

## FUNCTIONS OF SPOLIA IN Umayyad Architecture

Originally, the Latin term *spolia* (sg. *spolium*) was mainly associated with the military context and functioned in expressions such as “spoils of war”. In the area of art history, however, *spolia* are architectural elements, both constructive and decorative, which were reused in architectural context which differed from their original purpose.<sup>1)</sup> In the area of early Christian, Byzantine and early Medieval art history, the issue of *spolia* seems to have been considered by scholars as highly intriguing. Some different interpretations of the use of *spolia* were discussed; not only the pragmatical or economical, but also the aesthetic, symbolic and ideological aspects of this issue were covered.<sup>2)</sup> The problem of the lack of sources concerning the original theory of reusing architectural elements was also stressed.<sup>3)</sup> On the contrary, the historians of early Islamic art paid little attention to this problem. *Spolia* are usually only mentioned in monographic publications and are not the subjects of any deeper investigation.<sup>4)</sup> An interesting exception is a study of the Great Mosque of Damascus by Finbarr Barry Flood, in which the scholar conducted a brief but multifaceted analysis of the marble columns that had been reused in the building.<sup>5)</sup> In this

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<sup>1)</sup> Bloom, Blair (2009: 228); Brenk (1987: 103); Kinney (1995: 53); Kinney (2001: 13).

<sup>2)</sup> See for example: Deichmann (1975: 103–108); Brandenburg, Poeschke (1996); Flood (2001: 201–202).

<sup>3)</sup> Brenk (1987: 103); Kinney (2001: 53).

<sup>4)</sup> Cytryn-Silverman (2009: 54).

<sup>5)</sup> Flood (2001: 201–203); Note that *spolia* are also the subject of some attention in art history of the later Islamic period and new interpretations, such as an theory of their magical function, are being proposed, see: Gonnella (2012: 103–120); Flood (2006: 143–166).

text, the functions of spolia will be discussed with reference to examples of three Umayyad Mosques: in Damascus, Tiberias and Şaná.

The Great Mosque of Damascus was built under the reign of the caliph al-Walid, in the years AD 705 (or 706)–715<sup>6)</sup> in a place which was associated with cults for centuries. In Roman times there was a temenos with a Temple of Jupiter on this site, it was then replaced by a Church of John the Baptist. Most of the spolia in the mosque are fine marble columns with skilfully carved Corinthian capitals. Originally, there were 40 of these standing inside the sanctuary in two rows on both sides of the transept<sup>7)</sup>, 14 in its façade, 33 supporting the porticos and a few more from the so-called Treasury in the courtyard, not all of which have survived until now.<sup>8)</sup> Besides the columns, also the doors<sup>9)</sup> and a fragment of the stone relief in the outer wall of the sanctuary are pre-Islamic elements which were reused in the Great Mosque (Fig. 1).<sup>10)</sup> The interpretation of columns reused in the building was a subject of analysis conducted by Flood. The scholar assumed that, due to their provenance, two groups of spolia used in the building may be indicated. The first were elements from the destroyed Church of John the Baptist which were preserved on site. The other were columns, which had been transported on al-Walid's command, from famous buildings and cities of the era: the Church of the Virgin Mary in Antioch, the city of Cyrrhus, and from Alexandria. The cost and effort put into this complicated operation can be partially explained by the scarcity of spolia from the first group.<sup>11)</sup> However, as Flood argued, the symbolic meaning of these elements was of much greater importance:

(...) incorporation of material from celebrated pre-Islamic sites also amounts to a selective quotation which appropriates some of the kudos

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<sup>6)</sup> Flood (2001: 1–2); Note that there are slight differences in interpreting the date of the beginning of the mosque's erection, see Grabar (1973: 110); King (1976: 30–31); Creswell (1979: 153–154); Ettinghausen, Grabar, Jenkins-Madina (2005: 22).

<sup>7)</sup> Beside the high columns also shorter ones, placed on the top of the rows of columns with Corinthian capitals, are preserved in the Great Mosque of Damascus.

