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5 Ivory Production: Commerce, Culture and Power

Abstract: Since the 19th century scholars have claimed the existence of a school of ivory craftsmanship in late antique Ravenna. Following such theories, with the settlement of the western court in Ravenna in 402 a school of ivory carving produced plaques and *pyxides* that were exported outside the western capital. Later, in the 6th century, artists with different provenance came to Ravenna and there created consular and religious diptychs. Scholars' arguments were based upon iconographic and stylistic analyses, aimed at discovering the chronology and places of origin for a number of late antique ivories. Yet there is no evidence for the existence of an ivory atelier in Ravenna based on the lack of archaeological and textual support.

This paper attempts to demonstrate that Ravenna could plausibly have been a location for production of ivory objects for its centrality in the politics and commercial routes of the late antique Mediterranean. Furthermore, by analyzing the imagery of some late antique ivory carvings in relation to the visual culture of late antique Ravenna, this contribution will put forward a few hypotheses about specific ivory artifacts that may have had a major role as expressions of the culture and religion of the people leaving in late antique Ravenna.

It was at the end of the 19th century that Georg Stuhlfauth first postulated the existence of a school of ivory craftsmanship in late antique Ravenna.¹ Almost a century later, Wolfgang Fritz Volbach developed the argument further. According to Volbach, after 402 the settlement of the western court in Ravenna would have resulted in the creation of a school of ivory carving producing plaques and *pyxides*. Later, in the 6th century, increasing ties with Constantinople brought the arrival of artists with different provenance, who may have created consular and religious diptychs and even Maximian's chair.²

Stuhlfauth's, Volbach's, and other scholars' arguments were based upon iconographic and stylistic analyses, aimed at discovering the chronology and places of origin for a number of late antique ivories.³ Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann applied analogous methodology and attempted to answer the same questions, yet he emphasized that there is no evidence for the existence of an ivory atelier in Ravenna

¹ Stuhlfauth 1896, 84–112. Earlier, Jules Labarte had suggested such a possibility in relation to Maximian's chair (Labarte 1864–66, I. 17).

² Volbach 1977.

³ See also: Wessel 1952–53, 63–90 and 1953–54, 1–30.

based on the lack of archaeological and textual support.⁴ Indeed, until the pioneering work of Anthony Cutler gave rise to a new age of research on late antique ivory carving,⁵ style and iconography were the primary tools for art historical analysis as applied to ivory carving.⁶ In recent years, a deeper knowledge of carving techniques and materials, combined with new historical and archaeological data regarding trades and exchanges in the late antique Mediterranean, has allowed scholars to situate with certainty the presence of ateliers of ivory carving in certain areas at specific times in the history.⁷ However, such evidence for Ravenna is still scant and the potential of the late antique city as a center of ivory manufacture and for luxury objects, in general, is therefore greatly underestimated in modern scholarship.⁸

In this paper, I will first attempt to demonstrate that the city could plausibly have been a location for production of ivory objects. The centrality of Ravenna in the politics and commercial routes of the late antique Mediterranean, its wealthy social environment, and its rich cultural milieu all point to an élite clientele with a great appreciation for luxury goods, among which certainly were ivory products. Instead of trying to locate these objects by virtue of their style and technique, by analyzing their imagery in relation to the visual culture of late antique Ravenna, I will put forward a few hypotheses about specific ivory objects that are connected to fifth- and sixth-century Ravenna and show how it is possible that they were produced there. Using the most recent developments in research about late antique ivory carving, I will show that certain artifacts that are now part of museum collections may have had a major role as expressions of the culture and religion of the people leaving in this late antique city.

The question of ivory production in Ravenna is affected by the same difficulties as any study involving the production of objects within that city: that is, finding evidence for the presence of material resources and the local skilled craftsmen necessary to their manufacture. For, although material evidence attests for many kinds of imported materials and objects into Ravenna from antiquity on, until recently, there has been no archaeological evidence to suggest local manufacture for any of these.⁹ For instance, the

⁴ Deichmann 1989, 347–348.

⁵ Among his ample bibliography, see especially: Cutler 1998. For an overview of the *status quaestionis* until 1983: Cutler 1987, 431–471.

⁶ For discussion on art historical analysis: Cieri Via 1998.

⁷ For instance, Alexandria has been convincingly shown to be a center of production of *pyxides* and other objects in Late Antiquity (Bühl 2008, 9–16; Rodziewicz 2009, 83–96). For the ateliers of Rome until the 5th century: St. Clair 2003.

⁸ Apart from Carlo Bertelli's hypothesis that Ravenna produced the so-called Ariadne ivories during the Ostrogothic regency (Bertelli 1992, 177–188), and a few other mentions of Ravenna as a possible center of ivory production (for instance, Peschlow 2011, 75–89, especially 76), the only attempt to locate firmly a manufacture in Ravenna is: Frantová 2014.

⁹ The present book will certainly change this picture and, recently, the excavations at the harbor of Classe have brought to light new evidence proving the existence of a late antique manufacture of glass, metal, and bone objects (Augenti 2013, 219–236).

importation of stones, sculptural architectural elements, like capitals and columns, from across the Mediterranean was accepted by virtue of the evidence shown in Ravenna's church buildings and architecture. However, scholars dismissed the idea that artisans or architects traveled and worked in different areas of the empire, assuming that sculptures were imported already finished.¹⁰ Recent research has disproven this point of view, showing that sculptors and other craftsmen from the capital or the marble ateliers in the Marmara Sea came with the marbles to finish these architectural elements *in situ*, and at Ravenna, worked together with local artisans.¹¹

A study of ivory production in Ravenna is particularly difficult due to the fact that ivory objects are small in size and thus easily portable, suggesting that such objects were easily imported; and just as easily exported, given or carried away, if local ivory carvers did indeed work there. Until recently, any attribution of artefacts to Ravenna has been based on style, the importance of which has been heavily debated in more recent scholarship on ivory production. Style is not always useful, as it turns out. For example, the similarities in iconography and general composition of several surviving five-part ivory diptychs of religious content, each centering on the image of the enthroned Christ and Virgin, indicate that, despite *major* differences in style, they all originated in Constantinople in the middle of the 6th century, although they were probably made by different craftsmen.¹² The reverse is also true, as iconography cannot always determine place of origin. Scholars turn once again to elements of style, as in the confirmed common origin (and probably workshop) of several consular ivories that show differences in iconographical details, though the style is maintained throughout. For instance, the five famous ivories produced for the consulate of Anastasius in 517 show substantial variations in the dress of the emperor and the consular scepter,¹³ but were clearly all carved in the same style. However, the consular ivories of Areobindus (consul in 506) were produced in at least three versions, with totally different decorative schemes, iconography, and style.¹⁴ Such instances diminish the importance of any argument based entirely on stylistic analysis from the discussion of late antique ivory carving, and

10 This is the mainstream theory throughout Deichmann's work: Deichmann 1969–1989.

11 For Ravenna architecture: Russo 2003. For architectural sculptures and their craftsmen in Ravenna and Poreč: Russo 1991.

12 Caillet 2008, 17–29. This view is now generally accepted: Spieser 2015, 404.

13 For the Anastasius diptychs Delbrueck, 1929, n. 18–21; Volbach 1976, n. 17–21. For these ivories and their differences: Olovdotter 2005, pp. 47–55; Olovdotter 2012, 33–47.

14 The three versions are exemplified in two exemplars now in Paris and another one in Lucca: one type shows the portrait of the consul in a central roundel (Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. n. OA9525), another one is covered with an elaborate image of the consul attending at the circus games while seated on his *sella curulis* (Paris, Musée du Moyen Age, inv. no Cl. 13135), while the third type pertains to the so-called ornamental type of consular diptychs (Lucca, Complesso Museale e Archeologico della Cattedrale). For discussion: Delbrueck 1929, n. 9–15; Volbach 1976, n. 8–14; Olovdotter 2005, 38–44.

confirm the presence of different craftsmen with different skills, each with his own way of carving within the same cultural milieu, likely working together within the premises of an atelier.¹⁵ The organization of the production of ivory in ateliers grouping together artisans of different origins and skills is now generally accepted by scholars of Late Antiquity.¹⁶ If such ateliers existed in late antique Ravenna is, however, still not proven.

