Spolia and Heritage in Byzantium: A Brief Introduction

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In the 1380s, Raimondo del Balzo Orsini decided to establish the town of Galatina in the Salento, the very south of Italy, as a pilgrimage center. Having inherited the county of Soleto, he established a large basilica – S. Caterina d'Alessandria – in Galatina, located a mere 4 km from Soleto, outfitting it with relics of Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Architectural historians have long discussed whether this church was built *ex novo* or if it reused parts of a Byzantine church along with Romanesque structures and building sculpture.[1] The ground plan, with two ambulatoria dividing the main nave from the side aisles, is highly unusual and has been convincingly interpreted as an architectural quotation of St. Catherine's on Sinai, with its two rows of chapels lining the main nave.[2] Another unusual feature of the church is a single apse protruding southward from the right side aisle. Some scholars have suggested that these parts of the walls are the remnant of an earlier Byzantine church. However, in the absence of an archeological study of the building, this hypothesis rests precariously on a fragmentary Greek inscription placed over the side entrance on the right (fig. 1). The presence of the Greek inscription has been taken to be a holdover (*spolium*) from the original building. However, a recent paleographical study has demonstrated that the inscription dates from the late Gothic period, when Raimondo built the present church.[3]

Another piece of St. Catherine's building sculpture similarly hints at notions of spoliation or stylistic anachronisms: the Romanesque relief over the main portal showing Christ among the Apostles (fig. 2). Stylistically, it would be attributed to the twelfth century given its overt Romanesque character. This has led scholars to ask if the lintel is either a reused object from a different context or if the entrance wall and portal belonged to an assumed previous church, whose existence has yet to be proven. However, recent studies have convincingly demonstrated the unlikelihood of both of these theories; the lintel shows no signs of reuse and appears to be custom-made for the main entrance, and there is no evidence for parts of the entrance walls belonging to a previous building.[4] The more convincing explanation is that the lintel – along with the Greek inscription over the right side entrance – was made at the time the church was erected in the 1380s. At that point, the Romanesque style of the figures on the lintel would have represented a decidedly antiquated or antiquarian taste – it came ca. 200 years too late.[5]

Such archaisms in the spoliation of material, visual, and stylistic features are easily overlooked by modern art history, which – in the absence of textual evidence – often relies on dating artifacts based on an assumed linear development of artistic styles, visual or paleographic forms. This modern predisposition has long hampered our understanding of how people used and referenced the past through stylistic and material

1 Harvey 2022.
2 Pollini 2022b, 291–293.
3 Giannini – Virgilio 2021, 44–61.
4 Pollini 2022a.
5 On the "belatedness" or anachronistic features in art, see Moxey 2013.

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Fig. 1: Greek inscription, right side entrance,
S. Caterina d'Alessandria, Galatina (photo: Armin Bergmeier)

Fig. 2: Christ among the Apostles, main portal,
S. Caterina d'Alessandria, Galatina (photo: Armin Bergmeier)