<sup>8)</sup> Creswell (1979: 161, 165–172); Ettinghausen, Grabar, Jenkins-Madina (2005: 21–23); According to Creswell, there were also columns with Corinthian capitals in the great, east portico of the mosque, see: Creswell (1979: 161).

<sup>9)</sup> Flood (2001: 201).

<sup>10)</sup> Flood (2001: 2, fig. 9).

<sup>11)</sup> Flood (2001: 201–202).



of the source structure while simultaneously signalling the supercession of the religio-political order responsible for its creation.<sup>12)</sup>

The spolia of the Umayyad mosque of Tiberias<sup>13)</sup> are used as purely constructive elements. Basalt doors from the Jewish tombs of the Roman period served here as the bases of pillars placed in three rows (Fig. 2).<sup>14)</sup> The doors are in the form of simple, rectangular stones decorated delicately with small circles. The use of spolia in the building is not the only feature that makes it comparable to the Great Mosque of Damascus. Both buildings were also built in places which had been dedicated to religious purposes for many years. In Tiberias, the mosque was erected on the site of the previous, 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Roman Hadrianeum, which had probably never been fully completed. Interestingly, also the ground plan and proportions of the Tiberias mosque make it, as Katia Cytryn-Silverman indicated, surprisingly similar to the mosque of Damascus (Fig. 3).<sup>15)</sup>

The Great Mosque in Şanā was erected during the lifetime of the Prophet and rebuilt under the reign of Al-Walid (AD 705–715).<sup>16)</sup> As opposed to the two other mosques presented above, the one of Şanā was, most probably, not erected on a site of previous worship or any significant building. The great collection of spolia in the mosque consists of 52 capitals, bases, other fragments and whole columns, wooden elements such as a door jamb and fragments of the ceiling, and metal sheets with pre-Islamic inscriptions, which cover the door panels. A few stone reliefs decorated with representations of animals and other stones bearing pre-Islamic inscriptions are also preserved in the building.<sup>17)</sup> The biggest and most diverse group of spolia is the columns and their fragments. They are decorated with various motifs which can be derived from pre-Islamic, Arabic and Classical sources, such as stylised acanthus leaves and patterns imitating brick wall. From among those of them which are stylistically rooted

<sup>12)</sup> Flood (2001: p. 202).

<sup>13)</sup> The pillared building excavated in Tiberias was for a long time interpreted as a Byzantine covered market. This interpretation was modified by Katia Cytryn-Silverman, who argued convincingly that it was an Umayyad Friday Mosque; Cytryn-Silverman (2009: 37–56).

<sup>14)</sup> Cytryn-Silverman (2009: 45, 54, fig. 18); Note that even though the ground plan published by Katia Cytryn-Silverman indicates that there are forty-two pillars in the building, it is hard to establish precisely the number of pillars that were standing on reused elements, see: Cytryn-Silverman (2009: fig. 20).

<sup>15)</sup> Cytryn-Silverman (2009: 49–54, fig. 12).

<sup>16)</sup> Lewcock, Smith, Serjeant, Costa (1983: 323); Lewcock (1986: 85); Costa (1994: 1).

<sup>17)</sup> Costa (1994: 11–16, unnumbered plans at the end of the article); Lewcock, Smith, Serjeant, Costa (1983: 346).



in ancient Arabic artistic traditions two groups can be identified: Sabean and Himyarite.<sup>18)</sup> Some were probably taken from the famous palace of Ghumdān in Ṣanā<sup>19)</sup>, a symbol of the power of Yemen<sup>20)</sup> and from the Sabean temples. Other columns represent the Axumite style (Fig. 4), which indicates that they originally stood in the great church of Ṣanā<sup>21)</sup>, built in the 6th century by an Abyssinian governor of the city.<sup>22)</sup> This supposition is strengthened by the fact that one of these columns bears a Greek cross on its capital.<sup>23)</sup> Many of the elements of the columns are placed differently than they were in an original context, for example capitals serve as bases.

