

Using Spolia, (Re)building Cities

Metropolitan Perspectives on Forms and Meanings of the Antique
from the Hellenistic Period to the Middle Ages

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Use and Misuse of “Reuse”. An Introduction

Paolo Liverani

Abstract. This paper briefly traces the history of the concept of *spolium* and reuse in archaeological and art historical studies since its appearance in the sixteenth century. In the twentieth century, the term, which had previously been used in a rather negative sense, underwent a reappraisal following the flourishing of Late Antique studies. H. P. L’Orange (1939) and F. Deichmann (1940) provided the parameters of interpretation of the phenomenon that were accepted in the following decades. More recently, a critical revision of these ideas has been proposed, extending the concept beyond Late Antique architectural reuse and considering its development up to modern times. Using the tools of linguistics and semiotics, it is necessary to formulate a more rigorous theoretical framework of the phenomenon, taking into account the different historical and cultural situations from ancient to modern times, in order to avoid the pitfalls of an overly ideological and subjective interpretation.

The Latin word *spolium* means the stripped-off skin or hide of an animal, or – metaphorically – the weapons or armour taken from a defeated enemy. Thus, in general, it refers to the spoils of war. In early sixteenth-century Italy, the term changed in meaning, becoming a technical term in the art-historical lexicon: Raphael and Baldassar Castiglione in their *Letter to Pope Leo X*¹ or Vasari in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*² used the equivalent Italian word *spoglie* to designate the elements of ancient architecture or sculpture removed from their original location and reused in new contexts or buildings. The most famous example was (and is), of course, the spolia collection of the Arch of Constantine.

From the Renaissance until the last century the term spolia had negative connotations; we can still cite in this context Bernard Berenson’s famous essay published in 1954 on the Arch of Constantine.³ Spolia became an index of the decline in the creative and technical capacity of artists in the Roman empire. At the same time, the word aroused a feeling of regret for the loss of the

¹ Di Teodoro 2003, IX; Settis – Ammannati 2022.

² Vasari 1550 (ed. 1986), 131; Kinney 1997, 119-122.

³ Berenson 1954.

monument from which the spolia had been removed. More generally speaking, most late-antique artistic productions were held in low esteem owing to the classical bias of scholars. In the early twentieth century, Walter Amelung's catalogue of the ancient sculpture of the Chiaramonti museum in the Vatican⁴ followed a typical pattern with a few words of evaluation in the last lines of each entry. In the case of some fragmentarily preserved late Roman sarcophagi, Amelung invariably concluded his analysis with the formula: *spät und schlecht* ("late and bad"), two words that were almost synonymous for the great archaeologist.

In 1901, only two years before the publication of the Chiaramonti catalogue, Alois Riegl published his seminal work, *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie*,⁵ a re-evaluation of late-antique art. The turning point for spolia, however, came in 1939 when Hans Peter L'Orange and Armin von Gerkan published their monumental edition of the Arch of Constantine.⁶ The arch reused older reliefs, replaced the portraits of Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius with those of Constantine and, finally, depicted the emperor on the *Rostra* of the Roman Forum (Fig. 1) between the statues of the last two emperors.



Fig. 1 Arch of Constantine: frieze portraying the emperor on the Rostra of the Roman Forum.

According to L'Orange, in this way Constantine wanted to identify himself with the good old emperors of the second century and presented himself

⁴ Amelung 1903.

⁵ Riegl 1901.

⁶ L'Orange – von Gerkan 1939.

as the one who had restored the empire to its former glory.⁷ A year later, Friederich Deichmann interpreted the reuse of columns and other architectural elements in early Christian basilicas as a symptom of a new aesthetic that favoured diversity and *variatio* over the uniformity of the classical architectural orders.⁸

This new line of interpretation needed a while to take root, but then – at least for a couple of generations – it was the new standard theory of *spolia*, reversing the previously negative judgement on them such that they now became something positive. To be honest, this new theory, although very attractive, had weak foundations. I will only mention a couple of critical points: our ancient written sources mostly ignored the practice of reuse or even expressed disapproval of it, at least until the early sixth century. Only in the time of Theodoric do we find the first signs of a positive evaluation of this practice.⁹ Moreover, how could the ancient viewer recognize the original fragments and attribute them to earlier periods? And, in the event that this had really happened, why would he evaluate positively the replacement of the portrait of an ancient and glorious emperor with that of a more recent one? Would he be more inclined to regard it as an embarrassing and, perhaps, inexplicable *damnatio memoriae*?

