



"Piedra Franca": the same name for many different natural stones.

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The Spanish name “Piedra Franca” refers to all the stones of sedimentary origin that have uniform coloration and ease of cutting/carving in order to obtain dimensional blocks for construction. The first references to this denomination occurred during medieval times, when builders had to choose the best materials to construct magnificent cathedrals. The largest volume of such natural stones were extracted from Caen, northern France, and historic records use the English term, “freestone”, ie stone easy to cut, and to work by the masons dedicated to build cathedrals (“freemasons”) in contrast to the “roughstone”, hard stones worked by the hard hewers or “rough masons”. The original French name referred to the limestones extracted at Caen, but over time, the original meaning expanded to include other natural stones with similar coloration and ease to carve. Notably this included many sandstones that were used in adjacent countries such as Spain. In the latter, although the most popular for its importance in architectural heritage is the Villamayor sandstone from Salamanca, other historically important natural stones are also known as “Piedra Franca” including the calcarenite from Santa Pudía (Granada), the limestone from Alava, the sandstone from Jaen and the sandstone from Cádiz. All of them were used in the construction of Spanish architectonic heritage and share similar exterior characteristics. In fact, several are known as golden stones. However when conservation and restoration of architectonic heritage is involved, the correct and original material should be used. The existence of national networks (e.g. CONSTRUROCK) and international task groups (e.g. IUGS Heritage Stone Task Group) can help to properly characterize, document, and differentiate between the varieties of “Piedra Franca” and they should be consulted by builders, architects and any other stone professionals involved in such activities. An error in choosing the natural stone can result in significant damage to the architectonic heritage. The same issue that occurs with “Piedra Franca” also extends to other natural stones in Spain and around the world. This explains the importance of these networks and task groups.

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