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Seeking the place of the object in art history

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II. Seeking the place of the object in art history

Dptych of Five Parts in the Treasury of the Cathedral of Milan.

The two ivory panels deposited in the treasury of the cathedral in Milan with a size of 37.5×28.3 cm are labelled in the specialized literature as the Dptych of Five Parts because each of them is assembled using mortice and tenon joints from five separately carved ivory panels. Today, they are mounted on a wooden base with a silver-plated frame, which was added at the end of the 18th century.⁵ The horizontal panels each depict one scene lined by the crowns of oak trees with symbols or busts of the evangelists. The vertical panels are decoratively framed scenes divided into three smaller fields. Hence, in total, there are sixteen Biblical or Apocryphal stories from the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The central panels presenting a lamb and cross are executed in the goldsmithing technique of *cloisonné* (Figs. 1 and 2).

The two horizontal scenes of the panel with the Lamb of God depict the scene of the Nativity of Christ with Adoration of the Animals (cat. No. 1) and the Massacre of the Innocents (cat. No. 2). The vertical panels then present on the left the Apocryphal scene of the Annuciation at the Well (cat. No. 5), the Three Magi, who see the star (cat. No. 6), the Baptism of Christ (cat. No. 7) and on the right the ambiguously interpreted two scenes with a woman and an angel standing in front of a temple (Ordeal by the Bitter Water?, cat. No. 8) and the Twelve-Year-Old Christ in the temple (? , cat. No. 9), under them is the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (cat. No. 10). The second panel with a cross presents the Adoration of the Three Magi in two horizontal panels (cat. No. 3) and the Changing of Water into Wine (cat. No. 4), the side panels then have Christ miraculously healing the lepers (cat. No. 11), a paralytic (cat. No. 12) and the Resurrection of Lazarus (cat. No. 13), then on the right Christ seated on a globe and giving two saints martyr's crowns (cat. No. 14), the Last Supper (cat. No. 15) and the Widow's Offering (cat. No. 16).

5 Rossana Bossaglia, Mia Cinotti, *Tesoro e Museo del Duomo*, Milano 1978, p. 49.

Overview of the research up to now

For nearly a century, the catalogue by Wolfgang Fritz Volbach *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* has remained the fundamental source of learning on the ivory of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Since 1916 a total of three editions⁶ have been issued and is the result of significant effort to map the preserved ivory works, put them in logical chronological groups and write down the existing bibliography.⁷ The catalogue entry devoted to the Five-Part Diptych from the cathedral in Milan limits itself to a basic iconographic description of the scenes and presents several comparisons based mainly on an analysis of the composition and pictorial iconography.⁸ Volbach briefly devotes himself to the Diptych of Milan in terms of style in the general introduction of the catalogue. He speaks of a “decline of the spatial views” and “the beginnings of the overcoming of Hellenism”. The figures begin to be somewhat pudgier and stockier, forming a kind of intermediate step leading towards the complete isolation of the figure.⁹ According to Volbach, the “metal inlay” technique used in the central panels depicting the lamb and cross speak for its creation in North Italy.¹⁰ In the question of its dating, he refers in the third edition to Kolwitz¹¹ and places the Diptych in the second half of the 5th century.¹²

Volbach’s research path, which led him to setting the work’s dating and provenience, was gradually supplemented by the studies of other researchers, e.g. Baldwin Smith, Edward Capps, Alexandr Coburn Soper and Richard Delbrück.¹³ The studies by these authors are also part of the fundamental works that have influenced all of the further study of the Milan Diptych and Early Christian ivory in general; I therefore consider it to be necessary to summarize them briefly here.

In his book, *Early Christian Iconography and a School of Ivory Carvers in Provence*¹⁴ from 1918, Baldwin Smith assembled a group of ivory monuments in which he included the Milan Diptych of Five Parts, the Felix Diptych (Fig. 3), the panel of Trivulzio with the Women at the Tomb (Fig. 4), Boethius Diptych (Fig. 5), fragments of the former five-part diptychs of Berlin (Fig. 6), Paris (Fig. 7) and Nevers

6 The 2nd edition of Volbach’s catalogue from 1952 was substantially longer than the first; Cf. Edward Capps, [Review:] W. F. Volbach: *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, *AJA* 60, 1956, pp. 82–88.

