

Spolia and Reuse Practice

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Abstract: *Spolia* appeared for the first time in a Renaissance cultural context and the term refers to fragments of ancient buildings or statues of the ancient world that have been introduced into a new context, a phenomenon that has manifested itself particularly between the third and the seventh centuries. Used either as an economic necessity or as an apotropaic role, or to relate to past or continuity with the present or even as an aesthetic dimension, *spolia* is a complex phenomenon whose consequences can not remain unnoticed.

The monuments obtained through *spolia* are part of an important archaeological heritage, being unique in terms of their historical and functional route, and also often unusual in the context in which they are found. Among these, the Roman monuments are the witnesses of a special moment of the history of the ancient Roman heritage, the transformation, the loss and its conversion to another meaning.

Key-words: *spolia*; reuse; *sphragis*; cross; pagan; *Interpretatio Christiana*

1. Introduction

The term *spolia* appeared for the first time in a Renaissance cultural context, used in a pejorative manner, in a letter addressed to Pope Leo X by Rafael and Baltasare Castiglione, whose content includes a critical message on how Roman vestiges have been exploited throughout the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in the construction of civic buildings and churches in Rome. Invented during the Renaissance, the term refers to fragments of ancient buildings or statues of the ancient world that have been introduced into a new context, a phenomenon that has manifested itself particularly between the third and the seventh centuries.

Etymologically *spolia* comes from the latin *spolium*, which has the connotation of *war robbery (spolii) following victory over a conquered territory*, but at the same time it means *animal skin*. Its use in the sense that archeology and art history took over, meaning from the Renaissance, is related to the phrase used in a critical manner in the massive exploitation of Roman remains for various civic and religious constructions in Rome, starting with the late Antiquity, and ending with the Middle Ages, a period of which Renaissance people felt culturally detached.

In the modern academic sense, the word *spolia* came into use with the discussion about the monuments marking the passage from the culture of the Roman Empire to the late Antiquity or the Middle Ages, the generally accepted connotation being of a cultural object, fragment that can belong to the funeral, votive, religious or architectural, and which is re-used in a context other than the original one. The problem of the ruined elements and architectural fragments is already in the classical world, at least in the major urban centers, and the 4th century Roman legislation referred to the problem of preventing the destruction and destructuralization of decommissioned spaces by taking over and reusing building elements. It was called by the word *spoliatae aedes* and referred to the entire body of the edifice in question, not just to the architectural elements with a decorative role.

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In the 4th century also, the expression *redivivis de publico saxis* referred to those stones that came from public deposits as a result of their recovery from spaces that had been demolished or in ruins, therefore it had a similar meaning to of the term *spolia*, which will appear in the 16th century. It is about "fragments of old buildings that have been introduced into a new architectural context in a way that was intended to draw attention... most often reused columns, capitals and sculpture blocks" (Frey 2016, 16).

2. Some Interpretations about *Spolia*

Over time, there have been several interpretations about the phenomenon of *spolia*. There is a whole literature linking this phenomenon to Christian attacks on the images of classical antiquity (Pollini 2013, 5-6). Thus, it is believed that Christians have destroyed and profaned the ancient works, which, in certain circles, was and is believed to be justified by the belief that what ultimately counts is the so-called truth of the predominant Christian message. Anchored in this belief is the notion of "triumph" of Christianity and connected with him *Interpretatio Christiana*, a phenomenon that contributed to the symbolic transfer from a material patrimony loaded with heathen connotations to a Christian one.

As far as material evidence is concerned, they were largely ignored by archaeologists, who generally assumed that most of the damage was the result of war, accident or natural causes (Pollini 2013, 6).

For example, it was acknowledged that the Temple of Zeus in Nemea was not destroyed by an earthquake, as he had long thought, but by Greek Christians who hacked the base of the columns surrounding the temple for it to collapse or it is a well-established fact that Greek Christians have devastated the Temple of Athena, as well as a large part of Greece's classical heritage (Pollini 2013, 7 - 9). It seems that the bishops, priests, and fanatical monks were mainly behind the destruction and profanation of temples in later antiquity.

Regarding the destruction of the Parthenon by fire in later antiquity, the phenomenon was interpreted as due to natural causes or as a consequence of the invasions of the Herulians, invading barbarians from the middle of the third century or other later barbarians, some of whom were Christians. The hypothesis that the destruction of the Parthenon would have come from the guilt of the Greek Christian Athenians, who had the strongest motive to destroy the Parthenon, especially at the end of the fourth century, immediately after the decree of Theodosius I (380) banned polytheistic religion and demanded the destruction of the gods' temples, was long rejected (Pollini 2013, 11). Regarding the Parthenon frieze, it was assumed by scientists that most of the damage to this great sculptural work took place during the Venetian bombing of the Acropolis in 1687 under the command of Francesco Morosini, a Christian who did not respect classic antiquity. At that time, much of the Northern and Southern walls and the Parthenon frieze were destroyed, and all the heads of the Olympic gods in the central block of the eastern part of the Parthenon were intentionally mutilated (Pollini 2013, 13).

