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# A Late Antique Ivory Plaque and Modern Response

DALE KINNEY

## Abstract

A recently published challenge to the authenticity of the ivory plaque of the Symmachi, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is refuted, and its late fourth-century origin is confirmed by comparison with other plaques whose fourth- or fifth-century date is secure. The charge of forgery is related to patterns in recent art historiography, and these are traced to an anachronistic critical vocabulary that entails inappropriate norms of illusionistic depiction. A different vocabulary is proposed, based on a reexamination of the plaque's visible structure and of its artistic sources.

A pendant note by Anthony Cutler scrutinizes the fabric of the Symmachi diptych leaf and the manner in which it was worked. Recognizing both resemblances to and differences from the companion leaf of the Nicomachi, the author argues that these fit a known pattern of Late Antique workshop production and that the technical arguments underlying the claim that SYMMACHORVM is a 19th-century creation are therefore groundless.\*

In an essay entitled "The Aesthetics of the Forger," published in the spring of 1992, Jerome Eisenberg cited several well-known objects generally believed to be authentic antiquities to exemplify the "stylistic criteria" that he claimed are symptoms of forgery. Among these objects is an ivory plaque inscribed SYMMACHORVM (figs. 1, right, and 2) that is usually associated with the Roman senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (fl. 365–402).<sup>1</sup> Despite some dubious assertions, noticeable even in the essay's title (the very notion of "the" aesthetics of

"the" forger implicitly denies the historical relativity of aesthetics [not to mention style], and with it a fundamental premise of art history), Eisenberg's essay elicited a chorus of approbation from art professionals who wrote to express their own rejection of the object. Alan Shestack confessed that he had been "duped for decades" but was now converted; Christoph Clairmont proclaimed that "the forgery of the panel . . . is blatant!"; and so on.<sup>2</sup> Thus encouraged, Eisenberg went on to publish a second article devoted exclusively to the case against SYMMACHORVM.<sup>3</sup> The published responses to this article are more noteworthy, as they came from prominent authorities on Late Antique art. Neither Ernst Kitzinger nor the late Kurt Weitzmann disavowed Eisenberg's proposal; on the contrary, both allowed its possibility, while cautioning that it required further demonstration.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Eisenberg's arguments are very easy to refute. Were it simply a matter of exposing their failings it might be most productive to ignore them; but the willingness of connoisseurs and scholars to embrace his judgment suggests that there is something more meaningful at work here. That other "something" is the real concern of this essay, although I will begin by attending to the specifics of Eisenberg's case and the evidence that disproves it.

Eisenberg acknowledges that the plaque of the Symmachi and its presumed companion, NICOMACHORVM (fig. 1, left), can be traced almost con-

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\* The following abbreviations are used below:

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|----------------|---|
| Claussen       | P.C. Claussen, "Das Reliquiar von Montier-en-Der: Ein spätantike Diptychon und seine mittelalterliche Fassung," <i>Pantheon</i> 36 (1978) 308–19. |
| Cutler 1984    | A. Cutler, "The Making of the Justinian Diptychs," <i>Byzantion</i> 54 (1984) 75–115.   |
| Cutler 1993    | A. Cutler, "Five Lessons in Late Roman Ivory," <i>JRA</i> 6 (1993) 167–92.  |
| Delbrueck      | R. Delbrueck, <i>Die Consulardiptychen und verwandte Denkmäler</i> (Berlin 1929).   |
| Eisenberg 1992 | J.M. Eisenberg, "The Aesthetics of the Forger: Stylistic Criteria in Ancient Art Forgery," <i>Minerva</i> 3:3 (1992) 10–15.                       |

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- Eisenberg 1993 J.M. Eisenberg, "The Symmachi Ivory Diptych Panel: A Nineteenth-Century Interpretation of a Lost Original?" *Minerva* 4:2 (1993) 12–18.

<sup>1</sup> Eisenberg 1992. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, no. 212-1865; P. Williamson ed., *The Medieval Treasury: The Art of the Middle Ages in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London 1986) 44. I would like to thank Mr. Williamson for his assistance and friendly advice about this plaque.

<sup>2</sup> "Letters," *Minerva* 3:6 (1992) 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> Eisenberg 1993. Dr. Eisenberg kindly sent me several drafts of his article before publication, and we had some lively exchanges over them. I wish to acknowledge his courtesy and openness to debate. I expressed most of my objections to his argument to him directly in a letter of 19 January 1993.

<sup>4</sup> "Letters," *Minerva* 4:3 (1993) 5.

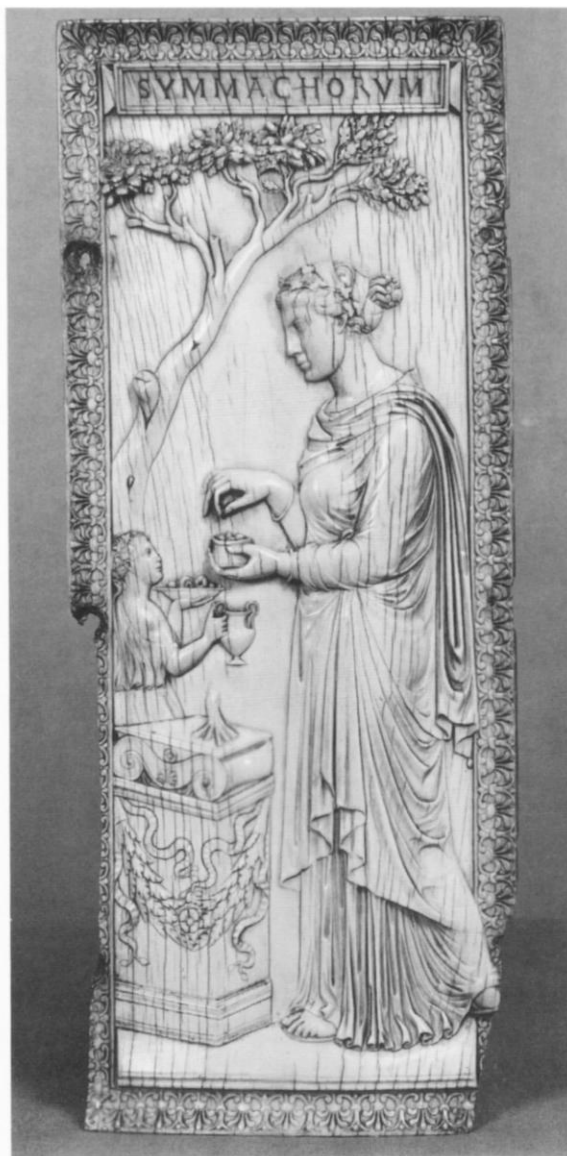


Fig. 1. Diptych leaves of the Nicomachi (left), Paris, Musée national du Moyen-Age, Thermes de Cluny, and of the Symmachi (right), London, Victoria and Albert Museum. (Photos courtesy Réunion des Musées nationaux and Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

