

Understanding the St Eustace Reliquary: What *Spolia* Reveals About
Classical Reception in the Middle Ages



“Head Reliquary of St Eustace,” Basel, Switzerland, 1180-1200.
Silver gilt with gemstones, wooden core. British Museum.

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In 1956, during a standard cleaning, the relics of various saints and nine unlabelled skull fragments were discovered inside a reliquary of St Eustace's head that had been in the British Museum's collection since 1850. While the relics were subsequently returned to the Basel Cathedral in Switzerland, new attention turned toward the reliquary itself. The piece features an outer silver-gilt head (as well as a wooden inner one), with a gem-set diadem containing sixteen stones in addition to two remaining stones surrounding the base.¹ In the year following the discovery, the museum began a study in their Research Laboratory using traditional gem-identifying techniques in order to discover more about their origins – but because researchers could not remove them, some were incorrectly or vaguely labelled. Joyner, Freestone and Robinson's crucial 2006 study using the British Museum's Raman microspectroscope and x-ray fluorescence spectrometry provided more accurate identifications and confidently suggested Roman origins to many of the gemstones, despite the reliquary's advised 1180-1200 creation date.² They propose the gemstones act as *spolia*, or what Kinney defines as the "reuse or continued use of antique buildings or objects."³ Using the content of Joyner, Freestone and Robinson's study, this paper aims to examine the St Eustace reliquary's role as *spolia* and its consequential exploration of how Classical culture was received during the Middle Ages – including the utility of recycling glass and the reception and interpretation of Classical gemstones.

Sat atop St Eustace's silver repoussé hair is a filigree circlet with sixteen inlaid gemstones – based on the findings of the Raman microspectroscope, the museum concludes there are nine of quartz (rock crystal, chalcedony, amethyst and carnelian), two of aragonite

¹ "The St Eustace Head Reliquary," British Museum, accessed October 2, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1850-1127-1

² Louise Joyner, Ian Freestone and James Robinson, "Crowning Glory: The Identification of Gems on the Head Reliquary of St Eustace from the Basle Cathedral Treasury," *Journal of Gemmology* 30, no. 3/4 (2006).

³ Dale, Kinney, "Ancient Gems in the Middle Ages: Riches and Ready-mades," in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (London: Routledge, 2016), 97.

(pearl and mother of pearl), one of obsidian and six of glass. Of these, six are highly likely to be of Roman origin, including the obsidian, the pearl and the three of glass (Gems 3, 9 and 14).⁴ The two remaining gems on the base (Gems 18 and 19) are also Roman glass. The reasoning behind these attributions is as follows: the obsidian features a carved Roman hippocamp, and obsidian is not widely accessible outside of the Mediterranean region; the pearl has an unnecessary drill-hole, implying prior use as a bead which were frequently used in the Roman period; and technical analysis from five glass stones strongly suggest origin in the Roman period – soda-lime-silica glass was used commonly in Rome yet is out of production by the tenth century (prior to the creation of the piece).⁵

While Roman glass reuse was common in the Middle Ages, it did not begin there. Because glass can be easily remelted and recast, contemporary Roman recycling created an entire industry of trade in cullet, or broken glass. Some cullet would also be reused without remelting due to special designs or other decorative elements, like the imitation nicolo glass (Gem 14) that features a fish intaglio.⁶ After the decline of the Roman empire, glass recycling remained on a smaller scale until an increase in production during the eighth century. While people stripped Roman buildings of stone for reuse in architecture, they also took glass from windows and mosaics. Of particular interest, found especially in mosaics, was coloured glass that was used widely until the end of the twelfth century.⁷ Theophilus Presbyter mentions the reuse of Roman glass in his early twelfth century text *Diversarum Artium Schedula* that outlines various artistic techniques from the period: “Should anyone desire to paint small vases in glass [...] let him grind Roman glass.”⁸ Freestone also mentions

⁴ I use the assigned numbers from Joyner, Freestone and Robinson’s analysis for the glass.

⁵ Joyner, Freestone and Robinson, “Crowning Glory,” 178-179.

