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Two Imperial Monuments in Puteoli:
Use of Proconnesian Marble in the Domitianic and Trajanic Periods in Campania
Irene Bald Romano, Hans Rupprecht Goette, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska .............................................. 267

Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16th And 17th Centuries):
the Church of Santi Severino e Sossio
Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Martino Solito .......................................................... 275

Roman and Early Byzantine Sarcophagi of Calcitic Marble from Thasos in Italy:
Ostia and Siracusa
Donato Attanasio, John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Anniewies van den Hoek ......................... 281

Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi ‘Church Wreck’ Cargo
Justin Leidwanger, Scott H. Pike and Andrew Donnelly .................................................. 291

The Marbles of the Sculptures of Felix Romuliana in Serbia
Walter Prochaska and Maja Živić .................................................................................. 301

Calcitic Marble from Thasos and Proconnesos in Nea Anchialos (Thessaly)
and Thessaloniki (Macedonia)
Vincent Barbin, John J. Herrmann, Aristotle Mentzos and Anniewies van den Hoek ......................... 311

Architectural Decoration of the Imperial Agora’s Porticoes at Iasos
Fulvia Bianchi, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska .................................................. 321

The Winged Victory of Samothrace - New Data on the Different Marbles
Used for the Monument from the Sanctuary of the Great Gods
Annie Blanc, Philippe Blanc and Ludovic Laugier ............................................................. 331

Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios
in Gortyna (Crete)
Jacopo Bonetto, Nicolò Mareso and Michele Bueno ............................................................. 337

Paul the Silentiary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina
John J. Herrmann and Anniewies van den Hoek ........................................................................ 345

Incrustations from Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Near Modern Xanten, Germany)
Vilma Ruppienė and Ulrich Schüssler .................................................................................. 351

Stone Objects from Vindobona (Austria) – Petrological Characterization
and Provenance of Local Stone in a Historico-Economical Setting
Andreas Rohatsch, Michaela Kronberger, Sophie Insulander,
Martin Mosser and Barbara Hodits ...................................................................................... 363

Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France):
Preliminary Results
Elsa Roux, Jean-Marc Mignon, Philippe Blanc and Annie Blanc .................................................. 373

Updated Characterisation of White Saint-Béat Marble. Discrimination Parameters
from Classical Marbles
Hernando Royo Plumed, Pilar Lapeunte, José Antonio Cuchi,
Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin ...................................................................................... 379
ROMAN AND EARLY BYZANTINE SARCOPHAGI OF CALCITIC MARBLE FROM THASOS IN ITALY: OSTIA AND SIRACUSA

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Abstract

Four sarcophagi in Ostia and one in Siracusa are made of marble that appears macroscopically to be from the island of Thasos. Samples were analyzed with stable isotope ratios of carbon and oxygen. In addition, the Siracusa sarcophagus was analyzed with electron paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy (EPR), and the maximum grain size (MGS) and color were measured. The analyses confirm that the sarcophagi were made of marble from Aliki on Thasos. The Ostian pieces date from the third century, and the Early Byzantine example in Siracusa can be dated to between 590-620 CE.

Keywords
stable isotopes, EPR, maximum grain size, Thasos, Aliki, sarcophagi, third century, post-Justinianic

Thasian calcitic sarcophagi in the West: previous research

Sarcophagi made of calcitic marble from Thasos were frequently exported to nearby Thessaloniki,¹ but in Italy they seem to be rarities. So far the only examples identified are unfinished chests in a cargo that sank around 200 CE off Torre Sgarrata near Taranto.² The cargo contained sarcophagi that came from both the calcitic marble quarries of Cape Fanari and the dolomitic marble quarries of the Cape Vathy-Saliara area on Thasos; the latter are well known as a source of sarcophagi for the Italian market.³ The only other previously confirmation of a calcitic Thasian marble sarcophagus in the western Mediterranean, however, is a lid from the quarries of Aliki, Thasos in Arles.⁴ Now, however, sarcophagi of calcitic marble from Thasos can be identified in north Italy at Milan and Ravenna⁵ and on the western side of the peninsula at Ostia and in Siracusa, Sicily. It will be these latter two sites that will occupy us here.

Thasian calcitic sarcophagi in Ostia

Four sarcophagi at Ostia appeared to be of the grayish, very coarse-grained streaked and spotted calcitic marble of Thasos. One, inscribed for a Julius Tannionius Donatus, was complete to its lid (Fig. 1), while the others were fragmentary (Figs. 2-4). Samples from each sarcophagus, including the lid, were analyzed at the University of South Florida (USF), and the ratios of stable isotopes of carbon and oxygen proved to be compatible with the quarries at Aliki on Thasos (Table 1). Non-destructive pXRF analysis revealed no magnesium (Mg) and relatively low concentrations of manganese (Mn) and strontium (Sr). These data support the isotopic and other data assigning these objects to a large-grained, calcitic, Thasos-Aliki marble source.