7 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976.

8 Ibidem, entry 119, pp. 84–85.

9 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, p. 19.

10 Ibidem, p. 84.

11 Johannes Kolwitz, [Review:], W. F. Volbach: *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*. 2. Aufl. (1952), *Germania: Korrespondenzblatt der Römisch-germanischen Kommission des Kaiserl. archäologischen Instituts* 30, 1952, pp. 226–227.

12 Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, p. 84.

13 Ibidem, p. 85.

14 Baldwin Smith, *Early Christian iconography and a school of ivory carvers in Provence*, Princeton 1918.

(Fig. 8), the Diptych of Rouen (Fig. 9) and the sarcophagus of St Victor of Marseilles.¹⁵ Smith attributes this group to a Roman school of ivory carvers working in Provence. The existence of this South Gallic school explains the invasion of the Goths under the leadership of Alaric into Italy, which culminated in 410 with the sacking of Rome, subsequent interruption of artistic activity and the departure of the craftsmen. He labels as the haven of the Roman artists the area of Provence, where around the beginning of the 5th century a fully developed school of stonemasons appears, who, however, maintained Roman traditions. It hence seemed likely to him that also ivory carvers took shelter there. Besides the stylistic unity of the figural scenes, he notices also the identical ornamental decoration. The strongest evidence of the existence of this “school of Provence” for him is the Massacre of the Innocents, where the method for the murder of the children is depicted for which no parallel is found in any other artistic area. The Massacre of the Innocents, or the way they were killed, is not described in the Gospel or the Apocrypha. On the sarcophagus of St. Victor of Marseilles, on a fragment of the ivory Diptych of five parts from Berlin (Fig. 6) and also on the Milan Diptych, the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents shows the way of death to be crushing, not piercing with a sword or spear. Smith believes that the impulse for the popularity of this scene in the fine arts comes from the North Spanish poet Prudentius (4th century), who in his treatise *Peristephanon* deals with the way the children were murdered. In the Mozarabic rite, the Feast of the Innocents was celebrated and this specific depiction of the scene according to him could also refer to the transfer of the relics to Marseille at the beginning of the 5th century.¹⁶

In 1927 Edward Capps published an article *The Style of Consular diptychs*. He continued to work with Smith’s “school of Provence” in connection with the Milan Diptych. He further analyses the strong ornamental links of the individual works from the group. The closest relation to the Milan tablets is in the decoration of the Diptych of Boethius (Fig. 5). He notices the same architectural background; the execution of the capitals of the columns and roughly carved architraves. According to him, the garland placed on the architrave of the consular Diptych is a combination of the central garland with the lamb and the garlands in the corners of the Milan tablets. The garland is identically decorated with a rosette and long twisted ribbon ended with a knot in the shape of a cone. He agrees with Smith and labels Rome as the starting point of the style of this “school”.¹⁷

15 Based on this study, Volbach in the second edition of his book (Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz 1952, p. 62) placed the Milan Diptych in the category of the sarcophagi of South Gaul. He abandons that in the third edition and selects the sarcophagi of Ravenna (Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, p. 84).

