Ottonian or Romanesque: Two Ivory Carvings from Liège

James Murphy

It has become a commonplace to speak of the artistic production of Medieval Liège in such terms as "Mosan classicism" or "Hellenism," in deference to that city's pronounced imperial and Byzantine orientation. A master such as Renier of Huy, for example, illustrates this tradition most vividly. But as John Beckwith has noted, even Renier should be seen in a direct line of development from the *Registrum* Master and extending into the work of Nicholas of Verdun at the end of the twelfth century.[1] With few exceptions, Liège ivory carving may be seen as a series of distinct responses to classical themes, periodically restated across the span of two centuries.

It is the purpose of the present study to examine two such exceptions: the first is an ivory panel depicting the Marriage at Cana, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 1); the second plaque, in the Bargello in Florence, depicts the Women at the Sepulchre (Fig. 2).[2] That these works should have been attributed to Liège has never been challenged. The Cleveland ivory, for example, is known to have decorated the cover of a late Carolingian gospel book written by a well-known Liège scribe, Framegaudus.[3] As to the Bargello ivory, it was the first of a group of carvings which Adolph Goldschmidt associated with the Cleveland work and to which he assigned a "belgisch-rheinisch" provenance. Later commentators have more or less accepted the common localization to Liège for both works, without, however, examining the problems of chronology.

To begin with, numerous writers have used the Cleveland ivory to identify the peculiarly Ottonian *Kunstwollen* which supplanted the earlier Carolingian esthetic.[4] Since in this case the precise model exists and is, in addition, a fine example of Rheims-style ivory carving, the contrast is a vivid one (Fig. 3).[5] The division into upper and lower registers, the disposition of figures and architectural devices all point to this work, or a similar prototype, as the inspiration for the Cleveland piece. Hanns Swarzenski, moreover, has argued that the impression of a "copy" is in itself a hallmark of the Ottonian style. The characteristic "severely partitioned effect" and the "expressionistic concentration on linear pattern" replaces "the organic, impressionistic modeling, the illusionistic space, and the birds-eye perspective."[7]

Otto von Falke has also commented on the Ottonian stamp of the Cleveland ivory, with its distinctive proportion and measured harmony of movement, in strong contrast to the overloading of the Carolingian relief. As for the architectural motifs, "the slender round turrets were as unknown to Carolingian art as was the transformation of the shell-like movement of the strip of ground into well-shaped tendril leaves."[8] Finally, Peter Lasko has described the panel as a Lotharingian work of about 1000, and feels it exercised the single most decisive stylistic influence on the bronze doors of Hildesheim Cathedral.[9]

On the other hand the Bargello ivory has been perceived as conforming to the essential characteristics of the Romanesque style, that is, a style of roughly a century later. The ivory's resemblance to the Annunciation panel in Berlin and the Crucifixion plaque in the Victorian and Albert Museum, works clearly of the twelfth century, supports this contention.[10] Swarzenski himself assigned the Bargello work to the early twelfth century, noting in passing the similar treatment of drapery in the metalwork of Roger of Helmarshausen.[11] Falke has used the Florence and London plaques to conclude that the influence of the Liège school spread beyond the boundaries of the Meuse.[12] A recent survey of ivories, finally, has continued this direction of didactic analysis by describing the work as a very characteristic, very "Romanesque" example of figural exaggeration.[13]

These two "exceptions" to Mosan classicism have been viewed separately, therefore, as examples of the Ottonian and Romanesque phases of Liège carving—distant cousins in time though of identical birthplace. On the surface this is an acceptable view; but there are some clear and apparently overlooked visual clues, common to both works, which point to a much closer temporal relationship. It is possible, in fact, that these panels were carved in the same workshop.

