The Eloquence of Appropriation

Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome
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by

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Many diverse elements have gone into the production of this book, making the working process related to the architecture it describes. The years of research and writing have been far from an isolated endeavour of uninterrupted and homogeneous work on my part. Rather the book is pieced together from stimulating discussions, generous help, and thought-provoking critique from a great many people and institutions. Thus the years of its creation have become a richly diversified memory for me — much like a medieval church pieced together from varied building materials and rich in narrative and historical references from its many subsequent building phases.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to all who have in some way contributed a fragment or a larger element to the book. I am grateful to my colleagues at the Department of Art History, Aarhus University, for their friendly support, energy, and willingness to listen and to discuss the subject, as well as to the three groups of students at the Department who in 1998, 2000, and 2002 participated in my seminars on architectural reuse and in excursions to Rome and thus added many stimulating comments and observations to the analysis. By reading and discussing the book in different stages of its writing, my friends and colleagues Hanne Kolind Poulsen and Jacob Wamberg, and my husband, Bjørn Bredal, have offered truly invaluable suggestions, improving greatly on both the form and content of the manuscript. Erik Thunø, Amanuensis at the Danish Academy at Rome, has been a reader of the manuscript too, and has given his help in other important matters during the research, writing, and production of the book. Indeed, the entire staff at the Danish Academy — especially the two directors Jan Zahle and his successor Gunvor Skytte, the administrator Karen Ascani, and secretaries Bente Rasmussen and Adelaide Zocchi — have been extraordinarily supportive, generously offering hospitality and practical help during the research and production of the book, including its final publishing phase. For many years, the Academy has been a welcoming, helpful, and extremely well-organised base for my studies in Rome. Without its support over the years, I doubt whether this book would ever have been written.

My heartfelt thanks go also to the foundations that supported the publication financially. The Carlsberg Foundation funded the pictures taken by photographer Pernille Klemp, and The Novo Nordisk Foundation paid for my trip to accompany her to Rome. For making the publication of the book possible with all its colour reproductions and drawings of plans and building elements by architect Pauline Ringsted, I am indebted to three foundations: the New Carlsberg Foundation, which has in the past made much of the research for the book possible through its generous travel grants, to the Novo Nordisk Foundation, and to Aarhus University Research Foundation, which furthermore financed the English revision of my text by Jenny Weatherford.
Matthew Moran helpfully read and corrected the final version of the text.

Finally, I wish to thank Pernille Klemp for her endurance and kind diligence while photographing in Rome under difficult working conditions and, if I may say so, for her excellent results, which have at least made this book worth looking at.
I. INTRODUCTION

With the reign of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, a new building practice involving the reuse of architectural or sculptural elements had its breakthrough in the Roman Empire. Columns, capitals, marble revetments—the valuable and exquisitely manufactured products of a more prosperous past—were put to new use.

Reuse of building material is not surprising in itself; it has probably existed throughout the entire history of architecture. Although there were a few forerunners around 300, what seems to be radically new at the time of Constantine’s victory in 312 is the importance and monumentality of the structures built in this way, combined with the clear evidence of recycled material. Apparently no effort was made to conceal the composite character of these buildings. The diversity of their elements was, rather, emphasised. Instead of grouping the elements most alike in order to get an aesthetical expression in line with the uniformity of classical Roman architecture, the masons used a remarkable variety of columns and capitals, orders and sculptural details, materials and colours, manufacture and dimensions. Moreover, they often appropriated old parts to new functions and structural contexts, thus making the use of spolia—older building elements employed in new contexts—a twofold strategy of preservation and innovation.

An attempt at understanding at least some of the meanings implicit in the new heterogeneity constitutes the basis of the present study. This book is partly intended as a brief survey of the field, summing up some of the steps taken so far towards describing the reuse of building material and aiming to add new insight through the illustrations, many of which reveal details and aspects of buildings not previously shown in photographs. It also aims to suggest a new approach to the interpretation of architectural reuse and thus includes a history of ideas and attitudes as a necessary contextualising and illuminating dimension of the analysis. This implies addressing questions about the development, characteristics, and ideological or metaphorical significance of the new architectural practice of appropriation.

