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The wayward history of some 'Late Antique' carved ivories in Philadelphia

by Donald White¹

A set of what are unquestionably counterfeit Late Antique carvings (Fig. 1) first came to my attention in 2000. They can now be said with perhaps equal conviction to be either overly clever or foolishly ill-conceived pastiches. But either way their fabricator seems to have gone to almost bizarre lengths to palm off what appears to be at first glance a heretofore unrecognized class of ancient artefacts, which, if only genuine, would have supplied a 'missing link' between the barbarian artistic traditions of the Rhine-Danube region and the Parthian-Sassanian east during the later 3rd to 4th centuries AD.

As matters developed, it would have been hard to unmask the Philadelphia carvings despite their moderately louche appearance if Donald Bailey had not brought to my attention the fact that other carvings produced by the same hand had been offered at one time to the British Museum. I am thus indebted to him and Catherine Johns for their considerable help in deciphering the odd story behind these strange artefacts to the extent that I have been able to do.

The pieces in question belong to J. Daniel Dannenbaum of Philadelphia, who had recently come across a cache of fourteen carvings among the effects of his mother, the late Mrs D. M. Lauchheim, who died in 1989. To the best of the owner's recollection his mother had acquired the carvings either shortly before or soon after World War II, but from exactly whom and where remains a mystery. Mrs Lauchheim had given a fifteenth piece to her daughter-in-law, Mrs B. Lauchheim, while another survives today only as a photograph, bringing the total to sixteen. I am much indebted to Mr Dannenbaum for his permission and encouragement to write this report.

Ranging in length from 107.7 to 203.0 mm, the carvings consist of gently bent, plano-convex lengths of either mammal tooth, tuck, horn, bone, or in one case possibly polished alabaster; for convenience they shall be referred to here simply as 'ivories'. Their smoothed backs

are convex. The fronts were planed flat before being carved in recessive low relief. The backs of several display hairline cracks and in two cases spot flaking and pitting. Otherwise, while they look indeterminately 'old', their overall condition is good, and they display minimal traces of wear.

Two types are represented, one with their carved scenes run horizontally, the other with superimposed tiers or registers of carved figures stacked vertically. The majority of the first type are pierced at both ends, suggesting that they might have been stitched to clothes, textiles or leather as some kind of insignia. Examples of the second type are pierced at their tops to hang as pendants.

Both types are peopled with mostly male human figures, but female subjects can be recognized on at least two. In addition a wolf, a bird's head, the forequarters of a horse, and two canine-like bears or, better since one has a long tail, ursine-like dogs complete the repertory of figures.

The eleven Type 1 (i.e. horizontal) carvings consist of one, two or three rows of inward-facing isocephalic males. They are for the most part grouped symmetrically to either side of a central scene executed in larger scale. At first acquaintance these glyptics communicate a vaguely Late Antique feel, further strengthened by texts inscribed on two: *PROBVS LEGIO VIII* in one case (Fig. 2), *GRATIANVS* in the case of the other (Fig. 3). The fact that the Legio VIII Augusta was stationed permanently on the Rhine frontier after Vespasian came to power (Ritterling 1925, 1652-64)² and that Marcus Aurelius Probus is known to have campaigned in Gaul and Germany in AD 276-277 (Dupuy & Dupuy 1993, 156) would appear to point to a place of manufacture somewhere in the region of the Rhine. A century later Gratian defeated the Alamanni and Franks in the same area (Dupuy & Dupuy 1993, 170).

¹ University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 3260 South Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6324, USA.

² I owe the reference to Brent Shaw.

