

Bars with marble surfaces at Pompeii: evidence for sub-elite marble use*

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with a contribution by dott. Donato Attanasio

Abstract

The eye-catching marble-clad surfaces of Pompeii's streetside bars have been ignored by scholars, perhaps because of their plebeian character, or the lack of research on the marble trade, or Pompeii's history of undocumented restoration. The latter remains a problem but is perhaps overstated.

Archival research validates paving with marble fragments as an ancient practice but no records let us control every bar for overzealous restoration. Nevertheless, occasional notices¹ and early drawings suggest that restoration has been careful, as demonstrable at bars V 4, 7, and VI 10, 1.

The University of Akron Sleazy Bars project, directed by J. Clayton Fant, has studied 23 bars with 3,775 pieces of marble and will record the other ca. 25 surviving ones in June 2008. The total absence of republican stones plus evidence of reuse implicate debris from the A.D. 62 earthquake as the source. A "fanciness" index (based on marble type) shows a close correlation with density of foot traffic. This, combined with different treatment of surfaces *within* bars, further implies that marble from the post-earthquake cleanup was sold, not left for salvage. Finally, the range of imported stones, including ones from Egypt's Eastern Desert, underlines the pervasiveness of the Mediterranean marble trade already in the Julio-Claudian period.

This is a preliminary report on a project which began in 2004 with a field campaign of three weeks and continued in 2006 with another week at Pompeii. A third field campaign of the length of the first is planned for summer, 2009.

One of the most arresting visual features of the site of Pompeii today is the colorful marble which covers the surfaces of many streetside bars. The guides call them "thermopolium" and offer to make a pretend coffee for their customers. For the life of the city the bars were obviously important. More than 160 bars are known (the basic definition is a service counter open to the street). In a town of perhaps slightly over 10,000 people, even adding thousands who came into town only in daylight, this is still a high proportion of bars per resident and implies that thousands of people found food and drink at them as they circulated about the city².

From an interest in the Roman marble trade and in the more humble uses of marble, the bars potentially offer important evidence. Almost half the bars had converted all or some of their surfaces from painted stucco on masonry to marble pieces set into mortar³. Of these approximately 50 are well enough preserved to merit detailed study. In 2004, we examined 16, and another 7 in 2006.

* Thanks are due to the Soprintendenza archeologica di Pompei, superintendent dott. Pietro Giovanni Guzzo, and dott. Antonio d'Ambrosio, director at Pompeii. Funding for the project has come from the Department of Classical Studies, Anthropology and Archaeology of the University of Akron and from the Faculty Research Committee of the university. In 2004 undergraduates Kent Humrichouser and Carrie Szoka worked hard and resourcefully, and in 2006 my friend Jeffrey Winstel, then of the US Parks Service, provided interdisciplinary skills and good company. This work has been discussed at a number of forums where perceptive comments were forthcoming: the Universities of Illinois, Michigan, and British Columbia; the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, January 2008, the VIIIth conference of the Association for the Study of Marble and Other Stones in Antiquity VIII, Aix-en-Provence, June 2006, and All Souls College, University of Oxford. Special thanks are owed to Amanda Claridge, Roger Wilson, James Adams, and Peter Kruschwitz.

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¹ PAH, *Notizie degli Scavi* and Warsher's *Marmi di Pompei*.

² ELLIS 2004a and b, 2005.

³ The figure of one half emerges from Eschebach 1993.

The question of authenticity

Two questions immediately present themselves. The first is whether the use of broken pieces of marble, “crazy paving,” was actually an ancient practice or a result of early modern repair. Lack of parallels for covering surfaces with broken pieces is undeniable, and many colleagues have expressed concern that the bar surfaces are not ancient. But excavation photographs and early travelers’ drawings vindicate the practice. A drawing of Vincenzo Loria (1849-1939) of the bar at VI 2, 4, built into the House of Sallust (fig. 1), clearly shows the broken pieces in the façade facing the street. I have been unable to find a date for this drawing, but presumably he was an employee of the Niccolini brothers and son⁴. The four volumes of *Le case ed i monumenti di Pompei disegnati e descritti* (1854-1897) spanned the second half of the 19th century, but Loria’s *floruit* should put his drawing into the last quarter. Excavation photographs along the Via dell’Abbondanza at the Caupona of Asellina (IX 11, 2), showing partially cleared *lapilli* and amphorae still piled against the rear walls, gives a clear view of the bar’s countertop with broken marble pieces mortared into it (fig. 2).