The account takes its point of departure in the early fourth century, employing the terms “late Antiquity” and “early Christianity” interchangeably, inasmuch as both definitions of period and style imply something different from Classical Antiquity. Even when one keeps in mind the difficulty of establishing period definitions and maintains the conviction that stylistic developments occur gradually, the conspicuous use of spolia at this time shows that innovation is taking place. Thus, the evident appropriations of material are taken to justify the early fourth century as the chronological starting point, relegating the preceding period to (classical) Antiquity and the period following to the early Middle Ages.

The survey will focus mainly on the city of Rome, with a concentration on the early Christian and medieval era up to the ninth century. Also included
are brief comments in chapters II.2 and IV.3 on Northern European uses of spolia before the Gothic era and on later developments from the high Middle Ages onwards. One practical reason for this has been the desire to reduce the scale of the work. I hope that many of the observations made and the methods applied to the Roman buildings might subsequently be transferred to investigations in other geographical areas too. In limiting the field, I have chosen Rome precisely because the Urbs was the richest in classical architecture and, consequently, in building material for potential recycling. Simultaneously, it was and is the place most intensely imbued with a memory of the great – if pagan – past of the Roman Empire, making it specifically appropriate as a point of departure for explorations of spolia and historical consciousness in the West.

I have not addressed the early Christian Eastern Empire because a different visual language, ornamental style, and understanding of the orders developed here. This legitimises, at least to a certain extent, the restricted focus of the present account on the history of architectural spolia in the West and particularly Rome.

The chronological limitations of privileging the early Christian era at the expense of the subsequent centuries of the Middle Ages are, perhaps, somewhat compensated for by the fact that many of the stylistic themes in later uses of spolia have already been introduced at this time. Although the general development moved towards an increased variety in the building elements, already in the fourth century there were examples of the mixing of materials and orders that was to be so decisive to the conspicuous appearance of reuse. The emphasis on the autonomy of the individual building parts achieved through the typically medieval combination of columns and archivolts (instead of a straight entablature as in the classical tradition), also saw its breakthrough in the fourth century.

Although this book deals with the relation between the architecture built with spolia and the structures of the classical tradition, it might be worth noting that it is not a study in early Christian and medieval revivals of the past. Rather, it has been my aim to focus on the continuity and transformation – or translation – of classical architecture into something new and different.

Finally, a few remarks on the structure of the book may prove useful. In this first, introductory section of the book, which is divided into four main sections, I shall present the topic and discuss the assumptions and methodology behind the analyses, and then round off in chapter I.3 with an illustrated survey of key monuments and a brief account of the historical background of the origin and development of the architectural practice of appropriation. This survey or “catalogue”, which by no means pretends to be comprehensive, offers a short compilation of existing knowledge and additional observations on the reused material in selected churches – information that has not previously been gathered in one place in English. Together with the photographs, this survey may provide a starting point for the reader who is not already acquainted with the material. The more experienced afficionado
of spolia will probably not need to read the text but may find the illustrations helpful.

Based on the information gathered in the survey of I.3, the aim of Section II is to characterise the way the spolia were employed. This section offers an account of the stylistic qualities of the new architecture brought about by the use of “translated” materials. It also discusses the translation of buildings or sites to new purposes, and, finally, the aesthetics underlying the reuse of old material, including ideas from literature and theology as comparative evidence.

Section III interprets some aspects of the early Christian architectural idiom based on the notion that style is a carrier of meaning. Analytical rather than descriptive, this section considers the iconography of architectural reuse from the perspective of the history of ideas and attitudes, and argues that the perception of the world as metaphorical was of supreme importance in the period. Here we shall look at the meaning of rejecting or breaking with tradition and examine how a corresponding aesthetic was not exclusive to the architecture of reuse, but corresponded with general cultural tendencies.

