

Christians as Classicists:

A Literary and Archaeological Analysis of Christian Invention of Tradition

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Early Christianity struggled to find its place in the world ruled by Romans. As a new religion in a society which valued antiquity and customs, Christianity sought a way to become more acceptable to a Roman audience, through the invention of tradition.¹ Various practices contributed to this mission and aided in the portrayal of Christianity as a part of an established tradition, both literary and architecturally. Early Christian authors would often discuss Christianity within the context of Roman society and politics. Eusebius, the first Christian Historian, is a paradigm of this practice, and his *Ecclesiastical History* portrays a Christianity at the center of Rome from its very conception. Additionally, spolia, an architectural feature common in churches, is a physical manifestation of Christianity's invention of tradition. Inscriptions on pieces of spolia even more clearly demonstrate a desired connection between Classical antiquity and Christianity. A thorough analysis of these two specific products of Early Christianity-- Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, and inscribed spolia in churches-- demonstrate Christianity's contrived connection to an established tradition.

¹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Hobsbawm was the first scholar to coin the concept of the invention of tradition, and fully discuss its implication in historical analyses. For more on invented tradition within Christian theology, see P. Fredriksen, "'Are You a Virgin?' Biblical Exegesis and the Invention of Tradition," in J. E. Taylor (ed.) *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via Monty Python's the Life of Brian* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 151-65. Fredriksen discusses Jesus's characterization of the Messiah in various sections of the Bible, and explores the possibility that this role was given to Jesus postmortem, and was the object of invented tradition. This possibility demonstrates a propensity for invented tradition within Christianity, and demonstrates how the first Christian authors (Paul, Luke, etc.) established the precedent for later authors to follow.

Necessity for Christian Tradition

Christianity's inherent nature as a new religion was a revolting concept to the Romans, a group of people who valued the *mos maiorum*, or way of the ancestors, and condemned anything new. This veneration of the old ways and hostility towards new concepts was so deeply entrenched in the Roman mindset that it is inherently visible in the Latin language. The word for ancestors-- *maiores*-- is the comparative form of the adjective *magnus*, meaning "great." *Magnus* can also be translated as "grand," "noble," or "of great weight/importance" and has a generally positive connotation. *Maiores*, as the comparative form of *magnus*, conveys the idea that the ancestors are *more* great/grand/noble. Literally translated, the term *mos maiorum* means "the way of the greater ones." Greater than whom? The current Romans. Latin has other words which mean ancestors, such as *prior* or *antiquus*, both of which relate more to the ancestors' role as temporal predecessors. Nevertheless, Romans, especially in rhetorical works of historical *exempla*, often employ the word *maiores* for ancestors, reflecting the Roman esteem of the established traditions. Conversely, the adjective meaning new, *novus*, also may be translated as "strange" or "unusual," illustrating the word's negative connotation. Furthermore, when *novus* describes the neutral Latin word for "thing"-- *res* -- the combination adopts a new meaning: revolution. A *nova res*, literally a "new thing," represents a danger to established government and society. The very concept of a new thing, and the possible change which accompanies it, threatens to undermine society, and thus is deplorable to a Roman. This mindset, while exemplified in the connotation of *res nova*, prevailed beyond the political and military confines into aspects of everyday life- including religion.

Christianity, from the beginning, suffered due to the Roman prejudice against new concepts and ideas, especially due to its close relationship with Judaism. The Romans, wary of Judaism, nevertheless allowed its existence specifically because of its antique tradition.

Christianity, however, contained the aspects of Judaism the Romans distrusted-- such as a monotheistic rejection of pagan gods-- but lacked any sort of tradition or tie to the past.

Suetonius captures Roman view of Christianity and its practitioners, describing them as “genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae.”² Here, Suetonius employs the adjective *novus*, discussed previously, to describe Christians and their newness in a negative light. Although Christianity did not suffer as much as some believe, and most likely did not undergo periods of mass persecution, it did face prejudice in Rome.³

As the reportedly first “Christian” emperor, Constantine would have had much to gain through making Christianity more acceptable in Rome. Whether Constantine himself converted or not, he was involved in the creation of the Edict of Milan, which granted tolerance to Christianity, and was generally more lenient towards Christianity than his rivals.⁴ Therefore,

² Suet., *Vita Ner.* 16.2. “A kind of people of a new and wicked superstition.”

