

THE INFLUENCE OF SPOLIA ON ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

M. ALI & S. MAGDI

Department of Architecture, Canadian International College, Egypt.

ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of its long history, Egypt has continuously experienced and practised despoliation and looting of monuments, of its past from antiquity through the 19th century, and it is clearly visible that many Islamic monuments have been built with materials removed from ancient buildings. Also the city of Rome is built of layers and layers of history. It was this fascinating accumulation of history, literally, the accumulation of old stones in medieval buildings, which first triggered our research into the field of Spolia – i.e. the art or historical term for older building elements reused in a new context.

In light of the previous context; the researchers in this paper are trying to shed light on the phenomenon of the reusing of some architectural elements in Islamic architecture in Cairo, in order to outline the reasons for such phenomenon and its motives, and examine the types of those elements and places of their existence in Islamic architecture through examples of intact Islamic monuments in Cairo such as the Al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun Mosque.

Keywords: ancient building, Ibn Qalawun mosque, Islamic architecture, reuse, Spolia

1 INTRODUCTION

Cairo, still surrounded by her walls and spectacular gates, is today the most splendid city in the Islamic world. The most prestigious buildings were the work of the sultans and their emirs, but civilians also created many fine buildings. It is clearly visible that many elegant medieval Islamic monuments have been built with reused materials such as columns, capitals, lintels, architrave, and thresholds removed from ancient buildings dating to the Pharaonic through the Byzantine era. Even mosques and contemporary secular buildings were not spared spoliation when a sultan or a high dignitary was in need of materials for his own monuments [1].

This medieval behaviour of reusing decorative or structural elements from ancient monuments to build new ones didn't find an Arabic synonym of the so-called Spolia, to be used in Islamic architecture dictionaries. The term 'Spolia' traditionally derives from the Latin *Spolium*, meaning hide of an animal, or Spolia, in the plural, literally the spoils of war, or an armour stripped from a fallen enemy. Its etymology connotes victory, triumph, violence, or even legitimate succession [2]. This could be considered as one of the main motives of reusing ancient architectural elements in new buildings to evidence the superiority of the new political regime over the preceding one. In this research we will use a comparative historical analysis of several ancient architectural examples in Rome and Cairo to understand the roots of the phenomenon of Spolia, which is used nowadays in a simple way to evidence the use of old structural or decorative elements from ancient buildings in new ones.



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2 SPOLIA FROM ROMAN TO ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

The term itself derives from Latin but its practice was not exclusively a Roman behaviour. Hence, it's necessary to shed light on the phenomenon and its early practices first in Rome to understand its later influences on Islamic architecture across the Mediterranean, and the motives beyond its use.

The wide use of Spolia in ancient Rome mainly started after the Constantinian period which witnessed the process of Christianization of the Roman Empire as a result of the edict of Milan in 313 AD, and for centuries it was seen as an exclusively negative practice. But, nowadays, our perception of the phenomenon is totally different; it represents one of the most appreciated values of an ancient city.

By following the traces of ancient monuments in Rome, we can identify the use of Spolia for different motives, even before the Constantine period. The Temple of *Apollo Sosianus* is a clear example of the reuse of decorative elements from ancient Greek temples, in particular the temple of *Apollo Daphnephoros* of Eretria in Greece, as we see from the reconstruction of the pediment by Melucco Vaccaro. [3] Later on, after the Christianization of the Roman Empire, in the fourth century, Spolia started being used from older monuments in new constructions. This was the case even with important public monuments like the Arch of Constantine which was built with sculptures and reliefs taken from several monuments of the previous centuries (Fig. 1), such as the triumphal arch in honour of Marcus Aurelius and the Forum of Trajan. The heads of previous emperors were re-carved in order to represent the

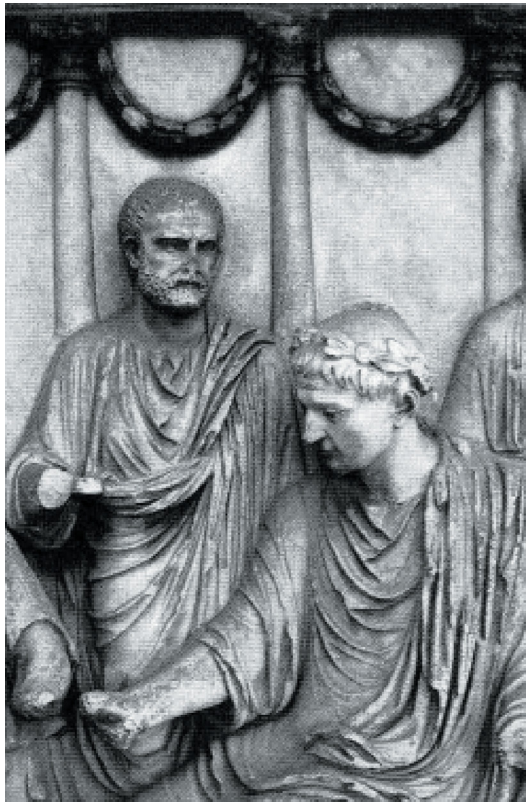


Figure 1: Arch of Constantine, Rome. Emperor Hadrian's head has been replaced with Constantine's features [4].



