

Marble from the Lahn



A historical project on the quarrying of stone

Quarrying is also part of mining. Stones, chalk, sand and gravel may at first glance seem less valuable, and quarries less interesting. However, these materials were and still are an essential component of our civilization. There would be no flour without millstones, no pottery without clay, no castles without stones, and no modern roads without road metal. This is why the department of mining history also deals with this important industry. Following on from the work of Christoph Bartels (slate villages) and Meinrad Pohl (millstones, tuff and trass from the volcanic eastern Eifel region), the plan is to investigate a further example from the industry within the framework of a dissertation project. This time the focus is on a type of stone which was used for building and decoration, the so-called “Nassau marble” or “Lahn marble”.

From a geologist’s point of view this is a cuttable, polishable limestone, formed about 380 million years ago from a tropical reef. The deposits are part of the Rhenish Massif (Rheinisches Schiefergebirge) and extend over a strip approx. 60 km long on both sides of the Lahn. “Lahn marble” was quarried and processed from the 16th century (if not earlier) until the 1970s.

Evidence of a highly developed “Lahn marble” industry can be found in a multitude of churches and palaces, public and private buildings, town squares and facades. The spectrum ranges from the mighty tombstones in the Mainz cathedral to the splendid Baroque staircase of the Würzburg Residenz and the sumptuous decoration of some of Wiesbaden’s villas and hotels. There is evidence that “Lahn marble” was exported from the end of the 19th century, and used for 20th-century building projects such as the Empire State Building in New York. But even on the Lahn itself traces have been preserved. Many abandoned quarries are still to be found, and show how extensively the area was quarried.

This topic presents a few unusual features: for example, there was a state-run “marble factory” in the prison at Diez. This institution came to have a leading role in the industry, and attained a strong position in the 19th century. Sources contain various complaints about the allegedly unbeatable competition for ‘poor’ master craftsmen and hard-working private entrepreneurs. This matter requires closer examination.

The aim of the project is to explore the development of the industry from the master craftsmen of the Baroque to the large factories of the late 19th century. Here the focus is on questions of economic and social history. Aspects related to technological, environmental and art history will not be overlooked, however.



Marbre de Lahn, Allemagne, Hesse



Statue of king Conrad made from famous Lahn marble near Villmar Runkel Hesse Germany

The Lahnarmor marble is about 380 million years old and formed when large parts of Germany were submerged beneath an equatorial sea. Prominent in the samples are stromatoporoids, an extinct group of marine animals intermediate between sponges and corals. Corals, brachiopods and gastropods are also found in the reef assemblage. At various times the region was subjected to volcanic activity and the fallout from this contributed greatly to the reef-building process (and to the red colour seen in some of the samples).

Lahnarmor marble has been used as a decorative building stone for centuries. Examples include the famous epitaphs of Mainz Cathedral such as St Matthias in Trier (the only apostle grave north of the Alps). The rock was also used in the baroque marble of Weilburg castle, at the altars of the Mannheim Jesuit church in the monastery church Amorbach, in Berlin and Würzburg Cathedral, the Hermitage in St Petersburg and the Kremlin, in the lobby of the Empire State Building in New York, the Kurhaus in Wiesbaden and in the palace of the maharajas of Tagore in India.



Colourful Lahn Marble



Examples of Lahnarmor marble.

The red colouration is derived from volcanic material that fell into the reef.





Lahn Marble in the Lobby of Empire State Building