The Salerno Ivories

OBJECTS, HISTORIES, CONTEXTS

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Gebr. Mann Verlag · Berlin

A publication of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz

Max-Planck-Institut

MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

with support from
the George Dewey and Mary J. Krumrine Endowment
Department of Art History, Pennsylvania State University
and
the Dipartimento di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale,
Università degli Studi di Salerno

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

www.gebrmannverlag.de

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem Papier, das die US-ANSI-NORM
über Haltbarkeit erfüllt.

Einbandabbildung: Adoration of the Magi (detail), see Pl. 20, p. 290, Rückseite: Creation of the Firmament, see Pl. 1, p. 250

Einbandentwurf, Layout: M&S Hawemann · Berlin

Schrift: Minion Pro
Papier: Magno matt

Druck und Verarbeitung: druckhaus köthen GmbH & Co. KG · Köthen

Printed in Germany · ISBN 978-3-7861-2730-7

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Gerhard Wolf

FOREWORD

Speaking of the Salerno ivories means something different from speaking of Murano glass, even if in both cases we combine the name of a city with that of a material. The definite article and the plural make the difference. In the first instance, the name of the material stands for a specific group of objects made out of it, whereas in the second case, glass is a sort of collective singular. In most examples of the first category the toponym refers to the actual site of conservation or discovery of an artifact; one need only think of the Riace bronzes. This taxonomic logic does not necessarily imply that there are or ever were elephants in Salerno, that Salerno has been an important ivory market or the place of a remarkable ivory carving "industry." It does not exclude, however, one of these possibilities. Intrinsic to all this is the notion of mobility and transfer, dialectically bound to the desire and need to bind things to places. The reconstruction of where objects were made, where the material came from, and the location of their subsequent "travels" or dwellings in one or more sites we call their history or biography. To this another dimension must be added: artifacts in their actual state are, for the most part, not the same as they may have looked when they were created, partly because they are exposed to the dynamics of the physical world – materials alter, colors change or disappear depending on the conditions of their handling and storing – and partly because they have been reworked, fragmented or inserted in other objects, overpainted or restored. In an art history obsessed with origin tales, that is, when, where, and by whom an object was made, all of these dimensions have been considered, if at all, in "negative" terms, or they have been studied in order to answer questions concerning their origin. Most attention has been devoted to the time "before" the artifact, the processes of its conceptualisation and realization. When the questions of origin can be answered and the contexts reconstructed, the object itself is hardly of interest anymore. As is well known, over the last two decades the approaches and methodologies of art history have substantially changed, shifted, or been enriched: the history of things and images has started to matter, especially in relation to transcultural dynamics and materiality. The study of routes are often preferred to those of roots, sometimes with new shortcomings, such as a lack of close looking at the artifacts themselves. No less obvious, the old questions of the processes involved in producing artifacts in general, as well as in relation to an individual set of objects, remain relevant within the broader transcultural horizon, especially given the new attention to materiality, techniques, and new scientific methods of analysis, which are producing ever more detailed results. But questions remain, and the simplest and most intriguing one is what we do if the traditional basic demands of the when and where of production cannot be answered definitively. It is interesting to observe case-by-case how art historical research over the decades has advanced hypothesis after hypothesis concerning what we would term the origin of an artwork, and one wonders what we learn by means of these approaches, especially when the main problems or questions they pose remain, in the end, unresolved and unanswered. Can we deconstruct this research and reformulate questions that do not lead to such an aporia? The rethinking and restudying of the so-called Salerno ivories in this book are brilliant attempts to discuss a major medieval "monument" from such perspectives and under new methodological premises, working so to speak backwards in time. Certainly, we are dealing with a group of objects for which a centuries long presence in Salerno is well documented. Yet the circumstances of production and original function remain open to debate. Here the arguments are enriched by a profound discussion of the "material" history of the artifacts.

Rather than represent a quickly-gathered collection of essays, this book is the result of a complex collaborative endeavor, designed and realised by Francesca Dell'Acqua

together with the co-editors of this volume and all authors present in it. This work led the group to Amalfi, Salerno, Florence and Washington DC. The collaborative research process is summarized in the introduction that follows, which acknowledges also the participating institutions. Here I wish only to express my gratitude to Francesca Dell'Acqua for her initiative as well as the energy and determination with which she promoted and followed the project in all its various stages. Avinoam Shalem, as a Max-Planck fellow, and I welcomed, without hesitation, the proposal that the KHI engage in this project and, with growing enthusiasm, we witnessed how it strongly contributed to the trans-Mediterranean focus and research agenda of the Institute. One of the first activities of the KHI in this respect was the exhibition on the Mandylion of Genoa in 2004 (in which Francesca Dell'Acqua played a major role), another was the conference "Islamic Artifacts in the Mediterranean World," transformed into a publication in 2010. Further related is the project and fellowship program "Art, Space and Mobility in the Early Ages of Globalisation," directed by Hannah Baader, Avinoam Shalem, and myself in collaboration with the Getty Foundation (running from 2009 to 2015), which explored trans-Mediterranean research perspectives from Late Antiquity to the early modern period in a series of workshops, site-specific seminars, and summer schools with groups of fellows and invited scholars.