³The historicity of Christian persecution is difficult to discern, and has been examined by various scholars. See esp. B. Shaw, “The Myth of Neronian Persecution.” *JRS* 105 (2015): 73-100. Carrier 2014 also casts doubt on the historicity of Neronian persecution through his exploration of the possibility of Christian interpolation in Tacitus. R. Carrier, “The Prospect of Christian Interpolation in Tacitus. Annals 15.44,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, No. 3 (2014): 264-283. On the doubtful nature of Domitianic persecution: T. Barnes “Legislation Against the Christians.” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 58 (1968): 32-50.; B. Jones, “Christians,” in *The Emperor Domitian* (London: Routledge, 1992).; M. Harmes, “Domitian and the Early Fathers of the Church,” *The Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 5 (2009): 35-54. In P. Keresztes, “The Emperor Antoninus Pius and the Christians,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 22 (1971): 1-18., Keresztes states that there is no evidence of an imperial decree mandating Christian persecution under the emperors Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, or Marcus Aurelius. This is not to say that a consensus has been reached within the scholarly community regarding the historicity of these persecutions. Neronian persecution is still largely considered to be fact, as supported by Jones’s 2017 response to Shaw. Keresztes 1973 remarkably advocates for veracity of Domitianic persecution, and while in his 1968 work he does conclude that Marcus Aurelius never took any measures to purposely persecute Christians, he does still hold to the fact that there was persecution present.

⁴ For more on Constantine’s relationship to Christianity, see T. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Constantine became associated with Christianity. However, more than merely personal gratification, Constantine would have gained a political advantage through the invention of a tradition for Christianity. Constantine's rise to power was not a clear cut path, and he had to fight for his position as sole ruler.⁵ Many of Constantine's enemies were known persecutors of Christians, following the example set by Emperor Diocletian. Constantine, in opposition to his rivals, did not persecute Christians. By bolstering the public's view of Christianity, the Romans would view Constantine's opponents more harshly for having actively persecuted the Christians.⁶ Constantine was a central figure in relation to both Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* and the popularization of spolia. Eusebius and Constantine were contemporaries, and Eusebius is believed to have been Constantine's theological advisor.⁷ Additionally, Constantine commissioned the first public church, and popularized the use of spolia in Christian building projects. Therefore, he greatly influenced both of the aspects analyzed in this paper.

Eusebius and his Ecclesiastical Emperors

The earliest Christian writers demonstrate the tendency to conflate Christianity's importance in Rome. Primary among these authors was Eusebius of Caesarea. The work of Eusebius, who was a prominent figure in the church and the author of the first extant history of Christianity, serves as a paradigm of the invention of tradition in Christian literature. Eusebius was a highly biased author, due to his personal beliefs and connections. As a Christian, Eusebius

⁵ Constantine's rise to power marked the end of the tetrarchy. In the tetrarchy four emperors ruled the Roman Empire, two senior emperors (Augustus) and two junior emperors (Caesar). Constantine's father, Constantius, was an Augustus in the tetrarchy, along with Diocletian. When Constantine came to power, he had to first fight Maxentius, who sought the title of Caesar for himself. Once Constantine became Augustus, he battled his co-rulers for sole power. For more on Constantine's political power and role within Rome, see T. Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, 2011)

⁶ Inventing a tradition for Christianity thus served as a form of predecessor denigration. For more on predecessor denigrations, see M. Charles, "'Calvus Nero': Domitian and the Mechanics of Predecessor Degredation," *Acta Classica* 45 (2002): 19-49.

⁷ See T. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

was biased in favor of Christianity and would have thought negatively of its opponents and oppressors. Moreover, Eusebius had a close relationship with Emperor Constantine, and demonstrates a loyalty towards him in his works.⁸ These biases play a significant role in the *Ecclesiastical History*. Eusebius primarily creates connections between prominent historical figures and Christians in various different ways, both positive and negative, to create a history of both Christianity and Rome in which Christianity plays a significant role in political and social events.

