

# TROPHIES AND ORPHANS: THE USE OF *SPOLIA* COLUMNS IN ANCIENT CHURCHES

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Image: David Valinsky

Fig. 1: Rome, *Santa Maria in Trastevere*, north colonnade. Drawing by David Valinsky.

Motley rows of reused column shafts, capitals, and bases were among the most conspicuous features of medieval church interiors in Rome and south Italy for over a thousand years, from the time of their first appearance under Constantine the Great (d. 337) until the end of the Middle Ages. They are the focus of Maria Fabricius Hansen's recently translated guidebook *The Spolia Churches of Rome*, which includes entries on eleven churches ranging in date from the fourth century (*Santa Costanza*) to the thirteenth (*San Lorenzo fuori le Mura*).<sup>1</sup> Hansen avers that these colonnades expressed the "new world view" of Christian builders as well as a new aesthetic. In their rejection of classical norms and regularity, colonnades made of *spolia* "produced a particularly attractive architectonic and spatial effect and evinced a complex and pleasing temporality."<sup>2</sup> Hansen's argument assumes a viewer who knew that the components of the colonnades were pre-Christian (or at least pre-Constantinian) and that they belonged originally to an older style of architecture, in which colonnades were not so diverse but displayed order and uniformity. A fourth-century Roman might have been such a viewer, but one of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries most likely was not, as Rome presented a very different frame of reference in the later Middle Ages. By the twelfth century nearly all colonnades were various and irregular, and nearly all classical counterexamples had collapsed.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not they

represented a "new world view," the fourth- and fifth-century colonnades created a "new normal" that later church builders reproduced. The novelty of the earliest colonnades quickly became routine and then canonical.

"Spoliate colonnade" is almost an oxymoron, as "colonnade" denotes a suite of identical units while *spolia* are individual pieces chosen separately. Many refuse subordination to the whole and stand out for their size, quality, design, material, color, condition, or some other factor that draws the viewer to them alone (fig. 1). By

standing out, *spolia* challenge the integrity of the colonnade and make it seem more like an elaborate work of jewelry, in which individual gems compete for attention with one another and with their setting. To understand the workings of the spoliate colonnade we must first say something about *spolia*.

For the sake of argument, I propose that in the European and Mediterranean Middle Ages, *spolia* were either trophies or orphans. The analogy with orphans is inspired by Siri Sande's evocative comparison of the spoliate colonnades in Constantinian basilicas



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Fig. 2: Rome, *San Nicola in Carcere*, four columns of the north colonnade.



Fig. 3: Rome, Santa Sabina, south colonnade.

with an Old Testament passage that was cited by Saint Jerome in the fourth century to illustrate how Christians might safely make use of the writings of pagans. The biblical passage concerns what we would today call prisoners of war:

If thou go out to fight against thy enemies, and the Lord thy God deliver them into thy hand, and thou lead them away captives, and

seest in the number of the captives a beautiful woman, and lovest her, and wilt have her to wife, thou shalt bring her into thy house: and she shall shave her hair, and pare her nails, and shall put off the raiment, wherein she was taken: and shall remain in thy house, and mourn for her father and mother one month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and shalt sleep with her, and she shall be thy wife.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4: Rome, Santa Sabina, Corinthian capital.



Fig. 5: Rome, San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, east basilica, trophy capital in north colonnade.

Sande wrote: "This is a good metaphor for material *spolia*. The many columns in the Constantinian basilicas stand, shorn of their original identity, like the female prisoners in a stranger's house. They are not allowed to remind the spectator of their past."<sup>5</sup>

The image of despoiled and kidnapped beauties is even more apt for twelfth-century colonnades like those in San Nicola in Carcere, which contain shafts of five different stones, five different kinds of capitals, and modern bases that disguise the irregular heights at which the shafts meet the pavement (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> There is something brave about the way these shafts rise to their new assignment, and also something lonely. The assemblage of heterogeneous units is like a foster family. Most spoliated colonnades in Rome are like this. Occasionally, as in the fifth-century church of Santa Sabina, the *spolia* come from a single source and thus recreate the unity of their original installation (fig. 3). They appear like a natural family but are alien to their context, because fifth-century Roman sculptors were incapable of producing fluted shafts and fine Corinthian capitals (fig. 4). Born in the second century, the shafts, capitals, and bases were adopted into a new construction in the fifth.<sup>7</sup> We do not know what building was destroyed to make them available. Like human orphans they are survivors of catastrophe, possibly the products of tragedy, in any case bereft of their proper context. Their natural environment might have been still in existence but too impaired to be functional. They were taken to a new home.

