The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art

Robin M. Jensen, Mark D. Ellison

Christian Ivories

Publication details
Niamh Bhalla
Published online on: 20 May 2018

How to cite :- Niamh Bhalla. 20 May 2018, Christian Ivories from: The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
13

CHRISTIAN IVORIES

Containment, manipulation, and the creation of meaning

Niamh Bhalla

Ivory, or elephant dentine, was frequently used for the production of Early Christian objects on account of the same aesthetic and practical characteristics that made it desirable for pre-Christian art. Its density, durability, pearly off-white color, attractive grain and the high shine that it took when polished, due to its high collagen content, made ivory a popular material for exploitation since prehistoric times. Although Early Christian ivories were also likely painted, to a greater or lesser extent, in bright primary colors and often gilded, it seems that the appearance of the material was valued for its own sake and rarely covered up entirely. The relatively large dimensions of elephant tusks also invited their exploitation since bigger objects could be made from them than from the tusks of the narwhal and walrus or from bone. The physiognomy of the elephant’s tusk determined the appearance of the objects made from it in terms of scale, shape, technique, style and finish and it seems that the aesthetic that resulted from its inherent physical characteristics, along with its relative rarity, determined in large part the cultural desirability of ivory in Late Antiquity and the uses to which it was put.

The value and use of ivory

In 301 CE the emperor Diocletian issued his famous Edict of Prices with the intended aim of curbing rising inflation in an already volatile economy. The price of ivory, as recorded, was significantly lower than any previously documented price at 150 denarii per Roman pound. Although the ostensible aim of the edict means that the prices found there cannot be considered precise indications of market value, the figures give us a comparative cost for the material: ivory was notably less expensive than precious metals and silk but cost considerably more than mundane materials such as bone and wood. Although ivory had been used since ancient times for its practical and decorative potential, its use and relative value fluctuated over time, mostly in relation to availability. Ivory, being an organic material—indeed the most dense and durable natural material available to ancient and medieval craftsmen—was subject to the vicissitudes of supply. It was above all a natural commodity that had to be sourced in either Africa or Asia and transported by means of trade before it could be wrought into functional, devotional and ornamental pieces. These broad categories of usage continued largely unchanged over time but the particularities of usage varied according to supply in different periods.
The form and function of ivories during the Early Christian period seem to have been informed by a relatively abundant supply of material, predominantly from North and East Africa, so that we find ivories being used for utilitarian objects such as pill boxes. Jerome, writing in 403 CE to the mother of a new daughter, recommends that she have a set of ivory or boxwood letters made for the child to learn the alphabet. Despite this seeming abundance, the simultaneous preciousness of the material is revealed in its prevalent use for diplomatic gifts, holy icons, and containers for sacred objects. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, for example, sent eight stools and fourteen chairs made from ivory to the emperor Theodosius II (r. 408–450 CE) in Constantinople suggesting both the profusion and prestige of the material. Despite having no bullion value, one of its principal uses during the period lay in gift giving in this way. It was especially used in such a capacity in the fourth- to sixth-century phenomenon of issuing consular diptychs. The post of ordinary consul was the zenith of a life of public service. It was taken up at the beginning of each New Year and required a large outlay of capital for a week of games and festivities. The incentive was a permanent place in the Roman calendar because each year took its name from its ordinary consuls. At least some consuls commissioned a series of ivory diptychs to commemorate the occasion, which were distributed as gifts. Ivory seems to have been the perfect material with which to create a durable memorial for this post, mirroring the immortalizing of the consul’s name in history.

In many ways, the use of ivory in a Christian context, primarily for diptychs, furniture revetment, book covers and boxes did not differ from its secular uses. Both Christian and secular ivories were inherently three-dimensional objects made with the purpose, or at least the pretense, of containing something, but very often they have not been approached with this in mind because of the attractive iconographies that they host on their surfaces. In this way, modern museums have turned what were once largely functional pieces made to be touched and handled into almost two-dimensional works of art, which are themselves contained in a vitrine and paralyzed under artificial lighting, frustrating any understanding of their original physical interaction with their viewers. Despite this, it was in fact subject matter, along with their now-lost contents, which separated Christian from profane ivories, though we will see that in some cases such modern taxonomies may be later categories that have been anachronistically imposed upon the material: the boundaries between sacred and secular were not so precise in the period.

