

AUTHENTICITY AND MATERIAL

A CONSIDERATION OF THE CONCEPT BASED ON EXAMPLES FROM (LATE) ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

LEX BOSMAN



A good description of authenticity in architecture might be that a built object – or part thereof – really is what it purports or appears to be, a definition related to existentialism. In a simple philosophical definition, authenticity is understood as the degree to which someone remains true to themselves, in spite of external influences. Yet it is clear from virtually every description of authenticity that this concept has only limited application in relation to architecture. In this article I set out to apply that initial definition to the architecture of Antiquity, late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I also explore some other interpretations of the concept of authenticity.

SPOLIA

In the architecture of the aforementioned periods, load-bearing elements such as columns usually perform the function for which they were intended, which is to say bearing or supporting part of a building. The way they are employed serves to demonstrate the essence of the architectural system and in that sense they are authentic. The issue of the application and the material of these load-bearing elements is relevant to the concept of authenticity. The numerous columns in ancient and medieval architecture may well be much older than the building in which they are used, as such elements were often redeployed in a new context. This reuse of materials – called ‘spolia’ – from late Antiquity until well into the Middle Ages, raises other questions that are related to authenticity. It was not unusual for older material used in a new context to be given a different architectural function from the one it originally performed. We see this, for example, in the new Magdeburg cathedral, built from 1209 onwards to replace its fire-ravaged predecessor. Many of the Roman spolia columns in this church were used in a way that differed from their original function. The striking quartet of costly granite and porphyry columns in the apse of the cathedral have no structural function (fig. 1). As such they do not appear to satisfy the definition of authenticity at the beginning of this article. Nevertheless, it was because of their (authentic) Roman origins that they were transported from Italy to Magdeburg and given such a prominent position in the church. The construction history of the new cathedral contains ample evidence that an eye-catching position was expressly sought for the multi-coloured columns, and eventually found in the apse.¹ In this case the significance eclipsed the original function of the columns.

In most cases, however, older material was used in the same role as originally and thus in line with the definition given above. A well-known example of this is the widespread reuse of column shafts in church buildings: the function remained the same, namely supporting an architrave or arch. For a contemporary researcher, this reuse of old building materials can serve to highlight the issue of authenticity in the sense of originality. At the time, however, this was not a consideration. There is not the slightest indication that spolia were purposefully employed in the early Christian era, nor that any distinction was made between new and recycled column shafts. The dozens of reused columns in the big early Christian basilicas of St John Lateran and St Peter’s in Rome were used on account of the material. In St Peter’s in particular the profusion of marble and granite was the deciding factor, not the issue of whether the material was new or had been used before.² This observation has relevance for the evaluation of the reuse of materials like column shafts,

architrave beams, capitals and bases. The availability of such materials is a substantial point. In the fourth century, for example, columns used in the construction of churches in Rome came not only directly from older buildings but also from previously stockpiled elements. The original context in which such materials had functioned was unimportant; the building did not have to be constructed from materials that all came from the same period. Clearly, other considerations weighed more heavily in the selection of materials and the development of a design concept, such as the richness of the material as manifested in the vibrant colours. What mattered was that the spolia should perform the same function as they had fulfilled in an earlier situation.

RECOGNIZABLE REUSE

An interesting point in all this is that of recognizability. For who would have been capable of discerning the difference between reused and new column shafts in the fourth-century basilica of St Peter’s in Rome? It was only in the sixteenth century that the artist Raphael and the writer Baldassare Castiglione were able to recognize that parts of the sculpture on the Arch of Constantine (c. 315) dated from different periods, witness their famous ‘Letter to Pope Leo X’; their evaluation of the quality of sculpture dating from different periods differed as well.³ Interestingly, it was not the unity of material that was under discussion, but the quality of the reworking of the sculpture.

In Rome and beyond spolia were employed for a variety of reasons, including after the fourth century. At times, the recognizable elements were taken for granted and no attempt was made to disguise the fact that some elements were being reused. At other times recognizable characteristics were actively sought after and in such cases the (putative) origin could be at issue. In the thirteenth-century church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, a second-century base was used in combination with a marble block with a conspicuous medieval inscription; two examples of reused material, placed one on top of the other.⁴ In the episcopal church in Pisa, construction on which began early in the second half of the eleventh century, older material was used in a totally different way. This important church building boasts an unprecedented wealth of Roman and Islamic spolia deployed in order to emphasize the status of both the institution and the city. Locked in rivalry with other maritime cities, Pisa incorporated into the architecture of this new church allusions to the city’s Roman origins, in the form of spolia columns (fig. 2), blocks of stone with clearly visible fragments of inscriptions, and a Roman sarcophagus. And on the exterior, bricked into one of the lozenge-shaped ornaments in the southern clerestory, an Egyptian *bacino*

