

The background of the cover is a photograph of the interior of a church, likely the Basilica of San Marco in Venice. It features several large, classical columns with Corinthian capitals supporting a series of arches. The architecture is made of brick and stone, showing signs of age and historical layers. The lighting is warm, highlighting the textures of the stone and brick.

MARIA FABRICIUS HANSEN

# THE SPOLIA CHURCHES OF ROME

Recycling Antiquity  
in the Middle Ages

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS



- 1 The Lateran Baptistery
- 2 Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura
- 3 San Clemente
- 4 Santa Costanza
- 5 San Giorgio in Velabro
- 6 San Lorenzo fuori le Mura
- 7 Santa Maria in Cosmedin
- 8 Santa Maria in Trastevere
- 9 San Nicola in Carcere
- 10 Santa Sabina
- 11 Santo Stefano Rotondo

- 1 Sant'Adriano
- 2 San Bartolomeo all'Isola
- 3 San Benedetto in Piscinula
- 4 Santa Bibiana
- 5 Santi Cosma e Damiano
- 6 San Crisogono
- 7 San Giovanni in Laterano  
(the Lateran Basilica)
- 8 San Giovanni a Porta Latina
- 9 Santi Giovanni e Paolo
- 10 San Lorenzo in Miranda
- 11 Santa Maria degli Angeli
- 12 Santa Maria Antiqua
- 13 Santa Maria in Aracoeli
- 14 Santa Maria in Domnica
- 15 Santa Maria Egiziaca
- 16 Santa Maria Maggiore
- 17 Santa Maria Rotonda
- 18 San Martino ai Monti
- 19 Santi Nereo e Achilleo
- 20 San Paolo fuori le Mura
- 21 St Peter's (San Pietro)
- 22 San Pietro in Vincoli
- 23 Santa Prassede
- 24 Santa Prisca
- 25 Santa Pudenziana
- 26 Santi Quattro Coronati
- 27 San Saba
- 28 Sancta Sanctorum



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*Translated from the Danish  
by Barbara J. Haveland*



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## **Glossary**

Architectural terms and the names of different types of stone listed in the glossary (p. 238) or the guide to materials (p. 243) are given in italics the first time they are mentioned in the introductory chapters or the descriptions of churches.

## **Numbering**

- [1] Numbers in square brackets refer to illustrations.
- ❶ Numbers in red circles refer to the eleven selected churches, each described in a separate chapter.
- ❶ Numbers in blue circles refer to the “Other noteworthy spolia churches” listed at the end of this book, in the section on Practical Information.

The red and blue numbers also indicate the locations of churches on the maps at the front and back of the book.

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A mosaic floor composed of various colored tiles (white, grey, yellow, red, green, purple) arranged in a pattern. A central rectangular tile contains a Latin inscription. The inscription is framed by a decorative border of stylized leaves. The text is arranged in three lines: 'IVIVS' on the top line, 'RTHOPVS' on the middle line, and 'I CONIVGI' on the bottom line. The mosaic is set in a larger, plain stone floor.

IVIVS  
RTHOPVS  
I CONIVGI

# **Recycling Antiquity**

ΑΥΤΑ  
ΟΙΣ  
ΛΑΛΟΥ  
ΝΖΕΥΤ  
ΛΕΣΑΤΟ  
ΑΚΑΓΝΟ



## Introduction

**R**OME IS BUILT on the past. There can hardly be any other city in the world whose history can so readily be traced: through the wealth of physical reminders still to be found there. A whole succession of different periods – the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque era and all the others in between, right up to the present day – have left their mark on ‘the Eternal City’. And of course beneath all the other layers, like a keynote, lies Ancient Rome. As the capital of a vast empire, Ancient Rome had a name and a standing which, in all the centuries since then, have been a source of admiration and inspiration.

To this day, almost everywhere you go in the centre of Rome or in the surrounding area the vestiges of antiquity can still be seen. And not just in such famous buildings as the Colosseum or the Pantheon, impressive for their very size alone, or in the large areas of archaeological interest which are rather like historic parks, the Forum Romanum being the most renowned of these. In the streets, too, here a column built into a house, there a fountain constructed out of ancient elements chimes with the city’s antique echo [1] [2] [3].

A particularly robust approach to Rome’s antique past was taken in the Middle Ages, or rather: from Late Antiquity in the fourth century until around the thirteenth century. During this period people built quite literally both with and on antiquity, working as they did to a great extent with recycled materials (or recycling entire buildings, come to that) from ancient times, what are known as *spolia*: columns, marble panels, bricks – it was all there for the taking. There were times when buildings such as the Colosseum actually functioned as handy quarries full of prefabricated masonry.

The Latin word *spolium* originally meant the flayed skin of an animal, but in its plural form *spolia*, it came to denote different sorts of plunder – the booty of war, for example. This *spolia* eventually became the general term for architectural elements or pieces of sculpture taken from one site and reused in a different spot, often in a different way. The interesting thing for a visitor to Rome today is that in the Middle Ages no attempt was made to conceal this use of second-hand materials. Often, architectural elements from



1 Spolia columns on a street in Rome. Via Portico d'Ottavia.

quite different sources were combined in creative and unorthodox fashion, and the builders were not always so intent on getting the pieces to match in terms of size. Quite the contrary. They seem in fact to have favoured the idea of the various elements being as disparate and multifarious as possible 7 [84].

To the visitor today these creative combinations of all sorts of materials and styles seem fascinating and instantly appealing – not to say downright entertaining. It can become something of a sport: going around the city and its buildings, hunting for recycled antiquities. Often these are to be found in churches. As an institution the church was a major force, culturally, economically and politically, and from the beginning of the fourth century (when Christianity became legal) it invested a great deal in its buildings which, as a result, house a rich variety of fine antique elements. As a visitor to Rome today you do however have to know what you are looking for in order to see it, so to speak. Over the centuries many of the churches have been ‘modernized’, with the addition of new chapels, altars, frescoes and so on which tend to smother the more discreet Medieval features. Often you have to consciously look for the variations in a colonnade in order to spot them and it takes a certain amount of training to be able to differentiate between the Medieval materials and later substitutions, alterations and modern restoration work. But the reward is that one leaves the church with a new sense of having listened to a long and fascinating story. The sort of story

which only a building which has stood at the heart of European culture for so many politically and socially stormy and eventful centuries can tell. This book is intended, therefore, as a guide for those eager to get off the beaten track of mainstream tourism and explore the phenomenon of spolia in the Medieval churches of Rome.

The first section of this book is devoted to a discussion of spolia, their history, use, stylistic features and significance. The second section, a catalogue of sorts, contains more detailed descriptions and illustrations of eleven churches. These factual descriptions can be referred to when you are visiting a particular church and want to know what is what. They have therefore been written in such a way that they can be read separately and independently of the book's first half (so the reader will have to bear with me if I occasionally repeat myself). In the presentations of these selected churches you will find the basic information about the history of each building, together with descriptions of which antique architectural elements have been used in it and how. These eleven churches are particularly worth visiting because they represent different forms of architectural recycling from different periods of the Middle Ages – and, not least, because in its architectonic totality each one is quite unique, both from an aesthetic-artistic point of view and as a historic monument. Visit one or two churches a day on a standard week's holiday and you can gain a very good impression of the

## 2 Columns set into a house front. Via della Tribuna Campitelli.

