

## FROM RUSSIA WITH ROCKS: THE TOMBSTONE OF NAPOLEON

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Our readers – collectors or dealers of minerals excellently know and understand how it is difficult to create a masterpiece. It always is a result of complicated “nodus” of genius and sensibility, of intentions and unexpected circumstances. The route from a birth of idea to create a tombstone of Napoleon to its incarnation was long and difficult. Here, we will consider ornamental stones only. A full content of our material with many first-hand documents and description of sometimes dramatic events is disposed on the website of the “Mineralogical Almanac” [www.minbook.com](http://www.minbook.com)

The tombstone of Napoleon in the Dôme des Invalides is one of the most visited monuments in Paris, but the continuous flow of messages on Internet shows that his history is very poorly known. Based on unpublished documents preserved in the French National Archives (Archives Nationales...) and on Russian literature sources (Bulakh, 2015<sub>1</sub>; Bulakh, 2015<sub>2</sub>, Ziskind, 1989) present paper describes an unique example of exemplary relations between France and Russia during a twenty-year long period (1840–1861) which saw in France three Kings, one Republic and one Emperor, and in Russia – two Empires. Most famous stones from France, Italy, and Russia were used for the decoration of the Dôme des Invalides and the making of the tomb (Fig. 1, 2).

Through twenty years after the death of Napoleon in St. Helens, King Louis-Philippe, “*Roi des Français*”, and his prime minister Adolphe Thiers, initiated a big campaign to repatriate the remains of the former emperor in his home country. Firstly, the remains of Napoleon, together with those of two “*Grand Maréchal du Palais*”, the generals Duroc and Bertrand, were rather discreetly placed in a side chapel of the Dôme, waiting for a final tomb which will only be completed twenty years later, in 1861.

### The Project of Louis Visconti

Despite severe critics by the opposition, substantial credits of 2.000.000 francs were allowed by the Chamber (a worker at this time did earn 3 to 3.50 francs per day!). A government commission of 12 persons, including well-known painters, sculptors and journalists had to define the main lines of the monument to be erected and organize an open contest to select its architect.

In April 1840 projects by 81 architects were publicly exhibited in the Palais des Beaux-Arts. The Commission had also recommended that all materials be taken on the French territory, a demand enforced by a law voted by the Chamber. Finally and out of concourse the Minister designated two persons, both of Italian origin: the architect Louis Visconti for the monument, and the sculptor Carlo Marochetti for an equestrian statue of Napoleon, in imperial dress, to be placed before the entry of the Dome (that was not made).

### Louis Visconti at Work

Almost untouched since the time of Louis XIV, the interior of the Dome was in a very poor state. The only real pieces of interest were magnificent marble mosaics on the floor (Fig. 3). They were also badly damaged and needed extensive restoration. By mid-1843, Visconti composed a project – that was simple, innovative and technically risky. The core of the project is a monumental sarcophagus, which occupies the center of the crypt and can be seen from two galleries, above and below. The

1. The Invalides Dome in Paris around 1850, with workers manipulating large blocs of rocks, presumably Shoksha quartzite (A. Lenoir, 1853).







2. The sarcophagus of Napoleon seen from the floor of the Dome.  
The red rock of the sarcophagus is Shoksha quartzite, its base of green Ternuay andesite, and the bright colors of the mosaics on the floor are white marble (Carrara) incrustated (or covered) with bright colors enamels.  
Photo: Jacques Touret.



3. Mosaic ordered by Louvois (17<sup>th</sup> century) on the floor of the Dome. Photo: Jacques Touret.



4. Twisted columns (Colonne torse, length: 8 m) in "Grand Antique", base of the columns and altar in "Brèche Napoléon".  
Photo: Jacques Touret.