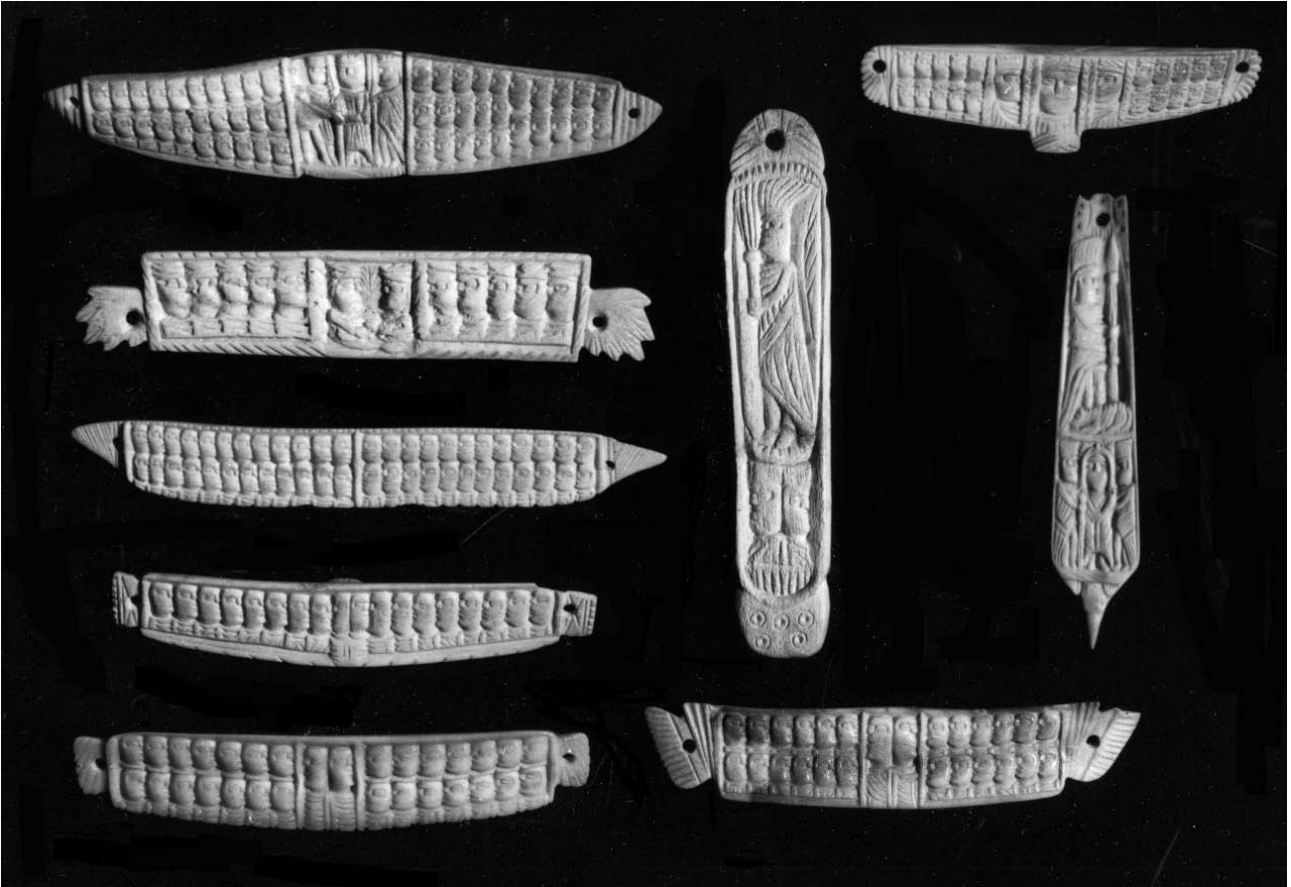


Fig. 1 — Representative sample of Type 1 and Type 2 carvings, Dannenbaum collection of carved ivories in Philadelphia. Photo: author.

In addition to the use of isocephalism combined with full profile views to organize the flanking crowd scenes, the overall composition and figure style could be argued to display a loose affinity to state-sponsored late Roman sculpted reliefs such as the *congiarium* on the Arch of Constantine in Rome (Bianchi-Bandinelli 1971, 77-8, pl. 69) and imperial *adlocutio* on the base of the Obelisk of Theodosius I in Istanbul (Bianchi-Bandinelli 1971, 354-5, pls 335-6). A noteworthy feature of the central scenes is their reliance on frontality and inflated size to signify elevated status, along with an anti-classical treatment of facial features. But although the low foreheads, bug eyes, and swollen cheeks and chins can be loosely matched by certain late Roman coins (Kent 1978, pl. 179, 707), the

style in fact departs sufficiently from conventional late Roman portraiture to point to a northern *limes*, barbarian origin.