While the third section concentrates mostly on spolia as a means of substitution or a vehicle of triumph (although chapter III.3 also considers ideas of renovation), the emphasis in the fourth and last section is on reuse as a strategy of cultural and ideological continuation. It deals with spolia as an instrument for recollecting the past and touches on the concepts of imitation, classicism and renewal. It also presents a brief survey of attitudes to spolia in the post-medieval centuries, concluding with some considerations on the significance of the subject in contemporary art historical research.
1.1 PRELUDE

"To Imitate the Bees"

"Die Benutzung antiker Baureste, an die man sich einmal gewöhnt hatte, ersparte zudem den folgenden Baumeistern die eigenen Gedanken [...]"

Jacob Burckhardt, Der Cicerone (1855) 1

The subject of “spolia” in the modern sense of the term – meaning architectural reuse – was apparently first dealt with at the time of Raphael and in the art history of Vasari. Though interest in spolia is thus not new, the numerous articles on the subject in recent decades testify to the renewed fascination with architectural reuse. 2 Still, Vasari’s classically prejudiced assertion that “spoglie” were used in early Christian architecture “per mancamento di maestri buoni” (due to the lack of good artists) has only incidentally met with critical resistance or attempts at additional explanations. 3

1 Burckhardt, “Altchristliche Architektur”, Cicerone, I, 79.

2 Although using the term “spoglie” or “spolia” with a familiarity that shows that it was not a new invention in the first half of the sixteenth century, the examples from this period seem to be the earliest known so far using the word in the modern sense. Cf. Francesco Alberini (c. 1510, mentioning some porphyry columns in St Peter’s as spolia originating from the Baths of Domitian), Opusculum de miraculis novae et veteris urbis Romae, 508; Raphael (commenting on the Arch of Constantine, c. 1519), “Letter to Pope Leo X”, 101; Vasari, Vite 2 (Testo): “Proemio delle vite”, 14; fundamental texts on spolia include V W. Deichmann, “Frühchristliche Kirtchen in antiken Heiligtümern” (1939), 105-136; id., “Säule und Ordnung in der frühchristlichen Architektur” (1940), 114-130; id., Die Spolien in der spästantiken Architektur (1975); M. Greenhalgh, The Survival of Roman Antiquities in the Middle Ages (1989); A. Esch, “Spolien: Zur Wiederverwendung antiker Baustücke und Skulpturen im mittelalterlichen Italien” (1989), 1-64; B. Ward-Perkins, From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy AD 300-850 (1984), cpts. 2-8, 10; the first modern monograph on the subject and especially useful because of the historical overview provided by the account is L. de Lachenal, Spolia. Uso e reimpiego dell’antico dal III al XIV secolo (1995), although the lack of footnotes regrettably makes it difficult to use the information as a starting point for further research; the anthology J. Poeschke (ed.), Antiche Spolien in der Architektur des Mittelalters und der Renaissance (1996), including both specific and thematic articles, also provides a useful and extensive bibliography on the large number of articles dealing with specific aspects and historical periods of architectural reuse; Esch, “Reimpiego” in the Enciclopedia dell’arte medievale (1998), 877, is a recent brief survey of the field with bibliographical references; the only really comprehensive monograph on the subject remains Giovanni Marangoni, Delle cose gentilesche e profane trasportate ad uso e adornamento delle chiese, Rome, 1744.