⁶ S. Paynter and C. M. Jackson, “Re-used Roman Rubbish: A Thousand Years of Recycling Glass,” *Post-Classical Archaeologies* 6, (2016): 4.

⁷ Ian C. Freestone, “The Recycling and Reuse of Roman Glass: Analytical Approaches,” *Journal of Glass Studies* 57, (2015): 36.

⁸ Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*, trans. Robert Hendrie (London: John Murray, 1847), 399.

precedent in the text for reusing in particular coloured glass.⁹ The only glass gemstone not of Roman origin is the red stone (Gem 7). According to Freestone:

Opaque red colours [...] did not require access to rare cobalt and antimony containing minerals, and they appear to have been one of the earliest glass colours made in the northwest that did not require access to Roman material.¹⁰

This illuminates how access to materials is one of the many reasons behind glass recycling.

Wolf, Kessler, Stern and Gerbler identify in their analysis of early mediaeval coloured window glass from Valais its silica-soda-lime composition comes from the Levantine coast.¹¹

Similarly, the glass gems from the St Eustace reliquary seem to have originated in Wadi Natrun, Egypt based on the soda selection.¹² Accessing materials to make and colour glass required vast networks and were consequently expensive; instead, artists like Theophilus established techniques to work with the array of glass left behind from the Roman empire.

Spolia in this context served as a solution to both access-based and economic problems.

Like the glass stones, reusing gemstones could also serve financial purposes. Ancient gems could boost the value of liturgical items in church treasuries, like the Basel Cathedral, where the St Eustace reliquary resided until its later relocation.¹³ What is perhaps more important to these stones, however, is their mediaeval *interpretatio christiana* – a term which refers to the appropriation and reinterpretation of aspects of non-Christian societies into a Christian viewpoint.¹⁴ Lapidaries existed long before the Middle Ages, and so those of the

⁹ Ian C. Freestone, “Theophilus and the Composition of Medieval Glass,” *Materials Research Symposium Proceedings* 267, (1992): 743.

¹⁰ Freestone, “Recycling and Reuse,” 38.

¹¹ S. Wolf, C. M. Kessler, W. B. Stern and Y. Gerber, “The Composition and Manufacture of Early Medieval Coloured Window Glass from Sion (Valais, Switzerland) – A Roman Glass-Making Tradition or Innovative Craftsmanship?” *Archaeometry* 2, no. 47 (May 2005): 365, 369.

¹² Joyner, Freestone and Robinson, “Crowning Glory,” 176.

¹³ Lucia Faedo, “The Post-Antique Reception of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture*, ed. Clemente Marconi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 422.

¹⁴ Arnold Esch, “On the Re-use of Antiquity: The Perspectives of the Archaeologist and Historian,” in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from*

period relied heavily on Classical traditions while translating these through a religious lens.¹⁵ *De Mineralibus* by Albertus Magnus regularly references the writings of Aristotle, demonstrating an appreciation for Classical knowledge, and simultaneously interprets gems through a Christian lens: saphirus, for example, is described as a stone which “makes one pious and devoted to God.”¹⁶ Wyckoff in the introduction to her translation of the text notes this sustained Classical/Christian connection throughout Magnus’s work: “This study of Aristotle’s science was undertaken in order to understand Aristotle’s philosophy as a whole and to reconcile it with the Christian faith.”¹⁷

The desire to connect the natural sciences of God with the work of Classical figures is not always straightforward, however. On pearls, like in the reliquary, Magnus writes, “Some are pierced and some are not” – Wyckoff elaborates that this references the belief by many mediaeval people that holes in pearls (the result of use in jewellery) are natural occurrences.¹⁸ Here is an example of a loss of Classical learning in the mediaeval lapidary tradition, exemplifying the transition of knowledge throughout time did not manifest in a united wave despite the cultural desire to remain in contact with Classical scholarship. It is therefore possible the inclusion of the pierced pearl in the reliquary is an example of *use*, not *reuse*, as per Cutler’s definition, who seeks to redefine *spolia* terminology through artistic intent.¹⁹ Where *reuse* describes the “deployment of a heritage object in order to refer to the past,” *use* prefers to bring an older object into the present.²⁰ In the reliquary’s context, the question that

Constantine to Sherrie Levine, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (London: Routledge, 2016), 15.