Thus crazy paving is shown to be a genuine ancient practice. If it strikes the modern professional eye as “byzantine,” this may only be the unfamiliarity of looking at very humble attempts at decoration; most such efforts were in perishable materials or simply were not recorded.

The second question is a more difficult one. It involves the fidelity of restoration, since we know that most bars have been restored - those in the area of the forum and in Region VI have been exposed to the elements for more than 200 years. The only documentation of restoration concerns the 1980s when a number of bars in Region VI were repaired. The Archivio Fotografico holds a number of records, but only a handful include photographs of the condition before restoration. An example is VI 8, 8, where a photograph shows a bare façade and loose pieces on the countertop (fig. 3).

There are other ways to approach the question, however. An “old photograph” in *PPM* of the bar at V 4, 7 (fig. 4) on the Via di Nola, shows it in the same condition as today except that the rough coat of mortar in the center panel has fallen off and the underlying surface of mortar and potshard shims is visible⁵. The side panels with their diamond compositions match well with the earliest published description (which, unfortunately, was not accompanied by an illustration) (figg. 5-6)⁶.

The bar at VI 10, 1 in the Via di Mercurio north of the Forum is given a general description in the earliest notice of 1827⁷. Tatiana Warsher illustrates it in her *Marmi di Pompei*, extant in a single hand-made copy preserved in the Swedish Institute in Rome (fig. 4). Her work is dated 1946, but from the preface it seems clear that most of the field work dates from the 1930s. Her photograph matches exactly the appearance of the façade today, but we know

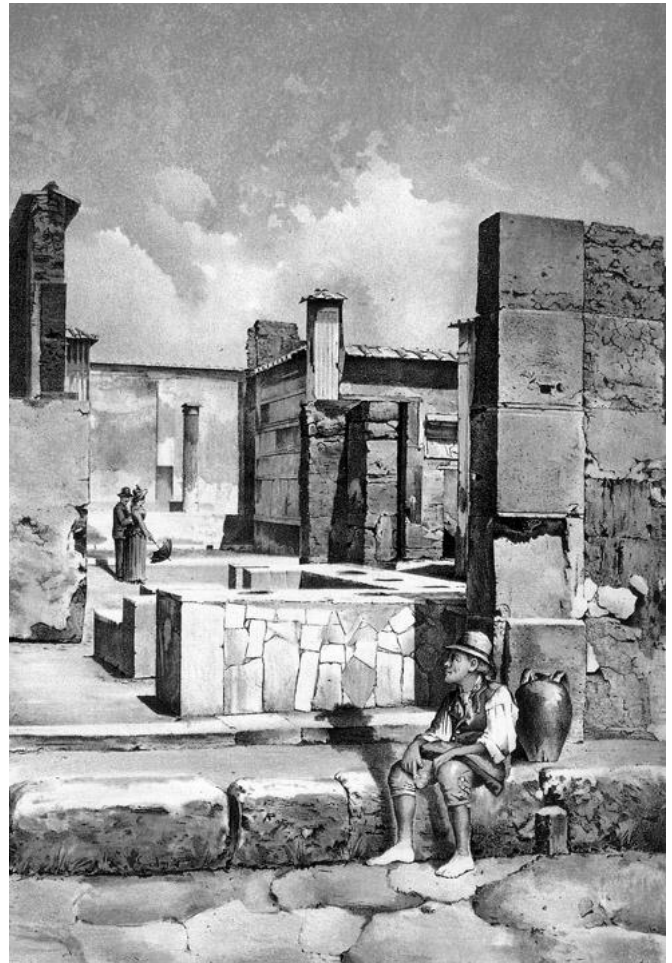


Fig. 1. Loria’s drawing of VI 2, 4 (CASSANELLI et al. 2002: 121).



Fig. 2. Excavation photograph during excavation of the Caupona of Asellina (IX 11, 2) (PPM).

⁴ CASSANELLI (et al. 2002) give no information of any kind about Loria; CLARKE 2003.

⁵ *PPM* vol. III (1991): 1056 ill. 1

⁶ *NS* 1902: 375.