Eusebius first links Emperor Tiberius, the second Julio-Claudian and earliest possible emperor to be associated with Christianity, to the tradition. Tiberius reportedly heard the story of Jesus's death and resurrection and appealed to the Senate to make Jesus an official Roman God. However, the Senate rejected the appeal, stating an ancient Roman law which prevented Jesus's canonization in Rome. Nevertheless, Eusebius states “τὸν Τιβέριον ἦν καὶ πρότερον εἶχεν γνῶμην τηρήσαντα, μηδὲν ἄτοπον κατὰ τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ διδασκαλίας ἐπινοῆσαι.”⁹ This account places Christianity at the center of Rome and Roman politics from the earliest date possible. As Tiberius was the Emperor during Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, he was the earliest political figure who could support Christianity. However, it is unlikely that the Roman elites

⁸ In the Later books of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius both praises Constantine and bashes Constantine's predecessors. Of Constantine, Eusebius says, “Κωνσταντῖνος εὐθὺς ἀρχόμενος βασιλεὺς τελεώτατος καὶ Σεβαστὸς πρὸς τῶν στρατοπέδων καὶ ἔτι πολὺ τούτων πρότερον πρὸς αὐτοῦ τοῦ παμβασιλέως θεοῦ ἀναγορευθεὶς, ζηλωτὴν ἑαυτὸν τῆς πατρικῆς περὶ τὸν ἡμέτερον λόγον εὐσεβείας κατεστήσατο.” “Constantine straightaway was proclaimed the perfect ruler and Augustus by the soldiers and even long before then by God the absolute ruler, and he established himself as an emulator of his father concerning our holy word” (8.13). Additionally, Eusebius decries Constantine's rivals, stating of Maxentius, “εἰς πάσας δ' ἀνοσιουργίας ὀκειλάς, οὐδὲν ὅ τι μιαρίας ἔργων καὶ ἀκολασίας παραλέλοιπεν,” “having run towards all wickedness, he left nothing remaining from the work of brutality and licentiousness” (8.14).

⁹ Eusb., *Hist. Eccl.*, 2.2. “Tiberius preserved the opinion which he first held, he did not intend anything foul against the teaching of Christ.” Translations my own unless otherwise noted.

knew of Christianity until a later period, making this account a work of fiction.¹⁰ In this story, Tiberius propagates for Christianity, and it is the Senate who shuts the idea down, because of an ancient law. This ancient law harkens back to the *mos maiorum* and its opposition to Christianity. However, as the story comes to a close, Tiberius retains his awe toward Christianity, and intends it no harm. Eusebius thus sends the message that Christianity triumphs over the *mos maiorum*, while also linking it to a very prominent and powerful politician.

In an opposite approach, Eusebius connects Christianity to the infamous Emperors Nero and Domitian through Christian persecution.¹¹ Despite, or rather because of, the heinous acts of these emperors, they were well known men. Nero's *postmortem* legacy was conflated and exaggerated to mythic proportions. Eusebius, along with other Christian authors, manipulated the public personas of these emperors to send a message for Christianity. Nero and Domitian both gained a reputation for cruelty and wickedness. In attaching a tradition of Christian persecution to these emperors, Eusebius creates a historical model with which to associate rulers who persecute Christians. Eusebius's audience would have seen their own rulers, who employed harsh means against the Christians, in these characterizations of the cruel emperors. Thus, Eusebius equates Christian persecution with despicable men, which aids in the political movement to accept Christianity. More generally, in order for Christianity to have been

¹⁰ R. Carrier, "The Prospect of Christian Interpolation in Tacitus. Annals 15.44," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, No. 3 (2014): 264-283. Carrier discusses the improbability that Christianity was known in Rome, especially by the elites, during the reign of the Julio-Claudians.

¹¹ A common vehicle for establishing a connection was through persecution narratives, and later martyr accounts. Many persecution narratives place Christianity at the center of Roman politics, the victims of some of Rome's cruelest and most vile Emperors. The rhetoric of these accounts victimizes Christians, while simultaneously connecting them to notable people in history. The earliest surviving accounts of Christian persecutions do not come from contemporaries. The Christian rhetorician Tertullian is one of the earliest extant sources to discuss Neronian and Domitianic persecution of Christians (*Apology*). His account latches on to these infamous emperors, and portrays Christianity as important enough to warrant the attention of emperors. Eusebius, the first author to write a history of the Christian church, likewise places Christianity at the center of Roman history through persecution narratives. For recent scholarship on the historicity of these persecutions, see note 3.

persecuted by these Emperors, it must have been a known religion in Rome. The persecution accounts conflate Christianity's presence and importance in Roman politics, and aid in placing Christianity in an important historical context.