According to a major scholarly theory, the production of luxury goods such as silverware, textiles, and ivories was linked to the presence of the court in the capital at a given time. In fact, the manufacture of these objects by the *palatini artifices* was under the control of the *comes sacrarum largitionum*, a member of the court with an important function within the imperial administration.¹⁷ This has proven true for imperial Rome as well as for Constantinople during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹⁸ According to this theory, Milan was a major center of production of silver and ivory objects from 286 until 402, when the western court resided in this capital.¹⁹ Gemma Sena Chiesa claims that Milan remained an active center of ivory carving even later, until the middle of the 5th century, long after the court had transferred in Ravenna (around 402). At that time another major fifth-century ivory atelier was apparently located in Gallia, probably in Trier.²⁰ Scholars of Ravenna agree that the settlement of the court in Ravenna would have brought about the transfer of craftsmanship for luxury goods such as jewelry and textiles to the city.²¹ However, no archaeological evidence has allowed scholars to prove this assumption.²² Presumably, then, ivories would have been included, as well. Again, nothing yet has been discovered to prove it. By contrast, archeological evidence shows that manufacture of ivory may have been

15 The differences between analogous objects are seen as “variations” by craftsmen working on the same model: Caillet 1986, 7–15; see also: Cutler 1993, 167–192.

16 Cutler 1994, 66–78; Cutler 2007, 131–161, especially 140–142; St. Clair 2003, 32–37.

17 The scholarly opinion that the *palatini artifices* were responsible also of ivory manufacture is based on a law issued by Emperor Leo (457–474) and recorded in Justinian’s law code that, however, does not mention ivory products: *CJ XI*, 12. In this respect, more important is perhaps another law issued by Constantine in 337 and concerning exemptions: it mentions the *eborarii* among the *artifices artium* benefitting from tax exemptions (*CJ X*, 66). For the *comes sacrarum largitionum*: Delmaire 1989, 38–91. Delmaire underlines that after 534 *sculptores* and *artifices* were qualified artisans working on a wide range of materials, including ivory (Delmaire 1989, 158).

18 For ivory production in Rome until the 5th century: St. Clair 2003. For silverware in Constantinople and generally in Byzantium: Boyd/Mundell Mango 1992. For ivory production in Byzantium: Cutler 1994.

19 Wessel 1948–49, 119–160; Volbach 1977, 7–9; Brandeburg 1987, 80–129; Sena Chiesa 1990, 335–338.

20 Sena Chiesa 1990, 338.

21 Maioli 1991, 223–247, especially 244–245. For jewelry production: Baldini Lippolis 1999, 240–241; and most recently: Aimone 2011a; Aimone 2011b. For book production (attested at least from the time of the Gothic rule): Cavallo 1992, 79–125; Degni 2006, 168–179. With special attention to the 6th century: Farioli Campanati 1988, 23–51.

22 Maioli 1991, 244–245; most recently, the discussion in: Mauskopf Deliyannis 2010, 218 and 321 n. 40.

present in other cities. For instance, a fourth-century atelier of ivory carving has been hypothesized for the area of the *capitolium* at *Brixia* (Brescia) based on archaeological finds, an important city, though unlike Ravenna, never a capital in Late Antiquity.²³ Thus, since such an important imperial seat as Ravenna almost invariably would have had luxury workshops at hand, and because evidence for ivory production, although very little, has been found in less important cities like Brescia, it is quite possible that ivory was carved in Ravenna.

Moreover, the most recent archaeological research in Ravenna and its surroundings has provided new evidence that, if not directly proof of ivory production there, may add contours to the local manufacture of decorative, small-scale carving. The excavations at the harbor of Classe have brought to light several bone finds, allowing scholars to hypothesize the presence of artisans carving in bone between the 5th and the 7th century.²⁴ Since the same techniques and tools were applied to bone as well as ivory carving,²⁵ the existence of an ivory production may now be at least posited on stronger grounds. Unfortunately, no systematic study of these finds has been published yet. The bone objects known from the supposed atelier of Classe are plaques with geometric decoration or simple combs,²⁶ the latter found buried as grave goods in women's and infants' tombs.²⁷ Indeed, this evidence is limited: although it does support the possibility of a larger production with bone carving at the lower end of the spectrum of a wider industry, it is too simple and scarce to point to the manufacture of high quality ivory carving in Ravenna.

What new archaeological research has brought to light, however, is an intense commercial network, which brought to Ravenna goods from the major areas of tusk distribution in the Mediterranean. The finds from the harbor at Classe demonstrate the vigorous importation of olive oil and wine from the eastern Mediterranean and of grain, *garum*, and red slipware from Northern Africa; but also included in the finds are a small number of amphorae from Egypt and Nubia that are rarely attested

23 Sena Chiesa 1990, 338. For the area of Brescia as an important commercial center, where luxury goods were both imported and produced especially in the 6th and 7th century: De Marchi 2006, 37–82, especially 60–81. Importantly, scholars tend to agree that in small centers, what is more indicative of the wide distribution of ivory goods than the presence of local workshops – the evidence for which is particularly scant – was the city's place within the commercial routes that connected the various areas of the Mediterranean (Melucco Vaccaro 1993, 1–19; St. Clair 2003, 37).

24 Augenti 2005, 239–240; Augenti 2013, 227.

25 Cutler 1985, 20–26, 36; see also Cutler 1993, 172–173. Most recently, with extensive comparison between bone and ivory carving: Olch Stern/Hadjilazaro Thiemme 2007, 13–30. For tools and techniques: Von Barga 1994, 45–63; Bianchi 2007, 349–386.

26 Among these objects there was also a horn used as a knife's hilt: Augenti/Bertelli 2007, 123, 124 (cat. n. IV.3, IV.4).

27 Ferreri 2009, 459–564, especially 459–460; Ferreri 2011, 59–74, especially 68–70. See also Ferreri's contribution in the present volume. As from personal communication with the author, such grave goods are local productions.

elsewhere in the Adriatic (Fig. 1).²⁸ This latter evidence is particularly important as the tusk used for the vast majority of late antique ivories is of African origin.²⁹ The tusk was imported from Northern Africa where elephants survived until the 6th century, or from Nubia, Ethiopia and Eastern Africa through the commercial routes that reached the Mediterranean from the Red Sea via the Nile.³⁰ Thus, since the archaeological evidence attests to a lively trade between Ravenna and Africa in the 5th and 6th century, raw tusks, semi-finished or even finished ivory products may well have been shipped to Ravenna and, from there, could have reached Northern Italy and Europe through river and canal routes. In other words, although the actual state of research cannot

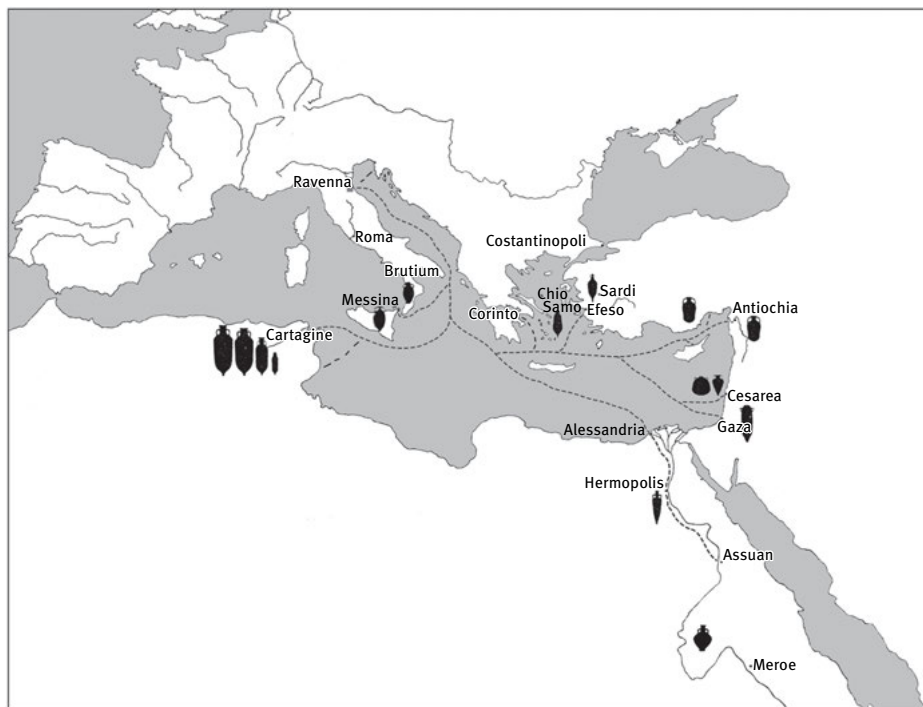


Fig. 1: Map, Ravenna and the Mediterranean trades between late antiquity and the early middle ages (© E. Cirelli).

²⁸ Cirelli 2007, 45–50; Cirelli 2014, 541–552.

²⁹ Cutler 1985, 20–37; Cutler 1993, 175; Cutler 1994, 56–65; Shalem 2004, 22. For medieval Europe, see most recently: Guérin 2013, 70–91.

