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## Copy-Paste. The Reuse of Material and Visual Culture in Architecture

### **Decorating with Things: *Spolia* as Material Culture in the Italian Maritime Republics, 1100–1300**

**Karen Rose Mathews**

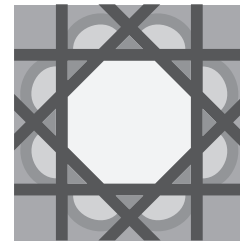
#### **Abstract:**

An extensive literature in archaeology and anthropology exists on material culture that addresses the relationships objects form with both people and things but this research has not been incorporated into the art historical study of *spolia*. In this article the dense spoliage assemblages on medieval structures in the Italian maritime republics of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice will serve as case studies for integrating art historical, anthropological, and archaeological discourses on material objects.

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## Editorial

**Francine Giese**  
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We are pleased to present the first volume of the *bfo-Journal*, a multilingual, peer-reviewed and open access publication, issued once a year and hosted on [bauforschungonline.ch](http://bauforschungonline.ch), founded in 2006 by Richard Buser and myself. The aim of the *bfo-Journal* is to provide a new space for innovative studies of the highest quality on all aspects of architectural history and critique, urbanism, and conservation of historical monuments.

The theme chosen for this first issue deals with the reuse of material and visual culture in architecture, taking into consideration the phenomenon within a global perspective, as may be seen by the contributions of this year's edition. What are the concepts sealed behind this visual and material reuse? What is the role played by cultural and cross-border exchanges and by the various political and religious systems in the appropriation of forms and meanings? These are just some of the questions raised by the authors, who examine the process of 'copy-paste' by analyzing case studies from Italy, Turkey, Iran, France and Iraq.

Let me end with a few words concerning the cover of this first issue, which shows a prominent example of the reuse of Islamic capitals from the Umayyad period in the so-called Mudéjar architecture of Medieval Spain. Dating from the califal period (10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries), this capital is just one of a set, reused in the palace of the Castilian king Pedro I (1334–1369), constructed between 1356 and 1366 within the former Islamic Alcázar of Sevilla,<sup>1</sup> using a predominantly Islamic vocabulary, mainly influenced by contemporary Nasrid architecture of Granada. In this context, the Umayyad capitals, standing for the most powerful and splendid era of al-Andalus, could be interpreted as just another source of Islamic models. Considering the widespread reuse of Umayyad capitals in Almoravid and Almohad buildings of Marrakesch, Rabat and Fes (12<sup>th</sup> century), as pointed out by Henri Terrasse in an article published in 1963 in the Spanish journal *Al-Andalus*,<sup>2</sup> these capitals were brought from the Iberian Peninsula to Morocco because of their meaning, legitimizing the claim of power of the new rulers of al-Andalus and the Maghreb. Pedro I must have been aware of the symbolic value of these capitals as well. However, in his case, they were not used to relate his reign to the Umayyad dynasty, but rather as a symbol of triumph of the Crown of Castile, that had reconquered Córdoba in 1236.

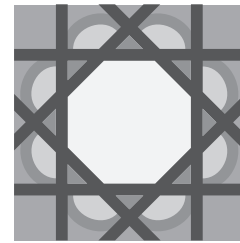
Finally, we would like to thank all those who have made possible the foundation of the *bfo-Journal* and trust you will enjoy reading this first issue.

<sup>1</sup> Miguel Angel Tabales Rodríguez, *El Alcázar de Sevilla: Reflexiones sobre su origen y transformación durante la edad media* (Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, 2010), pp. 287–357.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Terrasse, "Chapiteaux oméyades d'Espagne à la Mosquée d'al-Qarawiyyin de Fès", *Al-Andalus*, 28, no. 1 (1963), pp. 211–216.

