Eileen Choe

THST 398

Dr. Kirstin Noreen, Fr. Marc Reeves

June 15, 2015

Spolia of Rome, Spolia of Christianity

The Christianization of Rome is marked by a slow, but collectively dramatic change in the very fabric of the city, which is visible through the progression of Rome's art and architecture. From the remains that still stand today, one perspective through which the city of Rome and its Christian influence can be understood is by analyzing Rome as a magnificent piece of *spolia*, of reuse. The root of Christian Rome is fundamentally a reuse and adaptation of the artistic and architectural elements of pagan Rome. This is not only reflected in the artistic language of Christianity, but traces of this inclination towards spolia are weaved through the theology of Christianity that was developed concurrently in the early Christian era. The period referred to as the early Christian era supersedes the apostolic period and places a focus of study in the 4th century, during which the reign and influence of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, changed the course of Christianity. Early Christian imagery and architecture of this period that survive today serves as a platform through which one can understand the theological roots of themes such as Christian persecution and response, the cult of the martyrs, and sanctity of Christian worship and community. This essay will focus on the foundation of Christian Rome through historical, theological, and artistic lenses, which overlap and converge to paint a picture of the faith at the very beginning.

With humble beginnings, Christianity prior to the Constantinian influence took root in Rome through localized communities of Christians, who worshipped in house churches called *tituli*. The artistic remnants of this period are found in the imagery of Christian catacombs and suggest clues as to the experience of Christianity in "pagan" Rome. The pre-Constantinian era was a time of sporadic persecution of Christians in Rome, and a time before the unification of Christians under a single power structure—both Christian persecution and communities were largely localized. Thus, a strong sense of community formed in the house churches and extended from life to death, as Christians were commonly buried together in catacombs decorated with symbolic imagery marking their identity as Christians. As seen in the catacomb of Priscilla, under what is now the basilica of San Clemente, symbols used to represent Christians did so discreetly and furtively—the fish, anchor, and shepherd with sheep were unassuming images that did not read as decisively Christian, as to protect the identity of early Christians. Also, commonly depicted in the pre-Constantinian Christian catacombs are scenes of martyrdom and persecution, among the first depictions of an ensuing Christian tradition of linking the present suffering of persecuted Christians to a tradition of suffering for the Christian God. Another well-preserved late 3rd/ early 4th century image in the catacomb of Priscilla depicts the Old Testament martyrdoms of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego described in the book of Daniel. The glorification of martyrdom in this period can be understood as a precursor to the development of the cult of the martyrs later in the Constantinian era. Overall, the characteristics of Christian markers and the depiction of martyrs unique to the pre-Constantinian church, gives context by

which to analyze the turning point in Christianity, the first "Christian" emperor, Constantine.

The future of Christianity was radically changed in the early 4th century at the intersection of Christianity and political power in the first Christian emperor—Constantine. In *Life of Constantine*, the writer, historian, and bishop Eusebius details that Constantine was given a "divine sign" that appeared in the sky—a crucifix and text that read 'by this conquer' preceding his impending battle against his enemy Maxentius.[1] Soon after, God came to Constantine in a vision and urged the emperor to use the symbol of the cross and the monogram of Christ—"*rho* being intersected in the middle by *chi*"—for protection against his enemies.[2] With this symbol adorning the armor of his soldiers, Constantine is victorious in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 over Maxentius, and as emperor, Constantine sets out to establish his powerful rule and define the Christian influence that he would bring to Rome. This turning point in the history of Christianity is also reflected by a turning point in Christian symbolism. Constantine's Chi Rho, the monogram of Christ in Greek, is read very clearly as Christian. In contrast to the discreet Christian markers of the fish and the anchor seen in Christian catacombs, the Chi Rho triumphantly marked on the banner of Constantine's soldiers was a symbol of unity of state with religion and of a new era in Christianity.

The newly crowned Roman Emperor strove to leverage a transition from a military, pagan Rome to a peaceful, Christian Rome. Preceded by a string of military emperors, Constantine sought to gain political favor from the Romans and establish

---

[1] Eusebius Pamphili, *Life of Constantine*, Averil, Cameron; Stuart Hall, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81.
[2] Ibid., 81.

stability within the empire. Broadly, Constantine's strategy was to unify the empire under one religion and fund public building projects for the people—two aims interconnected as many of Constantine's triumphant building commissions were Christian buildings. Thus, Constantine's political agenda is largely reflected in his religious agenda, which in turn is largely reflected by his building agenda. By analyzing three monuments of focus commissioned and built during Constantine's reign: the Arch of Constantine, San Giovanni in Laterano, and St. Peter's basilica, conclusions can be drawn in regards to the influence of a Christian emperor on the theology and art of Christianity. Constantine, "entirely open in making the Son of God known to the Romans,"[3] sets out to literally and figuratively build Christianity into the fabric of Rome. However, for Christianity to establish firm roots in the city of Rome, the integration of Christianity was initially approached with caution—with ambivalence, then with more fervor and boldness. The transition was not from pagan to Christian instantaneously, but the transition was a gradient from light to dark, or perhaps, dark to light. Analyzing the use of spolia—considered broadly in the literal and figurative sense as anything with the quality of repetition or reuse from an earlier influence—in the development of Christianity during the Constantinian era, illuminates a method by which Constantine slowly but firmly integrated Christianity in Rome.

