Recycling Roman Funerary Sculpture in Italy and the Late Roman West

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In conjunction with literary and legal sources, several archaeological contexts testify that, in the Greco-Roman world, the destruction of tombs occurred predominantly in times of greater social and political instability. Tombs were often destroyed so that their sculptural décor could be recycled for new building purposes, a phenomenon that was particularly frequent in Late Antiquity. This paper assesses how and when tombs were stripped of their marble décor by comparing archaeological contexts from Italy with other regions of the late Roman west. These contexts clearly demonstrate that the recycling of sculptural décor from tombs was a process of *longue durée,* starting in Late Antiquity and continuing at least until the Middle Ages.[1]

In medieval Italy, Roman funerary art was a common form of spolia, frequently reused in the facades of Romanesque churches. Numerous art historical studies have discussed the historical implications of funerary spolia within their new medieval contexts.[2] However, marble decorations from imperial tomb monuments were already reused for building purposes in Late Antiquity. Literary and legal sources further confirm that the destruction of tombs must have become a routine felony by the fourth century AD.[3] For instance, the fourth-century edicts *"de sepulchri violati"* were promulgated by emperors with the objective of stamping out the all too frequent violations of tombs.[4] The edicts also inform us that specifically the marble ornaments of tombs were one of the main targets, as they were often reused for building late antique houses and public buildings (CTh 9, 17, 2; 9, 17, 5).

Recent studies on Ostia Antica have convincingly demonstrated that, especially in the fourth and early fifth centuries, the marble fittings and sculptures from abandoned buildings (i.e. temples and tombs) were reused for the newly constructed public and private buildings.[5] Funerary sculpture was not only reused within walls, but also as décor for late antique nymphaea, bath buildings, and houses (fig. 1).[6] Moreover, funerary inscriptions were reused visibly to pave late antique floors and to adorn walls with marble revetment. Therefore, the tombs in the necropolis of Ostia were stripped of their marble decoration not only in the Middle Ages (funerary spolia from Ostia can be found in medieval buildings as far as Florence),[7] but already in Late Antiquity. We might even suggest that, from the late third century AD onwards, the town's necropolis may have fallen victim to a more organised process of spoliation.[8] The fact that also elsewhere in Italy imperial tombs were already the target of larger spoliations in late antiquity, can be confirmed by a statistical overview on the reused inscriptions from Italy (fig. 2). Of the inscriptions from Italy that have been compiled in the Epigraphic Database Roma, 2853 inscriptions are listed as reused in new contexts.[9] The majority are funerary inscriptions: 508 funerary inscriptions are reused within late antique contexts, whereas

Fig. 1: Sarcophagus of the Severan period, reused as a water fountain in the entrance hall of the Domus sul Decumano (Ostia, Reg. III, II, 3).
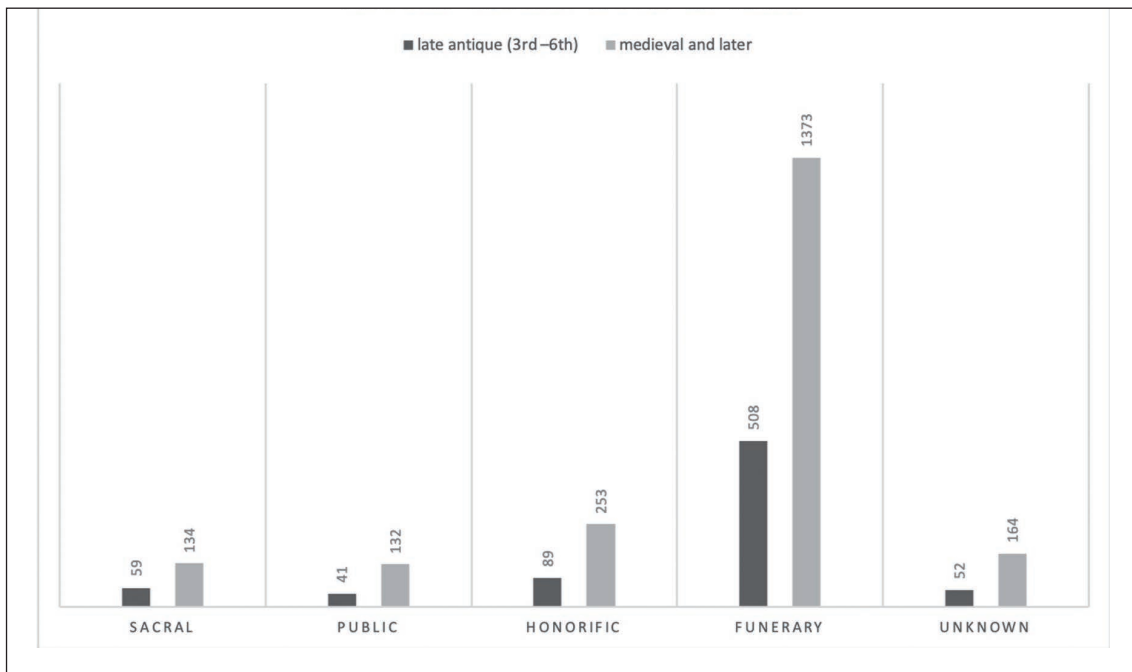