# Decorating with Things: *Spolia* as Material Culture in the Italian Maritime Republics, 1100–1300

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## Introduction

*Spolia*, or appropriated objects from past and foreign cultures, have long been studied in the fields of art and architectural history and these disciplines have developed a distinct conceptual framework for analyzing spoliated artworks that focuses on aesthetics, meaning and symbolism, and motivations for reuse.<sup>1</sup> An extensive literature also exists, however, on the topic of material culture in the domains of archaeology and anthropology that addresses the centrality of objects within networks of social relationships. This scholarship has not been brought to bear on the study of *spolia*, and in this article I will employ the dense spoliated assemblages on medieval structures in the Italian maritime republics of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice as case studies for an integration of art historical, anthropological, and archaeological discourses on material objects. The insertion of *spolia* into the broader category of material culture will illuminate how appropriated sculpture on medieval buildings was an active agent in the creation of meaning.<sup>2</sup> The openness and multivalence of *spolia* made them the perfect instruments for forging relationships temporally and spatially with both people and things as they circulated throughout the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages.

## The Pisan *bacini* of San Piero a Grado

The earliest manifestation in the Italian maritime republics of an eclectic and highly original use of *spolia* is found in Pisa. Beginning in the early eleventh century, Pisan churches featured architectural decoration consisting of ceramic basins (*bacini*) imported from the Islamic world.<sup>3</sup> At this time Christian Western Europe lacked the technical knowledge to produce glazed ceramics, so all of these colorful vessels originated in Islamic pottery centers for export across the Mediterranean. Pisan *bacini* use was the most extensive of any European city in the Middle Ages; the practice began in the eleventh and continued through the fifteenth century, and the sheer number of individual pieces (approximately 2000) is unrivaled anywhere.<sup>4</sup> Decoration with Islamic ceramics was clearly a meaningful art form for medieval Pisans.

Among the early Pisan structures with *bacini* decoration, the church of San Piero a Grado stands out with its vast number of objects and the great

<sup>1</sup> See Dale Kinney, "The Concept of *Spolia*", in Conrad Rudolph (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 233–252, for a general overview of *spolia* in the Middle Ages.

<sup>2</sup> Material culture studies provide an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the relationship between people and things. The website of the Center for Material Culture Studies at the University of Delaware provides a nice overview of the topic and its literature: <https://sites.udel.edu/materialculture/about/what-is-material-culture/>. See also Dan Hicks and Mary Carolyn Beaudry, *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Christopher Tilley, *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2006); and the numerous articles on this topic in the *Journal of Material Culture*.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent overview of *bacini*, see Graziella Berti, "Bacini", *Enciclopedia dell'arte medievale*, vol. 2, (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1991). Graziella Berti and Marcella Giorgio, *Ceramiche con coperture vetrificate usate come "bacini"* (Florence: All'Insegna del Giglio, 2011), provide the most recent catalogue of all the Pisan *bacini*. Berti's earlier volume on the Pisan *bacini*, Graziella Berti, Liana Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici medievali delle chiese di Pisa* (Roma: Erma di Bretschneider, 1981), is still the most comprehensive work on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> Graziella Berti, *Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo: Le ceramiche medievali e post-medievali* (Florence: All'Insegna del Giglio, 1997), pp. 10–32, addresses the uniqueness of the Pisan *bacini* phenomenon.



variety of ceramic types from several production centers (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The church dates to the early eleventh century and originally had 222 *bacini* ornamenting its exterior. All the pottery was placed immediately below the roofline, beneath blind arches or within specially designed cavities (Fig. 2). Archaeological research has shown that cavities were created in the stone or brick buildings to anchor the *bacini* to the walls. The inclusion of the ceramics was thus intentional and part of the structure's planning and design from the outset. The ceramic wares added color and variety to the often monotone church exteriors, and the shimmering effect of the green, yellow, blue, and gold glazes emulated the luminosity of polychrome marble at a fraction of the cost. The *bacini* might have been chosen as appropriate decoration for Pisan churches because of their connection to Mediterranean commerce, a significant source of Pisan wealth in the eleventh to fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The Pisan fleet battled valiantly to secure

<sup>5</sup> Stefano Sodi and Mariagiulia Burrese, *La Basilica di San Piero a Grado* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011), discuss the church and its *bacini* decoration; see also Graziella Berti, "La decorazione con '*bacini*' ceramici," in Maria Luisa Ceccarelli Lemut and Stefano Sodi (eds.), *Nel Segno di San Pietro: La Basilica di San Piero a Grado da luogo della prima evangelizzazione a meta di pellegrinaggio medievale* (Pisa: Felice Editore, 2003), pp. 157–173.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Rose Mathews, "Other Peoples' Dishes: Islamic *Bacini* on Eleventh-Century Churches in Pisa", *Gesta* 53, no. 1 (2014): pp. 16–19.