Thasian calcitic sarcophagus in Sicily

A Christian sarcophagus in the Galleria Regionale di Palazzo Bellomo in Siracusa⁶ is also made of a grayish marble with very large grain that appears macroscopically

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¹ STEFANIDOU-TIVERIOU, 2009; MANIATIS et al. 2010.
² GABELLONE 2009; CALIA 2009.
³ HERRMANN 1999; HERRMANN 2014, 1289-1291.
⁴ HERRMANN et al. 2002, 345, Table 1, no. 48 (lid with masks, Cloister of S. Trophime).
⁵ HERRMANN et al., in this volume.
⁶ AGNOLI 1953, 230, B29, PL. 97.
⁷ MAZZOLENI 1979, 81-83, Nr. 1; fig. 1; AE 1983: from the excavations of S. Ippolito, Isola Sacra. Translation: To the Manes. Iulius Tannionius Donatus has put a sarcophagus in this grave monument with the place being granted to him. But if someone puts in another body, he will pay to the treasury of the Roman people 50,000 sestertii.
⁸ Inv. 23545: Height 79, length 202, width 83 cm; from the chapel of San Rocco at the Civic Hospital of Siracusa, where it was used as an altar: TUSA 1995, 106, cat. no. 117, pl. 166.
Table 1. Sarcophagi at Ostia with marble from Aliki, Thasos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>USF #</th>
<th>location</th>
<th>identification</th>
<th>δ¹³C</th>
<th>δ¹⁸O</th>
<th>Mn</th>
<th>Sr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6145 (powder)</td>
<td>Ostia, Piccolo Mercato inv. SBAO46853 from Basilica of Pianabella⁶</td>
<td>Strigillated sarcophagus with corner column</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27859 (chip)</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6146 (powder)</td>
<td>Ostia, Piccolo Mercato, unnumbered</td>
<td>Sarcophagus with crossed legs (Cupid? Season?) and (now missing) basket</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27860 (chip)</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27856 (chip)</td>
<td>Piazzale dei Marmi, chest, inv. P85</td>
<td>Strigillated sarcophagus of Julius Tannonius Donatus⁷</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>-1.7</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27857 (chip)</td>
<td>Piazzale dei Marmi, lid, inv. P85A</td>
<td>Lid of preceding</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27858 (chip)</td>
<td>Near Porta Romana</td>
<td>Strigillated sarcophagus with pilasters</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>-0.0</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Sarcophagus of Julius Tannonius Donatus. Ostia, Piazzale dei Marmi, P85, P85A (lid). Marble from Aliki, Thasos, 2nd half of 3rd century

Fig. 2. Fragmentary strigillated sarcophagus, from Pianabella, Isola Sacra. Ostia, Piccolo Mercato, inv. SBAO46853. Marble from Aliki, Thasos, 3rd century

Fig. 3. Fragmentary sarcophagus with Eros or Season with crossed legs. Ostia, Piccolo Mercato, unnumbered. Marble from Aliki, Thasos, 3rd century
to come from the island of Thasos (Figs. 5-6). Two small chip samples were taken and were analyzed at the Istituto di Struttura della Materia, CNR, Roma (ISM) with multiple techniques: paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy (EPR), stable isotope ratios of carbon and oxygen, maximum grain size (MGS), and color. The analyses confirmed that this sarcophagus was also made of marble from the quarries of Aliki on Thasos (Table 2, Figs. 7-8).

Probable quarry of origin for the Siracusa sarcophagus

Analysis by linear discriminant function of the 6 variables in Table 2 are shown graphically in Fig. 8. Distance represents the distance of the sample from the center point of a field. Relative probability assumes that the sample belongs to one of the groups in the selection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Distance a.u.</th>
<th>Rel. prob.</th>
<th>Abs. prob.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample O</td>
<td>Th Aliki</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample U</td>
<td>Th Aliki</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Shown graphically in Fig. 8. Distance represents the distance of the sample from the center point of a field.

Even if not especially high, the absolute probability is well above the threshold and confirms, in agreement with the isotopic results, that the provenance of the marble from Thasos is clear and unquestionable. The rate of success of the method is 77%. This means that 77% of the database samples are correctly re-assigned to their true quarries of provenance using the statistical classification rule. The unknown sample is assigned to the most probable quarry of provenance and the results are deemed to be statistically reliable if the probability values are above their thresholds.

