

CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova



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**Spoliation
as Translation**
Medieval Worlds
in the Eastern
Mediterranean

edited by **Ivana Jevtić** & **Ingela Nilsson**
with the collaboration of **Zuzana Frantová**

SPOILIATION AS TRANSLATION.
MEDIEVAL WORLDS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

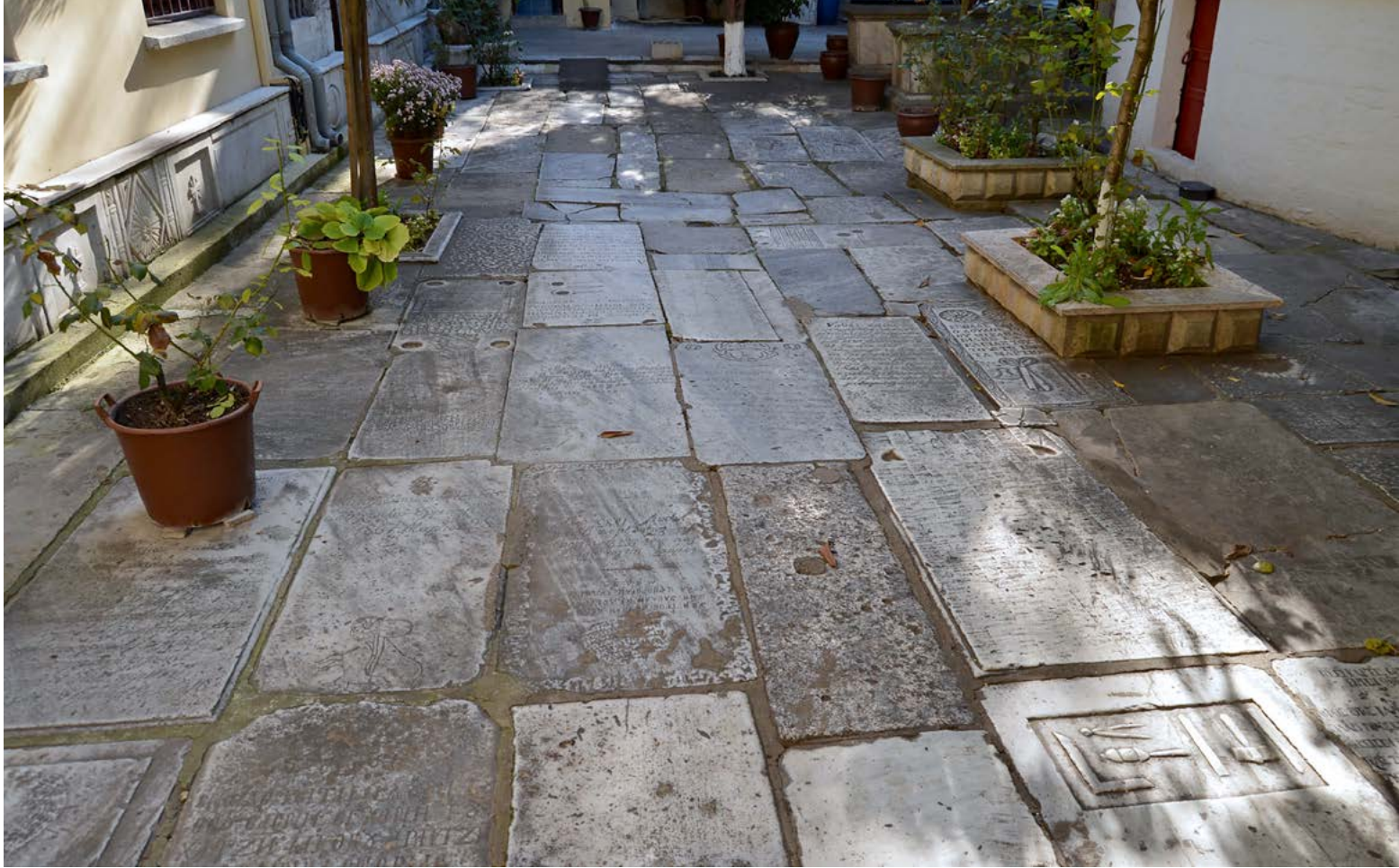
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Towards an Empathetic Approach to Material and Literary Spolia

