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Five lessons in late Roman ivory

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As in agriculture so in scholarship, fields are determined by those who laid them out. Enclosures may be imposed or hedgerows torn down but, in the main, the terrain belongs to those who first marked it off. For all practical purposes, two fundamental works, Delbrueck's *Consulardiptychen* and Volbach's *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, circumscribe and characterize the field of late Roman ivory carving. Conceptually and chronologically — the second, of course, being no more than a subset of the first — these books still define and delimit the ambit of our studies. Works of the first three decades of this century (the third edition of Volbach is essentially an expansion of his first version of 1916), they continue to be depended on; more importantly, they still shape the ways in which ivory carving in late antiquity is regarded. In light of the age of this defining literature, it remains to be determined whether this frame properly marks off the field and thus allows us, where necessary, to expand it, or, alternatively, hinders and thus distorts our view. This is no easy task, for the categories that Delbrueck and Volbach erected, the fences that they raised, have been treated almost universally as prescriptive. A fair test of their authority, of the extent to which they continue to be valid, cannot be couched in the terms that they devised sixty and more years ago — differentiations such as those between imperial, official and private types¹ (did these last, for instance, truly embody and promote ideas addressed to no larger audience than their sponsors' immediate families?); or the distinction between Christian and 'secular' works² (when the latter include not only diptychs issued by consuls, most if not all of whom in the 5th c. must have been Christians, but also signs that either name or refer to Christ³). If such categories appear to be suspect, will the entire structure, founded on hierarchical and confessional axes, still stand when subjected to the strains of modern archaeological and prosopographical methods or the stresses imposed by newer disciplines like material culture studies? With these tools, I propose both to dig up some old questions and to see if less category-ridden answers can be offered. The 'lessons' that follow are to be understood not as teachings but as *lectures*, readings and re-readings of earlier commentary and especially of the objects themselves. Lack of unmediated experience of the ivories in question is, as we shall see, not the least reason why we are saddled with misleading and/or unnecessary hypotheses. To the extent possible, I illustrate my observations with unpublished or little-known objects; for, despite a recent surge of interest in late Roman ivories, discussion has tended to revolve around a limited number of celebrated pieces. I also try to cite as much as possible of the useful literature, remote in time, recent, or forthcoming, for even in the sectors examined here it is so dispersed that its co-ordination is a task almost as necessary as a critical response to the books that continue to define the field.

1. Lessons of publication

One difficulty that immediately faces the user of Volbach's handbook is the absence of any clear statement of what constitutes a 'late antique' ivory. The problem is not so much the lack of a definition of the period as the lack of a past, a setting for the objects that he does consider.⁴ His pagan procession begins with fragments of a pyxis found in the arena at Trier,⁵ while the Christian series starts with works assigned to the third quarter or the end of the 4th c. (V 107 f.). What, apart from notional chronology, distinguishes these from the head and arm of an Athena in the Vatican and a Hercules relief from

1 Delbrueck 1929, 10-16.

2 Volbach 1976, 28, 77.

3 Such as the emblem and legend on the standard held by Honorius on the Probus diptych (Delbrueck 1929 [hereafter D], no.1, Volbach 1976 [hereafter V], no.1). We can assume the Christian belief of 6th-c. consuls, most prominently announced on his diptychs by Clementinus (D 16, V 15).

4 On these, see the reviews by E. Kitzinger and W. Tronzo in *AJA* 82 (1978) 131 f., and D.H. Wright in *Art Bulletin* 63 (1981) 675-77.

5 V 89. On these, see now Schwinden 1985.