³⁰ Cutler 1985, 24; Cutler 1987, 437–443; Chrzanovski 2007, 195–218; Olch Stern/Hadjilazaro Thimmes 2007, 15. Alternative views, claiming an import of Indian tusk on the basis of textual evidence, shall be reconsidered as the adjective Indian was indistinctively used to qualify a provenience from India, Arabia, or Eastern Africa: Cosentino 2016, 115–130, especially 127 with references.

prove ivory production in late antique Ravenna, the city could well have supported it through its trade lines in its bone carving workshops.

A taste for ivory products is attested in Ravenna since the Roman times³¹ and this likely continued through Late Antiquity. In the 5th century, the circulation of ivory artifacts among the élites is well attested by textual and material evidence for the East as well as for the West.³² Ravenna's importance in this exchange can reasonably be hypothesized based on the city's position as an imperial seat, which attracted a large number of courtiers, and the prominent role of the bishop and his church officers among the ecclesiastical hierarchies of the empire.³³ A law issued by Valentinian, Theodosius I, and Arcadius in 384 allows only the *consules ordinarii* to distribute ivory diptychs. This law was passed in reaction to other, lesser officials, who were commissioning their own ivory diptychs³⁴ and was included in the Theodosian Code, issued in 438. Therefore, the production of ivory diptychs by élite members who did not achieved the consulate was still a problem even when Ravenna had become the seat of the western court and this law applied to the city as well. Not just diptychs, but also other objects made of ivory had important political and cultural cache and were given as gifts. For example, around 431, Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria sent diplomatic gifts to the court of Theodosius II (408–450) in Constantinople, including numerous ivory chairs and stools, in order to gain the imperial officials' benevolence and support for his cause at the Council of Ephesus.³⁵ This text is evidence of the circulation of ivory objects and of their appreciation among the members of the court. Since the western court residing in Ravenna at that time was related by lineage to the eastern court of Theodosius II, the court culture of Ravenna could not be so different from its eastern counterpart and likely included a high appreciation for ivory. Considering the value of ivory objects as luxury goods capable of expressing both the high status of the patron who commissioned them, as well as the esteem in which the patron regarded their recipients, there can be no doubt that such ivories circulated among the imperial and ecclesiastical élites of late antique Ravenna.

However, while for the 6th century there is clear evidence of the presence of such precious objects in the city – as I will show in the last part of this paper – none of the several late-antique specimens now held in museum collections can be firmly traced back to Ravenna in the 5th century. Previous research has tentatively

31 This is shown by the finds of the Roman period at Classe: Maioli 1990, 415–455.

32 Cutler 1987, 431–437; Cutler 1994, 19–40; St. Clair 2003, 7–14.

33 For the élite society of Ravenna in the 5th and 6th century: Pietri 1991, 287–310; Orselli 1992, 405–422; Zangara 2000, 265–304; Mauskopf Deliyannis 2016, 39–52.

34 *CTh* XV 9, 1 *pr.* For discussion: Citti/Ziosi 2007, 45–71, especially 54–55. Alan Cameron argues that this law did not apply to West (Cameron 1998, 384–403, especially 399). Discussing the silk vestments that the law mentions together with the diptychs, Roland Delmaire has however demonstrated that the law applied to the West as much as to the East and that there could be exceptions (Delmaire 1989, 451).

35 Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistulae*, 96 (ed. Schwartz, 224–225). For discussion: Batiffol 1911, 247–264; Brown 1992, 16–18.

identified certain ivories as products of the ateliers of the city. Although, such claims cannot be supported by textual or archaeological evidence, the use of iconographies common to both ivories and Ravenna's mosaics and marble sculpture may perhaps show the impact of the artistic and intellectual milieu of fifth-century Ravenna on the art of ivory, if not of the circulation of certain ivory products in the city.

While the *pyxides* with testamentary scenes that Volbach attributed to Ravenna are now ascribed to a manufacture site located in Northern Africa, possibly at Alexandria,³⁶ his identification of the diptych panel held at the Cathedral Treasury of Milan as a product of Ravenna's ateliers has been recently developed by Zuzana Frantová (Figs. 2–3).³⁷ Each of two halves of the Milan five-piece diptych is dominated by a gemmed cloisonné jewel. On one side, the central cloisonné lamb is framed by five plaques with stories from the life of Jesus and Mary: the top plaque shows the Nativity flanked by two roundels with the symbols of the Evangelists Matthew and Luke, the bottom one the Massacre of the Innocents flanked by two roundels with the portrait of a man with long hair and beard; the vertical plaques flanking the central elements show each the Annunciation at the Well, the Magi following the Star, the Baptism and the Ordeal of the Bitter Water,³⁸ the Young Jesus in the Temple and the Entry into Jerusalem. The other half of the diptych centers on the cross on the mount, it is surrounded by the Adoration of the Magi flanked by the symbols of Mark and John on the top, the Changing of Water into Wine flanked by the effigies of the same man with long hair and beard on the bottom. The vertical plaques flanking the central elements show miracle scenes and images from Jesus's life each: one represents the Healing of the Blind Man, the Healing of the Lame, the Rising of Lazarus, the other one Christ giving Crowns to Martyrs, the Last Supper and the Gift of the Widow. The scenes from Jesus and Mary's lives are not arranged in a chronological or logical order and the choice of episodes does not find direct comparison in any other five-piece diptychs known so far. This has raised much scholarly discussion, recently leading Frantová to attribute the diptych to Ravenna. The author bases her arguments on a comparison between the design and style of the various individual plaques that make up either side of the diptych panel, and mosaics found in the fifth-century Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (425–450) and in the Orthodox Baptistery attributed to the bishopric of Neon (451–ca. 468). In particular, Frantová notes that the figures of the apostles in the mosaics and the human

³⁶ In particular, Volbach links the *pyxides* of the Museo della Cattedrale di Pesaro (6th century), the Musei Civici di Bologna and the Museo dell'Alto Medioevo at Rome (6th century) to Ravenna (Volbach 1977, 14, 20, 33, 49–50). For these group of *pyxides* see also: Engemann 1987, 176–182; Cutler 1993, 178–179; Bühl 2008. For the production of *pyxides* at Alexandria: Rodziewicz 2016, 87–91.

³⁷ Volbach 1977, 13–16; Frantová 2014.

³⁸ The scene has been interpreted also as the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple or as representing the angel showing to the Virgin the light that illuminates the world. For discussion and references: Frantová 2014, 176–177.



Fig. 2: Five-piece ivory diptych, Cathedral Treasury, Milan: front (photo: Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano, Milano).

figures of the ivory show all narrow shoulders and larger hips, thus a common design which is reflected also in the way the tunic folds envelop the bodies and fall.³⁹ However, it is implausible that the same artisan worked at the creation of both a mosaic dome and an ivory plaque.⁴⁰ While the style of monumental decoration in this case may have inspired ivory carving, the similarity of design may be better explained by the presence of the same iconographer behind these works or the circulation of model books that may have served as to disseminate common repertoires

³⁹ Frantová 2014, 111–113.

⁴⁰ Frantová is well aware of the difficulties in comparing monumental decoration and ivory carving (Frantová 2014, 111–115).

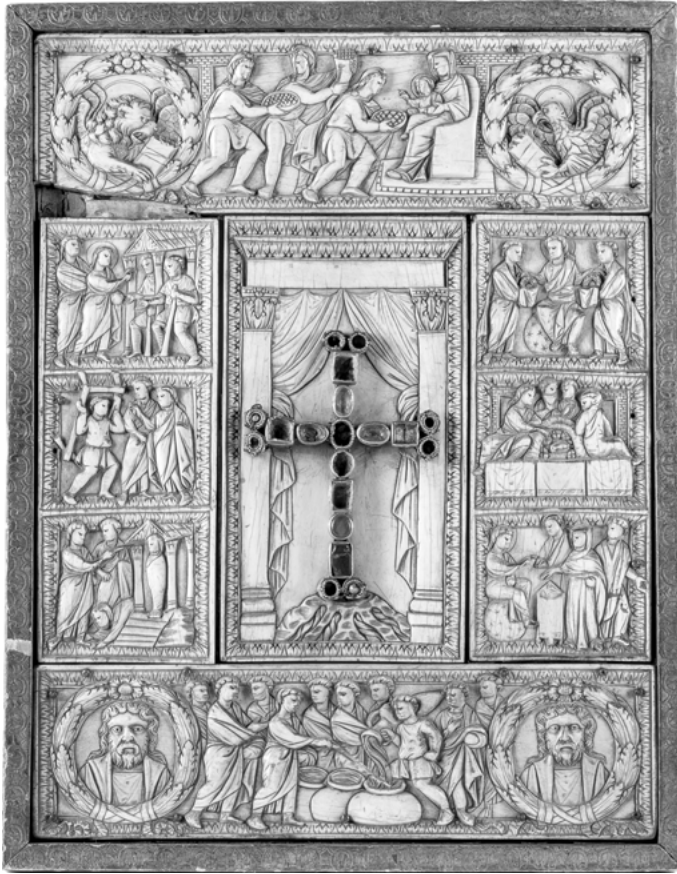


Fig. 3: Five-piece ivory diptych, Cathedral Treasury, Milan: back (photo: Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano, Milano).

of forms and iconographies. The existence of such model books also during Late Antiquity is now generally accepted and may illuminate the similarities between works of art that are so different in technique and skills.⁴¹

More than style and design, according to Frantová, it is the analysis of the *cloisonné* lamb and cross at the center of the Milan panels that allows one to attribute it to the supposed workshops of Ravenna.⁴² Although no archeological record proves the existence of a jewelry workshop specialized in polychrome *cloisonné* in late

⁴¹ For model books: Donderer 2005, 59–68; Donderer 2005–06, 81–113; Settis 2006, 20–65; Stauffer 2008. For a later period: Scheller 1963; Scheller 1995; Demus 1970, 58–60; Kitzinger 1972, 99–142; Dauphin 1978, 400–423.

