

Introduction

The Van Buren Antiques Collection of Smith College's Department of Classical Languages and Literatures is home to a group of 31 small cut and polished pieces of stone (Figure 1) whose origin has remained unknown to the Smith community. The purpose of this project is to shed light on the geological and historical origins of these stones.

Many objects from the Van Buren Collection were purchased in 1925 by Professor F. Warren Wright, Professor in the Smith College Classics Department from 1911 to 1953, from Albert William Van Buren, a professor of archaeology of the American Academy in Rome (Figure 3).

The pieces purchased from Van Buren were carefully cataloged by Professor Wright, but only two of these decorative stones were mentioned in Professor Wright's catalogue (Figure 2).

Analysis and identification of the stones using The Sourcebook of Decorative Stones by Monica Price as well as the Oxford University Corsi Collection of Decorative Stones Website revealed the geological origins and relationships between the stones, while written labels provided insight into their historical origin.



Figure 1: Complete compilation of the thirty-one decorative stones as they were displayed in the Van Buren Collection in the Caverno Room of Nielson Library at Smith College.

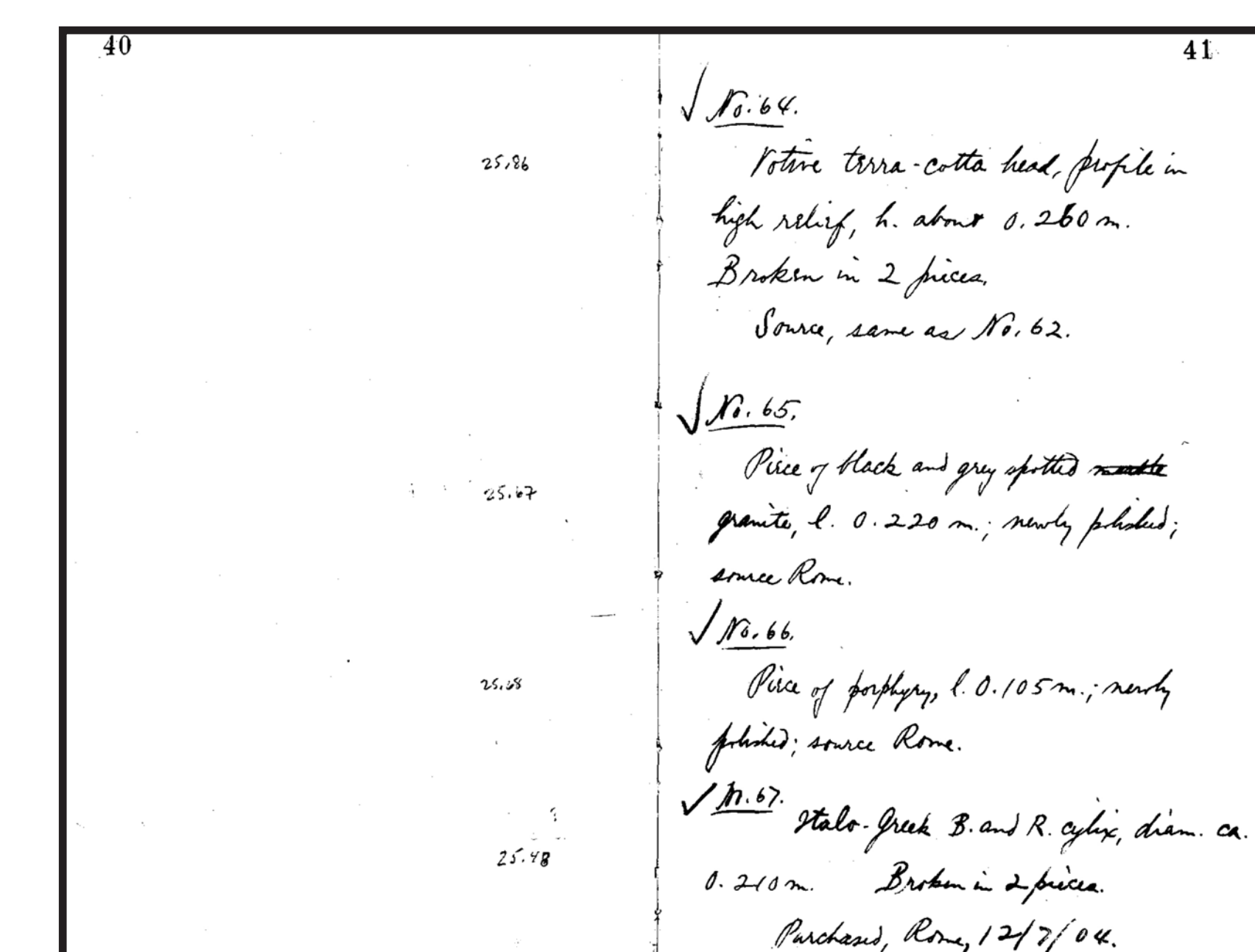


Figure 2: Scan of pages 40 and 41 of Professor Wright's handwritten catalogue of the artifacts from the Van Buren Collection. Artifact No. 65 refers to the long porphyry sample at the base of the arrangement shown in Figure 1. Artifact No. 66 refers to a second porphyry sample in the collection, shown on the top right of Figure 1. The numbers on the left page (25.67 and 25.68) indicate that the stones came into the collection in 1925 and were the 67th and 68th objects to be catalogued in that year.