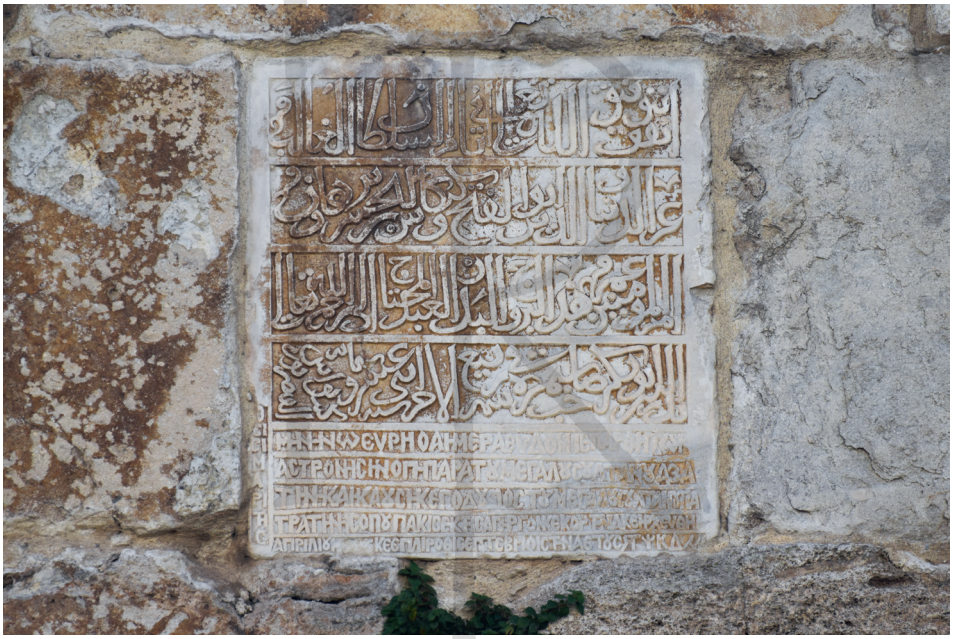

Fig. 3: Inscription, citadel walls, Sinop (photo: David Hendrix)

spoliation. Sometimes, when we know the date of an object's production, it is easier to grasp the character of the antiquarian intervention. The pseudo *spolium* over the main entrance of the church at Galatina is one example. Another famous example is the Seljuk inscription naming the patron Badr al-Dīn Abū Bakr on the citadel walls of Sinop, which provides a date (1215/16 CE) and a Greek translation of the Arabic text (fig. 3).[6] The Greek letters are without serifs and accents, a paleographic style that scholars largely believe was outdated in the course of the eleventh century.[7] Yet, the inscription's date is unambiguous, making clear that the style of writing is a continuation of a much older fashion, defying modern linear chronologies. These two examples lay bare the problems of modern historical disciplines and their relationship to style. They remind us in no uncertain terms, that we need to rethink how style, chronology, and history were mobilized in the past.[8] They can serve as a call to actively and critically look for moments of antiquarian engagement with the past.

The articles in this volume seek to shed new light on precisely these overlooked archaisms and acts of spoliation. This book is about ideas, style, and material objects, their reuse and repurposing in the Eastern Roman Empire and after its end in 1453. Ultimately, it is also about the futility of using style to date objects.

6 Redford 2014, 166–169.

7 On conservative letter forms in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Byzantine paleography, see for example Hunger – Kresten 1980, 187–236; Bianconi – Crisci – Degni 2021, 139–145. See also my contribution in the present volume.

8 See for example Bernard 2023.

Spolia and Cultural Heritage

Spolia and acts of spoliation have long been studied in order to establish the original context, meaning, and circumstances of the reused pieces.[9] Increasingly, scholars have also asked what the – ideological – reasons behind certain acts of reuse might have been. This last aspect has proven to be particularly difficult to ascertain as not all acts of spoliation were guided by lofty ideas and ideology. As Hugo Brandenburg has noted, the abundant use of spolia in late antiquity, such as in the churches of Rome, was not the result of an ideology that sought to make subtle points about history, heritage or belonging.[10] They simply continued a long-standing tradition of outfitting prestigious buildings with beautifully worked columns, capitals, and architraves. Of course, this practice inevitably served to mark a continuity with the building traditions of the past. But while Brandenburg confined his rejection of ideological interpretations to the historically-specific spolia buildings of late antique Italy, Michael Greenhalgh has argued that acts of spoliation universally lacked ideological concerns and should be understood as the result of purely pragmatic considerations.[11] This, however, is contradicted by the evidence of plentiful spolia throughout the Middle Ages and throughout various regions that all betray a concern with displaying, exhibiting, and mastering the things of the past.