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**Fig. 1**  
Pisa, Church of San Piero a Grado, general view (K. Mathews)

**Fig. 2**  
San Piero a Grado, detail of *bacini* decoration (K. Mathews)

safe passage for the city's commercial vessels and the *bacini* could index this great struggle for maritime supremacy and the material fruits of those labors – international trade goods like the foreign and exotic ceramics so proudly displayed on the city's churches.

## The Basilica of San Marco in Venice

The Basilica of San Marco, the doge's chapel, was the showcase for the fame and fortune of Venice as the central religious monument in the city.<sup>7</sup> A significant moment in Venice's history was the Fourth Crusade in 1204 when Venice conquered the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Complementing the city's new political identity as an empire, then, was a visual culture that highlighted Venice's embeddedness in the Mediterranean. Luxury objects flowed into the city from Byzantium and the Basilica of San Marco came to be encrusted with a dazzling array of *spolia* and spoils from Mediterranean locales (Fig. 3). The exterior decoration displays an assemblage of columns and capitals, hundreds of them so densely packed that they serve no structural function. More visually intriguing or perhaps jarring are the reused sculptural panels and other foreign objects on all of the church's three façades. The north façade displays early Byzantine reliefs like the panel depicting Alexander in his chariot (Fig. 4). The west façade, too, also has an array of columns and capitals combined with Byzantine reliefs. The crowning artwork on the west front, however, is the set of bronze horses taken from the Hippodrome in Constantinople (Fig. 5).<sup>8</sup> On the southwest corner of the façade, a porphyry head of a Byzantine emperor adorns the upper balcony while two intricately carved pilasters, no longer serving any architectural function, stand in front of the south façade (Fig. 6). The pilasters, now known as the "pilastri acritani" or "pillars of Acre" have no actual connection to Acre but were taken from the church of Saint Polyeuktos in Constantinople (Fig. 7). In between the chapel and the doge's palace, the sculptural ensemble of four porphyry tetrarchs guard the exterior of the church's treasury and lead the

<sup>7</sup> For general discussions of the Basilica of San Marco, see Ettore Vio (ed.), *St. Mark's: The Art and Architecture of Church and State in Venice* (New York: Riverside Book Company, 2003); see also Henry Maguire and Robert Nelson (eds.), *San Marco, Byzantium and the Myths of Venice* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2010) for recent interpretative work on the basilica.

<sup>8</sup> For the horses in general, see Michael Jacoff, *The Horses of San Marco and the Quadriga of the Lord* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). See also Irene Favaretto, *Il Museo di San Marco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), pp. 188–91; Vittorio Galliazzo, "I cavalli di San Marco: una quadriga greca o romana?", *Faventia*, vol. 6, n. 2 (1984), pp. 99–126.



Fig. 3  
Venice, Basilica of San Marco, general view (K. Mathews)

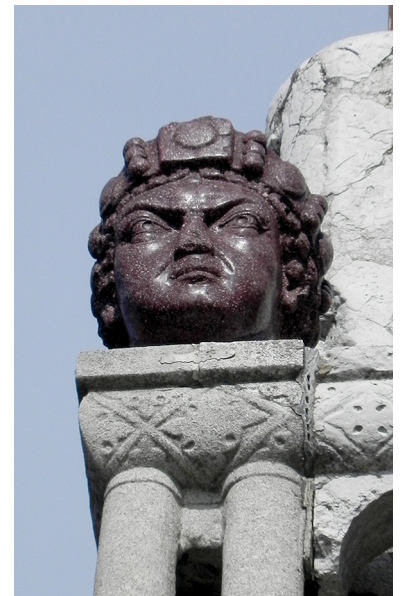




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**Fig. 4**  
Basilica of San Marco, north façade,  
Alexander relief (K. Mathews)