Vasari, Vite, 2 (Testo): “Proemio delle vite”, 14; in opposition to this way of thinking, some exemplary suggestions of an analytical architectural iconography are presented by Deichmann, “Säule und Ordnung”; Onians, Boreers of Meaning; Brenk, “Spolia”; Settis, “Trabiti sua marmora Roma”; and by Pensabene in various excellent articles, e.g. “Amministrazione dei marmi”, “Reimpiego dei marmi”, “Reimpiego nell’età costantiniana”; the essays published recently by B. Ward-Perkins, Re-using the Architectural Legacy (1999) and by Elsner, From the culture of spolia (2000) are excellent introductions to the field, confirming, moreover, some of the founding observations in the present book; Landros Wohl, “Constantine’s Use of spolia”, 85-115, focusing on the use of spolia in the age of Constantine, offers a useful recapitulation of information in the field, broadening the perspective with interesting suggestions concerning the “message” of the spolia, too.
Although refuted already by Alois Riegl in his supreme study *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901), the notion of the period as decadent compared to Classical Antiquity, as implied by Vasari, has been tenacious. The attitudes expressed by Jacob Burckhardt (1855), that the reuse of antique building material meant that succeeding architects stopped thinking creatively for themselves, and Bernard Berenson’s characterization of late Antiquity as a period of decline and the reuse of material as “a confession of inferiority to the past”, have continued to lurk beneath the surface of art historical endeavours, colouring research into the subject. The modern aesthetics of homogeneous seriality developed since the Gothic and Renaissance eras has, evidently, proved difficult to set aside when accounting for the heterogeneous variety of early medieval architecture. Similarly, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the apparent desire to use spolia, even among scholars claiming a positive stand towards the culture of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Many architectural historians have felt a need to apologise on behalf of the period for having abandoned the neat and rational architecture of the classical tradition and having introduced the disorganised architecture of spolia. This fundamental—although unstated and probably unconscious—intolerance is present even in many of the latest studies of the subject. For instance, the common notion that columns and capitals were combined even though the elements did not fit together reveals a point of departure based in modern aesthetics and ideals of rationality, by presupposing that an accurate fitting of elements must always have been desired. Even though it is so often presumed in modern times, there is no evidence of such a desire.

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4 Burckhardt, *Cicerone*, cf. above, 11, note 1; cf. also Burckhardt, *Age of Constantine*, 220, on the low artistic quality of the reliefs on the Arch; Berenson’s attitude is evident already in the title of his book, *The Arch of Constantine or The Decline of Form*, and, e.g., 14; according to Deichmann, *Spolien*, 26, which discusses Ravenna, the use of spolia had its origin neither in ideologies nor aesthetics but in the mere facility to the sovereigns of using prefabricated material. Deichmann, *Spolien*, 99, also claimed that the late antique builders preferred spolia to their own work because it was more beautiful and precise (“schöner und exakter gearbeitet”), implying, of course, that the late antique work was of a decaying and less beautiful standard, and leaving out the consideration that it might be the new heterogeneous use of the old pieces that secured their beauty in the eyes of their late antique beholders.

5 Even the greatest modern specialist in the field, Deichmann, *Spolien*, 17, saw Santa Sabina, for instance, as evidence that similar parts were used as long as possible; only when sets of identical pieces became scarce were the builders forced (“gezwungen”) to continue with heterogeneous material. Similarly, Deichmann, *ibid.*, 92, found that the use of two different sets of Composite capitals in the inner and outer ring of columns in Santa Costanza was a sign of a lack of sufficient identical pieces (and similarly in Grado, *ibid.*, 31). He also wrote about how, gradually, people had to be content with variegated material (“[man] musste sich mit verschiedenem Material begnügen”) *ibid.*, 93; and he described the use of heterogeneous material in the early Middle Ages in Rome as “die regellose Verwendung der Spolien”, or, “Säule und Ordnung”, 129, as a decline of the rules of the orders (“der Verfall der Anordnungsgesetze”), leading to a chaotic plurality of forms (“Man hat zugunsten eines chaotischen Formenreichtums die Regelmäßigkeit aufgegeben”); also the otherwise spolia-friendly A. Esch, who after Deichmann wrote one of the founding texts on architectural reuse, is not free of this attitude. In his account,
having been felt at that time. In fact the opposite seems to have been the case: the plurality and diversity of the material seems to have been appreciated, indicating that one reason for using spolia was, in fact, that the pieces were heterogeneous. Consequently, it would be more appropriate either to try to exclude negatively coloured expressions from the descriptions of architecture employing spolia, for instance by merely observing that columns and capitals of diverse orders, measures or materials were combined, or to suggest that the elements were combined because they varied or "did not match" each other.

