

THE MARBLES OF THASOS AND PROCONNESUS: SOME NOTES ON THE PRODUCTION OF IONIC CAPITALS IN EARLY BYZANTINE PERIOD

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The history of the production of architectural sculpture manufacturing is closely bound to the history of the material from which it is made, which is marble especially. In the Mediterranean world the use of marble for architecture and sculpture is attested to from ancient times. However, its intensive use begins with the Romans, who beside the colored marbles, used the white ones, on a large scale, on account of their major effects. The white marbles in antiquity were numerous but the main ones used were the Proconnesian, Thassian, Docimian, Parian and Pentelic¹. It seems that the Proconnesian and Thassian were the most widespread types because of their price² and the locations of the quarries in favourable geographical positions for the transport.

The marble of Proconnesus³, today Marmara adası, was exploited from the archaic period, but its large scale exportation began in the Flavian period, with the nearby city of Cyzicos acting as a centre for the collection and administration of the quarries. The production was mostly of architectural elements such as capitals, columns and bases, but also of sarcophagoi and other sculptural furnishings⁴. That they belonged to the imperial estates is attested by their large export in the Aegean, Pontic and

1. P. PENSABENE, *Le principali cave di marmo bianco*, I Marmi Colorati della Roma Imperiale (catalogue of the exhibition), ed. by M. DE NUCCIO, L. UNGARO, Venezia 2002, p. 203-212 (with an extensive bibliography).

2. In the 'Edictum de pretiis rerum venalium' promulgated in 301 by the emperor Diocletian, both types of marble seem to have been the most affordable in price (the Proconnesian is noted by 75 denari and the Thassian by 50 denari): I Marmi Colorati, op. cit., p. 318-320. The slab containing the complete inscription was found in Aphrodisias in Caria.

3. The Proconnesian is a white marble, coarse-grained with blue and grey veins; D. MONNA, P. PENSABENE, *I marmi dell'Asia Minore*, Roma 1977, p. 145-174; Marmi Antichi, ed. by G. BORGHINI, Roma 1989, p. 252; R. GNOLI, *Marmora Romana*, Roma 1971, p. 227-228; P. PENSABENE, art.cit. in footnote 1, p. 203-205.

4. N. ASGARİ, *Objets de marbre finis, semifinis et inachevés du Proconnèse, Pierre Eternel du Nil au Rhin: Carrières et préfabrications*, ed. by M. WAELEKENS, Bruxelles 1990, p. 106-126.

Mediterranean areas. At Proconnesus, activity became more intensive with the foundation of Constantinople, at which time most of the work on the marble took place in the workshops of the island.

The marble of Thasos, exploited from the four main quarries of the island⁵, was used in architecture and sculpture. For the most part, Ionic, Composite and Ionic impost capitals were produced. If the quarries of Proconnesus were exploited in Byzantine times (and in Ottoman ones as well, as they are exploited even today), the ones from Thasos (especially those of Alikí) seems to have been on the decline from sometime after 600⁶. In both cases, the preparation partly took place in the quarry itself, where the pieces were sketched out or semi-worked so that they could be finished later at their place of destination. Production in the half-worked stage of architectural elements is attested to in the late Hellenistic period and of course during Roman and early Byzantine times⁷. Such manufacturing required also the movement of the marble workers and of the workshops to the places of the product's delivery. This mobile workmanship was well coordinated and at times the work's completion was left, in most cases, to the local artists at the place of delivery. Studies show that in the late Roman period, the quarries of Proconnesus and Dokimios and the cities of Aphrodisias, Ephesus and Nicomedia, were probably the places of origin of these teams which moved from place to place⁸.

We have already noted the importance of the quarries in the semi-working of the marble by the mobile work-teams. The other thing of importance in the study of the architectural sculpture of Late Antiquity is the production on a standardized scale. It can be stated that up into the late second or early third centuries there was no mass standardized production. This rather begins slowly in the third century with the mass production of the Corinthian capitals of the Asia Minor type in Proconnesian quarries. This is probably connected to the building activities under Diocletian and Constantine after the crisis of the third century. It becomes more intensive in Late Antiquity, as can

5. Four main varieties of Thasian marble are attested: the one from Cape Vathy, middle-coarse grained, used for sculpture; the marble of Alikí, coarse grained, used for architectural elements; of Cape Phanari, coarse grained; and the one of Acropolis, coarse grained, white-greyish marble; *P. PENSABENE*, art.cit. in footnote 1, p. 208-212 (with bibliography).