Dale Kinney and I¹⁰ have raised these crucial questions and have also made several other points against L’Orange’s theory. It seemed difficult for the ancient viewer – lacking sophisticated archaeological and historical knowledge – to recognize the reuse of the *spolia*. Nor did we think that the average observer could generally date and attribute *spolia* to a certain historical period and then link them to the ideological and political programme of the later emperor who erected the new building. There were also theoretical difficulties. For instance, in semiotic terms, how is it possible to maintain a

⁷ L’Orange – von Gerkan 1939, 190-191.

⁸ Deichmann 1940, 114-130; Deichmann 1975.

⁹ Liverani 2004.

¹⁰ Kinney 1995, 56-58; Kinney 1997; Liverani 2004; Liverani 2011; Liverani 2021.

double reading of the portraits on the Arch of Constantine? The viewer had to consider the emperor portrayed on the arch either as Trajan or as Constantine and tended to disambiguate the message by choosing the easier and more obvious interpretation, which is to say the latter.

Last but not least, since L'Orange this theory has often been applied in a rather mechanical way, so that a reused capital on top of a church column has increasingly become the sign of the Church's triumph over paganism, regardless of the date, geographical location, or possible alternative explanations of the monument. This is an extremely serious shortcoming of the theory, resulting from a lack of historical perspective. Moreover, when we consider the meaning of the spolia, we enter into a judgment about intentions. In other words, its meaning depends on the viewer and not on the spolia themselves, and therefore is subject to context, historical condition, and cultural background. Finally, there is always the risk of projecting the ideas of the contemporary scholar onto the ancient viewer.

The first sign of reaction against this line of thought came in 1969, when Arnold Esch proposed a much more articulate and sensible interpretative scheme in his seminal work.¹¹ He considered five types of reuses or, rather, five different reasons to justify reuse: firstly, economic and practical reasons, then profanation and exorcism, *interpretatio Christiana*, political legitimization, and finally aesthetic appreciation. As an historian, Esch was more interested in the final new context of the *spolium* than in the lost original one and was therefore more attentive to the diverse and nuanced reasons for reuse than to a standard ideological explanation. In recent years, scholars have been more cautious in considering the many facets of the phenomenon and its historical evolution, and the treatment of this topic is no longer limited to the late antique and medieval world but has intrigued historians, art

¹¹ Esch 1969.

historians, and architects interested in studying this practice down to contemporary times.¹²

The concept of *spolia* itself has been greatly extended. More and more often we speak now of "reuse": a term encompassing not only material *spolia in se*, according to Richard Brilliant's felicitous definition,¹³ that is, *spolia proper*, but also *spolia in re*, that is, metaphorical *spolia*, for instance the reuse of an image or an iconographic type.

Among the *spolia in se*, we can cite a number of examples of different types.¹⁴ We have cases in which a statue is reused by changing its meaning. For example, in Caesarea Philippi there was a bronze group probably showing the emperor Hadrian as he received homage from the personification of the province of Judaea. In the early fourth century it was reinterpreted and reused as Jesus healing a bleeding woman.¹⁵ In the early Middle Ages at Constantinople a sculptural group in the Hippodrome probably representing Heracles with one of the Hesperides was reinterpreted as Adam and Eve.¹⁶ Following Jan Vansina, the anthropologists call this phenomenon *iconatrophy*.¹⁷ it is the process by which an oral tradition originates from a post-event explanation of a work that has lost its original meaning over time. Sometimes reuse arises from more practical needs, as happened, for example, with the bronze statue of a bear that is referred to as a she-wolf in Aachen. It was considered the local equivalent of the bronze she-wolf in Rome.¹⁸ In Orvieto, Arnolfo di Cambio transformed a pagan Roman goddess with a little retouching

¹² Cf. the essays collected in Brilliant – Kinney 2011, or Meier 2020.

¹³ Brilliant 1982.

¹⁴ Liverani 2014.

¹⁵ Eus. HE VII, 18, 2-3; Soz. HE V, 21; Philost. HE VII, 3. Wilson 2006; Stewart 2007, 32-33.

¹⁶ *Parastaseis* 5 (ed. Preger I, 21) = *Patria* 2, 87 (ed. Preger II, 196); Dagron 1984, 135; Basset 2004, 218.

¹⁷ Vansina 1985.

¹⁸ Falkenstein 1966, 51-53; Beutler 1982, 76-91.

to represent the Virgin Mary in the De Braye funerary monument.¹⁹ Many other examples can be cited.



Fig. 2 Tarquinia (VT), church of S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano: Roman sarcophagus as the architrave of a door.