Discussion, chronology, and historical significance

The chests of the four sarcophagi in Ostia (Figs. 1-4) were clearly decorated in Ostia or Rome, probably in the 3rd century. The inscription of Tannonius has been dated to the second half of the third century. In three cases the front of the chest is strigillated, and one is carved with a pair of legs and a basket, probably from a harvest or Bacchic scene. All these motifs are Western and alien to northern Greece. The lid of the sarcophagus of Tannonius (Fig. 1), on the other hand, is very similar to lids in the north Aegean. In Thessaloniki and on Thasos, Thasian marble sarcophagi often have double-sloped lids like this one with carefully detailed roof tiles and acroteria decorated with half-palmettes. The Tannonius sarcophagus apparently arrived in Ostia with a finished lid and an undecorated chest; the combination is also known from Thasos itself.

In the late second and the third century, Rome imported many unfinished marble chests from the Proconnesian quarries. Thasian calcitic marble resembles Proconnesian, and the Thasian sarcophagi may represent an attempt to capture a part of the trade in low-cost, unrefined marble.

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9 On local workshops near the cemetery, see AGNOLI 2008, 203; TORRES 2008, 167.
10 STEFANIDOU-TIVERIOU, 2009, fig. 4; MANIATIS et al. 2010, fig. 4.
11 STEFANIDOU-TIVERIOU, 2009, fig. 4.
Table 2. Analytical data for the two samples of the Siracusa sarcophagus inv. 23545 compared with a selection of marble groups considered to be possible provenances. Group properties include the mean and extreme values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISMNo.</th>
<th>Description, Dating</th>
<th>MGS mm</th>
<th>δ¹⁸O ‰</th>
<th>δ¹³C ‰</th>
<th>EPR Intensity %</th>
<th>EPR Linewidth %</th>
<th>Color %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pal. Bellomo inv. 23545, sample O</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pal. Bellomo inv. 23545, sample U</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aphrodisias 102 samples</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.1/4</td>
<td>-3.53</td>
<td>-2.7/2.6</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ephesos 1 88 samples</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.4/4.6</td>
<td>-4.42</td>
<td>-0.6/5</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ephesos 2 38 samples</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1.2/2.4</td>
<td>-3.14</td>
<td>-0.8/1.5</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Herakleia 51 samples</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>0.4/3.5</td>
<td>-2.59</td>
<td>-0.1/2.9</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Miletos 56 samples</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1/2.5</td>
<td>-2.56</td>
<td>1.2/2.6</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Naxos Apollonas 10 samples</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>2/5</td>
<td>-11.7</td>
<td>1.9/2.6</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Naxos Melanes 33 samples</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>3.5/8</td>
<td>-5.13</td>
<td>1.4/2.3</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Paros I 41 samples</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1/3.1</td>
<td>-3.25</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Paros II Cho 62 samples</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.9/3</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Paros II Ma 28 samples</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>-2.59</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pentelicon 154 samples</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.6/1.8</td>
<td>-7.00</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>226.3</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Proconnesos 1 380 samples</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.4/3.5</td>
<td>-2.08</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Thasos Aliki 76 samples</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>2.4/7.5</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
<td>1.9/4.1</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
grayish marble between the Proconnesus and the West. The rather dark color of the Tannonius sarcophagus and its coarse grain, which makes reading its inscription rather difficult, may have contributed to making the Thasian less popular than the Proconnesian sarcophagi.

The sarcophagus in Siracusa (Figs. 5-6) has a Christian decoration and is much later in date than the Ostian pieces. Its front is decorated with three crosses, each mounted on two steps. Between the crosses appear disks, which were probably intended to be carved as stars or rosettes. The back of the sarcophagus has three crosses without steps or intervening disks.

The sarcophagus has been dated to the eighth century, and the general composition of three Latin crosses can be paralleled on several sarcophagi of the eighth and ninth centuries in Ravenna. If eighth century in date, the decoration would have been applied long after the chest in Siracusa was shipped from Thasos; there are no indications that the marble trade between the Aegean and Italy continued at such a late date. Thasos itself was apparently devastated by Slavic invaders around 620, presumably putting an end to the island's marble trade.

Fig. 5-6. Sarcophagus with three crosses, Galleria Regionale di Palazzo Bellomo, Siracusa, inv. 23545. Marble from Aliki, Thasos, ca. 600 CE

It is likely that the Bellomo sarcophagus dates from late in the Early Byzantine period. A cross on a stepped podium seems to be a relatively late motif. The earliest example seems to be on a sarcophagus in Ravenna dated to the late fifth century (Fig. 12). The Ravenna example is quite different from that in Siracusa; there are five steps instead of two, and two rivers of paradise flow from them. On an ambo, apparently of Proconnesian marble, in the Church of Al Mo’sallaqa, Cairo a cross stands on three steps (Fig. 13). The ambo is also decorated with a shell niche that resembles niches on sarcophagi.

