

Travelling stone or travelling men?

Models of sculpture production in the Early Middle Ages (8th-9th c.)

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Despite nearly identical Early Medieval sculpted fragments have been found as *spolia* in several European regions (France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, etc.), scientific literature has paid very little attention to the modalities of their production. Most scholars have focused, instead, exclusively on the stylistic analysis of their decorations and the detection of parallels on a regional scale. An enlarged, overall look and a multidisciplinary approach (petrographic analysis to determine the provenance of raw materials; collections of reliable written sources describing craftsmen; archaeological examination of stone-quarries; study of working traces), enables to get precious information.

This method, adopted in many researches on Roman, Early Byzantine and Late Medieval sculpture, may lead to important results on Early Medieval production processes too. One of the most important is the widespread presence of itinerant groups of carvers and craftsmen, who travelled sometimes over thousands kilometers, being especially connected with high-level construction places. If one frames this tendency in a larger chronological horizon, it proves itself to be a consequent development of phenomena already occurring in Late Roman Times: back then, the massive exploitation of quarries and the long-distance transport of stone-blocks and ready-made objects were progressively abandoned due to the lack of demand, whereas the use of local raw materials became more and more common. Itinerant workforce, thus, increased (and further developed in Late Middle Ages), also explaining the strong resemblances among Early Medieval sculptures from very distant findspots, yet made out of local stone. Besides this, however, a few cases bear witness of different models of production, as in certain regions (e.g. in nowadays Switzerland) political or economic factors kept to encourage the movement of raw stone on relatively long distances.