As far as the mutilation phenomenon is concerned, we talk about the mutilation of the heads or faces as a result of trying to detach them from the building, and on the other hand the mutilation of the hands and feet and the genital organs.

The mutilation of the heads or faces occurred as a result of the attempt to remove sculptures from the building, which was designed to reuse them in the apse of the Christian church. Such intentional damage occurred in the central block as well as in one of the six sections of the north and south frieze of the Parthenon.

Another example is the *Omega House* of the Athenian Agora, where most of the sculptures "were defrauded by a strange stone or a blow", which is "evidence of the

systematic attack, especially on the heads or faces (Pollini 2013, 15). Moreover, a lot of funeral stars that reveal a similar pattern of destruction have been discovered in Greece and Turkey.

In terms of hand and foot mutilation, as well as the genital organs, this phenomenon is correlated with the Christian judicial punishments of the 4th and 6th centuries, when polytheism, which continued to thrive in one form or another at that time, was viewed by the Church as a major problem that had to be completely eradicated. We identify in this sense the existence of a negative attitude of Christians towards nudity, sex and fertility, which is why the naked figures created by the polytheistic peoples were objects of Christian attacks. Thus, both in male and female gods, the signs of a process of shredding them or around them, such as shredding of male genitalia in a number of images, shredding of female genital organs, as well as their breasts - a statue of Aphrodite of Faustina in Miletus being one of the illustrative examples in this respect (Pollini 2013, 21-22).

3. The Use of *Spolia* and Reuse Practice

The use of *spolia* varied from a physical, integral or partial removal of the original material to the strategy of incorporating elements of the original invoked by its substitutive representations, leaving the original state unchanged (Brilliant 2011, 251).

One of the issues that appear mainly in the literature is the use of elements from the imperial deposits, which leads to an economic motivation of using *spolia*. In this respect, the import of contemporary prefabricated chapters in Asia Minor and Greece is developing in the 2nd century, a phenomenon that has become more and more common at the end of the 3rd century. The imported chapters were stored in public marble storage. Despite their diverse manufacturing and often heterogeneous arrangement, these imports as well as older materials in imperial warehouses have not been perceived as foreign bodies but appear to have been preferred under certain circumstances due to their formal quality and richness. In addition, in the 4th and 5th centuries there was a common practice in Roman architecture to use old and prefabricated elements of architectural decoration, mostly in warehouses under public administration, along with new pieces. We are talking about reuse of elements taken from older buildings, which we identify as a *spolia* phenomenon. The massive presence of the old architectural ornaments in the 4th and 5th century churches in Rome should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon, but as a practice stemming from the cultural conservatism of the imperial Roman society, stimulated by a significant change in the mentality that emerged in the third century. This new mentality allowed new and less strict interpretations of traditional rules of composition, form and fabrication.

For example, extensive construction projects of the Tetrarchy and Maxentius, followed in the fourth and fifth centuries of ecclesiastical construction, created a great demand for architectural ornaments, which could be accomplished through appeal to warehouse stocks. In this sense, the use and reuse of older architectural elements must be seen as an integral part of the development of the architecture and construction techniques of the Empire: "Behind the rapidly increasing phenomenon of the use and reuse of older pieces is a set of diverse preconditions that reflect a development anchored in the architecture and building techniques of the high imperial era. This development is also the expression of a changing way of seeing and of a cultural and societal transformation that occurred over a long period of time, and was not simply determined by the Constantinian revolution and the religious changes that swept Roman society in the fourth century" (Brandenburg 2011, 70).

During the 4th and 5th centuries, the decoration of public buildings in Rome, including the profane structures, but above all the churches - which represent most of the public buildings projects in the 4th century - was assembled from the raw architecture, with elements of

different epochs and places, which were in the marble storage for public use. The ornaments were part of construction projects involving the rescue of ruined buildings the elements of which were stored, or imports from Oriental manufacturing, including architectural decorations of recent origin, which were stored for future public or private construction. These elements of the official deposits were not strictly divided into objects purchased by the demolition or looting of older structures in order to obtain building materials; they were not directly removed from an original architectural context and subjected to the organization of a different new architectural system in a new context, but rather represented a number of available imports or a series of prefabricated parts that used buildings at that time (Brandenburg, 2011, 67). Moreover, the evidence shows that, in the decoration of the buildings, next to each other, no prejudices, old elements of the public deposits and new ornaments produced specifically for the building.