At first glance the Bargello plaque, with its compression of elongated figures within the space, its sumptuous decorative effects and monumental proportions, seems at odds with the Cleveland piece. And yet a comparison of specific details yields surprisingly close parallels. The architecture of both ivories, for example, is alike in proportion and decorative technique: tall, slender turrets with sloped offset, pyramidal cupolas, narrow windows with surrounding sills, sawtooth crenellation and tile, shingle or masonry embellishments. The inner molding of the Bargello panel is composed of the same rope motif as that of the Cleveland work which forms the column shafts and the long, sinuous paths of water which the servants grasp with their hands. The ground line of both pieces is animated by deeply incised whorls, reflecting common Carolingian models. Drapery, while more richly developed in the Bargello ivory, contains the same V-shaped incisions between thighs, overlapping folds at the hemline and hard, geometrical outlines. Servants at the marriage feast and soldiers asleep at the tomb wear similar undergarments the sleeves of which are described by spirals of dense parallel lines.

The broad, sweeping gesture of the angel recalls the similar gesture of Christ in the lower zone of the Cleveland panel. The compression of two figures together oc-

curs in the lower right corner of the Cleveland work and in the left side of the Bargello work. Small morphological details correspond almost exactly, such as the overlapping folds of veils on the women's heads. Hands are large and rectangular with long, spatulate fingers; eyes have had the pupils drilled out, creating a staring effect (even, it would seem, in the case of the "sleeping" soldiers); and the full lower lip and pronounced cheek fold give the mouth a grim expression, almost a grimace. Finally, and perhaps most decisively, two subtle texturing techniques appear in both works: a striation pattern and a meandering interlace are combined on the Bargello tombstone and in various wine jars of the Cleveland work.

It is clear, first of all, that a single esthetic guides both ivory carvings, and that, secondly, precise morphological details correspond almost exactly throughout. A final comparison can be made on the basis of what we may call epigraphy: the existence of certain inscriptions of a fundamentally similar character on the garments of principal figures. Beginning with the topmost register of the Cleveland ivory, and concluding with the Bargello panel, the inscriptions may be listed as follows:

CLEVELAND IVORY: UPPER

the Virgin:

(left thigh)

(left elbow)

LOWER

first servant:

(right thigh)

second servant:

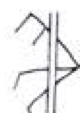
(right thigh)

Christ:

(right thigh)

BARGELLO IVORY:

first woman:



(right thigh)

second woman:

(left elbow)

Angel:

(below sleeve of left hand)

Because of the hard, geometric treatment of the drapery, the "inscriptions" are at times indistinguishable from the masses of folds and decorated hemlines. In the Florence plaque, moreover, the markings on the thigh of the first woman are partially hidden behind the chain of the censer. As in the Cleveland ivory, the inscriptions are generally located in the same area of the body (thigh or elbow), and are composed of the same basic elements. Such points argue for the case that the impressions were carved at the time of the panels' productions, not added later; what is more, they indicate a common source, perhaps a single workshop, as the place of production.

Less certain is the meaning, indeed the very identity, of these markings. While it is tempting to view them as a kind of "signature" of the artisan or workshop, it is clear that no two characters are exactly repeated, despite their internal consistency. Most frustrating is the fact that many of the inscriptions are tantalizingly close to such scripts as Runic and Greek, scripts which would have great bearing on the locatión of centers of production or patronage (that is, Scandinavian or Byzantine). Comparisons may also be made with early forms of arabic or Hindu-Arabic numbers, the so-called gobar numerals, which were known since the time of Gerbert of Aurillac, later Pope Sylvester II (999-1003).[14] It is known that Gerbert also practiced a type of shorthand alphabet, which appears in certain illuminated manuscripts of the Ottonian period.[15]

Since we have considered the prominent role played by models in the formation of the Ottonian style, and since both works reflect eclectic tendencies toward Carolingian and Byzantine prototypes,[16] it is possible that a model book, a book of approved compositional patterns containing abbreviated notations by a draughtsman would have accounted for the existence of similar notations in the ivory. In other words, the artisan (or workshop) reproduced his models all too well. At any rate, contemporary manuscript illumination offers a fruitful line of inquiry, and it is in this direction that we may seek the origin of the inscriptions and a clue to the dating.