tinuously to 1717, when they were recorded in the treasury of the Benedictine monastery of Montier-en-Der, mounted as doors on a medieval reliquary.<sup>5</sup> An engraving of the plaques was published in that year by Doms Edmond Martène and Ursin Durand (fig. 3), and another engraving appeared in A.F.

Gori's posthumous work of 1759.<sup>6</sup> A view of the reliquary without the plaques, also published by Martène and Durand (fig. 4), shows an inscription in Gothic letters on its base: *hiis tabulis hoc ditat op(us) B(er)chari(us) illi [sic] quas pegrinanti terra beata dedit*. With the reliquary itself the inscription is datable to

<sup>5</sup> Delbrueck 214 quotes an inventory of the monastery of 1717: "ce qui orne davantage ce reliquaire ce sont deux portes d'Ivoire. . . . Ce sont deux pièces achevées qui . . . servent de portes ou volets pour couvrir les reliques"; cf. Claussen 318, n. 20. The plaque of the Nicomachi is in Paris, Musée de Cluny, Cl. 17048: J.-P. Caillet, *L'antiquité classique, le haut moyen âge et Byzance au Musée de Cluny* (Paris

1985) 104–107.

<sup>6</sup> *Voyage littéraire de deux religieux bénédictins de la Congrégation de Saint Maur* (Paris 1717) opp. p. 98 (Eisenberg 1993, fig. 5); A.F. Gori, *Thesaurus veterum diptychorum consularium et ecclesiasticorum*, ed. I. Passeri, I (Florence 1759) pl. VI opp. p. 207 (Eisenberg 1993, fig. 7).

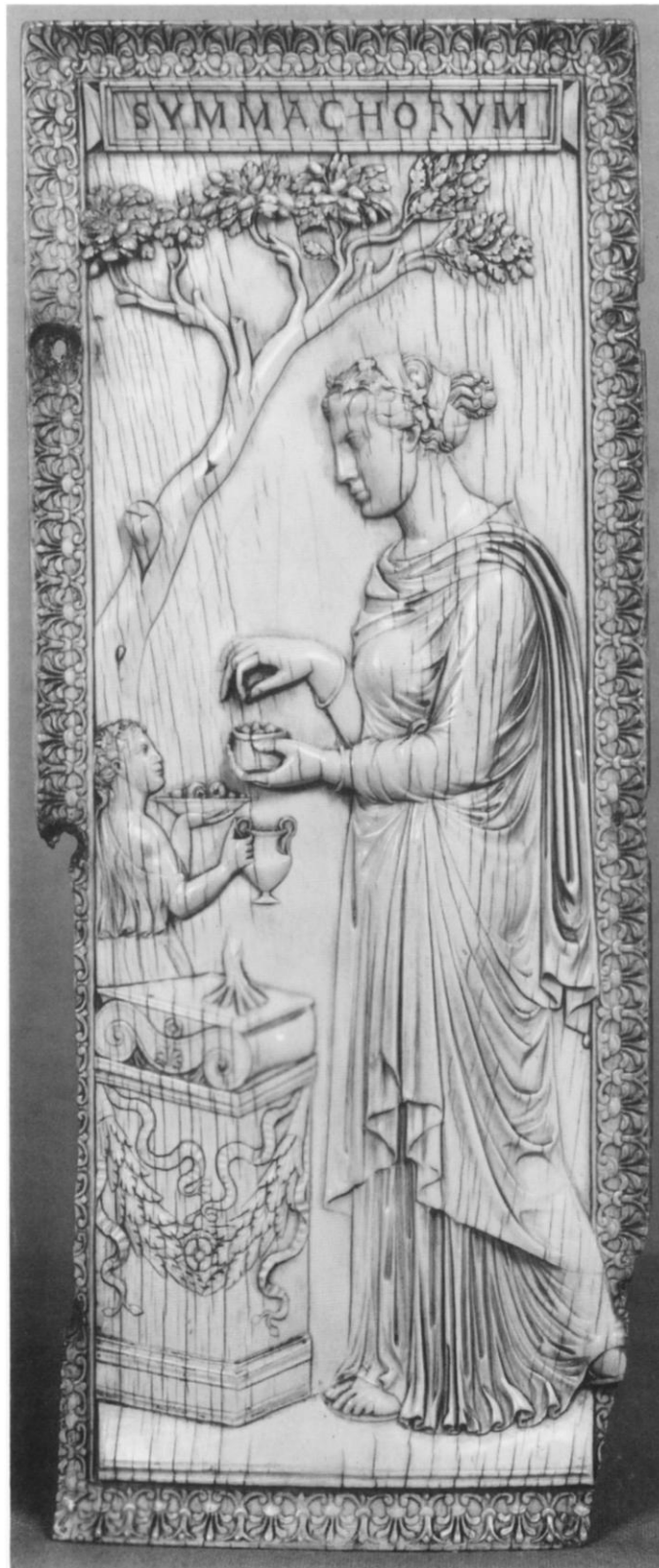


Fig. 2. Diptych leaf of the Symmachi. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. (Photo courtesy Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