Ivories remain one of the most important categories of artistic production for studying the Early Christian period. Large numbers survive due to their seeming profusion, relative durability and the general resistance of the material itself to recycling through re-carving. Despite this, as with other categories of late antique art, much has presumably perished. Ivory carving itself markedly declined around 600 CE. The decline seems to have resulted from the shifting geo-political, and thus economic, landscape of the Mediterranean at this time: the Byzantine–Sassanian wars of the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries and the Islamic conquests shortly thereafter disrupted established trade routes—and thus the supply of ivory—to the East and West. A liberal supply of ivory to the West would not be established again until around 1300 CE.

Diptychs

Ivory diptychs comprise two panels joined by hinges that allow them to be opened and closed in the manner of a book. Their outer surfaces host carved decoration, while their interiors have two slightly recessed planes surrounded by a narrow raised frame. These smooth depressed panels may have received wax for writing on: alternatively, these diptychs may merely have feigned such a function and could have been set up as display pieces in the manner of an inverted birthday card. Although the forty or so surviving consular diptychs have received
Christian ivories

most attention, ivory diptychs were also commissioned in the West from the second half of the fourth century by other notables such as magistrates, patricians, senators, imperial personages and priests. Epistolary evidence makes clear that such diptychs were dispatched as diplomatic gifts accompanying silver items such as bowls, which by contrast held realizable profit for the receiver. The letters of the famous pagan orator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (c. 345–402 ce) from Rome discuss those that were sent out to celebrate the quaestorial and praetorian games of his son Memmius Symmachus in 393 and 401 ce, respectively. The ivory formed an enduring testimony to the gift and thus the relationship between the giver and the receiver, generating social rather than monetary capital for both parties.

A number of impressive ivory diptychs hosting Christian iconography survive from the period, along with single leaves that once belonged to diptychs. How these related to the practices surrounding other ivory diptychs remains unclear. Ivory diptychs have traditionally been categorized into consular, official and private types without any evidence of differentiated use. Christian diptychs are presumed to fall into the third type, along with those hosting mythological subject matter, instead of imagery pertaining to a held office, and are thought to have been made for religious purposes rather than distribution. These boundaries have since been troubled by the discovery that some diptychs with mythological subject matter were in fact consular in nature. They were intended through their appearance and subject matter to display the erudition and social class of the consul, rather than the consul himself or his titles. Ivory diptychs hosting Christian subject matter remain obscure in scholarship because it is difficult to say what they were used for. Although it was once asserted that Christian diptychs were solely used as receptacles for wax to record the names of the living and the dead who were to be prayed for during the liturgy, no conclusive proof indicates that these ivories were used as such and not issued as diplomatic or commemorative gifts. The appearance of the ivory diptychs used for such socio-political purposes is never articulated in the literature of the period so that it is perfectly plausible that those with Christian iconographies were part of the same tradition, expressing some of the social and religious status of the giver through their style and subject matter. The study of one of these surviving panels and its Christian iconography should suffice to elucidate the point.

Despite its inclusion in introductory volumes on Early Christian art, the ivory panel showing the visit of the holy women to the tomb of Christ, which was made in Rome and is now in the Civico Museo d’Arte in Milan, has received curiously little discussion in its own right (Figure 13.1). The panel, measuring 30.7 × 13.4 cm, and dated to around 400 ce on the basis of its classicizing appearance, once formed the left-hand leaf of an ivory diptych, the other side of which is now lost. The subject matter of the ivory is one of the key biblical events on which the Christian faith was founded: the Resurrection. In the foreground, two holy women visit the tomb of Christ on the third day after his burial to find the door open and an angel seated outside. The angel has sometimes been identified as the risen Christ himself because of his halo, the attribute of a scroll in his left hand and the curious gestures of attempted touch by the two women. It may be deliberately ambiguous in merging the visit and a later appearance of Christ to the two Marys to thoroughly affirm the message of Christ’s resurrection. Christ’s resurrection is also affirmed by the inclusion of the Raising of Lazarus on the doors of the tomb, the miracle performed by Christ which prophetically foreshadowed his own death and resurrection. The tomb of Christ is represented as a two-story building surmounted by a domed drum. The two soldiers charged with guarding the tomb of Christ are unusually placed on the roof of the structure making gestures of fear and awe in the face of the event. Finally, in the upper corners of the panel the symbols of the evangelists Luke and Matthew emerge from the clouds.