Ideally, the point of departure of any analysis of spolia ought to be an awareness of the extraordinary architectural perceptiveness of the early Christians, witnessed by the careful arrangement of the building elements and materials manifest in many of the churches, as described in the following chapters. Such meticulous exploitation of decoration or colour in the overall structure presupposes an attentive and refined visual sensibility, which it takes quite an effort for the modern spectator to muster and, in con-

“Spolien”, 14, he characterised the variety of material in Santa Maria in Cosmedin as barbarically devoid of choice in the appropriation ("barbarisch wahlloser Aneignung"); in his survey “Reimpiego”, 877, Esch described the use of spolia from the seventh century as characterised by a “totale incomprensione del canone e la più completa insensibilità per le proporzioni”, with the different heights of the shafts being compensated for “sgraziatamente” with tall bases, while “i pezzi antichi finirono per assumere il valore di puro materiale: spesso vennero aggiunti l’uno sull’altro, senza pretese di unitarietà e di armonia” – all in all a wording that reveals an unquestioned notion of a Renaissance or classicist aesthetics as the fundamental and absolute ideal; Malmstrom, “The Colonnades”, 37, saw the use of spolia as chaotic, devoid of rules, and forced upon the builders because of the unavailability of homogeneous material: “Any capital was considered the equivalent of any other, the result being a chaotic, indiscriminate mixture of types arranged within no discernible patterns”; in a recent account of the use of spolia in late antique architecture, Brandenburg, “Verwendung von Spolien”, 17-18, repeated the claim of Vasari (and of Burckhardt, Age of Constantine, 220) by explaining the practice of using spolia in the beginning of the fourth century – e.g. in the Church of Constantine – as evidence of a lack of good craftsmen (“Mangel an geeigneten Handwerkern und Material” und “schwindenden handwerklichen Fähigkeiten”): when the imperially and papally supported San Pietro in Vincoli (consec. 439) featured a series of identical Doric columns, Brandenburg, “Verwendung von Spolien”, 23, concluded that it had not been possible to gather a workshop even in a campaign supported by the highest power; he furthermore explained the rare use of the Doric column as conditioned by its availability as a series of identical pieces, thus presupposing that newly manufactured elements must have been more attractive at the time, and also that a series of identical elements was the unquestionable ideal – that is, in other words, that homogeneity mattered more than the type of the appropriated building elements. He thus left out considerations of whether the Doric order had a special significance in the building; when Poeschke, “Architekturästhetik und Spolienintegration”, 225 observed that the “mehr oder weniger konzise Eingliederung [der Spolien] in den neuen architektonischen Zusammenhang offensichtlich eine Frage von sekundärer Bedeutung war”, it similarly reveals an implicit assumption that a "konzise Eingliederung" is the ideal solution according to which everything must be judged. Instead of stating that a less "konzise" fitting of the elements was indeed an asset sought after and desired in the architecture built of spolia, Poeschke explains the supposed lack by the observation that other things mattered more.
sequence, also for the historian of architecture to appreciate. Steeped as we are today in visual stimulation, and familiar as we are with church interiors that are exceedingly rich in imagery and decoration added through the centuries (like Baroque altars, chapels, and extensions of all different sorts), we seem to have become blind to the quiet allusions of early Christian architecture. In our own era of visual bombardment, the layers of imagery from centuries past have the effect of background noise, diverting our concentration from the architectural signs evident to the spectator a millennium and a half ago. Moreover, a general focus on the architectural space rather than its individual elements has been shown to be characteristic of the modern perception rather than an early Christian and medieval one, constituting yet another hurdle to our attempt at reconstructing the way architecture was seen in its day.

In classical Latin, spolium literally meant the skin or hide stripped off an animal. In plural spolia was used figuratively to designate the violent taking of something, as, typically, the spoils of war. Cicero (mid first century B.C.), for instance, used the term to describe how Verres robbed the province of Sicily of antiquities. However, the term spolia was rarely used in the modern sense designating reused architectural elements. Instead, it has been observed that in the fourth century, when reuse in building had become current, governing officials legislating on the practice preferred the phrase rediviva saxa (reborn or renewed stones) to the word spolia with its implicit negative associations. This linguistic detail seems to indicate a fascinating association of restoration with recycled material, suggesting that the use of spolia might be pregnant with significance. As we shall see, one possible implication in the appropriation of obsolete architectural elements to new structures was that the recycled part was allowed to live on into the present.