2. Pisa Cathedral, spolia columns in the dwarf gallery of the apse (author's photograph)



3. Pisa Cathedral, reused block of stone with a fragment of an older inscription (author's photograph)



(basin). These elements were intended to be visible because the blocks of stone could just as easily have been fitted in so that the inscriptions remained hidden (fig. 3). The Roman elements allude to the city's origins and thus to Pisa's importance, while it is assumed that the Islamic *bacino*, specimens of which were also incorporated into other Pisan churches, was intended to underscore the city's dominant role in the Mediterranean.⁵ In addition other, medieval, elements such as a frieze were also used, while the use of spolia in the interior is considerable.⁶ The totality of these reused elements points to a deliberate application of spolia in a rigorously organized programme. In this instance the authenticity, in the sense of the origins or

source of the individual elements, is fundamental: together they were intended to form a new architectural whole. And it was important that the reused architectural elements be used in accordance with their original function. If the recognizability of the majority of these spolia was of crucial importance in Pisa, this was not always or everywhere the case with the reuse of materials. In the extension of the 'Alte Dom' in Cologne from a three-aisle basilica to a building with five aisles in the tenth century, red sandstone columns of Roman origin were used. In this case, however, the origin appears to have been of little importance, although the columns did retain their original function.⁷

CONCLUSION

The examples given above justify my reservations as to whether authenticity is a useful concept for understanding the architecture of these periods. The contemporary concept of authenticity – in whatever meaning – did not exist in Antiquity or the Middle Ages. Authenticity in the sense of originality certainly did not feature highly in the architecture of Antiquity or the Middle Ages. To the extent that there was any notion of originality back then, it was usually something to be avoided; in the Middle Ages in particular architecture was expected to be familiar and to conform to established and important traditions. Too strong a deviation from what was familiar – and thus comprehensible – in the application of architectural

concepts would put the building or building complex's patron outside the established order. Ideally, the history of an institution or individual patron was to be rendered visible in the architecture, thereby creating a strong connection between the history and the contemporary situation.⁸

Nor did authenticity play any role in the reuse of material. The origins of material in the early Christian era was simply not a consideration; what mattered was the richness of the material. During the Middle Ages there was a more conscious use of older material on account of its significance, but the concept of originality seems more relevant here than authenticity.

NOTES

- 1 L. Bosman, 'Bedeutung der Tradition. Über die Spolien im Chorbereich des Magdeburger Domes', in: W. Schenkluhn and A. Waschbüsch (eds.), *Der Magdeburger Dom im europäischen Kontext*, Regensburg 2011, 187-195.
- 2 F. Marcorin, 'Classicismo e reimpiego nei colonnati dell'antica basilica di San Pietro in Vaticano', in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 58 (2015), 138-163, 154-157; L. Bosman, 'Spolia in the Fourth-century Basilica', in: R. McKitterick et al. (eds.), *Old Saint Peter's, Rome*, Cambridge 2013, 65-80; L. Bosman, 'Constantine's Spolia. A Set of Columns for San Giovanni in Laterano and the Arch of Constantine in Rome', in: L. Bosman, I.P. Haynes and P. Liverani (eds.), *The Basilica of Saint John Laterano to 1600*, Cambridge 2020, 171-181.
- 3 F.P. di Teodoro, *Raffaello, Baldassar Castiglione e la lettera a Leone X con l'aggiunta di due saggi raffaelleschi*, Bologna 2003, 82. For a good English translation of the text, see: V. Hart and P. Hicks (eds.), *Palladio's Rome*, New Haven/London 2006, 183.
- 4 P. Pensabene, 'Architectural Spolia and Urban Transformation in Rome from the Fourth to the Thirteenth Century', in: S. Altekamp, C. Marcks-Jacobs and P. Seiler (eds.), *Perspektiven der Spolienforschung 2. Zentren und Konjunkturen der Spolierung*, Berlin 2017, 222-225.
- 5 K.R. Mathews, *Conflict, Commerce, and an Aesthetic of Appropriation in the Italian Maritime Cities, 1000-1150*, Leiden/Boston 2018, 126-146.
- 6 A. Peroni, 'Spolia e architettura nel Duomo di Pisa', in: J. Poeschke (ed.), *Antike Spolien in der Architektur des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, Munich 1996, 205-223.
- 7 D. Hochkirchen, 'Antike Säulen im Alten Dom. Ein Rekonstruktionsvorschlag zu den Seitenschiffarkaden der vorgotischen Kölner Bischofskirche', *Kölner Domblatt* 76 (2011), 77-107.
- 8 W. Schenkluhn, 'Bemerkungen zum Begriff des Architekturzitats', *Ars* 41 (2008), 3-12.

PROF. DR. L. BOSMAN is professor of architectural history at the University of Amsterdam. He specializes in the architecture of late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, with a particular focus on the significations of architecture. He is also engaged in research into National Socialism and architectural history in the Netherlands 1933-1945.

AUTHENTICITY AND MATERIAL

A CONSIDERATION OF THE CONCEPT BASED ON EXAMPLES FROM (LATE)ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

LEX BOSMAN

It is not immediately clear whether the concept of authenticity can be applied to the architecture of (Late) Antiquity and the Middle Ages. If you were to apply the existentialist definition of the concept, you could say that an architectural element is authentic when it is what it purports or seems to be: a column, for example, should support something. Authenticity can also be understood in the sense of 'initial' and 'original'. A brief survey of a few examples reveals the importance of originality and, in particular, of the function of the architectural element. Examples like

the eleventh/twelfth-century episcopal church of Pisa demonstrate that alongside the original function of an element, in this case columns, there could be multiple layers of meaning. On the other hand there is the redeployment of ancient columns in the thirteenth-century Magdeburg Cathedral, where they have no load-bearing function, having been placed in the apse solely because of what they signify. Ultimately one can wonder whether the concept of authenticity can be usefully applied to the architecture of the periods in question.