In its new life, the *spolium* could change not only its meaning but also its function. In linguistic terms the change can affect both the signified and the signifier. A sarcophagus could be reused as the architrave of a door²⁰ (Fig. 2), another with a scene showing the clemency of a Roman general (Fig. 3) became the basin of a fountain illustrating the *Justice of Trajan*, that is, the legend

¹⁹ Coccia – Mozzoni 2009; Sensi 2016.

²⁰ Cf. the church of S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano at Tarquinia (VT): De Minicis 2008, 66-67, fig. 9, or that of S. Biagio at Nepi (VT).

of the meeting between the emperor and a widow.²¹ This was a widely depicted story in the Renaissance.

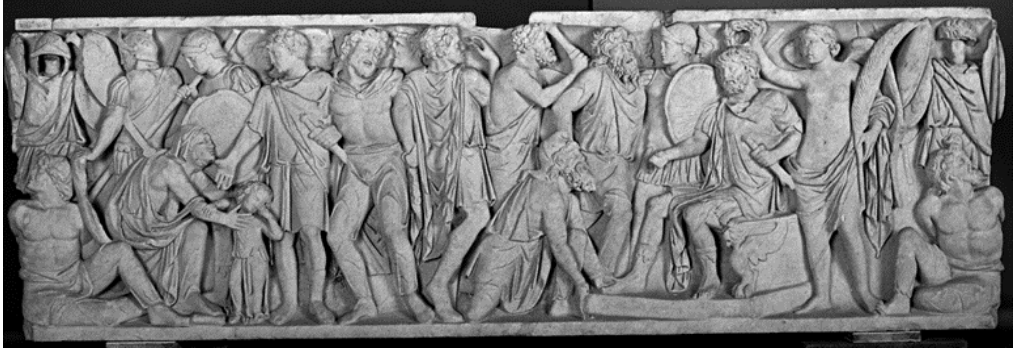


Fig. 3 Vatican Museum. Sarcophagus with a scene showing the clemency of a Roman general.

Of course, this evolution is even easier for the *spolium in re*, for an iconographic type: the classical image of the sleeping Endymion became the prophet Jonas on Early Christian sarcophagi,²² the sun god Helios became Christ in the mosaic of the vault of the tomb of the Julii, or tomb M, in the Vatican Necropolis,²³ and so on.

Some scholars have theorized an even more abstract concept of *spolium*, proposing an equivalence between the literary *cento* of Late Antiquity and the *spolia*.²⁴ The *cento* is a poetic composition made up of a collection of passages from various works, typically from Vergil for the Latin West and Homer for the Greek East. In my opinion, however, this extension of the concept of *spolium* risks straying too far from the term's original meaning. To understand the problems that this equivalence immediately raises, we must clarify two points.²⁵ Firstly, it should not be forgotten that Latin and Greek

²¹ Liverani 1998, 229; Liverani 2014, 173-175.

²² Bisconti 2000, 191-193 (D. Mazzoleni).

²³ Liverani, in Liverani – Spinola 2010, 114-119.

²⁴ Elsner 2000, 175-177; Fabricius Hansen 2003, 168-172.

²⁵ Cf. Liverani 2001, 386-388; Liverani 2011, 41-44. Lastly Settis 2022, 82.

have neither a term corresponding to the modern archaeological definition of *spolia* nor a word to translate our concept of 'quotation'.²⁶ Secondly, it is important to note that whoever employs *spolia* in a new context must tear them out of the previous one, damaging or even destroying it. A quotation, on the other hand, reuses an expression considered authoritative and significant, but in doing so not only does not damage the original text, but even turns it into a model, a classic, enriching it with new shades of meaning and implications. At least in theory, we can always verify a quotation by comparing it with its source text, whereas the monument from which the *spolia* are taken no longer exists by definition.

Added to this material impossibility is a second one concerning *spolia in re*, that is, the reuse of an image. In this case, there is no material destruction of the original, but is it possible to speak in the proper sense of a figural quotation? We must first define what we mean by quotation. The main criteria identified so far are two: literalness and delimitation.²⁷ The first can be applied only to a written text (and written in alphabetical notation). The second is difficult – though not impossible – to fulfil in the case of an image. We can consider special cases when an image is delimited or 'closed' by a frame or an equivalent device. For instance, in a fresco, a figure on a base indicates that it is a statue, hence a meta-image, different from the ones surrounding it. It is clear, however, that this concerns only a small number of cases, compared to what we would be tempted to define as quotation in a less rigorous manner. In order not to stray from our theme and address even more complex issues, I will neglect more subtle distinctions between quotation, copying, replication, plagiarism, and even the most difficult to formalize: allusion.

