

Maclean

Reprinted from

THE ANTIQUARIES JOURNAL

Being the Journal of the Society of Antiquaries of London

JULY, 1922 (Vol. II, No. 3)



Bibliothèque Maison de l'Orient



150697

Notes on the Panels from a Carolingian Ivory Diptych in the Ravenna and South Kensington Museums, and on two Fourteenth-century Ivory Groups

By ERIC MACLAGAN, C.B.E., F.S.A.

[Read 16th March 1922]

Panels from a Carolingian Ivory Diptych

THE three plaques of ivory here illustrated are already well known to students of such work, but there has been some uncertainty as to the form in which they were originally joined together. One of them, representing the Eagle of the Evangelist St. John, is in the Victoria and Albert Museum,¹ for which it was acquired in 1867 from the Webb Collection; the other two, with the Angel of St. Matthew and a half-length figure of Christ, are now in the Museo Nazionale at Ravenna.

The panels were originally of the same size; that in London measures $4\frac{5}{8}$ in. by 5 in. (12 by 13 centimetres), but the outer edge of each of the Ravenna panels has been slightly mutilated. On each the figure represented is enclosed in a circular moulding, richly carved, with a bead and reel ornament; this is again enclosed in a square border of conventionalized acanthus, and the corners are filled with boldly-cut foliage. The London panel is painted in vivid dark red and green, as is also the panel with the symbol of St. Matthew at Ravenna; the panel with the figure of Christ has no traces of painting, except that the letters IC XC have been inscribed, apparently in gold, on each side of the head. It will be admitted that the artist was much more successful with his magnificent eagle than with his human figures; which in that imitative age may only imply that he had a finer model—perhaps some Roman imperial device—to copy (figs. 1 to 3).

Some time ago my colleague Mr. King, in examining the London panel, was struck by the faint remains of writing at the back of it. Unhappily there is not much to be made of this, nor

¹ No. 269-1867.

does it appear that the writing, if it were completely legible, would throw any great light on the ivory carvings, for it is much later in date. But in discussing it we noticed that the panel was unquestionably cut off from the top of a larger panel, apparently the leaf of a diptych, for the flat raised border still remains on the top and the two sides, and one side is pierced with numerous



FIG. 1. The Eagle of St. John.

slanting holes, presumably for a thong fastening to attach the two leaves together.

This had already been noted by Maskell in 1872.¹ Maskell was not aware of the connexion of the panel with those at Ravenna, but all three panels were discussed by Westwood in 1876,² though they are described as having formed part of a reliquary. The Ravenna panels have since been well illustrated in *Arte Italiana* for 1898,³ where Corrado Ricci suggests that they

¹ *Description of the Ivories Ancient and Mediaeval in the South Kensington Museum*, p. 109.

² *Descriptive Catalogue of the Fictile Ivories in the South Kensington Museum*, pp. 117-18, and 360.

³ VII (1898), pl. 28, p. 51.

formed a triptych with the London panel.¹ Finally, all three panels are illustrated and discussed in considerable detail by Dr. Adolf Goldschmidt in his *Elfenbeinsculpturen aus der Zeit der karolingischen und sächsischen Kaiser*.¹ Dr. Goldschmidt writes: 'If only the symbols of St. Matthew and St. John were preserved, we might have supposed that we were confronted by the remains



FIG. 2. The Angel of St. Matthew.

of the cover for a Gospel-book, consisting of four parts . . . but as the figure of Christ provides a fifth panel, the reliefs may have formed the decoration of an upright Cross, with Christ in the middle and the Evangelists at the ends of the arms . . .'

The mouldings and piercings at the back of the South Kensington panel make it clear, however, that this suggestion cannot be accepted. In reply to an inquiry, Signor Santi Muratori, honorary inspector of monuments and excavations, has very courteously furnished me with photographs and particulars of the Ravenna panels, which make it possible to reconstruct the original diptych with comparative certainty.

¹ I (1914), pl. 16, pp. 20-21.

It was of considerable size, each leaf measuring 5 in. in width and about 14 in. in height. Each leaf was made up of three nearly square panels with the symbols of two of the Evangelists at the top and bottom and a figure, in one case of Christ and in the other probably of the Virgin Mary or perhaps St. John the Baptist, in the middle. The mouldings at the back show that on



FIG. 3. Christ Blessing.

the right leaf the symbol of St. John was at the top, with the figure of Christ below it, and presumably the symbol of St. Luke (or St. Mark) at the bottom. On the left leaf the symbol of St. Matthew was certainly at the top, with—again presumably—the symbol of St. Mark (or St. Luke) at the bottom. The position of the three panels which have been preserved is quite certain from the mouldings and piercings at the backs.