Eusebius additionally recounts a miracle in which Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his troops receive divine aid in battle. A group of Aurelius's troops prayed to God during a drought, and God provided a rain storm to protect them from dying of thirst. Moreover, the lightning from the storm terrified the enemy, and they retreated.¹² While this story does not state that Marcus Aurelius adopted Christianity, it does nonetheless associate Christianity with this prominent Emperor. This account further portrays Christians as the heroes, saving the Roman army. Eusebius does mention that non-Christian sources recount this event, and exclude Christian involvement. This statement clearly demonstrates that this story is an instance of invented tradition. As noted previously with the dubious historicity in the Tiberius account, Eusebius is not the most credible historian. He has already set the precedent for embellishment, when it serves to better the image of Christianity. As conflicting sources exist, in which the occurrence has no connection to Christianity, Eusebius, or an earlier Christian source, may have seen this story as an opportunity to insert Christianity further into the narrative of Roman history.

These accounts are indicative of larger themes throughout Eusebius's work, which praise Christianity and portray it as an integral facet of Rome. As the work is specifically a history of the church, the emphasis on Christianity is expected. However, Eusebius's liberties in recording events, and clear desire to connect Christianity to prominent people, misrepresent the actual role

¹² Eusb., *Eccl. Hist.*, 5.5.

of Christianity for most of this period. Thus, Eusebius portrays a version of Christianity with a venerable history.

Inscribed Spolia and Invented Tradition

Spolia in churches likewise created a physical connection between the Classical and Christian traditions. Although, spolia may serve multiple purposes, and possess complex social and religious connotations, as noted by certain key scholars. Early scholarship, such as that produced by Deichmann and Krauthmeir, presented a limited view on spolia. The popularity of spolia was either the result of a loss of proper funds and skill,¹³ or a rebirth of Classical architecture and culture.¹⁴ However, Brenk, a more recent scholar, has convincingly demonstrated the flaws in both of these proceeding viewpoints.¹⁵ Instead, Brenk postulates that Constantine popularized spolia as a demonstration of the shifting power dynamics in Rome.¹⁶ Saradi likewise demonstrates the complexities to studying spolia, and the various theological

¹³ F. W. Deichmann, *Die Spolien in der spätantiken Architektur*, SB Münch, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse (1975) 6,95.

¹⁴ R. Krautheimer, "The Architecture of Sixtus III: A Fifth Century Renaissance?" *Studies in Early Christian, Medieval, and Renaissance Art* (New York, 1969) 181-198.

¹⁵ B. Brenk, "Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics Versus Ideology," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 103-109. Brenk mainly refutes Deichmann, who prominently argued that spolia were employed specifically because of economic struggles. The elite Romans could no longer afford to import these valuable materials from other places, Deichmann argues, and thus re-used the precious materials from existing buildings. However, when Constantine popularized spolia, he maintained the means to acquire materials from other locations, had he so desired. The Empire was not in an economic crisis, at least not one that impacted the purse of the Emperor. Moreover, a high level of skill was required to incorporate spolia into structurally sound buildings, which refutes the idea that spolia rose in popularity due to a decrease in the skill level of artisans. Brenk does not as clearly refute Krautheimer. Rather, Brenk argues for other uses for spolia besides merely aesthetic value. However, this scholar is under the impression that the two are not mutually exclusive.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* The care and precision taken in crafting these spolia-laden projects illustrates that the monuments were political power statements. Constantine could afford new materials if he so desired, and it was a feat of great craftsmanship to create a structurally sound building or architectural feature with spolia. These architectural materials were expensive, and signs of power in whatever buildings they graced. Constantine's decision to remove these materials from older, primarily pagan, buildings instead of merely purchasing new materials, represents a physical manifestation of transition of power both from Constantine's predecessor to Constantine and from paganism to Christianity.

connotations which may be associated with spolia.¹⁷ Spolia may be interpreted as a visual way to illustrate Christianity's defeat of paganism, however spolia sometimes was used to insinuate that all of history was leading up to Christianity.¹⁸ These scholars demonstrate various ways of considering spolia. The ideas of these scholars, specifically Brenk and Saradi, are not entirely mutually exclusive. Spolia may send many messages, about the modern power dynamics or a connection to antiquity. The use of spolia should be considered on a symbolic level.

