The city of Rome is built up of layers and layers of history. It was this fascinating accumulation of history, literally the accumulation of old stones in medieval buildings, which first triggered my research into the field of spolia - i.e. the art historical term for older building elements reused in a new context.

The entire geographical area once occupied by the Roman Empire features the reuse of classical elements in medieval buildings as a very common stylistic and structural characteristic. The immense architectural activity of the Roman Empire provided the succeeding centuries with an excellent stock of building material. The sheer quantity of monumental buildings erected by the classical Romans is astonishing, and the fact that so many are still standing more or less intact today is perhaps even more so considering their medieval function as quarries with prefabricated material, as it were. Within this practice of recycling antiquity, the city of Rome was probably the place that most densely used and reused architectural relics of the past.

The building practice of using older architectural elements heterogeneously in new structures was, moreover, particular to the early medieval period, starting in the beginning of the fourth century and continuing 800 years or more till the Romanesque and Gothic styles became current. The conspicuousness of the reuse of building material in the Early Christian and medieval churches of Rome, the irregularity and stylistic plurality of the material, and the almost post-modern eclecticism of its appropriation seemed intriguing and very strange to a 20th-century art historian, trained with classical and Renaissance architecture as the unquestionable ideal of all times.

By way of introduction, I will briefly present some examples of such early Christian churches built with spolia, so that you may visualize what we will be discussing subsequently.

First, let me remind you of the characteristics of the traditional Roman temple. Although imperial Rome fostered many variations on what was originally the Greek form of a temple, still, the typical elements constituting this building in the Roman Empire were a colonnaded exterior with a horizontal trabeation, closing off a small and dark interior, namely, the cella reserved for the clergy only. Important to notice here are three things: first, the fact that the shafts used were identical; second, that the capitals were identical, and third, that the columns supported a horizontal entablature. These features brought about the homogeneous, serial quality of the Roman temple.

From the beginning of the fourth century, when Christianity was legalized and new church buildings erected, this homogeneity was deconstructed simultaneously with a shift in sacral
architecture from an emphasis on the decoration of the exterior to the interior. I will now show you four buildings exemplifying some of the principles in the early Christian use of spolia.

At Santa Costanza, built as an imperial mausoleum in the mid fourth century, variation in the shafts and capitals was used to structure the circular interior space. The shafts carrying arches are of plain grey granite except the outer pairs flanking the entrance and, opposite, the pair flanking the opening towards the niche with the imperial sarcophagus. These shafts are of red granite, indicating an axial quality in the round structure. Moreover, at the opening towards the niche the inner pair of shafts is also distinct from the rest as they are of dark grey granite. Of the two sets of composite capitals used in the building, the grandest is placed in the inner ring, the simpler one in the outer, indicating a hierarchy in the interior, with the inner domed circle being more important than the surrounding ambulatory.
In the following century – in the 430s – the Lateran baptistery was built. It is an octagonal structure with eight porphyry columns carrying two pairs of Ionic, one pair of Corinthian and one pair of composite capitals, all supporting a classical entablature that has been cropped a little, cut into eight pieces and adjusted to fit its new function. Here, as John Onians has shown, the diversity of the capitals seems to reflect the liturgy of baptism, a kind of architectural choreography of the person being baptized, followed by the inscription on the entablature. The variation in capitals matches the religious transformation taking place from the entrance flanked by Ionic capitals to the culmination of the ceremony represented by the pair of Composite columns, which – as also convincingly shown by John Onians – suggests triumph, here of course: the Christian triumph over death through baptism.
At San Lorenzo fuori le mura, in the so-called Pelagian basilica of the late sixth century, the nave colonnade is of Corinthian fluted columns except the last pair flanking the triumphal arch. These columns carry figural capitals with Roman trophy reliefs, indicating Christian triumph through their position at the triumphal arch of the building.

For those among the audience unacquainted with this church, it should be mentioned that later, in the early thirteenth century, the apse of the old church was pulled down and a new nave added, resulting in the old church becoming the presbytery of the new basilica, and the orientation of the church being reversed. In fact, the old sixth-century Pelagian Basilica might be seen as a kind of spolium in the structure of the new church.