6. *J.-P. SODINI, A. LAMBRAKI, T. KOZELI*, Les carrières de marbre à l'époque paléochrétienne, Alikí I, EtThas IX (1980), p. 125-126; *J. HERRMANN, A. MENTZOS*, The exportation of marble from Thasos in Late Antiquity, The quarries of Alikí and Cape Fanari, in Thasos. Matières premières et technologie de la préhistoire à nous jours. Actes du Colloque International (Thasos 1995), Athens 1999, p. 75-90.

7. *P. PENSABENE*, Il fenomeno del marmo nel mondo romano, I Marmi Colorati, op.cit., p. 50.

8. These then executed styles of their place of origin or training. For example, at Philippi, the Severian-age decoration, was of local marble, worked by Macedonian workshops which nonetheless employed the styles of Asia Minor; see *P. PENSABENE*, art.cit. in footnote 7, p. 54.

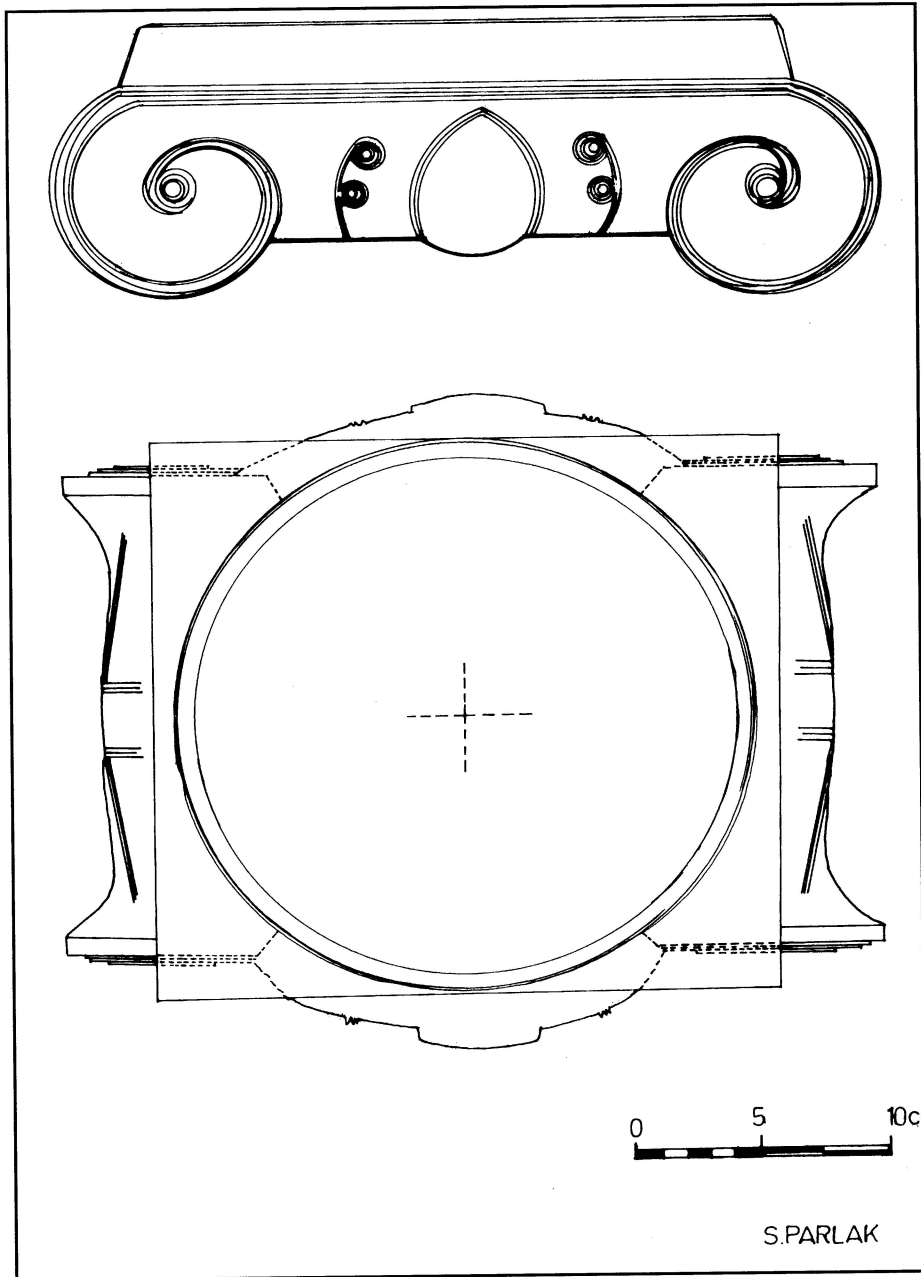


Plate I Istanbul University, Beyazit, Rectorate Building, Ionic capital.

be witnessed from the discoveries in the Proconnesian quarries, of manufacture in different stages of working on account of interruption⁹.