The message of spolia integral to this paper is its ability to create a physical-- and, thus, visible-- connection to an antique tradition. The addition of an inscription on spolia adds another dynamic to the connection, and often strengthens the link. For the purposes of this paper, three examples of such overlap between spolia and epigraphy will be analyzed. While certainly more than these three examples are extant in Roman churches, due to issues with documentation and digitization, it is difficult to analyze more examples without evaluating their nature in person.

One such piece of spolia is a column in the church of Santa Maria Aracoeli. This column, composed of Syenite marble, is the third column on the left colonnade. Located well above eye level is an inscription which reads "a cubiculo augustorum," or "from the bedroom of the Augusti" (Appendix 1, Figure 1). The placement of the column, and its inscription, allows one to see it soon after entering the church. As the inscription is on one of the first columns, it is in an area of high foot traffic, most visitors would pass the column whether they were present for worship or passing through as a tourist. One would not need to attend service and approach the altar to see this inscription. Moreover, the letters of the inscription are large, and despite their lofty location, are still clear to onlookers. The inscription divides into two lines of text, and is

¹⁷ H. Saradi, "The Use of Ancient *Spolia* in Byzantine Monuments: The Archaeological and Literary Evidence," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 3(1997): 395-423.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 401-404.

mostly oriented center. The letters are large enough to be read from farther away, and the inscription oriented towards the center of the church, so that when one looks at it while standing in the main area of the church, one is able to read the majority of the words. The placement of this column demonstrates a desire for the column to be seen and understood by many, highlighting its significance to the church.

The content of the inscription is certainly the most significant part of the column. The inscription states that the column was from the Imperial household. Not just any Imperial family, the Augusti. A connection to Emperor Augustus would have created a strong tie not just to Roman political history, but to one of the most beloved and significant figures in Rome.¹⁹ As the founder of the Principate, Augustus held a considerable amount of power in Rome and was an important figure to Romans. Beyond merely his power, Augustus was beloved by these later Romans. Augustus's imperial dynasty, the Julio-Claudians, reigned for four more rulers and left a lasting impact on Rome. Therefore, Augustus, and his household, were prominent figures in Rome. A physical connection to this family would have placed Christianity directly in the middle of one of the most influential periods of Roman history.

Christians during the Early Medieval period also sought to establish a connection to earlier Christianity, and figures such as Emperor Constantine. Such a connection is exemplified in a piece of floor spolia in San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura (Appendix 1, Figure 2). This piece of spolia reads "Constanti," and is this a clear reference to Emperor Constantine, if not the person himself then a family member or a freedman. The importance of Emperor Constantine in Christianity has already been discussed, and despite the ambiguity concerning his conversion, it

¹⁹ The title "emperor" is what is most commonly associated with Augustus. However, he never used the title Imperator (the Latin word from which our English word "Emperor" is derived) but rather gained the title Princeps. His rule established the Principate in Rome, which paved the way for the Imperial system.

is his reputation among later Christians which matters. Constantine was believed, by these Christians, to have been the first Christian Emperor. His prominence in Rome and Christianity created the perfect symbolic figure. Christianity finally gained an important historical figure to attach to, which placed Christianity as a focal point in Roman history. Thus, connections to Constantine draw on his two-fold identity: religiously, as a devout defender of the faith, and politically, as a powerful Emperor.

The significance of this inscription pairs with its location in the church. San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura, like many Roman churches, was built in various stages. The first portion of the church, the Pelagius Basilica, was constructed during the late sixth century.²⁰ The later Honorius Basilica was added during the thirteenth century.²¹ The inscribed spolia is on the floor in the Honorius Basilica. As this section was constructed in the thirteenth century, Constantine, who ruled about nine hundred years prior, would have been conflated as a great force for Christianity. Constantine serves as a reminder that Christianity had been around enough to have its own tradition, an aspect which contemporary Christians sought to highlight. Christianity had its own Emperors to claim, and wanted to demonstrate its prevalence in history and society.