**Fig. 5**  
Basilica of San Marco, bronze horses  
on west façade (original sculptures in  
the Museo di San Marco) (K. Mathews)

**Fig. 6**  
Basilica of San Marco, southwest  
corner of façade, porphyry head  
(K. Mathews)

**Fig. 7**  
Basilica of San Marco, "Pilastri acritani"  
in front of the south façade  
(K. Mathews)



eye to the so-called “trophy wall,” a space covered with relief carvings from Byzantium that are combined with Venetian copies carved in the Byzantine style (Fig. 8).<sup>9</sup> The unique spoliated assemblage on San Marco has been characterized as a bricolage, or an eclectic accumulation of heterogeneous parts, but it defined a distinctive aesthetic that effectively expressed Venice’s new civic identity and imperial aspirations, as the maritime city supplanted the East politically and appropriated it culturally, presenting its empire as natural, inevitable, and eternal.

## The Sarcophagi of the Cathedral of Genoa

The Cathedral of Genoa, like the Basilica of San Marco, was the most important civic and religious monument in the city, dwarfing all other medieval structures in its massive size and elaborate decoration (Fig. 9).<sup>10</sup> The structure was continually remodeled and embellished throughout the Middle Ages, but a catastrophic fire that occurred as a result of political unrest in the city in 1296 occasioned the renovation and redecoration of the structure in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. It was at this time that extensive Roman *spolia* were added to the cathedral’s decorative ensemble. Seventeen ancient Roman sarcophagi adorn the two towers of the cathedral and the Gothic façade (Fig. 10).<sup>11</sup> They consist of a variety of types but most feature strigilated decoration; some bear figures and inscriptions but the individual decorative motifs do not appear to have been of great importance as some sarcophagi were put into place upside down. No other church in Genoa, and few other churches in Italy in general feature such an extensive collection of ancient sarcophagi as architectural decoration.<sup>12</sup> A number of medieval churches might have one or two ancient tombs inserted into their walls as was the case with the Cathedral of Modena, and other religious structures like the Pisan Duomo would have had ancient sarcophagi distributed around their exteriors as funerary monuments for the city’s elite. The sarcophagi here have shed their functionality as tombs, however, and have become relief sculpture on the façade of Genoa’s cathedral.

The sheer number of reused Roman objects raises the question of their provenance and means of acquisition. Genoa was an insignificant city in the Roman period and it is thus unlikely that any of these objects were local products. The marble tombs on the cathedral mostly came from the areas around Rome and Campania, though one sarcophagus may have originated in Spain (Fig. 11).<sup>13</sup> The far-flung origins of the actual objects raise the questions of how and when they came to Genoa. There was at least one example of a sarcophagus being taken as war plunder in medieval Genoa, and that was one means through which ancient objects arrived in the city.<sup>14</sup> They would also have circulated as objects of commerce and in some cases may have served as prestigious burials for members of prominent Genoese families before being incorporated into the cathedral’s facade. These sarcophagi, then, arrived in Genoa either through trade as commercial products or as trophies of military campaigns in the medieval

<sup>9</sup> Henry Maguire, “Venetian Art as a Mirror of Venetian Attitudes to Byzantium in Decline”, in Sümer Atasoy (ed.), *550<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Istanbul University: International Byzantine and Ottoman Symposium (15<sup>th</sup> century)* (Istanbul: Istanbul Üniversitesi, 2004), pp. 283–286.