In addition to the all-encompassing admiration for the aesthetics associated with Classical Antiquity that complicates research in spolia, interpretations of the new style have, in general, been avoided. Extensive ground has

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9 The late antique collection of laws *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.19 (a. 376) (quoted below, note 155), and the *Codex Justinianus*, VIII.10.6. (a. 521), each mention the word in its participle form, in *spoliatis aedibus* (despoiled buildings) and in *civitate spoliata* (despoiled city); cf. Alchermès, “Spolia in Roman Cities”, 167, note 2; Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, mentions the employment of “spoliourn et praeda” to build the Persian Colonnade at Sparta, I.1.6, and “spollis Persicis” (Persian spoils) to build the Odeum at Athens, V.x.1.
10 Alchermès, “Spolia in Roman Cities”, 167, note 2; “redivivis... saxis” is, e.g., mentioned in *Cod. Theod.* 15.1.19. (quoted below, note 155); Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, VII.1, uses the term *redivivus* about old material reused for rubble paving; I am grateful to Rikke Lyngsø Christensen for this reference.
been gained regarding a descriptive architectural history of individual buildings. But compared to the investigations into the whens and wheres of the structures, the why's have attracted less scholarly attention. Indeed, analytical iconography of architecture has not been prominent within art historical research during the last century.\(^{11}\)

To a considerable extent, the profusion of spolia in new buildings in the late antique era may be understood as a consequence of the social and economic situation of the declining Roman Empire. My insistence on the legitimacy of not only describing but also interpreting the architectural language of reuse is not meant as a denial of this. The fact that the production of architectural elements such as capitals had decreased notably in Rome already by the fourth century speaks for itself.\(^{12}\) Just as the city in general was supplied with goods and materials from the provinces, stocks of serially or mass-produced capitals were imported from workshops in the Greek area. Combined with spolia, the use of stock material gathered, for example, in the *Statio Marmorum*, the city’s marble store, replaced the older practice of establishing a workshop at the building site to supply the necessary parts custom-made for the purpose.\(^{13}\) Seen as a facet of these circumstances, the use of spolia was a pragmatic feat of turning obsolete buildings into simply another “stock” of material to add to the stocks of mass-produced and imported pieces of long-distance origin.

Yet the remarkable coincidence of the introduction of a visible reuse in monumental imperial architecture and the official breakthrough of Christianity with Constantine, seems to suggest that architectural appropriation was not just the result of socio-economic conditions in the late Empire.\(^{14}\) And even if these conditions were decisive in the development of the new style, it is remarkable – as it has repeatedly been the case in the history of art – that

\(^{11}\) Krautheimer, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture’” (1942) and Bandmann, *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger* (1951), constitute rare discussions of some of the possibilities of the topic; an important, more recent contribution to the field is Onians, *Bearers of Meaning*, cf. also the bibliography in note 3; for an art historiographical survey and methodological discussion of the subject, see Grossley, “Medieval Architecture and Meaning”.


\(^{14}\) The relation between the reign of Constantine and the introduction of spolia on a monumental scale has been discussed by Brenk, “Spolia”; contrary to this view, Deichmann, “Frühchristliche Kirchen”, 113, saw the earliest use of spolia in Rome strictly as a matter of use of materials or practical concern: “Der Feind der Tempel ist nicht der Aufstand des fanaticierten, zerstörungswütigen Volkes, sondern der Bedarf an Baumaterial, die Spoliennahme für öffentliche wie private Zwecke in der verarmenden Stadt”; Deichmann, *Spolien*, 101, claimed that in the earliest use of spolia there was not yet any idea of triumph over the past.
Fig. 1. The Arch of Constantine (315). Marbles of different colours were used in the arch: Porphyry panels form the background of the roundels. The frieze below the attic was perhaps originally covered with green porphyry. The columns are of giallo antico (Numidian yellow), except the last one on the right on this side of the arch: here the original yellow column was replaced by a pavonazetto (Phrygian purple) column by Clement VIII c. 1597, who transferred the yellow one to San Giovanni in Laterano. The free-standing Dacian prisoners of grey-veined pavonazetto marble are placed on square bases of grey-green cipollino (Caryatid green).