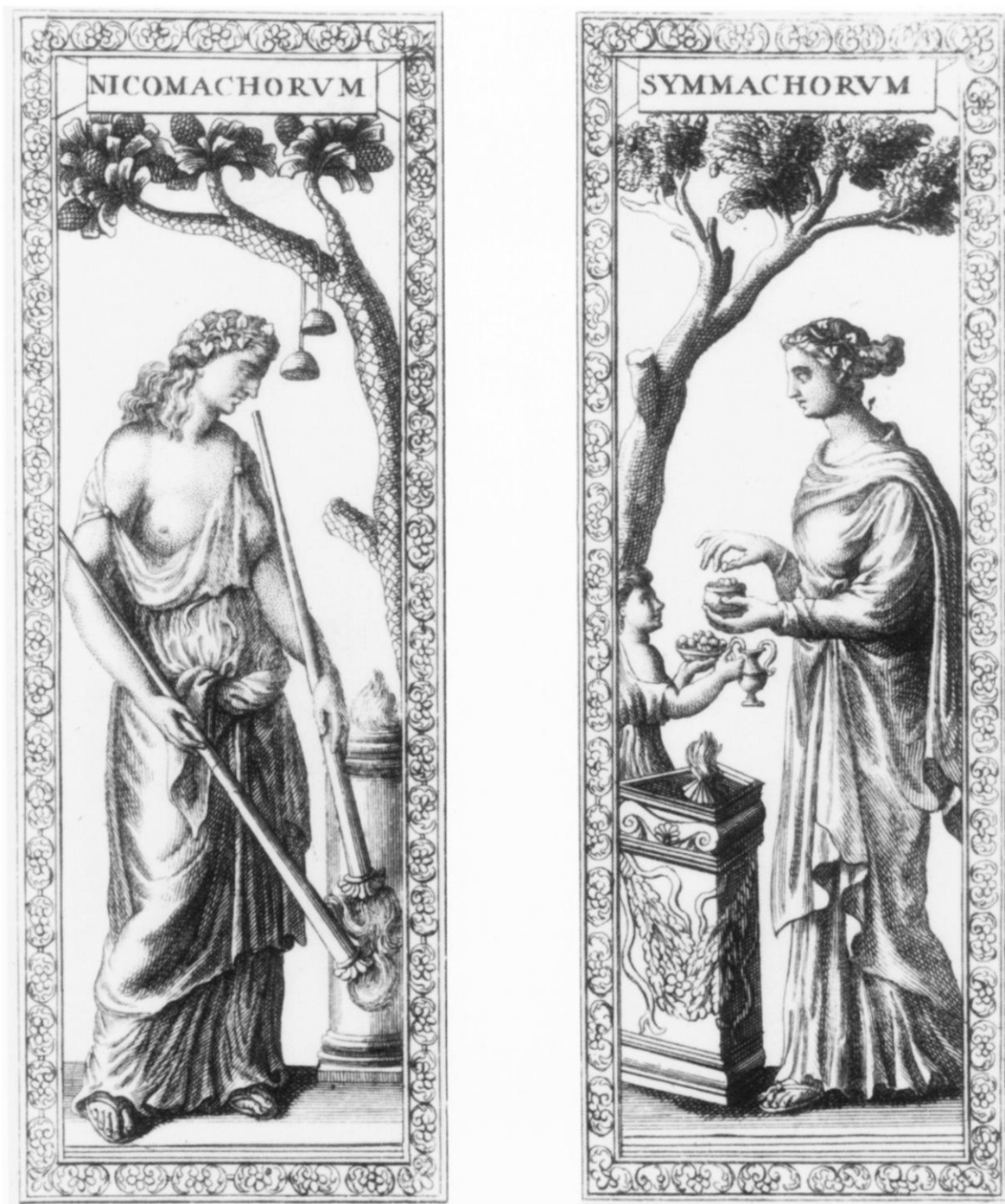


Fig. 3. Engraving of diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi. (After E. Martène and U. Durand, *Voyage littéraire de deux religieux bénédictins de la Congrégation de Saint Maur* [Paris 1717] opp. p. 98. Photo Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)

the turn of the 13th century.<sup>7</sup> Richard Delbrueck traced its content to a biography of Abbot Bercharius (d. 675) attributed to his distant successor

Adso (d. 922): "he [Bercharius] visited Jerusalem and obtained very many sacred relics, and he brought back with him excellent tablets of ivory."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Delbrueck 214; Claussen 312–15; P. Verdier, "A Thirteenth-Century Reliquary of the True Cross," *BClevMus* 69 (1982) 107.

<sup>8</sup> Delbrueck 214; cf. Claussen 310, 318, n. 16. *Acta sanctorum Octobris VII*, pt. 2, eds. J. van der Moere and J. van Hecke (Paris 1869) 1017: "*Hierosolymam adiit sacrasque plu-*

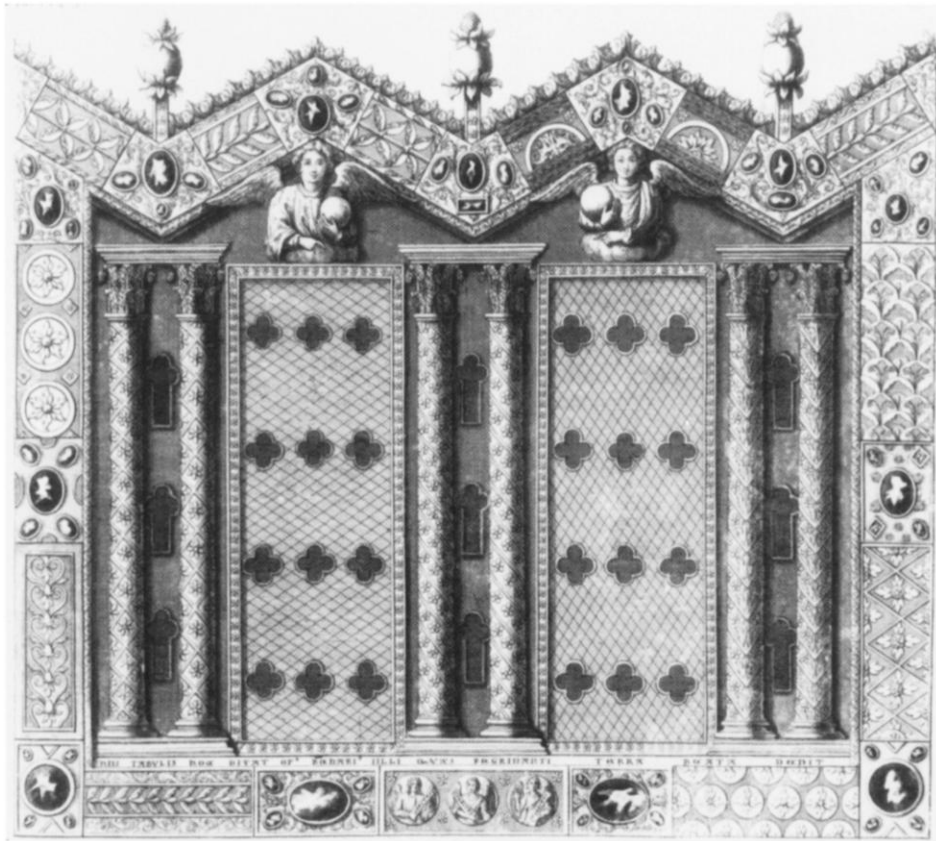


Fig. 4. Engraving of reliquary of the monastery of Montier-en-Der. (After E. Martène and U. Durand, *Voyage littéraire de deux religieux bénédictins de la Congrégation de Saint Maur* [Paris 1717] following 98. Photo Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)

