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INDEX

<i>Presentation</i>	XI
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I VOLUME

1. APPLICATION TO SPECIFIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS - USE OF MARBLE	
Architecture with concave and convex rhythms and its decoration in Hadrian age: the Maritime Theatre and the Southern pavilion of Piazza d'Oro in Hadrian's Villa, <i>B. Adembri, S. Di Tondo, F. Fantini</i>	3
Imported marbles found in three Roman cities of the territory of "Cinco Villas" (Zaragoza), north of Hispania Citerior, <i>J. Andreu Pintado, H. Royo Plumed, P. Lapuente, M. Brilli</i>	13
Pentelic marble in the Severan Complex in Leptis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya), <i>F. Bianchi, M. Bruno, S. Pike</i>	23
The limestone quarries of Wadi Gadatza in the territory of Leptis Magna, <i>M. Bruno, F. Bianchi</i>	35
Provenance and distribution of white marbles in the arches of Titus and Septimius Severus in Rome, <i>M. Bruno, C. Gorgoni, P. Pallante</i>	43
The imitation of coloured marbles in a first style wall painting from the Etruscan-Roman town of Populonia (LI – Italy), <i>F. Cavari, F. Droghini, M. Giamello, C. Mascione, A. Scala</i> .	55
Small Euboean quarries. The local community markets, <i>M. Chidiroglou</i>	63
Lumachella at Cosa: late Republican?, <i>J. Collins-Clinton</i>	73
Ancientmarbles.org: an open community for sharing knowledge about ancient marble from different approaches, <i>S. Costa, F. Marri</i>	81
The use of marble in Lusitania between Rome and Islam, <i>M. Cruz Villalón</i>	85
"Marmora Ostiensa". New results from the Ostia Marina Project, <i>M. David, S. Succi, M. Turci</i>	93
A column shaft in 'verde rana ondato' from the archaeological excavations in Palazzo Altamps, <i>M. De Angelis d'Ossat, S. Violante, M. Gomez Serito</i>	103
The exploitation of coralline breccia of the Gargano in the Roman and late antique periods, <i>A. De Stefano</i>	113
Ships lapidariae and the wreck, with <i>marmor numidicum</i> , discovered in Camarina: hypothesis of route, <i>G. Di Stefano</i>	119

INDEX

The use of marble in the roman architecture of Lugdunum (Lyon, France), <i>D. Fellague, H. Savay-Guerraz, F. Masino, G. Sobrà</i>	125
Marmora and other stones in the architectural decoration of early imperial Barcino (Barcelona, Spain), <i>A. Garrido, A. Álvarez, A. Doménech, A. Gutiérrez Garcia-M., I. Rodà, H. Royo</i>	135
Provenance of the Roman marble sarcophagi of the San Pietro in Bevagna Wreck, <i>M. T. Giannotta, G. Quarta, A. Alessio, A. Pennetta</i>	143
Thasian Exports Of Prefabricated Statuettes, <i>J. J. Herrmann, Jr., D. Attanasio, A. van den Hoek</i>	155
Multimethod marble identification for figural sculpture in Hippo Regius (Annaba, Algeria), <i>J. J. Herrmann, Jr., R. H. Tykot, A. van den Hoek, P. Blanc</i>	163
Awaiting identity: Copenhagen’s “diskophoros” and its auxiliary support, <i>M. B. Hollinshead</i>	171
Provenance, distribution and trade of the local building materials in the Sarno river plain (Campania) from the 6th century BC to AD 79, <i>P. Kastenmeier, G. Balassone, M. Boni, G. di Maio, M. Joachimski</i>	179
White and coloured marble on Pantelleria, <i>T. Lappi</i>	185
Local stones and marbles found in the territory of “Alto Aragon” (Hispania), in Roman times, <i>P. Lapuente, H. Royo, J.A. Cuchi, J. Justes, M. Preite-Martinez</i>	191
The Marmor Lesbium reconsidered and other stones of Lesbos, <i>E. Leka, G. Zachos</i>	201
The marbles from the Villa of Trajan at Arcinazzo Romano (Roma), <i>Z. Mari</i>	213
The introduction of marble in the cavea of the Theatre of Hierapolis: building process and patronage, <i>F. Masino</i>	225
Shipwrecks with sarcophagi in the Eastern Adriatic, <i>I. Mihajlović, I. Mihaljek</i>	233
The marble decoration of the peristyle building in the SW quarter of Palmyra (Pal.M.A.I.S. Mission), <i>S. Nava</i>	241
Stone materials in Lusitania reflecting the process of romanization, <i>T. Nogales-Basarrate, P. Lapuente, H. Royo, M. Preite-Martinez</i>	253
A uotorum nuncupatio from Colonia Augusta Firma. An analytical approach, <i>S. Ordóñez, R. Taylor, O. Rodríguez, E. Ontiveros, S. García-Dils, J. Beltrán, J. C. Saquete</i>	263
The Muses in the Prado Museum and the pentelic marble of the Odeon in Hadrian’s villa: workshops and statuary programmes. Preliminary report, <i>A. Ottati</i>	269
Local workshops of the Roman imperial age. A contribution to the study of the production of Campanian Sarcophagi, <i>A. Palmentieri</i>	283
Ceraunia and <i>lapis obsianus</i> in Pliny, <i>L. Pedroni</i>	295
Marbles from the Domus of ‘Bestie ferite’ and from the Domus of ‘Tito Macro’ in Aquileia (UD), Italy, <i>C. Previato, N. Mareso</i>	299
Production and distribution of Troad granite, both public and private, <i>P. Pensabene, I. Rodà, J. Domingo</i>	311
The use of Almadén de la Plata marble in the public programs of Colonia Augusta Firma – Astigi (Écija, Seville, Spain), <i>O. Rodríguez, R. Taylor, J. Beltrán, S. García-Dils, E. Ontiveros, S. Ordóñez</i>	323