⁷ *PAH* II, Nov-Dec.: 201-202.



Fig. 3. Bar VI 8, 8 before restoration in 1985 (SAP Archivio fotografico).



Fig. 4. Undated "vecchia fotografia" of bar V 4, 7 (PPM).

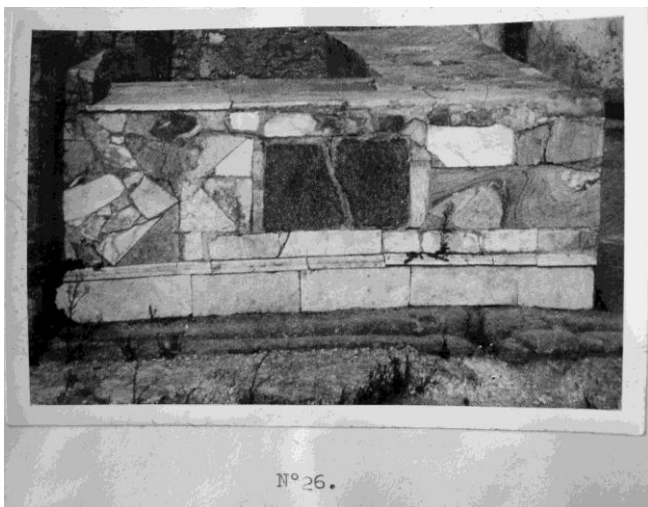


Fig. 5. Bar VI 10, 1 in T. Warsher's *Marmi di Pompei*, ca. 1930s.



Fig. 6. Bar VI 10, 1 in 2004 (photo author).

that the pieces were reset. Not only is the mortar joint between the two pieces of the central panel of granite (Sedia di S. Lorenzo) wider in the earlier picture, but the Archivio Fotografico records it as a restoration project, with a "before" photo that agrees closely with Warsher's. Documentation of this sort is rare, but it suggests that work of the 1980s at least was carried out carefully, using ancient pieces of marble and no others. One final source of confidence in the restorations is that in the nearly 4000 pieces catalogued to date, no clearly post-antique lithotypes have been found.

Methods

As mentioned, two campaigns have been carried out (fig. 6) in June of 2004 and June of 2006. The plan is to study the remaining ca. 25 bars with marble surfaces in the summer of 2009, with the result that instead of a sample of marble-clad bars (fig. 7), the database will contain all of them. Initial prospection was based on Eschbach's inventory (1993). Our method was to plan and measure all service counter surfaces, both vertical and horizontal. Each piece of stone was assigned an inventory number, measured, photographed and identified. Measurement of irregular pieces was done by a standardized protocol of measuring the greatest width and then taking a measurement at right angles to that. It was rarely possible to measure depth of pieces because of the mortar matrix. We ventured beyond agnosticism about the identity of white marbles only to the extent of labeling as "Lunense" pieces with the characteristic leaden-gray markings of Luna; certainly many other pieces of Lunense without pronounced markings lurk among those inventoried simply as "white" and so the count of pieces of this marble should be considered a minimum (see below). Secondly, we labelled white marbles which to the eye seemed to have much larger crystals and a warmer white color as "Island marble." This was not meant to mean literally from the Cyclades, but just to mark out a broad category.