Ivana Jevtić & Ingela Nilsson

Arriving at the courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise (Monastery of the Zoodochos Pege) in Istanbul, most visitors promptly enter the church or the chapel with its famous holy spring without paying attention to the pavement [Fig. 1]¹. But a curious visitor who looks around and takes in the environment will observe something intriguing under their feet: the entire church courtyard is paved with tombstones of various sizes and belonging to different periods [Fig. 2]. Some are inscribed with long epitaphs in Karamanlı Turkish (Turkish written in Greek letters), others have reliefs featuring religious symbols or sketchy representations alluding to the professions of the deceased [Figs 3–5]. Placed tightly side

1/View of the courtyard, the Balıklı Kilise in Istanbul, 19th century

2/ Reused gravestones, the courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise in Istanbul, 19th century

1 On this church and its spring, see Raymond Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin*, Part 1: *Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat œcuménique*, vol. 3: *Les églises et les monastères*, Paris 1969, pp. 223–232; Alice-Mary Talbot, “Holy Springs and Pools in Byzantine Constantinople”, in *Istanbul and Water*, Paul Magdalino, Nina Ergin eds, Leuven 2015, pp. 160–167. About the gravestones, see Antonis Tsakalos, “Identities: Imprints of Covering Slabs from Baloukli Cemetery and the Exhibition of the Byzantine and Christian Museum”, in *Identities: Balouki and the Romioi Greeks in Constantinople 19th Century*, catalogue of the exhibition (Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, January 10 – April 27, 2014), Tassos Triandafyllou ed., Athens 2014, pp. 42–45.



by side, though in different positions and with no apparent logic, the tombstones are gathered in a surprising assemblage where they all seem to fit. Taken out of their original settings – the nearby cemetery areas – these tombstones were reemployed like spolia in the courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise. Visitors who are used to spot reused pieces on the walls, here walk over a strange museum-like collection of spolia that lead them to the church. How did these tombstones come to be reused in such a manner? Why were they translated into a new language, offering another story? Moreover, what do they do to the visitor who now walks across them?

This collage of lives, of those whose names and prayers are still readable on the stone surfaces, do not only strike a visual and historical cord but they also provoke empathy – a miscellaneous concept and less often acknowledged component of artistic creation and reception². The articles gathered in this special issue of *Convivium* offer a variety of perspectives by historians of art, architecture and literature, exploring the relations between spoliation and translation, with a particular focus on the interconnections and similarities between material/artistic and textual/literary cultures. Building on current research in spolia and translation studies, they all respond to an increasing interest in and popularity of these two topics in recent scholarship. Considering its long history, the term spolia may need some clarifications. The original Latin word *spolia* (sing. *spolium*) appeared in the context of ancient Roman warfare where it signified the spoils of war, but it evolved to designate building materials and artworks brought from conquered provinces and exhibited in official triumphs³. This later meaning is broadened in modern conceptualizations of spolia in archaeology, architectural/art history where spolia designate artifacts “incorporated into setting culturally or chronologically different from that of (their) creation”⁴. In the past twenty years or so, spolia grew into a burgeoning field of studies that expands the understanding of reuse, recycling, remodeling, repurposing and similar processes. From the original negative connotation, spolia as well as spoliation thus became tools to contextualize these wide-spread and ancient practices in material and textual cultures⁵.



That is the case with this volume, seeking to uncover the broader artistic and cultural implications behind the phenomena of reuse in conjunction with translation. The aim is to foster a better understanding of the medieval worlds in the Eastern Mediterranean whose history was marked by constant cross-cultural encounters and interactions. In this perspective, empathy – as a recurring motif – may offer a starting-point for further investigation of these topics.

The role played by empathy has been touched upon in the case of literature and especially translation, but it is still a stranger in spolia studies⁶. Defined by the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* as “the ability to understand another person's feelings, experience”⁷, empathy may seem far removed from the study of material relocation. However, the reuse of an ancient object – changing the context, adapting the form or translating the meaning of a block of stone, a fragment or a motif – can hardly be achieved without some involvement of empathy on the part of the agent. The empathetic perspective brings those practices closer to human experiences, so that they can tell us more about the agency of artefacts or texts,

3/ Inscriptions on the gravestones, the courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise in Istanbul, 19th century

4/ Relief on the gravestone, the courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise in Istanbul, 19th century

5/ Relief detail, gravestone in the courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise in Istanbul, 19th century

2 About the definition of *empathy*, the history of the notion and its multiple facets, see Marie-Lise Brunel, Cynthia Martiny, “Les conceptions de l'empathie avant, pendant et après Rogers”, *Carriérologie*, IX/3 (2004), pp. 473–500; Pierre Louis Patoine, *Corps / Texte : Pour une théorie de la lecture emphatique*, Lyon 2015.