San Nicola in Carcere provides an example of a Christian basilica in which spolia provides a connection both to earlier Christianity and the Classical tradition. Inside the church, a column extracted from a previous church bears an inscription describing a donation made to the earlier church. The inscription reads (Appendix 2):

† DE DONIS D[OMIN]I ET
S[AN]C[T]E D[OMIN]I GENETRICI MARIE
S[AN]C[T]E ANNE S[AN]C[T]U[S] SIMEON ET S[AN]C[T]E
LUCIE EDGO ANASTASIUS MA

²⁰ M. Hansen, "San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura,": in trans. B. Haveland, *The Spolia Churches of Rome: Recycling Antiquity in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2015), 146-161.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

IORDOMU OFERO BOBIS PRO NATA
 LICIES BESTRE BINEA TABULUM
 R[E]P[OSITUM] IN PORTU SEV
 BOBES PARIA II IUMENTA S[E]V PECORA
 XXX PORCI X FURMA DE RAME LIBRAS
 XXVI LECTU SITRATU IN UTILITA
 TE P[RES]B[YTE]R SE VALEO LECTO SI TRA
 TO AT MANSIONARIIS EQUI
 SEQUENTIBUS²²

† IC REQUIESCIT IN ANTE

† From the gifts of the Lord and
 Of Saint Mary, the Begetter of the Lord
 To Saint Anne, Saint Simeon, and Saint
 Lucia I, Anastasius, the Maiordomo,
 Offer to you all for your feast day celebrations
 Wine, a stable placed in the port and
 cows, 2 pairs, mules, and 30 cattle,
 10 pigs, 26 pounds as the form of rams
 Having been selected, having been spread in the utility
 Of the priest himself, the other having been selected and spread
 For the the following journeys.

†He (Anastasius) rests below

This column demonstrates how Christians would use spolia to reinforce the history of
 Christianity within Rome. By including it within the new church, it serves as a reminder to all
 those present in the basilica that the tradition of Christianity had been present in Rome long
 before San Nicola had been built. Furthermore, by incorporating this column into the new
 church, the Christians of the time were asserting their belief that their heritage was worth being
 incorporated into other buildings. This column shows Christians accepting their narrative of
 importance within Rome. In this way, the column functions similarly to a relic, and a reminder of
 the tradition which Christianity has already worked to cultivate.

²² M. Hansen, "San Nicola in Carcere," in *trans.* B. Haveland, *The Spolia Churches of Rome: Recycling Antiquity in the Middle Ages* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2015), 184-193.

San Nicola in Carcere additionally is comprised of external spolia columns, remnants of the pagan temples upon which the church was built. Three neighboring temples, the Temples of Spes, Juno, and Janus, were all incorporated into the structure of San Nicola.²³ The Temples of Spes and Janus lend their columns to the exterior southern and northern sides of the Basilica, respectively. The Temple of Juno, the middle temple, provides its foundation as the base to San Nicola and its columns to the facade of the main eastern entrance (Appendix 1, Figures 3, 4, & 5).²⁴ The columns from these previous temples are still together and very clearly a spolia feature. The spolia utilized in this church differs from those present in the other examples in that this basilica was superimposed on three temples, and their actual physical structures are still present and clearly visible. These spolia are not just random pieces of spolia removed from other buildings and rearranged within a new building, they are still *in situ*. This creates a rather different impact to the viewer than the spolia in the buildings such as San Giovanni in Fonte or San Clemente. With this basilica, the message comes specifically because the spectator knows from which temples the spolia are from. The northern temple in particular, that of Janus, provides a powerful connection to Roman history. In his *Annales*, Tacitus lists this specific temple of Janus as one of the temples which Emperor Augustus restores.²⁵ By incorporating the temple columns from a temple specifically recorded to have been restored by Augustus, the very first emperor of Rome, a very strong and venerable connection to Roman history is solidified. This incorporation of spolia is a direct and physical tie to Augustus, and even though Augustus himself did not build this church, he did restore part of it. Furthermore, since these columns are visible from the exterior, anyone who passes by the church would see them, and not just those

²³ Ibid., 192-193.