<sup>10</sup> The most recent and comprehensive monograph on the Cathedral of Genoa is Anna Rosa Calderoni Masetti and Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *La Cattedrale di San Lorenzo a Genova: The Cathedral of St Lawrence in Genoa*, 2 vols. (Modena: Panini, 2012); see also Clario Di Fabio (ed.), *La Cattedrale di Genova nel Medioevo, secoli VI–XIV* (Milan: Silvana, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See particularly Colette Dufour Bozzo, *Sarcophagi romani a Genova* (Genoa: Tip. Pagano, 1967), pp. 31–43, for an inventory of the reused pieces on the cathedral, and more recently, Lucia Faedo, “Conoscenza dell’antico e riimpiego dei sarcophagi in Liguria”, in Bernard Andreae and Salvatore Settis (eds.), *Colloquio sul riimpiego dei sarcophagi romani nel Medioevo*, (Marburg: Verlag des Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminars, 1984), pp. 133–140. See also Di Fabio, “La Cattedrale di Genova” (see note 10), pp. 92–94.

<sup>12</sup> For the closest comparanda, the Cathedrals of Pisa and Modena, see Maria Cecilia Parra, “Rimeditando sul riimpiego: Modena e Pisa viste in parallelo”, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa: Classe di lettere e filosofia* series 3, 13 (1983): pp. 453–483.

<sup>13</sup> Faedo, “Conoscenza dell’antico” (see note 11), p. 140, has argued that this sarcophagus arrived in Genoa as a result of the Genoese military campaigns in al-Andalus in the twelfth century.

<sup>14</sup> This sarcophagus is not on the cathedral but on the Doria family church of San Matteo; see Rebecca Müller, *Sic hostes lanua frangit: Spolien und Trophäen im mittelalterlichen Genua* (Weimar: VDG, 2002), pp. 116–122, pp. 226–229.





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**Fig. 8**  
Basilica of San Marco, south façade,  
porphyry tetrarchs (K. Mathews)

**Fig. 9**  
Genoa Cathedral, general view  
(K. Mathews)

**Fig. 10**  
Genoa Cathedral, detail of sarcophagi  
on west façade (K. Mathews)

**Fig. 11**  
Genoa Cathedral, detail of sarcophagus  
from Spain (K. Mathews)



period. Thus though the marble tombs were not vestiges of a glorious Roman past in the city, they could still fabricate an ancient pedigree for the Genoese and display the city's preoccupation with establishing a noteworthy Roman heritage that served as a foundation for the medieval city's fame and prosperity.

In all of these cases, then, Italian cities with economies based on maritime commerce and a concerted presence in the Mediterranean decorated their signature monuments with objects from ancient and foreign cultures. These disparate and heterogeneous things displayed the integration of the maritime republics into Mediterranean culture and the sophistication of their citizens who traveled extensively to pursue political and economic interests. What was singular about the ancient and foreign *spolia* employed in the civic monuments of these maritime cities was the interplay between the insistent materiality of these objects and their indeterminacy and alterity, qualities that highlighted their thingness in a secondary context. Their dissonant and incongruous materiality empowered them to forge novel connections to people and other objects over space and time. In the analysis that follows, I will address these spoliative objects through the lens of material culture studies to demonstrate the powerful agency of things in defining civic identity for the medieval maritime cities of Italy.

### ***Spolia* as Material Culture**

One way in which *spolia* are embedded into the discourse of material culture is through the essential and active role played by objects.<sup>15</sup> The *spolia* accumulated on the architectural monuments of Pisa, Genoa, and Venice were acquired, transported, conceptualized and deployed by human actors, but the objects' agency can be seen in the way that they integrated themselves into larger social and cultural networks, interacting with people and other objects to produce singular and unexpected effects. Objects have the power to render visible previously hidden knowledge and information, to embody and express key ideas and emotions of a collective culture or an individual.<sup>16</sup> They can be person-like in playing a mediatory role between people and things and their efficacy lies in the constant redefinition and renegotiation of this role as intermediary. Their significance and function can change over time and the object can take on new identities even within the same context. The immobilization of *spolia* in an architectural context, then, did not hinder the polyvocality of the material.<sup>17</sup>