⁴² Frantová 2014, 115–124.

antique Ravenna,⁴³ the imperial city could indeed have had one. In fact, according to a theory advanced by Michel Kazanski and Patrick Périn and later developed by Marco Aimone, Ravenna had the means to access the raw materials necessary for the creation of polychrome *cloisonné* work through its harbor and commercial trade routes. It also had diplomatic connections to the major centers of Merovingian Gaul where such cloisonné jewels were found.⁴⁴ On the basis of the new research data on jewelry technique, Frantová claims that the lamb and cross on the diptych may reasonably have been the product of a jewelry workshop located in Ravenna at the time of emperor Majorian (457–461).⁴⁵ A dating from the time of Majorian is indeed plausible for the diptych, at least as a *terminus post quem*.

More significantly, the Milan ivory diptych panels offer evidence for the diffusion of a visual vocabulary that is rooted in the artistic culture of Ravenna. Particularly, certain iconographic details of the individual plaques are typical of fifth-century Ravenna funerary sculpture. The coincidence of iconographies that feature Ravenna fifth-century sarcophagi and the diptych plaques – above all the lamb and cross – may reveal a common origin for both the sarcophagi and the Milan diptych. While it cannot be claimed with certainty that Ravenna was a center of production for jewelry and ivory, a local production of sarcophagi is attested by material evidence in the city for all the late antique period and written sources firmly locate in Ravenna a production of sarcophagi during the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Theoderic.⁴⁶ In Ravenna both stones from the northern Adriatic and the Marmara Sea were worked and, from there, sarcophagi were exported following sea and canal routes. The great presence of specimens of this kind of funerary sculpture within the city today as well as their uniformity in design, iconography, and decorative programs point to the presence in Ravenna of artisans capable of producing such elements and then trading them throughout Northern Italy and elsewhere through the commercial routes.⁴⁷ The

⁴³ For further considerations on this absence: Baldini Lippolis 1999, 240.

⁴⁴ Kazanski/Périn 2007, 29–37; Kazanski/Périn 2000, 15–18; Aimone 2011a, especially 483–487; and most recently: Aimone 2011b, especially 608–612.

⁴⁵ Frantová's point is based on the connections between Emperor Majorian and the city (Gillet 2001, 131–167) and Aimone's theories on the link between polychrome cloisonné jewelry and Ravenna (Frantová 2014, 116–124). It should be noted that Aimone's suggestion of Ravenna as a center for jewelry production is supported by strong historical arguments. Nevertheless, it is somewhat influenced by Volbach's attribution of an ivory manufacture to the imperial city (Aimone 2011a; Aimone 2011b).

⁴⁶ For Ravenna's sarcophagi: Bovini 1954; Lawrence 1970; Valenti Zucchini/Bucci 1968; Gabelmann 1973, especially 193–195; Russo 1974; Farioli 1977, 133–159; Kollwitz/Herdejugen 1979; Dresken-Weiland 1998; Koch 2000, 378–398. A letter of Theoderic to the stonemason Daniel is testimony to the local production of sarcophagi from the years 507/511: Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 19 (ed. Mommsen, 89; for a new translation and commentary of this text: *Varie*, ed. Giardina, Cecconi, Tantillo, I–VI, 2014–2016 that I was not able to access).

⁴⁷ For the diffusion of Ravennate sarcophagi in the Adriatic and the Italian peninsula: Gabelmann 1973, 91–191; most recently, but with reference to the Roman period: Russel 2013, 176–177.

preference for decorative elements such as the lamb and the cross in the sarcophagi from Ravenna dating from the second half of the 5th century may perhaps indicate a common origin also for the Milan ivory.

In fact, the lamb and the jeweled cross at the center of either side of the Milan diptych are common elements in the art of Ravenna, in general, just as the Milan diptych's wreath is echoed in Ravenna's abundant imagery of wreaths and garlands with fruits from every season, prolifically used to represent the prosperity coming from Christ – for instance at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, where fruit garlands show simple crosses in the center.⁴⁸ The design of the garland in the Milan diptych recalls the garlands that can be found on fourth-century Roman sarcophagi connected with the cross or *chrismos*, on the back of the fifth-century Capsella of Samagher, and represented surrounding the portrait of Saint Victor in the fifth-century dome of San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, at Milan.⁴⁹ In Ravenna the garland was prolifically employed, especially in connection with the cross, the significance of which is linked with that of the sacrificial lamb. In fact, since the 5th century, the art of Ravenna shows a wide use of the lamb as a symbolic image for Christ. In funerary art, the nimbed lamb is usually found on the paradisiacal mount with the four rivers, such as on two sarcophagi traditionally attributed to Constantius III and Honorius at the mausoleum of Galla Placidia⁵⁰ and on a sarcophagus now at Sant'Apollinare in Classe,⁵¹ all dated between the middle of the 5th century and the beginning of the 6th century. In Ravenna, the lamb is represented inside a crown of fruits only in the sixth-century vault of San Vitale.⁵² All this evidence point to a development in the imagery of

48 The lamb appears for instance in several sarcophagi, while the garland surrounding the cross is found in the mosaics of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (425–450).

49 The garland of the five-piece diptych is divided into four sectors, each with different fruits and shows two ribbons at the bottom, just like the garland at the apex of the dome at San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, the latter being a sign of honor for the martyr achieved in the sky after his sacrifice. The diptych garland also bears a flower at the top, thereby recalling analogous laurel garlands of the fourth-century Christian art of Rome, namely in two sarcophagi with scenes from Christ's Passion, both dated around 325–350 and held at the Musei Vaticani (nos. 28591 and 31525).

50 The so-called sarcophagus of Honorius or Valentinian III (end of the 5th-beginning of the 6th century) shows the lamb without nimbus but in connection to the cross, making clear the association with Christ. Valenti Zucchini/Bucci 1968, 42–43, 46–47 n. 22, 30; Kollwitz /Herdejürgen 1979, 77. For the sarcophagus of Constantius (end of the 5th-beginning of the 6th century): Kollwitz / Herdejürgen 1979, 78.

51 Valenti Zucchini/ Bucci 1968, 42–43, 47 n. 31; Kollwitz/ Herdejürgen 1979, 38–39, 70–72.

52 The same meaning of the central panel of the Milan diptych is perhaps to be found in Thessaloniki in the first half of the 5th century, at the apex of the dome of the Rotunda of St. George, where Christ once appeared inserted in a roundel surrounded by a row of stars and a garland with fruit. Elsewhere I have underlined the connections of the mosaics of the Rotunda, and specifically of this theme, with the art promoted by Galla Placidia in Ravenna (Carile 2012, 91–100). For the garland see also: Carile 2016, 53–86.

the wreath with fruits that, after its first appearance in Ravenna in the mosaics sponsored by Galla Placidia in the first half of the 5th century, may have acquired a new form in the second half of the century.