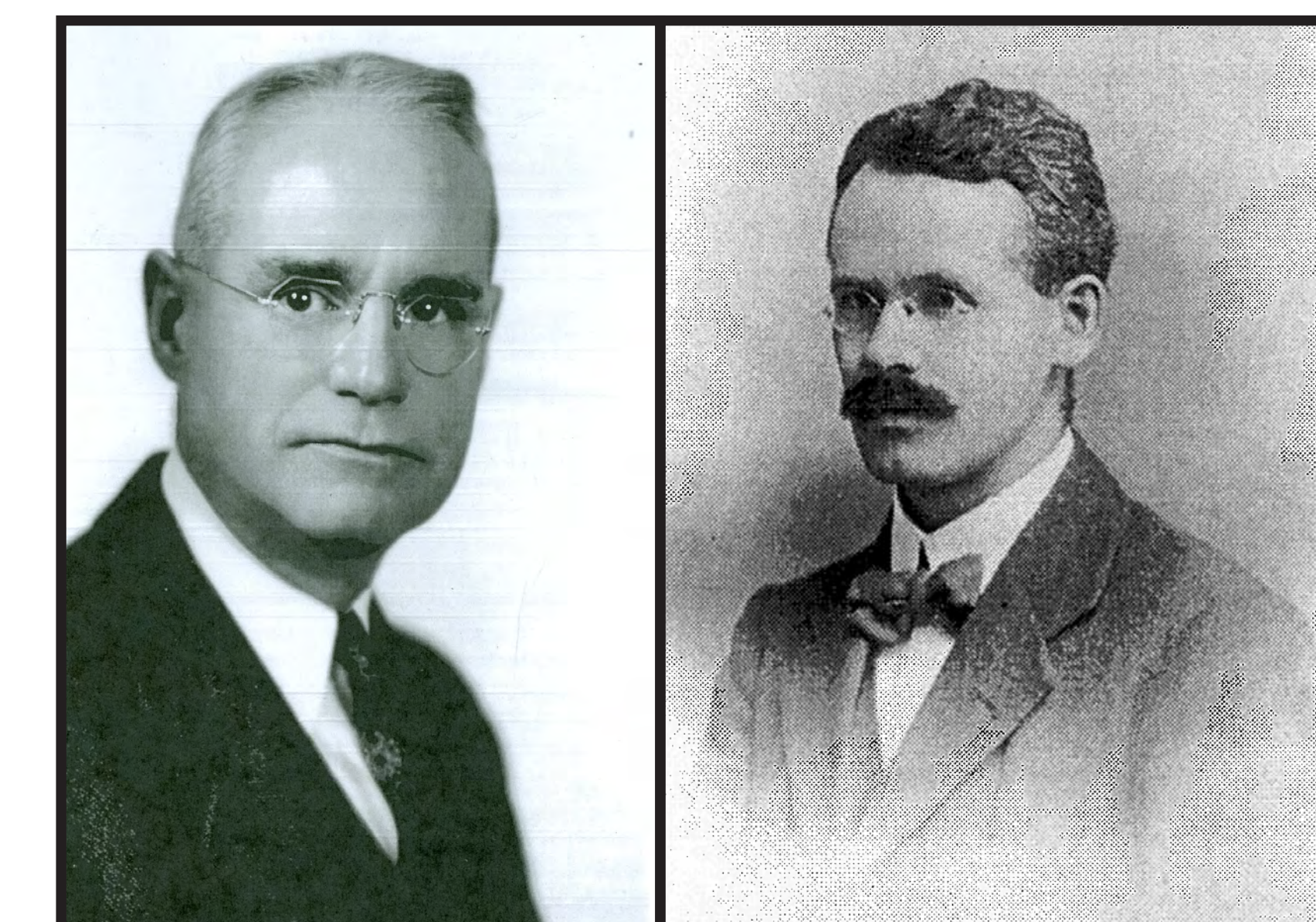


Figure 3: Photographs of Professor F. Warren Wright (left) of Smith College Classics Department and Professor Albert William Van Buren (right) of the American Academy in Rome. The stones resided at Yale University, where Professor Van Buren once worked, at the time they were purchased.

Decorative Stones of the Van Buren Antiques Collection at Smith College

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Italy

Rosso Verona

- Location: Verona, Veneto, Italy
- Description: This is a nodular red limestone. It has a micritic matrix, and its texture comes from the presence of clay seams throughout the stone.
- History: This stone was widely used in ancient Rome. It was very popular especially for building in Verona, and was used for many monuments and arenas. It is still quarried and very popular throughout the world.

Marmo Bigio:

- Location: Carrara, Tuscany, Italy
- Description: This stone is a fine grained calcite marble which can vary in appearance from white to gray as a result of the presence of graphite.
- History: The label on this stone does not give very much information about its origin, because the name "marmo bigio" is given to any gray marble. This stone does, however, closely resemble a specific marble called bardiglio from Carrara.

Pavonazetto:

- Location: Apuan Alps, Tuscany, Italy
- Description: These stones are metamorphosed limestones. The presence of graphite and organic matter contribute to the color and create gray or black veins.
- History: These stones have been used on and off since ancient Roman times. Quarries were especially successful in the 14th century, and became prominent again in the 18th and 19th centuries. Quarrying of pavonazetto still takes place today.

Diaspro Tenero di Sicilia

- Location: Toarmina, Messina, Sicily, Italy
- Description: This stone is a red sedimentary limestone. It has many stylolites throughout, which contribute to its texture, and its color is the result of the presence of iron.
- History: Although this stone is labeled as Occhio Pavone, which was quarried in antiquity in Turkey, its color and texture more closely resembles the diaspro tenero di Sicilia.

Portoro:

- Location: La Spezia and Portovenere, Liguria, Italy
- Description: Both of these stones are a type of portoro, a dark calcitic marble. The dark color of the stones comes from organic matter, while the lighter veins are stylolitic clay seams.
- History: This stone was very popular and widely quarried during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Some quarrying still takes place today, though it is not as prominent as in the past.

Breccia di Serravezza:

- Location: Apuan Alps, Tuscany, Italy
- Description: Within the calcareous matrix, these breccias are composed of mixed marble fragments, resulting in variation among samples. The presence of iron oxides contributes to the red color while quartz fragments lead to a white color.
- History: In the 16th century, quarries of this stone flourished in Italy. It is still quarried today, though only rarely and in small amounts.

