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Alabaster, a millenary stone of European cultural heritage

Wolfram Kloppmann¹, Lise Leroux², Philippe Bromblet³, Sophie Jugie⁴, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam⁴, and Aleksandra Lipinksa⁵

¹BRGM, French Geological Survey, Orléans, France

²LRMH, CRC-USR3224, MNHN-CNRS-MCC, Champs-sur-Marne, France

³CICRP Belle-de-Mai, Marseille, France

⁴Musée du Louvre, Département des Sculptures. Paris, France

⁵Institut für Kunstgeschichte Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München, Germany

Because of its ease of working in minute detail and its whiteness, gypsum alabaster was one of the preferred materials for European sculpture rivalling marble in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Its natural deposits are spread all over Europe, from the English Midlands to the Ukraine, from the Ebro basin to Tuscany, from the Alps and the Jurassic to central Germany (Fig. 1). The close connection between natural alabaster deposits and artistic centres, which has emerged in recent work, is related to the ecological perspective currently much discussed in art history, which emphasises the convergence of nature and culture. This new approach is based on a combination of art historical, historical and natural scientific methods and has been employed in several research projects over the last decade, involving geologists, geochemists, art historians, and conservators in a network of heritage research institutions, geological surveys, and museums. Progressively, the links established by this transdisciplinary work between historical alabaster deposits and artworks outline the evolution of the networks of European “alabaster routes”, of transfer of unworked stone, art, artists and technical and artistic knowledge which confers to this heritage stone a unique role in European integration.

Here we present the current state of the art on prominent historical alabaster quarries, notably in France and Germany, and research perspectives in the framework of the upcoming Franco-German Materi-A-Net project co-funded by ANR and DFG.

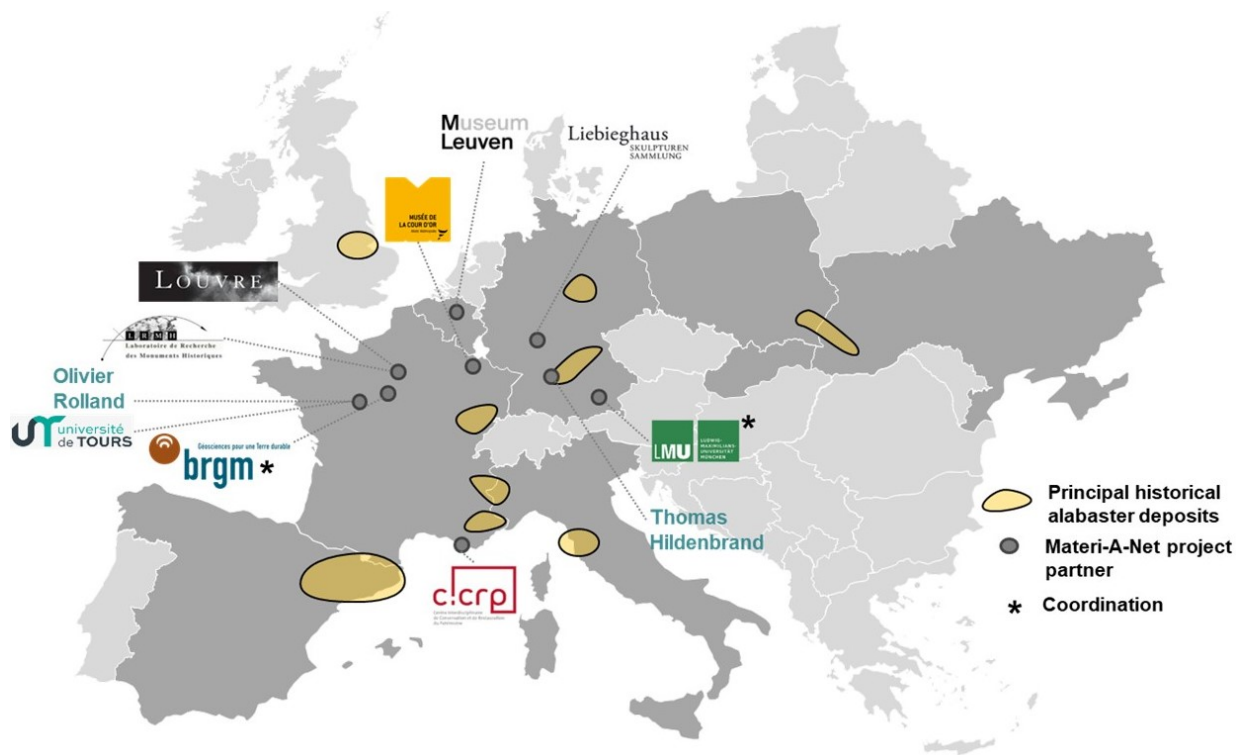


Fig. 1 Principal alabaster deposits used for sculpture in Late Medieval and Early Modern times. Transdisciplinary network of the Mater-A-Net project.