INDEX

Architectural elements of the Peristyle Building of the SW quarter of Palmyra (PAL.M.A.I.S. (PAL.M.A.I.S. Mission), <i>G. Rossi</i>	339
Casa del Rilievo di Telefo and <i>opus sectile</i> at Herculaneum, <i>A. Savalli, P. Pesaresi, L. Lazzarini</i>	349
The use of marble in Roman Pula, <i>A. Starac</i>	363
Architectural decoration of the episcopal church of Rhodiapolis in Lycia, <i>A. Tiryaki</i>	377
Byzantine carved marble slabs from Çanakkale Archaeology Museum, <i>A. Turker</i>	385
First preliminary results on the marmora of the late roman villa of Noheda (Cuenca, Spain), <i>M. A. Valero Tévar, A. Gutiérrez García-M., I. Rodà de Llanza</i>	393
Parian lychnites and the Badminton Sarcophagus in New York, <i>F. Van Keuren, J. E. Cox, D. Attanasio, W. Prochaska, J. J. Herrmann, Jr., D. H. Abramitis</i>	403
The use of Estremoz marble in Late Antique Sculpture of Hispania: new data from the petrographic and cathodoluminescence analyses, <i>S. Vidal, V. Garcia-Entero</i>	413
Montegrotto Terme (Padova) – Marble and other stone used in architectonic decoration of the Roman villa, <i>P. Zanovello, C. Destro, M. Bressan</i>	421
 2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: MARBLE	
The monument landscape and associated geology at the sanctuary of Zeus on mt. Lykaion, <i>I. Bald Romano, G. H. Davis, D. G. Romano</i>	429
Marbles of the Aracena Massif (Ossa-Morena zone, Spain): aspects of their exploitation and use in roman times, <i>J. Beltrán Fortes, M. L. Loza Azuaga, E. Ontiveros Ortega, J. A. Pérez Macías, O. Rodríguez Gutiérrez, R. Taylor</i>	437
Isotopic analysis of marble from the Stoa of Attalos in the Athenian Agora and the Hellenistic quarries of Mount Pentelikon, <i>S. Bernard, S. Pike</i>	451
An update on the use and distribution of white and black Göktepe marbles from the first century AD to Late Antiquity, <i>M. Bruno, D. Attanasio, W. Prochaska, A.B. Yavuz</i>	461
The use of coloured marbles in the neapolitan Baroque: the work of Cosimo Fanzago (1591-1678), <i>R. Bugini, L. Cinquegrana</i>	469
The imitation of coloured marbles in the Venetian Renaissance painting, <i>R. Bugini, L. Folli</i>	475
Stones and ancient marbles of the ‘Francesco Belli’ Collection: archaeological, art-historical, antiquarian, geological - technical and petrographical aspects, <i>R. Conte, A. D’Elia, E. Delluniversità, G. Fioretti, E. Florio, M. C. Navarra</i>	485
Provenance investigation of a marble sculptures from Lyon Museum, <i>M.P. Darblade-Audoin, D. Tambakopoulos, Y. Maniatis</i>	503
The limestone quarries of the Karaburum peninsula (southern Albania), <i>A. De Stefano</i> ...	513
The main quarries of the central part of Dardania (present Kosova) during the Roman period: their usage in funerary and cult monuments, <i>E. Dobruna-Salibu</i>	519
The use of marble in Hispanic Visigothic architectural decoration, <i>J.A. Domingo Magaña</i> .	527
Preliminary study of Los Bermejales, a new roman quarry discovered in the province of Cádiz, Southwestern Spain, <i>S. Domínguez-Bella, M. Montañés, A. Ocaña, J. M. Carrascal, J. Martínez, A. Durante, J. Rendón Aragón, J. Ríos</i>	537

INDEX

Marble pavements from the house of Jason Magnus in Cyrene, <i>E. Gasparini, E. Gallocchio</i>	545
The Portoro of Portovenere: notes about a limestone, <i>S. Gazzoli, G. Tedeschi Grisanti</i>	555
Saw cuts on marble sarcophagi: New York and Ostia, <i>J. J. Herrmann, Jr., M. Bruno, A. van den Hoek</i>	559
The basalt of the sacred caves at Ajanta (India): characterization and conservation, <i>F. Mariottini, M. Mariottini</i>	565
Marble and stones used in the central eastern Alpine area and in the northern area of Benacus: topographical reconstruction of trade routes and aspects of use in the Roman Era, <i>A. Mosca</i>	575
Life of Nora (Province of Cagliari - South Sardinia). Roman quarries and their organization in the rural landscape, <i>C. Nervi</i>	585
Naxian or parian? Preliminary examination of the Sounion and Dipylon kouroi marble, <i>O. Palagia, Y. Maniatis</i>	593
Analysis of the stony materials in the Arucci city, <i>E. Pascual, J. Bermejo, J. M. Campos</i>	601
Blocks and quarry marks in the Museum of Aquileia, <i>P. Pensabene</i>	611
Archaeology and archaeometry of the marble sculptures found in the “Villa di Poppea” at Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Naples), <i>P. Pensabene, F. Antonelli, S. Cancelliere, L. Lazzarini</i>	615
“Marmo di Cottanello” (Sabina, Italy): quarry survey and data on its distribution, <i>P. Pensabene, E. Gasparini, E. Gallocchio, M. Brilli</i>	629
A quantitative and qualitative study on marble revetments of service area in the Villa del Casale at Piazza Armerina, <i>P. Pensabene, L. Gonzalez De Andrés, J. Atienza Fuente</i>	641
Quarry-marks or masonry-marks at Palmyra: some comparisons with the Phoenician-Punic documentation, <i>D. Piacentini</i>	651
Fine-grained dolomitic marble of high sculptural quality used in antiquity, <i>W. Prochaska</i> . .	661
Discriminating criteria of Pyrenean Arties marble (Aran Valley, Catalonia) from Saint-Béat marbles: evidence of Roman use, <i>H. Royo, P. Lapuente, E. Ros, M. Preite-Martinez, J. A. Cuchí</i>	671

