

Constructing Memory in Byzantine Architecture: *Spolia* as a Mnemonic Device

Summary:

This research, focusing on Byzantine Anatolia, investigates the role of *spolia* in constructing memory in Byzantine architecture and how such memories affected interpretation of architecture by the Byzantine beholder. Using textual and archaeological evidence, it re-interprets the role of *spolia* as a continuing source of stylistic inspiration, whereby building techniques, materials, and traditions inherited from antiquity acquired new forms and meanings. It identifies how the perception of architecture of memory and transcendence became imbued with new meanings and qualities, how architecture constructed of *spolia* created or reinforced collective memory and how this was exploited by patrons and builders to evoke and/or manipulate specific memories.

This research aims to investigate the role of *spolia* in constructing memory in Byzantine architecture, with particular focus on Byzantine Anatolia, and how such memories affected interpretation of architecture by the Byzantine beholder. The practice of *spolia*, i.e. the reuse of building materials removed from earlier structures, expanded in close association with the spread of Christianity, and became a distinctive feature of architecture, deliberately introducing a new aesthetic taste of *varietas* (ποικιλία) in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The reuse of earlier building materials, a practice almost inevitable given the economic conditions of the Late Roman Empire, thus found its most explicit expression in association with Early Christianity; sharing ideals of ‘unifying the old and the new’ and appropriating the classical traditions into ‘new forms and meanings’.

The motivations underlying *spolia* and spoliation have long been debated, with the practice acquiring both positive and negative connotations and extending into far-reaching multi-disciplinary connections. Architectural recycling and maintaining a physical record of the city, statement of civic pride, admiration for and revival of classical antiquity, desires for continuity (or discontinuity) with the past, manifestation of political or religious propaganda, aesthetics and, naturally, factors of practical expediency are frequently invoked as explanations for the practice of spoliation and architectural reuse. In addition, *spolia* can be interpreted as an almost indelible form of physical memory; practical mementos forming an historical thread linking phases and eras along an historical timeline.

Using textual (e.g. legislative regulations, city *encomia*, Byzantine histories and chronographies) and archaeological/architectural evidence, this research re-interprets the role of *spolia* as a continuing source of stylistic inspiration to appropriate building techniques, materials, and traditions inherited from antiquity into – and endowing them with – new forms and meanings. It also seeks to identify the perception of architecture of memory and transcendence, imbued with new meanings and qualities by the Byzantine viewer and understand how architecture constructed of *spolia* could have created or reinforced collective memory. This investigation is carried out in conjunction with an analysis of how the inherent power of *spolia* was exploited by

patrons and builders in Late Antiquity and Byzantium to evoke or manipulate specific memories in various contexts and settings.

The initial stages of this work, stemming from the author's previous research on spolia and spoliation in Byzantine Ankara, were presented at 71st Annual International Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) in Saint Paul, Minnesota (2018) in a thematic session titled *Constructing Memory in Ancient and Pre-Modern Architecture*. The conceptual, theoretical, and comparative framework for this draft is now being developed at the Italian Academy with the support of the Weinberg Fellowship. Did spolia come solely from structures already in ruins, or were some buildings deliberately dismantled to acquire construction materials for either ideological or practical reasons? Were the processes of spoliation and architectural reuse carried out under the directives of patrons and rulers? What aspects or contexts of Classical Antiquity were selected to survive (through spoliation), and what was left behind? The upcoming stages will involve an in-depth analysis of these issues through a series of selected case studies from Byzantine Asia Minor (modern Turkey), focusing on key sites such as Ancyra (modern Ankara), Constantinople (modern Istanbul), and Nicaea (modern Iznik), among others. Emphasis is placed on the surviving examples of religious and defensive architecture, both often enlivened with copious amounts of spolia, in association with the changing character of cities in the Byzantine Middle Ages.

For instance, in the cases of both Ancyra and Nicaea – cities which re-emerged without major interruption from the ruins and with the memory of their Classical past through the 'Dark Ages' into modern times – medieval builders, aspiring to build, or rebuild, a chain of defenses to reflect both strength and aesthetics, appropriated building materials inherited from Antiquity. In the process, they embellished and presented these materials with new forms and meanings in the fortification walls; providing physical and visual access to, and protection for, their respective cities. Of course, their apparent concern for appearance and aesthetics cannot necessarily be interpreted as indicating an attempt to establish a connection with the past (Serin 2024, 23). Yet, the citadel of Ankara emerges as a Mnemosyne upon which the fragmented communal memory of the city was inscribed, intentionally or not, in physically recognizable components of the Classical and Early Christian past (Serin 2014, 80).

Both historical sources and archaeological interpretation suggest a multiplicity of approaches towards the practice of spoliation and architectural reuse. However, as the earlier stages of the present research have also shown, quite apart from the practical or ideological motivations engendering their use, *spolia* are material reminders of lost and irretrievable architectural settings and can therefore be recognized as tangible and mnemonic devices for a better *interpretation* of those lost settings; or, in other words, making those settings accessible and comprehensible to the contemporary beholder. In the widely quoted words of Freeman Tilden ([1957] 1977, 8), interpretation is 'the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact. [The interpreter] goes beyond the apparent to the real, beyond a truth to a more important truth'. Interpretation also involves 'a perceived gap between the known and the unknown' and a desire

to explore meaning (Shanks and Hodder 1995, 6-7). Seen in this perspective, architecture built of *spolia* inevitably encapsulates a ‘dimension of time’, i.e. the viewer’s retrospective contemplation on ‘historical time’ (*tempo storico*) to establish a tangible link between the past and the present, or, in other words, to explore meaning. The processes of constructing memory and finding meaning in the past, fostered by the use of *disiecta membra* from earlier buildings, also involve, whether intentionally or not, the selection of the ‘context’ to fabricate a present from the remnants of the past, the meaning of which, and of its products, largely depends on the viewer’s perspective, and this applies particularly to *spolia* (Hansen 2003, 165, 170; Stenbro 2005, 74-75).

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