Speaking in very general terms, the essential difference is what Nelson Goodman identified between 'autograph' and 'allographic' works.²⁸ An autograph work is one that exists in a single copy, as in the case of a painting or

²⁶ Compagnon 1979, 48.

²⁷ Morawski 1970, 691.

²⁸ Goodman 1968.

a statue. Its exact duplication is both practically and theoretically impossible. Examples of allographic works, on the other hand, are a symphony, a novel, a play. What counts in this case is ‘sameness of spelling’, that is the exact correspondence of a series of signs, in which every performance, every edition or print is equally ‘authentic’ in the sense that it does not constitute an imitation, even though it may be more or less accurate. If we define the problem in this way, it is clear that the quotation of an image is not possible, strictly speaking. At most we can accept that it is the figural evocation of another image.²⁹

Last but not least, there is the reuse of places and buildings. We arrive now at the second thematic pole of this volume: the metropolises. As is well known, the demographic decline of most ancient cities forced civic communities to face difficult choices. Many important buildings and public monuments lost their function and significance due to changes in the social and economic structure of the city.

In Rome we have a great number of examples: the temple of Mars in the Forum of Augustus was legally dismantled in order to reuse its architectural elements by a certain *Patricius Decius* between the late fifth and the first half of the sixth century.³⁰ A good candidate could be Caecina Decius Albinus, consul in 493 and Praetorian Praefect between 500 and 503, the man whom Theodoric authorized³¹ to extend his house above the *Porticus Curva*, generally identified with the entrance to the *Forum Transitorium* from the Subura, just a short distance away.³² Another famous example can be found on a pillar of the second order of the Colosseum (the first floor): it is the inscription of

²⁹ Forero-Mendoza 2004, 25.

³⁰ AE 1996, 244; Meneghini, in Meneghini – Santangeli Valenzani 2004, 179-180. Basilius Decius consul in 486, urban prefect and prefect of the praetorium (PLRE 2, *Decius* 2, 349), or Flavius Decius consul in 529 and patrician in 546 (PLRE 3 A, *Decius* 1, 391), or finally Caecina Decius Albinus (PLRE 2, *Albinus* 9).

³¹ Cassiod. var. 4, 30.

³² Guidobaldi 1995. Some doubts were cast on this reconstruction by Spera 2015, 252-253; more elaborate treatment by Dey, in print.

“Gerontius v(ir) s(pectabilis)” attesting his right to exploit the monument as a quarry. This Gerontius is also known in the Rome of Theodoric.³³

In the sixth century, Rome’s population was reduced to a tenth or even a twentieth of the size estimated for the fourth century.³⁴ Its monuments underwent a severe process of reduction and transformation; some of them, as we have seen in the case of the Colosseum, lost their function and became simply quarries, others changed their function and were reused for purposes unknown in the classical city. Hadrian’s imperial mausoleum became a fortress to protect the Aelian bridge during the Gothic War, several monuments were transformed into churches, such as the Curia of the Senate in the Roman Forum occupied by St. Hadrian, the hall in the southwestern corner of the *Templum Pacis* that housed the basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, or the Pantheon rededicated as *Sancta Maria ad Martyres*. As early as the fourth century, the enclosure of the *Templum Pacis* housed a series of buildings, probably including the *Horrea Piperataria*, a warehouse and bazaar of oriental spices, which were moved to this site in order to open space for the construction of the nearby Basilica of Maxentius. Other public spaces between the Forum of Trajan and the so-called Market of Trajan were occupied in the early Middle Ages by the *Xenodochium a Valeriis*, a hostel for pilgrims. Let me stop here because the list of examples that can be cited is very long.³⁵ If we want, we can easily consider the entire city of Rome as a *spolium*, a reuse: each historical period has reused and transformed the previous version of the city in an inextricable overlap of functions and urban forms.

To sum up, the concept of spolia has been expanded and transformed in recent years, but it has also become confused as a result, at the risk of losing specificity. I believe that an attempt should now be made to thematize and specify the distinctions between the various types of reuse in order to guide future research. The differences and similarities between the various types of

³³ Rea 1995, 174-176.

³⁴ Lo Cascio 2013.

³⁵ An updated panorama in Meneghini – Santangeli Valenzani 2004; Dey 2021.

spolia need to be marked in order to eliminate nebulous confusion and provide a flexible taxonomy that allows for a more rigorous description and interpretation of the phenomenon. Mechanical schemes, ideological over-interpretations, and anachronistic superimpositions of modern concepts onto ancient evidence should be avoided as much as possible.

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