Chapter 3

Reuse as Repair: The “Inscription Wall” at Aegina

As we have seen in the previous chapter, spolia have become a subject of intense interest for art historians and scholars of late antiquity who have examined from numerous and diverse points of view a surprisingly small set of the larger body of monuments and objects built from reused materials. It is also clear that in their intense focus on spolia as unique objects, the vast majority of studies have not paid sufficient attention to reuse as a process that involves a number of individuals acting together in order to create the final product that we today find so fascinating. The process approach adopted here offers new insights into the practice of reuse because it focuses instead on evidence for decisions made at the level of the project in order to learn more about the unique set of interests and concerns that played a role in shaping a monument’s final appearance. In our first case study, we will see that the builders of the “Inscription Wall” at the site of Kolonna on the island of Aegina likely envisioned this project more as a restoration of an ancient structure than a daring new use of a symbolically charged form of building material. In choosing to focus on the basic structural qualities of the blocks they reused instead of their symbolic or aesthetic potential, the builders at Aegina were working within the long tradition of reuse as repair. At the same time, inconsistencies in construction reveal that this overall conceptualization of the project took place not at the level of the project organizers, but at the basic level of the builders themselves.

The City of Aegina and Site of Kolonna

The roughly triangular-shaped island of Aegina occupies a central place in the Saronic Gulf midway between the Athenian port of Piraeus and the Methana Peninsula. The rocky terrain reaches its highest elevation on Mt. Oros in the south and plunges steeply to the sea on its eastern and northern shores. While this topography hinders both settlement and safe anchorage along most of its coastline, the northwest corner of the island is much more hospitable and allows both for a safe approach from the sea and for agricultural production. It is in this area that the settlement of Aegina grew and thrived in antiquity.

For the most part, the modern town of Aegina occupies the same location as its ancient namesake on the coast at the western edge of a gently sloping plain.
Upon a promontory just to its northwest is the site of the ancient acropolis, more recently named Kolonna in reference to the single standing column from the archaic Temple of Apollo. While tectonic activity has had little effect on the settlement, other geologic processes have significantly altered the shape and size of the acropolis as well as the ancient harbors. Over the centuries, much of the limestone underlying the acropolis has crumbled into the sea, resulting in a noticeable loss of land to the north and west of the temple. At the same time, rising sea levels first led to the abandonment of a harbor to the north of the site while the deposition of sediments carried to the coast from farther inland resulted in the silting up of the two later harbors to the south. In general, a picture emerges of a settlement and sanctuary constantly dealing with the effects of erosion and a shrinking coastline.

1 Welter 1938a; Knoblauch 1972, 55.
2 Knoblauch (1972, 81) suggests that the acropolis plateau extended anywhere from 30 to 60 meters further into the sea.
3 Welter 1938a, 484; Knoblauch 1969, 112–113; 1972, 6.