

Reuse, Revival, and Recarving: Ancient Granite Columns in Renaissance Rome

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Architects of the Italian Renaissance often quoted ancient architectural details in modern designs as an act of reference and revival. While historians frequently note this common method of transumption, the creation of all'antica architecture through the use of ancient building materials has gone largely ignored. This paper argues that the revival of antiquity in late-fifteenth and early- sixteenth century Rome relied not only on the resurgence of ancient forms but also the employment of ancient materials, specifically spoliated granite.

Granite columns quarried in Egypt were a common feature of Imperial Roman architecture. In Rome, the abundance of durable ancient granite columns insured their persistent reuse after the decline of the Empire. Builders continued to widely use spoliated granite until the mid-fifteenth century when travertine took precedence in the Roman architectural vocabulary. Despite the availability and workability of travertine, by the end of the fifteenth century granite once again became the preferred material for columns as Rome saw a virtual renaissance in the application of granite.

By focusing on the revival and continual use of spoliated granite in Renaissance architecture, this paper suggests that ancient granite, identifiable only by its physical properties, became increasingly associated with ancient Rome. Based on physical and textual evidence, I propose that in the early- sixteenth century there was a surge of granite spoliation stimulated by the importation of new tempered chisels which enabled Roman architects to reshape hard, often broken granite columns. The ability to recarve these columns, first demonstrated at the Palazzo della Cancelleria, enabled architects to integrate an Imperial Roman material into an appropriate all'antica setting. Thus, by recarving these pieces of antiquity, Renaissance architects and patrons revived ancient Roman architecture by literally making it whole again.