²⁴ Ibid., 187.

²⁵ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by M. Grant (New York: Penguin Group, 1956).

who went inside. Therefore, this spolia reaches a far wider audience than the spolia in most other churches would reach.

The internal Christian spolia creates a powerful and robust message in conversation with the external spolia. The external spolia, remnants from Classical temples, associate this church with the Classical tradition to anyone who happens to pass by. Within the church, the spolia connects back to the internal tradition of Christianity, and sends a message more to other Christians. The justification of Christianity's position affirmed by the external spolia, furthermore justifies the internal, Christian spolia. Thus, spolia from both pagan and Christian buildings collaborate in creating a well-rounded perception of Christianity's authority.

The writings of contemporary Christians provide further evidence as to spolia's role in establishing a connection to a tradition. These sources describe how Christians visiting Rome perceived the churches, and understood that many of their architectural features had been incorporated from significant buildings. Importantly, these works demonstrate that Christians sought a connection with Classical antiquity not merely for survival, but also because of admiration. The views expressed in these texts illustrate a veneration of the Classical tradition, and hint at how the connection to the glory days of Rome also impacted Christians on a more personal level. Two specific texts, Gregorius Magister's *Narracio De Mirabilibus Urbis Romae* and Hildebert of Lavardin's *Par Tibi, Roma*, are prime examples, and necessary in the interpretation of these spolia.

Gregorius Magister's work falls within the genre of topography, and thus describes his personal reflections as a pilgrim in Rome. At one point, Gregorius, describing notable bronze statues, remarks that, "blessed Gregory took down the horse and the rider, and placed the four

columns in the church of St. John Lateran.”²⁶ A line later, Gregorius describes the golden richness of the statues and the columns.²⁷ Additionally, Gregorius comments on the palace of Augustus in a later section, stating, “Built entirely out of marble, it had supplied a great deal of precious material for the construction of Rome’s churches.”²⁸ These are the only two places in which Gregorius mentions the addition of spolia in churches, although he does also describe the renovation of the Pantheon into a church.²⁹ The only two monuments mentioned from which spolia were removed were places of significance, with a rich history. Christians were not merely recycling from any old building, they deliberately chose pieces of importance and power within Rome. This conscious choice would have left a visitor feeling awestruck from the beauty of the church, as well as an understanding that these pieces, and subsequently their history, had been adapted into the Christian tradition.

Hildeburt of Lavardin’s poetry, specifically *Par Tibi Roma*, further demonstrates the veneration that early Medieval Christians held for the Classical tradition, justifying their desire to create a connection to the Rome of antiquity. Hildeburt, a well known poet, was inspired by a visit to Rome in around 1100 to write two poems.³⁰ These poems elicit a much more emotional response from the reader than Gregorius’s topography of Rome does, and in employing more of this vivid language, Hildeburt reveals how Rome was viewed in the early twelfth century. The iconic opening line of *Par Tibi Roma*, “Par Tibi, Roma, nihil cum sis prope tota ruina,” reveals

²⁶ M. Gregorius, *The Marvels of Rome* in trans. J. Osborne (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁰ B. Gibson, “Hildeburt Lavardin on the Monuments of Rome,” in A. J. Woodman and J. Wisse (eds.) *Word and Context in Latin Poetry: Studies in Memory of David West* (Cambridge: The Cambridge Philological Society, 2017), 131-154.

how wonderstruck people were to see Rome, even in ruins.³¹ From there, Hildebert continues on to describe the former splendor of Rome. The climax of this poem is contained in lines 19- 20 when Hildebert writes, “Urbs cecidit, de qua si quicquam dicere dignum| moliar, hoc potero dicere ‘Roma fuit.’”³² This one line perfectly sums up the feel of Hildebert’s poem, it is a poem of mourning for the Rome that was lost. However, even though Rome is nowhere near its previous splendor, one can still see that it was Rome, and even that is a compliment enough. This poem is the perfect encapsulation for the meaning behind spolia. The Classical tradition, despite its connection with pagan cults, was still highly regarded and longed for within this Christian community. Thus, spolia’s ability to link Christianity to the Classical tradition aided not only Christianity’s social position, but also its perception among practicing Christians.