Serpentina con Zolfo/Verde di Prato:

- Location: Prato, Florence, Tuscany, Italy
- Description: This is a serpentinized peridotite with flakes of diallage, a variation of augite that can appear bronze-colored.
- History: Although this stone is labeled as serpentina con zolfo ("serpentine with sulfur"), it is in fact verde di Prato. Used in medieval times, quarrying stopped in the 16th century and recommenced in the 19th century.

Giallo di Siena:

- Location: Siena, Italy
- Description: This stone is a fine grained calcareous limestone. It has been weakly metamorphosed and contains iron and stylolites which contribute to its texture, color, and appearance.
- History: This stone may have been used in antiquity. It became actively quarried though, in the 19th and 20th centuries. This stone is still actively quarried today.

France

Cipollino Verde Mandolato

- Location: Haute Pyrenees, France
- Description: This is a nodular limestone that has been weakly metamorphosed. It has a calcite groundmass colored by the presence of chlorite surrounding calcite nodules.
- History: This stone was quarried in France but widely used by the Roman Empire in medieval times. Quarries became prominent again in the 17th century.

Figure 5: This enlarged portion of the Map of the Roman Empire shows the location of many of the Italian cities from which the Italian stones were quarried at various times throughout the history of the Roman Empire.

Algeria

Marmo Scritto and Marmo Fasciato:

- Location: Capo de Garde, Annaba, Algeria
- Description: These stones are medium grained calcitic marble. Throughout the white marble are dark graphite rich veins, which have been folded as the result of deformation.
- History: The sample labeled marmo scritto (above), was mainly quarried in Capo de Garde in the first and third centuries AD. The sample labeled marmo fasciato (below) is possibly the same stone, though it may have come from a different quarry.

Greece

Portasanta:

- Location: Chora, Island of Chios, North Aegean, Greece
- Description: This stone is a limestone with brown clay seams, stylolites, and pink micritic matrix.
- History: Used in antiquity by the Greeks, in the 1st century BC this stone was extensively quarried by the Romans until the time of the Byzantine Empire. Quarries reopened in the 19th century and have been occasionally quarried since that time.

Verde Antico

- Location: Larisa, Thessaly, Greece
- Description: A breccia-conglomerate, this stone is composed of marble fragments as well as serpentine and schist. The matrix is serpentine and calcite.
- History: Verde antico was first used in the 1st century by the Romans, and was very popular in the 5th and 6th centuries. Ancient quarries were rediscovered in 1886 and stones were extracted until 1985. Since then quarrying has stopped.

Rosso Antico:

- Location: Mani Peninsula of the Peloponnese region of Greece
- Description: This stone is a very fine grained, impure calcite marble. The deep red color is a result of the presence of iron and manganese oxides.
- History: This stone was quarried and used widely by the Roman Empire in the 2nd century. Quarrying still takes place today, though it is rare.

Parian:

- Location: Island of Paros in Cyclades, Greece
- Description: This sample is an example of the Parian Marbles of Greece. These are very fine-grained calcite marbles that are distinguished by their bright white color.
- History: These stones were frequently quarried in antiquity and were widely used by the Roman Empire. Today they are rarely quarried.

Breccia di Settebase:

- Location: Island of Skyros, Greece
- Description: This stone is a breccia made up of fine grained marble clasts. The clasts may be a range of whites, pinks, and yellows.
- History: Breccia di settebase was widely quarried during the time of the Roman Empire. Today, however, only white marble is quarried from this location.

Uncertain

Slate

- Both of these stones have unknown provenance. The sample on the left appears to be a slate, which is a very fine grained, metamorphosed shale. As this sample is unlabeled and has no distinguishing features, it is difficult to determine a location of origin.
- The sample on the right is labeled as "Rose Alabaster". In fact it is calcitic travertine that is medium grained and may have been deposited in a terrestrial setting such as a spring or stream. The small size of the sample makes it difficult to speculate on a source for this sample, as well.