The long-standing interest of art historians and archaeologists in spolia resonates with and informs the more recent focus on heritage in material culture studies. At their core, both spolia and heritage are about acts and processes of the transformation of material and meaning. Cultural heritage studies do not examine what something signified at the moment of inception, but rather how objects and ideas were reshaped, reused, and reinterpreted over time. Spolia – reused and reworked fragments from the past – are material expressions of these same categories and manifestations of change over time. Both spolia and heritage trace how the relationship between the past and the present was continually negotiated, how the past was *used*. Laurajane Smith defines heritage "not so much as a 'thing', but as a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present."[12] The act of negotiating the value of the past through artifacts can be highlighted through conscious interventions to frame the reused objects as fragmentary and seemingly 'out-of-place', thereby drawing attention to the act of reframing.

The field of cultural heritage studies can be broadly separated into two thematic and methodological areas: the first frequently addresses how objects are protected, preserved, and conserved, and the debates and laws around certain sets of artifacts today. A second approach investigates how objects collected, rewrote, and reconfigured meaning over time along with their role in exhibiting aspects of identity, belonging, and history of social groups in the past. The first strand comprises inquiries relating

9 See for example L'Orange – von Gerkan 1939; Esch 1969; Deichmann 1975.

10 Brandenburg 2011 esp. 61. Beat Brenk has argued for an intentional strife for variety (*varietas*) in late antique visual culture, but it must remain open what is the hen and what is the egg. See Brenk 1987, 105–106.

11 Greenhalgh 2009; Greenhalgh 2011.

12 Smith 2006, 2. See also Harvey 2001.

to the physical, ideological, and legal place older artifacts hold today. Scholars frequently inquire about the paths along which material heritage has made its way to us and what meaning it holds today and in the recent past. The second strand predominantly studies *past presents*, epistemological shifts and the various epistemologies that have shaped how people have used and reused the objects over time. To understand these acts, it is of foremost importance to question modern lenses, the epistemological patterns of knowledge-making today. Both strands of heritage studies are ultimately present-centered, be it how heritage is understood, used, and preserved today or how past presents have been written and rewritten over time and thus made their way into the Now. Both strands are not focused on excavating original meaning; rather they study ways in which the objects and ideas have been transformed, used, and misused at different times in their lives.

In the shift of material culture studies towards questions of heritage lies a drastic change of perspective and a decentering of the objects. They and their (original) meaning are no longer studied as an end in themselves. Instead, academic inquiries focus on the values, uses, alterations, and the reasons for these interventions in the time after the moment of production. A cultural heritage approach asks not: what is this object about or what does it mean? Rather, it asks: how did people use it, and in which structures of knowledge-making was it embedded? It focuses on aspects of use, preservation, excavation, alteration, and display, on forgery, recreation, and spoliation. Such an approach, thus, aims at an epistemological critique of narratives framing the objects and practices. Spolia, acts of spoliation, and cultures of reuse are bound to play an even greater role in material studies in the future. As Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood wrote, "all histories of building and painting are histories of reuse."[13] The shift away from meaning and context at the moment of production will yield more nuanced questions of heritage and how objects and ideas were used again and again. This volume seeks to contribute to this trend that has accelerated in recent years with an increased volume of publication centering on spolia and spoliation.[14]

Summary of the Contributions

In the past, spolia have often been subjected to interpretations casting them as apotropaic objects deflecting evil or as triumphalist gestures establishing supremacy over other groups or periods. The contributions in this volume, by contrast, seek to understand spolia beyond analogous meaning-making, understanding them as active, multi-faceted ways to cite, show appreciation, adapt, transform, recycle and repurpose older artifacts.[15] The act of spoliation invests the old with a new significance modifying or even completely changing the meaning these objects might have had at their moment of inception.

13 Nagel – Wood 2010, 178.

14 Some of the most important edited volumes and monographs on the subject of spolia include Settis 1986; Brilliant – Kinney 2011; Altekamp – Marcks-Jacobs – Seiler 2013–2017; Jevtić – Yalman 2019; Meier 2020; Jevtić – Nilsson 2021.

