Beyond Reworked Portraits: Other Forms of Re-use and Re-carving in Roman Sculpture

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The pervasiveness of re-carving in the Roman world ensured its place as one of the essential skills in the stone carver's repertoire.[1] To date, studies on re-carving have tended to focus on the reworking of portraits into new likenesses, particularly imperial male portraits as a result of what has become known by the modern name of *damnatio memoriae*.[2] Although portrait heads provide some of the most compelling evidence for re-carving, the Romans re-used sculpted material for a variety of purposes and across categories of sculpted material. The corpus investigated, drawn from across the empire during the first five centuries AD, shows the extent of such practices. This paper examined a selection of re-carved sculpted stone (portraits, statues, sarcophagi, reliefs, sculpted architectural blocks) that were transformed into new objects through the practice of re-carving. The head of a woman of unknown provenance, now in Princeton University Art Museum,[3] for example, illustrates the practice, as well as the skill and good judgement required on the part of the carver in deciding how best to adapt and carve the block on hand. The portrait dates to the early 1st century AD and was most likely re-carved from a helmeted deity. The eyes, nose and chin of the original portrait are still identifiable on the back of the neck of the new portrait, while the face and hair of the new portrait were carved from the helmet. Moreover, the top of the new head has a slight flatness due to the small volume of material available from the earlier head. The new portrait seems to have been intended as an insert into a separately carved statue body. The carver skilfully used the earlier face as the tenon to match a mortise in the new statue body. This had the added benefit of hiding the indications that the piece had been re-carved from an earlier portrait.

In addition to highlighting the forms and varieties of sculptural re-carving, this kind of re-carving can add much to our knowledge of the sources of stone for re-carving projects. Stone was obtainable from a variety of sources: direct from the quarry, stone from cancelled commissions and demolition projects, architectural elements damaged during transit, or unfinished pieces, which developed faults upon further carving and were therefore unusable for their original purpose. A sculptor's workshop at Aphrodisias, which was located in an open space behind the Bouleuterion, appears to have operated from the late 3rd to the 5th centuries AD and would have stored sculpted stone available for re-use.[4] It is clear that clients employed stone-carvers for re-carving jobs, such as updating out-of-date hairstyles to the latest fashion.[5] How regularly ancient stone carvers relied on such material for projects, the extent of such stocks or the degree to which they were consistently maintained is difficult to determine; however, examples of re-carving presented here show the clear exploitation of such sources. Indeed, there is no reason to suggest that this recyclable material would have been in limited supply.

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Regular demolition associated with the continued development of urban landscapes and natural disasters created quantities of material for re-use. Throughout the imperial period it is likely that these stocks of unfinished, discarded or second-hand material would have been used to satisfy small-scale demand or individual commissions.

Overall, this paper presented new information about the supply and organisation of sculptural production through re-carving and recycling of earlier sculpted stone objects. It is clear that materials were re-used for a variety of purposes quite different from their original function. Given the high cost of importing and working stone, it is not surprising that economy remained a continued concern of both sculptors and their clients, increasingly so into Late Antiquity. It seems probable that stonemasons' yards contained older material from a variety of contexts awaiting re-use, with stone-carvers retaining or buying damaged material and older items to hold in stock ready for re-carving. Re-carved stone served the needs of individual clients while offering a means of financial saving that made carved stone available for many.

Notes

[1] For an overview of the practice, see Varner 2015.

[2] For example, see Bergmann – Zanker 1981; Jucker 1981; Varner 2004.

[3] Princeton Art Museum, inv. no. 1989.55. See Padgett 2001, 11–14 no. 3.

[4] Rockwell 1991, 130–134.

[5] Herrmann 1991.

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