Underscoring the story of the women visiting the tomb was the concept of witness: the account appears in all four gospels and the idea is that these women are the first to bear witness
to his resurrection after his death and entombment. The identities of these women shift in the various gospels so that it is difficult to name them with precision apart from Mary Magdalene who appears in all four. The number of women also differs in each account: there are often three in the iconography because there are three in Mark’s gospel (Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Mary Salome) and three in Luke, plus unnamed others. Only Mary Magdalene is included in John and there are two in Matthew. Based on the number of women, the astonished and dynamic appearance of the guards who seem unsteady and literally blown away by what has happened (note the dramatic upwards movement of the chlamys belonging to the guard on the left), it is quite likely that the representation was based on Matthew 28:1–6:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.”

NIV
The economy of scale within the image also seems to confirm this: the importance of the angel is expressed through his exaggerated size and perhaps the halo was an attempt to denote the brilliance of his appearance as akin to lightning. In gesturing beneath to the scene as it unfolds, Matthew’s symbol of the man in the top right corner of the ivory also seems to confirm the origins of the iconography.

Although the subject matter focuses on the historical event in this way, it also centers on the most sacred of contemporary pilgrimage sites. The tomb building has traditionally been interpreted as an intended representation of the Anastasis Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the structure built over the site of Christ’s tomb. In this it is comparable with other Early Christian ivories such as the Ascension ivory, the leaf of a diptych now in Munich also dated to around 400 CE, which shows the three Marys visiting a similar structure, conflated with a depiction of the Ascension of Christ on the Mount of Olives. These representations seem then to pose a connection to contemporary practices of pilgrimage on the part of these ivories.

Paulinus of Nola (354–431 CE) noted, “The foremost reason which draws people to Jerusalem is the longing to see and touch the places where Christ was present in the body.” The Resurrection, more than any other Christological belief, necessitated an emphasis on its actual physical occurrence and yet it was necessarily the most difficult event of all to source material traces for, given the whole body resurrection and ascension of Christ. All that remained was the empty space that needed to be witnessed nonetheless. The impetus to see, touch and experience the holy sites very often manifested in the arts connected to pilgrimage and this is palpably seen in the Milan panel. Based on contemporary pilgrimage accounts of visiting the site of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, clearly the pilgrim became caught up, not only in seeing and touching the places associated with Christ’s burial and resurrection, but in ritually re-enacting the events themselves. The ivory panel allowed viewers to become part of experiencing the historical event and the contemporary pilgrimage site, regardless of whether or not they had visited it. The panel diverges from the scriptural account in order to resonate with the experience of the pilgrim in the Holy Land: this is seen in the replacement of the rock cut tomb where Christ was actually buried with an architectural construction intended to represent the shrine erected over it by Constantine the Great (r. 306–337 CE). The resulting building on the ivory did not faithfully represent the building in Jerusalem but included its defining elements to allow for recognition.

The pictorial composition and gestures of the figures also allowed the viewer of the ivory to vicariously experience the holy site. Very often the frame of an ivory plays a role in separating the world of the image from the reality of the viewer but in the Milan panel it is used to the opposite effect. Here the frame of the composition is intentionally merged with the architectural structure so that the building projects into the space of the viewer, obliterating the framing device. The containment of the representation within its own parameters is further compromised through the manner in which the limbs of the protagonists overlap the frame and emerge into the temporal and spatial field of the viewer. The nature of the frame meant that the world of the viewer became merged with that of the historical event and the contemporary holy site. The women make a gesture of touching that is unnecessary to the biblical account. These women form the devotional model for the viewer who is encouraged to look, touch and believe in a similar manner. Everything in the image conspired so that viewers could take on the role of witness to this historical event and the contemporary pilgrimage site, simultaneously transporting them back to first-century and fifth-century Jerusalem.

The question remains then of who made and viewed this ivory. The general level of refinement and sumptuousness certainly reflects aristocratic patronage. This panel and the Munich
panel are also considerably Hellenized in their appearance, on account of the poses of the figures and the classicizing folds of their draperies. A classicizing style at this date has often been connected to a perceived “pagan revival” in the 390s in Rome, whereby there was an increase in works of art espousing an intentionally pagan subject matter and associated classicizing style in response to the increasing Christianization of Roman society. An ironic transfer of this classicizing, “pagan” style into Christian ivories was posited to have occurred around 400 ce. Such arguments depended, however, on these pagan ivories being earlier than surviving secular and Christian ivories which has since been invalidated, undoing any assumed link between paganism and classicism.