According to a source of 1845, the reliquary “fell prey to fire” after the monastery was closed in 1790.<sup>9</sup> In 1860 the plaque of the Nicomachi was found “at the bottom of a well,” presumably having been thrown there as debris.<sup>10</sup> The plaque of the Symmachi appeared soon after, in good condition, “in the possession of an *amateur* in the town of Montier-en-Der.”<sup>11</sup> It was purchased by the South Kensington (now Victoria and Albert) Museum in 1865.<sup>12</sup>

Eisenberg finds it suspicious that the plaque of the Symmachi turned up “in virtually pristine condition” so soon after the discovery of the ruined NICOMACHORVM. He contends that the object acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum is a forgery, a copy made principally after the engravings. Although he misstates the sequence of events

(SYMMACHORVM was found after the discovery of NICOMACHORVM, but not after its publication; see ns. 10–11 *supra*), I think that we might grant some grounds for suspicion. The plaque of the Symmachi is much better preserved than NICOMACHORVM (though hardly pristine) and it shows no traces of fire. In theory it could be an opportunistic recreation of a plaque even more disastrously wrecked than NICOMACHORVM, made to fetch a better price.

Though it is justified by circumstance, Eisenberg’s case against SYMMACHORVM is ultimately moved by style, and this forces him to an even more drastic conclusion. The plaque now in the Victoria and Albert Museum is a forgery, he claims, but so was the plaque published by Martène and Durand in 1717:

*rimum Reliquias impetravit, tabulasque eburneas optimas secum deportavit.*”

<sup>9</sup> R.A. Bouillevaux, *Les moines du Der* (Montier-en-Der 1845) 425, quoted by Claussen 317, n. 5; I have not seen the original. Cf. Caillet (*supra* n. 5) 104.

<sup>10</sup> E. Du Sommerard, *Musée des Thermes et de l’Hotel de*

*Cluny. Catalogue et description des objets d’art et de l’antiquité . . .* (Paris 1878) 317. Claussen 317, n. 5 cites the original edition of 1863.

<sup>11</sup> Du Sommerard (*supra* n. 10) 317.

<sup>12</sup> W. Maskell, *A Description of the Ivories Ancient and Mediaeval in the South Kensington Museum* (London 1872) 44.



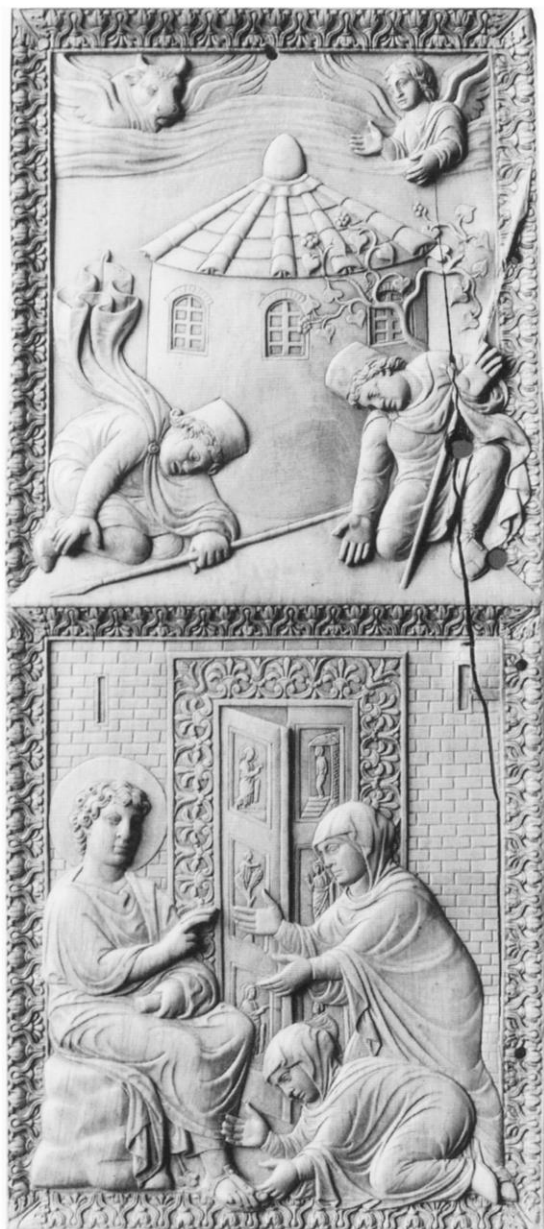


Fig. 5. Diptych leaf with the Myrophores, obverse. Milan, Civiche Raccolte di Arte Applicata ed Incisioni, Castello Sforzesco. (Photo Civico Archivio Fotografico)

"One could also argue that the actual Symmachi panel [sic] either never existed or was not known at the time that St Bercharius supposedly acquired the Nicomachi panel. It could even have been commissioned at a later date, perhaps in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, to replace a missing panel in the reliquary."<sup>13</sup> The rationale for this proposal is

<sup>13</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 17.

