



Imperial Porphyry

Daniele Torcellini

Imperial Porphyry is the most important natural stone employed during the Roman Empire for sculpture, statues and sarcophaguses, for architectonic elements, ornamental carvings and inlays. It was a precious stone that embodied rich symbolic values, even identified with the imperial glory itself. From the petrographic point of view, Imperial Porphyry is an igneous rock consisting of large-grained crystals such as feldspar or quartz dispersed in a fine-grained feldspathic matrix or ground mass. It has a dark red-purple base, dotted by white little inclusions. But its historical and cultural fame surpasses greatly its scientific description.

Ancient marbles are natural stones mainly extracted and employed during the Roman Empire or before and, extensively, the stones also extracted during the Renaissance and later to ornate buildings, furnishings, or other precious objects, for personal embellishment, social or ritual needs. Within this context, the word *marble* refers both to real marbles as petrography defines them – metamorphosed limestone, consisting chiefly of recrystallized calcite or dolomite – and to any other natural stones which could be polished to reach a high gloss surface.

Since late-republican period of Roman history many different marbles were imported in Rome mainly from Greece. Pentelic marble was certainly one of the most widespread. It came from Attica, where it was used in the construction of the Parthenon in Athens. From the 2nd to the 1st century B.C., Roman aristocracy inherited from Hellenistic culture ideological issues related to white and colored marbles. So, many important buildings begun to be externally covered by marbles slabs and internally worked by marble inlays – *opus sectile* – for floor and wall revetment.

The interest in marbles increased consistently during the Roman Empire. Quarries were installed along the territories of the Empire, Spain, Gaul, Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, Tripolitania, Numidia, Mauritania and Italy of course. The main quarries were directly managed by imperial fiduciary, the others were subcontracted. Marbles were transported across the sea, with special ships (*naves lapidariae* each of one can bring up to 300 tons of marble) which held rough materials, but also architectonic elements – such as columns, capitals, basis, statues – already finished or almost finished. Augustus, the first Emperor, is remembered for having said that he found Rome built in brick while he left it shining of colored marble.

One of the most important quarries of the Empire was in Egypt, some 480 kilometers southeast of Cairo, near the coasts of the Red Sea. Romans reached out it by following the Hellenistic kings of Egypt, and they found a huge lode in a massif they called *Mons Porphyrytes*, now called Jabal Abu Dukhan. The dark red-purple Imperial Porphyry, the natural stone most acclaimed during the Roman Empire, for its preciousness and its symbolic values – the hardest rock known at the time – has been extracted right there.

For ancient Greeks and Romans, Imperial Porphyry was never simply a hard rock. It was a mixture of fire and blood, conveying the most important symbolic values of the time.

The latin words *porphyrites* and *purpura* both originate from the Sanskrit word *pur-phur* (and the greek *porphyra*) which originally mean: *to move with excitement, to burn, to shine*, having linguistic and semantic similarities with words indicating the excitement of fire and waves and the shining of color. Bright red-purple garments always sheathed the bodies of the powerful. But red-purple did

Imperial Porphyry

not invariably speak of “glowing” success. For the warrior, death also was a red-purple vail, a flood of bright blood that fell across the eyes of the mortally wounded.

The symbolic values of Imperial Porphyry are strictly related to red-purple color. The same latin word *porphyrites* can be translated with *purple*, even if our purple is too much bluish in color, and *porphyrites* color can be more correctly matched with crimson. Homer, in his Iliad, associated red-purple (*porphyra*) with Zues, sanctioning the supremacy of this color in the political and religious contexts. Red-purple became a color which symbolized divinity, richness, selection, the embodiment of power itself and Imperial Porphyry become the red-purple minerals *par excellence*.

Imperial Porphyry excavated in Egypt, was the most important natural stone employed to symbolize the majesty and the supremacy during the Roman Empire. From the age of Caligola and Nerone (I century AD) the exploitation of the Egyptian mine became ever more intense. Imperial Porphyry was used to produce columns, to cut floor and wall slabs, to sculpt portraits and sarcophaguses, *solia porphyretici marmoris*. Firstly in Rome, then in Constantinople, the *New Rome* after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, where the use of Imperial Porphyry marked out the rulers of Constantinople as the true heirs of Rome.

The transmission and reinterpretation of imperial symbols made during the Christian age, saw red-purple color becoming symbols of Jesus's blood. This allowed Imperial Porphyry to assume new relevance, while the Egyptian mine was abandoned and the traffic of this precious materials across the Mediterranean Sea stopped. The spoliation of the Roman marbles begun. Rome became an open air mine. In the Early Christian and Medieval churches it was largely employed. Saints and bishops were buried in the Imperial sarcophaguses reused, altered and adjusted to convey the Christian message.

Large discs of Imperial Porphyry, *rotae*, sliced from giant Roman columns, mapped out the route of processions of the pope along the nave and identified the sacred space where popes crowned emperors. The fortune of Imperial Porphyry still maintained alive during the Renaissance and Baroque period, up to our days. Even if Michelangelo was defeated by its hardness. It was impossible for him to readapt an ancient sarcophagus made from Imperial Porphyry that was gifted to Giulio II.

Today this precious stone keeps its fascination unchanged and the symbolic values it conveys are still well present. The monetary value of any objects made from Imperial Porphyry is very high too. DCACC is eager to inspire contemporary artists with the rich symbolism and the historical background of the material. Having access to an important stock of raw material and to high skilled artisans who have experience in processing it, DCACC is pleased to support the collaboration with artists interested in the use of Imperial Porphyry for their projects.



Imperial Porphyry