The gemmed cross on the reverse side of the Milan ivory panel is a particular kind of cross: for its shape, with the gems casts projecting out from it, recalls the flourishing *lignum crucis*, while its materials recall the gemmed Heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation. It stands on a mount with the four paradisiacal rivers, which reinforce the strong apocalyptic meaning of this image and, at the same time, declares that the sacrifice of Christ is a prefiguration of the salvation of humanity achieved in the last days.⁵³ The paradisiacal mount with the four rivers is rooted in the funerary visual language of Ravenna and, in the 6th century, it also appears in the apse mosaic of San Vitale, at the feet of Christ. It is found in connection with a monogrammatic cross at the side of a sarcophagus at Sant'Apollinare in Classe (end of the 5th-beginning of the 6th century)⁵⁴ (Fig. 4) and with the enthroned Christ, as we can see in the fifth-century sarcophagus of Saint Rinaldus in the Cathedral of Ravenna (Fig. 5).⁵⁵ The jeweled cross becomes frequent both in funerary sculpture and mosaic decoration from the time of Theoderic (493–525), in the form of a cross with its body covered in gems and straight arms – thus not a flourishing cross.⁵⁶ It is perhaps in the majestic example of the late fifth-century sarcophagus of Saint Barbatianus in the Chapel of the Madonna del Sudore at the Cathedral that it is best attested the imagery from which the Milan diptych draws (Fig. 6).⁵⁷ The lid of the coffin shows at the center a Christogram accompanied by A and Ω within a flowered garland with ribbons, while at the sides are two jeweled crosses with gems projecting out from the arms. Indeed, here the apocalyptic meaning of the image is made clear with the presence of the Greek letters (*Rev* 22:13) and the jeweled crosses at either side of Christ's monogram. The garland functions to glorify Christ and, at the same time, to remind viewers of his flourishing and renewing sacrifice, as well as

⁵³ For the meaning of the jeweled cross and the flourishing cross: Casartelli Novelli 1996, 143–145; Hellemo 1996, 114–116; Carile 2012, 85–86.

⁵⁴ Valenti Zucchini /Bucci 1968, 47–48 n. 32; Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 70.

⁵⁵ Valenti Zucchini /Bucci 1968, 34–35 n. 15; Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 65–66.

⁵⁶ As such, this cross is found on the sanctuary marble slabs in the Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and in the mosaics of the Arian Baptistry. It also adorns the sixth-century fragmentary sarcophagus of Bishop Ecclesius (522–532/3) today at Santa Maria Maggiore. For the Sant'Apollinare Nuovo slabs: Angiolini Martinelli 1968, 71, 75 n. 132–133 (ca. 550–575); Deichmann 1974, 136–139. For Bishop Ecclesius' sarcophagus: Mazzotti 1953, 38–47; Valenti Zucchini/Bucci 1968, 50–51 n. 40; Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 79–81.

⁵⁷ This sarcophagus is variously dated on stylistic grounds from the end of the 5th to the second half of the 6th century: De Francovich 1957, 17–46 especially 29–31; Valenti Zucchini/Bucci 1968, 36–37 n. 17 (second half of the sixth century); Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 63–64, 125–126 (mid-5th century); Farioli 1980, 147–194 especially 175–182; Dresken-Weiland 1998, 119; Baldini Lippolis 2003, 225–238 especially 231–232; Jäggi 2013, 87–90.



Fig. 4: Sarcophagus, Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna: mount with four rivers (photo: author).



Fig. 5: Sarcophagus of Saint Rinaldus, Cathedral, Ravenna: enthroned Christ over a mount with the four rivers (photo: author).



Fig. 6: Sarcophagus of Saint Barbatianus, Cathedral, Ravenna: lid with jeweled crosses (photo: author).

the new era coming with Christ's second *Parousia* in the last days. Indeed the central elements of the Milan diptych use the same components – namely the garland and the jeweled cross – and associate those with two other themes – the lamb, a symbolic expression of Christ, and the four rivers of paradise – to convey an analogous content. Thus, although the central elements of the Milan diptych do not find direct comparison in the art of Ravenna, their components and meaning draw from the visual language of the fifth-century imperial city.

Several other details of the Milan ivory find comparisons in the artistic culture of Ravenna. The shallow architectural representations framing the lamb and the cross, for example, can be seen on several sarcophagi and altar bases, where the *fenestrella confessionis* is similarly framed by columns and curtains drawn the sides.⁵⁸ In the 1970s, Volbach noted that the plaque with the adoration of the Magi reproduces a detail found on a fifth-century sarcophagus that is today in the basilica of San Vitale and, in the 7th century, held the body of the Exarch Isaac.⁵⁹ Just as on the ivory plaque, the second magus on the sarcophagus looks backwards. This is a peculiar feature, found elsewhere on the sarcophagus of Flavius Justus Catervius (beginning of the 5th century) in Tolentino.⁶⁰ In another marble object from Ravenna, the reliquary of Saints Quiricus and Julitta dating the beginning of the 5th-century,⁶¹ the second magus holds a tray decorated with two concentric circles that differentiate it from the

⁵⁸ For instance, in the altar of San Giovanni Evangelista (ca. 450–475), on a fragmentary altar front now at the Museo Arcivescovile (6th century), but also in the central opening of the *palatium* in the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo. For the altar Angiolini Martinelli 1968, 18–19 n. 1 and 5.

⁵⁹ Volbach 1977. For the sarcophagus of Isaac: Rizzardi 1997, 177–178; Valenti Zucchini/Bucci 1968, 32–33 cat. n. 13; Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 55–56.

⁶⁰ Ioli 1971; Nestori 1996. This peculiarity is also found on a sixth-century *pixys* at Florence (Museo Nazionale del Bargello); Bovini 1956, pp. 49–50 n. 39.

⁶¹ Angiolini Martinelli, 1968, 81–82 n. 138 (ca. 440–450); Diemer 1977, 32–43; Novara 1991, 119–122.

trays held by the other Magi (Fig. 7).⁶² In the ivory, Mary is seated on a chair that is placed on a platform, a detail that is similar to the reliquary, where she sits on a chair with *suppedaneum*. Although in the ivory, the squeezed representation of the Adoration of the Magi is not directly comparable to the more dynamic and extended images on Isaac's marble coffin or on the reliquary, these features link the Milan diptych to iconographies that spread in Ravenna in the 5th century.



Fig. 7: Reliquary of Saints Quiricus and Julitta, Archiepiscopal Museum, Ravenna: magi (photo: Opera di Religione, Archidiocesi di Ravenna e Cervia, Ravenna).

Unfortunately, the narrative scenes that appear on the diptych are often rare images that do not find direct comparisons: this applies for example to the image interpreted as the Ordeal of the Bitter Water or the Twelve-Year Old Jesus at the Temple and may indicate an early date for the ivory. However, other scenes appear to have spread in the sculpture of fifth-century Ravenna and then in the sixth-century mosaics of the city, which offer the first instances of narrative images in the arts of Ravenna. For instance, the scenes of the Annunciation at the Well and the one interpreted as the Ordeal of the Bitter Water show a rare iconography, drawing from apocryphal texts that were known in Ravenna, as evidenced in the Annunciation on the sarcophagus Pignatta (5th-century).⁶³ Furthermore, the subject of the Raising of Lazarus, found among the smaller biblical scenes on the Milan ivory panel, was particularly frequent

⁶² Such differentiation perhaps reflects the differences between the two liquids, incense, and myrrh, and the solid gold brought as gifts by the Magi. I thank Antonio Panaino for this suggestion. Interestingly, this differentiation is not discussed by Cumont (Cumont 1932, 82–105).

⁶³ For the sarcophagus Pignatta and its iconography: Testini 1977 321–337; Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 54–55; Baldini Lippolis 2003; Jäggi 2013, 87–90.

in the funerary art of Ravenna: it is found on the already mentioned sarcophagus of Isaac and on a sarcophagus from the church of St. John the Baptist now at the Museo Nazionale, both dating from the 5th century (Fig. 8).⁶⁴ Yet, in these cases, Lazarus is shown inside an arched aedicule raised on a platform or on steps; the only figures of the scene are Christ and Lazarus. On the ivory plaque, the image follows closely the iconography that we find at Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (493–526): the tomb is in the form of a small temple and Christ is accompanied by an apostle; though in the mosaic, the composition is reversed and Lazarus's sister, Mary, is absent.



Fig. 8: Sarcophagus of the Exarch Isaac from the church of St. John the Baptist, now in the Basilica of S. Vitale, Ravenna (photo: author).

The ivory's miracle scenes have iconographic schemes that can also be seen in the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo,⁶⁵ including the Transformation of the Water into Wine, as well as of the Last Supper. The only other late antique image of the Gift of the Widow than the one that is found on the ivory is similarly from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, but the iconography differs in the placement of the figures and Christ, who

⁶⁴ For the sarcophagus at the Museo Nazionale, the so-called "*traditio legis*" sarcophagus: Valenti Zucchini/Bucci 1968, 29–30 n. 10; Kollwitz/Herdejugen 1979, 56–57.

