

Reconsidering Spolia: Architectural Reuse of Greek Temples in the Early Roman Empire

“Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle.” The concept behind this familiar phrase has echoed around the world for thousands of years. In the ancient Greco-Roman sphere, architects and sculptors often implemented this practice through *spolia*. In the most basic sense, these are materials removed from one context and reused in another. On the one hand, reusing spolia cut down on the time, resources, and workforce necessary for public building programs throughout the expansive civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean. In other cases, the appearance of these reused materials could invoke an ideological or emotional response in the original viewers. Traditionally, classicists have accredited the activity to late antiquity when architects plundered pagan structures, statues, and monuments for materials to use in early Christian churches. However, this practice did not arise from a vacuum and recent scholarship has pushed for a re-categorization of our definition and chronology for spoliation.

Taking these perspectives on spolia into account, this paper investigates two areas displaying the reuse of temple architecture in early Roman Greece in order to expand the chronology of repurposed religious spoliation and suggest the intentionality inherent to spolia reuse. I consider two primary case studies, the colonnade of the Temple of Apollo at Corinth and the reconstructed temples of the Athenian Agora, in the hopes that the similarities between these two cases can suggest a wider trend. In a brief literature survey, this paper first discusses Roman reactions to spolia, including the idea of luxury mixing with reuse (Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 77 CE, 36), the benefits of repurposed building materials (Vitruvius *On Architecture* ca. 30 BCE, 2.8.19), and the militaristic view of rightful spolia (Cicero *Against Verres* 70 BCE, 2.4.97). Archaeologically, I will examine which materials the architects selected to reuse, the

effort they exerted to re-contextualize the temple architecture, and the visibility of the spolia in its final position. This paper suggests that the religious symbolism and invocation of cultural identity inherent to temples caused their materials to be replaced in an aesthetic, public manner. Furthermore, these examples occurred alongside a deliberate religious shift toward the imperial cult and Roman deities over local traditions. Thus, these early Roman spoliation cases show some continuity with the practices of late antiquity that attempted to supersede paganism with Christianity. Additionally, the temple reuse in Roman Greece has a different character than the concurrent spoliation of other cultures; it recalled the feats of the Greeks rather than their defeat.

This paper adds a re-definition of temple architecture reuse to spolia studies, investigates the specific cases from a comparative angle, and offers insight into the deliberate appropriation of cultural symbolism. The few edited volumes that address Roman reuse, such as *Reuse and Renovation in Roman Material Culture* (Ng and Swetnam-Burland 2018) or *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Duckworth and Wilson 2020), neglect the early architectural spolia of temples and leave a gap in the scholarship. Moreover, although Dr. Jon Michael Frey (2015) has published an excellent article on the reuse of the columns of the Temple of Apollo at Corinth, he only offered many brief theories concerning the message behind the spolia. My paper teases out a more widely applicable claim about temple reuse by comparing his findings with the case of the “wandering temples” at the Athenian Agora, as discussed in books like *The Agora of Athens: The History, Shape and Uses of an Ancient City Center* (Thompson and Wycherley 1972). Additionally, I can address these temples in light of the modern debates, since many chief sources for the Athenian Agora and Corinth are decades old. Finally, my conclusions can help address the intentional strategies for cultural appropriation in a way that’s still relevant today by

discussing how narratives can grow through the invocation and/or replacement of an earlier culture using architecture.

Bibliography

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