIRT 2010, 290-331; RUSSELL 2013, 45-49.

24 FANT 1989, no. 90.

25 FANT 1989; HIRT 2010, 293-299.

26 HIRT 2010, 392-393, no. 310-319.

27 CUVIGNY 1996.

were paid the equivalent of 70 drachmas per month.<sup>28</sup> This is higher than was typical for labourers in the Nile valley, who in this period were paid on average 25 drachmas and rarely above 40 drachmas.<sup>29</sup> However, 70 drachmas per month translates to just a little over 2 drachmas per day and this sits at the lower end of daily wages recorded in other areas of the empire, which typically range from 2-4 sesterces.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, these wages seem to be about the same as those paid to miners in Dacia in the same period, indicating some level of central control.<sup>31</sup> We have no information on how many months these workers were employed each year at Mons Claudianus. Scholars working on ancient labour often use a figure of between 200-250 working days per year as an average.<sup>32</sup> This would equate to seven or eight months of full-time employment. However, it is very unlikely that rest days were not built into the monthly schedule at Mons Claudianus. Indeed Cuvigny notes that when daily wages are attested on the *ostraka* they are in the region of 4 drachmas, perhaps suggesting that built into the monthly rates was an understanding that only half the days of the month were working days.<sup>33</sup> Since there was little seasonal variation in temperature or rainfall in the Eastern Desert, there is no reason to assume that these workers could not have been employed all year round. Cuvigny, in fact, has argued that the monthly wages attested at Mons Claudianus are actually based on annual salaries broken down in monthly instalments.<sup>34</sup>

To put these wages in context, a worker at the top end of the pay scale was paid 564 drachmas annually or roughly half what a legionary was paid following Domitian's reforms (1200 sesterces).<sup>35</sup> However, since the workers at Mons Claudianus were also provided with some rations on top of their wages, they did much better than this comparison suggests; Serafino's monthly estimate of 70 drachmas would equate to an annual pay of 840 sesterces. Since the annual subsistence requirement has been estimated at 115-200 sesterces for the same period, with a sestertius and a drachma being broadly equivalent, it is clear that the workers at Mons Claudianus were paid a reasonable wage.<sup>36</sup>

From the perspective of the state, just to pay the 421 *παγαβοί* listed in *O. Claud. inv. 1538*, therefore, would have cost around 230000 drachmas (assuming that 88% of the workers were on the highest rate, 8% on the middle rate and 4% on the lowest rate). To this total we need to add roughly 46000 drachmas in wheat, plus the cost of other rations, which could easily add up to the same again. To pay these specialist workers, therefore, would have cost the equivalent of the salaries of approximately 270 legionaries. To this total one needs to add the cost of the 400 *φαμελιάριοι* and the wages of the soldiers and other specialists at the site, which could easily have added up to more than the cost of the *παγαβοί*. In reality, of course, these wages would have constituted only a small portion (less than half?) of the total costs of running Mons Claudianus: no account here is made for the cost of food for the animals and the cost of equipment, in particular metal; transport of quarried material outside the quarry would also have been hugely expensive.

The correspondence between the Mons Claudianus wages and those attested in Dacia indicate an agreed pay scale across imperial extractive operations, which is somewhat surprising considering the varying local economic conditions. If the workers at Dokimeion were paid the same during the construction of the Forum of Trajan (when the leasing system that developed later appears not to have operated) then the 150-200 workers required could easily have cost at least 100,000 sesterces and more if payments in kind (like the rations at Mons Claudianus) or equivalent incentives were also paid.

These totals provide an insight into the level of finances that the state invested in securing supplies of prestigious materials. Since the Forum of Trajan also used substantial quantities of *giallo antico* and *cipollino*, we might hypothesize workforces of 150 and 100 workers respectively in each of these quarrying districts just employed on this project. At Luna, meanwhile, where all of the white marble came from, a total of at least 200-250 workers directly involved in the supply of material to the Forum site can be estimated. These are extremely hypothetical totals, but within an order of magnitude that appears plausible based on the analysis attempted for Dokimeion. Just to secure enough material for the Forum of Trajan, therefore, the state may well have had to employ close to 2000 workers at quarries scattered around the empire. The costs involved in this process might explain why this direct system of exploitation was apparently replaced with a more indirect system, which utilised private contractors, at most imperial quarries where this was feasible. At Mons Claudianus, this was not possible and indeed overall investment in the site and its infrastructure seems to have declined after the Hadrianic period.

28 DUNCAN-JONES 1990, 151; SERAFINO 2009, 47.

29 DREXHAGE 1991.

30 DELAINE 1997, 119-121, 209; BARRESI 2000, 182, 345; DOMINGO 2013, 127-129.

31 NOESKE 1977, 396-404.

32 DUNCAN-JONES 1982; GOLDSMITH 1984, 269.

33 CUVIGNY 1996, 141.

34 CUVIGNY 1996, 143-145.

35 SPEIDEL 1992, 88, table 1.

36 GOLDSMITH 1987, 46; JONGMAN 2007, 599-600.



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