First and foremost it was the seductive materiality of these objects that made them attractive. The gleaming, reflective, and colorful surfaces of glazed ceramics, the bright white marble of ancient tomb sculptures, the adamantine hardness of porphyry and its intense blood-red color were physical properties that rendered the objects desirable. That materiality unleashed a chain of events that brought these foreign and ancient objects to Italy, conveyed by the cities' merchants from all over the Mediterranean. Once in Italy, the stone sculptures and ceramics continued to circulate

<sup>15</sup> Scholars within the fields of anthropology and archaeology continue to debate the agency of objects with some expressing skepticism about the ability of things to act independent of human impetus and manipulation, while others are wholly convinced of the power of things as actors and social agents. Alfred Gell, in his work *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), is one of the most outspoken proponents of the agency of objects, as is Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Other scholars emphasize the agency of humans in manipulating objects; for a critique of Gell's position see Liana Chua and Mark Elliott, "Introduction: Adventures in the Art Nexus", in Liana Chua and Mark Elliott (eds.), *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell*, (New York: Berghahn, 2013), pp. 12–14, and Christopher Steiner, "Rights of Passage: On the Liminal Identity of Art in the Border Zone", in Fred Myers (ed.), *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001), pp. 209–10, argues against giving objects too much agency.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Myers, "Social Agency and the Cultural Value(s) of the Art Object", *Journal of Material Culture* 9, no. 2 (2004), p. 210; Pierre Lemonnier, *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-verbal Communication* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012), pp. 119–220; Roberta Gilchrist, "The Materiality of Medieval Heirlooms: From Biographical to Sacred Objects", in Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss (eds.), *Mobility, Meaning and Transformations of Things* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), p. 172.

<sup>17</sup> This idea of immobility or stasis is explored by Alfredo González-Ruibal in "Houses of Resistance: Time and Materiality among the Mao of Ethiopia", in Hahn and Weiss, *Mobility, Meaning* (see note 16), p. 15, and Carl Knappett, "Networks of Objects, Meshworks of Things", in *Redrawing Anthropology: Materials, Movements, Lines* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 48–49.

among secular and religious authorities, artists, and designers. As they conveyed information about the cultures from which they were taken – exotic foreign locales or the distant ancient past – they were open to new meanings and significations.

The juxtaposition of Islamic ceramics, for example, on a Christian building created a new cultural synthesis that could index religious difference and aesthetic appreciation simultaneously. The majority of the decorative sculpture on San Marco was Byzantine but came from both secular and religious contexts, as well as a number of different locations and time periods. The unexpected parataxis of imperial portraiture and Roman horses with images of saints and other religious figures created an accumulation of history and displayed Venice's mastery over Roman and Byzantine civilizations. The insertion of ancient Roman artifacts into the walls of Genoa's Cathedral employed objects in the fabrication of fictive lineages and historical connections to a Roman past. These objects, then, strengthened or redefined pre-existing social and cultural relationships or forged completely new connections and mediations between human actors or between people and things.<sup>18</sup>

The object's movement through time and space triggered the polyvocality of *spolia* and that translation had profound effects on objects and the humans with whom they interacted. The use of *spolia* displayed a concept of time that was mutable and flexible where the complexity of an object lay in its ability to represent the past and present simultaneously.<sup>19</sup> The resonance between the two or between the present and multiple pasts revitalized ancient objects in new contemporary contexts. The horses on San Marco's façade typify the layering of history in a single spoliage object.<sup>20</sup> The bronze sculptures are ancient Roman artifacts that were taken to Constantinople and erected in the Hippodrome where they presided over equestrian events for centuries. When they arrived in Venice in the thirteenth century, the bronze horses languished in storage for a half-century before finally crowning the ducal basilica. The multiple pasts – Roman, Byzantine, and Venetian – and multiple contexts – Roman public space, hippodrome, and warehouse – gave them a conceptual patina akin to the physical one that covers the horses today. Medieval viewers would have had access to some or all of these pasts and the longevity of bronze sculpture allowed the team of horses to shift in trajectory and move through different regimes of value.