II VOLUME

3. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION II: OTHER STONES

The stone architecture of Palmyra (Syria): from the quarry to the building, <i>R. Bugini, L. Folli</i>	683
Quarries in rural landscapes of North Africa, <i>M. De Vos Raaijmakers, R. Attoui</i>	689
Local and imported lithotypes in Roman times in the Southern part of the X Regio Augusta Venetia et Histria, <i>L. Lazzarini, M. Van Molle</i>	699
Preliminary study of the stone tesserae of Albanian mosaics. Materials identification, <i>E. Omari</i>	713

4. ADVANCES IN PROVENANCE TECHNIQUES METHODOLOGIES AND DATABASES

Provenance investigation of some funeral marble sculptures from ancient Vienna (France), <i>V. Gaggadis-Robin, J.-L. Prisset, D. Tambakopoulos, Y. Maniatis</i>	725
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INDEX

Isotopic testing of marble for figural sculpture at Guelma, Algeria, <i>J. J. Herrmann, Jr., R. H. Tykot, D. Attanasio, P. Blanc, A. van den Hoek</i>	739
5. QUARRIES AND GEOLOGY	
Analysis and discrimination of Phrygian and other Pavonazzetto-like marbles, <i>D. Attanasio, M. Bruno, W. Prochaska, A. B. Yavuz</i>	753
Roman stone-carvers and re-carving: ingenuity in recycling, <i>S. J. Barker, C. A. Ward</i>	765
Can a fire broaden our understanding of a Roman quarry? The case of el Mèdol (Tarragona, Spain), <i>A. Gutiérrez García-M., S. Huelin, J. López Vilar, I. Rodà De Llanza</i>	779
The Roman marble quarries of Aliko Bay and of the islets of Rinia and Koulouri (Skyros, Greece), <i>M. Karambinis, Lorenzo Lazzarini</i>	791
The splendor of Andesite. quarrying and constructing in Larisa (Buruncuk) Aeolis, <i>T. Sanner, U. Almaç</i>	805
Carving a corinthian capital. New technical aspects regarding the carving process, <i>N. Toma</i> .	811
New evidence on ancient quarrying activity at the Mani Peninsula, <i>M.P. Tsouli</i>	823
Ancient lithic naval cargos around Sicily, <i>S. Tusa</i>	831
An unusual Roman stone cinerary urn from London, <i>D.F. Williams, R. Hobbs</i>	843
Presenting and interpreting the processes of stone carving: <i>The Art Of Making In Antiquity</i> Project, <i>W. Wooton, B. Russell</i>	851
The Roman Mio-Pliocene underground quarries at Ksour Essaf (Tunisia), <i>A. Younès, M. Gaied, W. Gallala</i>	861
6. STONES PROPERTIES, WEATHERING EFFECTS AND RESTORATION	
A strigilated sarcophagus in providence: ancient, modern or both?, <i>G. E. Borromeo, M. B. Hollinshead, S. Pike</i>	871
Art historical and scientific perspectives on the nature of the orange-red patina of the Parthenon, <i>O. Palagia, S. Pike</i>	881
7. PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS ON MARBLE	
The polychromy of Roman polished marble portraits, <i>A. Skovmøller, R. H. Therkildsen</i> ..	891
Some observations on the use of color on ancient sculpture, contemporary scientific exploration, and exhibition displays, <i>J. Pollini</i>	901
The Ulpia Domnina's sarcophagus: preliminary report about the use of digital 3d model for the study and reconstruction of the polychromy, <i>E.Siotto, M. Callieri, M. Dellepiane, R. Scopigno</i>	911
8. SPECIAL THEME SESSION: ORDERS, REPERTOIRES AND MEANING OF MARBLE WITHIN THE PUBLIC AND THE DOMESTIC CIRCLE FROM ANTIQUITY TILL POST-ANTIQUITY TIME	
Marbles from the theatre of Colonia Caesar Augusta (provincia Hispania Citerior), <i>M. Beltrán, M. Cisneros, J. Á. Paz</i>	923

INDEX

Calculating the cost of columns: the case of the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, <i>P. Barresi</i> . . .	933
The decorative stoneworks in the east and center of Roman Gaul: recent data of the archaeological operations, <i>V. Brunet-Gaston</i>	941
Colored columns and cult of the emperors in Rome, <i>B. Burrell</i>	947
Roman sculpture in Pannonia between imports and local production, <i>M. Buzov</i>	955
A New Julio-Claudian Statuary cycle from Copia Thuri. Brief remarks on quality and methods of extraction and processing of marble used for the sculptures, <i>A. D'Alessio</i>	969
Stone in the decorative programs of Villa A (So-Called Villa Of Poppaea) at Oplontis, <i>J. C. Fant, S. J. Barker</i>	977
Stable isotope analysis of Torano valley, Carrara, marble used in 18th-century french sculpture, <i>K. Holbrow, C. Hayward</i>	987
Cassiodorus on marble, <i>Y.A. Marano</i>	997
Colored marbles of Diocletian's Palace in Split, <i>K. Marasović, D. Matetić Poljak, Đ. Gobić Bravar</i>	1003
<i>Fabri Luxuriae</i> . Production and consumption of coloured stone vases in the Roman Period, <i>S. Perna</i>	1021
Porphyry bathtubs in the sacred space, <i>O. Senior-Niv</i>	1031
Mythological sculptures in late antique domus and villas: some examples from Italy, <i>C. Sfameni</i>	1039
Architectural language and diffusion of decorative models: a group of unpublished figured capitals from Hierapolis in Phrygia, <i>G. Sobrà</i>	1049