3 Inge Uytterhoeven, “*Spolia*, -iorum, n.: From Spoils of War to Reused Building Materials: The History of a Latin Term”, in *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlives of Objects, Materials, and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, Ivana Jevtić, Suzan Yalman eds, Istanbul 2018, pp. 25–50.

4 Dale Kinney, “The Concept of *Spolia*”, in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, Conrad Rudolph ed., Oxford 2006, p. 233.

5 The research in this field increased with multiple studies made by different authors but it also spread both geographically and chronologically. For the most comprehensive status of spolia, see *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, Richard Brilliant, Dale Kinney eds, Farnham 2011; *Spolia Reincarnated* (n. 3).

6 Françoise Wuilmart, “Le traducteur littéraire : un marieur empathique de cultures”, *Meta Translator's Journal*, XXXI/1 (1990), pp. 236–242. For a more recent perspective, see Mark Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*, Cambridge, MA. 2018.

7 “Empathy”, in *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/empathy>; retrieved 2021-08-25).

about how they produced their impact on cultures and people. So let us take a closer look at what exactly empathy would mean in this context and how one can distinguish it behind various artistic and literary forms created through reuse and translation.

Funerary monuments, inscriptions and images are powerful markers of culture and memory, and yet many of them have a long history of reuse, relocation and repurposing. The courtyard of the Balıklı Kilise gathers mostly nineteenth-century tombstones belonging to Christian communities of Istanbul, but, if we go back in time, the Roman sarcophagi went through the most diverse recycling in the medieval world across the entire Mediterranean, representing a very effective way to preserve and reshape antiquity. Sarcophagi slabs embellished the cathedrals of Italian city republics. They were reemployed as altar pieces or lintels in Byzantine churches, decorated the city gates of Constantinople and Nicaea, were transformed into fountains and inspired features in Byzantine iconography. They also adorned the mosques in Seljuk Anatolia and featured in the city walls like those of Konya, where some of them were even repaired in the thirteenth century. Several authors in this volume interpret the reuse of Roman sarcophagi panels, a practice that offers a clear point of intersection between Christians and Muslims in the medieval period.

But can we understand the mentality of people who reused ancient sarcophagi, or trace the entire process of their transformation and translation into new contexts? For instance, how did an artist/craftsman come up with the idea of reusing such a slab? Did the piece seduce him, challenge him, catch his interest in one way or another? What about the patron who approved of such an intervention? Was it a random choice where the practice was the result of a need to use the stone, ignoring the significance of the piece and what it represented? The majority of evidence seem to point in the opposite direction: as objects of aesthetic appreciation and means to connect with wise men of the past, reused Roman sarcophagi resonated with ancient times, history and memory in the medieval world, as much as the tombstones from the Balıklı Kilise courtyard do today. This brings us back to empathy, the emotions that arise from it, and how they can represent an angle for spolia studies, material as well as literary.

Even though the term *empathy* entered modern vocabulary in the early twentieth century, it has its roots in the ancient idea of sympathy. Eighteenth-century philosophical theories on sympathy in particular paved the way for our modern understanding of empathy as “an emotional state resulting from observing or imagining the state of others in order to share it”⁸. For the Scottish writer and philosopher Henry Home (1696–1782), for instance, the ideas that produce speech and memory can generate an ideal presence, almost as powerful as a real presence. This ideal presence can in turn provoke emotions that are coming from a sensation of presence⁹. If we follow this line of thought, spolia in all of their forms materialize the past, which gains more presence, visibility and readability when its remnants/fragments (*antiquus*) are staged in new contexts (*modernus*)¹⁰. The past becomes like a presence one can relate to and engage with, it affects the viewers, provokes their reactions and emotions, feeds their imagination. Literary spolia in the form of citations, allusions and topoi function in much the same manner, perhaps even more strongly affecting the emotions of the audience by their forceful restaging of the past and immediate effect on the imagination of readers or listeners.