So, in this picture we are looking towards the original position of the apse still framed by the mosaics of the triumphal arch. In the old basilica the columns of the nave carry an entablature, not a conventional one constituted by its classical, canonical parts, but instead one pieced together by ornamental blocks originally made for other positions – for instance, doorposts. Above, in the gallery zone, there is also a variation in the shafts and capitals, and here, in contrast to the colonnade below, the columns carry arches.

3. San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. The Pelagian Basilica (579-590) looking towards the nave added by Pope Honorius III (1216-1227). Photo: Pernille Klemp
My last example is Sant’Agnese fuori le mura. The church has been modernized in succeeding centuries, but the columns and capitals remain original. In the first part of the nave arcade, varied plain grey marble shafts are used with Corinthian capitals. In the part of the nave closest to the apse, however, first we have a pair of white fluted marble shafts and then two pairs of columns of rare, splendid red polished marble carrying composite full leaf capitals – again, as we saw in the Lateran Baptistery and in San Lorenzo with its trophy capitals, a suitable choice for the capitals flanking the triumphal arch.

In this church you might note the following: First that the materials were often paired symmetrically along the central axis of the church, and second, that a hierarchy of materials was used to structure the interior of the basilica and to reflect the notion that salvation increased with the movement from outside into the church and towards the altar. Moreover, it is likely that the area closest to the altar framed by the red marble columns and delimited from the rest of the nave by the white fluted columns was reserved for the clergy, exemplifying how the materials in a church like this might be used to indicate liturgical functions.
These examples of buildings give an idea of the ways in which old building elements were reused, how variations in colour, material and ornament were exploited in the interiors of the churches, and how the classical system of the orders with identical columns and capitals carrying a continuous, canonically structured entablature was deconstructed, either by piecing together a trabeation of irregular blocks of diverse origin or simply by combining the columns with arcades, leaving out the trabeation altogether. In this way, the traditional relation between base, shaft, capital, and horizontal entablature was disintegrated, isolating the individual parts from their previous monotonous interdependence within the system of the orders and creating a new unpredictable plurality instead.

When I began studying in Rome many years ago, I gradually realized that most of the questions raised by the way in which historical building elements were handled in these beautifully heterogeneous churches were not answered in the art historical literature, and, I dare say, often not even posed; as a consequence, carrying out research into the field seemed even more urgent and relevant.

My dissertation is the conclusion of this research. Strangely, it is the first monograph in English on the subject. One intention with the book has therefore been to synthesize the major research published so far and scattered in a vast number of articles, especially by German and Italian, but also English, American and French art historians and archaeologists – hence the dense mass of nearly 700 footnotes and 26 pages of bibliography in my book. In this way, I have attempted to make a basic and, I hope, useful survey for students and researchers working on spolia.

However, I have of course tried to add something to this synthesis or collection of previously published knowledge about spolia. In this regard, a striking condition of the traditional art historical discipline became a determining factor in my work. It turned out that in architectural history dealing with medieval buildings an analytical approach was and is depressingly rare in interpretations of the meaning of architecture. The common architectural history of the Middle Ages almost exclusively deals with description, style and influence, chronology and building history, and iconography in the sense of an identification of building types and functions. The problem is, indeed, much more acute in the art historical treatment of architecture than in the art history of pictures and sculptures. The reasons for this, which are probably to be found, for instance, in the historiographical traditions and the training of architectural historians dealing with older historical periods, shall not detain us here, however interesting the phenomenon is in itself. Anybody acquainted with the architectural history of
pre-modern periods will probably agree with my description – not least my opponents, who have, contrary to this common trend, presented quite another interpretative approach to architecture and sculpture, respectively. Indeed, one exception in architectural history that proved quite fundamental to my work (and I am happy to be able to say this today) was a book written by my opponent Professor John Onians, namely, *Bearers of Meaning* from 1988, which analyzes the meaning of columns and capitals in Western architecture from Antiquity to the Renaissance. When, many years ago, I read this book, I realized that an analytical, interpretive iconographical approach was possible, turning architectural history into a really intriguing eye opener.