FIRST PRELIMINARY RESULTS ON THE MARMORA OF THE LATE ROMAN VILLA OF NOHEDA (CUENCA, SPAIN)

M. Á. Valero Tévar*, A. Gutiérrez García-M.** , I. Rodà de Llanza**

Abstract

The discovering of impressive well-preserved mosaics, paintings and polychrome stucco wall decoration as well as an extensive assemblage of marbles has demonstrated that the Late Roman villa near Noheda was of exceptional wealth and importance. Even though its study is still in progress, the richness and variety of the finds as well as their implications on the role this villa played in Late Roman Hispania is so extraordinary that are worth presenting. The marble assemblage that has been discovered so far basically come from the two areas of the site and includes a wide variety of foreign marmora, both white and coloured, as well as Hispanic ones. Moreover, a differentiate patron of marble use seems to emerge: Hispanic marbles were used as wall revetments at the residential building while the balnea was exclusively decorated with foreign marmora.

Keywords

Marmora, Hispanic marbles, Roman villa, Late Antiquity, opus sectile, Hispania (Spain)

Introduction

The archeological site at Noheda can be found 500 miles to the northwest of the locality Noheda, district of Villar de Domingo García, situated next to highway N-320, located 17 kilometers from the city of Cuenca.

Declared “Heritage of Cultural Interest” in 2012, mainly because of the mosaics discovered there, it is not

only the late-antiquity era that contains evidence of human existence – albeit the most well-documented¹ – as the research done in the past few years confirms the existence of archeological structures under the late imperial Roman *villa* adscribable to the 1st century A.D.², but due to the limited surface excavated, its interpretation is currently impossible. In addition, the territorial analyses of the immediate surrounding area indicate intense human activities in these regions³, showing evidence of the uninterrupted existence of a settlement from the prehistoric era until the Early Middle Ages.

Archeologists have known about the existence of archeological remains in the settlement for a long time⁴, seeing as the evidence for the figurative mosaic was documented in the 1980’s thanks to the farming improvements that were taking place on the plot⁵.

It was not until the end of 2005 that the first endeavors of assessing the archeological site began, quickly revealing its relevance. This realization motivated the Community Council of Castilla-La Mancha to assume the responsibilities and financing of the excavation of the site after the following year, including it within the program “Systematic Excavations,” which at the time facilitated the research’s development⁶. For the past few years, the Provincial Deputation of Cuenca⁷ has been in charge of promoting the exploration work on the site. Through it all, the hospitality, support, and implication of the town of Villar de Domingo García have been invaluable.

The town’s geographic location in the peninsula

* UNED Centro Asociado de Cuenca (Spain); mvalero@cuenca.uned.es.

** Institut Català d’Arqueologia Clàssica (ICAC) and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) (Spain); iroda@icac.cat. A.Gutiérrez García-M. is currently at the IRAMAT-CRP2A UMR 5060 CNRS-Université de Bordeaux Montaigne (France); anna.gutierrez@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr.

1. Valero Tévar 2009; 2010; in press-a.

2. After dating the numismatic material, as well as studying the ceramic materials, we can situate the start of the monumental phase of the *villa* in the last quarter of the 3rd century, even though the era with the most splendour corresponds to the 4th century.

3. Valero Tévar 2007; in press-b.

4. Larranaga 1966, 438; Abascal 1982, 68; Palomero 1985, 169.

5. Lledó 2007; 2010; Valero Tévar 2010, 5.

6. Our thanks to the Directorate General of Cultural Heritage in the Council of Education, Science and Cultural in the Community Council of Castile-La Mancha for the institutional and economical support that they have been giving us throughout these years, which has been vital for the maintenance and adequate progress of a research project that offers relevant scientific results in the same way as the already abundant number of available publications available on the site and its repercussion on the knowledge of the Late Antiquity in the region support.

7. There have been various projects and agreements endorsed between this institution and the Community Council of Castilla-La Mancha, which have facilitated the development of the research of the site in the last years.