15 On the spolia in Constantinople as "living collections," see Melvani 2018, 168–169.

The contributions in the first section of the book study how older visual culture was cited, understood and reemployed in antiquity and in the medieval Roman period. Julian Schreyer studies how ancient works, such as the Choragic Monument of Thrasylos (fourth century BCE) at the Athenian Acropolis, referenced earlier architecture, by isolating and reapplying certain recognizable features. The resulting configuration thereby created surfaces that visually indicated their attachment to the past through their fragmented aesthetic.

Andrew Griebeler focuses on the clash between Christian and occult image cultures, highlighting how ancient ideas were reemployed and reimagined in ninth-century Byzantium. By focusing on illuminations from the Paris Gregory, he addresses the ways in which medieval Romans conceptualized the differences between Christian images and pagan statues.

Andrea Mattiello studies the churches of Mystras and their imagery and frescoes relating to Saint Demetrios. He shows how the visual references to this early Christian saint were geared towards establishing a Greek historical identity for the newly-founded city of Mystras, arguing that the Palaiologan dynasty was eager to express cultural relevance by re-engaging the late ancient history of the early Christian era.

In a similar vein, Jon Cubas Díaz looks at stylistic reuses in Northern Macedonian churches – Sv. Nikola in Varoš (Prilep) and Sv. Nikola in Manastir, south of Prilep. The anachronistic borrowings resulted in an eclectic mix of styles. The contribution is a reminder that stylistic borrowings were not uncommon in the premodern era. These visual spolia, thus, disrupt modern ideas of linear chronologies and developments across time, asking us to reconsider how style could be employed as an active agent.

The second section of the volume studies aspects of material heritage. Here, I look at how the churches of the Mani used and reused sculptural elements in open templa and in later reconfigurations. By focusing on the often overlooked succession of interventions over time, I argue that epistyle beams and other sculptural elements were often reused much later than thus far assumed and that closed screens (iconostases) are likely to be a product of the period after 1453. An important case study is the church of Ag. Theodoroi in Vamvaka, which should be dated substantially later than the date – 1075 – inscribed on its reused tie beam.

Ivana Jevtić highlights the fact that spolia often strive for a dialogue with the past. Focusing on the recently discovered late Byzantine or early Ottoman spolia floor of Vefa Kilise Camii in Istanbul, she describes it as an "artistically heterogeneous ensemble" where everything fits obliquely together as in a collage. She shows that the composition of the pavement appears like a simulation of spolia walls transposed to the floor. The pieces, whose provenance is likely a local one, accumulated history and forged connections with the Byzantine past via material heritage.

Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan and Martin Dennert similarly query the provenance of some spolia pieces in the early Ottoman mosques of the Troas. These reuse ancient and Byzantine pieces alike and were often transported across vast distances. The lintel over the door of the Murad Hüdâvendigâr Camii in Assos bears a secondary, eleventh-century inscription, which was later reused in the mosque. Its ornament develops from a central Christogram, which the two scholars argue should not be identified

as a sign of victory. The piece can be traced back to the late antique church of Hagios Kornelios in Skepsis and was thus transported over a distance of 80 kilometers.

Finally, Georgios Pallis draws our attention to the largely unknown middle Byzantine sculptural pieces from the Eastern Aegean islands and to the various ways these objects have survived into our time – frequently by being reused in later buildings. He notes the dominance of sculpture from templon screens in the surviving pieces, while other building sculpture is largely absent from the local production. Pallis urges us to respect the secondary context in which the artifacts are found today instead of decontextualizing them in modern museum displays.

This volume thus aims to draw attention to the fact that spolia studies and current approaches to cultural heritage are connected on multiple levels: they both ask us to foreground material and ideological transformations across time, and they are intimately connected with questions of preservation, collecting, and curation. The study of spolia has long existed independently, but the contributions in this volume demonstrate that these studies may well have paved the way to the current focus on cultural heritage studies and should be seen as an integral part of these. As spolia and heritage studies converge, we might ask how modern-day and historical approaches differ regarding acts of curating the fragments from the past.

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