Type 1

L...length; H...height, T...thickness, W...width. All measurements are expressed in millimetres.

1. Fig. 2. L. 114, H. 32, T. 0.9. Left unpierced. Upper row of eighteen and lower row of six isocephalic heads face toward central frontal figure who may be standing in enclosed compartment or pulvinar-like box lined with curtains. Figure rests right arm and hand on box's sloping



Fig. 2 — Type 1 carving, n° 1 in text catalogue, inscribed PROBVS LEGIO VIII. Length 114 mm. Photo: author.

rail decorated with checkerboard lattice-work. Alternatively figure may be read as lying flat in lined coffin, with body covered with checkerboard fabric. Lower frame inscribed at left *PROBVS*, at right *LEGIO VIII*.

2. Fig. 3. L. 145, H. 35, T. 0.35. Double pierced. Three rows of 50 inward-facing heads; lowest row composed of profile busts. Central pair of larger-scale three-quarter view busts facing one another but separated by unidentifiable bush-like element; both wear hooded, crenelated (?) crowns. Clasping hands, they stand in balcony-like box setting ornamented with incised lines and four dotted circles. Upper frame inscribed *GRATIANVS*.

3. Fig. 4. L. 150, H. 27, T. 0.6. Double pierced. Two rows of 28 inward-facing heads, wearing flat headdresses; lower row display traces of dress. Central draped figure wearing flat crown or low turban headdress, sits on sloped stool to confront furry dog or bear standing on hind legs at left; animal rests front paw on seated figure’s lap and thrusts muzzle against his chest. Five-branched leafless bush or tree fills space above animal’s head.



Fig. 3 — Detail, Type 1 carving, n° 2 in text catalogue, inscribed *GRATIANVS*. Photo: author.



Fig. 4 — Type 1 carving, n° 3 in text catalogue. Scale 1:1. Photo: author.

Type 2

4. Fig. 5. H. 107.7, W. 23, T. 0.8. After accidental breakage the 17.7 mm long tip with suspension hole was used for C-14 testing. Raising hands to touch temples, a frontal standing figure wears feathered headdress, belted parka, and undergarment hemmed at knees over tall lace-wrapped boots. Bottom of the suspension hole’s incised extension is decorated with two dotted circles.

5. Fig. 6. H. 122, maximum W. 25, T. 0.8. Suspension hole surrounded by seven dotted circles. Tapered point at opposite end carved into bird of prey’s head. Upper register contains figure standing right, grasping either a thick spear or tall torch in right hand. Figure wears high vertically fluted headdress over hood. Double hem of belted robe is swept back over knees to reveal trousers over high boots. Small shaggy bear-like animal with long tail crouches at his feet. At the center of the lower register is a woman standing frontally with shoulder-length hair parted in the center. Wearing a caftan-like robe swept back into a swallow-tail below the knees, she clasps her hands over her stomach. Flanked by two robed attendants seen in three-quarter view, wearing vertically fluted headdresses and belted robes swept back at the knees. The figure to the left clasps what appears to be an inverted sword.

Despite their being thematically more eclectic, all four Type 2 vertical pendants are linked to the Type 1 horizontal carvings through shared idiosyncracies in dress and figure style. The hair of the woman from the lower register of n° 5 (Fig. 6), for example, appears to be arranged in late Roman style (Bianchi-Bandinelli 1971, 112-16, figs 101-3; Kleiner 1992, 380, fig. 347). On the other hand, the headdress, body garments and foot gear of all of the remaining central figures of both types seem indeterminately more at home in the ancient East (Ghirshman 1962, figs 10, 15, 17, 79, 80, 99, 100, 110) without exhibiting any direct correspondence to the standard repertory of artefacts produced by the tribal Celts, Burgundians, Goths, Franks, Alamanni, Alani, Sarmatians, Parthians and Sassanians³.

