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Introduction

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I. Introduction

The ivory Diptych of Five Parts, deposited in the cathedral treasury in Milan today, remains its exceptional place in the context of Early Christian art for several reasons. Primarily, it is the earliest completely preserved example of the five-part format (i.e. that each of the two panels is made of five separately carved panels). It is also one of the earliest ivory diptychs of explicitly Christian function. What makes the monument unique and utterly luxurious is the technique of *cloisonné*, with which its central panels are executed. It is the only known connection of ivory with the technique in Early Christian art. It is mainly for these reasons that the Milan Diptych has been repeatedly reproduced and cited by a substantial part of the studies dealing with Early Christian monuments.[1] The numerous mentions of it, however, with a few exceptions,[2] limit themselves to the question of its dating and provenience, or the reading of the narrative scenes, in which they proceed from the data set in 1976 by Wolfgang Fritz Volbach.[3]

The work presented does not set its aim only to subject the proposed hypotheses to critical thought, weigh the places pronounced doubts and more precisely date the Diptych and determine the likely place of its creation. It is primarily an attempt to answer other questions which arise when looking at the high-quality and without a doubt also exceptionally thoughtout art work. These questions include predominantly the clarification of the artistic models, determining the possible commissioner of the work, the reason for its creation and determining its art historical and cultural historical significance.

The introductory chapter is an attempt to summarize the existing literature. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all of the mentions of the Milanese Diptych but rather a synopsis of the works which are considered as fundamental for learning about it and the results of which influenced further study. Subsequently, there is a part dealing with interpretations of the form, time and place categorization

1 E.g. André Grabar, *L'âge d'or de Justinien: de la mort de Théodose à l'Islam*, Paris 1966, p. 289; Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Ivoires du Moyen Age*, Fribourg 1978, pp. 26–27; Jeffrey Spier (ed.), *Picturing the Bible,* New Haven 2007, p. 258.

2 E.g. David H. Wright, [Review:] W. F. Volbach: Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters, *The Art Bulletin* 63, No. 4, 1981, pp. 675–677; Marco Navoni, I dittici eburnei nella liturgia, in: Massimiliano David (ed.), *Eburnea Diptycha,* Bari 2007, pp. 299–315.

3 Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz 1976, p. 84.

of the work, where the greatest scope will be left to the technique *cloisonné* and use of the laterest knowledge acquired in the area of goldsmithing. Answering the question of for what purpose the Five-Part Diptych could have been produced is the aim of the chapter after that, because without any evidence it is generally considered to be the luxurious binding for an unpreserved manuscript. Nevertheless, by following the development of the use of ivory diptychs beginning with their profane counterparts, consular diptychs, we discover that its original function is not so clear, as it might seem at first glance. The conclusions of these two chapters will be used in the crucial part of the entire work, the content of which will be the endeavour for a thorough iconocgraphic analysis using historical studies, preserved written sources and period sermons. Only an understanding of the social and cultural atmosphere of the given period may make it possible to find an answer to the question of whether the Milanese Diptych was something more than "just" a luxurious binding. The placement of the Five-Part Diptych in its wider polictical, social and religious context is hence the main aim of the study presented here. For the readability and flow of the text, the descriptions of the sixteen narrative scenes describing the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary and their brief interpretation are in an appendix to the text.[4] Bibliographic citations are listed in their full form only when first mentioned, then repeated in abbreviated form. They can then be found in the expanded form in alphabetical order at the end of the book.

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4 See Catalogue of the narrative scenes.

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