

Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle: The Spolia of Late Antique and Early Christian Rome

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Architecture in Rome often looks like a mosaic; early antique marble chunks lie side by side with late antique brickwork and medieval stone blocks. This potpourri of material history can usually be attributed to spolia. The term originally referred to spoils of war, but among scholars its usage has expanded to any reuse of materials or artifacts.¹ From Constantinople to Reims, evidence of repurposed structures can be seen in countless churches, walls, and monuments. Rome is arguably the greatest basis for the discussion of spolia; many of its most iconic sites are made up of a combination of ancient and medieval materials working in tandem. While there is evidence of material reuse throughout Republican and Imperial Rome, it was Constantine I who legitimized the practice of spoliation and set a precedent of imperial claim to existing monuments.² Later emperors built on Constantine's foundation and eventually papal figures adopted the practice. It is important to note that although spoliation often carries the negative connotations of looting and plunder, it was actually a legal practice in most cases; legislation compiled by Emperor Theodosius clearly outlined regulations on what could be repurposed, how it could be presented, and who had the power to do so.³ Theodosius's legislation covered the period from the 320s to the 420s, but given the depth and quantity of the collection it is fair to assume that similar legislation had existed in Rome since Constantine I. In the time between these two emperors, the use of spolia shifted greatly; many scholars attach a symbolic purpose to the spolia of emperor Constantine I but attribute Theodosius and his papal contemporaries' use of spolia to the economic decline of the empire. In this essay I will explore commonly cited motivations behind the use of spolia in Rome. I will then review specific case

¹ Dale Kinney, "The Concept of Spolia," *A Companion to Medieval Art* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc: 2019), pp. 331–56, doi:10.1002/9781119077756.ch14, 233.

² Joseph Alchermes, "Spolia in Roman Cities of the Late Empire: Legislative Rationales and Architectural Reuse," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 48 (1994), 170.

³ Joseph Alchermes, "Spolia in Roman Cities of the Late Empire: Legislative Rationales and Architectural Reuse," 168.

studies, from the Aurelian Wall to the Pantheon. Rather than discuss every instance of spolia in Rome (I would need a full library for that venture), I will focus on sites that exemplify the potential pragmatic and symbolic interpretations of spolia that can then be applied to other sites in Rome and abroad.

Historians have cited pragmatism, triumphalism, heritage preservation, religious appropriation, historical continuity, civic pride, and the appreciation of classic aesthetic forms as explanations for the use of spolia in Rome⁴. However, there is dissent in academic circles on the reliability of such claims given that most of these symbolic meanings were extracted by modern historians rather than explicitly written by contemporary Romans. For this reason, I'd like to review some of the surviving contemporary literature on the uses of spolia. As a large portion of studied spoliation cases are directly or indirectly related to the creation of churches in the late antique and early Christian periods, it would be beneficial to include a popular contemporary theological opinion on spolia. The following quote from 397 CE comes from St. Augustine of Hippo, a prominent Christian philosopher and father of the church:

As [pagans] for their part make perverse and unjust misuse of [materials] in the service of demons, so Christians for theirs ought(...) to take these things away from them for the proper use of preaching the gospel. Their fine raiment too, meaning, that is, what are indeed their human institutions, but still ones that are suitable for human society, which we cannot do without in this life, are things that it will be lawful to take over and convert to Christian use.⁵

As one of the authors of Christianity itself, it is fair to assume that St. Augustine's expressed opinion on spoliation at least slightly reflects the broader Christian viewpoint. With that in mind, Augustine sees the reuse of pagan objects (columns, capitals, decorations, etc.) as a sort of material proselytism. He believes that pagans have stained the very structures they created 'in the service of demons,' and it is the duty of Christians to repurpose and thereby cleanse these structures. Thus, the reuse of temple materials was accepted, even encouraged, in early Christian Rome as long as it served the objectives of the church. It is also important to note that Augustine duly praises the 'fine raiment' of classic architecture and the convenience that its repurpose provides, pointing also to a pragmatic motivation behind early Christian spoliation. Along the same lines is the following excerpt from the poet Prudentius around 410 CE:

Oh noble Romans, (...) let these statues, the works of great craftsmen, stand undefiled;
Let them become the most beautiful adornments of our native city- may no Depraved
purpose taint these works of art, no longer in the service of evil.⁶

⁴ Lisa Huberts, "Ideology vs. Practice: The Use of Spolia in the Early Christian Churches of Rome, 300-600 AD," Master's thesis, Royal Netherlands Institute, 2014. Accessed December 2, 2019, 22.

⁵ Lisa Huberts, "Ideology vs. Practice: The Use of Spolia in the Early Christian Churches of Rome, 300-600 AD," 32.

⁶ Ibid, 33.