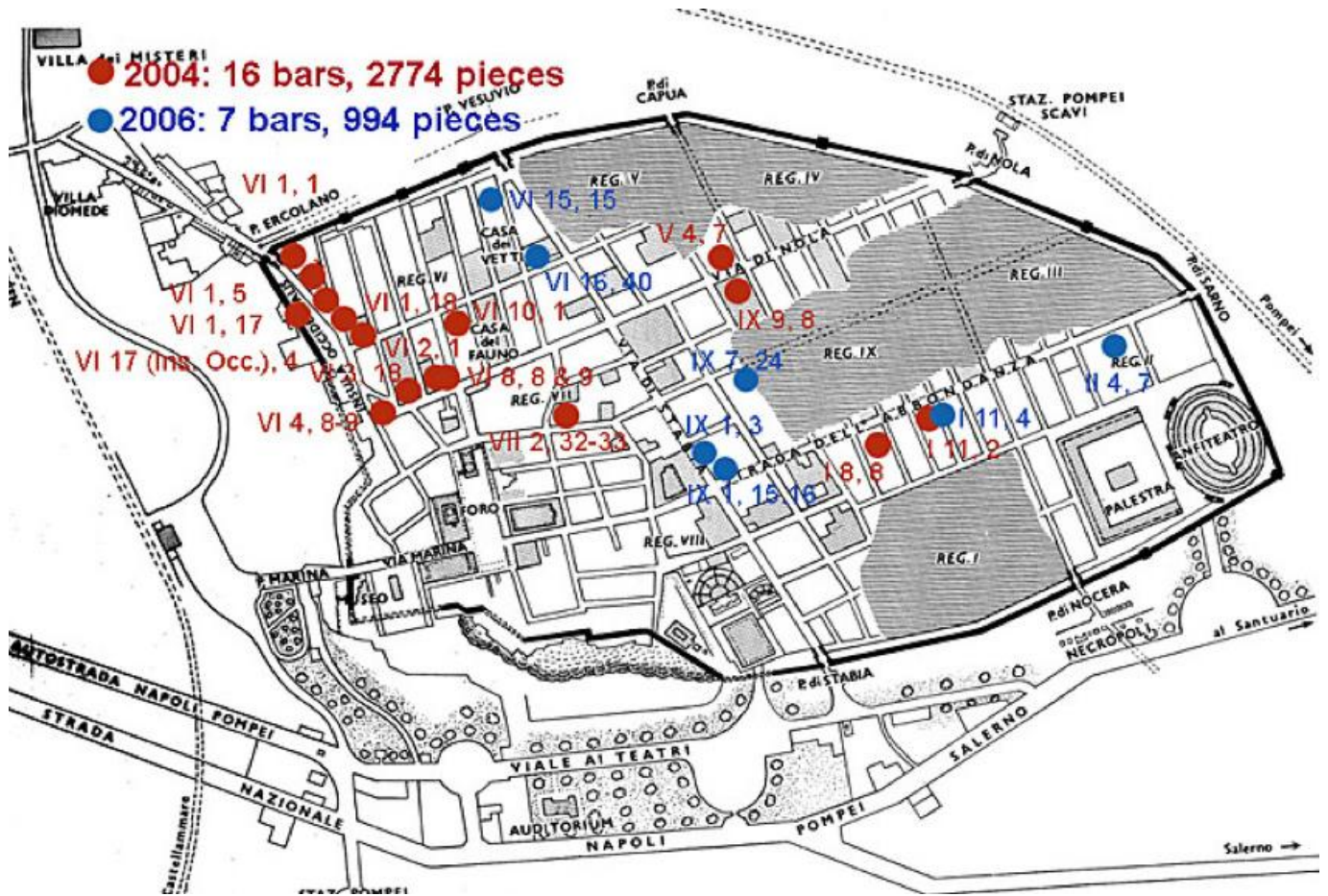


Fig. 7. Bars studied in 2004 (red) and 2006 (blue).

However, in one small controlled sampling by paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy, carried out by Dott. Donato Attanasio, 5 white marble pieces of bar VI 17 (Ins. Occ.), 4 were chosen because to the eye they appeared not to be of Lunense marble, with its typical very fine grain and frequent lead-colored streaks. The results (Appendix 1) show that three of the five samples were shown in fact to be from Luna, while the other two seem to be of Pentelic marble. On the one hand, this shows a substantial amount of Pentelic, although the sample is too small to extrapolate from, but on the other it suggests that the naked eye is not completely reliable for making even the basic distinction between Lunense and larger-grained and lighter-hued Greek marbles. Colored marbles are easily identified visually. Our field manual was Borghini (1989). The few pieces which remain unidentified were covered with lichen or otherwise heavily weathered.

Results

The first result is an average size of pieces: 22.2 cm x 11.6. 90% of all pieces have *no* preserved edges. Thus they represent a very thoroughly smashed and broken assemblage indeed. This would be consistent with our initial hypothesis about the source of the pieces, that is, rubbish from marble workshops, representing what the proprietors judged they could find no further use for and so discarded. Such seems to be the likely origin of the paving sometimes called *opus scutulatum*, seen at its best in the atrium of the House of General Championnet (fig. 7-8).



Fig. 8. Atrium paving, Casa del General Championnet, VIII 2, 1.