There are no traces of writing on the back of the St. Matthew panel—the left leaf—but the back of the panel with the figure of Christ shows similar traces to the London panel. These consist of a few words in a small liturgical hand of the 13th–14th century, and three or more memoranda or receipts in a much larger and perhaps rather later cursive hand of the fourteenth century.

Mr. J. P. Gilson, of the British Museum, who has been kind enough to furnish me with the above particulars, has deciphered a few words from a photograph of the back of the London panel. The inscription in liturgical writing, two or three lines of which run across the bottom of the London panel, seems to begin *Confer opem misero . . .*, and the fifth word may be *acidie*, in which case it is presumably a prayer against sloth; but I have not been able to trace any known liturgical formula beginning in this way. The notes in the later cursive hand are not easy to disentangle. After a few disjointed words or letters one seems to contain the words *die dominica . . . hanc(?) . . . ego Ricardus(?) Laurentius(?) resepi de . . .* Below it is another note with *Ego Ricardus . . . anno d(?) . . . die veneris martii recepi . . .*

Below this comes the liturgical inscription which just continues on the top of the Ravenna panel (the back of the Christ), and below this again is a third cursive note which seems to have the words *Laurentius . . . anglo . . . clas . . . die d . . .* There are also traces of similar writing running sideways, and two drawings, one a rough sketch of a face and the other something like a decorated initial T.

There seems no reason to suppose that the writing is not Italian; it is just possible that the *clas . . .* in the last note, if it has been read correctly, may be part of the place-name Classis. The Ravenna panels were actually at Classe up to the end of the last century, and the diptych may have been there in the fourteenth century as a complete whole. It is clear in any case that it was complete somewhere, probably in Italy, at that time, and it seems likely that the painting on the two upper panels may be of the same or a somewhat earlier date, rather than contemporary with the carving.

It might have been difficult to date the London panel, with its grandly-designed eagle, by itself. In the Webb Collection it seems to have been called Byzantine of the eighth century, and Maskell catalogued it as Byzantine twelfth century. In the Westwood Catalogue the three panels are given as North Italian(?), ninth century. Dr. Goldschmidt, who had already discussed these ivories in 1905 in the Prussian *Jahrbuch*,¹ classes them in his *Elfenbeinsculpturen* as belonging to the Ada group of Carolingian ivories, and dates them in the ninth century.²

¹ *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, xxvi, p. 60.

² The 'Ada' group, one of several into which Carolingian ivories have been divided, is so called from its relations with a manuscript of the Gospels at Trèves, illuminated for the Abbess Ada about the year 800; various centres have been suggested for this group, which probably originated in the Middle Rhine or Moselle

The same ninth-century date is apparently accepted by Molinier¹ but he regarded the three panels as neither Italian nor Carolingian, but rather as Byzantine in the stricter sense of the word; associating them, as also does Dr. Goldschmidt, with the ivory relief of a standing Christ on the cover of a manuscript² in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris. It may be noted that the reference to Molinier is in each case accidentally omitted in Dr. Goldschmidt's book.

If, then, we take the date of ninth century as generally accepted, the balance of authority as to the place of execution is strongly in favour of a Western rather than an Eastern origin; and probably the view taken by Molinier would not now be upheld. Dr. Goldschmidt's comparison of the figures with those on the Lorsch book-covers (in the Victoria and Albert Museum³ and in the Vatican), and of the acanthus borders with those on the fine diptych with scenes from the life of Christ in the Rylands Library at Manchester, and on the single leaf of a diptych with two Virtues in the Carrand Collection at the Bargello, will be generally recognized as plausible. The Manchester and Florence diptychs have also a very similar bead and reel ornament, which, though common on late classical diptychs, is rarely to be met with on Carolingian ivories. The Bargello diptych-leaf came from Ambronay, near Geneva, the two book-covers from Lorsch, in Germany (Hesse-Darmstadt, not far from Worms); the Manchester diptych cannot be traced back beyond the collection of Samuel Rogers. I doubt if it would be profitable, in the present state of our knowledge, to speculate much further as to the district in which what we may recall the Ravenna diptych (the fragments of which we have been considering) was carved; except so far as to say that it was most probably within the eastern half of the empire of Charlemagne at its widest extent, and that it might have been in Italy.

