

DARIO DEL BUFALO

# PORPHYRY

## Red Imperial Porphyry. Power and Religion

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PER IL VI CENTENARIO  
DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DEI  
MARMORARI DI ROMA



DARIO DEL BUFALO

# PORPHYRY

RED IMPERIAL PORPHYRY  
POWER AND RELIGION

*PORFIDO ROSSO IMPERIALE  
POTERE E RELIGIONE*

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# Preface

I remember leafing through the pages of the fine catalogue by Delbrueck, *Antike Porphywerke*, when I was a young man and being struck at times by some omissions of works I was familiar with and that, in my opinion, were noteworthy; and likewise by some imprecisions that showed that the author had not always personally seen the objects described. On page 244, I still remember, he mentioned a *Kleine Schale* (a small bowl) with an umbo in the shape of a lotus (see entry L56). I then happened to see it on temporary deposit at Villa Giulia, under a kind of pergola (impounded by the State as it was about to leave the country), and was dumbfounded. It was not a small cup at all, but a big porphyry basin about two metres in diameter. But I realise that some inaccuracies are inevitable in a work of that kind and they certainly do not diminish its worth. Dario Del Bufalo's book corrects some of these oversights and, compared to the more than 150 pieces listed by Delbrueck, contains more than 850.

In the rich introduction, Dario Del Bufalo dwells on the symbolic value of purple, which as a royal colour dates back to the Lagids, then follows its various fortunes through to the last Porphyrogeniti. A surprising theory (and, quite honestly, presented only as a theory) concerns the famous graves of the Ptolemies. Could these not be the big imperial porphyry sarcophaguses altered for a new use and now on display in Istanbul? Special attention is focused on the *damnati ad metalla* in the Eastern Egyptian desert and on the subsequent homes of the monks. A whole chapter is then devoted to the Four Crowned Martyrs, whose martyrdom Dario Del Bufalo rightly locates not in Pannonia but in the Thebaid.

Readers will find many other items in this book, which sparked off many memories for me. I have visited the Thebaid quarries three or four times (the last, precisely, with Dario Del Bufalo) and I still have extraordinary images of this desert region firmly in my memory, along with the vibrant, almost draining and all-pervasive perfume of a certain variety of yellow daisy that grows as if by miracle amongst the stones. I collected some of these and planted them at Castel Giuliano. In the rich soil of the garden the perfume faded very quickly and nothing remained but a few insignificant small round flowers.

RANIERO GNOLI

President of the National Committee for the Celebrations  
of the 6th Centenary of the Università dei Marmorati, Rome

# Foreword

**A**s promised in the presentation to the reprint of *Antike Porphywerke* (2007), promoted and produced by the National Committee for the Celebrations of the 6th Centenary of the Università dei Marmorari, Rome, and exactly eighty years after the work by Richard Delbrueck (1932), here now is the monograph on Imperial Red Porphyry published by Umberto Allemandi, with a register of works of art and artefacts updated, as far as possible and up to the last moment, to 2012.

The book is presented in English and it seems almost a paradox that the monographic studies on this magnificent marble have been printed only in languages other than Italian, which has always been the language of art. And although Imperial Porphyry is of Egyptian origin, it has always represented aspects of Italian culture, politics, religion and art.

In 1932 Delbrueck wrote *Antike Porphywerke* in German; in 2003 Malgouyres edited the *Porphyre* exhibition catalogue in French, and we now publish *Porphyry* in English. However, we and the publisher very much wanted all the texts to be printed in Italian too, as an appendix.

About 700 “new” artefacts are presented here as compared to the more than 150 listed in Delbrueck’s catalogue and, as far as possible, a date and provenance have been given, obviously together with the location of the works presented.

For some categories, such as Heads and Vases, we show at the end of their respective entries some examples of modern imitations and forgeries that have appeared over the last two centuries, and, applying the best of our knowledge, we have added critical notes and historical analyses.

From pagan Rome to Christian Rome, from Byzantium to Venice, from the Hohenstaufen tombs in Palermo to the altars of Roman churches, the colour Purple and Red Porphyry have been identified with the power and dignity of the Roman empire, and are still the symbol of the Church’s spiritual power and sanctity.

I would like to offer special thanks to Rauf Claude Abdalla of Cairo, for the fraternal help he gave me; thanks to Sheikh Abdel Zaher of the Kushmaan tribe who was my guide for more than twenty years with his son Salama, in the Eastern Desert of Egypt; and finally thanks to my friend and President of the National Committee, Professor Raniero Gnoli, who with great generosity has always supported and encouraged these studies and initiatives.

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Honorary President of the Università dei Marmorari, Rome

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