My sense of "trophy" is informed by

the work of Antje Krug, whose article “*Spolia as Trophies*” traces a continuous line from the dark origin of *spolia* as “blood trophies” or war booty to trophy artifacts acquired by gift or commerce as evidence of wealth and political stature, and finally to antiquities admired as exempla from a model past.<sup>8</sup> She dates the last transition to the Carolingian period. Ultimately, in my view, the three modes of *spolia* co-existed. Blood trophies were still taken in the Middle Ages—as they are to this day—and trophy artifacts were still acquired by real and would-be potentates. “Antiquity” became one of the features that qualified an artifact as a trophy, along with material value, craftsmanship, and pedigree.<sup>9</sup> Two capitals in the lower colonnades of the sixth-century basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura are definitive examples of trophy artifacts (fig. 5).<sup>10</sup> Displaying images of battlefield trophies (the armor of the vanquished, hung on a pole) on their four faces and of four Victories at the corners, they represent all three aspects of the trophy-*spolium*: the blood trophy in their imagery; the trophy artifact in their exceptional condition, craftsmanship, and possibly also their provenance, which is lost to us; and antiquity in both workmanship and the obviously non-Christian iconography. The battle trophy had been appropriated by Christians as early as the second century as a covert symbol of the crucifix, and martyrs’ bodies were also sometimes called “trophies” (*tropaea*), so it is likely that the capitals were deliberately placed near the altar in allusion to the Eucharist and the body of Saint Lawrence, which is enshrined in the church.<sup>11</sup> Their susceptibility to Christian interpretation only added to the value of these trophy artifacts, as in reuse they could function as symbols of the superior moral virtue of their new Christian owners over the pagans who originally produced them.

“Orphan” is a situational category; it describes the condition of a *spolium* at the time of its acquisition, not the motive or intention in acquiring it. “Trophy,” as used here, is also situational, although the word implies an intention to convey triumph or superiority, as in the example just discussed. The motives for using *spolia* in art and architecture have been debated for many decades. In a foundational article published nearly fifty years ago, Arnold Esch proposed five motiva-



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Fig. 6: Venice, San Marco, detail of west façade, with *spolia* taken from Constantinople.

tions for using *spolia* in medieval Italy: convenience, profanation or exorcism, *interpretatio christiana*, political legitimation, and aesthetic beguilement.<sup>12</sup> More recent studies have refined and expanded this list; for example, Bente Kiilerich listed nine lenses through which *spolia* have been interpreted by modern art historians: ideology, magic, exorcism, appropriation, citation, nostalgia, memory, triumphalism, and historical awareness.<sup>13</sup> Robert Coates-Stephens observed that all or most

such categories are indistinguishable from the motives for using new materials and thus are not explanatory of *spolia* per se. On the basis of his reading of the few late antique texts that refer to *spolia*, Coates-Stephens identified four headings under which *spolia* were perceived in that era: spoils of war, religious triumphalism, despoiling the dead (i.e., the reuse of material from tombs), and aesthetic conservatism.<sup>14</sup> It is striking that there is so little overt overlap between his categories and

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Fig. 7: Venice, San Marco, tetrach reliefs from Constantinople.



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Fig. 8: Cordoba, Great Mosque, completed in 987, interior view.

Küilerich's. If his represent the views of the early users of *spolia*, hers reflect the interpretive devices of our own day. We must use both, because contemporary testimonies do not account for all of the spoliated monuments and objects

we want to explain.

Coates-Stephens's example of *spolia* as spoils of war is a strange episode in the history of the Sasanian Emperor Khosrau I, who conquered the Christian city of Antioch in AD 540. Before

burning the city he had his troops strip it of everything down to the marble revetment of its houses, in order to adorn a new city near Ctesiphon where he resettled Antioch's captive population. This story was not only remembered but continued to be embellished for centuries. In the tenth-century version of al-Tabari,

within it, and [he gave] orders that a [new city] should be built for him exactly like Antioch but situated at the side of [Ctesiphon] . . . He thereupon had the inhabitants of Antioch transported and settled in the new city; when they entered the city's gate, the denizens of each house went to the new house so exactly resembling their former one in Antioch that it was as if they had never left the city.<sup>15</sup>

[Khosrau] . . . gave orders that a plan should be made for him of the city of Antioch, exactly to scale, with the number of its houses, streets, and everything c o n t a i n e d

The story of Khosrau sheds some light on the best-known Western example of *spolia* as spoils of war, the decoration of San Marco in Venice after the Crusader pillaging of Constantinople in 1204 (fig. 6). The dozens of columns affixed to San Marco's west façade do not recreate the Constantinopolitan palaces they came from, but in a more general way they capture the splendor of Constantinople as a whole, which is thus transferred to Persia. These Venetian *spolia* have been naturalized, however: the shafts, capitals, and bases were so carefully chosen that they seem to have been made for their new environment.<sup>16</sup> Other *spolia* at San Marco do not blend in and thereby announce their status as trophies, especially the ancient bronze horses that were displayed in the center of the west façade and the porphyry figures of Roman tetrarchs pasted onto the wall of the treasury (fig. 7).<sup>17</sup>