No in-depth interpretation has so far been proposed for the use of spolia in the mosques of Tiberias and Ṣanā.<sup>24)</sup> Flood's explanation concerning reused material in the Great Mosque of Damascus remains, thus, the only theory which deals with the general problem of the interpretation of spolia in early Islamic art. As has already been mentioned, he supposed that spolia were applied mainly as an expression of the universalist character of the religion of Islam and due to political aspirations. Are there any arguments that would also allow the application of a similar interpretation to the cases of the two other buildings? At first, the general distinction between the reused material in the Ṣanā and Damascus mosques and the spolia of the Tiberias Friday Mosque must be stressed. While in the first two buildings the spolia affect the whole visual impression of the architecture, in the mosque of the Tiberias the reused tomb doors are installed in a way which indicates that they were not supposed to play any role in the artistic programme of the building. Their function was purely practical and even if some ideological meaning can be decoded it seems to be a secondary one. For this reason, in the following analysis only the spolia of the two other mosques will be examined.

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<sup>18)</sup> Lewcock, Smith, Serjeant, Costa (1983: 346).

<sup>19)</sup> Lewcock (1986: 86); Lewcock, Smith, Serjeant, Costa (1983: 346–350).

<sup>20)</sup> Serjeant, Lewcock (1983: 44).

<sup>21)</sup> Lewcock (1986: 86); Lewcock, Smith, Serjeant, Costa (1983: 349–350); Note that for capitals which were probably taken from al-Qalis in Ṣan'a, the authors of this publication used the term "Early Islamic Relics". As these elements were produced most probably in the 6th century, this seems to be misleading, see: Lewcock, Smith, Serjeant, Costa (1983: 346).

<sup>22)</sup> Serjeant, Lewcock (1983: 45); Finster, Schmidt (1994: 67).

<sup>23)</sup> Costa (1994: 12).

<sup>24)</sup> Although a reused stone relief with the representation of birds in the Ṣanā mosque was interpreted by Flood as an apotropaion, he did not propose an explanation for other spolia in the building, Flood (2006: 158–159).



Although Umayyad art and architecture created a new visual language, its particular components are deeply rooted in the artistic traditions of the late Roman and early Byzantine period. It seems, therefore, that decoding the meaning of the spolia of the early Islamic art should be conducted in the light of the wider context of Late Antiquity studies. In his article of 1987, Beat Brenk argued that the use of spolia in the late Roman and early Mediaeval period could have been dictated by two main motivations: an aesthetic and ideological one. The first, as he showed analysing the example of Constantine's foundations, was based on the concept of *varietas*, i.e. diversity. Its main principle was to mix and match elements derived from various sources and differing in style and decoration. The second was crystallised in the idea of *renovatio Imperii Romanorum*, which was characteristic of the reign of both Theodoric and Charlemagne. In the case of the second ruler, the reuse of antique material and the ideology which motivated this act were both strongly connected with the need for political legitimisation.<sup>25)</sup> When trying to apply these theories to the problem of spolia in early Islamic architecture, one would state instinctively that rather the second motivation would explain, in a similar way to Charlemagne's case, the motivation of the Islamic founders of the mosques researched. Although this kind of an ideological interpretation may fully explain, as Flood has indicated, the effort which was put into the process of reusing material from Christian and pre-Islamic buildings, the idea of the aesthetic of *varietas* seems to be worth considering.

Whatever the ideological reasons for this phenomenon are and however unique its result is, it cannot be denied that the art and architecture of the early Islamic period is a conglomeration of various styles, forms, materials and techniques. Elements derived from the two great artistic traditions of Late Antiquity, i.e. Classical/Roman and Sassanian, were combined and joined in a creative, new way. Some other, rooted in pre-Islamic Arabia, also influenced the development of art and architecture in Umayyad times. Patterns, motifs and materials differing in their artistic expression were being used to adorn the same building. This is particularly well traceable in the early Umayyad foundations, such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem where the Roman/Byzantine mosaic technique was applied to represent motifs derived not only from Classical, but also from Sassanian patterns.<sup>26)</sup> One may argue, thus, that

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<sup>25)</sup> Brenk (1987: 103–109); For the concept of *varietas* in reference to the use of spolia in the art of late Antiquity, see also: Saradi (1997: 396–397).