But several factors asserted themselves against this theory. First, many pieces are not small by any measure, and would have been useful for too many purposes to have been discards. Bars VI 8, 8 and VI 8, 9, virtual twins located across the street from the N side of the Forum Baths, are a good example with their large slabs of *cipollino* (fig. 9).

The second factor is the presence of a considerable amount of stone which had been fashioned into working objects, put into use, and then for some reason become available for reuse. Examples are bases for various objects like the one below, which was fixed with two iron supports (fig. 9), and fragments of inscriptions (fig. 10), none more than two letters.

Finally, some seven masks or fragmentary heads have been reported incorporated into bars, nearly all of which have subsequently been removed⁸. There are also a number of minor architectural elements such as fillets and mouldings (fig. 11), some quite long although in a number of pieces with broken ends (fig. 12). These factors point away from workshop debris as the principal source and toward debris from the demolition of destroyed buildings from the earthquake of AD 62. In particular, inscriptions were intended be enduring public fixtures and would only become debris if a catastrophe had made them useless and unrecognizable as fragments.

Composition of the sample

The marble pieces of the sample are 53% white, 19% gray, and 29% polychrome. Some inexactitude must be allowed for as the distinction between white and gray falls into a gray area, so to speak. The colored marbles break down thus:

Phrygian pavonazzetto	05.5%
Chian portasanta	09
Luculleum africano	19
Numidian giallo antico	22
Carystian cipollino	37
Scyros breccia di Settebassi	03
rosso antico from Tenaron	03
(total = 98.5%)	

A few more exotic can be counted (individual pieces, not percentages) without excessive numerical effort:

porfido verde, Laconia	9 pieces
ofites, granito della Sedia di S. Lorenzo	3
alabastro cotognino	9
alabastro fiorito	3
onyx	1
breccia di Aleppo	1
breccia corallina	1
breccia (variety?)	2



Fig. 9. Large *cipollino* slabs at bar VI 8, 9 (photo JCF).



Fig. 10. Base with supports, bar VII, 2, 32.



Fig. 11. Fragmentary inscription, bar VI 4, 8.

⁸ Information courtesy of Dr. Jessica Powers.

There is no purple porphyry, Mons Claudianus granite (*granito del foro*), or indeed any other granite present with the exception of the ofites.

It is notable that the familiar stones of the Republic are present in numbers as low as those of the most highly prized stones of the Julio-Claudian period:

Caserta limestone	1 piece
limestone (variety?)	6
Sarno limestone	1
palombino	1
slate	1
metamorphic clay	0

The only exception is *rosso antico*, which we counted among the first group since it carried its popularity into the imperial period. Thus the stones used in the *impluvium* of the Casa del Fauno (fig. 10), an exemplar of elegance of the Samnite period, have been almost entirely ignored in the selection made by Pompeians of the city's last years.

Generations of owners of the Casa del Fauno remained obdurate in maintaining unchanged the severe Samnite décor of this house, apart from a few Augustan updates. There is little trace of late Julio-Claudian tastes. But if we look more closely at the central area of this *impluvium*, where the base which may (or may not - the statue was not found here) have supported the statue of the homonymous faun, we see a startling change (fig. 13).

Here, one of the original slate diamonds with inset *palombino* diamond has been removed along with its surrounding diamonds of *palombino* and *argilla* (metamorphic clays and replaced by the polychrome marbles favored by the new imperial architecture of the capital: *giallo antico*, *portasanta*, *africano*, and *breccia di Settebassi*. Debris from the earthquake contained stone from the city's earlier centuries as well as its recent decades, and this suggests that those culling the debris for decorative stone exercised a definite selectivity. No one wanted the prestige stones from the Republic any more.

Debris for sale?

Although marble clad bar surfaces may strike the contemporary eye (and perhaps the elite Pompeian eye) as crude, they were a substantial upgrade to the painted stucco surfaces. But only half (75 of 162) bars adopted the new fashion for at least one surface. And all Inside surfaces seen only by the employees have only stucco surfaces, even in the fanciest bars (definition below). A great many bars with marble counters and street-facing facades, like IX 7, 24 (fig. 15), today display bars rubble walls within the confines of the shop space, and these presumably are what is left from the original, unimproved stucco surfaces, which later



Fig. 12. Mouldings in bar I 11, 2 (photo JCF).