Fig. 2. The Arch of Constantine (315). Detail of reliefs from the period of Hadrian (the roundels) and Marcus Aurelius (the rectangular panels) and of the Constantinian frieze and spandrel figures.
the technical capabilities coincided with aesthetic preferences. There may have been a lack of new local products, but in the architecture of spolia this became an advantage rather than a drawback. As I will argue, the heterogeneity brought about by the use of elements salvaged from different contexts came to coincide with a disavowal of the qualities inherent in a classical (i.e. timeless, homogeneous, complete, and corporeal) style. It is not a straightforward task to separate cause and effect, but apparently the demand or wish for a different architectonic idiom originated simultaneously and in parallel with – rather than either before or after – new techniques of building with spolia.

Indeed, there is no evidence of spolia having been used reluctantly at the start. If in the early fourth century it had been essential for the emperor to employ homogeneous material, the necessary means could probably have been invested in establishing a workshop to produce new regular pieces or at least to camouflage the reuse of old elements. Far from being a discount business, very large amounts of money were actually invested in architecture at the time of Constantine. As it has been observed, reusing building material was not a necessarily cheap or easy solution: the different pieces had to be found, collected, transported, and, not least, adjusted to fit their new context. Indeed, there is no evidence of spolia having been used reluctantly at the start. If in the early fourth century it had been essential for the emperor to employ homogeneous material, the necessary means could probably have been invested in establishing a workshop to produce new regular pieces or at least to camouflage the reuse of old elements. Far from being a discount business, very large amounts of money were actually invested in architecture at the time of Constantine. As it has been observed, reusing building material was not a necessarily cheap or easy solution: the different pieces had to be found, collected, transported, and, not least, adjusted to fit their new context. 15

Furthermore, the use of spolia was first and foremost found in architecture initiated or sponsored by the emperors. The earliest buildings employing spolia conspicuously and on a monumental scale were the Arch of Constantine (315) and the large basilica, San Giovanni in Laterano (c. 312-313, originally consecrated to the Saviour), founded by Constantine. 16 And during the next centuries, spolia seem to have been incorporated in practically all important churches with some connection to the emperors. In smaller, more insignificant or provincial churches, however, the use of newly produced or stock material seems to have persisted, at least for a time. 17 These practices, which varied with the importance of the building to be erected, were also legally determined. Until the Pope officially took over control of Rome from the Byzantine emperor in the second half of the eighth century, the reuse of building material at a scale sufficient for larger buildings was limited to the jurisdiction of the emperor, as various laws of the period testify. 18

Finally, that certain principles of organization in the use of spolia actually emphasised the recycled appearance of the building (as we will discuss further in chapter II.1), rather than camouflaging it (making it clear that the

15 Brenk, “Spolia”, 106; Pensabene, “Contributo”, 5-6, argues similarly in his article on the Normannic use of spolia.
16 On a few examples previous to Constantine, cf. below, 41f, 108f, fig. 92.
18 Cod. Theod. esp. 15.1.: “Public Works”; “De aedificis publicis”, Leges novellae ad Theodosianum pertinentes, Noe IV, 161; Cassiodorus, Variarum libri XII; on the political development towards independence of the Byzantine emperor in the eighth century, cf. Noble, Republic of St. Peter, 57 ff.
Fig. 3. Arch of Constantine (315). Trajanic relief inside the central passage of the arch, looking east.

Fig. 4. Arch of Constantine (315). Detail of Fig. 3 showing head of Trajan reworked as a portrait of Constantine.
parts were not merely distributed fortuitously), would strongly suggest that this style of building should be seen as having qualities that were appreciated and desired.

This point of view may be substantiated by a comparison with the development of other kinds of cultural and artistic expressions. It proves difficult to argue that technical, material, and production-oriented causes were applicable only to the use of spolia in large building enterprises when similar changes of style occurred in, for instance, the literature, painting, sculpture, and small-scale decorative art of the era. Such observations prompt other understandings of the mechanisms behind the development and meanings of the new style.