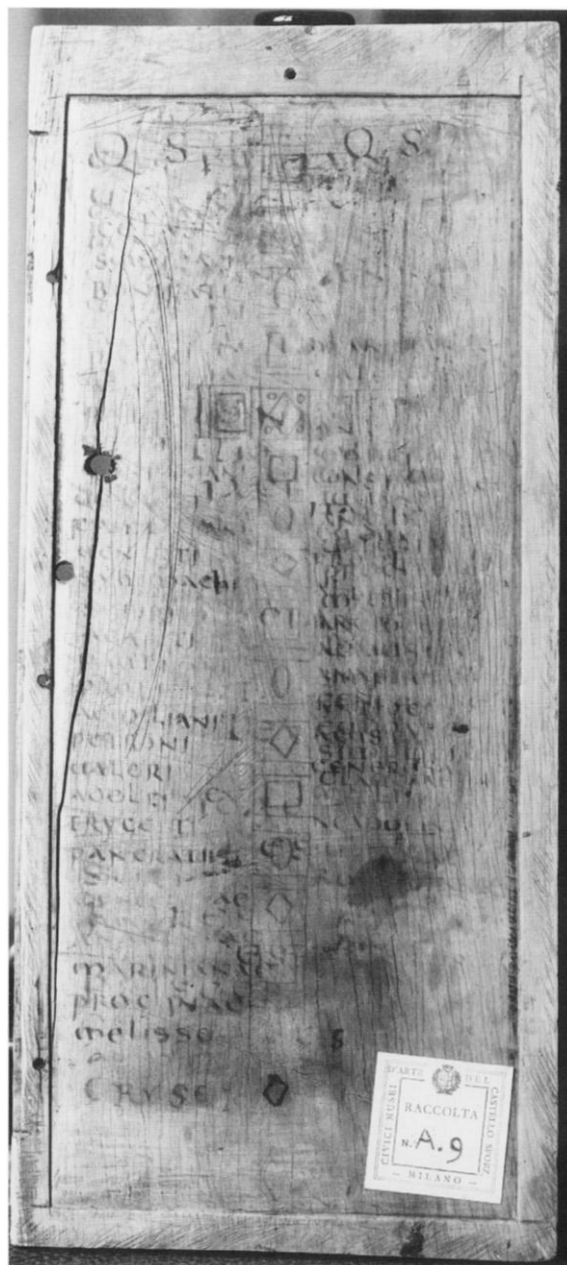


Fig. 6. Diptych leaf with the Myrophores, reverse. Milan, Civiche Raccolte di Arte Applicata ed Incisioni, Castello Sforzesco. (Photo Civico Archivio Fotografico)

not clearly distinguished from the argument for a 19th-century facture of the plaque we know, but insofar as it can be extricated the case rests on qualities of design classified as suspicious in "The Aesthetics of the Forger," notably horror vacui and mirror-imaging.<sup>14</sup> The implication of Eisenberg's assertion is that the design of the plaque of the Sym-

<sup>14</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 17; cf. Eisenberg 1992, 14–15.

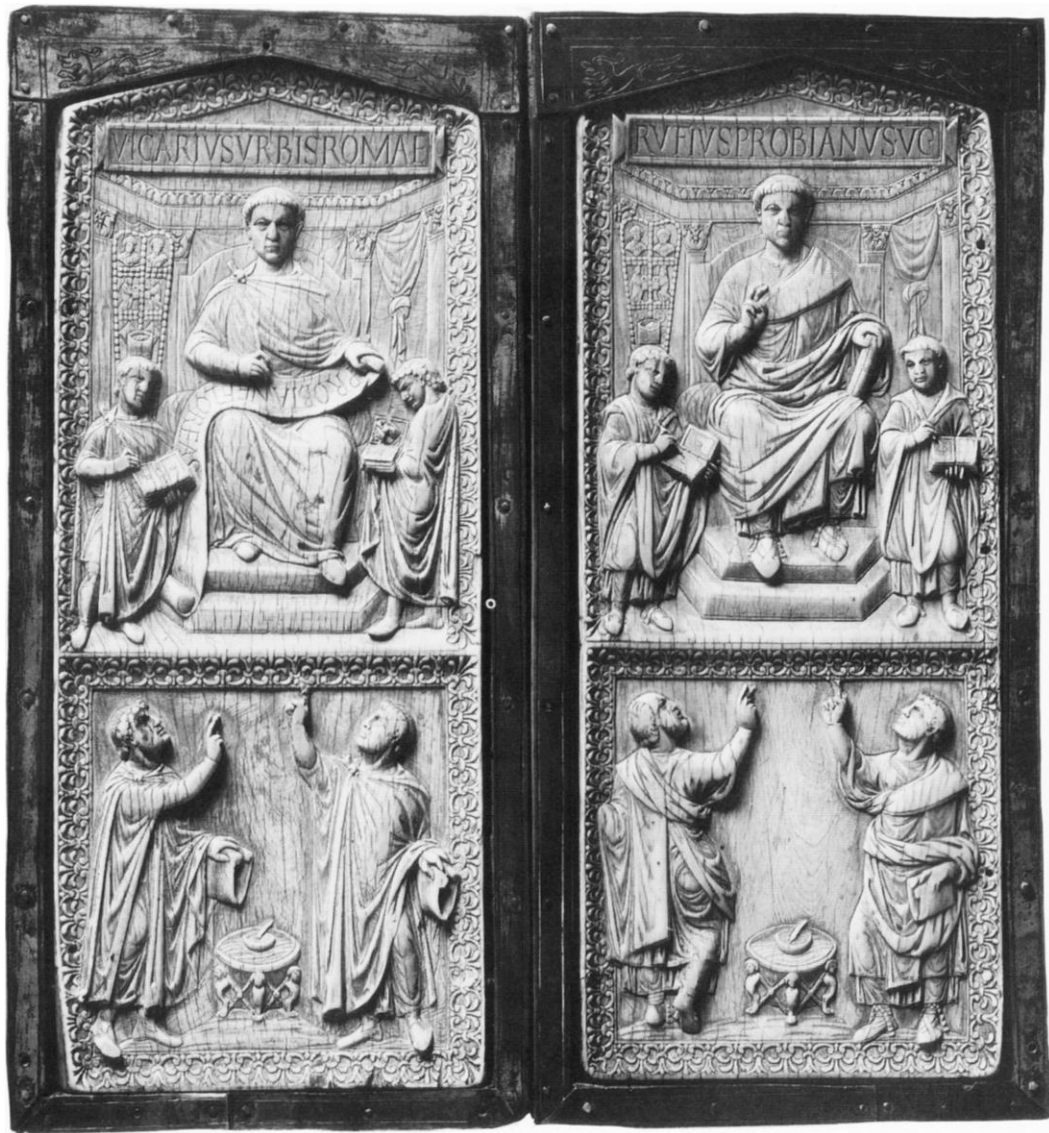


Fig. 7. Diptych of Rufius Probianus. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 323. (Photo Staatsbibliothek)

machi is not authentically Late Antique. This position can be maintained only by ignoring other objects with the same stylistic peculiarities, whose affinity with SYMMACHORVM has been reiterated in the scholarly literature for decades.