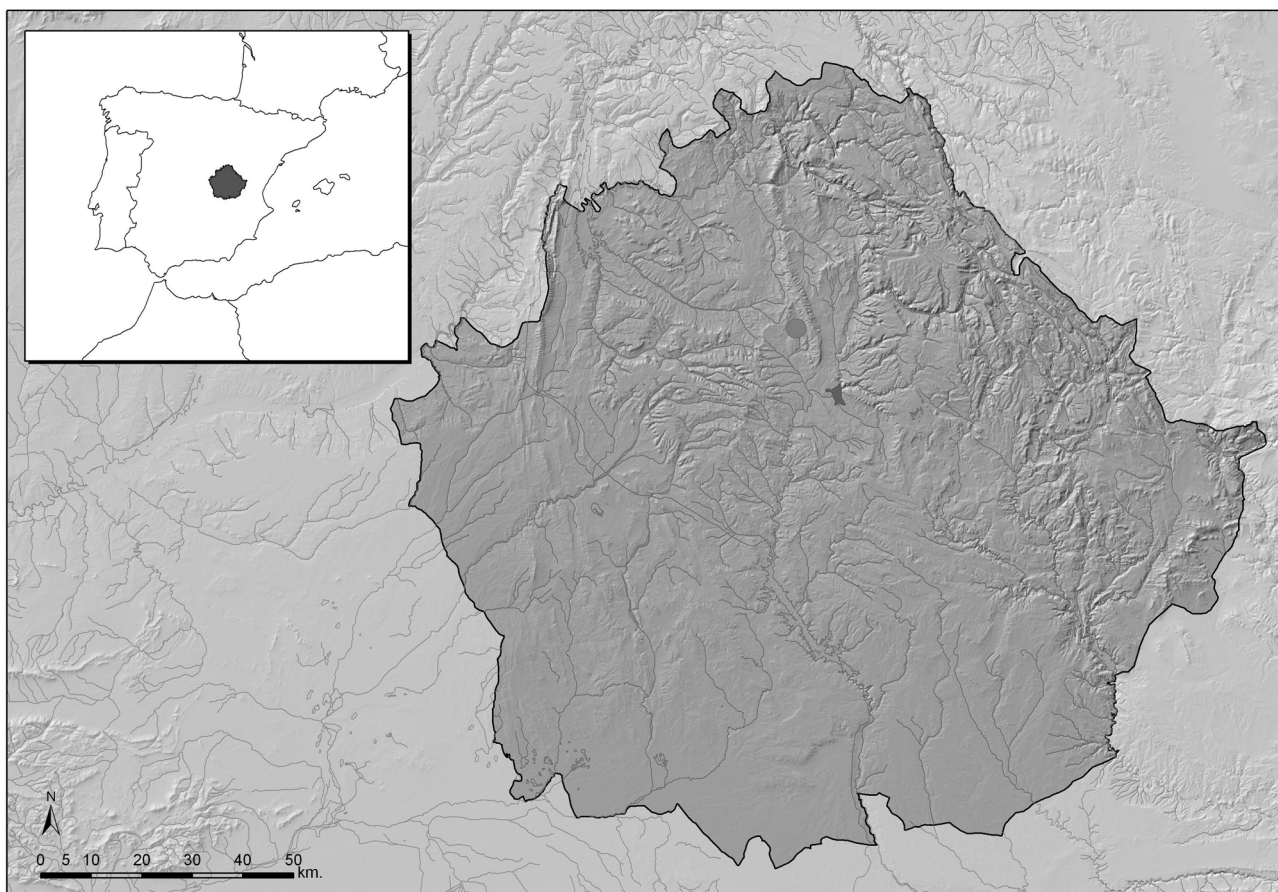


Fig. 1. Location of the Roman *villa* of Noheda in the province of Cuenca.

(Fig. 1), in the vicinity of cities from central Hispania, such as Ercavica, Valeria, Segobriga, and Complutum, demarcates a noticeable sort of crossroads, converting it into a natural path from south to north between the aforementioned mountain ranges, turning it into a zone full of natural travel routes⁸, which precisely follow some Roman roads⁹ (Fig. 1).

At present there are three areas of the villa that have been exhumed: some structures belonging to the *pars rustica* (Sector III) of the rural complex, as well as a part of the *pars urbana*, consisting of a few rooms of the *balneum* (Sector II) and some of the rooms of the residential building (Sector I) which, due to the insufficient amount of excavated space, we cannot determine which type of *villa* it belongs to¹⁰.

This last sector is made up of various rooms of ample size, among them the so-called tri-apsed Room, not only because of its impressive dimensions (290,64 m²) and its extraordinary pavements, but also because of its complex architectural articulation and its carefully decorated walls, comprising a skirting board made of mar-

ble tiles and a wall painting on the elevation. Its square morphology, with exedras on three of the sides, allow for it to be ascribed to the type of trifora rooms that were frequently done in the most luxurious residential complexes dating from the end of the 3rd century A.D. on¹¹. These rooms have a *trichora* articulation, which are interpreted as *triclinia*¹¹, thus adapting the architectural form to the new tendencies of the spatial organization for banquet guests, with beds available in a semicircle, the *stibadia*.

It is in this room that we find an exceptional mosaic with a conserved size of 231,62 m², mostly made of *opus vermiculatum* (with *tesserae* of up to 1.5 mm.) with a greatly varied range of colors, with colored glass paste used for certain colors in a multitude of tones, including gold¹².

Adding to the structural ornamentation is a large quantity of sculpture fragments that, just like in other cases in the same region¹³, point to the possibility of the villa owners belonging to the highest social class, with the capacity to import exceptional pieces from the almost all over the Mediterranean.

8. Valero Tévar 1999a, 14; 1999b, 213; 2008, 180.

9. Abascal 1982, 68; Palomero 1987, 156.

10. Gorges 1979; Fernández Castro 1982.

11. Romizzi 2006, 29; Hidalgo 1998, 283; Dunbabin 2003, 198; Mar and Verde 2008, 78; Arce 2010, 40.

12. Valero Tévar 2013 and 2014.

13. Fernández Ochoa *et al.* 2007, 745.

The large *balneum*¹⁴, almost 900 m² with an axially symmetric scheme¹⁵, is composed of rooms of different uses, to which we must add various *praefurnia*, arranged around a central axis that mark the entrance to the *narthex*, the *apodyterium*, and the large *frigidarium*. Just as can be seen in other Roman baths dating from after the end of the 3rd century or throughout the 4th century A.D.¹⁶, in Noheda, one notices the complexity of the operating schemes and the abundance of apses or octagonal spaces.

Complementing the architectural monumentalization of the *balneum*, there is a preeminence of cold rooms, which not only occupy the majority of the building, but also feature an elaborate decor composed of an attractive mosaic floor, of which there is little proof left, and a colorful skirting board on the wall surfaces, which are tiled with *opus sectile* in alternating tones and types, a large part of them having been imported from almost all over the Mediterranean, which shows the use of superior constructive materials in the decor of the villa's main structures, allowing it to be associated with the social elite¹⁷, and promoting the emergence of local and traveling workshops dedicated to carrying out complex and expensive decoration schemes.

The massive inversion of money and effort by the *dominus* in the Roman bath in Noheda is not a isolated case, seeing as in many of the late imperial rural complexes, in Hispania¹⁸ as well as in other parts of the Empire¹⁹, the configuration of these installations was commonly set up as prominent pavilions as a representation of the *villa* owner's wealth, next to the *triclinia* and *oec*²⁰.