Jasper

- Location: Unknown
- Description: This stone is a fine grained, red limestone or perhaps a siliceous deposit of deep sea red clay.
- History: The name "jasper" is a broad description and could refer to a number of jaspers quarried throughout Italy. The stones most closely resembling this one, though, include "diaspri di Sicilia" from Sicily, Italy, and "diaspro di Volterraio" from Volterraio, Island of Elba, Livorno, Tuscany, Italy. The Sicilian jasper is a fine grained limestone while the Volterraian jasper is composed of deep sea clay.

Turkey

Rosso Brecciato:

- Location: Kiyikislaçik, Mugla, Turkey
- Description: This stone is a breccia composed of fine grained calcite marble fragments. These fragments are embedded in a hematite rich marble matrix, creating a deep red color.
- History: This stone is most likely rosso brecciato, which was quarried extensively in antiquity by the Roman Empire, especially in the 4th and 5th centuries. It is still quarried today.

Tunisia

Giallo Antico:

- Location: Tunisia (Roman City of Smithus)
- Description: This stone is a fine grained, calcareous limestone. It has been recrystallized through diagenesis, and contains iron rich veins.
- History: Giallo antico was most actively quarried in 2nd and 3rd centuries. It was quarried in Roman city of Smithus, in present day Tunisia. Quarrying today is rare.