The diptych of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi closely resembles three other extant ivory plaques: a single leaf with the Women at the Tomb of Christ

(Myrophores) in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan (figs. 5–6), and the diptych inscribed RVFIVS PROBIANVS V C VICARIVS VRBIS ROMAE in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin (fig. 7).<sup>15</sup> The most obvious connection among them is the lotus-and-palmette frieze that borders the plaques of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi and Probianus, and frames the entrance to the tomb on

<sup>15</sup> Milan, Castello Sforzesco, Civiche Raccolte di Arte Applicata ed Incisioni, inv. 9: O. Zastrow, *Museo d'arte applicate: Gli avori* (Milan 1978) 19–20. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 323:

V.H. Elbern ed., *Das erste Jahrtausend: Kultur und Kunst im werdenden Abendland an Rhein und Ruhr* 2 (Düsseldorf 1962) 84; W. Stüwer ed., *Das Erzbistum Köln 3: Die Reichsabtei Werden an der Ruhr* (Berlin 1980) 70.



the tablet with the Myrophores.<sup>16</sup> An ancient Greek pattern much favored in Rome in the Early Imperial period, the lotus-and-palmette is less typical of the arts of late antiquity. Its form on the plaques is retrospective, and signals both the common origin and the shared art historical self-consciousness of these reliefs.<sup>17</sup>

The diptych of Probianus can be traced to the monastery of Werden on the Ruhr, founded by St. Liudger (ca. 745–809).<sup>18</sup> It was acquired after the secularization of the monastery in 1802 or 1803 by the Paulinische Bibliothek in Münster, and was bought from there by the Royal Library (now Staatsbibliothek) in Berlin 20 years later.<sup>19</sup> The diptych caught the eye of antiquarians and art collectors in the 18th century, but it did not enter the literature on carved ivories until the 1860s.<sup>20</sup> The first accurate scholarly explication of it emanated from Wilhelm Meyer in 1879.<sup>21</sup> In between, Anatole Chabouillet, curator of the Cabinet des Médailles, publicly questioned the diptych's authenticity, though admitting that he had not seen it.<sup>22</sup> Chabouillet's objections, furthered by innuendos about the silence with which the diptych supposedly had been treated and the motivations of those who published it, led him to propose a scenario very like Eisenberg's for SYMMACHORVM: "Could this diptych not have been forged in the sixteenth century,

at a time when there were many artists so skillful, and so enamored of antiquity, that they could hardly have prevented themselves from counterfeiting it?"<sup>23</sup> Meyer's meticulous verification of the insignia and other official details in the diptych made such speculations futile, and Molinier dismissed them as not worthy of mention, were it not for their author's long association with the ivories in the Cabinet des Médailles.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, the diptych of Probianus has a medieval history much like that of the plaques of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi. It came from Werden Abbey on a book-box containing an 11th-century manuscript of the so-called *vita secunda* of St. Liudger, the separated plaques set into recesses in the two thick boards of which the box was made.<sup>25</sup> Because the peculiar dimensions of the manuscript (31.6 × 12.9 cm) match those of the ivory panels (32 × 13 cm), it seems likely that the manuscript was proportioned to the diptych, and that the box (34.6 × 16 cm) was made to fit both.<sup>26</sup> This places the diptych in Werden by the 11th century.<sup>27</sup> Scholars have speculated that it was given to the monastery by St. Liudger himself, who like Abbot Bercharius of Montier-en-Der is said to have traveled to Rome and to have obtained relics there.<sup>28</sup>

The diptych of Probianus can be dated with near precision. André Chastagnol identified the vicar it

<sup>16</sup> The first to notice this relationship seems to have been É. Molinier, *Histoire générale des arts appliqués à l'industrie du V<sup>e</sup> à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle I: Ivoires* (Paris 1896) 12. He concluded from it that all five plaques must have been made within a 30- to 40-year span: p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> The closest parallel I have found is on a cornice attributed by Canina to the door of the "middle temple" (Iuno Sospita?) in the Forum Holitorium: L. Crozzoli Aite, *I tre templi del Foro Olitorio* (MemPontAcc s. 3.13, Rome 1981) 15 fig. 7, 52 fig. 61 (Crozzoli Aite 51–53 doubts the attribution). Also similar is the pedimental cornice of the temple of Magna Mater as depicted on the so-called "Ara Pietatis": F.C. Albertson, "An Augustan Temple Represented on a Historical Relief Dating to the Time of Claudius," *AJA* 91 (1987) 448 fig. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Delbrueck 256; V.H. Elbern, "Der Werdener Buchschrein mit dem Probianusdiptychon," in B. Senger ed., *St. Liudger und die Abtei Werden* (Essen 1962) 89–101. On St. Liudger: *Bibliotheca sanctorum* 8 (Rome 1966) 290–92.

<sup>19</sup> F. Wilken, *Geschichte der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Berlin 1828) 147–48; J. Staender, *Chirographorum in Regia Bibliotheca Paulina Monasteriensis catalogus* (Bratislava 1889) IX–XV.

<sup>20</sup> Baron von Hüpsch tried to buy it from the Abbot of Werden in the 1790s: A. Schmidt, "Handschriften der Reichsabtei Werden," *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* 22 (1905) 252–57; cf. Wilken (supra n. 19) 220–21. J. Labarte, *Histoire des arts industriels au moyen âge et à l'époque de la*

*Renaissance* I (Paris 1864) 198 is the earliest art historical publication of the diptych I have been able to trace. A prior one by J.O. Westwood is cited in diverse forms by Maskell (supra n. 12) xxviii, n. 54; Westwood, "Ivory Carvings," in J.H. Parker, *The Archaeology of Rome* 9/10 (Oxford 1877) 61, n. k; and W. Meyer, *Zwei antike Elfenbeinarbeiten der k. Staats-Bibliothek in München* (Munich 1879) 35–36.

