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The British Museum Casket with Scenes of the Passion: The Easter Liturgy and the Apse of St. John Lateran in Rome

In the collection of the British Museum in London are four ivory plaques displaying a cycle of images of the Passion and Resurrection.¹ On the right side of the first one, we find Peter denying Christ, while the left side depicts Pilate washing his hands and the centre shows Christ carrying the cross with the help of Simon of Cyrene (Fig. 1). The second ivory shows Judas hanging from a tree, alongside the Crucifixion. Beside the cross stand Mary, John and Longinus (Fig. 2). The third relief presents the soldiers asleep after the Resurrection and the women at Christ's tomb (Fig. 3). The final plaque is decorated with a symmetrical composition with Christ at its centre and a pair of apostles on each side. The first disciple on the left touches the wounded side of Christ with his finger, and must therefore be identified as doubting Thomas (Fig. 4).

Scholars concur in attributing these ivories to a single Roman workshop, dating it to the years 420-430.² This attribution, based on formal considerations, includes the British Museum ivories in a relatively homogeneous group of reliefs characterised by figures which are stocky but executed with Hellenistic refinement.³ The chronological and geographical limits of this group are furnished by three securely dated works whose geographical provenance is also known: the Diptych of Rufius Probianus (made at Rome after 400 AD), the left panel of the Diptych of the Lampadii (sculpted in the West in the first half of the fifth century), and the Consular Diptych of Flavius Felix (produced at Rome in 428 AD).⁴

In light of the great stylistic coherence of the British Museum ivories, vestiges of joints between the panels, and the panels' identical dimensions, scholars consider them the four sides of a single casket (albeit one which has lost its lid).⁵ It is difficult to determine, at this remove, what the casket's lid might have looked like. It may have been decorated, since the only Roman ivory casket from the era which has survived intact – the Samagher casket – has a decorated lid.⁶ Given the

1. Each one measures 7.5 x 9.8 cm.

2. See the recent synthesis by Harley 2007 and Harley 2013.

3. Cf. Volbach 1976, nr. 116, p. 82.

4. Cf. Volbach 1976, nr. 62, pp. 54-55; Volbach 1976, nr. 54, pp. 50-51; Volbach 1976, nr. 2, p. 30.

5. This question has a unanimous answer. Cf. Harley 2007, p. 232; Kötzsche 1979.

6. Cf. Buddensiegg 1959; Guarducci 1978; Longhi 2006.

dimensions of our presumptive casket, the lid (at 9,8 x 9,8 cm) may have been the most important panel of the casket. Despite this lacuna, our casket is of primary importance, since it gives us one of the earliest surviving representations of the Crucifixion. Thus it is surprising how little the casket has been studied, and that no monograph has been written about it.⁷ The objective of this essay is to make up for this neglect, and in particular to analyse the casket's unusual iconography in relation to the Liturgy.

As a “narrative” monument, this casket is absolutely unique. Very few cycles from the fourth or fifth centuries are devoted to the death and Resurrection of Christ. The best known are the Sarcophagus of the Anastasis (dated to the reign of Theodosius) and the mosaic narrative conceived under Theodoric for the Basilica of St. Apollinaris at Ravenna.⁸ In neither case is there a depiction of the central scene of the Passion, i.e. the Crucifixion. The only cycle which can be compared to the British Museum plaques is the one on the doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome, dated to the same years (Fig. 5).⁹ The interpretation of these doors, which put events from the Old and New Testaments side by side, is complicated by the fact that they have not survived complete, and the Crucifixion panel is just as challenging as the rest. The small size of this Crucifixion scene indicates that it was not intended as the centre of the cycle. Furthermore, on these doors the Passion and Resurrection were integrated into a longer discourse on the entire biography of Christ. This makes the London ivories the only surviving example of a fifth century narrative cycle in which Christ's death and Resurrection are the exclusive subject matter.¹⁰

Whoever conceived the images on the casket wanted to insist, in particular, on the “martyrial” function of the Cross. As depicted in the first two panels, the cross is not a symbol of victory – as on the sarcophagi or in the apse mosaics of those years – but rather an instrument of the Passion. Even if this symbolism is not obvious in the *via crucis* scene, there is no denying it in the second panel, where the Crucifixion is directly juxtaposed with the hanging of Judas. This is a shocking association of the two deaths, even if it is hinted at in the Bible, where Judas hangs himself in desperation at having betrayed the Christ.¹¹ This choice must have emphasised by another factor as well: according to Kötzsche's study of the wear on the four ivories, it appears that the Crucifixion panel formed the front of the casket. Interestingly, this does not square with what contemporary sources

7. What we have are mostly excerpts from catalogues or brief descriptions from much broader works. The only article (Kötzsche 1994) analyses merely one side of the composition. Cf. Harley 2007 and Kötzsche 1994, Avery-Quash 2000; Buckton 1994; Stutzinger 1983; Volbach 1976, p. 82; Delbrueck 1952, pp. 95-98. The only apparent exception is the article of Harley 2013, however in despite of the title “The Maskell Passion Ivories and Greco-Roman art: notes on the iconography of crucifixion”, the article is dedicated mainly at the question of the crucifixion.