<sup>26)</sup> Gautier – van Berchem (1979: 321–322).



the concept of *varietas* was applied in early Islamic art practice and was, in fact, its foundation. Although a different provenance than in Roman art and probably not theoretically defined, this idea seems to be manifested also in the use *spolia* in the buildings examined. It does not seem unjustified to suppose that importing marble columns from such different, celebrated buildings – as did the founder of the Great Mosque of Damascus – is itself an expression of *varietas*, if not in a visual then in a symbolic way. To reuse columns differing so much, as in the case of the Şanā mosque, is an even more significant and clearly visual execution of the same concept. Taking into account the importance of both these buildings it is probable that the idea of *varietas* manifested there was connected with the need to show off power and superiority.

The function of *spolia* in Umayyad architecture cannot, as it was argued, be understood one-dimensionally. Many different motivations could have founded the decision to reuse material from a church or a Roman temple. In this text only one aspect of this phenomenon – the idea of *varietas* – was analysed in more detail. It showed that interpreting the use of *spolia* in the context of the visual culture of Late Antiquity can be a promising strategy. Growing scholarly interest in the issue of the use of pre-Islamic architectural elements in Umayyad structures and new archaeological data will probably allow the development of a more articulated theoretical framework in the future.

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Fig. 1. Reused relief in the outer wall of the sanctuary of the Great Mosque of Damascus, Flood (2001: fig. 9)





Fig. 2. Basalt doors from the Jewish tombs of the Roman period, the Friday Mosque of Cytryn-Silverman (2009: 54)



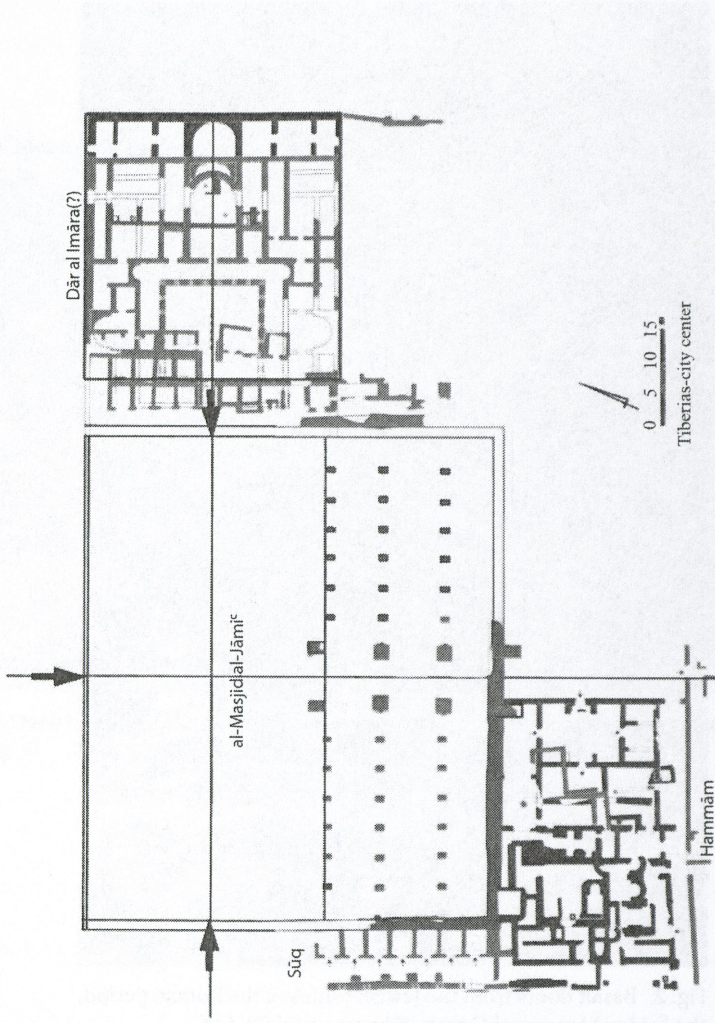


Fig. 3. Plan of city centre of early Islamic Tiberias with the plan of the Friday Mosque, Cytryn-Silverman (2009: 55)





Fig. 4. Upturned "Axumite" capital of the column of the Great Mosque of Sanā, Lewcock (1986: 25)