Again, the association between paganism and ‘the service of evil’ is highlighted; however, rather than using this juxtaposition to encourage the reuse of pagan structures for the church like Augustine, Prudentius instead focuses on the aesthetic value of classic architecture. He writes that once the ‘evil’ association of paganism is stripped, the ‘beautiful’ adornments of the city can be truly appreciated. Prudentius expresses reverence for the craftsmanship of the classic era believes it is a defining feature of Rome. Taking St. Augustine’s and Prudentius’s words together, we can conclude that the religious, pragmatic, and aesthetic motivations behind the use of spolia were not mutually exclusive and often operated in tandem.

This multi-faceted background helps to explain why spoliation occurred more and more frequently after Constantine I; the rise of Christianity coupled with the economic and political decline of Rome left a large demand for the reuse of classic materials, and thus spoliation reached an all-time peak. Some historians, however, completely reject any notion of meaning behind spolia and instead approach the practice from a strictly pragmatic perspective.⁷ It is simply more cost-effective to reuse columns, capitals, and other frequently spoliated items than create new ones. If there are entire abandoned temples strewn throughout the city, why not make them useful? Those who consider pragmatism the primary purpose of spolia often attribute the rise of spoliation seen in the early Christian era as evidence for and a result of Rome’s decline. A weakened Rome in need of defense would certainly encourage the rapid reuse of any available materials; a great example of spolia in this situation is the creation of the Aurelian Wall.

The Aurelian Wall was first built by Emperor Aurelian between 271 and 275 CE to fulfill the need for an expanded defense system in the wake of the Gaulish threat to Rome.⁸ To fortify the city as quickly as possible, efficiency was prioritized. This manifested in two primary pursuits: the reuse of building materials and the incorporation of pre-existing structures in the wall. The wall was made of a combination of new and reused brick; pre-Aurelian stamps from the 2nd C CE found throughout the wall prove that at least a portion of the bricks were sourced from existing structures.⁹ Additionally, in later expansions and repairs, large ancient stones (often from aqueducts) were recut and placed in the wall.¹⁰ In this case, the spolia found in the Aurelian Wall was used for its convenience rather than for its symbolic meaning. Similarly, the many existing buildings that were incorporated into the wall were meant to speed up construction and save on resources. Some of the most famous structures found in the wall include the pyramid-shaped Tomb of Gaius Cestius, Castra Praetoria, and the Aqua Anio Novus.¹¹

⁷ Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney, *Reuse Value*, (Routledge: 2011), <https://ebookcentral-proquestcom.proxy.lib.umich.edu/lib/umichigan/reader.action?docID=4501153>, 78.

⁸ Hendrik W. Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271–855* (Cambridge University Press: 2011), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511974397, 13.

⁹ Hendrik W. Dey. *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271–855*, 94.

¹⁰ Jan Gadeyne, "Aurelian Walls," Lecture, Waterways & Walls Lecture, Rome, November 2019.

¹¹ Hendrik W. Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271–855*, 75.

were underwritten by an intense visual programme appealing to and rooted in the past”.¹⁵ The ‘new dynasty’ element of Constantine’s Arch is provided by the extensive frieze depicting the Battle of Milvian Bridge; as the first arch dedicated to a civil rather than a foreign war, it separates Constantine I from the tradition of the past and hints at a different (Christian accepting) trajectory for the future. To satisfy the need for establishment on the part of the pagan elite, Constantine I used spolia in the decoration of his triumphal arch to solidify his connection with the beloved rulers of the past. These reused sections come from monuments dedicated by Hadrian, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius.¹⁶ These rulers make up three of the “Five Good Emperors” and the allusions would have been quickly understood by contemporary Romans. On the west wall of the central opening lies the great Trajanic frieze which was moved from its original location in the Basilica Ulpia in Trajan’s Forum. The frieze contained a sculpted head of Trajan, which Constantine had recut to portray his own likeness.



Constantine’s recut face of Trajan¹⁷

By literally creating himself in the image of Trajan, Constantine symbolically rendered himself as the natural successor to the power and prestige attributed to Trajan. Similarly, and to the same effect, Constantine resculpted the head of Hadrian from the Hadrianic Medallion and multiple heads of Marcus Aurelius. In addition to symbolically garnering himself the power of these great emperors, Constantine also uses his chosen spolia to justify his questionable-at-best accession to emperor. Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius all protected Rome from foreign invaders; by adopting scenes depicting these battles in his triumphal arch, Constantine portrays himself as

¹⁵ Jaś Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms." *Papers of the British School at Rome*, vol. 68, 2000, pp. 149–184. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40311027, 155.

¹⁶ Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms," 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 159.

protector, rather than the tyrant, of Rome. The Arch of Constantine is the perfect example of the symbolic potential of spolia; the incorporation of monuments from the past created the perception of historical continuity and placed Constantine as the natural inheritor of the empire.