Figure 2: Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome – The porch portal of the church, two different Ionic columns, white marble and red granite [6].



Figure 3: Church of San Salvatore, Spoleto – The use of different construction elements in harmony [7].

features of Constantine [4]. This behaviour could be related to a different purpose: in Latin the so-called '*Damnatio memoriae*', literally meaning condemnation of memory, this practice was initiated due to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, as all pagan buildings and their memory were condemned and the buildings turned an easy target for justified destruction, and Spolia was widely practised to use their precious decorative and structural elements.

This famous Spolia of the arch of Constantine was not always appreciated in the 19th century, as Viollet le Duc criticized it severely accusing the use of ancient decorative elements and fragments removed from the arch of Trajan; 'it is neither restoration, nor reconstruction, it is an act of vandalism and could be considered as a barbarian sacking' [3]. In spite of all these criticisms, the arch is not a patchwork but a prominent monument of imperial propaganda by definition: these Spolia may not be considered as a sign of economic necessity, lack of artistic imagination, or superficial haste. The reused reliefs of former times evoked the early Roman tradition. With this monument, as a whole, Constantine placed himself in the midst of a venerable line of Roman emperors [5].

Later on, during the Middle Ages, the practice of Spolia was widely used in public buildings and above all in new churches, as we notice from the Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin (Fig. 2), where the porch of the church was built using different columns and capitals, but ensuring that they were matching: two fluted marble columns with Ionic capitals and two red granites columns with Ionic capitals as well, always equal to each other [6]. Another example is the Church of San Salvatore in Spoleto (Fig. 3), where the use of columns and entablature in the presbytery of the church were used in a wise way for constructive reasons, creating a refined decorative motif that is also reflected in the facade, where the use of construction elements corresponds carefully with the use of decorative elements.

On the other hand, across the Mediterranean the reuse of architectural elements in the monuments of Islamic Cairo closely follows the older practice of usurpation by some Egyptian rulers of replacing the names of predecessors with their own on monuments such as temple reliefs and royal statuary. This practice continued through the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine periods [8]. Reused architectural elements, especially columns, were originally used in Cairo in a wide range beginning in the ninth century AD, and through the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods (969–1171 AD and 1171–1250 AD, respectively). This changed dramatically in the Mamluk period (1250–1517 AD) when more elements and blocks were used extensively in other parts of the buildings [9]. Following the traces of some Islamic monuments in Cairo provides us with more knowledge about the phenomenon and the motives beyond its use in Islamic architecture which won't be much different than what we have seen in Rome, for example the mosque of Ibn Tulun which was built with piers instead of columns; only the prayer niche was adorned with two pairs of basket-style Byzantine column [10] (Fig. 4).

Another example is the mosque of Al-Hakim, which was built with the use of materials from the demolished Pharaonic temples in Lower Egypt; quantities of Pharaonic blocks were used in the north minaret of the mosque [9] (Fig. 5).

Public buildings were built with the same concept, as we see from the example of the funerary, madrasa of Al-Ashraf Sha'ban [11] (Figs. 6 and 7), which was built with stone blocks from ancient monuments dismantled by the Amir Jamal Al-Din Yusuf for the building of his own madrasa, Jamal Al-Din also dismantled the madrasa of Al-Ashraf Khalil (Fig. 8) and used its stone for a new minaret at Al-Azhar (Fig. 9).

Regarding the materials, we see that Muslim builders made use of Roman granite and porphyry columns, taken from ancient buildings, despite the variations in size. The transfer of these columns from a Roman temple in the town of Ashmunyan had taken place with great difficulty and at high cost.



Figure 4: Mosque of Ibn Tulun.



Figure 5: Minaret of Al-Hakim Mosque.



Figure 6: Madrasa of Al-Ashraf Sha'ban.



Figure 7: Madrasa of Al-Ashraf Sha'ban.



Figure 8: Madrasa of Al-Ashraf Khalil.



Figure 9: Al-Azhar Mosque.