Most of the spolia we study are artefacts or textual fragments that have distinctive features and attributes, something recognizable that made them evocative/expressive for their users/viewers. Authors in this volume tackle the question of what in or about the piece could trigger its spoliation or, indeed, translation. Was it the material, the state, the shape or the ornamentation of the piece? Was it the style, the language or the rhetorical

form of a textual snippet? Was it the imagery and what it was supposed to represent? Or were the choice of location and how the fragment would be displayed significant factors of the selection? Some authors argue that the reason for reuse was the potential of a fragment to refer to and be associated with something or someone – that is, the symbolical/referential potential of spolia. In a combination of their formal characteristics – iconography or inscriptions, material and medium – reused elements were carriers of communication in which affective components played a role together with visual and cognitive aspects¹¹. It is by stimulating empathy that spolia can create and carry their own narratives across time and space, illustrating the interdependence of people, material culture and artistic imagination¹². The phenomena of reuse thus offer a lot of ground to explore further this entanglement of objects and people, its role in the construction of identities and memory where empathy has an obvious place¹³.

Susana Calvo Capilla's convincing analysis of the reasons behind the reuse of Roman sarcophagi in the palace of Madinat Al-Zahra in Spain illustrates this point¹⁴. She shows how the sarcophagi were placed in spaces designed for teaching, nurturing of the arts, practice of science and preservation of knowledge. In this specific context, they lost their value of funerary monuments and the original meanings of their sculptural reliefs were transformed. Capilla argues that the scenes of philosophers and Muses surrounded by books and the mythological stories of Heracles on the sarcophagi panels now served as inspiration, maybe even a form of protection for those who were using the spaces for learning. The ancient sarcophagi became allegories for the "science of the Ancients", their reuse was a deliberate action designed to exalt ancient and Hispanic heritage in the legitimization for the Cordoban caliphate in the tenth century. We can go one step further and assume that translating meanings of the classical sarcophagi in spaces devoted to learning and knowledge also depended on empathy. One can imagine the caliph and other members of the elites studying, surrounded by images representing the wise men of antiquity, and how their emphatic response (mimetic reaction) to such spolia was actively shaping their sense of owing and claiming that past (via *la communauté des lettrés*)¹⁵. As a parallel, it is easy to envision how the use of ancient texts in education and, as a result, in the production of new texts functioned in the rhetorical and literary sphere, spilling over into practices of rulership and legal proceedings¹⁶.

8 Patoine, *Corps / Texte* (n. 2), pp. 75–102.

9 *Ibidem*, pp. 75–76.

10 Bente Küllerich, "Antiquus et modernus: Spolia in Medieval Art – Western, Byzantine and Islamic", in *Medioevo: il tempo degli antichi*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi (Parma, 24–28 settembre 2003), Arturo Carlo Quintavalle ed., Milan 2006, pp. 135–145.

11 About the artefacts and the question of their meanings, see Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York 1955, pp. 1–25.

12 The interdependence of people and material culture they produce is not a novelty for recent scholarship where archaeology, anthropology or sociology highlight how things (monumental, portable) act in the world, produce meanings and relationships. See, among others, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005; *Material Culture and Social Identities in the Ancient World*, Shelley Hales, Tamar Hodos eds, Cambridge 2010; Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*, Malden, MA 2012.

13 *Ibidem*, pp. 88–112. About memory see Amy Papalexandrou, "Memory Tattered and Torn: Spolia in the Heartland of Byzantine Hellenism", in *Archaeologies of Memory*, Ruth M. Van Dyke, Susan E. Alcock eds, Malden, MA 2003, pp. 56–80.

14 Susana Calvo Capilla, "The Reuse of Classical Antiquity in the Palace of Madinat Al-Zahra, and its Role in the Construction of Caliphal Legitimacy", *Muqarnas*, xxxi (2014), pp. 1–33. I am grateful to Muradiye Öztaşkın who in the Bizantolog Reading Group meeting (May 2020) advised me to read Capilla's article and to think about emotions and spoliation (Ivana Jevtić).

15 About emphatic response in aesthetic experience and visual arts, see David Freedberg, Vittorio Gallese, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, xi/5 (2007), pp. 197–203.

16 For the latter, see Milan Vukašinić, "The Power of Learned References: Subatomic Interpretations of Epirot Bishops", in *Learning, Performance and Power in Pre-Modern Eurasia*, Niels Gaul, Foteini Spingou, Curie Virág eds, forthcoming, employing metaphors drawn from particle physics to describe Byzantine reference practices.

