

# A decorated bone ring from a cabinet or chest and workshop procedures in the 4th c. A.D.

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A well-preserved bone ring from Kenchreai, made up of 6 curved pieces, demonstrates some efficient workshop procedures in use in the late Roman period.<sup>1</sup> As a finished piece, it sheds light on a use to which a standard product of bone processing — namely rectangular and trapezoidal blanks cut from long bones or, less frequently, ribs, scapulae or pelvic bones — could be put.<sup>2</sup> Such blanks were typically cut into moulding strips to frame the incised or low relief bone or ivory panels that were attached to boxes and chests, either left plain or decorated with lines, spiral grooves, or floral patterns;<sup>3</sup> or these blanks could be used to construct larger decorative plaques, even large rings, as the bone strips presented below demonstrate. The preservation of this complete ring, evidently a unique example, illustrates the systematic procedures and potential for large-scale output by the decorative bone industry in Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

During excavations conducted by The University of Chicago and Indiana University between 1963 and 1968 at Kenchreai, the Saronic gulf port of Corinth, there were recovered, from a sunken, apsidal room behind the port installations at the SW end of the harbor, more than 120 panels of glass *opus sectile* and a deposit of ivory, bone, and wood fragments belonging to elaborately decorated furniture.<sup>5</sup> The structure where these were found came to be called the “fountain court”. The first fragments of the furniture and decorative attachments were recovered in the closing days of the 1964 season, and the remainder in the next two years when the “fountain court” was drained and excavation completed. The materials are now exhibited or under study at the Archaeological Museum at Kyras Vrisi adjacent to the Isthmia site.

Among the furniture veneer and attachments were 44 richly-decorated curved bone strips, some well preserved, others very fragmentary. Six of them, decorated with a swastika-type pattern enriched with flowers, can be placed together to form a single ring, with an outer diameter of 14.8 and an inner of 10 cm (fig. 1).

- 1 The wood furniture and related ivory and bone veneer, plaques, and attachments from Kenchreai will be published by the present author and D. Hadjilazaro Thimme as vol. 6 in the series *Kenchreai, eastern port of Corinth*.
- 2 A. St. Clair, “Evidence for late antique bone and ivory carving on the northeast slope of the Palatine: the Palatine East Excavation,” *DOP* 55 (1996) 373, fig. 16; E. Hostetter *et al.*, “A late Roman *domus* with apsidal hall on the NE slope of the Palatine: 1989-1991 seasons,” *Rome papers* (JRA Suppl. 11, 1994) 168, fig. 49; D. De Cupere, W. Van Neer, and A. Lentacker, “Some aspects of the bone-working industry in Roman Sagalassos,” in M. Waelkens and J. Poblome (edd.), *Sagalassos* vol. 2. *Report on the third excavation campaign of 1992* (ActaArchLov 6, 1993) 271, fig. 5f; V. J. Hutchinson and D. S. Reese, “A worked bone industry at Carthage,” in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *The circus and a Byzantine cemetery at Carthage* (Ann Arbor 1989) 549-94, esp. 556-69; M. Hassall and J. Rhodes, “Excavations at the New Market Hall, Gloucester, 1966-67,” *TransBristolGlosArchSoc* 93 (1974) 73 report 1,709 pieces of bone from a workshop, averaging 2 mm thick, mainly cut into straight geometric shapes, including trapezoids, squares, triangles, and parallelograms.
- 3 Among numerous examples, see the panels of the casket in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Inv. No. 71.40, edged in this fashion with striated strips and bead-and-reel moldings: R. H. Randall, Jr., *Masterpieces of ivory from the Walters Art Gallery* (New York 1985) 90, 107, cat. no. 135 and color pl. 44; among the strips with floral relief in the Benaki Museum, Athens, see Inv. no. 18728 and 18730: L. Marangou, *Bone carvings from Egypt, I. Graeco-Roman period* (Tübingen 1976) 129, cat. nos. 237 and 239, pls. 65b and 70h respectively.
- 4 It will be argued fully elsewhere (*Kenchreai* vol. 6) that the bone and ivory furnishings from Kenchreai were produced in Egypt in the second third of the 4th c.
- 5 For the circumstances of the excavations, see R. Scranton, J. W. Shaw, and L. Ibrahim, *Kenchreai* vol. 1, *Topography and architecture* (Leiden 1978); for the glass panels, L. Ibrahim, R. Scranton, and R. Brill, *Kenchreai* vol. 2. *Panels of opus sectile in glass* (Leiden 1976).