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Examples of Coates-Stephens's second category, religious triumphalism, are often ambiguous. The columns holding up the Umayyad Mosque in Cordoba must have come from buildings erected for Christians (fig. 8). Does that make them signs of religious triumph, or were they just useful orphans, recruited to do a new job? Barry Flood has objected to what he perceives as an overreliance on religious triumphalism to explain Christian *spolia* in Islamic contexts.<sup>18</sup> His test case is a number of marble table tops that decorate the walls of Islamic buildings in Syria, which since the 1920s have been interpreted as Christian altars taken as trophies by Muslim armies during their campaigns to recapture territory from the Crusaders. Confirmation of this theory seems to be found in a somewhat later description of a table top in one of the foundations of the fierce anti-Crusader Nur al-Din (1146–1174):

They show in [this] madrasa an altar on which the Christians used to sacrifice, of royal transparent marble, a stone of exquisite beauty . . . We are told that Nūr al-Dīn had it brought from Apamea in 1149. The stone bears a Greek inscription . . . which [indicates a date] 3,000 years . . . before Nūr al-Dīn . . . They tell that Nūr al-Dīn used to stuff the professors with sweets with which this basin of marble was filled.<sup>19</sup>

The irreverent use of the table to feed overprivileged professors indicates that its Christian association was part of its meaning as a *spolium*, but Flood argues that this was only part of the meaning. The other attributes singled out in the description—the beauty of the stone and the table's supposed great age—were equally important. A reductive description of the table as a trophy of Muslim triumph misses the aesthetic and the historicist elements of its appeal.

It may be that religious triumphalism has also been overemphasized in the case of the spoliated colonnades. Colonnades—or *porticus* in Latin—were ubiquitous in ancient Rome, lining streets, surrounding *fora*, supporting civil buildings like basilicas, and adorning recreational ones like theaters. If they were also employed in religious buildings, that did not make them essentially religious; they were



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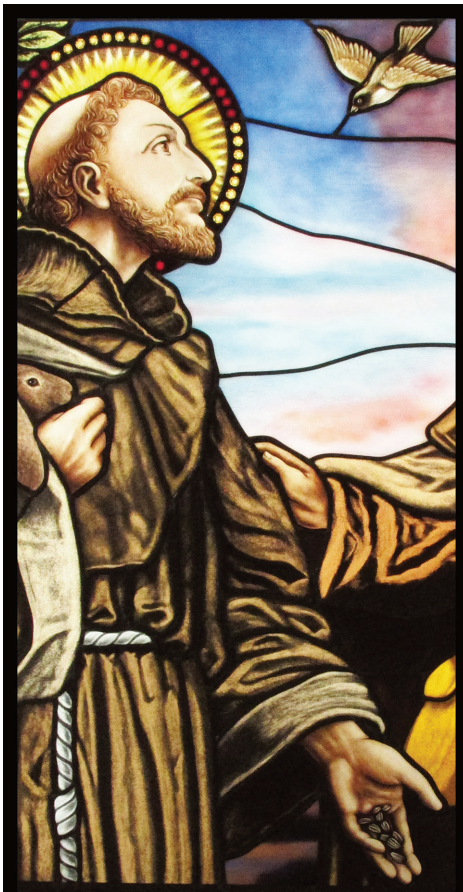
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Fig. 9: Rome, Saint Peter's, detail of Dionysiac column from the Shrine of Saint Peter, now in the niche of Saint Helena.

cultural objects. Even the blatantly Dionysiac imagery of the "corkscrew" columns that adorned the shrine of Saint Peter, gifts of Constantine, did not cause the precious columns to be viewed as pagan, at least as far as we can tell from surviving sources (fig. 9). A medieval legend, probably born in the twelfth century, claimed that they came from the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> This could be a different kind of religious triumphalism—Christianity over Judaism—but in my view a better fit is "translation" (*translatio*), denoting the supersession of one political power—or in this case, one center of religion—by another: Jerusalem superseded by Rome. Whatever the intention, it is clear that in the twelfth century these very special columns were still viewed as trophy artifacts, as they were in the fourth.