Fig. 2: Statistics chart of reused inscriptions (still *in situ*) from Italy based on the EDR Database [<http://www.edr-edr.it> (24. 09. 2020)].

1373 hail from medieval contexts. Although this dataset is not complete, it still demonstrates that the reuse of tomb materials for building purposes was already frequent in Late Antiquity and continued to be in the Middle Ages.

In contrast with the literary and legal sources as well as the contexts of reused funerary sculpture, it is much more difficult to identify archaeological evidence that illuminates how these tomb spoliations were organized. More recently excavated tombs and mausolea (such as the one of the senator M. Nonius Macrinus) between the fifth and sixth miles of the via Flaminia, were found spoliated of their marble decorations. Since the Tiber flooded the site in several periods, fluvial layers allowed the excavators to differentiate between two distinct phases of spoliation.[10] In Late Antiquity, tombstones were reused for repairing the roadside of the Via Flaminia, whereas, in the Middle Ages, the marble decorations were recycled for new buildings, and large quantities of the marble décor were destroyed in a lime kiln that had been constructed in one of the tombs.[11] Few contexts of this nature have been found in Italy[12]; however, better-preserved contexts are known from other regions of the western Empire. Recent excavations and geophysical surveys at Duppach-Weiermühle (60 km northeast from Trier) investigated looted tombs at a Roman villa. The villa-estate, from which several smaller buildings survive (fig. 3, nos. 1–13), was built at the end of the first century AD and underwent several modifications and additions, before its abandonment at the beginning of the fifth century AD.[13] Several looted tomb monuments alongside the Roman road were discovered in close proximity to the villa (fig. 3, A–D): the remains of two pillar tombs, dating to the Antonine period (fig. 3, A. B), and smaller tomb monuments (fig. 3, C. D). The last burial took place in the early third century AD.[14] Thorough excavations have allowed us to understand how these tombs were stripped of their stone decorations. This spoliation was once again a *longue durée* process, which occurred in three distinct, stratigraphically attested phases of spoliation. In a first phase, during the later third century AD, a smaller tomb monument was transformed into a workshop (fig. 3, no. 2). Additionally, a limited amount of the décor from the destroyed tombs was recycled as building material.