⁶⁵ Nineteenth-century restoration works altered the original iconography of the mosaic that is recorded in a seventeenth-century drawing by Ciampini (Ciampini 1690–99, II, 96, tav. 27). For this mosaic: Bovini 1950, 20–39, especially 33; Deichmann 1969, 182.

is shown standing and not seated on a globe as in the ivory. Other miracles of Christ have also been represented in the Christological cycle of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, such as the Healing of the Blind Man, while further comparisons between the typical scenes on the ivory and the mosaics from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo reveal pronounced variations, such as the Healing of the Paralytic at Bethesda that shows the paralytic turned towards Christ. Also the Baptism scene follows a different tradition: it omits the personification of the river Jordan, common to the mosaics of the Orthodox and Arian baptistery at Ravenna.

Thus, the iconographies of the Milan ivory do find comparison in the arts of Ravenna, particularly in the 5th century, although they have features that anticipate the sixth-century themes visible in Ravenna mosaics. In fact, the representation of the Last Supper finds remarkable comparisons in the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, while the plaque with Christ donating crowns to the martyrs strikingly resembles the apse mosaic of San Vitale (ca. 547/8) with Christ seated onto a globe. Surely, the Milan diptych pertains to an analogous visual culture in which the representation of the life and the miracles was connected to an apocalyptic perspective that celebrated the role of Christ as the Savior even in the last days. This perspective may be found in the symbolic representations of the sarcophagi more than in the decorative program of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, itself an Arian monument the iconography of which was not substantially differentiated from orthodox imagery.⁶⁶ The Milan diptych then may well have been created in Ravenna, possibly in the second half of the 5th century, when the development of Christian speculation, the diffusion of apocryphal texts and the taste for an imagery merging symbolic and narrative themes had already developed. Probably, as Frantová as rightly pointed out, only a better understanding of the origins of the *cloisonné* polychrome jewelry of the Milan diptych will allow us to solve the problem of the place where it was produced, although Ravenna may indeed represent a strong candidate.

Another ivory attributed to Ravenna is the Bryn Athyn plaque, dated to the 5th or 6th century (Fig. 9).⁶⁷ It shows saint Peter holding the keys and a cruciform rod set above a mount from which spring the four rivers of paradise. The figure is framed by a niche, the top of which is shaped in the form of a shell. On the basis of the mount with the four rivers and the shell motif that features in the mosaics of both the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, it has been attributed to Ravenna.⁶⁸ Although all of these elements are indeed part of the visual vocabulary of

⁶⁶ On the existence of a supposed "Arian iconography", see with different points of view: Penni Iacco 2011; Carile/Cirelli 2015, 97–127.

⁶⁷ Griffing 1938 266–279; Gómez Moreno 1968, n. 70 dates it to the 5th century; Volbach 1976, n. 134 dates it to the 6th century; Patterson Ševčenko 1977, 539–540 cat. n. 485, dates it to around 500. For a complete bibliographical discussion: Nikolajević 1989, pp. 429–441.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, however, Volbach omits the plaque from his work on Ravenna school of ivory carving.



Fig. 9: Ivory plaque, Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn (photo: courtesy of the Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania).

the city that used the mount with the four rivers in an apocalyptic-paradisiacal perspective and the shell motif for visualizing the importance of the person or symbol placed underneath it, indeed such a composition as a whole is absent from the visual repertoire of the city. In particular, the cross on the paradisiacal mount never appears as being held by a saint. This unique iconography has led scholars to claim that the plaque is a forgery.⁶⁹ However, Anthony Cutler has demonstrated that the technical details and fabric of the ivory are common to fifth and sixth-century ivories, proposing a

⁶⁹ Nikolajević 1979.

date within the 5th century.⁷⁰ Cutler has rightly pointed out that the cross here is not the cross on the paradisiacal mount that appears in the form of a monogrammatic cross in several sarcophagi from Ravenna or a jeweled cross, but the cross of Saint Peter's martyrdom. On the sarcophagus of the twelve apostles at Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Peter appears to hold both the keys and his cross, and on the already-mentioned sarcophagus of Rinaldus at the Cathedral the crown and the cross (Fig. 5).⁷¹ In this case, the paradisiacal mount may express the achievement of paradise through Peter's martyrdom more than the rock springing water with which Peter baptized his guards in the apocryphal Acts.⁷² Comparing this plaque and the lid of the *Capsella Africana*, where a martyr is analogously shown on a paradisiacal mount while holding the crown of his martyrdom and being crowned by the hand of God, Galit Noga-Banai underlines that such rare iconographies show the martyrs modeled after Christ, carrying the latter's power within them.⁷³ The provenance of the plaque as being from Ravenna cannot be ruled out: in the second half of the 5th century, Bishop Neon built a church dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul (the *Basilica Apostolorum*, today know as



Fig. 10: Apse mosaic, Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna (photo: Petar Milošević; Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International).

⁷⁰ Cutler 2001, 27–32.

⁷¹ For the sarcophagus of the twelve apostles (mid-5th century): Kollwitz/Herdejürgen 1979, 66–67. For the sarcophagus of Rinaldus, see above.

⁷² For this last interpretation: Cutler 2001, 30–31.

⁷³ Noga-Banai 2008, 66–67.

San Francesco). The interior decoration of the church featured a mosaic with Peter and Paul flanking a cross,⁷⁴ an imagery that seems at least partially echoed in the Bryn Athyn ivory plaque.⁷⁵ For the iconographic features of the ivory plaque and its connections to fifth-century art of Ravenna, the ivory may indeed have been produced in the city.

On the basis of the presence of the court in Ravenna, several consular diptychs are also attributed to a manufacture possibly located in Ravenna. For instance, this is the case of the Halberstadt diptych (417), identified with an image of Constantius III, Galla Placidia's second husband and short-lived emperor of the West in 421,⁷⁶ or of Orestes, consul in 530 under the Ostrogothic reign of Amalasantha and Athalaric.⁷⁷ However, none of these diptychs show elements that can be attributed exclusively to the iconographic repertory of late antique Ravenna. Rather, they demonstrate the diffusion of a visual language common to the members of the imperial administration of the empire, using analogous representational schemes and symbols of authority expressing their power and social status. By contrast, we may effectively see some features typical of Ravenna in the anonymous diptych of a *patricius* now in Novara, generally dated between 425 and 450.⁷⁸ (Fig. 11) Volbach already tentatively attributed it to Ravenna.⁷⁹ Indeed, the overall iconographic scheme with the two columns and curtains framing the central figure resembles the central panels of the Milan diptych panel and even the shallow relief of the architectural representation finds comparisons in the Milan diptych. Although the Novara diptych's details – like column capitals, lintels and curtains – are different from the Milan example,⁸⁰ there are nonetheless certain traits in common between these ivories.

74 *LPRa* 30 (*De Neone*) (ed. Mauskopf Deliyannis, 184).

75 If, as hypothesized, the ivory plaque showing an apostle now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was a product of the ateliers of Ravenna, this could demonstrate the diffusion of ivories with representations of apostles in fifth-century Ravenna (Williamson 2010, 40–41 cat. n. 4).

76 For the first time, Richard Delbrueck recognized in the diptych a portrait of Constantius III made in 417 (Delbrueck 1929, n. 2; Volbach 1976, n. 34). Alan Cameron has argued for his identification with Constantius *consul* of the east in 413 (Cameron 1998, 384–403. However, this new interpretation has been convincingly opposed by: Engemann 1999, 158–168; Bühl 2001, 193–206; Olovsson 2005, 20–23, 98–100, 109. For a possible production in Ravenna: Volbach 1977, 27–28; Bühl 2001, 193–206.

77 Delbrueck 1929, n. 32; Volbach 1976, n. 31; Netzer 1983, 265–271 (claiming that this was indeed made in Constantinople for Clementinus in 513 and then recut in 530); Olovsson 2005, 30–34. For the provenance of the diptych from Ravenna: Volbach 1977, 10, 23, 37.

78 Delbrueck 1929, 248 n. 64; Volbach 1976, 43 n. 64; Galletti 2007, 216–219 cat. n. 58 (with references).

79 Volbach 1977, 27–29.

80 It is worth noticing that in the Milan diptych the architectural representations of the central panels are similar, but not exactly the same: for instance the acanthus leaves of the capitals differ considerably, showing the hand of two different carvers.