8. Cf. Saggiorato 1968; Penni Jacco 2004.

9. Cf. Spieser 1991, pp. 47-81; Jeremias 1980; Foletti, Gianandrea 2016.

10. Cf. Felle 2000; Jaszai 1994; Schiller 1968, pp. 89-110.

11. We are unaware of any other such juxtaposition. Normally, the hanging of Judas is seen in manuscripts and is treated as an isolated event. Cf. Leclercq 1928.

tell us regarding the devotion of worshippers in those years. Those sources indicate with insistence that the shame of the Cross wounded the sensibilities of the faithful. The arrangement of our Roman casket thus appears disconcerting.¹²

A Strange Iconography

The panel which comes first in a chronological ordering of the scenes is no less surprising in the way it shows Pilate, the *Via Crucis*, and Peter's denial of Christ. These episodes are not arranged according to the story. This re-ordering may have been motivated by a desire for symmetry or in order to put Christ in the centre of the composition. But the very idea of associating these three scenes is unique, as is the inversion of the various figures' roles. Usually we see the *dialogue* between Pilate and Christ – as on the Brescia Lipsanoteca or in the Rossano Gospels (Fig. 6), while the scene of Peter with the rooster is elsewhere found either as an isolated image – e.g. in the Brescia Lipsanoteca (Fig. 7) – or showing the moment where Christ predicts Peter's denial – e.g. on the doors of Santa Sabina or Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (Fig. 8).¹³ On the British Museum casket, on the other hand, Pilate washes his hands alone, since Christ has already turned away and, in the presence of Simon, is already on his way to Calvary. At the same time, Christ is clearly communicating with Peter, to whom he has turned his attention. Peter extends his arms in response. Even if this last scene can be found in the Gospels – Peter and Christ exchange a glance after Peter's denial, its iconography is absolutely unique among surviving works (Luke 22, 61).

The scene of the women at the tomb, the third panel if we follow chronological order, is less extraordinary.¹⁴ In accordance with a tradition developed at the beginning of the fifth century, we find the women shown beside a round tomb with open doors attesting to the Resurrection.¹⁵ Kötzsche, however, has called our attention to some particular choices here.¹⁶ Unlike in other depictions from Late Antiquity – say, this one from the *Museo d'arte antica* at Milan (Fig. 9),¹⁷ the women are not part of any dynamic movement, but rather seem blocked in a meditative and suffering pose. Kötzsche explains this difference by pointing out similarities to pagan models; in pagan art, the women present at a death or a

12. Felle 2000; Leclercq 1957 recalls a passage in Gregory of Tours, *Gloria martyrum*, 1, I, XXIII. Here Gregory describes the reaction of his faithful upon seeing, at the end of the fourth century, an image of the Passion: they forced the bishop to cover it. At Rome, furthermore, Leo the Great speaks of the “scandal of the cross”. Cf. Leo the Great, *Sermons*, 38, 3, 2, ed. Montanari, Pratesi, Puccini 1999; p. 255.

13. For Christ before Pilate cf. Schiller 1968, pp. 71-73. For Doubting Thomas cf. Schiller 1968, pp. 69-71.

14. Cf. Perraymond 2000.

15. Kondakov, long ago, perceived here a type of iconography formed in the Holy Land, since he considered it a reference to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Cf. Kondakov 1914, p. 208. This idea was recently taken up anew by Ross 1996.

16. Kötzsche 1994.

17. n. 313, in Ensoli, La Rocca 2000, p. 612.

funeral are always paralysed by suffering. In this case, we may be looking at an attempt to re-compose a familiar scene.

Stranger still is the last scene, which depicts Doubting Thomas.¹⁸ This is an exceptional subject known in only three other antique versions: the sarcophagus of St. Celsus at Milan (dated to 370-380 AD – see Fig. 10), a fragment of an early-fifth-century sarcophagus from Ravenna, and finally one of the mosaic panels in Sant’Apollinare (Fig. 11).¹⁹ In the first two versions cited, we see the dialogue between Christ and Thomas while the latter confirms the Resurrection by putting his hands on the wounded side of the Lord. In Sant’Apollinare, the verification has already taken place, in the presence of the other disciples, and while Christ shows his wounds, Thomas bows before Him and professes “My Lord God”! (John 20, 28). The British Museum ivory shows the verifying gesture of Thomas, but three other apostles are also present. What is more, the movement of Thomas’ hand is indistinguishable from the gestures of the other three apostles. Another surprise, especially in comparison to the Sant’Apollinare mosaic, is that the British Museum ivory does not make Thomas stand out from the other apostles. This is odd if we consider how easy it is to read the casket’s other scenes.

Images and Liturgy

We have now seen that the iconography of the British Museum’s casket is nothing if not unusual. If we consider the choice of scenes, intrinsically tied to the mysteries of Easter, I think we can find the explanation in the Easter Liturgy. Before we proceed, we should therefore recall what we know about the celebration of the Holy Week in Rome in the fifth century. Even though we have but scarce information, we know that the rites were centred on the Lateran and its surroundings.²⁰ At the beginning of the fifth century, only one exceptional liturgy was celebrated in the course of the *Triduum*, namely the Easter vigil. (On Good Friday and Holy Saturday the faithful had to content themselves with an instructive and meditative sermon).²¹ During the rest of the year, there was a stational liturgy which took place at various sites in Rome and had its origins in the fourth century, but the Easter Vigil itself was held only at the Lateran, confirming the primacy of this cathedral.²²

Over the course of the fifth century, the Easter celebrations were greatly expanded: Palm Sunday was added (and assigned to the Lateran), and a penitential rite began to develop in the Lateran Baptistery on Holy Thursday.²³ The Good Friday prayers were assigned to Santa Croce, perhaps as early as the end of the

18. Leclercq 1957b.

19. Cf. Brandenburg 1987, pp. 95-97, Fig. 109; Bovini 1954, pp. 26-27, Fig. 17; Penni Jacco 2004, pp. 61-62.

20. De Blaauw 1994, p. 42.

21. De Blaauw 1994, p. 147.

22. Baldovin 1987, pp. 147-156.

23. De Blaauw 1994, p. 148. The first known occurrence of this liturgy is mentioned by Innocent I (402-417) in a letter to Bishop Decentius of Gubbio, cf. Cabié 1973, p. 49.