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de Jong, I.J.F.; Versluys, M.J.

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Innovating Objects? Spolia and the Question of Appropriation

Irene J.F. de Jong and Miguel John Versluys

Plundering and taking home (precious) objects from a defeated enemy was an age-old and widespread phenomenon in ancient Greece, Rome and the Hellenistic world, as in most, if not all, other cultures worldwide. Indeed, one of the major incentives to wage war, apart from settling political issues, was to secure as much booty as possible. People, cattle and possessions were at stake when a city or area was attacked, and all parties knew this harsh reality. 'It is a custom (νόμος) established for all time among all men that when a city is taken in war, the persons and the property of the inhabitants belong to the captors', Xenophon makes the wise Persian king Cyrus say (*Cyropaedia* 7.5.72).

The 'ur'-form of spoliation consists in a victorious warrior taking off his dead opponent's armour and carrying it away to his own camp. This can be considered a lethal variant of the exchange of gifts which commonly took place between guest-friends (*xeinoi*). The close connection between these two forms of exchange was immortalised by Homer in the scene of the Lycian Glaucus and the Greek Diomedes (*Iliad* 6.119–236): when confronting each other on the battlefield before Troy, the two men find out that their fathers were guest-friends and instead of engaging in a duel which would end in victor stripping vanquished, they exchange armour peacefully. In both cases, guest-giving *and* spoliation, the object acquired often becomes a treasured heirloom of its new owner, who may even start using it himself: Achilles whiles away the time of his wrath by playing on the lyre which he has won from the spoils of a vanquished city (*Iliad* 9.186–189) and Odysseus deals the suitors a first blow with the bow which he received as a guest-gift (*Odyssey* 21.11–41).¹

The study of this form of spoliation has been largely the remit of ancient historians who discuss it in the context of ancient warfare. Here pride of place must go to W.K. Pritchett, who in 1971 noted that 'No full-scale study of booty has ever been published', and then offered two detailed treatments of the topic that go a long way towards filling that gap, at least for Greek society and

1 For spoliation in Homer, see Ready 2007.

for booty as a military phenomenon.² Where the Roman world is concerned, there is a recent boom in literature on the triumph and the immense amounts of spolia that, as a result of Roman imperialism and this military institution, inundated Rome, especially in the final centuries BC.³ But there is room for other perspectives on spolia than the military and the imperialistic ones, as this volume will illustrate.

The first such broader perspective is a literary one. Spoliation is an important motif in ancient epic, primarily the customary stripping of armour already touched upon, but also the division of collective booty (e.g. *Iliad* 1.125–126). The importance of armour as a status symbol of heroes is reflected in the space devoted to arming scenes, a traditional element of all epics.⁴ In comparison, the stripping of armour is usually dealt with in one line only: ‘then Agamemnon son of Atreus killed and stripped him of his armour, and went carrying his fine armour through the mass of Greeks’ (*Iliad* 11.246–247). But, interestingly enough, this military routine is occasionally expanded into a gripping scene. When Hector, after killing Patroclus, dons his, that is Achilles’, armour, Zeus shakes his head and prophesies the Trojan’s death (*Iliad* 17.192–214). To strip armour was customary, to put it on oneself not. Homer here makes Hector perform this exceptional deed, in order to illustrate how the hero’s military success has gone to his head. Hector symbolically proclaims himself the equal of Achilles, son of a goddess and the best warrior on the Greek side, but, of course, will turn out *not* be his equal ... and die. His act of spoliation thus is morally charged, and in this respect Homer blazes the trail for many spolia scenes to follow in Greek and Latin literature.

Spoliation often implies that artifacts move from one culture to the other. This makes it a highly relevant topic within the burgeoning field of connectivity, network and globalisation studies, a second broader perspective.⁵ The infusion of Persian goods coming to Greece as booty of the Persian wars had profound effects on Athens and Athenian society in particular, in both the short and the long term.⁶ Here we witness, on a collective level, the same kind of relation

2 Pritchett 1971: 53. See Pritchett 1971: 53–100 and 1991: 68–541. For a shorter discussion, see Krentz 2007: 180–183.

3 Beard 2007; Östenberg 2009. When the editing of this book was in its final stage, we learned of the upcoming volume edited by M. Helm and S.T. Roselaar entitled *Spoils in the Roman Republic. Boon and Bane – a Re-evaluation* (Stuttgart). We encourage our readers to consult that book together with this volume.