To this day, the figurative mosaic found in the *triclinium* in the villa is without a doubt the site's most well-known artifact for which it is known, seeing as researching the site could stand alone; that is, without forgetting the mosaic, but allotting the same relevance to the exhaustive study of the rest of the settlement, adequately interpreting the rooms, the chronology, the evolution of the constructive phases, the building techniques used, the rich decoration of the rooms, the destruction process, the objects, etc. Above all, searching for an overall knowledge of the whole, as this is the only valid method for the application of true archeology.

Among the aspects researched, one cannot omit the marble that decorates a good number of the rooms in the complex, for which we consider this exposition to be completely justified as a preview of the first results.

The *marmora* of the Roman *villa* of Noheda

Most of the impressive decorative program already mentioned uses a wide range of coloured stones. They are not only large revetment slabs but also *crustae* for *opera sectilia* and especially *tesserae* to elaborate the large and colourful mosaics. Although the study of these materials has only begun, the range of *marmora* types and especially their large use at Noheda make it worth presenting a first approach as they place this Roman *villa* among the richest of Hispania in Late Roman times, next to the Roman *villa* of Carranque (Toledo), the richest Roman *villa* of Hispania so far²¹, or the Roman villa of Las Pizarras, at ancient Cauca (modern Coca, province of Segovia)²².

During the several archaeological campaigns undertaken at this site, a very large number of *marmora* fragments have been unearthed. The most rich parts in terms of *marmora* of the whole site, however, are the tri-apsed room on Sector I (Fig. 2, Room 1), where abundant slab fragments they have been found, and the *balneum* on Sector II (Fig. 3), where a wide range of small pieces for *opus sectile* compositions were found. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the finding of several fragments of ornamental stone slabs that were part of the stairs that give access the large tri-apsed room from the portico as well as to enter the smaller, octagonal, adjacent room (Fig. 2, Room 2).

The *opera sectilia* pieces assemblage

Even though only a small sample of the whole assemblage of *opus sectile* pieces has been thoroughly examined, it has enabled to establish the broad spectrum of types of coloured *marmora* that were employed. In this first stage of the study, only a macroscopic identifi-

14. Due to the large dimensions of the *balneum*, it has been catalogued as pertaining to the third type according to García-Entero's classification (2005, 764), this type of building representing the symbolism and the aristocrats' way of life, to which this complex undoubtedly belonged (Balmelle 2001, 190).

15. García-Entero 2005, 751; 2006, 107.

16. García-Entero 2006, 107.

17. Rodà 2004, 412.

18. García-Entero 2005-2006, 61.

19. Balmelle 2001, 190 pp.

20. Starting in the 1st century and finishing in the 2nd century, this happens once the tradition of separating the hot spaces from the private domestic rooms begins, through the use of *praefurnia*, exclusively used for the hot rooms in the *balnea*, which consequently allows them to isolate these buildings, thus giving them more importance, from the domestic areas, or at least separate them (García-Entero 2005-2006, 97).

21. Where over thirty different types of *marmora* were used (Rodà 2001, 247-267; 2012, 86; García-Entero and Vidal 2007; 2008; 2012; García-Entero *et al.* 2008; Fernández Ochoa *et al.* 2011, 231-242).

22. Where despite a less wide range of *marmora* employed, an impressive ornamental programme articulated around the use of eight types of *marmora* (porfido rosso, porfido verde, giallo antico, portasanta, pavonazzetto, rosso antico, Proconessian white marble and Estremoz white marble) has been discovered (Pérez *et al.* 2012).

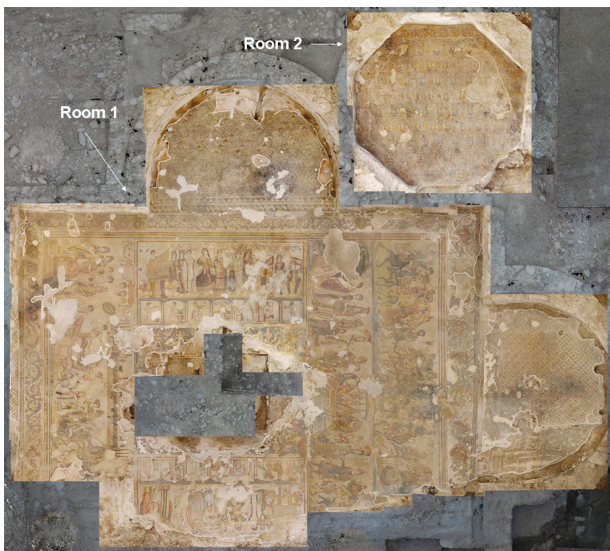


Fig. 2. View of the known part of the *pars urbana* of the Roman villa of Noheda.



Fig. 3. View of the *balneum*.

cation has been carried out. In further stages, we intend to extend the examination to a larger sample (if not all) the fragments found during the excavations, which would be the only way to achieve a real idea of the variety and extent of the use of *marmora* at this part of the building of the Roman villa of Noheda.

As could be expected, the large majority of these pieces are coloured *marmora*, most of which of foreign provenance (non-Hispanic) and that cover a broad geographic spectrum. So far, we have been able to identify the following coloured *marmora*:

Giallo antico (or *marmor Numidicum*).

Different varieties of the renowned yellow limestone from near Chemtou (ancient Simitthu, Tunisia), have been identified. They include not only the most common, homogeneously yellow one, but also the brecciated



Fig. 4. Example of giallo antico fillets from the *balneum*.

type with whitish clasts and yellow matrix, the brecciated type with yellow clasts and reddish matrix as well as giallo antico of pinkish shade (Fig. 4). Within the sample examined, there are mainly rectangular *crustae* and thin fillets of various sizes, although examples of figurative *crustae* in giallo antico have also been found (such as a human leg) (Fig. 8).