Bernhard Bischoff has shown that a system of so-called "Greek" or "Chaldean" numerical symbols were used in the Middle Ages, gradually replacing Roman numerals as a simpler method of notation in manuscripts.[17] The notations first appear in the twelfth-century English "Ars notatoria," a scanty stenographic system, and may be found with minor variations in numerous manuscripts throughout the medieval period. A comparison of these late stenographic figures with the inscriptions on the Cleveland and Bargello ivories yields close parallels. In both cases we find angled lines with cross bars and parallel bars. Unfortunately, the English examples tell us little about the meaning of the symbols formed on the ivories, and less still about the probable date of execution.

The solution to this problem lies partly in the evolution of manuscript illumination in Liège itself. The lengthened, attenuated figures in the Cleveland and Bargello plaques represent a culminating phase of figural exaggeration which also occurs in illuminations of the second half of the eleventh century. Works such as the frontispiece to the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus,[18] or the "author" portrait page in the Commentary of Florus on the letters of Saint Paul[19] describe a gradual elongation of figures and greater elaboration of architectural motifs.

The Florus Commentary is particularly indicative of the style of the later eleventh century. Rich architectural effects, with arcades culminating in intersecting roofs of multiple textures, separated by towers set "on edge," and knotted curtains hung between arches, echo corresponding devices in the ivory carvings. Another manuscript, The Evangeliary of Judith of Flanders, is valuable because it can be securely dated to 1066-1071.[20] It shows a treatment of drapery, particularly women's veils, which is similar to corresponding motifs in the Cleveland and Bargello ivories.

Having noted the rich architectural effects on painted page and carved plaque, a word should be said about the actual structures which inspired them. The so-called tomb on the Bargello ivory represents a complex of twin flanking stair turrets, massive triple-staged spire, and gabled roof over a basilican nave rendered in perspective. What we are looking at is in fact the westwork of an early medieval church, of a type initiated in the Carolingian period and continuing long into the Romanesque. The towers and spires of the Bargello ivory are surprisingly close to the westwork of the abbey church at Centula (Saint-Riquier), which we know from a seventeenth century engraving.[21]

The structure found on the Bargello ivory, however, is clearly depicted as masonry, not wood, as at Centula. Historically the translation of wooden spires into stone occurs during the tenth and eleventh centuries, as for example in the Church of St. Cyriacus of Gernrode.[22] Within the borders of Belgium itself, and a direct descendant within the Centula strain, is the imposing church of St. Gertrude at Nivelles.[23] The building still retains its tall westwork, dating basically from the eleventh century; if one can imagine it with a triple-staged spire over the crossing, one would have a complex similar to the "tomb" structure depicted on the ivory.

While it is difficult to substantiate an exact dating based upon correspondences with manuscript illumination and similarities to architectural features, it is nonetheless possible to view these two ivories as close companions in a period of rapid stylistic change. The available data indicates the late eleventh century, very likely the third quarter, as the period of time this workshop flourished; perhaps a surer chronology must await the deciphering of the inscriptions. At any rate, both works reflect the crossing of the threshold into the Romanesque, one looking forward, the other backward.

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1 John Beckwith, *Early Medieval Art* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), pp. 178-179.

2 The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust. Formerly in the Collection of the Duke of Cumberland. See Adolph Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der karolingischen und sächsischen Kaiser*, I (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1914-23), No. 27; 17.8 x 14.3cm. Florence, Museo Nazionale (Carrand Collection, No. 36); Goldschmidt, II (1914), No. 162; 11.8 x 10.2cm.

3 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Lat. 17969: a Liège work of perhaps the early tenth century. See J. Porcher, ed., *Bibliothèque Nationale. Les manuscrits à Peinture en France du VIIe au XIIe Siècle* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1954), No. 50. The size and shape of the ivory plaque make it possible to prove its original use.

4 See especially Hanns Swarzenski, "The Role of Copies in the Formation of the Styles of the Eleventh Century," *Studies in Western Art. Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art*, I (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 7-18; and Otto von Falke, *et al.*, *Der Welfenschatz* (Frankfurt/Main: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt a. g., 1930), pp. 40-41; see also Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra. 800-1200* (Harmondsworth, GB: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 120. Neither Marcel Lurent, Joseph Philippe, Jean Lejeune nor any of the principal authorities on Mosan ivories has discussed this work.