Fig. 13. Impluvium of the Casa del Fauno (photo JCF).

centuries did not think worth the effort to preserve or restore.

Where stone fragments were used, there is a clear gradation in fanciness between surfaces facing the street and ones facing the inside of the shop (fig. 14). The highest priority was given to the counter upon which patrons rested their glasses; these were given a more elaborate treatment even than those which faced the street directly and might be supposed to act as a kind of advertisement to potential customers. This economizing deployment in turn implies that there were neither infinite quantities available nor was the supply free. Someone had, presumably, sorted through debris by variety and set it into piles, 10 sesterces a piece from this pile, 5 from that one, and so on. There is some precedent for building material being made available for sale in a *depinto* first published by Della Corte⁹ but misunderstood by him¹⁰. It is in tall letters following the conventions of inscriptional capitals rather than cursive, and it is considered to have been republican in date (fig. 16).



Fig. 14. Polychrome marbles inserted around statue base in the Casa del Fauno impluvium (photo JCF).



Fig. 15. Interior façade in bar IX 7, 24 (photo JCF).

Tegula cumular(ia) / opercula, colliquia / venalia, convenito indide(m)

Loosely translated (the syntax and semantics are controversial), "Roof tiles, cover tiles, drains for sale, come to the usual place to make a deal."

Moreover, we gained the impression as we worked that the fineness of the marbles used in a bar reflected the desirability of the bar's location in terms of the number of pedestrians and potential customers. In order to give some substance to this impression, we sought a means of measuring the prestige of the marbles used in a bar. The "fanciness index" weights the marbles used in bar surfaces according to their prestige and value. The index sprang from my own sense of this, and it has been refined based on the comments of a number of colleagues who specialize in marble studies. It is based on scarcity and the context in which

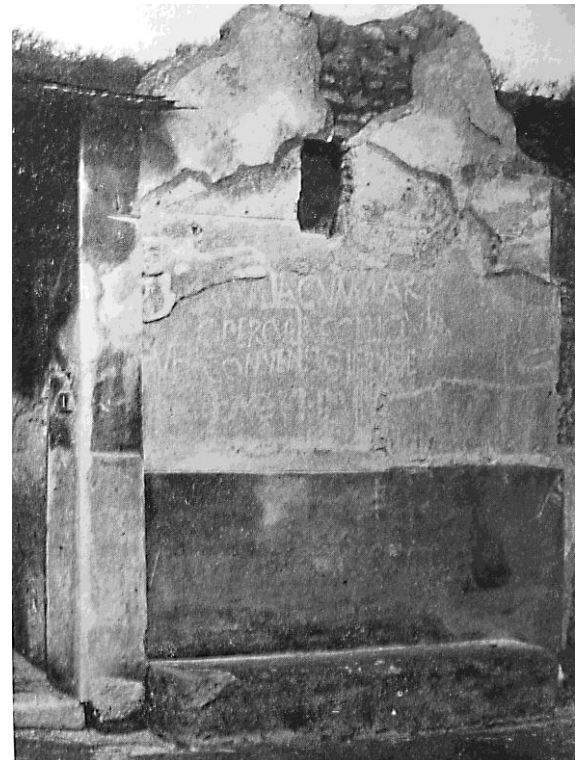


Fig. 16. Dipinto advertising used building material for sale (NS 1936: 332-333).

⁹ NS 1936: 332-3.

¹⁰ cf. FRANK 1938: 224-225.

each stone was used. For instance, while Carystian cipollino and Chian portasanta are common in imperial buildings, especially baths, they are excluded from the Pantheon. There is, however, no objective source that can be cited to establish its viability.

