The superb ivory diptych preserved in the Treasury of Milan Cathedral, carved with scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin and ornamented with a cross and Lamb of God inlaid with gems, is a remarkable survival of the fifth century /Figs 13, 14/. Its iconographical program is exceptionally rich and has invited numerous interpretations over the years. Frantová’s wide-ranging study, published in a bilingual Czech and English format, provides an iconographical interpretation that seeks to place the ivory in Ravenna in the 450s, in the circle of the imperial court and Bishop Neon (450–473), a supporter of Pope Leo I (440–461) in his opposition to the Monophysite heresy.

Frantová’s methodical approach begins with an appraisal of the ivory’s long publication history and continues with a thoughtful consideration of its possible workshop and date, its function, and the significance of the iconography. Scholars of the first half of the twentieth century were generally more concerned with the possible workshop and place of origin of the ivory, but later studies, notably by Wolfgang F. Volbach and Richard Delbrück, moved the discussion more to the iconographical significance that interests Frantová.

She does agree with a number of earlier scholars, to whom on both stylistic and historical grounds an origin in Ravenna seemed very likely (pp. 111–115 and 124). Emperor Honorius moved the imperial court to Ravenna from Milan in 402, and although Valentinian III returned the capital to Rome for a time, Ravenna remained an important imperial residence until the Germanic invasion in 476. Frantová compares the style of the mosaics of the great buildings in Ravenna and sees stylistic (rather than iconographical) similarities especially to the figures depicted in the Orthodox Baptistery (built ca 458), although such a comparison is difficult to make in view of scale and subject. The iconographical parallels between the scenes on the Milan ivory and the mosaics of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, built by Theodoric at the beginning of the sixth century, are significant and have often been remarked upon (and indeed some scholars have placed the ivory in the same period), but Frantová sees the mosaics as considerably later in date than the ivory, although perhaps influenced by common sources (pp. 113–114).

Another intriguing clue to the origin of the ivory is the unique use of applied metalwork figures in the center of each five-part panel. On one side stands a nimble Lamb of God composed of gilt-silver cells inlaid with garnet. The other panel is decorated with a cross comprised of gilt-silver cells inlaid with sapphire and other precious stones, placed within the carved ivory curtained doorway. Gold jewelry elaborately inlaid with...
garnet is characteristic of aristocratic Germanic burials of the fifth and early sixth centuries, such as those of the Frankish King Childeric (ca 457–481) and the remarkably rich grave of Omharus at Apahida, Romania, which likely comes from the late fifth century but is difficult to date with precision. Gold and garnet buckles, fibulae, and swords served as symbols of the highest status, presented on ceremonial occasions by the emperor or his representatives. It is difficult, however, to distinguish which of these fine objects were made in Germanic workshops and which in Byzantium. Recent scholarship, notably by Birgit Arrhenius and Marco Aimone, has had some success in distinguishing by stylistic and technical means the differences between workshops, but the question of where the Byzantine objects were made, whether in Constantinople or Ravenna, remains unresolved. Frantová would like to see the metalwork on the ivory as originating in Ravenna (pp. 116–122), which is a reasonable supposition and follows the analysis of Aimone, but the influence of Constantinople should not be underestimated. In any event, there are chronological clues that the garnet-inlaid jewelry can provide. The tombs of Childeric and Omharus, as well as the treasures from Reggio Emilia and Desana (the latter studied by Aimone), all date to the last quarter of the fifth century, a generation later than the date proposed for the diptych by Frantová (she suggests 451). An early date for the diptych is certainly possible, but the chronological implications of the other treasures and cloisonné jewelry in general are not fully considered.

Frantová then considers the function of the diptych (pp. 125–139). Long presumed to be book covers, the ivories need not have served this purpose, as David Wright observed in his review of the third edition of Volbach. They may have merely been luxurious objects displayed to worshippers in church services. The presence of the symbols of the four evangelists carved in the corners of the ivory diptychs, however, does suggest a Gospel book, and although Frantová mentions the symbols in passing (p. 125), she does not consider the significance. Frantová concludes somewhat haphazardly that the original function of the diptych is not an important consideration in her iconographical interpretation (pp. 125–139), but if the ivories really did cover a Gospel book, the imagery may be more straightforward in its meaning than what she proposes.

The concluding section of the work (pp. 140–158) concentrates on the iconographical significance of the images, arguing that there is indeed a theological program, one that reflects the violent debates of the mid-fifth century regarding the nature of Christ. Pope Leo I championed the doctrine asserting the dual nature of Christ, which was affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 in opposition to the Monophysite movement centered in Alexandria. Drawing on Leo’s writings, notably the Tomus ad Flavianum (449) and a series of contemporary sermons, Frantová proposes that the ivory served as “a visual rewriting of Leo’s efforts in the battle with the Monophysite heresy” (p. 153). The ivory thus depends on a theological program developed in Rome.

Leo does indeed make use of the most prominent scenes on the ivory, including the Nativity, the Murder of the Innocents, the Adoration of the Magi, and Christ’s miracles in general, as illustrations of Jesus’ dual nature. Frantová asks (p. 152), “Can it be an accident that precisely these scenes are the subject of the four horizontal panels which
because of their size have at first glance greater importance than the others?" Surely they are not there by accident, but all these scenes are commonly depicted in Early Christian art. Indeed, the juxtaposition of these particular scenes is not uncommon. If more unusual scenes had been placed side by side, such as those on the remarkably complex lipsanoteca in Brescia, which mixes Old and New Testament images, or the diptych in Florence showing Adam naming the animals alongside episodes from Acts featuring Paul’s travels, one must wonder why and search contemporary theological commentary as a means of explanation. Conventional depictions of the life and miracles of Jesus, on the other hand, are very common and require little additional interpretation. Indeed, they seem especially appropriate as covers for the Gospels, especially in view of the presence of the symbols of the Evangelists. Frantová’s thesis that the imagery of the Milan diptych served as a theological statement of Leo’s orthodoxy is plausible, but there is nothing in the iconographical program that demands such an interpretation. Nevertheless, Frantová’s book is a fascinating exploration of Christian imagery in Ravenna, Milan, and Rome in the mid-fifth century.


5 See e.g. Herbert Kessler, “The word made flesh in early decorated Bibles”, in Picturing the Bible. The Earliest Christian Art, Jeffrey Spier ed., pp. 141–168, sp. pp. 142–144, where the Lamb of God and cross before drawn curtain on the ivories are both seen as symbolic portals inviting the viewer into the Gospels, which served as the new sanctuary, replacing the Jewish temple.

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