The Arch of Constantine is a triumphal arch built to commemorate Constantine's victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. One of the first building projects of Constantine, completed in 315 A.D., the Arch of Constantine is the least "Christian" of the three monuments of focus, although it was under God's provision that

[3] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 86.

Constantine supposedly was triumphant in his victory. The only nod to the Christian God is a part of the inscription on the Arch—"inspired by the divine"—that doesn't necessarily read as Christian. There are neither symbols of Christianity on the Arch, nor are there any direct references to the Battle on the Milvian Bridge. There is somewhat of a disconnect to what Eusebius writes of Constantine, "entirely open in making the Son of God known to the Romans," and the Arch of Constantine, which read more as a tribute to emperors of the past than to a tribute to the Christian God.[4] The function of a triumphant arch is to commemorate the victory of an emperor, yet the Arch of Constantine's imagery has little to do with Constantine's military successes or newfound God, confirming the initial ambivalence with which Constantine intended to create a Christian empire.

Reading the Arch of Constantine as a work of spolia, however, points to more concrete political statements that this triumphal arch intends to make. Constantine literally and figuratively imposed himself on the bodies of the great Roman emperors of the past, through the replacement of his head on these sculptures—reflecting Constantine's intent to align with previous emperors and link himself to a powerful earthly lineage. In the historical context of Constantine's reign, Constantine's efforts to associate himself with benevolent emperors of the past after a period of largely selfish military leaders was necessary in establishing his credibility and influence. Spolia, evident in Constantine's first monument as making a political statement, will later be of great influence in the creative effort to make a religious statement through the building of the first Christian buildings of worship.

[4] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 86.

Constantine proceeds to establish a Christian architectural presence in Rome through his commissioning of the first Christian building for worship and gathering—San Giovanni in Laterano. Constantine decided on the pagan basilica format as the blueprint for a church dedicated to the Christian God. The basilica was the least religiously affiliated building format prior to its adaptation as a Christian building of worship, as it was a space dedicated to public affairs. The adaptation and reuse of the pagan basilica for the construction of the first Christian basilica was practical, as it was a conventional and familiar architectural style to design and construct. In addition, its neutral connotations as a building style in terms of its religious affiliations formed a void in which new connotations as a place of Christian worship could fill. The San Giovanni basilica, as a premier work of spolia, allowed Constantine to make a statement and establish the physical presence of Christianity in Rome, in a discreet way. Fittingly, an aesthetically significant observation is the contrast between the exterior and interior of the basilica, which also speaks to the intended response of the Romans to this church. Whilst on the outside, the façade of the basilica is rather plain and unassuming; the interior of the basilica is lavishly decorated and furnished. This demonstrates Constantine's intent for his building programs to not completely take up Christianity, which was still largely a minority religion at the time, but to slowly integrate it into the fabric of the city itself—not forcing his religion on a people predominantly worshipping pagan gods. Not only did the adaptation of the basilica as a Christian building change the visual language of Christianity, but also induced a change in the structure of Christian worship. In terms of the form/function relationship of the basilica as opposed to the tituli prominent before Constantine, the form of the basilica largely influenced the development of a new

liturgical function of worship within the new space. "[F]rom small face-to-face groups to large, comparatively anonymous congregations, from domestic table to permanent altar, from earnest informality to solemn ceremony,"[5] the adaptation of the basilica style of building drastically changed the course of Christian worship.

The last of Constantine's major building projects is St. Peter's basilica, commissioned and planned between 318 and 322, and completed 30 years later.[6] The location of St. Peter's basilica has symbolic importance related to its namesake, St. Peter. Built on the site of the Circus of Nero, where Peter is believed to have been martyred on a cross upside down, and over the burial site of the "prince of the apostles," St. Peter's basilica largely influenced the concept of the sanctity of Christian basilicas and confirmed the direction that the influence of the cult of the martyrs would have in Christian theology. Although archeological and historical records regarding the actual burial site of St. Peter prior to the construction of St. Peters are virtually non-existent, "[b]y the year 200, at the very latest, the Christians of Rome believed this spot to be the tomb of St. Peter."[7] The importance and sanctity of Peter, to whom Jesus spoke the following words: "Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my Church and I will give to thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven,"[8] transferred to the space in which his

---

[5] Mark Searle, "Liturgy: Function and Goal in Christianity," ed. Leon Klenicki and Gabe Huck, *Spirituality and Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 87.
[6] Wikipedia contributors, "Old St. Peter's Basilica," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Old_St._Peter%27s_Basilica&oldid=662376826 (accessed June 15, 2015).
[7] Charles B. McClendon, "The History of the Site of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome," *Perspecta* 25 (1989):44, 58.
[8] Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, Yale University Press (Italy, 1997), 1.

holy bones rested, confirming the necessity of relics and holy objects for creating the sanctity of Christian places of worship.