³ Just to adumbrate the relevant titles in Penn’s museum library would exceed the purpose of this small offering, especially since none produced a comparison worth citing.



Fig. 5 — Detail, Type 2 carving, n° 4 in text catalogue. Scale 1:1. Photo: author.

The headgear of both types vary from a kind of Bactrian soft cap called a *kausia* by the Greeks and *chitrali* by the Afghans today (Kingsley 1981, 39) to turbans, hoods, feathered headdresses, crenelated ‘crowns’ and fluted stove-pipe hats. Some wear ankle-length pleated caftans bound at the waist by rope-like belts. When these split over the thighs or knees, they reveal either trousers or a kind of saw-toothed hemmed undergarment. Carving n° 4’s solitary figure wears a waist-length parka and short robe over tall, lace-wrapped boots (Fig. 5).

Two points emerge at this stage. The first is that both types must have originated from the same hand. The other is that neither has any exact parallels in Late Antique art.

Baffled by what to make of such oddities, I sent photographs to Donald Bailey. His response was as startling as it was disconcerting. Some time perhaps before World War I a large collection of similar carvings had been offered (presumably for sale) to the British Museum. The collection was rejected on grounds of inauthenticity after the pieces had been duly recorded by photography⁴.

Unfortunately, who offered them and precisely when were apparently not recorded. It also remains uncertain whether the extant photos supplied by Bailey document the entire collection offered at the time or merely a representative sample. But, with a total of 135 objects photographed, the chances seem good that we are dealing with what represented at the time the complete offering.

What seems moderately off-beat in the case of the Philadelphia carvings explodes here into a cornucopia of outlandish types and shapes. Of the 135 objects 31 were



Fig. 6 — Type 2 carving, n° 5 in text catalogue. Scale 1:1. Photo: author.

spoons or in one case a strainer, three were finger-rings, and 63 were three-dimensional objects resting on bases which, for lack of a better word, can be compared with chess pieces (Fig. 7), nineteen were pieces which closely mimic the Dannenbaum Type 1 horizontal carvings, and nineteen the Type 2 vertical pendants (Fig. 8).

Two additional facts immediately surface when confronted with the British Museum assemblage. The first is that all of the categories of objects just listed, including the so-called chess pieces, share elements in common with the Philadelphia carvings in terms of thematic content, figure style, and details of costuming. The second is that one of the three British Museum horizontal carvings depicting bears sitting in front of men is literally our n° 3 (Fig. 8, second to top on left, compare with Fig. 4). This can only mean that the Philadelphia carvings must have been originally part of a larger assemblage which at one time included all 135 of the figures offered to the British Museum. It would also seem to indicate that the total collection represents the output of a single craftsman or at the most a single, closely-controlled, workshop.

⁴ In a letter of 3/31/00 Bailey says, “The photographs are sepia, and probably date from the beginning of the last century or late in the 19th”. In a later email he says that they must certainly date to before World War II. For what it is worth, they look to me no later than the early 20th century.



Fig. 7 — Selection of carved three-dimensional objects resembling chess pieces offered to the British Museum perhaps before WWI. Image courtesy of Donald Bailey and The British Museum.

During the spring of 2001 Donald Bailey and Catherine Johns visited the University of Pennsylvania Museum where they were able to inspect the Dannenbaum collection at first hand. Both remained more convinced than ever of their fraudulent character. Their skepticism notwithstanding, and finding myself compelled by a possibly perverse wish to leave no stone unturned, I persuaded Mr Dannenbaum to have the tip of his n° 4 (Fig. 5) tested for a C-14 date. The test results were

returned by the University of Arizona's C-14 laboratory in December 2002.

Contrary to the anticipated outcome, they indicated an uncorrected date for the specimen of BP 1654 +/- 43 years, or a corrected date corresponding to the late 4th or early 5th century AD.