By contrast the columns in Saint Peter's four colonnades seem to have been orphans, pieces rescued from ruin or abandonment. Abandonment was not infrequent in the ancient marble industry. Some elements barely made it out of the quarry; others were damaged in transit or survived the transport only to be deemed surplus. Items that arrived broken were repaired, if possible, in the marble yards at Portus, the second-century harbor where they were unloaded for shipment up the Tiber to Rome.<sup>21</sup> Builders with no access to new imports could have made use of these "seconds." Blocks that made it upriver to Rome were stored on a stretch of the left bank

known since the Middle Ages as the "Marmorata" because of the quantities of marble that were found there. A nineteenth-century excavation of the area uncovered over one thousand large blocks and columns and "tens of thousands of sawn [marble] plaques."<sup>22</sup> Although the finds were carted away to repair ancient churches in Rome and elsewhere, Clayton Fant has argued that much of the stone left at the Marmorata had been repeatedly passed over by ancient and later builders as inadequate.<sup>23</sup> Unwanted orphans.

Aftermarket orphans were produced by demolition and decay. A fourth-century inventory of such columns is preserved in a recently published papyrus fragment found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt.<sup>24</sup> The person who compiled the inventory noted precisely the location of each shaft, its dimensions, surface treatment (fluted or not), position (standing or not), the presence of capitals and bases, and whether they were of "foreign" stone. Once inventoried, the columns could have been collected and used by the municipal government to repair public buildings, or sold to what we might call a developer for reuse in the private sphere, or stored until they were needed.<sup>25</sup> Warehouses of such recuperated ornament certainly existed in Rome. It seems likely that some Constantinian colonnades were assembled from the contents of such warehouses or, as argued by Lex Bosman with regard to Saint Peter's, from sites like the Marmorata. Observing that some of the granite shafts that survive from Saint Peter's colonnades have horizontal striations, Bosman concluded that the discolorations were produced while the shafts lay unclaimed on the ground after being shipped from Egypt.<sup>26</sup> In other words, for the fourth-century builders these shafts were surplus goods or imperfect "seconds," orphans available for adoption rather than trophies.

In the Middle Ages the situation was different. The industrial and governmental organization of late antiquity had broken down. The built landscape of Rome was largely privatized, and ruins like the first-century Forum of Caesar were occupied by medieval dwellings and gardens.<sup>27</sup> Broken columns littered the landscape and were sometimes reused as uprights in the walls of the medieval houses (fig. 10). From the tenth through the fourteenth centuries, Rome was pieced to-

gether from such classical debris, with more of it under the surface, buried by the rising ground level. A market for antique building materials was served by mining abandoned public sites on the periphery, like the Baths of Diocletian and Caracalla, as well as private properties in the center of town. The market supplied the twelfth- and thirteenth-century boom in new churches, whose patchwork colonnades are composed of recuperated orphans. Sometimes orphans turned out to be trophies, like the red granite column shaft in the left colonnade of Santa Maria in Aracoeli that bears the inscription A CVBICVLO AVGVSTORVM (“from the chamber of the emperors”; fig. 11).<sup>28</sup> “A cubiculo” was the title of the emperor’s head chamberlain, and the inscription must have been carved in the third century – but thirteenth-century Romans did not know that. They understood the phrase to mean something like “from Augustus’s chamber” and associated it with a legend that Santa Maria in Aracoeli stood on the site of an altar erected by the first-century emperor Augustus to the “son of God.” The builders of the basilica repurposed the shaft to serve as a material proof that Augustus vowed his altar on this site.

Just as orphans could be trophies, so most trophy-*spolia* were orphans; the categories are not mutually exclusive. One describes the conditions in which the elements of spoliated colonnades were found and chosen for adoption; the other indicates the special value

that attached to some of them. Medieval Roman church colonnades comprised one or the other, and almost always both.



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#### Endnotes

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6. Hansen, *Spolia Churches of Rome*, 186–93; for more precise information on the *spolia* see Patrizio Pensabene, *Roma su Roma. Reimpiego architettonico, recupero dell’antico e trasformazioni urbane tra il III e il XIII secolo*. (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2015), 559–560.
7. Hansen, *Spolia Churches of Rome*, 194–205 (erroneously dating the *spolia* to the late third century); Pensabene, 252–253.
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27. Kinney, “*Spolia* as Signifiers,” 155–58.
28. Hansen, *Spolia Churches of Rome*, 66–67. Hansen follows the common view that the inscription is medieval, but I think this is epigraphically impossible. See Dale Kinney, “Making Mute Stones Speak: Reading Columns in S. Nicola in Carcere and S. Maria in Aracoeli,” in *Architectural Studies in Memory of Richard Krautheimer*, ed. Cecil L. Striker (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1996), 83–86; Pensabene, 658–660.



Fig. 10: Rome, medieval house above the Market of Trajan, second century AD.



Fig. 11: Rome, Santa Maria in Aracoeli, completed in the thirteenth century, inscribed granite column in north colonnade.