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Rome's marble yards

J. Clayton Fant

Introduction

By the death of Augustus, imperial building projects in Rome were being supplied by marble¹ from Africa (Chemtou), Asia (Docimium), Egypt (various alabaster sources), Aegean Greece (Chios, Euboea, and Paros), Attica (Pentelikon), and from Luna (Carrara) in N Italy. A vast network of quarries in Egypt's Eastern Desert was already under development, and their granites and porphyry began to be seen at Rome in the middle of the Julio-Claudian era. By the Antonines, marble from Scyros, Thasos, Proconnesos, and Iasos was also arriving in Rome.²

Quantities in this period reached several thousand blocks per year. Relative to demand, was this a lot or a little? The Roman marble trade has always attracted attention because of the facilities and the organizational feats that brought so much exotic stone to the capital and thence outward, but the real importance of the answer lies in the use of marble. Whether marble was easy or hard to come by and what distinguished the grades and colors — even whether all grades and colors were available to customers up and down the social ladder — are prerequisite questions for understanding the choices open to imperial and private architects, to sculptors with great or humble commissions, and even to wall-painters with faux architecture to apply to a wall.

Ward-Perkins argued that the imperial system of quarries, operating continuously rather than fulfilling orders as they arrived, had produced so much marble by the late Antonine period that the rest of antiquity, and indeed later ages, never used it up. This doctrine, which I will call the infinite stockpile, has prevailed for a half century and has attracted new support recently, but the evidence for it has never been compelling and the new finds, like the older ones, must be read in a different light.

Rome in the 19th c. was fertile soil for the study of the Roman trade in imported marbles since there was a living artisanal tradition of marble-working much appreciated by antiquarians like F. Corsi and scholars like G. de Rossi, G. Henzen and R. Lanciani.³ But archaeological data were scarce until 1868 when P. E. Visconti cleared the marble wharves at the Marmorata, though he kept no records. L. Bruzza's pioneering study of quarry inscriptions present on the Visconti finds was the most tangible advance, but despite early interest in quarry inscriptions the new *CIL* never incorporated Bruzza's 300 texts.⁴ Evidence for marble arriving at the mouth of the Tiber was even more exiguous; a couple of inscriptions attested functionaries. But in the last 40 years hundreds of quarry-state or semi-finished marble objects have been recovered from Portus and vicinity and from near Rome. Two large groups were published by Baccini (1979 and 1989). In an article and conference paper of 1993,⁵ I made some preliminary suggestions about these objects. Two subsequent major studies, P. Pensabene's *Le vie del marmo*,⁶ and M. Maisch-

1 In general I will use the term "marble" loosely, as the Greeks and Romans did, to mean any fine stone capable of taking a polish.

2 For a list of imperial quarries and a discussion of dubious cases, see Fant 1993, 163.

3 On the antiquarian tradition, marble collections and F. Corsi's catalogue of marble columns in Rome, see Gnoli 1988, Melchiorri 1840, de Rossi 1878 and Henzen 1843; cf. Fant 1988.

4 Bruzza 1870. Mommsen carefully edited W. Ramsay's (1882) texts from Phrygia for *CIL* III and Cagnat incorporated quarry inscriptions at Chemtou in *CIL* VIII. Dressel was reported to be preparing a collection of *instrumenta* including quarry texts for *CIL* XV.3 (Hirschfeld [1905] 162 n.5) but the project was never completed.

5 Fant 1993a, a paper given at the second ASMOSIA conference in Leuven in 1990; Fant 1993b.

6 Pensabene 1994. Although the title page carries the date 1994, it includes finds made in 1995, and the printer's notation on the last page gives December 1995; hence it was not actually available until 1996. There is an unfortunate duplication of title with that of an unrelated exhibition catalogue, *Le vie del marmo. Aspetti della produzione e della diffusione dei manufatti marmorei tra '400 e '500* (Prato 1992).