Portasanta (or *marmor Chium*).

The pink limestone from Chios (Greece) so sought-after for ornamental purposes is not as common as giallo antico at Noheda, but still quite significant in number within the whole sample²³. The examples examined basically consist of rectangular *crustae* and fillets of various sizes (Fig. 5).

Cipollino (or *marmor Carystium*)

The white and green marble from the island of Euboea (Greece) is another of the mainly used *marmora* at the *balneum* of the Roman villa of Noheda. In this case, however, the pieces found belong to larger *crustae* of similar thickness²⁴. This is not strange, if we take into account that the way this stone shows its most beautiful appearance is when presents a relatively large surface that enables all to appreciate its bicolour waves (Fig. 6).

Pavonazzetto (*marmor Docimium, Phrygium* or *Synadicum*)

Unmistakeable examples of the white and violet marble from Afyon have been found among the *marmora* of the *balneum* as rectangular *crustae* or diverse sizes. Most of the pieces show the appearance of the most characteristic pavonazzetto, yet in some cases, the features could also belong to a grecco scritto type of marble (Fig 7).

Bigio antico

This grey and sometimes mottled *marmora*, from Asia Minor, is not too common in our sample of the No-

23. For the diffusion of *marmor Chium* in Hispania, cf. Mayer and Rodà 2000.

24. Between 1.4 and 1.8 cms; their large and width cannot be ascertained as they all are fragments.



Fig. 5. Examples of portasanta and possible africano fillets from the *balneum*.

heda assemblage in terms of number of pieces and appears employed in medium size *crustae*.

Greco scritto

Some pieces showing the small, random and intricate veins on a white marble, typical of the greco scritto, have been identified (Fig.7). Traditionally, the quarries of Cape Garde, about 10 km from Annaba, near Hippo Regius (Algeria) were considered the main source of this marble. However, as recent studies have pointed to the existence of several outcrops near ancient Ephesus (Turkey) that supply a marble of macroscopic appearance almost identical to that of Algeria and that was widely used throughout the Roman Empire²⁵, a Ionic origin for these pieces cannot be ruled out.

Porfido rosso (*lapis Porphyrites*)

This highly luxurious stone from Mons Porphyrites (Gebel Dokhan, Egypt) was also used at the *opera sectilia* that decorated our *balneum*. In this case, the *crustae* fragments preserved show an unusual thickness²⁶ for this type of stone, which allows a thin cut, especially when compared with other pieces from this same assemblage²⁷.

Rosso antico (*marmor Taenarium*)

This homogeneously red limestone from Cape Taenaros (Greece) was mainly used as small module, rectangular elements, but the existence of motive-shaped



Fig. 6. Example of cipollino *crustae* fragments from the *balneum*.



Fig. 7. Examples of pavonazzetto and greco scritto fillets from the *balneum*.

pieces which could be combined with the giallo antico ones cannot be ruled out²⁸.

There are also scattered cases for which a straightforward identification has not been possible. Some of them are likely to belong to the **africano** (*marmor Luculleum*) from Teos (Turkey). Indeed, there are some pieces of the green variety of africano, yet for some oth-

25 Yavuz 2011; Attanasio *et al.* 2012 for the Ephesian marble; Antonelli *et al.* 2009 for the Algerian one. Therefore, the archaeometric analysis of these pieces is compulsory in order to provenance them.

26. 2.4 cms.

27. See, for example, the rosso antico and the possible africano pieces.

28. Examples of motive-shaped pieces in rosso antico have been found at Las Pizarras roman site, of Late Roman chronology and which lies also in the center of Hispania (Pérez *et al.* 2012).



Fig.8. One of the *opus sectile* figured pieces decorated the walls of the *balneum*

ers, the fact that they are small, relatively thin²⁹ pieces and that their traits do not completely match with the most well-known dark variety of this very variable breccia, prevent us of confirming it. Likewise, a small triangular *crusta* of greenish limestone that might be an uncommon sort of **verde antico** (*marmor Thessalicum*) has been identified; yet this identification must be subject to the finding of other pieces showing more definitory traits that help to confirm the presence of this *marmora* in our assemblage.

Among the coloured *marmora*, the only one of non foreign origin is **broccatello** (also known locally as Jaspí de la Cinta) from Tortosa (ancient Dertosa), in the banks of the Ebro River, in the NE of Hispania. Despite being a geographically closer marble, it seems to be only employed very scarcely at the *balneum* of Noheda. Even though the future study of the rest of

the assemblage will help to corroborate or dismiss this impression, it is worth remembering that although broccatello did not enjoy a wide distribution inland (it is found mainly on the coastal and riverside towns and villae), it has been documented at the relatively nearby town of Segobriga, where it was used in the Augustan reforms of the forum³⁰.

Finally, we must mention the presence of other *crustae* which were cut from stones which, due to their coloration were employed to achieve the intended chromatic effect, but that could not be identified. They are a black limestone, a grey limestone for which a local or regional origin cannot be dismissed.

As for the white marbles, the only one that it has been possible to identify at this stage of the study is the **Proconessian marble**. Like bigio antico, it is numerically less present at the sample examined³¹ and the examples provided belong to small, rectangular *crustae*. However, there are also some pieces that strongly suggest that white marbles other than that from Proconessus were employed to decorate the *balneum* at Noheda (Fig. 8). They are two white marbles with thin, parallel grey veins for which archaeometric analysis is compulsory in order to provenance them.