[15] This situation changed in the last quarter of the fourth century AD: according to numismatic evidence, specifically during the reign of Valentinian. In the second spoliation phase, the ornamental stone covering of the pillar-tombs A and B were completely stripped of their stone decor. This was a longer and more organized process, which is clear from the installation of a shelter next to pillar tomb B, for reworking the stones before reusing them elsewhere (fig. 3).[16] The reuse of funerary material in late antique buildings is well attested in the same region:[17] for example, in the villa-estate at Bartringen (fig. 4).[18] A third phase of spoliation, in which the tomb monuments from Duppach-Weiermühle were completely dismantled down to their foundations, took place in a much later period, over the course of the fifteenth century (fig. 5).[19] The stones were again sometimes cut on site and later reused in buildings as far as 15 kilometers away from the site.[20] Similar to what was illustrated in the above-mentioned archaeological record from Italy, organized spoliation of the Roman
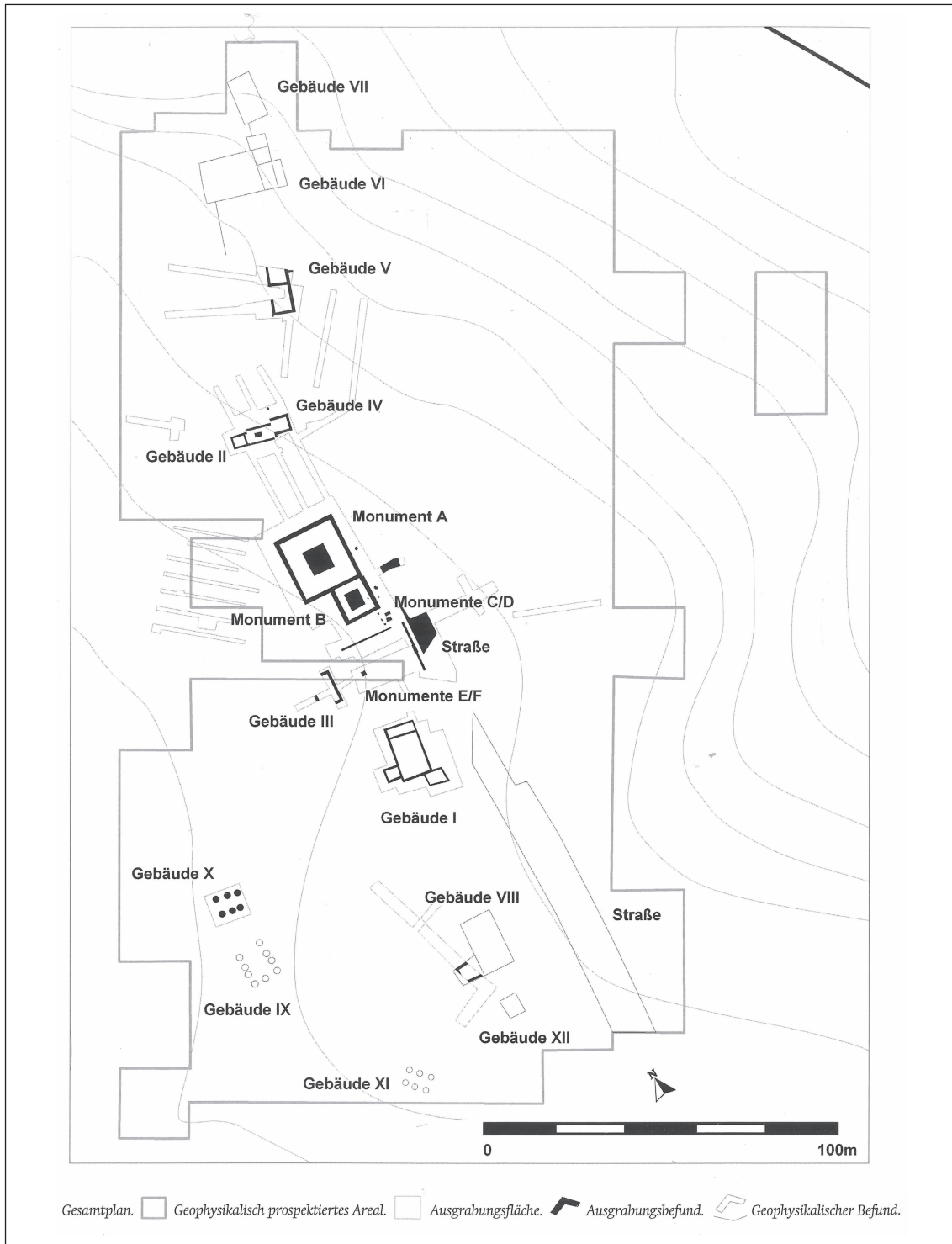
Fig. 3: Map of the excavations and geophysics results, showing the villa and tombs found at Duppach-Weiermühle.
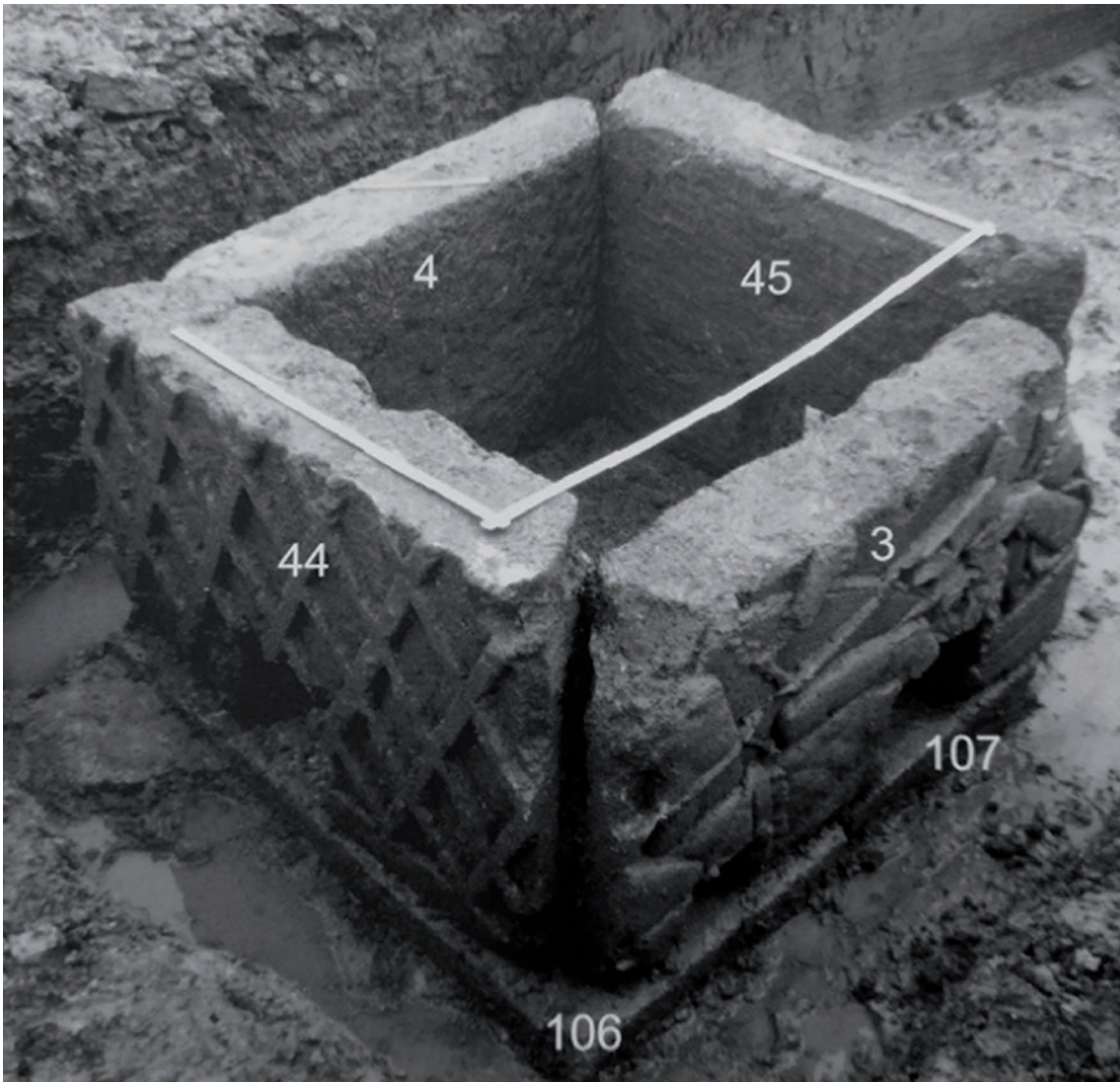
Fig. 4: Decoration from an early Imperial mausoleum reused in the fountain within the burgus of Bartringen.