The stance towards time displayed in the Genoese use of ancient sarcophagi is more focused and univocal than that of the San Marco *spolia*, as the objects were intended to reference one culture and historical moment, that of Roman antiquity. The objects evoked an absence, the lack of a Roman past for the Ligurian city, but highlighted a presence in the accumulation of ancient objects on the cathedral.<sup>21</sup> The Roman *spolia* thus created a completely new relationship with antiquity, augmenting the city's legitimacy and visualizing a new collective historical memory for the Genoese.

<sup>18</sup> Miguel John Versluys, "Roman Visual Material Culture as Globalising Koine", in Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys (eds.), *Globalisation and the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 165–166; Bjørnar Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 13; Anne Brower Stahl, "Material Histories", in Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 151–156; Christopher Tilley, "Objectification", in Christopher Tilley et al. (ed.), *Handbook of Material Culture* (see note 2), pp. 60–64.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Knappett, "Imprints as Punctuations of Material Itineraries", in Hahn and Weiss, *Mobility, Meaning* (see note 16), p. 38; Dale Kinney, "Introduction", in Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (eds.), *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Nelson has addressed the multiple pasts and meanings of the San Marco horses in his article "Appropriation", in Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 116–128.

<sup>21</sup> Marissa Lazzari, "The Texture of Things: Objects, People, and Social Spaces in Argentine Prehistory", in Lynn Meskell (ed.), *Archaeologies of Materiality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 127.



Just as objects crossing temporal borderlines were unstable, open to new significations and changes in trajectory, so too were things displaced in space, traveling along new pathways and social networks. The further an object traveled the less was known about its place of origin; it could be mythologized, accruing a new biography as it moved.<sup>22</sup> The Islamic ceramics that made their way to Italy, for example, were not luxury goods in their place of origin. But by the time that they arrived in Pisa, their value had increased exponentially as common kitchen objects became symbols of exotic lands and the wealth and prestige Pisa gained through Mediterranean commerce. Displayed on dozens of Pisan churches, their symbolic value increased further; they were now art objects, removed from commercial circulation and prized for their aesthetic qualities.<sup>23</sup> As the vessels passed through various contexts, from secular to religious function, from merchant traders to ecclesiastical art patrons, they experienced a dramatic transformation of identity.

This was also the case with Venetian *spolia*, as the disparate objects on San Marco's façade were subject to multiple reinterpretations over the centuries. A venerable myth connected to the basilica's decoration was that the objects accumulated there were spoils of war from the Fourth Crusade when the Venetians conquered the Byzantine capital. Some of these pieces may have been plunder but no documentary evidence exists that addresses their means of acquisition. The Venetians had been buying luxurious marbles on the Mediterranean market since the ninth century, so it is highly likely that trade, in addition to war, brought these sculptures to Venice.<sup>24</sup> Thus, while the Pisans transformed trade goods into art objects, the Venetians interpreted their commodities as symbols of military triumph. In another conceptual conversion, the *spolia* on San Marco oscillated between secular and religious realms. The most visually arresting objects – the bronze horses, porphyry head and Tetrarchs, the relief of Alexander – were secular in origin but subsequently redefined in a religious context. The “pilastri acritani” moved in the opposite direction, however, as architectural elements of support from a church that became secular symbols, erected as victory trophies in a public city square. The cultural and religious borders they crossed were sites of negotiation and transaction and the moving object could continue to evoke its previous contexts or shed them altogether and be defined and interpreted in novel ways in subsequent stopping points on its journey.

A final distinctive characteristic of *spolia* as a manifestation of material culture is the dichotomy they present between alterity and familiarity. There is an abstraction and an opacity to spoliating objects, what Alfred Gell has termed “cognitive stickiness”, that defies categorization.<sup>25</sup> Their alterity lies in the striking incongruity of incorporating *spolia* into heterogeneous decorative ensembles in order to create polysemous relations between things, unexpected connections that would not have been made otherwise. The encrusted exterior of the Basilica of San Marco epitomized this polysemy as objects from different periods, places of origin, materials, colors, sizes, and styles were juxtaposed while resisting a visual

<sup>22</sup> Hahn and Weiss, “Introduction”, in Hahn and Weiss, *Mobility, Meaning* (see note 16), p. 5; Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 42–44 and 48; Mary Helms, *Ulysses' Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge, and Geographical Distance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 114 and 121.

