

# Roman Sculptural Recycling in the Western Provinces

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Throughout the course of Late Antiquity, particularly from the third century onwards, cities and local communities all over the Roman empire increasingly turned to material produced in earlier times for new buildings and sculptural monuments. While not a new phenomenon, the scale and intensity of late-antique recycling became an important feature of the period. Recent years have seen much new work on late-antique recycling. Diverse attitudes towards and activities within *spolia*-use have been identified, with both pragmatic and symbolic motivations identified;<sup>1</sup> however, even with a seemingly clear ‘macro-picture’ of increased recycling across the empire, regional and local pictures remain to be fully determined.<sup>2</sup> Regional analysis is therefore vital to understanding how recycling developed in different parts of the empire. It is equally important to consider re-use from a variety of monument types within their specific physical, historical, and cultural contexts so that larger trends can be identified alongside aspects that are specific to a city or region. By marking out both local and wider trends, it is possible to identify regional patterns of recycling and to see which regions had similar or different patterns of recycling. This paper presents preliminary observations about re-use from the northwestern provinces during Late Antiquity in order to provide an understanding of recycling practices during this period.

The evidence for the northwestern provinces, while perhaps not as rich (with the exception of city walls) as that for the eastern provinces, indicates a clear concordance with the overall picture of the widespread re-use of building and sculptural material from the third century AD. However, there is a notable peak in recycling activities during the fourth and fifth centuries AD, particularly the breaking up and re-use of sculptural, epigraphic and architectural objects for building material. City walls and late Roman forts provide some of the best and most consistent examples of this practice. In almost every example in the northwestern provinces, we find recycling of architectural, sculptural and epigraphic material, sometimes on an enormous scale. The re-use of material in the city walls of London and other British towns (such as Lincoln, Cirencester, Chichester, Caerwent, Godmanchester, Greater Casterton and Kenchester) included material from private housing, public buildings (*fora*, temples, *mansiones*) and cemeteries. This mirrors wider patterns of recycling in city walls across the empire.<sup>3</sup>

The preliminary survey of recycling in the northwestern provinces, however, also reveals much divergence in recycling practices from elsewhere in the empire. The practice of re-carving imperial portraits was common in Rome, Italy and the eastern provinces, where such portraits were made and displayed. However, this was less common in other parts of the empire. In Gaul, only a few examples exist, such as a portrait head of a short-bearded man (probably Maxentius) dated to the early-fourth century AD from Lugdunensis I (Lingones).<sup>4</sup> The head was re-cut from an earlier portrait with longer hair and then combined with an early-fourth-century togate statue. In Britain,

only one imperial portrait – an early-fourth-century over-life-size portrait of (probably) Constantine from Eburacum (York) – has been identified as being re-carved from a previous portrait.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the variation in the amount and types of recycling in different regions should not be unexpected. Recycling depended on a variety of circumstances, such as the availability of skilled carvers, as well as the availability and suitability of existing material (marble, for example, is more suited to re-carving; moreover, re-carving required an original object of suitable size). In addition, different requirements by patrons in different regions and the presence or lack of suitable locations or buildings for continued display also contributed to regional variation in recycling practices. These differences in the adaptation of the urban landscape and the treatment of second-hand material demonstrate the necessity of studying recycling in relation to regional responses to urbanism in Late Antiquity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The bibliography on this subject is vast, and continues to grow. For a review of *spolia* studies, see Pensabene 2015. See also, Altekamp et al. 2013 and 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For the potential of regionally-specific analyses of re-use within a specific class of monument, see Frey 2015, who addresses three case studies of late-antique fortification projects in the Roman province of Achaëa.

<sup>3</sup> Barker et al. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> De Kersauson 1996, 520–521, no. 248.

<sup>5</sup> LSA-1226 in The Last Statues of Antiquity Project (LSA) Database (<http://www.laststatues.classics.ox.ac.uk/>). The project is co-directed by R. R. R. Smith and B. Ward-Perkins, and includes further discussion, references and photographs.

### References

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