



Examining Roman Spolia Found at Cosa

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Abstract

This research delves in the various kinds of spolia found at the Roman archaeological site Cosa, Italy, using data gathered by Dr. Andrea De Giorgi and his team over many years. The most important type of data used for this poster is from the image database. Spolia is a Latin term used by modern archaeologists to define the reuse of art or architectural elements over time by a people. A modern example would be thrifting a chair to recycle the wood into a table. Ancient builders were resourceful and used accessible materials to produce or supplement their projects. The city of Cosa was founded in 273 BCE and over time grew into a multicultural hub. The archaeology team has focused on the bath complex in recent years and has found many different examples of spolia. The foundation of the outer walls of the building contains stones and materials that previously had a different architectural function. Over the course of this poster, I will show the kinds of spolia used at the site and what they tell us about the Romans who lived there.

Background

The city of Cosa sits on a hilltop overlooking the sea and bountiful countryside. After the Romans took control of the area, they formed a colony of around 4,000 families on the site. It was described as a small town served with naval and governmental outposts to control the newly acquired lands north of Rome when it was settled. The city plan grew over the years and today there are remains of a Forum surrounded by a basilica, bath, temples, cisterns, and everyday homes as well as a defensive outer wall with towers. After the Social Civil Wars of the first century BCE, the settlement lost its economic and military functions and many people moved away. The final blow to Roman Cosa occurred in the third century CE when the Imperial estates purchased all land in the area for private use. There was a brief time in the Middle Ages when a Christian building was constructed, a church or monastery, but in 1329 an army from Siena removed the local Lord and had the town abandoned.

References

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Methodology

Over the course of the year, the main task was to label and organize over a thousand images of individual artifacts so they could be added to Cosa's official database. The raw images were stored in a flash drive as unnamed .JPG files which had to be named with the identifying code per item, per image. For example, an image of a ceramic pottery shard would have a notecard next to it detailing where and when it was found. On the card will be the identifying number for the item and the year it was found. That information gets added to the file name alongside the number the camera gave the image. Items can have up to 30 photos associated with it, so the file names appear as C14.024_IMG_3424, C14.024_IMG_3425, and so on. The "C" stands for the name of the site (Cosa), "14" for the year it was found, and "IMG" refers to the camera that took the picture and was given to the image by the camera. All this information is crucial to the research team at Cosa as it makes every variable searchable and sets up the images for uploading to the online database. The database gets used by many archaeological teams working on Cosa, not just FSU. Having an extensive digital database allows for remote study of objects by experts all over the world, meaning fragile objects can be carefully preserved on site. These photographs also record the condition of the item the day it was found, beginning a long-term record of research done of the object and the site.

Discussion

Spolia takes many forms in Roman archaeology and the examples from Cosa offer insight into the people who lived there over two thousand years ago. The presence of various items in the foundation and walls of the bath complex allow archaeologists to see what people needed and stopped needing at the time of construction. The large quantity of loom weights is physical evidence of women and families living in the town and the changing architectural landscape of Cosa. Roman women relied on clay weights to add tension to their looms, without them no cloth could be made. The loom weights were discovered in the foundational walls of the bath complex, some with mortar still stuck to it after two thousand years. The presence of mortar, in addition to the location of discovery, helps archaeologists to understand that these weights were being used for construction and not weaving. Another popular form of spolia is repurposed architectural artwork, commonly made from terracotta at Cosa. The decoration art style is typically Greek, representing a possible reuse of the material. Terracotta pieces could easily be removed from one building and installed on another because they were attached with mortar after the wall or roof was finished. The popular types of architectural decoration at Cosa are terracotta plaques, large flat pieces that hang on the wall, antefix, a curved cover for roof beams, and cornice, a decorative border between the wall and ceiling or doorframe. The Romans also used stones from older buildings to create new ones, reusing the blocks of marble or specially cut stones. Historian Dale Kinney offers, "Any culture that produces artifacts from scarce or laboriously sourced materials is likely to reuse rather than discard them" (Kinney 117, 1997). Spolia offers invaluable data about the nature of the people who built the everyday towns of the Roman Republic- all through their recycling.



Ceramic loom weight made from a mold with traces of mortar (white residue)



Ceramic loom weight made from a mold with traces of mortar



Terracotta plaque of vegetation in relief



Terracotta antefix of a female deity with flowers and a spiral, traces of mortar, original use 180-175 BCE