Granites, porphyries, other igneous stones	10
Phrygian, Numidian, Lucullan	9
Chian, Scyros, breccia di Aleppo	8
Carystian	7
Alabaster and rosso antico	6
"Island" white marbles (large crystals), greco scritto	5
Bardiglio (Luna) and other grays	4
Lunense white marble	3
Limestone, slate, other republican/Italian stones	2
Terracotta	1

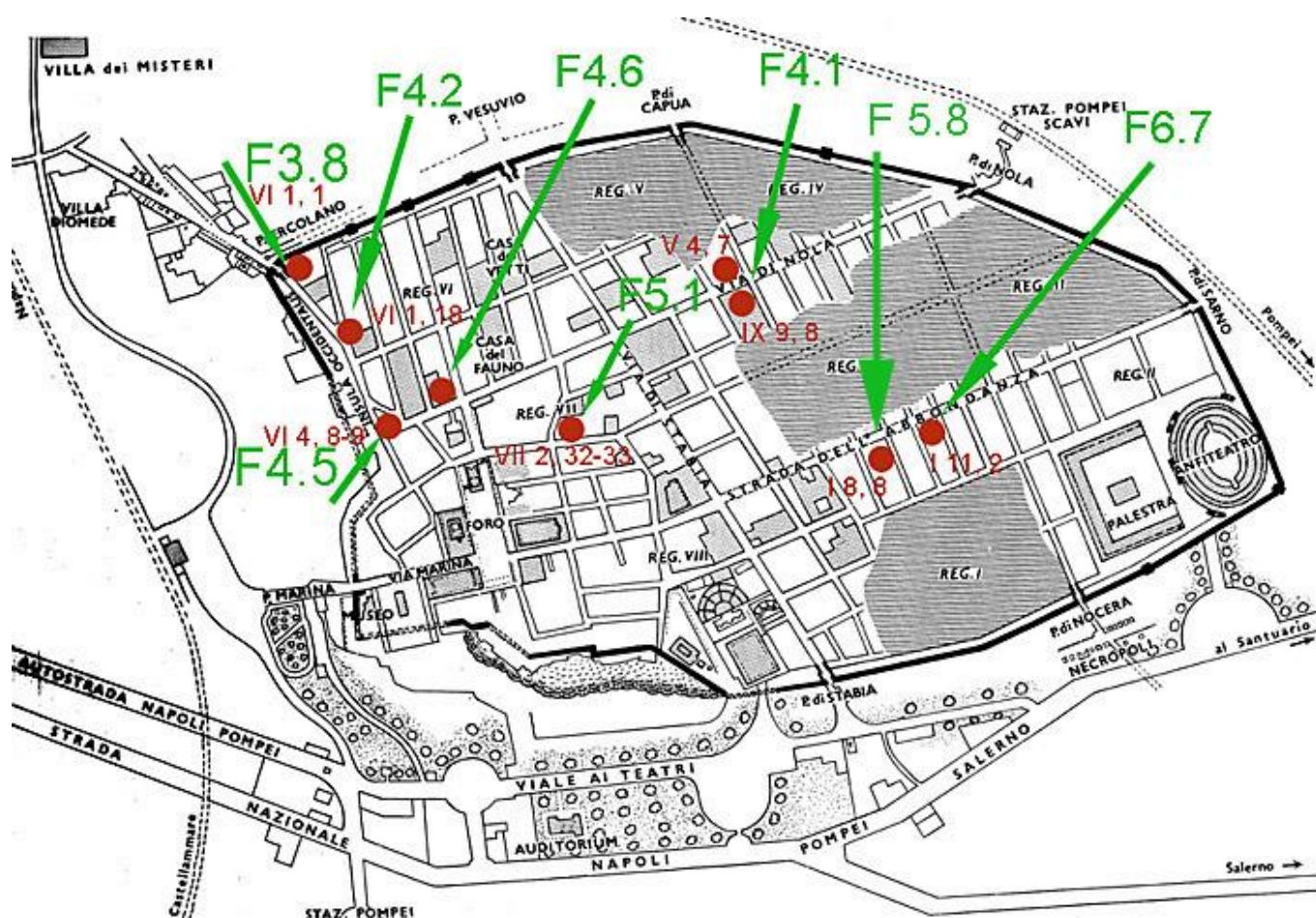


Fig. 17. Bars with their "fanciness" quotient (JCF).