The form of the diptych as reconstituted is, so far as I know, unique. A three-fold division of each leaf into separate square or oblong panels is not uncommon in Early Christian and Carolingian ivory diptychs; and at least one Consular Diptych—that of Philoxenus, A.D. 525, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris—has an arrangement of three linked circular medallions, two of district. In his first article Dr. Goldschmidt regarded the London and Ravenna reliefs as forming part of a later (10th century) group following on the Ada group, and classed with them the diptych with Christ and St. Peter at Darmstadt, and (at a further remove) the diptych leaf with the Washing of the Apostles' Feet and the Crucifixion at Bonn. In the later classification of the *Elfenbeinsculpturen*, however, the reliefs are put back with the Ada group itself in the ninth century.

¹ *Les Ivoires*, p. 86.

² MS. Lat. 9387.

³ No. 138-1866.

which enclose half-length figures. But I know no other example of circular medallions enclosed within rectangular compartments. The size is unusual at such a date; each leaf is about the size of the leaf of the Consular Diptych of Anastasius in the Victoria and Albert Museum,¹ but the only later diptych leaf as large or larger that I am acquainted with is the relief of the Nativity and Baptism of Christ at the British Museum,² dated by our Fellow Mr. Dalton about A. D. 1000. This measures a fraction of an inch more in height, and was probably when complete about the same width; but there are others which do not fall very far short of it.

A Re-carved Ivory Group of the Fourteenth Century

About two years ago Major Astor very kindly allowed me to photograph two pieces out of his fine collection of medieval ivories at Hever Castle in Kent. One of these was a group which puzzled me as to its subject and nationality—but not, so far as I then saw, as to its date, which seemed to be clearly fourteenth century (fig. 4).

I sent a print of my photograph to my friend M. Koechlin in Paris, on whose supreme competence in such matters there is no need to insist here. He, too, was puzzled by the subject, and he suggested that the group might possibly be English—an idea which had also occurred to me independently—as it does not quite fit in with any known style of French work.

Some months later, when I happened to be looking at the photograph, the subject occurred to me, as it has probably already occurred to others. The group (which is between 5 in. and 6 in. in height) I think undoubtedly represents St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin finding Christ in the temple; the little figures round the base are the doctors, made small to show their relative unimportance; and there was presumably a corresponding group showing Christ on some sort of a raised seat surrounded by more of the diminutive doctors.

I must admit that I have never seen a similar representation, and in any case detached groups of this period, other than statuettes of the Virgin and Child, are exceedingly rare. The present group to some extent recalls the large chessmen of the same period, generally considered to be of German origin, in which subsidiary figures on a small scale are gathered round the base of king, bishop, or knight.³ But a much closer parallel is

¹ No. 368-1871.

² No. 53 in Mr. Dalton's *Catalogue*.

³ There are examples in the British Museum (a king and a bishop), in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and elsewhere.

afforded by the sadly damaged ivory group of the Adoration of the Magi in the British Museum.¹ In this the Virgin is seated with the Child on her knee, and the three kings on a much smaller scale are gathered round her feet. The similarity extends only to the composition, for the British Museum Adoration of the Magi is of considerably earlier date.—Mr. Dalton places it as early as the middle of the thirteenth century. But it is generally accepted as of English origin, and this would to some



FIG. 4. Ivory Group, belonging to Major Astor.



FIG. 5. Ivory Group, from photograph belonging to M. Koechlin.

extent strengthen the claim of the present group to be regarded as English.

When I wrote to M. Koechlin suggesting this interpretation of the subject—the Virgin and St. Joseph with the doctors in the temple—he agreed with it, but at the same time he sent me a photograph which he had come across in looking through his wonderful collection, and this shed new light of a rather disturbing kind on the ivory. This photograph (fig. 5) shows an almost identical group, 15 cm. or a shade under 6 in. high, which was some twenty years ago in the possession of a Paris dealer; almost identical, but seriously damaged. The first idea that occurs to one is that the

¹ No. 248.

group at Hever must be a copy of the damaged group; but a careful comparison of the photographs makes it certain that the two groups are really only one, and that it has been to a large extent—to a very large extent, I am afraid—re-carved since the first photograph was taken. The re-carving has been most skilfully done, and I must confess that I had no doubts of the authenticity of the work when I saw it. The material, indeed, is old, still, the group is one example the more of the uncanny skill with which imitators can on occasion work, and of the ease with which the surface of ivory can be treated to produce any desired effect. M. Koechlin, of course, had not seen the original at all, but only my photograph.

