The Sword and the Shrine: Rendering Spoils Sacred in Republican Rome

Pablo Picasso once remarked that "lesser artists borrow; great artists steal." The Romans were not the first to confiscate artworks as war booty or to use them in the decoration of performative religious spaces, but they did it so effectively and so often that the word spolia immediately evokes imperial Rome. Yet modern scholarship's understanding of this phenomenon is frequently overwhelmed by late antique evidence for pagan spolia in Christian churches. Moreover, studies of Roman religious spaces have focused largely on symbolism and perception, rather than on the creation of these semantic systems. This paper seeks to redress that imbalance by asking: what motivated the early reuse of spolia and who participated in the process? How did the intersection between stolen objects and sacred architecture operate in Republican Rome?

Using M. Claudius Marcellus's conquest of Syracuse (c. 212 BCE) as a case study, this paper argues that the reuse of spoils in Republican sanctuaries was a negotiated act that transformed material appropriation into cultural capital. Drawing on Dominik Maschek's model of expert and vernacular knowledge systems, I propose a reconfiguration: while expert knowledge keepers—architects, builders, artisans—were directly engaged in the physical manipulation of construction materials, vernacular knowledge keepers—commissioners, patrons, and viewers—were directly engaged in the production of meaning. It was the intersection of these two forms of knowledge that cooperatively produced a semantic system through which foreign objects were integrated into Roman sacred topography.

The process by which spoils became sacred was therefore not merely aesthetic or economic, but ideological and network-based. Vernacular knowledge keepers leveraged spolia to

project family prestige, divine favor, and cultural sophistication, while expert knowledge keepers adapted technical traditions to accommodate new materials and forms. The Temple of Honos and Virtus, rebuilt by Marcellus's family after his Sicilian campaign, exemplifies this reciprocity: innovations in twin cella design, artistic display, and marble use reveal how Greek aesthetic vocabulary entered Rome's architectural language through the mediation of both artisans and commissioners. Vernacular knowledge keepers plan the project to maximize cultural capital through visibility, family prestige, and piety; experts, by contrast, implement those decisions practically, translating the vernacular imagination into built form. As Penelope Davies has shown, such architectural acts operated as instruments of identity; here, they also emerge as instruments of religious translation.

This model of a cooperative network reframes early *spolia* as a process of semantic construction within an evolving imperial consciousness. By engaging with the theories of cultural appropriation advanced by Versluys and de Jong, this paper argues that the sanctification of spoils reflects an early stage in the Roman strategy of transforming conquest into cultural continuity. In this framework, the sacred reuse of material is not simply a display of domination but a mechanism for addressing the relationship between self and other. While martial law normalized spoliation, ancient sources like Livy and Cicero reveal ongoing moral controversy over the ethics of appropriation. As Flower explores, the *spolia opima* became a paradoxical act of violence and sanctification. The system succeeded because it internalized conquest as piety, transforming the act of taking into one of giving—to the gods, to the city, and to Roman identity.

Thus proceeds the pattern of material appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and transformation: the general removes the object from its original context, the commissioner introduces it into Roman religious space, and expert artisans rework it into the architectural

language of the city. Through this network, spoils of war are rendered sacred. The sword provides the material and the shrine imparts the significance. As the Romans learned, great artists may steal, but the most innovative artists are those who reuse.

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