Conclusion

Christianity’s desire to create a connection to an ancient tradition manifested itself in various forms. The works of Eusebius and the architectural use of spolia are only two facets which are indicative of a larger phenomenon visible across multiple works of literature and archaeological features. A more holistic study could be attempted, however either better digital resources are necessary or the ability to work in the field. Nevertheless, clear trends are visible from these two *exempla*. The invention of tradition in early christinity can only be fully understood through an examination of both its literary and physical manifestations. The literature supplements the archaeological evidence, and vice versa. Each body of evidence has flaws and issues which must be worked through. However, when studied together, the written and physical evidence strengthen each other. Through this holistic approach to studying early Christianity, one

³¹ Hildebert Lavardin, *Par Tibi, Roma*, compiled C. Brunelle. “Nothing is equal to you, Rome, even though you are near total ruin.”

³² Ibid. “The City fell, about which if I undertake to say anything worthy, I will be able to say this ‘it was Rome’”

can gain a deeper understanding about the world in which Christianity rose to prominence, and what it meant to be Christian at this time.

Appendix 1



Figure 1

Location: Santa Maria in Ara Coeli

Description: a Syenite marble column, bearing the inscription “a cubiculo/ Augustorum.”

Image Provided By: Columbia University Media Center Image Database.



Figure 2

Location: San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura, Honorius Basilica

Description: a piece of floor reading “Constanti”

Image Provided By: M. Hansen, *The Spolia Churches of Rome: Recycling Antiquity in the Middle Ages*



Figure 3

Location: San Nicola in Carcere

Description: The southern exterior walls of San Nicola in Carcere, within which the columns from the Temple of Spes are still visible.

Image Provided By: Columbia University Media Center Image Database



Figure 4

Location: San Nicola in Carcere

Description: The entrance of San Nicola in Carcere, within which the columns from the Temple of Juno are still visible.

Image Provided By: Columbia University Media Center Image Database

Figure 5



Location: San Nicola in Carcere

Description: The northern exterior walls of San Nicola in Carcere, within which the columns from the Temple of Janus are still visible.

Image Provided By: Columbia University Media Center Image Database

Appendix 2



Location: San Nicola in Carcere

Description: A Late Latin inscription on a column in the interior of the church.

Image Provided By: Columbia University Media Center Image Database

The unique Late Latin spelling and grammar in this inscription creates some abnormalities and possibilities for dispute in the translation. The common Medieval and Late Latin collapse of the diphthong is evident in the first few lines, where the feminine ending *-ae* reads merely as *-e*. Additionally, due to pronunciation, the constant “b” often replaces a “v” as in “vobis,” “vestro,” and “vinea.” Less frequent spelling changes, such as the word “ego” spelled as “edgo” and “natalitio” spelled as “natalicies” represent the larger characteristics of Late Latin. If the inscription had been composed in Classical Latin, it would read:

† DE DONIS D[OMIN]I ET

S[AN]C[T]AE D[OMIN]I GENETRICIS MARIAE
 S[AN]C[T]AE ANNAE S[AN]C[TU]S SIMEON ET S[AN]C[T]AE
 LUCIAE EGO ANASTASIUS MA-
 IORDOMU OFERO VOBIS PRO NATA-
 LITIO VESTRO VINEA STABULUM
 R[E]P[OSITUM] IN PORTU SEV
 BOVES PARIA II IUMENTA S[E]V PECORA
 XXX PORCI X FORMAS DE RAME LIBRAS
 XXVI LECTU STRATU IN UTILITA-
 TE P[RES]B[YTE]R SE VALEO LECTO STRA-
 TO AT MANSIONARIIS EQUI
 SEQUENTIBUS

† HIC REQUIESCIT IN ANTE

The inscription contains various abbreviations, most of which are common in Medieval and Late Latin. The abbreviation *SCE* and its masculine form *SCS* appear four times in the opening dedication of the inscription. These abbreviations stand for *sanctus*, the adjective which means “holy” and is the common word for “saint.” Additionally, the abbreviation *DI* is short for “domini” from the word *dominus*, which means “Lord.” Towards the end of the inscription, the abbreviation *PBR* appears, from the noun *presbyter* in English “priest.”

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