

THE RED AND THE BLACK

Pauline Ducret – I study stones, simple stones; in my case, volcanic stones that are easily found in Italy. They are called “tuffs“, and mostly used in constructions because they are easily rough-hewn. I wrote my PhD on the various categories of people involved in construction facets: those that fund, those that think, build, and so on, and I tried to do this by combing through all available sources - literary, judicial, epigraphic and archeological. Doing so, I realized that an entire area had escaped our attention, involving construction materials per se, and their market. Perusal of texts in search of answers to questions such as “Is there a market? How does it operate? Who sells? Who mines? Who owns the quarries? etc .“ left you empty-handed.

These stones are interesting first because they’re right under our feet, you find loads of them all over, they’re easy to dig up because they’re light; they are termed semi-tender, fairly easy to carve, hence fit for both domestic and monumental architectural work. Their main flaw is their significant porosity; they are difficult to carve very precisely. So, although there are some examples of tuff sculptures such as a beautiful peperino head at the Ecole Française de Rome, these are rare. Such stones are mainly used in construction or to produce sarcophages. So when you’re in Rome or in Etruria, when you’re in Naples, you just can’t ignore the huge amount of these stones that had to be quarried, transported, carved, used, taken down, reworked and reused in many ways in innumerable, quite different monuments.

.Chronologically speaking, these are essentially forerunners of bricks. In fact, until Caesar’s time practically all of Rome was built in tuff; if you visit Ostia and its large warehouses, you’ll find them made partly of tuff, partly of bricks. The question is then to understand why, how, where they come from, who mined them, how they got there - did they travel a little or a lot? -, were the stones picked up next door or was the tuf brought in from far, and why. Among all the Ostian monuments, the castrum is impressive because it is very old. When you look at it rather carefully, a striking feature appears: it is made of a tuff that isn’t found at Ostia, a red tuff containing what are known as scoria. These are black, so one finds a pretty two-colored tuff. They are called red tuff with black scoria! It’s strange to find it at Ostia, since there are no such stones in the neighborhood.

Many are found in Etruria, notably here at Cerveteri, where we are surrounded by red tuff with black scoria. It’s the material out of which are carved and built the necropolises such as Banditaccia, where we stand, and in fact it was the building material for all the town’s palaces. As we go down inside the Tomb of Inscriptions, you’ll see tuff strata, a very beautiful, impressive succession of white, yellow, grey, black, red and black lines that reaches a height of over ten meters. We are presently carrying out a precise study of all the areas where the

red tuff containing black scoria is found, aiming to find out where the Ostia castrum tuff came from: how did it get there and why. For example, might some Etruscan tuffs have reached Ostia by sea? Cerveteri is at the seaside, so rather than sailing down the Tiber and crossing Rome, these tuffs could have taken a boat and landed at Ostia's harbor. And who knows, perhaps we can prove that there were ancient commercial networks that extended far beyond the Roman and Etruscan cultural domains?

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