Unexpectedly handed a scientifically-based date which more or less coincided with the time-frame previously indicated by the style of the crowd scenes, the hair treatment in the case of the female protagonists, and the epigraphic allusions to Probus and Gratian, had the cumulative effect of breathing fresh life into a renewed search for validation. In the event, however, this proved to be of fleeting duration. Photos of the Dannenbaum ivories had been previously sent to Professor Dr Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hase of the Research Institute for Pre- and Early History at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz, Germany, in July 2003. An expert in Late Classical barbarian archaeology, von Hase was kind enough to convey back to me his strong personal doubts as to the carvings' authenticity. In addition, he provided offprints of two articles published in 1984 by his colleague at Mainz, Dr Mechtild Schulze (Schulze 1984a; 1984b).

According to Schulze, the 1964 Vienna exhibition *Frühchristliche und koptische Kunst* included some nine ivory or bone carvings on loan from the Ante Topic-Mimara collection⁵, identified by the exhibitors as late Roman military insignia. To judge from Schulze's illustrations, four of the Topic-Mimara carvings find their nearest parallels in the 'chess pieces' offered to the British Museum, while the remainder belong to the Dannenbaum Type 1 variety.

One particularly unrestrained Type 1 example features no less than four tiers of isocephalic heads framing a central figure of a rider standing behind his mount; the horse is equipped with protective (equine cataphractic?) armor, while the remainder of the surface runs wild with a menagerie of exotic animals.

But what finally and conclusively exposes the hand of the forger are a pair of Type 1 carvings. The first depicts three rows of late Classical heads facing a central tondo decorated with a profile female head turned left (Fig. 9). With this piece Schulze extinguishes any lingering hope one might wish to nurture for authenticity by skilfully demonstrating how the female head has been directly, albeit crudely, lifted from a mid 1st-century AD sardonyx cameo in the Cabinet de Médailles in Paris portraying Valeria Messalina, wife of the emperor Claudius. In other words, a 1st-century head anachronistically cobbled together with a 3rd- to 4th-century AD crowd scene. In the case of the second the carver has rather fecklessly chosen to combine his stock late Roman crowd scene with the inscription NERO LEGIO III in an apparent reference to the mid 1st-century AD emperor (Fig. 10).

⁵ Originally from Tangiers but located by the time of Schulze's writing in Zagreb.