Together with the admiration of antiquity and the pride of being its custodian, spoliation could also reflect nostalgia for past glories. A wistful affection for the past probably lays behind many revivals of antiquity, assuring its memory and sense of continuity. Why was the Church of the Panaghia Gorgoepikoos, the *Little Metropolis* in Athens built almost entirely out of second-hand materials? Its patchwork exterior, made of carefully arranged classical Greek but also Byzantine sculptural reliefs, presented the viewer with a collection or collage that must have made quite an impression. If one accepts the dating of the church to the twelfth century, it is tempting to assume that such a display of spolia in the Little Metropolis reminded the Byzantines of the once glorious past of the city¹⁷. That nostalgic attitude would coincide with the contemporary literary interest in recycling and transforming ancient Greek texts, emotionally expressed in a poem by Michael Choniates: “A desire for Athens, once so famous, / wrote this as if playing with shadows, / and cooling the fire of my longing”¹⁸. As he was writing this, Michael was the archbishop of the ancient city, but he could no longer see the Athens he knew from ancient texts – only the ruins and the stories remained. A comparable longing for a better past is to be found in the person of Theodore Metochites, who wrote nostalgic essays about a more glorious past of authors, philosophers and politicians, but also restored the Chora Church and transformed it into a “living collection” through the reuse of older material and visual elements¹⁹.

The reuse of ancient artefacts was not only about admiring their beauty or appreciating their antiquarian value – spolia could also be bestowed with effective power and apotropaic qualities. Roman reliefs on the city gates of Byzantine Nicaea or on the walls of Seljuk Konya could avert evil and the enemies. Their imagery and decorative patterns, nourishing associations with myths, could inspire wonder and generate a sense of protection, although outside of these contexts of reuse, the same reliefs with their images of pagan gods and heroes could be abandoned or rejected²⁰. Finally, at the opposite end, negative emotions and hatred could cause rupture and stimulate the desire to destroy the past, as exemplified in various attempts at religious and political annihilations and condemnations. Consider, for example, the practice of *damnatio memoriae* and various expressions of iconoclasm²¹.

Reuse has multiple facets. Translation is not necessarily a *channel*, but rather a *prisma*, “a matter of an endlessly varying proliferation and change”²². Spolia fascinate because they materialize various means and levels of engagement with the past, sometimes of an ambivalent nature. Defended or claimed, contested or revived, imitated or appropriated, translated or alluded to, collected/restored or spoliated – the past offered endless possibilities of rewriting, representing and retelling. Moreover, as shown in this volume, spolia lend themselves to different readings. Objects, artefacts, buildings and texts were and are constantly subject to reworkings through which they are interpreted and translated. When we take a closer look at their composition and fabric, we see that many times the old was seamlessly combined with the new. Old stories gain new significance in new contexts, just as old objects gain new meaning in new settings. Spolia are often elements/fragments that have been lifted from a larger ensemble and original setting. In other words, they may be seen as details, and yet they offer significant points, laden with connotations that may offer a key to interpretation²³. They are thus comparable to accents – emphasis – that articulate and add a certain tone to the whole composition – the polyphonic quality of textual and material spolia. If spolia aesthetic emerges as a visual and literary koine of the medieval world, its language served to tell, convince and move the viewers in particular ways; in this way, the use of spolia was indeed connected to empathy and emotions.

Reuse and translation represent two key processes that materialize cultural dialogues and exchanges across time and space. They are particularly valuable for art history that seeks to understand art made in the past and contextualize our present-day relation to it. At the same time, we are both destroyers and beneficiaries of what has been passed to us, and most of what has come down to us results from a long history of use. Today we dispose of new technological tools to reveal and explore those layers of reuse and translation. The growing number of databases and digitized manuscript collections open new possibilities for textual and narratological studies, while various advanced techniques for analyzing, recording, imaging and reconstructing artefacts and architecture reveal many more episodes of their lives. The Sinai Palimpsests Project is one example of how innovative multispectral technology produces extraordinary results in the study of the palimpsests collection at the Monastery of St Catherine: it has shown how many different texts and languages were written on recycled parchments where they substituted earlier works, including classical texts²⁴. In a similar manner, all culture – material and textual – can be seen as palimpsestic, in the sense that it is grafted on previous generations of artistic expression: everything is spoliated and everything is translated. Through this lens, art, architecture and literature become more colorful and human, they foster a new way of understanding and transmitting the past, challenging the dominant historical narratives and forcing them to become more inclusive and more multilayered²⁵.