A work of great interest as regards these considerations of the early Christian attitude to eclecticism and reuse of older material, is Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*, written around 400 and consisting of a compilation of encyclopaedic information and literary material, especially concerning Vergil and his appropriation of Homer and other authors of the past. In the preface to this work, Macrobius prescribed how writers should work and simultaneously described his own practice:

> We ought in some sort to imitate the bees; and just as they, in their wanderings to and fro, sip the flowers, then arrange their spoil and distribute it among the combs, and transform the various juices to a single flavor [...].

This ideal of borrowing from a multiplicity of sources with the aim of transforming the gathered material to a coherent but new and different whole, seems precisely to have been at stake in building with spolia.

In addition to this, the way in which new aesthetic preferences combined with new techniques may be illustrated by the Arch of Constantine. We shall later return to how the stylistic characteristics of late antique sculpture are comparable to the qualities of the non-figurative architecture of spolia. At this point, however, some comments on this monument, one of the earliest to make conspicuous use of spolia, may serve to open the discussion. Celebrating the recent victory of the emperor and dedicated to him by the Senate of Rome (315), the Arch exhibits a remarkable contrast between the older reliefs and the newly produced elements [Figs. 1-2]. The panels of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius and the Hadrianic roundels, featuring naturalistically rendered figures moving unimpededly within an illusion of pictorial space,
are combined with the Constantinian frieze with its compact figures lined up on the flat surface of the background, proportioned hierarchically according to their social status, and with schematic, abrupt patterns of movement. While the figures in the old reliefs are self-contained, the frieze addresses the spectator, with the seated, frontal figure of Constantine in the middle.

The simplification, flatness, and squareness found in the Constantinian frieze, as well as in other late antique sculpture, cannot satisfactorily be explained away (as it has been done traditionally) as the result of a lack of stoncutters or harassment by barbaric aggressors. Leading to a prominence in the production of reliefs rather than of free-standing three-dimensional figures, the tendency towards abstraction and hierarchical rather than naturalistic compositions was ubiquitous in the entire Roman Empire, not just in the Western areas of decreasing population and military crisis. At the same time, it may have been desirable for Constantine, the soldier-emperor, to associate himself with a simple, "popular", and unsophisticated style of sculpture, just as it may have been appropriate to indicate a new approach to governing with a new stylistic expression. 20 As H. P. L’Orange noticed in one of the seminal studies on spolia (1939), some of the heads in the Trajanic and Hadrianic reliefs were recut to represent Constantine [Figs. 3-4]. 21 The use of the reliefs of the important imperial predecessors, including the adjustment of their faces to metamorphise into Constantine, as well as the placement of the old elements on the upper half of the monument together with the new frieze and reliefs placed at their base, made the Arch of Constantine a very conscious political statement. 22

The fact that the arch was officially erected by the Senate, as stated by its dedicatory inscription, does not reduce its importance in this regard, as it must be assumed that the project was accepted, if not conceived, on Constantine’s part. The new emperor continued the Roman tradition while simultaneously transforming it. He had the old reliefs reworked and integrated on the monument in an innovative way. All of them literally rest on the contemporary work of the frieze. The structural composition and the iconographic programme are thus bound together. Following this line of

20 Kitzinger, “Interpretation of Stylistic Changes”, 36 ff.
21 L’Orange, Der spätantike Bildschmuck, 161-191.
22 L’Orange, ibid.; Pensabene, “Reimpiego nell’età constantiniana”, 752 ff; Brenk, “Spolia” 104 ff; Pensabene & Panella, “Reimpiego e progettazione”, 125 ff, 174 ff; Pensabene & Panella (eds.), Arco di Costantino; Peirce, “The Arch of Constantine”, 387-418; Kinney, “Rape or Restitution”, 55-58; Elsner, “From the culture of spolia”, 149-184; Brilliant, Visual Narratives, 119-123; the practice of replacing a predecessor’s head with the present emperor’s was often used as a means of dannatio memoriae. However, this was apparently not at issue in the Arch of Constantine as the old reliefs had been removed from their original context and were therefore no longer to be understood as monuments to, for instance, Trajan. People of the day may or may not have been aware of their origin, but the fact remained that their stylistic idiom differed from the Constantinian reliefs. It is in this sense that Constantine appropriated the old tradition, regardless whether the reliefs were recognised at the time as specifically Trajanic or not.