It is important to observe that this is not said to deny the usefulness of the conventional histories of medieval architecture, only to state that the positivistic descriptive approaches do not suffice. They do not bring about explanations of why spolia were used in such a varied and heterogeneous way. Spolia were used at a time when the production of new building material ceased and at a time of socio-economic crisis, but lack of means and technical abilities is not enough to account for the new aesthetics of the late Roman Empire. A great many art historical discussions of spolia are based on an unstated assumption that the spolia were used because there were no other possibilities; and that people of the day would have preferred identical material had it been available. For the last 150 years of art history, this attitude, which is basically a classicist-centristic one, has only too rarely been contested. According to Jacob Burckhardt in the 1850s, the use of ancient building elements saved the medieval builders from thinking themselves; in the wording of the great specialist on spolia Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, writing his first articles on the subject in the late 1930s, the masons were forced to use the varied material and had no other choice but to be content with it; in the 1950s Bernard Berenson claimed that the use of spolia was "a confession of inferiority to the past"; and in present times the heterogeneous disposition of spolia in the churches is still regularly characterized condescendingly as "barbaric", "awkward" or "chaotic", as professing a “complete lack of understanding of the classical canon” and “a thorough lack of sensitivity for proportions”, and with “no pretensions of harmony”. Although these scholars would surely insist that their attitude to the early Middle Ages is sympathetic, the negatively slanted wording slipping unawares into their description exposes the extent to which the classical ideal continues to determine our perception also of medieval architecture.

A practical reason for the perseverance of this attitude has also been the scanty visual material available to scholars. Many buildings have hardly been registered photographically, and if they have, it has been as black-and-white images of the interiors with no details visible, obviously a problem if you acknowledge that variation in ornament and colour is an important asset of spolia. With the help of photographer Pernille Klemp, we took the necessary pictures in the most important churches, so
that the dissertation could be suitably illustrated, bringing forth the fascinating unevenness of the material as regards form, style and colour.

As a consequence of this state of affairs in much writing on spolia, my point of departure became an urge to accept the aesthetics of reuse on its own conditions, attempting not to judge it on grounds belonging rather to the Renaissance, Neo-classicism or Classical Modernism, which imply an aesthetic ideal of homogeneous seriality.

According to the main thesis of the dissertation the variation and material heterogeneity brought about by the use of spolia resulted in an intended and sought-after aesthetic – an architectural language rich in meaning.

And how exactly, you may ask, is this concept of meaning in architecture to be understood?

For instance, one possible layer of meaning might consist of a quality of triumph in relation to the pagan past, the idea that the Christians literally built their churches on or with parts of pagan buildings. In addition to these associations with triumph, another, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, layer of meaning could be a wish in Christian Rome, personified by the pope, to continue the glorious past of the Roman Empire, to assimilate its authority, so to speak.

Apart from this predominantly ideological content in the architecture of reuse, yet another way of understanding the churches built of spolia could be as a kind of memory structure, representing some fundamental conditions of Christianity in stone – such as the importance of movement, change and renewal, or as a figuration of the relation between old and new, as in the relation between the Old and the New Testament.

In the early Christian churches the tendency to deconstruct the rationality of the classical connection of column and horizontal entablature might similarly be seen as one aspect of many within a general strategy: parts from the past could be appropriated, but fitting the parts in new ways or new contexts was a crucial property of this project. The early Christian building with spolia is far from an imitation of the past; nobody would confuse a medieval church with a classical building. The transformation or conversion of the material and the building types to something new and different was in itself valuable and rich in metaphorical meaning and analogies to the transformation and conversion that people experienced as fundamental to being a Christian.

These suggestions indicate the way in which the architecture built of spolia might be informed by layers of meaning, some of which were not necessarily consciously considered by the builders.
The method I chose to adopt in endeavouring to interpret the meaning and ideologies inherent in the eclectic architecture of spolia was based on two main bodies of material: First, the buildings themselves, which despite later rebuilding are rich in evidence of how the spolia were used. And second, a broad spectrum of written sources on, for instance, theology, literature and poetry, rhetoric, and music.