5 London, British Museum (Dalton *Catalogue*, 1909, pl. XXII, No. 44; Goldschmidt, I, No. 46), 13.8 x 8.3cm. The ivory, assigned by Goldschmidt to the Liuthard group, once adorned the cover of a Gospel book now in Darmstadt (Landesbibliothek, Ms. 746) which is signed by this same Liuthard.

6 Swarzenski, "The Role of Copies," pp. 15-16.

7 Swarzenski, *Monuments of Romanesque Art*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1967), p. 26.

8 Falke, p. 41.

9 Lasko, p. 120.

10 Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Goldschmidt, II, No. 160), 18.4 x 11.9cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum (Goldschmidt, II, No. 161; Longhurst *Catalogue*, 1927, No. 151-1866), 18.5 x 11.5cm. Longhurst assigned the Crucifixion to the early twelfth century; Goldschmidt assigned to both works a date of *ca.* 1100.

11 Swarzenski, *Monuments*, p.29.

12 Falke, p. 41.

13 Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Elfenbeinkunst im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1978), p. 105.

14 See Alexandre Olleris, *Oeuvres de Gerbert* (Paris: C. DuMoulin, 1867), p. 361; Nikolai Bubnov, *Gerberti postea Silvestri II papae opera mathematica* (Berlin: R. Friedländer, 1888), p. 381. The gobar numerals were numbers written in the sand, or literally, "dust numbers."

15 Carl Nordenfalk, "An Early Medieval Shorthand Alphabet," *Speculum*, XIV (1939), pp. 443-447.

16 Hanns Swarzenski suggested that the Bargello ivory was inspired by a Byzantine gilded plaque from the Treasure of Saint-Denis in the Louvre (*Monuments*, p. 29, illus. No. 6). A much more likely model is the Victoria and Albert Museum ivory plaque depicting scenes from the Life of Christ (Longhurst *Catalogue*, No. 295-1867), one of a group of Italo-Byzantine ivories.

17 Bernard Bischoff, "Die sogenannten 'griechischen' und 'chaldäischen' Zahlzeichen des abendländischen Mittelalters," *Mittelalterliche Studien, Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte*, I (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 67-73.

18 Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, Ms. II. 2570, fol. 3r. See J. Prochno, *Das Schreiber und Dedikationsbild in der deutschen Buchmalerei*, I (Leipzig-Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1929), 66f; C. Gaspar, F. Lyna, *Les principaux manuscrits à peintures de Bibliothèque royale de Belgique* (Paris: Société francaise de reproductions de manuscrits à peintures, 1937), No. 16, pp. 58-60.

19 Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, Ms. 9369-70; Gaspar, Lyna, No. 15, pp. 56-68.

20 Fulda, Hessisches Landesbibliothek, Hs. Aa 21; see Hanns Swarzenski, *The Berthold Missal. The Pierpont Morgan Library Ms. 710 and the Scriptorium of Weingarten Abbey* (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1943).

21 W. Effman, *Centula. Saint-Riquier. Eine Untersuchung zur Geschichte der kirchlichen Baukunst in der Karolingerzeit* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1912), figs. 1-2.

22 See E. Gall, *Karolingische und ottonische Kirchen* (Burg bei Magdeburg: A. Hopfer, 1930), 24f; H. Jantzen, *Ottonische Kunst* (Munich: Münchner Verlag, 1947), 61f; G. H. Forsythe, Jr., "St. Martin's at Angers and the Evolution of Early Medieval Church Towers," *Art Bulletin*, XXXII (1950), p. 317.

23 See A. Verbeek, "Ottonische und staufische Wandgliederung am Niederrhein," *Beiträge zur Kunst des Mittelalters* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1950), 70f; A. Mottart, *La collégiale Ste-Gertrude de Nivelles* (Nivelles: Les Archers, 1954).

Fig. 1, *The Marriage at Cana*, Cleveland Museum of Art.

Fig. 2, *Women at the Sepulchre*, Bargello, Florence.

Fig. 3, *The Marriage at Cana*, British Museum.