At the end of the 4th and 5th centuries, such imported stocks were still used to decorate ecclesiastical buildings, such as S. Pudenziana or S. Stefano Rotondo. For example, "in S. Stefano Rotondo, contemporary prefabricated capitals and high imperial-era pieces were supplemented by contemporary imported capitals of eastern workmanship from warehouse inventories. They were placed side by side despite considerable differences in dimension and formal vocabulary. With the exception of the main axis, distinguished by richly decorated Corinthian capitals, an attempt was made to maintain a uniform order. Here, as elsewhere, it was the *typological* unity of the architectural decoration that was important, while differences in dimensions, formal vocabulary, and date did not matter" (Brandenburg 2011, 67).

However, with regard to the larger ecclesiastical buildings at the end of the 4th and 5th centuries, built by the ecclesiastical hierarchy or imperial house, there is a preference for the unity of the decor, and the available deposits seem to have provided sufficient materials for to satisfy this taste. For example, the arrangement of ornaments in the St. Peter and the Lateran basilica, although derived heterogeneous storage materials were used, has been made an effort to maintain a typological unity, and the differences in size, origin, date and style had was overlooked. The S. Sabina church on Aventin, built under Pope Celestine I (422–32) by the presbyter Peter, also boasts a unified décor: "The columns probably were nottaken from an abandoned temple or portico because they carry an arcade, while the complement of architectural elements obtained from a dismantled temple or portico would have included an architrave. Two additional columns from this inventory were used 30 years later in the construction of the church of S. Stefano Rotondo, about which more shortly" (Brandenburg 2011, 64).

Esch (1969, 44) and Deichmann (1975) drew attention to reuse as a practice that does not always involve artistic, political and social decline. Moreover, a number of studies have argued that the use of *spolia* can't be governed exclusively by economic necessity. For example, it has been noticed that the programs of ambitious constructions in Rome and Constantinople in the 4th century did not give the impression that the empire was going through a great financial difficulty (Frey 2016, 24). Thus, another aspect related to the use of *spolia* is interpreted in close connection with the apotropaic role of this phenomenon. Henry Maguire speaks of this so-called action of neutralizing a potential danger and transforming negative powers into positive powers that would be achieved by using the sign of the cross. Thus, potentially threatening forces are neutralized, the sign of the cross contributing to the protection of the construction (Kiilerich 2005, 105). In this regard, we are talking about a practice known as *sphragis*, which was a way to change the pagan aspect of a construction, neutralize and of "baptising the object" (Kiilerich 2005, 102).

By placing one or more crosses on or near a pagan object, it is believed that potential evil forces lose their power. A series of symbols were used in this respect "placed on the antique pieces therefore are of different types and also differ from most of those appearing on the

Byzantine material, such as *crux florida*, the banded cross, and the interlaced cross" (Kiilerich 2005, 102).

The church of the Panagia Gorgoepikoos gives us an example in this regard. Thus, "on the southern [of the church] flank without human figures, the Eleusinian frieze with the torches and poppies refers to death and resurrection. Rebirth through baptism may be indicated by *sphragis* (baptism through the sign of the cross). This is especially prevalent on the northern flank and at the northwest corner, where the women on the grave stele, the satyr and a female figure have all been 'baptised'. Finally on the eastern wall it is hardly by chance that so many sculptures – the two reliefs with wreaths, the one with the prizes, the choregic inscription the two reliefs with Nikai – share the theme of victory. *In toto* this sculpted ensemble suggests the victory and triumph of Christ and His Church" (Kiilerich 2005, 111).

In another interpretation, *spolia* is seen as a way of creating a connection with the past and establishing its continuity with the present. Thus, "the display of *spolia* in the Little Metropolis might represent a nostalgic reference to the glorious past of Athens, the Byzantines projecting themselves as the heirs of the classical tradition" (Kiilerich, 2005, 106). In this regard, Cyril Mango has spoken of «*relics of the past*», apast one admires but cannot quite expound; Charalambos Bouras refers to the church as a «*mimesis of an 'archaic' building*», a structure that expresses a nostalgia for the greatness of Classical Athens, and Amy Papalexandrou speaks about the «*appreciation for antiquities as a visual link to a great past*» (Kiilerich 2005, 106). An example in this regard is represented by the Little Metropolis, the church of the Panagia Gorgoepikoos, which "is a thesaurus of sculpture spanning more than a millennium. By reusing the old stones and displaying them ostentatiously, a church was created that is both unique and uniquely Athenian. ... As to a thematic link between ancient and medieval, pagan and Christian, the following tentative pattern presents itself: with the peopled scroll, the various tree of life panels and the calendar, the message of the front appears in a general way to relate to notions of beginning, birth, growth, life and eternity" (Kiilerich 2005, 111).