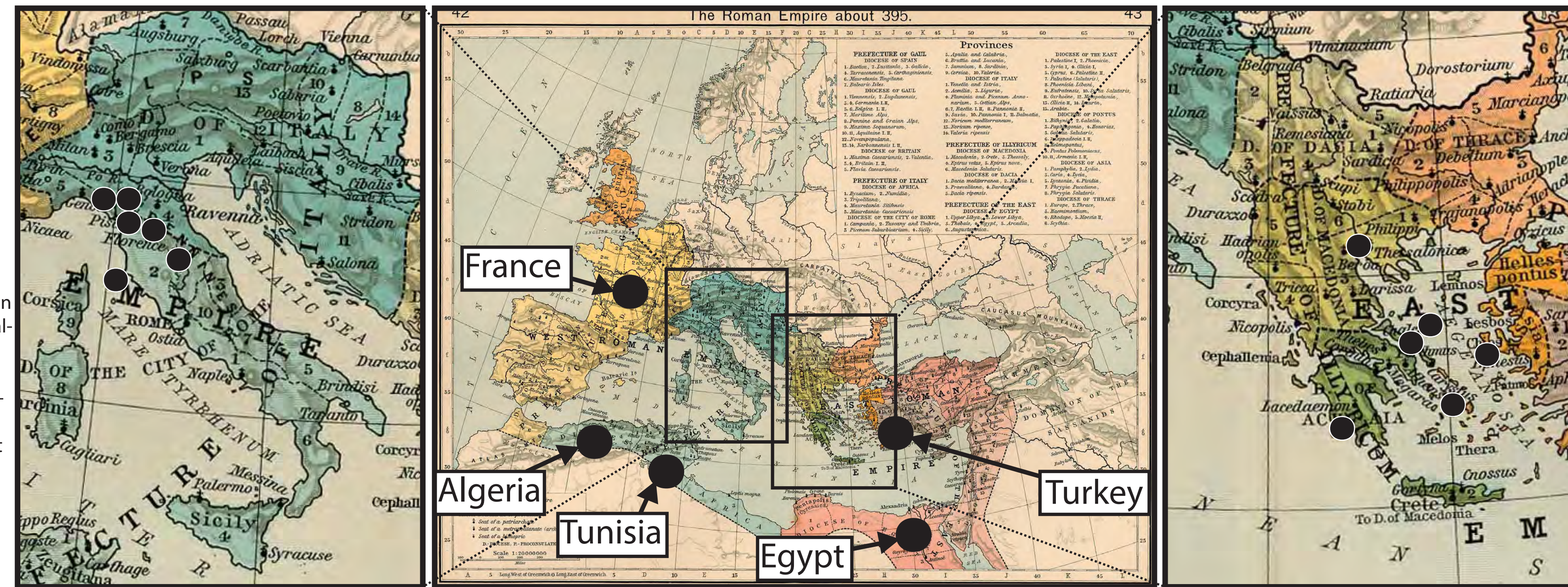


Figure 4: This map of the Roman Empire in the Third Century AD shows the countries from which many of these stones originated. Dots show the locations of Algeria, Egypt, and Turkey, all of which were at this time under the control of the Roman Empire. Italy (Figure 4) and Greece (Figure 5) are the countries from which a majority of the stones were most likely quarried.