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- 17 The dating to the twelfth century has been refuted by Bente Kiilerich, who argues for a later date, probably after 1436. See Bente Kiilerich, “Making Sense of the Spolia in the Little Metropolis in Athens”, *Arte medievale*, IV (2005), pp. 95–114; also, “*Antiquus et modernus*” (n. 10), pp. 141–142.
- 18 Michael Choniates, *Verses on Athens* 1–3, in *Μιχαήλ Ακομινάτου τοῦ χωνιάτου τὰ σωζόμενα*, vol. 2, Spyridon P. Lampros ed., Athens 1879–1880, repr. Groningen 1968, pp. 397–398. On this poem, see Christopher Livanos, “Michael Choniates, Poet of Love and Knowledge”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, xxx/2 (2006), pp. 103–114; on this poem in the context of 12th-century literature, see Ingela Nilsson, “Komnenian Literature”, in *Byzantine Culture*, Dean Sakel ed., Ankara 2014, pp. 121–131, sp. p. 126. On Michael Choniates in Athens, see Anthony Kaldellis, *The Christian Parthenon: Classicism and Pilgrimage in Byzantine Athens*, Cambridge, MA 2009, pp. 145–165.
- 19 Nicholas Melvani, “Late, Middle, and Early Byzantine Sculpture in Palaiologan Constantinople”, in *Spolia Reincarnated* (n. 3), pp. 149–169. For Metochites’ expression of nostalgia for antiquity, see his so-called *Miscellanea*, edited and translated by Karin Hult and published in the series *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia*; on his literary style, grafted on ancient rhetoric, see Karin Hult, “Theodore Metochites as a literary critic”, in *Interaction and Isolation in Late Byzantine Culture*, Jan Olof Rosenqvist ed., Stockholm 2004, pp. 44–56. About commonalities in the Byzantine, Italian, South-Slavonic and Ottoman perceptions of antiquity by focusing on textual, visual and material evidence for the reception, recovery, and reworking of the past in the first half of the fifteenth century, see Ida Toth, “Late Medieval Antiquarian Culture and the Poetics of Reuse: Three Case Studies”, in *Proceedings of the International Workshop on Late Byzantine Cities* (Bahçeşehir University, 20–23 August 2019), Aslihan Akışık, Suna Çağaptay eds, Istanbul, forthcoming.
- 20 Livia Bevilacqua, “Spolia on City Gates in the Thirteenth Century: Byzantium and Italy”, in *Spolia Reincarnated* (n. 3), pp. 173–194; Persis Berlekamp, “Symmetry, Sympathy, and Sensation: Talismanic Efficacy and Slippery Iconographies in Early Thirteenth-Century Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia”, *Representations*, CXXXIII/1 (2016), pp. 59–109; Suzan Yalman, “Repairing the Antique: Legibility and Reading Seljuk Spolia in Konya”, in *Spolia Reincarnated* (n. 3), pp. 211–233.
- 21 Dale Kinney, “*Spolia, Damnatio and Renovatio Memoriae*”, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, XLII (1997), pp. 119–122.
- 22 Matthew Reynolds, “Prismatic Agon, Prismatic Harmony: Translation, Literature, Language”, in *Prismatic Translation*, Matthew Reynolds ed., Cambridge 2019, pp. 21–47, sp. p. 24.
- 23 About the detail and its role in aesthetic and art historical discourses, see Daniel Arrase, *Le détail : Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, Paris 1992.
- 24 Available at <http://sinaipalimpsests.org>; retrieved 2021-08-25.
- 25 Most articles in this collection were presented at a workshop that took place in Istanbul in December 2019, organized in collaboration between The Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul and Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED). We are grateful to the participants for the fruitful discussions that inspired the present volume and to the organizing institutions for their financial support. The production of this volume has been undertaken within the frame of the research programme *Retracing Connections* (<https://retracingconnections.org>; retrieved 2021-08-25), financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (M19-0430:1). We also wish to thank Zuzana Frantová and the *Convivium* for their valuable editorial support.