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12 TUSA 1995, 106, cat. no. 117.
13 LAWRENCE 1945, figs. 71-73; VALENTI ZUCCHINI, BUCCI 1968, cat. nos. 60, 61,65, 66.
15 BOVINI, BRANDENBURG 1967, cat. 813. The curling ends and the outlined borders of the crosses seem post-Justinianic.
16 TUSA 1995, cat. no. 42-43, pls. 62-64; SODINI 2012, p. 82 for the 6th – 7th century date.
17 VALENTI ZUCCHINI, BUCCI 1968, cat. nos. 30, 31b, 37b.
18 KOCH 1996.
20 LAWRENCE 1945, 32, 36, 37, fig. 57; VALENTI ZUCCHINI, BUCCI 1968, cat. no. 27; KOLLWITZ, HERDEJURGEN 1979, 71-72, cat. no. B 21, pl. 8.1.
21 ATALLA 1989, 32-33.
Fig. 7. Isotopic diagram for the Sarcophagus with three crosses, Palazzo Bellomo.

Fig. 8. Diagram of 6 variables for the Sarcophagus with three crosses, Palazzo Bellomo.
Fig. 9. Sarcophagus with three crosses in diamonds, unknown marble, reworked for Christian use, 6th or early 7th century, Messina, Museo Regionale (photo: TUSA 1995, cat. 42)

Fig. 10. Sarcophagus with three crosses in niches, probably Proconnesian marble, 500-525 CE, S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna

Fig. 11. Ionic Impost capital, probably Aliki marble, Aliki, Thasos, second half 6th century CE

Fig. 12. Cross on steps with rivers of paradise, probably Proconnesian marble, sarcophagus of 3rd century, recut with Christian imagery, ca. 480-500 CE, S. Francesco, Ravenna

Fig. 13. Ambo platform, probably Proconnesian marble, 500-525 CE, Al Mo‘allaqa, Cairo
in Ravenna of the late fifth and early sixth centuries. A cross on steps, this time four in number, appears in an inlaid marble panel in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, built and repaired by Justinian (527-565) (Fig. 14). The main period of use of the stepped cross motif is in post-Justinianic times; a cross on four steps became a standard motif on Byzantine gold coins (solidi) from time of Tiberius II (578-82) well into the eighth century (Fig. 15). Crosses on steps appear on ambo panels from Paros of ca. 600 (Fig. 16). A cross on a globe above three steps appears on Byzantine silver coins (hexagrams) from 610-685 (Fig. 17) and on a 7th or 8th century Proconnessian marble parapet from Alacam on the Black Sea coast of Turkey (Fig. 18). A cross on three steps appears in the apse mosaic of Hagia Irene, Constantinople, shortly after 753 (Fig. 19). Stepped crosses are incised in the quarries of Proconnessus, and several are accompanied by inscriptions and abbreviations typical of the ninth century and later.

The modest level of workmanship of the Siracusa sarcophagus probably indicates that it is not an especially early example of the cross on steps motif. Its “reduced” arrangement with only two steps also suggests a relatively late date; a two-step arrangement is seen in one of the ambo panels from Paros of ca. 600 (Fig. 12) and the chancel barrier from Alacam (Fig. 14). The Palazzo Bellomo sarcophagus then could well have been both quarried and decorated around 570-610. Since sarcophagi were usually shipped from Thasos in an unfinished state, it is likely that the Palazzo Bellomo example was decorated in Sicily.

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22 VALENTI ZUCCHINI, BUCCI 1968, cat. nos. 28-31.
24 WHITTING 1973, 112; BARBER 2002, 83-87; cited in PICKETT.
26 EFFENBERGER 1989, 130, 136, 149.
28 ASGARI, DREW-BEAR, 3-4.
29 GABELLONE 2009; CALIA 2009; HERRMANN et al., in this volume.
Conclusions

Macroscopic examination led to tentative identifications of sarcophagi in Ostia and Siracusa as Thasian, and isotopic analysis and analysis with EPR have confirmed these conjectures and established the origin of the sarcophagi in the calcitic marble quarries of Aliki. Previously, sarcophagi of calcitic marble from Thasos had been known only from shipwrecked cargoes, and these new identifications add substance to the trade in prefabricated and semifinished sarcophagi from Thasos in Italy. Art historical study of the decoration and workmanship of the sarcophagi provide chronological markers. The chests in Ostia were decorated locally in the third century, but the lid of one of them seems to have been both extracted and decorated on Thasos. The sarcophagus in Siracusa was extracted and decorated on Thasos in the late sixth or early seventh century. This result is important in establishing that marble products were exported from Thasos to Italy toward the end of the Early Byzantine period and thus at a much later date than previously known.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks for understanding and cooperation go to Carmela Vella director of the Galleria Regionale di Palazzo Bonomo, Siracusa and to the Soprintendenza Speciale per il Colosseo, il Museo Nazionale Romano, and the Area Archeologica di Roma, and especially to the Area Archeologica di Ostia, to the Soprintendente Francesco Prosperetti and Paola Germoni, and to the former Soprintendente Anna Gallina Zevi.

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