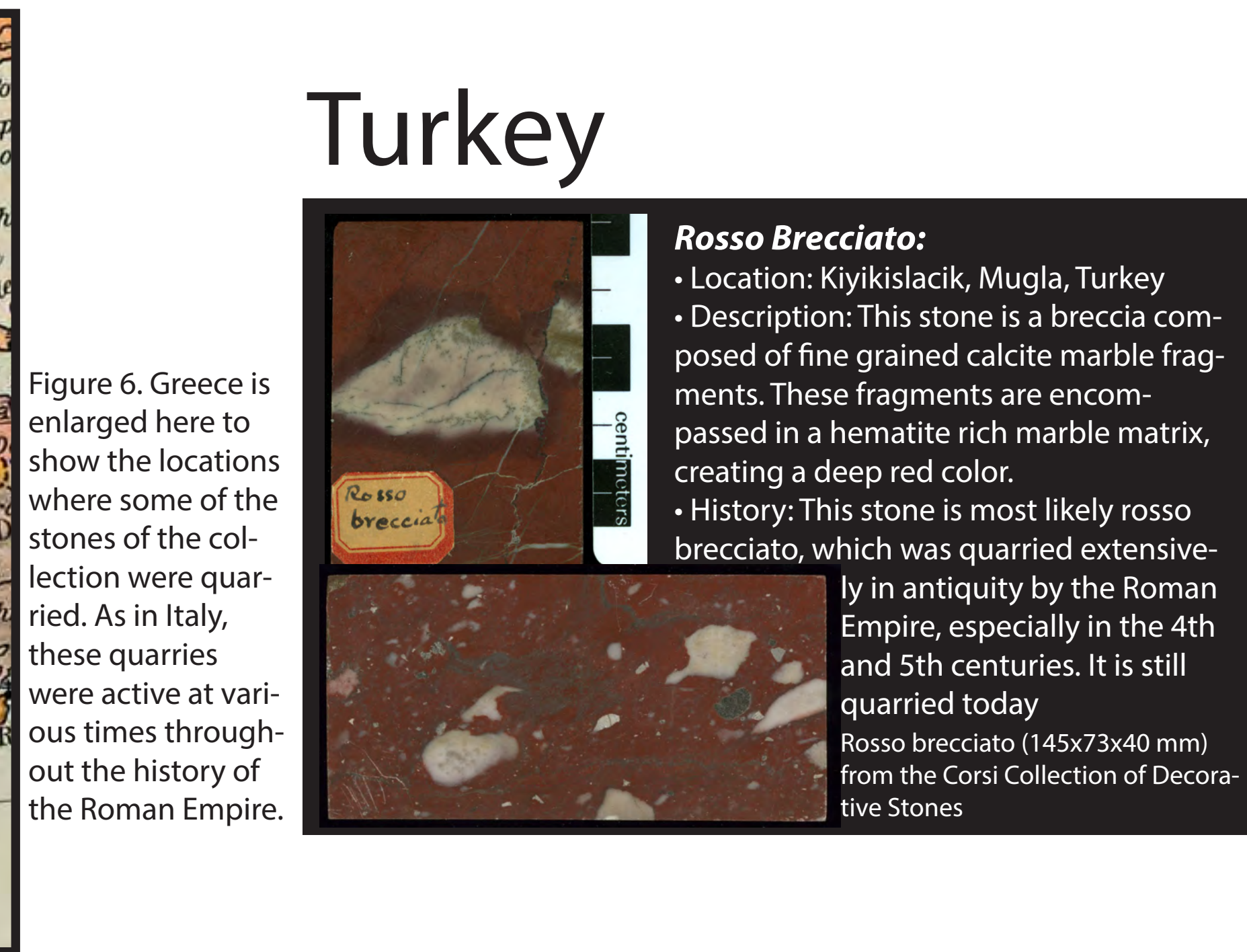


Figure 6: Greece is enlarged here to show the locations where some of the stones of the collection were quarried. As in Italy, these quarries were active at various times throughout the history of the Roman Empire.

Discussion

Geologically, the stones from the Van Buren Collection represent a variety of origins from sedimentary limestones and travertines—formed in shallow marine environments and various terrestrial settings such as springs, cascading streams, and caves—to igneous porphyries—formed when magma cools in separate stages creating differences in crystal size—to metamorphic marbles—formed when limestones are recrystallized under high temperatures and pressures.

Despite their diverse geological origins, the stones have a common provenance and quarrying history. They most likely came from at least seven different modern countries, though they were likely quarried when these countries were part of the Roman Empire, and were used for sculpting as well as architectural purposes.

The stones can be grouped into at least two categories. First are the porphyries, which came to Smith as part of the original Van Buren Collection and are mentioned in Professor Wright's catalogue as a "piece of black and gray spotted granite" and "piece of porphyry" both with "source Rome" (Wright, 41). A third somewhat smaller porphyry closely resembles the large red porphyry and is unmarked. It is possible that this, too, was originally a part of this group, and was not mentioned in Professor Wright's catalogue because of its association with the large red porphyry.

The second group of stones share common general shape, are polished on the front surface, and represent marbles, limestones, travertines, and one slate. They are all small, thin tiles and many contain similar identification markings, including a paper label stating the stone name along with the words "Paolo Triscornia di Ferd." and "Carrara." This label is intact on some, while on others it has been partially or completely worn away with the name re-written in pencil (Figure 7). Based on the presence of the labels and/or the pencil markings and other similarities, it appears that all of the remaining stones came from a common source.