This is not the place to discuss these and the many other pertinent research activities of and at the KHI or to delineate the conceptual frameworks and dynamics of Mediterranean art histories over the last decade. I would just like to underline the interest of the KHI, in collaboration with various partners, in further exploring new horizons in Mediterranean and trans-Mediterranean studies, methodologically and empirically. I read this volume as a major reflection on the role of Southern Italy in the medieval Mediterranean in a collaboration concentrating on the Salerno ivories, here presented in new photographs, in a series of essays that provide groundbreaking insights and reformulated problems.

F. Dell'Acqua, A. Cutler, H. L. Kessler, A. Shalem, G. Wolf

PREFACE

The subject of three monographs in some forty years,[1] of the ambitious exhibition *L'enigma degli avori medievali da Amalfi a Salerno* (Salerno, Museo Diocesano, 2007–08),[2] and of numerous shorter studies,[3] the so-called Salerno ivories preserved and kept mainly in the Museo Diocesano in Salerno, with individual plaques held by other major museums in the world, remain a mystery; fundamental questions regarding their patrons, the period and circumstances of their design and production, and the object they originally decorated are to this day open to speculation.

In 2007, with the aim of trying to unlock the ivories' secrets, Francesca Dell'Acqua, Herbert L. Kessler, Avinoam Shalem, and Gerhard Wolf invited scholars from various disciplines to embark on the research project "Mediterranean Cross-Currents: the So-Called 'Salerno Ivories' as Examples of Artistic Interaction in the Middle Ages" – a project of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut. In December 2009 the Centro di Cultura e Storia Amalfitana hosted a first workshop in Amalfi, *Gli avori "amalfitani" / "salernitani" e il Mediterraneo medievale*, that was followed by another one titled *Ivory Analysis Combined: Art History and Natural Science* in June 2011 at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, hosted by its director, Jan Ziolkowski, the director of its museum, Gudrun Bühl, and its then director of Byzantine Studies, Margaret Mullett. In early summer 2012, a symposium entitled *The Tusk and the Book: The Salerno /Amalfi Ivories in their Mediterranean Contexts* was then held at the Kunsthistorisches Institut – Max-Planck-Institut Florenz.

This volume collects many of the papers produced for these three meetings and modified after an inspiring exchange of ideas among the participants, including most notably Anthony Cutler (first as a contributor to our understanding of the techniques employed in carving the material, and then as editor), Charles Little, Paul Williamson, and an assembly of graduate students. Though not all papers could be published here, the editors especially wish to thank Antonio Braca, Gudrun Bühl, Fulvio Cervini, Philippe Cordez, Elisabeth Corey, Holger Klein, Karen Mathews, and Mariam Rosser-Owen for their participation in and contributions to the various workshops and symposia mentioned above. Among the diverse issues the papers reconsider here are the dating and localization of the ivories, the models they drew upon, the innovations they introduced, the original function of the core objects, the religious and political contexts in which the ivories

1 A. Carucci, *Gli avori salernitani del secolo XII* (Salerno, 1972); R. P. Bergman, *The Salerno Ivories. Ars Sacra from Medieval Amalfi* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); A. Braca, *Gli avori medievali del Museo Diocesano di Salerno* (Salerno, 1994).

2 *L'enigma degli avori medievali da Amalfi a Salerno*, exh. cat., Salerno, Museo Diocesano, 20 Dec. 2007 – 30 Apr. 2008, ed. F. Bologna, 2 vols. (Pozzuoli, 2007–08).