A more recent concept about the use of *spolia* refers to the aesthetic dimension of the phenomenon. In this regard, "the *spolium* does not serve to restage the past, but is one component of a work cobbled together from various found materials, sometimes with the explicit intention to overturn normative aesthetic conceptions. More recently, this type of reuse has been carried out in the name of an ecologically grounded conservation of resources and/or in opposition to the monotony of contemporary materials and forms. Thus the appreciation of *spolia* can be economically and ecologically determined, but also aesthetically motivated. The practice has been institutionalized in markets and warehouses for old architectural pieces that are supplied by the dismemberment of old buildings, usually buildings slated for demolition" (Meier 2011, 225). Thus, different deconstruction and reconstruction practices, which act as structural elements for a new building, are considered *spolia*. In this respect, German architect Christoph Mäckler believes that *spolia* "must be incorporated, not as decorative elements, but as pieces that are also functional. When you position such a capital or console or whatever other pieces it might be somewhere, you cannot put it under glass" (Meier 2011, 231 - 232). Moreover, in Mäckler' opinion there are forth five principles that are necessary to an appropriate engagement with a site and the fourth is that "preserved parts of the original façade, the so-called *spolia*, be reintroduced and relate something of the history of the place" (Meier 2011, 232). *Spolia* becomes an art historical term for the recycling of architectural fragments, "it has lost its classical reference to the predatory confiscation and display of plunder necessary to the public spectacle of power" (Wharton 2011, 179).

Closely related to the aesthetic dimension of the phenomenon *spolia*, Donald Kuspit (2011, 237-250) speaks about a kind of spoiler's art, which linked to what Rosenberg called

"signature painting" (Kuspit 2011, 240). It can be understood as "the postmodernist's signature added to a modernist work of her choosing, for whatever theoretical and ideological reasons" (Kuspit 2011, 240). In the sense of Roland Barthes we are talking about the collapse of authorial authority, in the sense that the author doesn't have the last word about the work, nor for that matter the first word. From the point of view of Jacques Derrida the work is never original and the author's own, but "always and inevitably an "endless linked series [of] supplementary mediations" that pre-exist it, and thus never the product of "originary perception" (which doesn't exist)" (Kuspit 2011, 240). One of examples of D. Kuspit is related to a possible complex temple in the reign of Ramses, who ordered more buildings and colossal statues than any other pharaoh did. For it is known that Ramses carved his name on statues of previous pharaohs or to have reshaped them. Thus, Ramses made the statues of his predecessors his own representation carving his name in place of theirs or having their statues reshaped so that they became his and deleting their name off the map of Egyptian history. Whether the action of Pharaoh Ramses was a follow-up act of tradition or whether it was a new one, it is just the sign of vanity "it was the same old ruler with another name – the name a sort of Emperor's New Clothing on the same old authoritarian power" (Kuspit 2011, 238). Thus, envious appropriation art is a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*, a failure of imagination, decadence, sterility, and stagnation.

One of the important aspects that we need to stop when talking about the *reuse practice* is associated with ethics. For, we are talking about taking possession of something that actually deprives the original of its own properties. Thus, the acquisition of works of art involves a series of transformation and adjustment actions "necessary to assimilate borrowed elements in a new artistic context" (Brilliant 2011, 251). In addition, some actions are so blatant that they constitute forms of robbery, as works of art are appropriated by conquerors. For example, the sacred objects taken from the Temple of Jerusalem and appearing in a great sculpture on the triumphal arc of Titus in Rome are an example in this respect (Brilliant 2011, 251-252). We are talking about a simulacrum of the original, and a probative value of the objects for the manifestation of the Roman power in Jerusalem. The Roman works of art are thus presented as a direct instance of the transfer of precious material into an own artistic representation, thus investing the robbery into the artistic object present in the pre-existing conventional repertoire of Roman triumphal images.

Conclusions

Spolia appeared for the first time in a Renaissance cultural context and the term refers to fragments of ancient buildings or statues of the ancient world that have been introduced into a new context, a phenomenon that has manifested itself particularly between the third and the seventh centuries. Used either as an economic necessity or as an apotropaic role, or to relate to past or continuity with the present or even as an aesthetic dimension, *spolia* is a complex phenomenon whose consequences can't remain unnoticed.

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