4 See Reitz 2019.

5 See Versluys 2021 for an overview of this development and the relation between the (overlapping) concepts of connectivity, network and globalisation.

6 Miller 1997; cf. now Miller 2017, identifying these processes as *perserie* or Persianism.

between guest-giving (a positively charged form of appropriation of an object from outside the own cultural sphere) and spoliation (a negatively charged form of appropriation of an object from outside the own cultural sphere) already mentioned above.⁷ In both cases we do not so much end up with separate categories of Self and Other but rather with forms of entanglement. Spolia, so it seems, always establish a connection. This has become particularly clear for the Roman late Republic. From Marcellus' conquest of Syracuse in 211 BCE onwards, unparalleled amounts of booty met the eyes of the Romans when their generals brought back silver, gold, statues, paintings, furniture, precious objects as well as books, plants and animals – together with many enslaved enemies. All these spolia soon made their way into Roman Republican society and started changing it from the outside in, like the Corinthian furniture that became popular in Rome after it was introduced through the triumph of Lucius Mummius in 146 BCE.

It was as the result of the confrontation with the Other, through spolia, that much curiosity about the wider world and comparativism concerning the (Roman) Self arose. Already early on, the Romans started to interpret spoliation as a form of identity-formation relevant to the development of their own Empire. A clear example is provided by a speech, allegedly proclaimed by a certain Roman named Kaeso on the eve of the First Punic War: 'We', he stated, 'have thrived thus ...: we agree with our enemies to their terms, and we surpass in foreign customs those who have been practicing the same things for a long time. For the Etruscans had bronze shields and were in the phalanx when they fought us, and did not fight in maniples; and we, swapping our armour and taking up theirs, lined up in formation against them and striving in that fashion were victorious over men who had long been accustomed to fighting in the phalanx'.⁸ Roman identity, as Claudia Moatti has argued amongst others, is born from the contact with, curiosity about and appropriation of the Other.⁹ Spolia play an important role in that story of cultural innovation. How does this 'incorporation leading to innovation' take place, what mechanisms of appropriation (or repulsion) can be observed, and what is the active role or agency of the objects themselves in those processes?

7 For an anthropological view on gift versus theft, see Platenkamp 2022: 343.

8 The text is preserved in the Πλουτάρ <χου ἦ> Κεκιλίου Ἀποφθέγματα Ῥωμαϊκά ('Roman anecdotes of Plutarch or Caecilius'), which was discovered in a Vatican codex and published by H. von Armin in 1892. Its authorship and date are disputed (although probably late Republican-Augustan), see Loar, MacDonald and Padilla Peralta 2018: 1–2. Another version of it is preserved in Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 23.2.

9 Moatti 1997.

In order to tackle questions like these, we have selected a number of significant spolia scenes from Greek and Latin literature, which report the act of taking away spolia or the display of spolia in a victory *pompe* or triumph. Each text is discussed by a set of two specialists from different backgrounds (historians, archaeologists, literary critics and linguists). As a result, the information provided by each text is evaluated both from a literary and from a material (cultural) perspective, and a central question that is running through the book is how these two perspectives relate to each other. What do we know about the practical reception, integration, appropriation of the objects brought home, on the one hand, and how do authors reflect on that influx of artifacts, on the other?

To give a sneak peek of what this volume will bring, we can reveal that the confrontation between text and material lays bare an interesting array of clashes, conflicts and paradoxes. One of these frictions was formulated long ago by Horace, whose pithy *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* brings home how the military vanquished may be the cultural victor. Another paradox to be observed quite often is that the material record shows an eager and massive *appropriation* of objects, while the texts display an individual or collective *abhorrence* of the moral decadence thought to result from the sudden influx of (usually precious) objects. Such a strong anti-reaction, of course, in the end only testifies to the pull exerted by the objects. The moral charging of spolia, which we already saw in embryonic form in Homer's *Iliad*, became such a recurrent theme in literature that it was even forceful to a second degree, when stories about spoliation *from the past* were used as warning exempla for the present. In several respects, therefore, spolia turn out to play an important role within processes of anchoring cultural innovation, and thus to fit eminently the research programme of Anchoring Innovation under the aegis of which this volume was produced.¹⁰

Our volume, therefore, is part of a development within the *Spolienforschung* that tries to understand the practice and idea of spoliation in terms of translation and cultural formation in the first place.¹¹ Spolia, from Latin *spoliare* ('deprive', 'strip') originally refers to the arms stripped from a defeated enemy, hence more widely booty. In scholarly parlance, it has come to denote 'materials or artefacts in re-use' in much more general terms¹² Within the fields of Art

10 See the Preface. For the concept of anchoring see Sluiter 2017 with earlier bibliography.

11 For *Spolienforschung* see Altekamp, Marcks-Jacobs and Seiler 2013 (with an extensive earlier bibliography). For spoliation as translation see the recent volume Jevtic, Nilsson and Frantová 2021, prepared by publications like Ashley and Plesch 2002.