So far as I know I have never seen an ivory re-carved in this way before; but perhaps I have without knowing it. It is a treatment that is unfortunately rather often applied to later Gothic wood sculpture, especially in Germany; before the War there seems to have been at least one workshop where second-rate or damaged wood figures of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were bought up, and the faces and hands, and perhaps details of the drapery as well, very skilfully and effectively re-carved, thus immensely increasing their sale value. I have seen a fair number of figures treated in this way, and they can of course be very deceptive, as the material and part at least of the surface is genuine enough.

An Ivory Group of the Maries at the Sepulchre

Leaving this unpleasant subject—a painful one for all collectors, and a particularly painful one, if I may say so, for museum officials—I should like to add a few words about a singularly beautiful and indisputably authentic ivory belonging to Mr. Henry Harris, of 37 Kensington Square, which he has been kind enough to let me bring here to-night; it has been for the past year exhibited on loan at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The group, or rather relief (the background has been cut away) came into his possession by bequest, and nothing is known of its previous history (fig. 6).

Beyond calling attention—and even this is hardly necessary—to its quite exceptional beauty, I do not think there is much that need be said about it. It represents the two Maries with their pots of ointment at the sepulchre of Christ. It belongs to a rare group of medieval French ivories (there can be little hesitation in accepting them as French, and of the fourteenth century) where the figures are relatively of considerable size; this example is

$4\frac{1}{4}$ in. high and about $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide at the base, or nearly 11 cm. by 9 cm. There is every reason to believe that they formed part of the large ivory retables of which no complete example has survived, and that they were intended to be mounted in an architectural setting on a background, perhaps of ivory, perhaps of ebony or



FIG. 6. Ivory relief, belonging to Mr. Henry Harris ($\frac{1}{3}$).

black marble, which explains the cutting away of the ivory round the figures. Nearly all the separate groups or figures of this class which are known connect themselves with the Passion, which was of course a usual subject for retables in any material. Such altar-pieces may have been the precursors of the well-known composite bone retables made at the end of the fourteenth and in the early fifteenth century in the north of Italy by the Embriachi

family, but they must have been on a very different artistic level from these rather tedious productions.¹

The scanty remains of the French ivory retables of the fourteenth century have been dealt with by M. Koechlin in an essay in the *Monuments Piot*,² and more briefly in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* for 1906.³ The figures in them, with their peculiar sharp features, are all more or less of the same type, and they may well have come from the same workshop or tradition. Among them are two *Annunciations*, at Langres and in the Bargello, and a number of Passion scenes, including part of a *Betrayal* (St. Peter drawing his sword), at the British Museum. One particularly fine series, scattered among various private collections in Paris, but apparently homogeneous, includes a *Betrayal*, a *Mocking of Christ*, a *Christ at the Column*, an *Executioner*, and a *Deposition from the Cross*. The lovely group of the *Two Marias* seems fairly closely related to this series and to the Bargello *Annunciation*, and like them it must count among the finer examples of French ivory carving in the fourteenth century, standing out conspicuously above a mass of work which too often represents little better than the organized production of a flourishing trade-industry.

DISCUSSION

Mr. DALTON said the idea that the panels formed part of the covering of a cross had always seemed improbable, though crosses of metal had similar panels on the arms. Such treatment of large ivory plaques would be inappropriate, and even the original diptych must have been of unusual size. Like that of St. Michael in the British Museum, the diptych necessitated a tusk of extraordinary dimensions. Several ivories were known with inscriptions on the back, but the latter were generally disappointing.

The PRESIDENT thought it opportune to remind Fellows of the existence of the Arundel casts of ivories, a collection due to the energy of Alexander Nesbitt and others who went about making copies of the leading examples. Inscriptions written on the back of ivory panels were generally liturgical, and the subject had been taken up with ardour by his friend Mr. Meade Falkner, late of Elswick. The Society was indebted to Mr. Maclagan not only for an account of the diptych but also for a sight of the charming group of the Marias at the Tomb.

¹ The best known, as well as the largest, are the altar-pieces in the Certosa at Pavia (datable about 1400) and in the Louvre; a third was in the collection of Mr. Pierpont Morgan. The work of the Embriachi family has been very fully discussed by J. von Schlosser in the *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, xx (1899), pp. 220 ff.

² XIII (1906-7), pp. 67 ff.

³ XXXV, pp. 61-62.