Investigation into the names on these labels revealed that a family of artists once lived in Carrara, Italy, by the name of Triscornia. It seems that this family at one time owned a stone sculpting and distribution company. A series of help wanted ads in an American magazine called Stone: An Illustrated Magazine from May 1908 to June 1909 were posted by a Paolo Triscornia Di Ferd from Carrara, Italy. The advertisement reads:

"Wanted-Reliable agents (American or German), in the principal cities of America to represent a first class and leading Studio in Pure Art Sculpture, Architecture and Colored Marble Specialties. Must be well connected with Sculpturers, Architects, Ecclesiastics and Decorators. References requires. Address Paolo Triscornia di Ferd, Carrara, Italy" (Stone: An Illustrated Magazine).

The advertisement speaks of "colored marbles," which are often used in sculpture and architecture to describe limestones and travertines as well as true marbles. Thus it is possible that the second group of stones came as samples of materials used by this company. How these decorative stones became a part of the Smith College Van Buren Antiques Collection, though, remains unknown.



Figure 7: Three examples of stone with the front label (above) and the corresponding back label (below). Many of the stones are marked on the back with the same label containing the names "Paolo Triscornia di Ferd." and "Carrara." Others have a partially faded label or the label has been worn away completely and re-written in pencil.

Conclusions

The stones of the Van Buren Collection represent a variety of geological origins, including igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rocks.

All of stones originally came from quarries that were at the time part of the Roman Empire

There are at least two porphyries that were part of the original Van Buren Collection, and perhaps a third piece of porphyry that is not mentioned separately in the catalogue.

The remaining limestones, travertines, and marbles may have come from the Paolo Triscornia di Ferd. company of Carrara, Italy.

How were and when the stones were assembled and became part of the present-day collection remains a mystery.

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