The so-called Consecratio diptych, now in the British Museum (Figure 13.2), which likely commemorated the death of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus in 402 ce, poses perhaps the greatest problem to making the case for elite families reviving classical art in the service of paganism. The notably unclassical tenor of this leaf, made for the Symmachi family who were connected to many of the surviving classicizing pagan pieces, is at odds with its subject matter of the apotheosis of Symmachus to meet his ancestors. The leaf lacks any convincing spatial representation: separate scenes showing Symmachus himself, his funeral pyre and elevation to the realm of his ancestors, are shown simultaneously and populated by simplified, stocky and rigid figures. Clearly, then, pieces for the same family were being commissionned according to different stylistic modes, so that the notion of a classical revival tied to a resurgence of defiant paganism in Rome at the end of the fourth century is untenable.

Figure 13.2 Carved ivory leaf from a diptych, Consecratio. © British Museum, London.
Christian ivories

A potential workshop connection also exists between the Milan panel and other pagan and secular ivory diptychs, on the basis of a shared lotus and palmette border, demonstrating that the same ateliers were making both Christian and pagan ivories. Overall, there seems to have been an attempt in these Christian panels to imbue Christian art with status through a classicizing style, keeping up with the best of pagan and secular offerings as the demographic of the church in Rome continued to shift towards an elite membership in the century after Constantine’s Edict of Tolerance (313 CE). In this way, no real reason exists why such ivories might not have been commissioned as gifts, impacting the status of both giver and receiver, commemorating pilgrimage and providing for receivers an experience of the Holy Land from the comfort of their own home.

Pyxides

By far the most common type of Early Christian ivory is the elliptical storage box decorated with Christian scenes, which has subsequently been termed a pyxis. Around seventy ivory pyxides survive that can be dated between the fifth and seventh centuries and about forty of these host Christian imagery. These boxes suggest, more than any other type of ivory, the relationship between the tusk of the elephant and their finished form, implying very clearly their process of manufacture in the absence of any written treatise. The natural structure of the elephant’s tusk suggested the shape of these boxes: transverse sections were taken from near the base where the pulp cavity is greatest in diameter, fixing the diameter of each box at around 11–12 cm. On account of the lesser limitations on height, pyxides vary from between 8 to 12 cm tall. Owing to a desire to exploit the tusk for a box of maximum dimensions, a second tusk was then used to provide longitudinal sections sufficient in width to be used as the base and lid, but not many boxes retain these original parts. The eborarius—or ivory worker—necessarily worked alongside other craftsmen then, such as the metalworker for the hinges and locks of these boxes, and many of the pyxides seem to have been executed on a lathe, so that it appears that ivory workers operated in some form of fixed workshop. This is supported by the discovery of a late antique workshop on the northeast slope of the Palatine hill in Rome, which worked ivory and bone.

The original purposes of these boxes remain tenuous. Some have been found in a context consistent with their use as a reliquary, such as a pyxis now in the Musée du Bardo in Tunis, which was found wrapped in canvas and integrated into a tomb in the crypt of a fifth-century basilica near the city of Yunca in southern Tunisia. No evidence suggests that they were all used in this manner and the fact that they are found hosting both Christian and pagan subject matter indicates that they were likely multifunctional boxes made via serial production with a range of uses in mind. On the basis of their subject matter, however, some seem to have been more specifically suited to containing the eucharistic bread and may have been intended for such a purpose. A sixth-century ivory pyxis (10.8 × 12.7 × 12.1 cm) now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Figure 13.3) presents the same subject matter as the Milan panel but its treatment differs and this variance demonstrates how iconography can at times help to elucidate use. This later and more symbolic treatment of the women at the tomb shows the possible purpose of the box as a container for the host but we cannot definitively rule out another role such as holding incense. Either way, the iconography points strongly to a liturgical use and its now-lost lock to the containment of a valuable sacred object.

