

The Afterlife of Stones after the Disruption of Roman Tombs in Late Antiquity and Middle Ages. A Selection of Case Studies from the *regio Venetia et Histria*

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The debate concerning the long-term phenomenon of the destruction of monuments in the post-Classical era is generally concerned with theoretical aspects or with specific archaeological evidences involving either classes of artifacts or individual case studies. Among the research studies in the field, funerary monuments could be considered a favoured source.¹

A particularly complex area of research is the one that focuses on ancient Roman archaeological materials that had been reused in the post-Classical era and show clear traces of craftsmen at work.

The aim of my speech consists in investigating three case studies from Venice and its lagoon. Within this peculiar landscape, indeed, many *spolia* are preserved, which are useful to better understand the well-structured organization of the workshops where craftsmen and stonemasons carried out their work. This analysis could help to shed light on the extent to which Venice and the lagoon are connected to the destroyed ancient Roman settlements of the mainland and to the early Medieval urban landscapes that were contemporary to the foundation of the city (i.e. from the 7th century AD).²

Indeed, as is well known, ancient Roman inscriptions in Latin had been reused starting from the 6th century AD; by the 9th century AD, the ancient elements used as building materials employed in the foundations of Saint Mark's bell tower had lost their original meaning.³ In this case, we can reconstruct the ways, in which the original artefacts were readapted and modified for their new usage: apart from the first working required to adapt a segment of the inscription to be used as architectural frame, a second intervention was undertaken to transform the piece into a uniform rectangular slab used to strengthen the foundations of the monument. Two centuries later, in the 11th century, a second case study show us a very different behavior on the part of the craftsmen. In the cathedral of Murano, the funerary monument of the *Acilii* was dismantled and the octagonal pilaster divided in two portions, which still adorn the portal of the basilica of the Saints Maria and Donato.⁴

The third case study consists in the so-called sarcophagus of 'Barbola', which is currently preserved in the chapel of Saint Philomena within the cathedral of Murano.⁵ The front of the sarcophagus, which was probably taken from an ancient Roman settlement of the mainland, had been reused in the church like a floor slab with its reverse side. When the front was discovered it already showed extended reworking dating to the 8th century, including the leveling of the epigraphic mirror to carve a new inscription.⁶ The pavement of the church of Saints Maria and Donato can be dated to the year 1052

thanks to a mosaic inscription. Therefore, it is likely that in Murano as well, craftsmen were engaged both in the 8th century to find, adapt and rework the entire sarcophagus or just the front, and in the 11th to readapt it to its new function as floor slab.⁷

The three cases I have investigated, although they belong to a rather specialist field, have the potential of opening up to a much broader study concerning the social organization of craftsmanship and its features between the 6th and the 11th century. The widespread business of finding ancient materials to be reused in other places has been already studied, i.e., for late antique Ostia by Patrizio Pensabene⁸ and for Veium in the late Middle Ages.⁹ Conversely, as regards *Venetia et Histria*, there are not documented cases, but is perhaps this very lack of information that should be interpreted as meaningful. However, the phenomenon, the modesty of craftsmen and their scarce social relevance, are all factors, which, together with continuous invasions, make the area an immense uninterrupted construction site between the Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, with relevant consequences on the urban and agricultural landscape of the ancient *regio*.

The economic value of stones and the prestige of their owners are testified by some – unfortunately few – records;¹⁰ the spoliation of necropolis in this period is something we can take for granted. Further research on this phenomenon would allow us to finally gain better knowledge and understanding of the professionals involved in the flourishing market of the afterlife of stones, which progressively reshaped the urban landscape of a myriad of a myriad of Medieval towns still existing in Europe and around the Mediterranean today.

Notes

¹ Murer 2016; Murer 2019.

² Ammerman 2003; Ammerman – McClennen 2001; Ammerman et al. 2017.

³ Calvelli 2012; Pilutti Namer 2012.

⁴ Calvelli 2005.

⁵ Pilutti Namer 2012; Calvelli 2014.

⁶ Calvelli 2014.

⁷ Pilutti Namer 2012.

⁸ See i.e. Pensabene 2006.

⁹ Pascucci 2009; Fusco et al. 2015.

¹⁰ Pilutti Namer 2012.

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