3 See mainly: L. Becherucci, "Gli avori di Salerno," *Rassegna Storica Salernitana* 2.1 (1938): 62–85; H. L. Kessler, "An Eleventh-Century Ivory Plaque from South Italy and the Cassinese Revival," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 8 (1966): 67–95; C. Greenia, "The Salerno Ivories Unsolved Problems and Unanswered Questions," *Monumenta Apuliae ac Japygiae* 6.6 (1995): 7–32; V. Pace, "La Cattedrale di Salerno: committenza programma e valenze ideologiche di un monumento di fine XI secolo nell'Italia meridionale," in *Desiderio di Montecassino e l'arte della riforma gregoriana*, Miscellanea cassinese, Biblioteca 1, ed. F. Avagliano (Montecassino, 1997), 189–230; E. C. Corey, "The Purposeful Patron: Political Covenant in the Salerno Ivories," *Viator* 40.2 (2009): 55–92; K. Müller, "Old and New Divine Revelation in the Salerno 'Ivories'," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institut in Florenz* 54.1 (2010–12): 1–30; *The "Amalfi" – "Salerno" Ivories and the Medieval Mediterranean*, conference proceedings, Amalfi, 10–13 Dec. 2009, Quaderni del Centro di Cultura e Storia Amalfitana 5, ed. F. Dell'Acqua (Amalfi, 2011); F. Dell'Acqua, "'Il grande foglio del mare': gli avori di Salerno e il Mediterraneo medievale," *Rassegna Storica Salernitana* 50.2 (2008): 103–24; eadem, "Les cinq sens et la connaissance de Dieu. Marie-Madeleine et Thomas dans les Ivoires de Salerne," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 55 (2012): 571–98; A. Shalem with M. Glaser, *Die mittelalterlichen Olifante*, Die Elfenbeinskulpturen, 2 vols. (Berlin, 2014), 1: 66–76. For a complete bibliography, see the articles of Dell'Acqua, and Longo and Scirocco in this volume.

were manufactured, the origin of the material itself, their mode of production and technical and artistic characteristics, as well as the ivories' connections to Egypt, the Holy Land, Sicily, Montecassino, Spain, and Rome.

The Salerno ivories clearly lie at the very heart of the complex nature of "Mediterranean art" at a time of intense commercial and cultural exchange, in which Salerno and Amalfi played significant roles. So many essential questions are still subject to debate: whether they were commissioned by a pope, an archbishop, or a powerful secular ruler; if they were carved in the eleventh or twelfth century; if this occurred in Salerno, Amalfi, Palermo, or Rome, in a monastery, at a court, or in an independent workshop; if they were part of an archiepiscopal throne, an *antependium*, a set of doors, or a reliquary. And in absence of specific historical sources they, unfortunately, will remain so. Initially, there was hope that C14 analysis would at least settle the chronological question, yet at Dumbarton Oaks in 2011 Charles Little warned us that C14 would at best tell us something about the date of the elephant's death, rather than about the date of the carving – even if it is questionable, as Anthony Cutler remarked, that such a rare commodity would have been stockpiled in the Middle Ages. At the same occasion, Noreen Tuross raised even more troubling questions about the precision C14 analysis could offer for such materials as the Salerno ivories. Hence it became clear that, in order to narrow down the chronology, it was necessary to probe more deeply into the historical framework and the cultural *milieu* in which the Amalfi and the Salerno ivories were produced. This is attempted in an exemplary manner in a number of essays presented here, which in many ways enhance our knowledge of the politically and culturally vibrant region of southern Italy under the Normans and its connections with the Near East, the Mediterranean basin, and northern Europe. The different academic backgrounds of the scholars involved have been essential in sifting and connecting traces of evidence left by medieval pilgrims, merchants, envoys, artisans, scholars, students, soldiers, and clerics who came to southern Italy, bringing objects with them and spreading knowledge and ideas. This may be one reason why the Salerno and Amalfi ivories seem to encapsulate stimuli of the most diverse origins and present an extraordinary cultural complexity that eludes all attempts to label them.

The picture offered by the essays in this book is that of an extensive map of the Mediterranean, on which the authors follow well-trodden paths as well as little-known trails. It is a map of Mediterranean networks and nodal points, extensive in both chronological and geographical terms, made of pieces of parchment in which very detailed areas are surrounded by wide swaths of *terra incognita*; a map with no clear margins, open to changes and further modifications to be made by the next cohort of scholars.

Many, indeed, are the issues that await attention in the future: the role of local and international patronage in shaping, between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, what appears to be the original "container" of the Salerno ivories, that is, the city's cathedral; the decorative and ideological employment of Roman marbles in the same building; the place of Salerno and Amalfi within Mediterranean commercial routes; the production of Byzantine-style mosaics beyond Byzantium and the subsequent establishment of a mosaic tradition in southern Italy; the exchange of *maestri marmorai* between the Norman capitals of Salerno, Palermo, the Amalfitan coast, and Rome; the place of Salerno's cathedral in the extensive *loca sancta* routes, and the evidence that pilgrims from the eastern Mediterranean came to venerate St. Matthew's relics. These are just some of the questions that will need to be addressed from a broad diachronic perspective.

Yet for all their elusiveness, the Salerno ivories do appear as prime visual witnesses to remarkable intercultural interactions in the medieval world and, in offering a wealth of insights, the essays presented here mark a decisive step forward in understanding them.