¹⁵ Christopher J. Duffin, “The Western Lapidary Tradition in Geological Literature: Medicinal and Magical Minerals,” *Geology Today* 21, no. 2 (March 2005): 60-61.

¹⁶ Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, trans. Dorothy Wyckoff (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 115.

¹⁷ Magnus, *Minerals*, xxvi-xxvii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹ Anthony Cutler, “Use or Reuse? Theoretical and Practical Attitudes toward Objects in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Ideologie e Pratiche del Reimpiego Nell’alto Medioevo*, ed. Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo (Spoleto: Presso la Sede del Centro, 1999), 2:1055-83.

²⁰ Kinney, “Ancient Gems,” 112.

arises is whether the artist(s) intended viewers to identify the pearl's Roman origins, or if they desired its new situation to supersede historical usage.

Another gemstone whose categorisation into *use* or *reuse* remains complicated is the obsidian stone. It features an intaglio design of a hippocamp, a winged sea-horse found throughout Classical mythology; the carving of gems such as these was a renowned artform during the Roman period in particular.²¹ The creators' choice to add the gem could signal two different intentions: either they meant to "render the carving invisible," or visually represent the Roman origins of the saint himself.²² To argue the former, Kinney writes on the mediaeval loss or disregard for Classical iconographic symbolism; items could be converted simply through "a pure heart and good intentions" from Christian artists desiring to use them in liturgical settings.²³ Material and colour mattered more than images, although these histories come just as much from Classical origins found in the lapidary tradition as the hippocamp displayed. Alternatively, choosing a gemstone of Roman origin may signal deference towards the Roman saint to whom the reliquary is dedicated. St Eustace was a Roman general who converted to Christianity after witnessing a stag with an illuminated crucifix while hunting on Good Friday. Refusing to worship Roman gods after his conversion, Eustace and his family were executed in a brazen bull – but their bodies were found to be miraculously unburnt when removed.²⁴ The decision to represent a Roman man, converted to Christianity by a vision of the holy, through a Roman gem, converted to Christianity by contact with the holy (the relics inside), is a powerful act of consecration. It calls into memory other such spoliated reliquaries, like that of St Foy, a martyr saint who lived within the Roman Empire and was killed for her Christian faith, and whose famous

²¹ Marina Belozerskaya, *Medusa's Gaze: The Extraordinary Journey of the Tazza Farnese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 31.

²² Kinney, "Ancient Gems," 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁴ Joyner, Freestone and Robinson, "Crowning Glory," 170.

head reliquary is believed to have been repurposed from a Roman Imperial bust.²⁵ These reliquaries and others reflect the continuous theme of *interpretatio christiano*: venerating the artistic creations of Classical people by reusing them, and simultaneously converting and sanctifying them through association with saints.

These complex feelings towards the pagan Classical society are reflected in wider cultural trends. Faedo argues there are three main reasons for Roman spoliation during the mediaeval period: economic purposes, religious triumph and cultural admiration.²⁶ The St Eustace reliquary exhibits all three. The reuse of Roman glass reflects the financial benefits of recycling due to the expense of new materials. The conversion of Roman objects into pieces which adorn religious artwork reflects the wide-held view of Christian triumph over pagan past. And yet the reuse of Roman pieces as decoration (as opposed to remelting Gemstone 14's fish or turning the hippocamp around so as to not face outwards) displays a deep appreciation for the Classical. While the discovery of the relics inside was an exciting revelation, the increased interest in the reliquary itself is just as important: the St Eustace reliquary is an exemplary object which illustrates well the practice of *spolia* in the Middle Ages and Classical reception during the period as a whole.

²⁵ Wan-Chuan Kao, "The Tomboyism of Faith: Spiritual Tomboyism in the Cult of Sainte Foy," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15, no. 4 (2011): 422.

²⁶ Faedo, "Post-Antique Reception," 421.

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