Fig. 5: The medieval ramp built to access the stones from the foundation of pillar tomb A at Duppach-Weiermühle.

tombs in Duppach-Weiermühle also took place in two distinct phases: in Late Antiquity and once again in the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

Literary, legal, and archaeological sources prove that, from the 3rd to the 6th centuries AD, Roman tombs that had fallen into oblivion were subject to more organised spolia-tion processes not only in Italy, but also in the wider Late Empire. It was predominantly the stone decorations of tombs that were reused for building purposes. They were not only reused invisibly within walls, but also as décor for public and private buildings. The violation of pagan tombs that is mentioned in late antique edicts must therefore be explained with economic rather than ideological motivations. In a similar fashion to the temples, the tombs had also lost their social function and were thus a very welcome recourse for redecorating newly designed or renovated late antique buildings all over the Mediterranean.

Notes

[1] The ongoing SNF-project *"Plundering, Reusing and Transforming the Past: Grave Robbing and Reuse of Funerary Material in Late Antiquity"* is gathering literary, legal, and archaeological sources that attest the appropriation of tomb material in the late Roman Empire. It shall be clarified to what extent the spoliation of tombs can be explained by economic, ideological, or social transformations. [<http://www.hist.unibe.ch/forschung/forschungsprojekte/plundering_reusing_and_transforming_the_past> (24. 09. 2020)].

[2] See for example Esch 2005.

[3] The topic of tomb spoliation must have been of great concern to the fathers of the eastern church, (especially Gregory of Nazianzus) who often report of such felonies. Petzl 1987, 117–130; Floridi 2013, 55–81.

[4] CTh 9, 17, 1–7.

[5] Pensabene 2005, 707–726; Pensabene et al. 2007, 441–447.

[6] Murer 2016, 177–196; Danner 2017, 100; Murer 2019, 115–138.

[7] For example (CIL XIV 105) Paolucci – Chiarlo 1994, 387 fig. 674.

[8] The tomb material might first have been stored in deposits before it was reused, see: Pensabene – Panella 1993–1994, 125–154; Brenk – Pensabene 1999, 296; Baldassarri 2017, 272 note 74.

[9] Epigraphic Database Roma (EDR) [<http://www.edr-edr.it> (24. 09. 2020)].

[10] Rossi 2012.

[11] Chiocci et al. 2012, 305 f.

[12] For example, the tombs at the Necropoli di Levante in Iulia Concordia: Vigoni 2011, 149–158.

[13] Henrich 2010, 9–14.

[14] Henrich 2009, 34–37 fig. 11; Henrich 2010, 43 f. fig. 18.

[15] Henrich 2010, 54 fig. 37 a. b; 130 f.

[16] Henrich 2010, 128–134.

[17] Funerary spolia was also reused in the villa of Welschbillig, set visibly in the basin and balustrade of the famous herm gallery basin: Hettner 1893, 18–37; Wrede 1972, 5–9. 16–23.

[18] Krier 2003, 255–263; Kremer – Krier 2009; Henrich 2010, 131.

[19] Henrich 2010, 122 f.

[20] Tabaczek 2009, 39–65; Henrich 2010, 132 f.

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Fig. 1: after Danner 2016, 100 fig. 46. – Fig. 2: after EDR Database [<http://www.edr-edr.it> (24. 09. 2020)] – Fig. 3: after Henrich 2010, 44 fig. 18. – Fig. 4: after Krier 2003, 259 fig. 5. – Fig. 5: after Henrich 2010, 125 fig. 92.

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