16 Smith, *Early Christian iconography*, pp. 65 and 241.

17 Edward Capps, *The Style of Consular diptychs*, *The Art Bulletin* 10, No. 1, 1927, pp. 60–101.

To strengthen the bases of the north Mediterranean artistic production and raise its importance within the development of Early Christian art was the aim of the article by Alexander Coburn Soper *The Italo-Gallic School of Early Christian Art*.¹⁸ He attempts to demonstrate this intent using three monuments: the Pola Casket (Fig. 10), the wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome (Fig. 11) and the Brescia Casket (Fig. 12). He presents for the first time a hypothetical Milanese workshop, which already at the end of the 4th century shaped ivory of the highest quality for Roman patrons, whether for export or through some “daughter” workshop active in Rome itself, but with the strong cooperation of artists from Milan and Ravenna.¹⁹ He proposes an interesting formal and iconographic comparison of the Milan Diptych with the wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, where he highlights two significant iconographic details. The first of them is a brick wall in the background, which is a constant symbol of Smith’s Provençal group and labels it as “an extremely rare motif in Rome”. The second detail is the characteristic clothing of the magis, for which he also did not find any parallels in Rome (Fig. 11). For him, these two details are indisputable proof that they are the product of artistic customs spread from the north.²⁰ The idea itself of doors decorated with figural scenes can be seen in the Latin world only on the doors of the Basilica of St Ambrose in Milan, on the doors of the Holy Sepulchre on the ivory tablet of Trivulzio (Fig. 4) and on the ivory tablet from the British Museum (Fig. 13).²¹ The application of northern artistic customs on monuments created in Rome can be derived from the entries in the *Liber pontificalis*, which prove the constant intervention of Valentinian III from Ravenna in the construction and decoration of Roman basilicas. The doors of Santa Sabina (and hence also the ivory monuments connected with them) were attributed by Soper to works of sculptors from Provence or from North Italy. He subjected Smith’s “Provençal School”, however, to stylistic criticism and labelled particularly the later monuments from this group as typical for the entire northern Mediterranean area extending from Spain to Dalmatia, not exclusively to the area of Provence.²²

Richard Delbrück in 1951 contributed to the further revision of Smith’s “Provençal School” in the article *Das fünfteilige Diptychon in Mailand*. The author here carefully accumulated the written sources, which could serve as a source of the narrative scenes of the Milan Diptych, although in this sense he did not draw a clear conclusion; he hence rather proves a mixture of western and eastern

18 Alexander Coburn Soper, *The Italo-Gallic School of Early Christian Art*, *The Art Bulletin* 20, No. 2, 1938, pp. 145–192.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 164.

20 Soper, *The Italo-Gallic*, p. 169.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 170.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 182.

written sources.²³ He devoted the most space to the scene of the Massacre of the Innocents. He thus reacts to the arguments of Baldwin Smith, who sought the popularity of this theme in Provence. Delbrück was able based on the written and pictorial sources to refute this claim, yet he continued to consider this single scene as the least typical and sought the sources of the special veneration on this event directly in Rome, where the starting point of style also is. He seeks a comparison with works created in the Roman milieu in the acanthus decoration of the frames, in the figural types, in their clothes and in the oak crowns lining the busts of the gospel authors, which points to the *corona civica*.²⁴

After Volbach's catalogue work came out in the 2nd edition, John Beckwith in 1958 devoted himself to the Milan Diptych in detail, or the most cited of its analogues, i.e. the Werden Casket (Fig. 14).²⁵ The greatest contribution of Beckwith's article is the careful accumulation of all of the bibliography to that time. He investigates the Diptych and the Casket in terms of style much more than the other authors and based on several convincing pieces of evidence this connection seems no longer tenable to him. He attempts through a thorough analysis of the individual iconographic details and techniques of the carving into the ivory to put the Werden Casket in the Carolingian period and thus refute the opinion generally accepted until then; that the Casket and Diptych belong to the same artistic circle. He was the first to point to the "uncommon formal and iconographic similarities" of the Diptych with the mosaics in San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna,²⁶ which a few years later would be dealt with in detail by Volbach.²⁷

The treatise by Giuseppe Bovini from 1969²⁸ is limited mainly to the description of the individual scenes. It is a summary of the existing proposals of the dating running from the end of the 4th century all the way to the 6th century. At the end of the work without any argumentation, he dates the Diptych to the 2nd quarter of the 5th century and considers it to be a work carved at a Milanese workshop, where besides ivory carving they had also extensive experience with cutting precious stones.²⁹ The conclusion is somewhat surprising since he does not deal with the question of dating or provenience anywhere in the article. Furthermore, the bibliographic reference, where it would be possible to verify this last claim, is lacking.

23 Richard Delbrück, Das fünfteilige Diptychon in Mailand, *Bonner Jahrbücher des Rheinischen Landesmuseums in Bonn und des Rheinischen Amtes für Bodendenkmalpflege im Landschaftsverband Rheinland und des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande*, Mainz 1951, pp. 96–107.