<sup>21</sup> Meyer (supra n. 20) 35–41.

<sup>22</sup> [A.] Chabouillet, review of "Le diptyque consulaire de Saint-Junien au diocèse de Limoges," by L'abbé Arbellot, in *Revue des sociétés savantes des départements* s. 5.6 (1873) 290–93. Labarte (supra n. 20) also expressed an inkling of doubt: "sa perfection nous avait fait douter de son authenticité, si le savant M. Pertz, Conservateur de la Bibliothèque de Berlin, ne nous avait assuré que cet établissement en avait la possession depuis très-longtemps."

<sup>23</sup> Chabouillet (supra n. 22) 291: "Ce diptyque ne peut-il avoir été fabriqué au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, alors qu'il y avait tant d'artistes si habiles, et si amoureux de l'antiquité, qu'ils ne pouvaient s'empêcher de la contrefaire?"

<sup>24</sup> Molinier (supra n. 16) 40.

<sup>25</sup> Staender (supra n. 19) X; Elbern (supra n. 18).

<sup>26</sup> Elbern (supra n. 18) 99. The dimensions cited here are after Elbern 90; Delbrueck 250, however, gives 31.6 × 12.9 cm as the dimensions of the plaques.

<sup>27</sup> Elbern (supra n. 15) 84 attributed the book-box to the abbacy of Adalwig (1066–1081).

<sup>28</sup> Elbern (supra n. 18) 98–99.

celebrates as the Probianus who was (later) Prefect of the City in 416.<sup>29</sup> Alan Cameron argued from the relative sizes of the imperial busts on the portrait stand behind the vicar that the diptych must have been made for a different Probianus in 396.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the differences between these views, the date is specifiable as the end of the fourth or early fifth century.

The plaque with the Myrophores in Milan was purchased for the civic museums in 1935, when Prince Gian Giacomo Trivulzio sold a large part of his family's renowned collection.<sup>31</sup> When and where the Trivulzi acquired the plaque is not recorded; it could have been right in Milan, where ivory diptychs figured prominently in the medieval liturgies of the cathedral.<sup>32</sup> Although many travelers and scholars visited the Trivulzio collection, none mentions seeing the Myrophores before J.O. Westwood.<sup>33</sup> He published a description of the plaque in 1876, thinking it Carolingian, and Garrucci published an illustration in his *Storia della arte cristiana* in 1880.<sup>34</sup> Émile Molinier seems to have been the first to remark its resemblance to the diptychs of Probianus and of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi, but it was Hans Graeven who drew the conclusion that the Trivulzio plaque must therefore be a product, like the others, of late fourth-century Rome.<sup>35</sup>

Far more than the plaque of the Symmachi, the Trivulzio Myrophores should have tripped Eisen-

berg's stylistic alarm. Its composition is bizarre. The ornamental border breaks away at right angles in the middle of the plaque to become the upper cornice of the first story of the sepulcher. This brings the building so far forward in the pictorial space that no room remains for the figures, who not only overlap the frame but appear to be pushed in front of it (the effect is only optical, however, as the relief is so low that very little actually projects beyond the framing cymatium). Surely this is an extreme display of "horror vacui." The plaque also exhibits "incongruous and extraneous elements" (the soldiers kneeling on the roof of the building; the vine behind the soldier on the right), "disparity in degree of abstraction of elements" (cf. the upper story of the sepulcher with the lower), "a misinterpreted or unique element" (cf. the position of the hands of the kneeling woman with respect to the angel's foot), "disproportionate elements" (notice the varying lengths of the arms), and "lack of emotion." All of these characteristics are among Eisenberg's symptoms of forgery, and he adduced most of them to discredit the plaque of the Symmachi.<sup>36</sup>

Now, while it may be the most suspicious of the five plaques under consideration according to Eisenberg's criteria of style, the Trivulzio panel is also the one least open to question as an authentic work of late antiquity. For it bears on its reverse (the inside of the original diptych; fig. 6) a palimpsest of

<sup>29</sup> A. Chastagnol, *La préfecture urbaine à Rome sous le Bas-Empire* (Paris 1960) 465 (dating the vicariate between 408 and 416); Chastagnol, *Les fastes de la préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire* (Paris 1962) 275–76.

<sup>30</sup> A. Cameron, "Pagan Ivories," in F. Paschoud, G. Fry, and Y. Rütsche eds., *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire* (Paris 1986) 60–61. Employing a similar reasoning, Delbrueck 256 deduced a date of 402.

<sup>31</sup> C. Alberici, in *Capolavori di arte decorativa nel Castello Sforzesco* (Milan 1975) 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Beroldus sive Ecclesiae Ambrosianae Mediolanensis Calendarium et Ordines saec. XII*, ed. M. Magistretti (Milan 1894) 48 ("puero stante . . . cum eburneis tabulis . . . in medio choro"), 49–50 ("puer magistri scholarum, acceptis tabulis eburneis de altare vel ambone"), 63, 95, 115; G. Bugati, *Memorie storico-critiche intorno le reliquie ed il culto di S. Celso Martire con un'appendice nella quale si spiega un Dittico d'avorio della Chiesa Metropolitana di Milano* (Milan 1782) 245–57.

<sup>33</sup> The Trivulzio collection went back at least to the 15th century, but the Marquis Teodoro Alessandro (1694–1763) and his brother Abbot Carlo (1715–1789) are considered the founders of, respectively, the library and the museum: F. Piper, "Verschollene und aufgefundene Denkmäler und Handschriften," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 34 (1861) 467; cf. G. Seregni and E. Motta, in *Le*

*biblioteche milanesi: Manuale ad uso degli studiosi* (Milan 1914) 326–27. The Marquis corresponded with Antonio Gori about ivories (supra n. 6, vol. 3, 258; cf. Bugati [supra n. 32] 257 and K.J. Shelton, "The Diptych of the Young Office Holder," *JAC* 25 [1982] 135), and Don Carlo collected consular diptychs (*Opuscoli eruditi latini ed italiani del P.M. Giuseppe Allegranza*, ed. I. Bianchi [Cremona 1781] 14–15). An amusing description of the state of the museum at the end of the 18th century appears in *Cartas familiares del Abate D. Juan Andres a su hermano D. Carlos Andres*, diandole noticia del viage que hizo a varias ciudades de Italia en el año 1791 . . . 4 (Madrid 1793) 139–48. Piper found it in better order in 1860.