The standardization of production can be considered the basis of early Byzantine sculptural art. It was so widespread that from the same forms capitals and bases were being produced. This phenomenon begins in the early fourth century and become more widespread between the fifth and sixth. In this period the preeminence in the production lies first with the Proconnesian quarries then with those of Thasos. In other places however, this feature has a different meaning, because it is connected with the social-economic conditions of the cities in Late Antiquity. A decline at that time led to an impoverishment of the activities in the local workshop. Also, by the early Byzantine period, production centres begin to import rather than to produce their products. This is especially the case with church buildings and columned roads¹⁰. This development means that the quarries of Proconnesus and Thasos became more important for production, both because they were imperial properties and because they were situated in very favourable geographical locations for transport.

Between the fourth and sixth centuries it seems that quarry production was mostly concentrated at Proconnesus-Constantinople. In the same period we have small-scale production of the columns and Ionic capitals from the quarries of Thasos (Alikı)¹¹.

It is well known that Thasos was a centre largely producing Ionic and Ionic impost capitals. The Ionic capitals are to be found in Limenas, in the basilica north of Alikı and in the local Museum. All are in the marble of Alikı and, at the time of the research of Hermann and Sodini, there were twelve of them from the whole island¹². In all the Mediterranean area there are to be found examples which have the same features¹³. They are simple, with plain echinus, and they present the typical tendril in the first quarter-turn of the volute channel. The ones in the north basilica of Alikı (500c.), dated to the early fifth century, are probably reused. Studies show that their evolution terminated around 410¹⁴.

9. N. ASGARI, The stages of workmanship of the Corinthian capital in Proconnesus and its export form, *Classical marble: geochemistry, technology, trade*, ed. by N. HERZ, M. WAELEKENS, Dordrecht 1988, p. 115-125. This is also to be witnessed in other parts of the Mediterranean, namely Thasos, Luni, Penteli, and Erakleia at Latmos.

10. P. PENSABENE, art.cit. in footnote 7, p. 57.

11. P. PENSABENE, art.cit. in footnote 7, p. 57.

12. The few examples which are in Thasos itself and also outside the island show a regular and clean development, see; J. HERRMANN, J.-P. SODINI, Exportations de marbre thasien à l'époque paléochrétienne: le cas des chapiteaux ioniques, BCH 101 (1977), p. 471-511 (481).

13. J. HERRMANN, J.-P. SODINI, art.cit., p.481-493 (Greece, Italy, Syria; from the third to the fifth century).

14. J. HERRMANN, J.-P. SODINI, art.cit., p. 505; J.-P. SODINI, A. LAMBRAKI, T. KOZELI, op.cit., p. 160.

As mentioned, the main feature of the Ionic capitals of Thasos are the tendril in the channel of the volutes, the undecorated echinus, and the presence of the points in the centre of the volutes. Between the third and the fifth centuries they were imported to Greece and especially to Italy. The production of the Ionic capital of Thasos declined around the beginning of the fifth century. They are however the earliest examples of Ionic mass-produced capitals in Late Antiquity and in early Byzantine times. Production in fact did not stop but slackened. We have later examples dated to between the middle of the fifth and the middle of the sixth centuries¹⁵.

In Constantinople now, in Late Antiquity, on the contrary, we do not have any large-scale production of Ionic capitals as we do in Thasos. Until now only a few examples of Constantinopolitan products have been registered and published. On the island of Marmara nine finished Ionic capitals have been found¹⁶. They show the same design: in the echinus is an U-shaped egg and the half palmettes are like two small scrolls coming out from heart-shaped leaves. The bolsters, without balteus, are decorated with simple water leaves.

To this stereotyped group also belong some examples from the city itself: in the Archaeological Museum¹⁷ and in military area near Topkapi Palace¹⁸. This last one, well preserved, has the same type of egg surrounded by heart-shaped leaves with scrolls and elegant water leaves in the bolsters. A part of this group found in the city itself shows little variation in the decoration of the echinus¹⁹. The ones re-used in the walls of Topkapi Palace are in general too worn to be clearly classified²⁰.

To these now we can add two examples which have been recently discovered and remain unpublished. These turned up during the reconstruction of the gardens of

15. In these later examples we can notice that more importance has been given to the decoration of the echinus and the bolsters; *J. HERRMANN, J.-P. SODINI*, art.cit., p. 505-507.

16. *N. ASGARI*, The Proconnesian production of architectural elements in late antiquity, based on the evidence from the marble quarries, Constantinople and its hinterland, ed. by C. Mango, G. Dagron, Variorum 1995, p. 273 fig. 10.