24 Ibidem, pp. 104–107.

25 John Beckwith, The Werden Casket Reconsidered, *The Art Bulletin* 40, No. 1, 1958, pp. 1–11.

26 Beckwith, The Werden Casket, p. 10.

27 Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Avori di scuola ravennate nel V e VI secolo*, Ravenna 1977, pp. 14–19.

28 Giuseppe Bovini, Il dittico eburneo dalle cinque parti del Tesoro del Duomo di Milano, *Corsi di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina* 16, 1969, pp. 65–70.

29 Ibidem, p. 69.

Volbach returned once again to the Diptych in his monographic work on the ivory production of the 5th and 6th centuries in Ravenna.³⁰ Here he specified the proposals already mentioned in the catalogue's introduction of the iconographic similarities with the local sarcophagi and like Beckwith³¹ proposed a comparison of the scenes on the mosaics in San Apollinare Nuovo.³² Mainly, the motif of the lamb and the cross from the central panels of the Milan Diptych are found e.g. on the preserved sarcophagi from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (Figs. 15 and 16). The adoration of the Magi appears in a similar composition on a sarcophagus from San Vitale (Figs. 17 and 18).³³ He considers the most important of the comparisons to be the Werden Casket (Fig. 14) and mainly the Andrews Diptych from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Fig. 19). Here, he says that the Early Christian original, which served as the model for the Andrews Diptych, was produced at the same workshop as the Milan Diptych.³⁴ Despite the noteworthy similarities with the mosaics, however, he is not inclined to date the Diptych to the period of the creation of the decoration of the Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo as Beckwith did.³⁵ He submits the hypothesis that the carver had in front of his eyes a model unpreserved for us that served as the starting point also for the mentioned mosaics. At the same time, he leaves his original dating to the second half of the 5th century, but it is not uninteresting that there is no mention that the Diptych could come from the time of the Empress Galla Placidia (died 450). Yet, he admits that there is no support for this hypothesis. The only thing that could connect the Milan Diptych with the imperial court is its five-part form according to Volbach.³⁶ He thus indirectly indicated the question of the relation of the Early Christian Diptych to profane diptychs, which was dealt with in 1981 by David H. Wright in a review of the last edition of Volbach's catalogue.³⁷

On that occasion, Wright considered the function of the Milan Diptych. In all of the previous texts, these panels were automatically considered to be a binding of an unpreserved Evangeliary. Using several examples, David Wright pointed out the absence of evidence that the Diptych served as a cover of a manuscript and labelled the judgements of Volbach and other researchers as haphazard and unjustified.³⁸ He compares the basic five-part model of similar diptychs with the

30 Volbach, *Avori di scuola ravennate*.

31 Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*, p. 10.

32 Volbach, *Avori di scuola ravennate*, pp. 14–18.

33 *Ibidem*, p. 15.

34 *Ibidem*, p. 17.

35 Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*, p. 10.

36 Volbach, *Avori di scuola ravennate*, p. 15.

37 Wright, [Review:] W. F. Volbach.

38 E.g. according to Volbach the five-part Diptych (Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, 1976, entry 145) belongs to St Lucipin's preserved gospels (Bibl. Nat. lat. 9384, 9th century), Wright presents several pieces of evidence that it likely was not the case.

imperial Barberini Diptych (Fig. 20), where he considers precisely the Milan Diptych as the earliest example of a sacral purpose and he dates to the 3rd quarter of the 5th century.³⁹ He assumes that it could have been as early as Charlemagne who with his effort to connect imperial and ecclesiastical authority had one whole made of similar diptychs and manuscripts; earlier examples could be like consular diptychs rather a symbol of ecclesiastical power without containing manuscripts. Naturally also so they could be displayed jointly on the altar and carried in the liturgical processions.⁴⁰