12 Kinney 2019 for definitions as well as an introduction to what the concept of spolia can mean and how it can be used. See also the important volume Brilliant and Kinney 2011.

History, Architecture and Archaeology, however, the term *spolia* is most often used in a more specific and applied manner to indicate the re-use of remains of earlier monuments for new buildings; notably the architectural re-use of elements from ancient buildings during late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹³ As will already have become clear from the discussion above, our book is not about these spolia and this particular form of spoliation. It is rather about the impact of re-use in much wider terms.¹⁴ Frequently this impact has been understood in terms of the past: as it concerns the use of older elements, spolia would be about the power of tradition. They are indeed.¹⁵ But, as a process of appropriation, they are inherently about cultural change and innovation as well, as this volume will illustrate at length.¹⁶

To explore in depth the theoretical point of departure only briefly outlined here, our volume opens with three more introductory chapters that, together with this opening chapter (1), form Part 1 of the volume.

The second chapter, written by Ter Keurs, presents some anthropological basics concerning the question how people deal with things from Outside. This confrontation with the Other is always a dangerous process that has to be carefully mediated. It is, at the same time, a necessary and indispensable process if societies want to renew and innovate. Moving from anthropological fieldwork in present-day Indonesia to early modern European history, Ter Keurs illustrates how processes of appropriation, including the ‘taming’ of spolia, play an important role in that era too. This is an important conclusion and the point of departure for our volume on Antiquity.

The chapter by Versluys (3) follows up on this anthropological given and applies it to Roman spoliation and the triumph, fuelled by Roman imperialism in the final centuries BC. Elaborating on the theoretical framework as introduced by Ter Keurs, the first part of his chapter presents the concept of appropriation on the basis of the work of the anthropologist Hans Peter Hahn, who distinguishes between four different phases of appropriation: 1. material appropriation, 2. objectification, 3. incorporation and 4. transformation.¹⁷ This

13 Cf. Kinney 2019 and Elsner 2000.

14 Note, however, that also this kind of *Spolienforschung* can ultimately be about cultural formation, as demonstrated by Elsner 2000, who talks about ‘genesis’ in this respect.

15 Bosman 2004 for theory and examples.

16 See already the important essay Ashley and Plesch 2002 (the introduction to a thematic volume on spolia and the cultural processes of appropriation) as well as Brilliant and Kinney 2011. For appropriation specifically see Plesch 2017 and Platenkamp 2022.

17 See Hahn 2011 for a brief summary of his ideas; and the chapter by Versluys for further references to his work. For the subject, note also the important essays Plesch 2017 and Platenkamp 2022.

(methodological) division serves as a guideline for the interpretation of the spolia scenes presented in Part 2 of the volume. The second part of the chapter by Versluys analyses the Roman triumph and the impact of its objects from this perspective, drawing in literary evidence and suggesting to understand it as a ritual meant to tame the agency of the spolia that innovate Roman society from the outside in.

With Pieper's chapter (4) the literary perspective is introduced and illustrated in its own right. He shows how two instances of spoliation function as a literary topos in Latin literature. The first concerns the famous Syracusan spolia brought to Rome by Marcellus, which are turned in an exemplum of collective or personal ethics by Livy to be followed or rejected by his readers. The objects would change Roman morals, the shape of the city and, arguably, the character of Marcellus. The second instance is found in Cicero's *De natura deorum* and discusses the figure of Dionysius I of Syracuse. This time we are dealing with both material spoliation, by Dionysius, and textual spoliation, by Cicero who reuses the exemplum of this Syracusan tyrant employed by other authors before him. While material spoliation usually triggers a negative moral evaluation, exempla seen as textual spolia can be put to a positive use, to instruct the readers.

The second part of the volume presents some important spolia scenes from Greek and Latin literature, each text being analysed both from a literary and a material (cultural) perspective and with keen attention for the question how these perspectives relate to each other.