<sup>23</sup> See Mathews, “Other Peoples' Dishes”, (see note 6), p. 19, for a discussion of *bacini* as terminal or diverted commodities based on the categories of commodities devised by Igor Kopytoff “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process”, in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, pp. 64–91.

<sup>24</sup> Simonetta Minguzzi, “Aspetti della decorazione marmorea e architettonica della basilica di San Marco”, in Irene Favaretto et al. (eds.), *Marmi della basilica di San Marco: capitelli, plutei, rivestimenti, arredi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000), p. 41 and 66.

<sup>25</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency* (see note 15), p. 86; Chua and Elliott, “Introduction”, in Chua and Elliott, *Distributed Objects* (see note 15), pp. 12–13; Janet Hoskins, “Agency, Biography, and Objects” in Tilley, *Handbook of Material Culture* (see note 2), pp. 76–77.

synthesis. They tantalized the viewer but frustrated any attempt to reconcile the whole with the disparate parts.<sup>26</sup>

The dichotomy between alterity and familiarity can be most clearly seen in the Pisan *bacini* decoration, where mundane things shift from the domestic realm to a religious one.<sup>27</sup> These vessels were used simultaneously as tableware and church ornament, and the jarring contrast between their normative use and new function displayed their indeterminacy and inherent elasticity while maintaining their strangeness and incongruity.<sup>28</sup> Innovative uses of material objects allowed for the blurring of boundaries between art objects and ordinary things, and in Pisa the meanings associated with beautiful Islamic pottery vessels vacillated depending upon whether you viewed them on a public church façade or in the privacy of a domestic environment.

## Conclusion

Over the course of centuries, however, concrete information about the procurement of these foreign and past objects would have been lost. The *spolia* became naturalized, then, in their Italian contexts to the point that their distant origins were forgotten and they became localized, distinctly Pisan, Genoese, and Venetian.<sup>29</sup> The loss of knowledge of the previous context was liberating to some degree, opening up these multivalent objects so that they could convey information about a variety of new symbolic domains. They continually added new meanings and defined novel connections to people and things though their physical movement had stopped centuries before. The omnipresence of spoliage ornament on the medieval architecture of the maritime republics demonstrates how significant it was for the Pisans, Genoese, and Venetians to decorate with things. The abstract indeterminacy of *spolia* provided an extraordinary hermeneutic richness and layering for both medieval and modern viewers. Studying these eclectic and heterogeneous spoliage ensembles as material culture can complement art historical research while broadening our understanding of *spolia* through an emphasis on an object's movement, its power to accumulate or resist meaning, as well as its endless potential for redefinition.

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<sup>26</sup> Janet Hoskins, "Agency, Biography, and Objects" (see note 25), p. 76. See also Fabio Barry, "*Disiecta membra*: Raniero Zeno, the Imitation of Constantinople, the *Spolia* style, and Justice at San Marco", in Maguire and Nelson, *San Marco, Byzantium* (see note 7), pp. 26–27.

<sup>27</sup> This idea of mundane and ordinary objects taking on heightened significance is addressed by Pierre Lemonnier in *Mundane Objects* (see note 16).

<sup>28</sup> Mathews, "Other Peoples' Dishes", (see note 6), p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> See Heather Grossman, "Syncretism Made Concrete: The Case for a Hybrid Moreote Architecture", in Judson Emerick and Deborah Deliyannis (eds.) *Archaeology in Architecture: Studies in Honor of Cecil L. Striker*, (Mainz: von Zabern, 2005), pp. 65–73, for this idea of local identity. See also Stefania Gerevini, "The Grotto of the Virgin in San Marco: Artistic Reuse and Cultural Identity in Medieval Venice", *Gesta* 53, no. 2 (2014), pp. 219–220, and Lamia Balafrej, "Saracen or Pisan? The Use and Meaning of the Pisa Griffin on the Duomo", *Ars Orientalis* 42 (2012), pp. 31–33 and 37.