Whereas the Arch of Constantine utilized the symbolic power of spolia to align the past with the present, St. Peter's Basilica and Saint John Lateran use it to pronounce a separation from the past and a march towards the Christian world of the future. Also created by Constantine, these structures, like many early Roman churches, contain spolia in their decoration. The most commonly reused material in these churches are the columns. In both St. Peter's and St. John Lateran, one of the most noticeable features is the variety of columns placed side by side, ranging in color, size, and material.¹⁸



Spolia columns of multiple colors and sizes coexist in Saint John Lateran.¹⁹

This represents a stark departure from the aesthetic tradition of Ancient Rome in which order and continuity were prioritized; whereas a classic edifice would have required uniform supports and ornaments, late antique structures often contained a mix of different columns, directly opposing the classic preference. Brenk argues that Constantine opted intentionally for an eclectic selection of columns in his basilicas to “obtain varietas,” and curate a non-classical aesthetic using

¹⁸ Beat Brenk, "Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics versus Ideology," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 41 (1987), 104.

¹⁹ Altar of Saint John Lateran. Photograph. Accessed December 2, 2019. <http://mikestravelguide.com/things-to-do-in-rome-visit-the-basilica-of-john-in-lateran/>.

“traditional forms... but disconnected from their canonical use.”²⁰ In other words, Constantine twisted well-defined classic architectural to be recontextualized within a Christian setting. In the same way that he used established emperors of the past to justify his accession to power in his arch, in his churches Constantine used established aesthetic forms in a novel format to represent the beginning of a new age. Both cases rely on the assumed knowledge of the contemporary audience; if late antique Romans did not grasp the historical framework from whence classic columns originated, the significance of their reuse in a novel aesthetical form would be lost. However, given the increase in the frequency of spolia after Constantine, it is safe to assume that the intended message was indeed transmitted, and transmitted effectively. As I mentioned previously, recontextualization plays a tremendous role in the symbolic power of spolia; this phenomenon occurs frequently in the recontextualization of pagan artifacts in Christian contexts, like the Basilicas of St. Peters and John Lateran.

Another famous example of Christian recontextualization is the Pantheon. It is important to note that Rome had a unique relationship with the pagan temples within the city compared to other Roman settlements. In the East, it was not uncommon to see the “fanatical burning of altars” and “razing of temples” as the empire transitioned away from paganism.²¹ In Rome, instead, there was legislation that protected pagan temples for their cultural importance and classic aesthetics. This represents a relationship that relies less on the destruction of the past and more on its appreciation, helping to explain the push to recontextualize pagan temples in the Christian world rather than demolish them. Accordingly, the Pantheon was left relatively unchanged in its conversion to the Church of Santa Maria ad Martyres under Pope Boniface IV in 609 CE.²² Contemporary Romans understood the magnificence of the structure; both in unique size and design, the Pantheon was unparalleled when it came to ancient Roman architectural ingenuity. The primary modifications to the structure were cosmetic; the pagan altars were replaced with Christian saints.²³

²⁰ Brenk, "Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics versus Ideology," 106.

²¹ Frances J. Niederer, "Temples Converted into Churches: The Situation in Rome." *Church History*, vol. 22, no. 3, (1953), 176.

²² Niederer, Frances J. "Temples Converted into Churches: The Situation in Rome," 177.

²³ *Ibid.*



Spaces that once contained pagan idols were converted into chapels for Christian saints.²⁴

The recontextualization of the Pantheon aligns with the opinions of St. Augustine and Prudentius. They supported the conversion of pagan artifacts and temples into the world of Christianity not only to establish a new Christian order, but also to preserve the original classic material for its aesthetic and pragmatic benefits.

The multi-purpose explanations for the widespread use of spolia in late antique and early Christian Rome help to explain the rise of the practice as the empire progressed past its peak. Although scholars disagree on the exact motivations behind the use of spolia, most occurrences can be justified with a combination of multiple factors. Whether it be the pragmatic efficiency of reused materials in the Aurelian Wall or the symbolism-laden artwork on the Arch of Constantine, spolia played an important role in Rome's transition from late antiquity to early Christianity. Contemporary Roman literature illuminates the unique relationship between the citizens and the ancient urban fabric of Rome; written works of St. Augustine and Prudentius chronicle the Roman aesthetic appreciation for classic architecture that existed in tandem with the desire to cleanse the city of its pagan associations. Taken all together, spolia has become a defining feature of the Roman urban landscape; it has played a defining role in the story of Rome and exquisitely illustrates the historical coalescence of the Eternal City.

²⁴ Tomb of Raphael in the Pantheon. Photograph. Accessed December 2, 2019. <https://www.picturesfromitaly.com/rome/pantheon-tomb-of-raphael>.

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