In her chapter (5), De Jong argues that Herodotus' report on the spoliation after the battle of Plataea in *Histories* 9 reflects Greek amazement at Persian luxury but that this luxury and fascination is also negatively framed in a two-fold way. More than just being the standard outcome of a battle won, the spoliation is morally charged and made to symbolize the way in which the Persians are, deservedly, stripped of their fabulous riches. The figure of the Spartan general Pausanias, moreover, reveals the potential danger of Greek fascination for Persian luxury: although he uses a luxurious Persian meal to deride the folly of the Persians to attack a frugal country like Greece, his remarkable negative qualification of the Greek way of life hints where his true feelings lie. For the attentive reader this anticipates his later 'medising', which included the adoption of a Persian luxurious lifestyle. Herodotus' text thus illustrates three of Hahn's stages: material appropriation, transformation (part of the spolia are dedicated to the gods, but not before they have first been turned into Greek works of art), and in the figure of Pausanias questionable incorporation.

Van Rookhuizen (chapter 6) investigates Herodotus' text and his interest in the Persian spolia from a historical and archaeological perspective by asking

how Herodotus knew about these objects and how he was able to describe them in such great detail. His focus is not on questions of ‘authenticity’ but rather on the ‘effect of reality’ that Herodotus is clearly looking for. To this end he analyses the Athenian practice of ‘treasure collection’ on the Acropolis by focusing on how all these spolia were incorporated in its sacred landscape. His conclusion that (a lifelike description of) the objects testified to the ‘rebirth’ of Athens after the Persian invasions strongly resonates with the anthropological practices as described by Ter Keurs.

Rutger Allan in his chapter (7) on Polybius shows how the Greek historian passes a negative judgment on the spoliation of Syracuse by the Romans as led by Marcellus. The Romans, Polybius argues, made a grave mistake, both in moralistic and pragmatic terms. He turns the episode into a general lesson on human morality for his readers: if you are successful, show moderation in your behaviour, bearing in mind that fortune is capricious. Do not incur the envy of the vanquished, as it may turn against you in the end. It is interesting to note that throughout Polybius’ text the spoliated objects are presented as having a great deal of impact in and by themselves. Polybius thus argues against every stage of the process of appropriation: Romans should have left the objects at their original place (against material appropriation); the objects should not have been reused to adorn Rome (against objectification and incorporation) and a full transformation of the imported objects will never be attained since there will always remain a tension between the Romans’ exploitation of the objects as evidence of their military success and the non-Roman spectators’ feelings of envy for the Roman victors and pity for the vanquished.

Questions of human-thing entanglement and the agency of spolia move centre stage in the contribution by Van de Velde (chapter 8), who studies the impact of the spolia from Sicily in and on Republican Rome. It is impossible, unfortunately, to find these objects themselves in the archaeological record but contextual evidence allows her to trace their impact all the same. She focuses on the so-called Ludovisi acrolith, a marble head once part of a large (composite) sculpture, dated to the period 480–460 BCE and probably from Sicily or another part of Magna Graecia. It was objects like this, amongst many others, that were brought to Rome by Marcellus, although we cannot prove that this particular sculpture indeed came to Rome at that specific moment. Be that as it may, by including the biography of the statue, Van de Velde is able to convincingly argue for the impact of the acrolith on Roman society in terms of (anchoring) innovation.

In their chapter (9) Van Gils and Henzel confront Livy’s claim that *luxuria peregrina* started with the influx of luxury goods after Cn. Manlius’ victory in 187 BCE with the archaeological picture, focusing on culinary practice. Livy’s

condemnation flows forth from the historiographical practice of thinking in terms of exempla (cf. the chapter of Pieper) but also from the influence of his own times, when the *luxuria* was even greater but also even more problematic. The archaeological picture shows the changes which Livy attributes to one man to be part of a much larger socio-economic development. Moreover, the changes in culinary practices in reality seem to have taken place (much) later. Livy, therefore, exaggerates the impact of Manlius' spoliation. At the same time his text testifies to the fact that the Romans themselves considered spoliation a form of identity-formation relevant to the development of their own Empire and discussed it in these terms.