While the written sources do not help our understanding of the diffusion of ivory products in fifth-century Ravenna, we may assume that these goods circulated on the basis of the wide dissemination of ivory objects as symbols of status among the élites.⁸¹ Even at the court of Theoderic, these objects may have been present and surely the intellectuals related to Theoderic had a certain acquaintance with the use of ivory as an expression of the taste and refinement of the ruling classes. Cassiodorus, a well trained Roman of the highest rank in the Ostrogothic administration, does not mention the art of ivory but for one topical passage that is itself revealing of the influence of Graeco-Roman culture on the Ostrogothic court, where ivory was valued as an expensive and precious material. Celebrating the magnificence of the eternal city, Cassiodorus compares Rome to the seven beauties of the earth, among which was the statue of Olympian Jove, made of gold and ivory by the hand of Phidias.⁸² The literary's acquaintance with ivory products may be inferred from a later text of religious content, where Cassiodorus exalts the virtue of chastity by comparing it to ivory – and the elephant, from which ivory comes, an intelligent and disciplined animal, according to Cassiodorus.⁸³ In particular, in this text the author recalls the “ivory palaces” (*domus eburneae*) of the Lord's bride (the Church), clarifying that these adorned palaces should not be interpreted as mere luxury houses, but as the residences of chaste women, the kings' daughters, the latter being the faithful or the children of the ruling classes who often follow Christ in glory. In this passage, we may see an indication for his understanding of the place of ivory in the contemporary culture of the élite class. Apart from its value in the scriptural commentary, here, ivory is synonymous with luxury and, particularly, with the extreme wealth of contemporary palaces (*domus eburneae*): otherwise, Cassiodorus would not feel the need to clarify to his reader that in this case it is used as a metaphor for chastity. Similarly in the same years, in a passage of his philosophical work, Boethius mentions a library decorated with ivory, glass, and furnished with comfortable chairs,⁸⁴ a useless comfort if man had not ideas and opinions. These texts clarify the spread of the use of ivory among the élites as an element in the imagery of great and magnificent mansions, as well as of refinement and culture.

Yet it is only by the middle of the 6th century that we have clear evidence for the diffusion of ivory objects in Ravenna and their use among the highest members of the élites. The famous ivory-reveted *cathedra* of Bishop Maximian (546–557) is the most striking proof. Unlike other outstanding late antique ivory artifacts that came into the

81 For the role of ivory as an indicator of social status: Cutler 1987, 432–437; Cutler 1993, 187; Sena Chiesa 2005, 188–201.

82 Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 15.

83 Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum* XLIV, 10 and 17 (ed. Adriaen 1958). Scholars emphasize that this passage is replete with Virgilian echoes (Ceresa-Gastaldo 1968, 304–309); however this does not diminish its importance as an evidence of the value of ivory objects for Cassiodorus.

84 Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae* I, 5 (ed. Bieler 1958, 13).

city collections at a later age, such as the diptych of Murano (6th century),⁸⁵ its link to late antique Ravenna and the city's élites is testified by its monogram and plausible historical sources. The monogram decorating the front of the chair has been recognized as Bishop Maximian's on the basis of comparisons with other monograms found on the architectural elements that once decorated the Church of Sant'Andrea Maggiore, built under his patronage.⁸⁶ In the 11th century, John the Deacon records that in 1001, Doge Peter II Orseolo of Venice donated to emperor Otto III a *cathedra elephantis artificiosa sculpta tabulis*, in an exchange of gifts between the two allies. The emperor, who resided in Ravenna, left the chair in the city.⁸⁷ Scholars have associated Maximian's chair with that *cathedra*. Accordingly, the chair was first taken by the Venetians sometime between 6th and the 10th century and then brought back to Ravenna in 1001 as an imperial gift.⁸⁸ Or, perhaps the Doge brought the ivory chair from Pola, where Maximian lived before taking office in Ravenna, and then donated it to the emperor:⁸⁹ however, there is no reason to suppose that the bishop of Ravenna had his *cathedra* in Pola, the enduring connections of Maximian with the latter city notwithstanding.⁹⁰ John's record seems quite reliable, since the author witnessed the donation. Certainly, he could have been referring to another ivory chair;⁹¹ however, this might be the first literary reference to Maximian's *cathedra* in historical sources.⁹² Either if the *cathedra* was previously in Ravenna since the bishopric of Maximian or it was brought from Venice in 1001, its certain association with one of the most prominent figures in late-antique Ravenna attests for the use of and taste for ivory objects among the sixth-century élites of the city.

Maximian had strong relationship with the court of Constantinople, as well as with the highest élites of the empire. Justinian put him on the archiepiscopal chair

85 Wessel 1958, 11–127; Furlan 1960, 142–151; Rizzardi 1994, 486–496; for a new reading in the context of sixth-century ivory production: Caillet 2008. For the ivory collections acquired by various local institutions starting from the 18th century and now at the Museo Nazionale: Martini/Rizzardi 1990.

86 Gerola first recognized the monogram on the ivory chair as Maximian's: Gerola 1915, 807–813. The other monogram is on an impost block coming from the church of Sant'Andrea Maggiore and now held at the Museo Arcivescovile (Deichmann 1976, 305–7 and fig. 173; Farioli 1969, 86 cat. n. 183, fig. 152). For the churches built by Maximian: Mazzotti 1956, 5–30; Bovini 1957, 5–27; Montanari 1991, 368–416. For the church built by Maximian to host the relics of Saint Andrew: *LPRa* 76 and 82–83 (*De Maximiano*) (ed. Mauskopf Deliyannis, 243, 250).

87 Iohannes Diaconus, *Chronicum Venetum* s.a. 1001 (ed. Pertz 1846, 34).

88 Ricci 1898, 1–4.

89 Bettini 1974, 19.

90 For the possessions of the church of Ravenna in Istria during Maximian's bishopric: Fasoli 1991, 389–400, especially 394–397; Grah 2005, 49–60.

91 This is the opinion of: Cecchelli 1936–44, I, 27–32.

92 The first mention of the *cathedra* in the Archbishopric of Ravenna dates 1553 ca.: Mazzotti 1954, 483–492. For the history of the chair after the 17th century: Cecchelli 1936–44, I, 17–25.

of Ravenna, imposing him upon the leading classes of the city that, after initial resistance, eventually accepted him.⁹³ During his bishopric he actively supported Justinian's politics, especially those concerning the schism of the Three Chapters that was dividing the empire, and he visited the emperor at Constantinople on at least two occasions while he was the leader of the Church of Ravenna.⁹⁴ Because of the strong ties between Maximian and Justinian, the *cathedra* has been interpreted either as Justinian's gift or as a work sponsored by the archbishop.⁹⁵ However, by virtue of chair's iconographic program, the ivory throne was plausibly attributed to the patronage of Maximian himself. As a whole, the program appears to be a celebration of the theological and political positions of the bishop, without direct reference to the emperor.⁹⁶ The front of the chair is particularly telling in this respect: on it, Maximian's monogram is centrally placed above the image of John the Baptist surrounded by the evangelists, and beneath the plaque with Christ *Pantokrator* at the apex of the backrest (Fig. 12). Thus, visually the chair conveys the idea of the power and role of the archbishop: Maximian here is a continuator of the Baptist's work – and of the evangelists – at Christ's behest.

Indeed, an analogous message is expressed also in the spatial arrangement of liturgical furniture and mosaics at the basilica of San Vitale, completed by Maximian 547/8. There, in the apse, the marble bishop chair stands in the middle of the *synthronon* right below the image of Christ *Pantokrator* in the apse conch (Fig. 10).⁹⁷ The faithful gathered in the nave would have attended to a demonstration of the bishop's role within the Christian hierarchy, being the bishop the representative of Christ on Earth. On Maximian's chair, the message is even stronger, as all the images are surrounded by vine leaves and inhabited scroll-work reproducing a paradisiacal environment. The chair declares the role of the bishop in the Christian hierarchy, a heavenly role achieved by virtue of his earthly appointment. Evidence that the chair has

⁹³ *LPRa* 70 (*De Maximiano*) (ed. Mauskopf Deliyannis, 239).

⁹⁴ Montanari 1991 368–416; Cosentino 2008, 234–235; Mauskopf Deliyannis 2010, 209–219.

⁹⁵ Against a supposed dating of the *cathedra* before 546 by virtue of the monogram read as Maximianus *Episcopus*: Farioli 2005, 165–168. Here I am not discussing the enormous scholarly literature on Maximian's *cathedra*, for references see: Bovini 1990; Farioli Campanati 2000, 94–97. For the discussion of its artistic context: Farioli 1992, 127–157; Gaborit-Chopin 1992, 42–45.

⁹⁶ For the theological reading of the program and the interpretation of the *cathedra* as a product of Maximian's patronage: Montanari 1991, 368–416.

⁹⁷ The original marble work cladding the apse wall was first replaced by wood during the 16th century and by marble slabs around 1863. Between 1900 and 1904, analysis of the remaining archaeological evidence proved the original existence of the *synthronon* and the central bishop chair. See correspondence between Icilio Bocci, responsible for the excavation works, and Corrado Ricci: Ravenna, Biblioteca Classense, Carteggio Ricci Monumenti, Letter by Icilio Bocci, 9 March 1900. This allowed the reconstruction of the apse as we see it today, around the years 1910'. Evidence of the original *synthronon*, in fact a *subsellium*, can be seen in the photographs now held at the Biblioteca Classense (Ravenna, Biblioteca Classense, Fondo Fotografico Ricci, n. 1652).