From the period after the publication of the 3rd edition of Volbach's catalogue, we will mention especially three newer studies. The synoptic work by Danielle Gaborit-Chopin *Ivoires du Moyen Age* from 1978⁴¹ places the Milan Diptych in the Ravenna studios the same as Volbach did. The author refutes at that time the already generally abandoned hypothesis of the origin of the Milan Diptych in Gaul, but without any argumentation she rejects also its Milanese origin and focuses her attention again on the doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome (Fig. 11). There, she finds the same style of reliefs carved not very deeply, the purposeful schematization of the drapery and the liveliness of the thin figures. According to her, the doors of Santa Sabina are a work executed in Rome showing strong eastern influences.⁴²

Among the less substantial works that deal with the Diptych, I present the catalogue by Jeffrey Spier from 2007.⁴³ What is surprising is the very first sentence labelling the Diptych as a "likely gift from the emperor to the prominent church in Milan",⁴⁴ without being able to verify this claim based on a bibliographic citation. In the spirit of the book which deals with narration in Early Christian art, the most substantial part is devoted to iconography. The Diptych according to him is an example when it is not an organized chronological story but a series of theological allusions inciting the viewer to seek deeper meanings. He mentions the above-mentioned connection with the Werden Casket (Fig. 14), where he already accepts Beckwith's theory that it is a Carolingian copy. He finds a further comparison identically with Beckwith and Volbach in the Ravenna churches and in the iconographic programmes coming from the circles around the imperial court. He therefore sought the workshop that had produced the Five-Part Diptych directly in Ravenna or in Milan.⁴⁵

39 Wright, [Review:] W. F. Volbach.

40 Ibidem.

41 Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires du Moyen Age*.

42 Ibidem, pp. 26–27.

43 Spier (ed.), *Picturing the Bible*, pp. 256–258.

44 Ibidem, p. 256.

45 Ibidem, p. 258.

Marco Navoni in 2007 used the example of the exceptional Milan tablets for his study on the usage of ivory diptychs during the liturgy. In it, he dealt with their development from the profane use towards the sacral. He includes the Milan Diptych in a group of artefacts labelled only incorrectly as diptychs; they do not have the elongated form of consular diptychs and are not foldable. According to Navoni, they were to be the binding of a book used during a liturgical celebration.⁴⁶

We can thus summarize that the study of departure cited until the present is the catalogue by Wolfgang Fritz Volbach from 1976.⁴⁷ His conclusions concerning the dating and provenience of the Milan Diptych of Five Parts are generally accepted. Only a few exceptions in the existing literature differ from his proposals; the dating moves up towards the middle of the 6th century,⁴⁸ but the texts mentioned above are not very convincing and do not present arguments upon which it would be possible to rely with certainty. Another lack of the research so far leading to the determination of a more precise period and place of the creation of the Milan Diptych is the surprisingly little emphasis attached to what makes the art object supremely luxurious and exceptional and why the goldsmithing technique of *cloisonné* is used. A special place in the bibliography is taken by the brief mention by David H. Wright in the review of Volbach's catalogue⁴⁹ and the study by Marco Navoni,⁵⁰ who were the only ones to focus on the question of the original function of the Diptych. The detailed analysis of the history of the use of ivory panels conducted by Marco Navoni, however, was in the end not applied to the Five-Part Diptych; in his study, he deals with its use based on the preserved written sources coming as late as from the 12th century.⁵¹ A more detailed iconographic analysis and consideration of the iconological significance was not performed by any of the authors, through which we would be able to explain the reason for the selection of the individual narrative scenes. The overall importance that the Milan tablets have in the context of Early Christian art hence has not yet been clarified.

46 Navoni, I dittici eburnei.

47 E.g. Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires du Moyen Age*, pp. 26–27; Gemma Sena Chiesa (ed.), *Milano capitale dell'impero romano 286–402 d. c.* (Milano, Palazzo Reale, 24 gennaio–22 aprile 1990), Milano 1990, p. 108; Spier (ed.), *Picturing the Bible*, pp. 256–258.

48 E.g. Beckwith, *The Werden Casket*; Grabar, *L'âge d'or*, p. 289.

49 Wright, [Review:] W. F. Volbach.

50 Navoni, I dittici eburnei.

51 *Ibidem*, p. 307.