Buijs (chapter 10) analyses the accounts of the three-day triumphal procession of Aemilius Paullus in 167 BCE as told by Plutarch in his *Life of Aemilius Paullus* and by Diodorus Siculus. Although both accounts present, more or less, the same events, their style and hence effect on the reader are markedly different. Plutarch creates a kind of eye-witness report which strongly engages his readers. Diodorus' report more resembles a list and entirely lacks the internal perspective which Plutarch employs so effectively. The result is that Diodorus is 'telling' spolia in a distanced style, while Plutarch is 'showing' spolia in an engaged style.

In chapter 11, Strootman presents a historical and archaeological analysis of the same triumph that ended the Antigonid monarchy and the rule of king Perseus. The procession was a carefully orchestrated, ritual public event in which large amounts of Macedonian objects (arms and armour, gold and silver, votive gifts and other offerings, court objects, tableware and regalia) and Macedonian captives, amongst whom the Macedonian king himself, were paraded through the streets of Rome. Focusing on the significance of the booty, the role it played in Rome and the Roman imagination of Other and Self, Strootman sees clear signs of the process of objectification as defined by Hahn. He underlines the twofold nature of the triumph and its spolia: they show the subjugation of conquered Macedonia on the one hand while simultaneously testifying to the incorporation of the Macedonian Other in the (emerging) Roman Empire. Arguing that the main appropriation taking place was an ideological one, Strootman presents a clear example of how spolia always establish a connection.

Huitink's chapter (12) brings us to the imperial period and starts with an analysis of Josephus' elaborate narrative of Vespasian's and Titus' triumph over Judaea in the summer of 71 CE in his *Bellum Judaicum*. This fascinating spolia text displays tensions between the surface of the spectacle and what Josephus conveys about its underlying significance. In a second move Huitink shows how the implied emotional evocation of the temple spoils in the procession

is reinforced when readers recall two earlier descriptions of the temple treasures in the *Bellum*. When looked at by uncomprehending 'Roman eyes', the objects are stripped off their symbolical significance, but those who have read Josephus' work are in the know about their true meaning.

In chapter 13, Moormann discusses the *Resonanz* of these Judaica for Rome in both the short and the long term. He distinguishes between material appropriation and objectification on the one hand, when the spolia from the temple change in meaning from sacred objects (in Jerusalem) to symbols of a captured nation (in Rome); and incorporation and transformation on the other, when dealing with the 'musealization' of the spolia in imperial Rome and its consequences until the present-day. The different modes of appropriation distinguished by Hahn are clearly visible in his discussion of the spolia and allow us to better understand how appropriation functioned as a process in imperial Rome.

The third and final part of the volume presents a conclusion by Vout that departs from the literary sources and the mentalities they reflect (chapter 14). Written as a critical discussion, it mirrors the rich debates after the two expert meetings and the interpretative questions this volume hopes to instigate.

Reading Greek and Hellenistic-Roman spolia focuses on spolia in terms of appropriation and cultural change. Having come to the end of our introduction, we would like to stress that we are only too well aware of the fact that spoliation involves much more than cultural innovation alone. What is gain for the one society is loss for the other. Spoliation usually involves the mass deportation of peoples, looting of their heritage, destruction of their property and the annihilation of their historical memory. The last phenomenon has recently been aptly identified as epistemicide, the destruction of (or even war on) the knowledge about the Other.¹⁸ The ruthless and complete wrecking of Carthage by the Romans obliterated knowledge concerning this city and its culture(s) for later generations; in fact a problem scholars still struggle with today. '*Urbs antiqua fuit*' is Virgil's famous but incisive introduction of the city of Carthage in his story of 'the birth of Rome' (*Aeneid* 1.12). His use of the perfect tense, rather than the present or imperfect tense, signals that this proud city no longer exists at the moment his poem is read. By then it had been defeated and destroyed by the Romans, who thereby become the unmistakable masters of the Mediterranean but who also enslave no less than 50,000 Carthaginians, not to speak of their killing most of its male inhabitants. The discussion of spolia in terms of processes of appropriation and cultural change in this volume is not meant to add to the 'Empire-is-good-gospel', as Padilla Peralta calls the

18 Padilla Peralta 2020; cf. Loar, MacDonald and Padilla Peralta 2018.

colonialist Western view of the Roman Empire (and Antiquity more in general).¹⁹ On the contrary. By showing how Greece and Rome were strongly influenced by the objects they conquered we hope to put these cultures and their worldviews in a different perspective.

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¹⁹ Padilla Peralta 2020: 153. See also the contribution by Versluys, this volume.

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