The box unusually retains its original lid, although the current copper mountings are a later addition. The main subject is the visit of the holy women to the tomb. Most Early Christian pyxides host New Testament scenes, with only nine of the remaining forty displaying Old
Testament iconography. The context is clearly liturgical: two women arrive with swinging censers to an altar on a raised curved platform surmounted by three domed arches. The altar has a lamp hanging over it and a gospel book on it, while curtains hang in the other arched openings. The place where Christ’s dead body was buried and resurrected is replaced by the altar where it was increasingly believed that his actual body was consumed. The altar was also often considered a symbolic representation of the tomb of Christ in Christian literature, perhaps most famously in the *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*) written by the seventh-century Byzantine patriarch Germanos. No visual evidence relates this architectural structure to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem; it merely intimates the general structure of a ciborium in the Syria/Palestine area. Stylistically, the box has also been tied to this region. Again, Christ’s tomb is not represented realistically or historically but according to the purposes of the object at hand and the message it wished to convey. The fact that the ivory conflates Christ’s tomb with an altar betrays the eastern origins of the piece where it was commonly agreed at this date that the host was the actual body and blood of Christ. The substitution of the altar for the tomb also suggests the probable use of this pyxis as a container for the consecrated bread for storage or for distribution to the incapacitated in their homes.

Early study of these boxes was largely confined to separating them into two stylistic schools based in Egypt or the Syria/Palestine area and they were predominantly seen as being an eastern, rather than western, phenomenon. Such stylistic studies of provenance have since reached an impasse compounded by a lack of securely placed and dated comparable material and the inherent portability of these pieces: the find-spots of these boxes range from as far afield as Gaul, Carthage, the Caucasus, Egypt, Syria/Palestine and Constantinople. What remains is that these Early Christian ivory boxes were originally and ostensibly meant to
contain something. The relationship between their contents and iconographies is not now easily accessible, and may not have been prescriptive at the time, but it is worth thinking about the acts of handling that activated the relationship between the insides of these boxes and their decorated exteriors. A holistic approach is needed that goes beyond isolated stylistic or iconographical analysis.

Representations on ivory pyxides were not deployed as part of a coherent linear narrative around the box. Rather, they were constructed according to a meaningful program planned in connection with the manner in which the box was handled. Two scenes occupy both sides of the above pyxis to either side of the lock space (Figure 13.4). A simple cross is found beneath the original lock space and the viewer is encouraged to turn the box clockwise through the dynamic movement of the holy woman to the right of the lock to uncover the entire scene of the women at the tomb. The centralized motif of the altar seems to dominate this side of the box and prompts the viewer to arrest movement at this point with the altar in the middle so that, with the women at the tomb, it forms its own independent tableau on the box. If the viewer recommences turning the box in his or her hands three holy women with their hands elevated in prayer occupy the arcade that continues around the remainder of the box back to the lock space where the cross arrests movement once more. The original hinges encroached on the first of these praying figures so that their importance was undermined. This, in combination with the impressive tableau formed by the women at the altar and the amount of space that it occupies, underlines the first scene as the most important and the interpretative key for the entire box. Above all, this liturgical motif focuses on the liturgical body of Christ and its connection to the historical body of Christ at the tomb. This iconography would have resonated strongly with the purpose of carrying the host.

Figure 13.4 Carved ivory pyxis, praying female figures. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
**Book covers**

Perhaps the only type of ivory object that was new to Early Christian art was the book cover. It is difficult to say with certainty when they originated but a number of impressive examples survive from the fifth and sixth centuries.²⁵ Four complete sets survive, with fragments of at least five others still extant. Each leaf of a book cover was usually a five-part composite piece and the various panels were likely carved from the same tusk to ensure consistency of color and grain. Where a humbler medium, such as leather, was not used it seems that ivory was a popular choice for the revetment of sacred scripture. It appears again that it was the inherent physical characteristics of ivory that made it a popular choice given its opulence and durability in the face of repeated handling. Perhaps an organic medium was also inherently suited to conveying themes of incarnation, both of Christ Incarnate, a theme that is often represented on the front cover, and the incarnation of the Word of God in the scriptures contained within. We cannot discount the fact that many covers in gold and silver may have been made and subsequently melted down. Those made of precious metals that do survive, however, were far less intricate in their detailing and less ambitious in their iconographic programs.²⁶

