LOOTING THE EMPTY SEE: THE EARLY CHRONOLOGY

1. Introducing Spolia: The Connection with the Ancient

If one were to peruse a medieval Latin dictionary and search for the word spolia, several meanings would surface. Spolium, expolium, and the neuter plural spolia meant pillage and robbery, clothing apparel, movable goods, and “the movable effects of a deceased ecclesiastic devolving upon the church advowee.” A search into the original Roman meaning of the word partially explains its medieval etymology. Spolia, originally meant the hide, the skin removed from a carcass, and hence the booty removed by a victor from the vanquished; the term literally meant what a victor stripped away from the body of the vanquished—the spoils of war—as one strips the skin from the body of an animal.

With imperialistic enthusiasm, the Romans counted no less than four different words for spoils. Praeda included “plunder of every description,” manubiae was the income from the sale of these objects gained by the praetor, exuviae designated anything stripped away from the enemy (hence the link with skin and clothing articles), and spolia itself was reserved to the enemy’s military equipment, including the armors and weapons, and chariots, standards, beaks of ships, and other things that were preserved and displayed by victors. William Ramsay explained these ancient usages by emphasizing the public visibility of victory. Stripping the enemy and displaying spoils taken away from him advertised the warrior’s valor. These symbols of victory were quasi-sacred because the sale of a house or edifice exhibiting spoils prohibited their removal by new owners. In addition to banning the removal of spoils from their owner’s chosen location, Roman custom also prohibited their replacement or repair; decay emphasized their value and thus, the

1 Niermeyer, Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus, p. 984.
2 The Bantam New College Latin and English Dictionary, p. 394.
irreplaceable worth of the man who had obtained them. Of all spoils, the apogee of fame was reserved to the possessor of *spolia opima*, the spoils that a commander-in-chief of the Roman army stripped from the enemy’s leader he had single-handedly vanquished. Only the greatest of warriors could claim such prizes, and they were few; according to tradition *spolia opima* were granted to Romulus, Cornelius Cossus, and Claudius Marcellus upon their victories over the kings of their enemies. The fourth occurrence, when the honor of *spolia opima* was granted to Julius Caesar the year of his death, was a mockery and pretense. The honor was supposedly unwarranted because of his assumed dictatorship, a violence to the Roman republican body.\(^4\)

Although *spolia* can be defined literally, the term also belongs to the vocabulary of archeologists and art historians. Archeological spoils are fragments of ancient classical monuments imbedded in the construction of more recent ones, usually of the medieval period. Medieval architects refined the arts of reuse, and ancient remains were carried into medieval contexts. This transposition of physical material brought with it a cultural symbolic interchange. As stones were reused, they also reproduced or mimicked the symbolism they had originally carried—that is, in most case, notions of legitimacy and authority. Because Rome was the capital of the church, it is important to underscore that the process is nowhere more visible than in Rome. Michela Nocita and Francesca Zagari remarked with perspicacity that Rome is the city of spoils. For centuries, it furnished the medieval world with ancient materials that offered legitimacy and authority to the new capital of Christianity and its rulers. Both authors clearly saw that the ties that bound ancient stones to their ancient symbols of authority had not been missed by medieval builders.\(^5\)

Medieval Rome emerged physically and symbolically from the ashes of Ancient Rome. Louis Hamilton notes the specific appeal of Rome when he states “The city of Rome existed at the juncture of two power-

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\(^4\) Idem.

\(^5\) See their discussion in the indice of the new online journal *Spolia* at http://www.mediate.it/liberliber/biblioteca/elenchi/riviste/spolia under *Archeologia*, where they state, “Roma è per antonomasia la città delle spolia: per secoli ha rifornito di materiali antichi il mondo medievale procurando a nuove capitali e a nuovi sovrani legittimazione e autorità; ma accanto a questo reimpiego *mores romani* si diffusero anche altre e più modeste tipologie che hanno avuto nella cultura materiale del Medioevo un ruolo preponderante e meritevole d’annalisi.”