(a)



(b)



Fig. 11a–b: So-called diptych of the *patricius*, Musei della Canonica del Duomo, Novara (photo: courtesy of the Musei della Canonica del Duomo di Novara, Novara, Italy).

heavenly significance is seen in the two peacocks carved at either side of the monogram, strong symbols of eternity that were associated with paradisiacal imagery since antiquity. This message is particularly suitable for a *cathedra*, meant to be displayed in the bishop's palace during ceremonies of semi-private character. The fact that the *cathedra* may not have been destined to be used as a chair notwithstanding,⁹⁸ this object is nevertheless extremely important to the bishop's role and his self-perception in the 6th century. Furthermore, by having represented the stories of Joseph, significantly located on the arms of the chair, Maximian declared his position in the hierarchy of the empire: a loyal vice-king himself capable of ruling without interfering with the king of Egypt.⁹⁹ Indeed, the iconographical program of the chair is

⁹⁸ For the hypothesis that the *cathedra* was not intended to be used but only displayed: Farioli Campanati 2000. However, the ebanus with which was made the original structure is a strong material that would have allowed the use of the *cathedra* as a chair.

⁹⁹ Montanari 1984–85, 305–322.



Fig. 12: Maximian's ivory chair, Archiepiscopal Museum, Ravenna: front (photo: Opera di Religione, Arcidiocesi di Ravenna e Cervia, Ravenna).

more understandable as a personal declaration by the bishop, one that finds visual comparisons in the other monuments sponsored by Maximian in the city, more than as a reflection of the mentality of an emperor like Justinian.

Recent research has recognized that the ivories assembled in the chair come from three different hands, or that there were three groups of carvers assigned to the three separate narrative cycles: the infancy plaques, the miracles plaques, and Joseph plaques.¹⁰⁰ This does not necessarily mean that the chair was only assembled in Ravenna, where workers joined together three groups of tablets coming

¹⁰⁰ Deichmann 1989, 348; Bovini 1990.

from different areas of the Mediterranean.¹⁰¹ Rather, it shows that there were different artisans with different styles at work. According to one important theory, the *cathedra* may have been a product of the workshop at Constantinople.¹⁰² This attribution is not only due to the Greek characters on the back of the plaques, which could have been written by a Greek in Ravenna, the inhabitants of which in the 6th century included Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Goths.¹⁰³ Comparison with the Constantinopolitan Christ and the Virgin's ivory diptych, now in Berlin, reveals striking similarities in iconography and style to Maximian's chair (Fig. 13).¹⁰⁴ The compositional scheme, architectural features, and figures of the Berlin ivories find exceptional comparisons with the plaques representing John the Baptist and the four evangelists on the front of Maximian's chair.¹⁰⁵ What is more, the Berlin ivories originally showed a detail that linked them directly to the *cathedra* itself, and to Maximian. The lower part of the plaque was cut out, leaving a few fragments of an inscription that once formed a monogram of Maximian. Thanks to a detailed analysis, Gudrun Bühl was able to reconstruct the monogram as a variant of the one that is still visible on the *cathedra*, firmly connecting the Berlin ivories to Archbishop Maximian,¹⁰⁶ who apparently had an affinity for ivory products of religious content. It also sets the date of production for these artifacts to the middle of the 6th century. By means of comparison to other five-piece diptychs that have been attributed to Constantinople,¹⁰⁷ it appears that in the middle of the 6th century, Constantinople was a very active center of ivory production and that the most important members of the élites of the empire – like Maximian – must have received these objects from the capital. Another important piece of evidence that attaches the Berlin diptych to the city of Ravenna is a list of names, written on the back of the panels. According to paleographic analysis, it is an early form of half-uncial script, used in Northern Italy until the middle of the 6th century, a calligraphy that can be found in other manuscripts from sixth-century Ravenna,¹⁰⁸ suggesting that the plaques were inscribed with these names in Ravenna,

101 Labarte 1864–66, I, 17. For discussion of the various theories on the provenience of the *cathedra*: Volbach 1977, 38–39, 46–49.

102 On the basis of these Greek characters, Deichmann supposed the provenience of the chair from Constantinople or Asia Minor (Deichmann 1969, 76; Deichmann, 1989, 348). For the Greek characters: Cecchelli 1936–44, III, 45–57. See also: Farioli Campanati 1992; Gaborit-Chopin 1992.

103 For the cosmopolitan society of Ravenna in the 6th century (especially after 540): Brown 1991, 135–149.

104 Berlin, Bode Museum, inv. n. 564 and 565.

105 For discussion: Bühl 1999, 21–26; Bühl 2000, 76–77 n. 19; Bühl 2002, 81–97; Farioli Campanati 1992.

106 Bühl 2002, 81–97; Bühl 2000, 76–77 n. 19.

107 Caillet 2008.

108 In particular Arwed Arnulf finds comparisons with the script of a manuscript now at the Archivio Arcivescovile, s.n., f. 46 containing the *De Fide* by Ambrose (Arnulf 1993, 134–139). For a discussion see also: Bühl 2002, 81–97 who corrects the list at the light of new archive documents.



Fig. 13: Ivory diptych with Christ and the Virgin, Bode Museen, Berlin (photo: WikimediaCommons; Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication).

as would have been typical for the time period in which diptychs were used as commemorative register of those deserving veneration.

The list is fragmentary, as the diptych was cut down at a later period, but corresponds to a series of saints, some of whom have been recognized to be of Roman origins, some others from Aquileia or Asia Minor, which do not find parallels in any known *martyrologion* or calendar.¹⁰⁹ Although scholars have underlined the personal character of this catalogue, which seems to correspond to a series of saints particularly venerated by the person who wrote it, it is worth noticing that at least twelve or thirteen saints out of twenty-four saints recognizable in the inscriptions

¹⁰⁹ Solin 1995, 357–370; Bühl 2002, 88–94 with important considerations and comparative chart.

were venerated in Ravenna in the sixth century.¹¹⁰ Speculating on the possible identification of the person who received the ivory based on the list alone would be pure fantasy. However, the presence of the monogram's fragment on the ivory connects it to Maximian and the script of the register of saints links it to manuscripts from Ravenna, firmly placing the Berlin ivory in the city at the time of Maximian. The list of saints, moreover, sheds new light on the devotional or liturgical role of ivories of religious content in sixth-century Ravenna.

Another *pyxis*, the style of which finds comparison in the Christological plaques of Maximian chair,¹¹¹ may be evidence for the great favor that ivory objects received in sixth-century liturgical contexts in the area of the Pentapolis, where, after 540, Ravenna was the most important city – supposing that the *pyxis*, now at the Cathedral Treasury of Pesaro, was in this area since antiquity.¹¹² In any case, the ivories connected with Maximian are evidence of the taste of the empire élites for ivory as a symbol of status and a means to express the culture and sophistication of the highest members of Ravenna's high society. Furthermore, ivories of religious content may well have served as liturgical objects in the city and its surroundings, as signs of personal devotion or expressions of the means of the church.

In conclusion, recent research on late antique ivory carving has shown that its manufacture in a given center depended upon the city's access to supplies of raw material, the presence of skilled craftsmen, the cultural requirements for ivory products, and the city's prominence in major trade routes to distribute those products.¹¹³ In the fifth as much as in the 6th century, Ravenna certainly had the means to receive tusk and, conversely, to distribute ivories around the Mediterranean. Since it was a lively commercial center, a seat for the western court in the first half of the 5th century and later an outpost of the imperial administration, likely it also attracted skilled artisans. Furthermore, from extant evidence, it appears that the visual language of the arts of Ravenna also had an impact on ivory-craft, which may indicate the production of ivory in the city as early as the 5th century. Later, in the 6th century, the abundance of ivory artifacts connected to Maximian and the members of the élites of Ravenna prove the power of this material as a medium to express the social status, education, refinement, and religious affiliation of the city's leading class. However, without clear archaeological data, the production of ivory artifacts cannot be claimed with certainty for late antique Ravenna. In short, if there is no definitive archaeological proof that Ravenna ever manufactured ivory, there is still enough evidence to assert that it had the requirements to do so. Moreover, for the wealthy people living in one of the most

110 The fragmentary list included thirty-one names on the back of the Virgin's plaque and at least another three names on the back of Christ's plaque (Bühl 2002, 92).

111 Russo 1989, 79–147, especially 99–102.

112 Unfortunately the first records about the *pyxis* date to the 18th century (Rizzardi 1985, 609–620).

113 Cutler 1993, 10.

prominent cities of the empire, ivory was an important medium for their cultural expression, which would have almost certainly drawn artisans and positioned Ravenna as a potential center for late antique ivory carving.

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