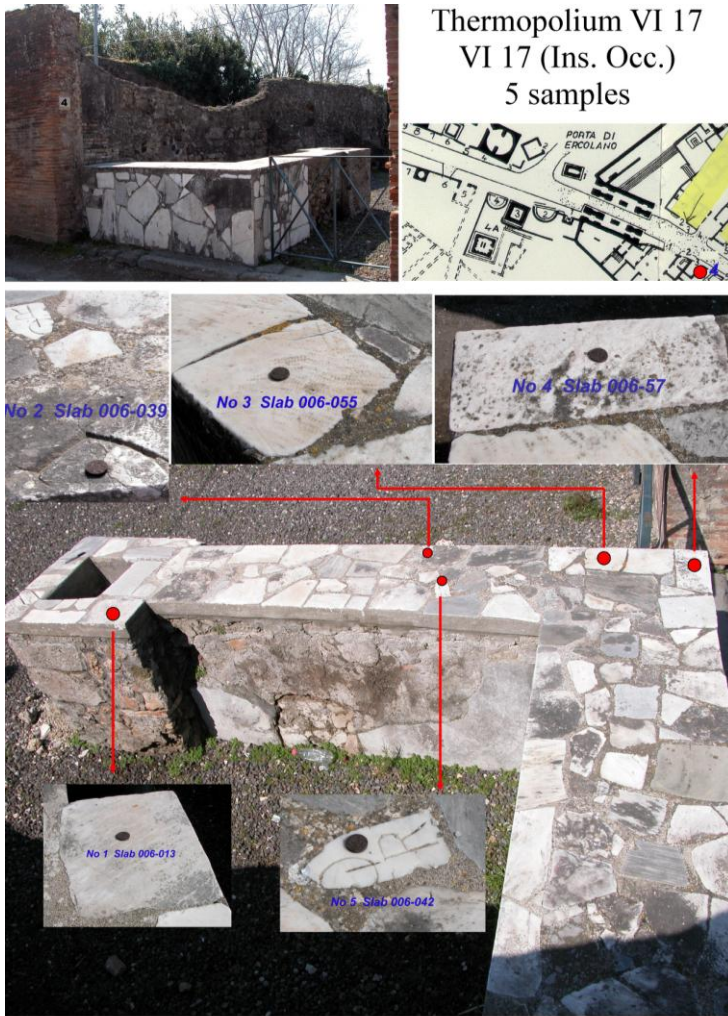
With a numerical value assigned to each piece documented, it was feasible to average the values for each bar, and even for each separate surface (fig. 17). The scale from 1 to 10 became rather compressed in the results from the fact that the majority of pieces are either white or gray, and so the range of the quotients for each bar is more like 3 to 7. Hence a quotient like 6.7 for bar I 11, 2, a large establishment in a very high traffic location on the Via dell'Abbondanza, is the highest value. Similarly, there is a large distinction in appearance between a quotient in the 3s and one in the upper 4s.

The final report for this project will also incorporate a "composition" index that will take account of shapes arranged in imitation of opus sectile patterns and pieces that had begun life as architectural elements.

APPENDIX I

Provenance analysis by paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy 5 marble samples collected at Pompeii (16 March 2005)

Donato Attanasio¹¹



Thermopolium VI 17
VI 17 (Ins. Occ.)
5 samples

Thermopolium VI 17 (Ins. Occ.), 4 5 samples			
No.	Label	Picture	Description
1	Bar 1.1		Slab 006-013
2	Bar 1.2		Slab 006-039
3	Bar 1.3		Slab 006-055
4	Bar 1.4		Slab 006-057
5	Bar 1.5		Slab 006-042

Sample	Site	Post	Typ
Bar 1	Pe	.815	.000
Bar 2	Ca	.982	.459
Bar 3	Ca	.898	.312
Bar 4	Ca	.952	.554
Bar 5	Pe	.955	.044

The Carrara provenance of samples 2, 3, and 4 is firmly established. The two Pentelicon samples Bar 1 and Bar 5 are atypical, but there are no real alternative for their provenance.

Appendix II Bars Documented in 2004 and 2006

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 2004 | 2006 |
| I 8, 8 | I 9, 4 |
| I 11, 1-2 | II 4, 7 |
| V 4, 7 | VI 15, 15 |
| VI 1, 2 | VI 16, 40 |
| VI 1, 5 | IX 1, 3 |
| VI 1, 17 | IX 1, 15-16 |
| VI 1, 18 | IX 7, 24 |
| VI 2, 1 | |
| VI 3, 18-20 | |
| VI 4, 8 | |
| VI 8, 8 | |
| VI 8, 9 | |

¹¹ Istituto di struttura della materia CNR, Monterotondo, Roma.

VI 10, 1
VI 17, 3-4
VII 2, 32-33
IX 9, 8

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