An ivory panel of the Adoration of the Magi dating to the fifth to seventh century, originally from Syria and now in the John Rylands Museum in Manchester, has been identified as belonging to a book cover (Figure 13.5). Through its relatively flat abstracted style and the remains of a gilt star pattern that has not been removed through subsequent cleaning, it has been matched to several other fragments in museums around the world, so that its program has been reconstructed. It has also been paired with its back panel, now held in the Museo Nazionale, Ravenna (Figure 13.6). Collectively they are often termed the Murano diptych.²⁷ Composite ivory covers encausting sacred scripture usually comprised a large central panel surrounded by four narrower strips. This panel, measuring 23.3 × 12.3 cm, formed the central section of a front cover. The enthroned Virgin and Child dominate the largest section of the plaque attended by the three magi and an angel. The Virgin and Child greatly exceed in scale the three magi in Phrygian caps and eastern dress who approach the sacred pair, carrying their gifts in covered hands. Beneath the largest section is a narrow strip, found in the same position on the central panels of many book covers, showing the Nativity of Christ. Mary reclines on the left while the infant Christ is swaddled in a manger to the right and gazed upon by the donkey and a bull. The midwife Salome offers her shrunken hand to the child in accordance with the apocryphal story, recounted in the *Protoevangelium of James*, in which her hand withered because she had doubted and tested the virginity of Mary.²⁸

A narrow strip, now in Berlin, that formed the upper panel of the front cover, displays a wreath-bound cross suspended by two angels, a scene commonly found in this position on book covers, while the panels from the right-hand side, now in St Petersburg, show scenes concerning the early life of the Virgin such as the Annunciation to St Anne from the *Protoevangelium of James* (3.2). The last surviving piece, now in the Louvre (Figure 13.7), formed the bottom panel of the cover and shows a series of scenes, also based on the *Protoevangelium of James*, concerning the life of the Virgin and the birth of Christ from the Annunciation to the Virgin while she spins the temple veil, and her trial by water in the temple, to her journey to Bethlehem (11.1; 16.1–2; 17.1–2). In this way, all of the scenes on the front cover deal with the conception and early life of Christ. Most surviving front covers similarly relate to the theme of the Incarnation, resonating with the story of Christ in the scriptures within. Back covers often dealt with the divine, rather than the human, nature of Christ: the back cover of the Murano diptych, for example, hosts the miracles of Christ that denoted the salvation that came through his divine nature such as the healings of the Gerasene demoniac and the paralytic and the Raising of Lazarus.²⁹
Figure 13.5  Carved ivory panel from a book cover (Murano Diptych), Adoration of the Magi and the nativity of Christ. John Rylands Museum, Manchester.

Figure 13.6  Carved ivory leaf from a book cover (Murano Diptych). Museo Nazionale, Ravenna.
Figure 13.7 Carved ivory panel from a book cover (Murano Diptych), scenes from the life of the Virgin. Louvre Museum, Paris. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Jean-Gilles Berizzi.

together then, the covers form not an illustration of what was found between them in the text, especially given that they very often hosted apocryphal stories, but a framework for its interpretation—the mystery of Christ, as fully God and man, made visible in the flesh for the salvation of humankind.

Ornately bound Early Christian books were likely displayed open with the covers, rather than the text, oriented towards the viewer. This would explain the iconic nature of the central largest panel with the Virgin and Child gazing out at the viewer requiring devotion, while the smaller narrative strips surround and interpret it. When displayed as such the back panel became the left and thus the beginning of any program. What could have been read in a narrative biographical way when the book was closed—from the nativity and early life of Christ on the front to his later healing miracles on the back—is inverted when opened to form a theological affirmation of both the divine and human natures of Christ, with the former coming first.

Conclusion

Ivory was used in Early Christian art in the same manner as other mediums—such as precious metals and wood—for pyxides, reliquaries, diptychs and book covers. As a material it was desired for the same reasons that it was valued in classical antiquity: it was hard, durable, creamy-white in color, though painted and gilded to some extent, and it took a high shine. It was also relatively rare, which added to its cultural desirability. In Late Antiquity it was in good supply so that it was employed for a range of objects from utilitarian pieces to prestigious gifts. Most surviving Christian ivory objects were made to contain something, whether that was writing on wax, the eucharist or sacred scripture. Thinking about the way in which all of these ivory objects were handled, used, and displayed can transform any understanding of their iconography. In many cases their design appears to have been carefully planned so that the meanings of their Christian iconographies were constructed and activated through use.

Notes

Christian ivories


6 Symmachus, *Epistles*, 2.81; 5.56; 7.76; 9.119.


28 Protoevangelium of James, 19–20.


Further reading


Niamh Bhalla