To be explicit about how such sources might be illuminating in the analysis of architecture, we could, for instance, look at the writings of Augustine. Around the year 400 he wrote a kind of manifesto on how to relate to the classical, pagan cultural inheritance, arguing that a Christian ought to take over those parts of, for instance, literature, rhetoric or music that might be useful in a Christian connection. He supported his statement by referring to the Old Testament episode of how the people of Israel took spoils from the Egyptians when leaving their exile. Such a statement by Augustine might help to understand how the intellectually conscious Christians related to the pagan past, including its material treasures and its architecture. And in the writings of Paulinus of Nola, a contemporary of Augustine of around 400, who became bishop of the small town Nola situated near Naples, we read how Paulinus used his restoration of a church and the building of a second church (rich in spolia, by the way) as an image of theological truths. The combination of an old and a new building was explicitly interpreted by Paulinus as representing the relation between the Old and the New Testament, and the renovation of the old church was similarly understood as representing renovation as a Christian ideal.

Here, it is crucial to observe that such a metaphoric understanding of architecture, seeing the buildings as reflections of fundamental Christian conditions and truths, was paradigmatic at the time; it was a self-evident, inevitable way of perceiving architecture. To put it another way, all evidence seems to point to the fact that even if we tried to interpret the early Christian architecture as excessively as we possibly could, it would be hard to match the early Christians’ own ability to perceive a deeper meaning everywhere in the physical, material reality of their surroundings.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, gathering both architectural and written sources in order to let these fragments of the past constitute at least an approximate image of the times, I have endeavoured to characterize a mental condition, a situation in the history of ideas and mentalities which made the eclecticism of spolia desirable as an aesthetic choice. Of course, such an analysis can only begin to map some overall structures or patterns in history, and many specific and local conditions concerning each building could not possibly be included, however interesting they might be if the topic had been approached from a micro-historic point of view. Instead, the observation that recycled material was not used in an obvious, manifest way until the early fourth century has been fundamental, and, moreover,
that this manifest aesthetic of reuse ceased again in the high Middle Ages, limiting the history of spolia to a certain segment of the medieval period. Neither earlier in the Roman Empire or in any other ancient culture, nor later, in the centuries that succeeded the early Middle Ages, did a similar appropriation of old material in an evident, obvious way take place. Or perhaps, at least not until today, with the remarkable tendency of the last decades of architectural development to integrate old buildings in new ones, to work eclectically with architectural quotations of the past, or simply to reuse obsolete architecture for new functions.

All this said, I would never claim that a complete innovation in architectural thinking started on a specific date in history; evidently, the earlier Roman Empire was already extremely eclectic in its approach not only to architecture, but to all other aspects of culture. It is well known how the Romans took over the Greek gods, how they mass-produced marble copies of Greek sculpture, and how they appropriated the basic elements of Greek architecture. Nevertheless, the transformation of the original culture into something new and distinctly Roman can not be denied. And just as the strategy of appropriation was highly developed already centuries before building with spolia began, it would be naïve to claim that variation in architecture was an invention of the Christians. There are, undeniably, strong roots back in time preparing for the culture of early Christianity.

Still, the clear delimitation historically of the use of spolia, which can be described as both a prominent feature of architectural style and a striking approach to building, legitimises the fact that these early Christian and medieval centuries are isolated and dealt with as a separate period. It legitimises the claim of an overall, governing paradigm differing from the preceding earlier centuries of the Roman Empire and also distinct from what was to follow in the high Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

I have thus sought to write a book that at one and the same time summarizes factual knowledge about the most important churches built of spolia in Rome and analyzes and interprets the material evidence by seeing it in a broader cultural context. The presentation of the use of architectural fragments along with the collection of textual fragments aims at facilitating and substantiating the comparison of the buildings with the aesthetics and ideologies expressed at the time.

Though of course infinitely more can be said on spolia, this hopefully also makes the book of general use methodologically. To my view, its approach, which may be characterized as an analytical iconography of architecture implying a history of ideas and attitudes, contains considerable potential within the field of architectural history, also if applied to other architectural phenomena than spolia, to other geographical areas or to different periods.
And, finally, for those to whom the concept of spolia previously appeared a bit obscure, I hope that the material of the buildings constructed of spolia will speak for itself in all its tremendous creativity, in all its exciting eclecticism, so astonishingly familiar to a 21st century viewer.