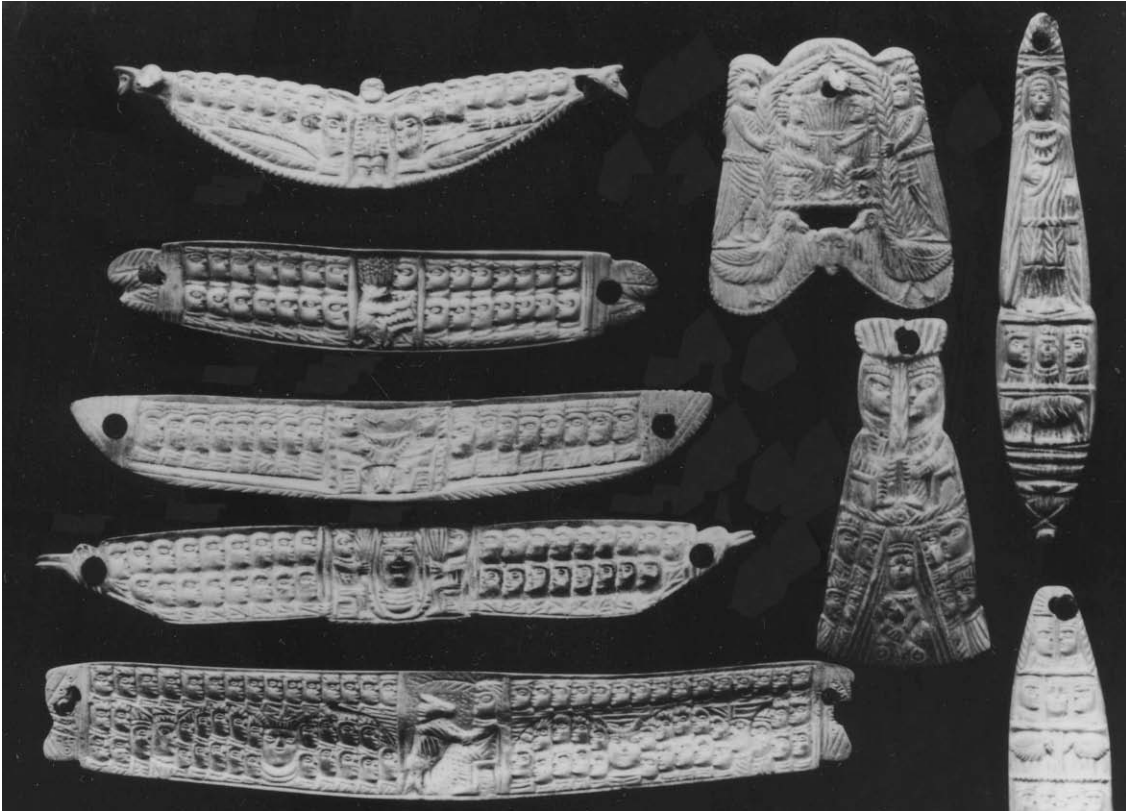


Fig. 8 — Selection of Type 1 and 2 carvings offered to the British Museum perhaps before WWI, including the Dannenbaum Type 1 ivory n° 3. Image courtesy of Donald Bailey and The British Museum.



Fig. 9 — Type 1 carving from Ante Topic-Mimara collection (after Schulze 1984a, 99, pl. 7; 1984b, 55, fig. 1).

Where this leaves us is by now fairly obvious. A grand total of 160 carvings can be attributed to our unknown forger: sixteen in Philadelphia, including n° 3 above (Fig. 4) which was once part of the 135 originally offered to the British Museum, and nine additional pieces from the Topic-Mimara collection last seen in Zagreb. Unless I am mistaken all must be fakes, but more on this below.

Ironically, if all we had today were Dannenbaum's sixteen carvings in Philadelphia, including n° 4 above (Fig. 5) with its late 4th- to early 5th-century AD C-14 date, we might still be arguing for the recognition of a previously unknown class of barbarian military *insignia* produced somewhere between the Rhine-Danube region and Parthian-Sassanian east during the later 3rd to 4th



Fig. 10 — Type 1 carving from Ante Topic-Mimara collection (after Schulze 1984b, 56, fig. 6).

centuries AD. Fortunately, Bailey's photos of the various pieces offered to the British Museum arrived in time to erode the case for authenticity on a number of grounds, none more so than the inclusion of the idiosyncratic three-dimensional objects resembling chess pieces. If true chess pieces, there is no reason for them to have existed this early anywhere outside of possibly India and, even less likely, Persia, where the introduction of chess is normally attributed to the 6th and 7th centuries AD (New *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 3, 178). Schulze then provides the *coup-de-grâce* through her analysis of the imitation Messalina head and the Nero inscription attached to the Type 1 carvings in the Topic-Mimara collection.

But what then of the C-14 date? Baffling indeed. It seems that there can only be two explanations. The first and probably the correct explanation is that our forger came into the possession of a quantity of 'old' ivories, which he cleverly exploited to 'antique' the look of his carvings in order to bump up buyer interest. By some kind of massive coincidence, the actual age of his raw materials coincided in a general way with the period he was trying to replicate, although at a time before C-14 testing there was no way he (or she) could have known this⁶.

The only other rationalization, which seems statistically even less defensible, would be that our C-14 test piece, n° 4 (Fig. 5), is in fact an authentic ancient artefact which served as the archetypal model for all of the forger's subsequent counterfeit horizontal and pendant carvings. But to swallow this would require explaining the existence of a barbarian artistic tradition from an area yet to be discovered and which has no archaeologically documentable parallels, and this I believe cannot be done.

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⁶ Willard Libby's first tentative efforts to measure the presence of radiocarbon in the atmosphere were published in 1946. See E. H. Willis, 'Radiocarbon dating' in D. Brothwell and E. Higgs, eds, *Science in Archaeology* (New York; 1970), 46, note 1.