17. *G. MENDEL*, Catalogue des sculptures grecques, romaines et byzantines, Constantinople 1914, t.III, p.439-440 n.1198(2704) and 1199(2702); *J.-P. SODINI, A. LAMBRACKI, T. KOZELJ*, op.cit., p.160 footnote 47; *J. HERRMANN, The Ionic capital in Late antique Rome*, Rome 1988, p.94-96, pl.LXXIII/174 (below).

18. *H. TEZCAN*, Topkapi Sarayı ve çevresinin Bizans devri arkeolojisi, İstanbul 1989, p. 322 fig.446.

19. *J. HERRMANN*, op.cit., p. 94-96 fig. 174 (above), 175, 178(left). The echinus is decorated with a single central element: either an egg or a cross (fig.175), an egg flanked by heart-shaped leaves and scrolls (fig.178). Sometime the traditional motive of egg and dart is visible: *H. TEZCAN*, op.cit., p. 148 fig. 166. Another example was identified in 1971 near Kalenderhane Camii: *J. HERRMANN, J.-P. SODINI*, art.cit., p.506 fig.2.

20. *H. TEZCAN*, op. cit., p. 46 figg. 40,44. Another, with the egg and dart design in the echinus, is used in the outer wall of the cistern inside the park of Gülhane: *IBIDEM*, p. 227 fig. 302.



Fig. 1) Istanbul University, Çapa, Faculty of Medicine, Gardens, Ionic capital.



Fig. 2) Istanbul University, Çapa, Faculty of Medicine, Gardens, Ionic capital.



Fig. 3) Istanbul University, Beyazit, Rectorate Building, Ionic capital.



Fig. 4) Istanbul University, Beyazit, Rectorate Building, Ionic capital.

Istanbul University²¹. The first has the echinus zone decorated with an egg design and two small scrolls coming out from ivy leaves. The bolsters are finely carved with water leaves (Fig. 1-2). The second presents similar decoration but it is less well preserved (Fig. 3-4 and pl.I).

The similarities of the decoration of bolsters and of the small leaves with tendrils shows them to belong to the group found in the Proconnesus quarries. As noted, this group, though limited in number, is a typical product of those quarries²².

About their production not much is known because the findings are few. An important indication is given by the presence of this particular type of product in Rome. In the early Christian Church of S.Stefano Rotondo built by Pope Simplicius (468-483), four Ionic capitals have been used²³. The proportions and the decoration are similar to ours; a single egg decorates the echinus and the half-palmettes are a pair of lively scrolls emerging from a heart-shaped leave. Water leaves decorated the bolsters and it is probable that there was no balteus as in the case of our Istanbul capitals.

As Herrmann notes, the S.Stefano capitals do not seem to have been ordered specifically for this Roman church and they are a part of numerous unrelated sets of marble-works employed in the building. He adds moreover that part of the stonework employed in the Church was ready-made from marble yards²⁴. This being the case, ready material was used in the fifth century Church. On these grounds we can affirm that these capitals were produced sometime before the third quarter of the fifth century, which is the date of the construction of the Church.

As to their production, it is difficult to make assertions: the similar examples found in the quarries leads Asgari to think that they were produced 'for only a very short time' and 'not mass-produced but prepared for specific buildings'²⁵. The same scholar makes them part of the production of the Theodosian workshops in the quarries. Of course these few examples are not enough to delineate the production development of this type. It is possible that they were prepared for specific buildings. For example we know that the little columns of the gallery level in the Basilica of Saint John of Studios (dated 463) were topped by Ionic order capitals. The presence however of such a type in other parts of the city makes one think that the production was not so limited, their

21. The first one is in the garden of the Faculty of Medicine in çapa and the second is preserved in the Rectorate building in Beyazıt.

22. For the others found in the city, the attribution of their marble to Proconnesus is not entirely certain since they have not been analyzed. Nonetheless, whether because of the later presence of the cross, or of the transformation of classical features, they seem to be local products rather than imports.

23. The capitals are used in the outer ring; R. KRAUTHEIMER, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, vol. IV, Città del Vaticano 1970, p. 199-240 fig. 181; J. HERRMANN, *op.cit.*, p.94-95 fig. 176.

24. J. HERRMANN, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

25. N. ASGARI, *art.cit.* at footnote 16, p. 273.

being made to order for specific buildings. On the other hand, it is possible that the scattered findings are scraps or remains, used as in the case of S.Stefano Rotondo. I think that since examples continue to come out it is difficult to make any assertion about their production period and process.

In conclusion, the new Istanbul capitals are part of a particular production of the Proconnesian quarries workshops around the first half of the fifth century. However, this production of Ionic capitals remains a restricted phenomenon in comparison to the one from Thasos, the slackened production of those quarries at the beginning of the century was replaced by the larger-scale production of Proconnesus in all types of architectural sculpture.