3 MOTIVES BEHIND SPOLIA

In light of the previous examples in Rome and Cairo, it's clear that the practice of Spolia was not limited to a certain cultural or religious context but it was mainly concerned with satisfying contemporary needs. The motives behind it are varying to both extremes: on one hand, architects used ancient elements as a confession of technical inferiority, on the other hand, it was used as a sign of superiority over the pre-existing culture or religion. We cannot exclude economic reasons, as some elements were expensive to be left to systematic destruction. Meanwhile the lack of skilled workmanship and the necessity of speed to finish projects with limited funds were related to economic feasibility as well. Sometimes, the aesthetic aspect was the only reason to preserve antique fragments that were part of declining monuments, by placing them within a new context, as a gesture of appreciation to these unique elements.

4 CASE STUDY: AL-NASIR IBN QALWON MOSQUE AS A SAMPLE OF SOPLIA INFLUENCE ON ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

The mosque was built by al-Nasir Muhammad in 1318 AD during his third and longest reign (1309–1340 AD) as the royal mosque of the citadel, possibly on the site of the Ayyubid congregational mosque (Fig. 10), which al-Nasir Muhammad ordered to be demolished and built anew. The Ayyubid mosque was probably founded by Saladin as part of his works at the citadel [12].

The mosque is a free-standing, rectangular block, the austere exterior of which might be accounted for by the military nature of its setting. It follows the hypostyle scheme with the standard pattern of a rectangular courtyard, with a sanctuary on the *Qibla* side and arcades surrounding its other three sides. The arcades of the sanctuary and around the courtyard are formed by marble columns with pre-Islamic capitals carrying pointed arches with *Ablaq* voussoirs. Above each arch is a pair of pointed-arched windows. These windows form the lower part of the crenellated wall which was probably added above the arcades in 1335 [13].

The two minarets exhibit features unique among the extant minarets of Egypt. The shafts and tops are believed to have been built in 1335. They are the only minarets in Egypt whose bases are below the level of the roof of the mosque [14]. The mosque's height was increased, roof rebuilt, and green-tiled wooden dome added over the *Maqsura* in 1335. It was the royal mosque of the Mamluk sultans where their Friday prayers were performed. It was one of the



Figure 10: Al-Nasir Ibn Qalwun.

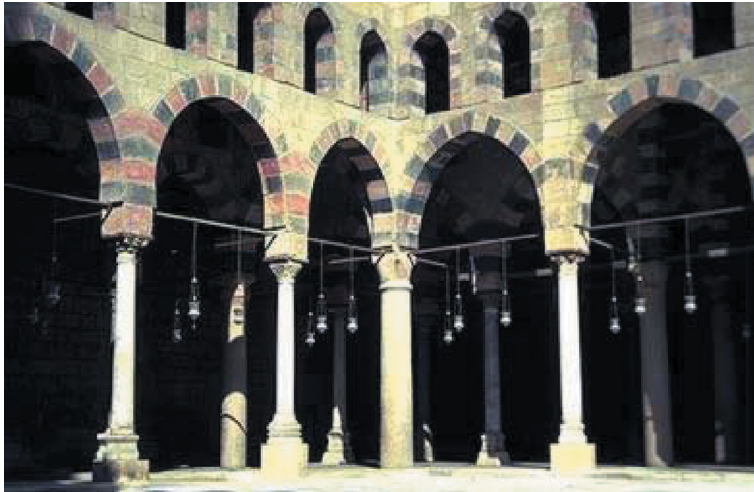


Figure 11: The different types of columns in the Al-Nasir Ibn Qalwon Mosque.



Figure 12: The inside columns in the Al-Nasir Ibn Qalwon Mosque.

most spectacular mosques of the city until the original tiled wooden dome over the nine-bay Maqsura in front of the Mihrab collapsed in the 16th century and the marble dado was carried off by Sultan Selim to Istanbul.

The complex of Qalawn was built with material and marble removed from Al-Salih citadel at Rawda which itself had been built with pre-Islamic spoils such as the different types of columns (Figs. 11 and 12). But pious people would not pray in this mosque because of its suspicious financing [15].

5 CONCLUSION

The subject of Spolia is a rich and contestable one. This study has aimed to contribute other layers of meaning that were specific to Spolia in Islamic Architectural, such as the following:

- Reused columns were not the only kind of ancient Spolia in Islamic architecture; there was a great interest in employing ancient blocks of stone as thresholds and lintels of doorways;
- Most of the Spolia are found in religious buildings rather than secular monuments, some of the Pharaonic reused blocks were invested with talismatic properties;
- The practice of reusing architectural elements may relate to financial purposes;
- The use of the Spolia transferred from one culture to another was foremost an act of appropriation.

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