Another adaptation of the pagan basilica in the Christian basilica is the function of the apse, the semicircular recess across from the entrance of the basilica.[9] Whereas a statue of the emperor would be placed in the apse of the pagan basilica, the altar would be placed in the apse of the Christian basilica. As the focal point of the building, the use of the apse in which the ceremonies and proceedings of Christian worship would take place over the altar, was an optimization of the natural visual inclination of the basilica architectural format, a more figurative example of the spolia used in the adaptation of the pagan basilica to the Christian basilica. More concretely, the altar itself was constructed from columns from the Temple of Solomon, which according to legend, Constantine himself brought from the Holy Land. Whether the columns themselves were genuine or a copy, they demonstrate the reuse of the architectural language of the Old Testament holy place and visually and symbolically confirms the Christian basilica as a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophesies.

Thinking of spolia in the more figurative sense, the concept of spolia also applies to the rather fluid notion of Christian persecution since Christianity's earliest days. Christians have been persecuted in many historical moments, but were also the persecutors in other historical moments. The exponential growth of Christianity in the first three centuries induced a "transfer for pagan animosity from Jews to Christians" and

[9] Wikipedia contributors, "Apse," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Apse&oldid=666628398 (accessed June 15, 2015).

led to bloody Christian persecutions, such as the persecution under Emperor Diocletian.[10] However, by the fourth century under Emperor Constantine as Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, Christians slowly transformed from persecuted to persecutors and at times, persecuted pagans and Jewish people with the same fervor as Christian persecutors once persecuted Christians. Looking at the history of Christian persecution in a broad perspective, the same tendency towards spolia applies to the Christian, or rather, human, experience with persecution.

The study of the spolia used in the early Christian era, points to broader human tendencies and inclinations. Symbolically, spolia is the idea of looking back—of using the past to validate the present, a glorification of the past. This yearning to confirm the present through establishing a continuation with the past was particularly evident in the late 16th/early 17th century during the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation. During a time in which Catholic tradition and theology was questioned, there was a push to look to the past for justification and answers—for evidence of early suffering, a tradition of imagery, the cult of the martyrs, and historical precedents for Catholic tradition and worship. Thus, the early Christian era/ Constantinian era was often considered, in retrospect, as a triumphant period for Christianity, and was consistently held up on a pedestal during periods of Church reform. Early Christian art and architecture from the Catacombs of the Pre-Constantinian era to the first Christian buildings built under Emperor Constantine was revisited to look for clues as to the early experience of Christianity, through a lens of looking for evidence and precedents to defend elements Catholic tradition under scrutiny. Human nature tends to dictate a

[10] Edward Flannery, Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Anti-Semitism, Revised and Updated Edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 28.

tendency to believe that what is at the root, at the beginning, must be pure, good, just, and true—divine.

However, what we know from the remnants of this early Christianity is that its architectural and cultural language was not novel, but a reuse in and of itself—frequently citing pagan influence to build a Christian influence. The inclination towards spolia points to a cyclical human nature, easily observed through the study of art history. Art and architecture of the past does not exist in the bubble of the historical period in which it was created but was influenced by the past and will play a role in influencing the art and architecture of the future. However cyclical human nature can be, there is also a parallel tendency to reason linearly and chronologically. Thus, the search for truth and confirmation of the Church has pushed to venture for evidence and facts further back in time past the Constantinian era. Enabled by evolving technology and curiosity, a more accurate picture of the rather arbitrary concept of the "beginning" is painted through discoveries such as the notable Vatican statement of the validity of the relics of Peter on the basis of DNA testing. Yet, in the search for the truth and for the divine, must the search dig deeper and deeper into a past in which bias, pride, and a tendency to glorify the past, has often distorted and disguised truth? Or, instead of looking to the past to confirm the present, as has been done through the use of spolia, can eschatology, the study of the end, be a more fruitful search for the divine, as the future has not yet been flawed by the flaws of man, but divine in nature? The study of the art and architecture of early Christianity reveals that the inclination towards spolia, at the bottom line, shows the confines of the endeavor of human knowledge. Alas, as faith does not originate in evidence, it will not be found in the remains of "early" Christianity.