As already mentioned, they all belong to the ornamental revetments that profusely decorated the walls (and maybe the pavements as well) of the *balneum*. A first approach to these pieces, show that two types of *opera sectilia* were elaborated for the interior decoration of the baths, as not only geometric pieces³² but also figurative *crustae* have been discovered. The most outstanding examples are a small human leg and a human foot; the first one is made of yellow, homogeneous giallo antico while the foot seems to be of a fine-grained white marble (Fig. 8). It is also worth mentioning that the significantly different sizes of each element suggest that they probably belong either to two different compositions where human figures had an important role, or that they belong to a same scene where a sort of perspective or a hierarchy of figures existed. Although these remains of wall revetment may seem very scanty, we must bear in mind that they are always a rare occurrence in Hispania, and they deserve to be mentioned. Again, the closer parallels are found in Carranque, where pieces of *opera sectilia* have been found both at the villa of Maternus and the late-Roman complex known as Building A; in this second building the evidences show that they also included parts with *interrasum marmor*³³. Yet there are other examples of *opera sectilia* such as those of Hacienda del Algorós de Elche, La Malena de Azuara, la villa de Els Munts in Altafulla (near Tarragona), scattered uncontextualized finds from

29. Between 0.8 and 1.2 cm thick.

30. Cebrián *et al.* 2004; Rodà 2005, 467; for the broccatello, see Álvarez *et al.* 2009: 74-79.

31. Although this might not imply that it is equally less present in the whole assemblage. We hope to be able to provide a more detailed account when further data is incorporated as the study progresses.

32. They are mostly small, rectangular *crustae* of various widths and lengths, but also some circular elements have been found. The detailed study of these elements is still in progress.

33. Pérez Olmedo 1996, 183, num. 135; Rodà 2011, 114.



Fig. 9. *Opus sectile* pieces on their original position on the *balneum* walls.

the necropolis of *Tarraco* (modern Tarragona), Los Torrejones de Yecla, the Flavian forum of Conimbriga and especially Gabia La Grande (Granada), which is the best preserved assemblage so far³⁴.

Fortunately, some pieces of *opera sectilia* have been preserved in their original position on small areas of the *balneum* walls (Fig 9). Therefore, there is little doubt on the highly interesting data that the future excavation of this area will provide in order to understand the combinations and compositions that once covered these small but very rich private baths.

The use of marmora of the Residential building

A huge amount of fragments from thick revetment slabs have been found in Late Imperial stratigraphic contexts at the tri-apsed and octagonal room that made up the residential building. The number of fragments, most of which are of significantly large dimensions and thickness³⁵, recovered from these rooms is so high that we can consider this *marmora* assemblage one of the largest in central Hispania.

Again, the time and financial constraints have not allowed a complete exam of all the fragments recovered during the archaeological campaigns. Nevertheless, it is clear that the range of *marmora* used at this part of the villa was much reduced. In fact, so far only two types of marbles have been distinguished, with the exceptional addition of a third stone, which is a red limestone.

Since no analysis have been undertaken to these marbles, we have not been able to characterize and provenance them, yet their macroscopic appearance seems to suggest an Hispanic provenance at least for some of them. Indeed, a large portion of these slabs are of a white



Fig. 10. Fragments of wall veneers made of marble slabs in the *tri-apsed* room.

medium-grained marble with a very distinctive pink hue and only scarce (if not completely absent) veins, which strongly resembles to some of the marbles from the Ossa Morena formation (in southern Spain) and in particular to some of the varieties outcropping at the Estremoz area (Alentejo, Portugal). The other main type of marble is a medium-grained white and grey marble. Despite the presence of white and grey marbles at Ossa Morena, they mostly are strongly veined and with a quite diverse general appearance; thus, it is even more difficult to venture an provenance for this second type of marble and the analysis become even more necessary than in the previous case.

Finally, the use of a third type of stone is worth mentioning even though it is substantially less present than the two previous ones. It is a red limestone, which bears a resemblance to rosso antico, but that could not been identified. Yet, it is interesting to note that this particular type of stone was recorded only as being used as door-frames.

Some of these fragments were found still *in situ*; they are the lowest parts of slabs used as wall veneers. This is not too common, but the few examples suggest that an alternance of the two types of marbles (white with pink hue – white with grey veins) was used to obtain a chromatic effect to decorate the tri-apsed room walls (Fig. 10). On the other hand, there are evidences in other slabs suggesting that they were salvaged from their original position and they were found carefully placed and laying down on the floor, as ready to be reused.

Preliminar considerations

The lack of a complete examination of the assemblage and of archaeometric analysis that enable to

34. Pérez Olmedo 1996, 68-69, num. 14 (Elche), 191, num. 148 (Azulara), 175-177, num. 126-128 (Altafulla), 182, num. 134 (*Tarraco*), 152-153, num. 103 (Yecla), 198-199, num. 157 (*Conimbriga*), 130-134, num. 81 (Gabia La Grande); for this last site, cf. a previous study by Pérez Olmedo (1994, 595-615).

35. They range from 2.1 to 3.1 cm thick.

provenance the marbles are important drawbacks to understand the ornamental program of these buildings³⁶. However, we can already venture a few general, preliminary considerations.

First of all, a pattern on the use of *marmora* in the Roman villa found near Noheda emerges even from this very preliminary observations: coloured imported *marmora* were used in small pieces (*crustae*) for the *opus sectile* compositions (so far discovered only in the *balneum*) while large white probably Spanish marble³⁷ slabs were employed as wall veneer in the monumental areas of the building (tri-apsed and octagonal rooms).

It is also worth mentioning that both the *opus sectile* pieces and revetment slabs have been only documented as wall decoration, while the pavements uncovered so far (only at the residential building) consisted on exceptionally rich mosaics.³⁸

Finally, the slabs prized off in Late Roman times are an exceptional find. Their analysis will help to understand the decay and Late Antiquity processes that took place in central Hispania.

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36. We hope to be able to fulfill these key aspects in the near future.

37. Although, as already mentioned, this is a mere hypothesis until archaeometric analyses are performed.

38. We hope that the study of the stone materials employed for the *tesserae*, which has not been addressed yet, will eventually give more information on the factors involved in their creation.

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