<sup>34</sup> J.O. Westwood, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Fictile Ivories in the South Kensington Museum. With an Account of the Continental Collections of Classical and Mediaeval Ivories* (London 1876) 366; R. Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa* 6 (Prato 1880) 74 and pl. 449.2.

<sup>35</sup> Molinier (supra n. 16) I 63–64; cf. H. Semper, "Ivoires du X<sup>e</sup> et du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle au Musée national de Budapesth," *Revue de l'art chrétien* s. 8.4 (1897) 395, n. 1. H. Graeven, review of G. Stuhlfauth, *Die altchristliche Elfenbeimplastik*, in *GGA* 159 (1897) 72–75.

<sup>36</sup> Eisenberg 1992, nos. 4, 6, 8, 11, 15, 17. He cited SYMMACHORVM for 4, 8, 11, and 15.

early medieval writing, one layer of which is attributable to the sixth or seventh century.<sup>37</sup> These rolls or litanies were written on a slightly recessed field whose plain border accommodates a 25.5-cm-long channel and three holes for hinges (on the left in fig. 6).<sup>38</sup> Since whoever carved the relief decoration on the outer side of the plaque anticipated the hinge holes by leaving a greater thickness of ivory in their vicinity (witness the swelling of the ground at the right side of the vine, near the slit window of the tomb, and behind the leg of the standing woman), we can infer that the two faces of the panel were worked simultaneously, before any writing was added. In other words, the relief of the Myrophores must be dated before the sixth or seventh century.

All five of these related panels show remarkable plays with the decorated frame, with effects that range from the extreme artificiality of the Myrophores to relatively inobtrusive overlappings on NICOMACHORVM. The diptych of Probianus is more like the Myrophores in its negation of pictorial plausibility (fig. 7). The lotus-and-palmette border again bisects the field of the image, in this case severing the space of the officials and senators who address the vicar from the vicar himself and the stenographers who record the interaction.<sup>39</sup> Once again every figure is pushed forward to a compressed zone outside the frame and the pictorial space it notionally defines; from a post-Albertian perspective, these appear to be pictures turned in-

side-out.<sup>40</sup> Or to describe the same effect another way, by intruding the frame into the normal vertical structure of a Late Antique acclamation scene, the designer acknowledged the nonpictorial and symbolic character of the genre.<sup>41</sup> In its disruption of pictorial conventions, the treatment obstructs spatial illusionism and proclaims instead the tactile three-dimensionality of relief.

By comparison, the plaques of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi are less transgressive of norms we take to be Classical; and for that reason, the unorthodox moves they do display are more offensive to the postmedieval eye. Notorious on SYMMACHORVM are the matron's right leg and foot, which are rotated an impossible degree from the plane of her hips to bring the foot over the frame on the right. Since her left foot seems to be aligned with the rear corner of the altar, and the altar slides behind the frame at the left, the result is an intolerable "spatial" ambiguity.<sup>42</sup> Modern viewers commonly interpret this as a mistake.<sup>43</sup> In light of the other reliefs just described, however, the placement of the foot can hardly be called an error, much less, as per Eisenberg, the blunder of a forger.<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, the foot initiates the play with the frame that is the hallmark of this sophisticated, albeit mannered, group of reliefs. On SYMMACHORVM as on the Myrophores and the diptych of Probianus, pictorial space is annihilated by the absorption of its own defining boundary, an implosion of the frame that renders

<sup>37</sup> The late Bernhard Bischoff ventured this date on the basis of a photograph: "Die Frage der Datierung des . . . wahrscheinlich liturgisch verwendeten Liste kompliziert sich durch die doppelte(?) Beschriftung; die verhältnismässig leicht lesbare Schrift . . . mag vielleicht ca. saec. VI/VII geschrieben sein." Letter to Virginia Brown, 24 April 1983, quoted with permission of Prof. Brown. Delbrueck 274 noted "spätere [than the carving] Inschriften, frühmittelalterlich"; he read "Quos deo Offerimus?" at the top. Zastrow (supra n. 15) 19 read only Q S Q S; this was confirmed by Bischoff, who also deciphered the following names in the left-hand column: BONIFATI, SYMMACHI, ACA\_TI, PAULI, PROLI, AEMILIANI, PETRONI, UALERI, ADEL . . . , TRYGETI, PANCRA-TII, MARINIANAE, PROC PIAE, MELISS.

<sup>38</sup> On the type and structure of the hinge, see Delbrueck 19–20; Shelton (supra n. 33) 136–39; C.T. Little, "A New Ivory of the Court School of Charlemagne," in K. Bierbrauer, P.K. Klein, and W. Sauerländer eds., *Studien zur mittelalterlichen Kunst 800–1250. Festschrift für Florentine Mutherich zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munich 1985) 20–21.

<sup>39</sup> The accoutrements—toga, baldachin, *theca* or portrait stand with *caliculus* (inkwell), and tripod table—indicate that the vicar is shown in an official capacity, such as a legal proceeding. Pace H. Gabelmann (*Antike Audienz- und Tribunalsszenen* [Darmstadt 1984] 206), the inscription PROBIANE FLOREAS on the open scroll signals that at least one leaf is also a scene of acclamation. See Meyer (supra n. 20) 36–41; Chastagnol 1960 (supra n. 29) 193, n.

3, 197, 199, 201–202, 241, 247; P.C. Berger, *The Insignia of the Notitia Dignitatum* (New York 1981) 106–109, 184–90.

<sup>40</sup> L.B. Alberti, *De pictura* I.19: "*Principio in superficie pingenda quam amplum libeat quadrangulum rectorum angulorum inscribo, quod quidem mihi pro aperta finestra est ex qua historia contueatur*"; C. Grayson ed., *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting and on Sculpture* (London 1972) 54; cf. 10–13.

<sup>41</sup> I have discussed these effects before: "The Makings of Byzantine Art," *Byzantine Studies/Études byzantines* 9:2 (1982) 326–27. For the normal conventions see N. Himmelmann-Wildschütz, "Sarkophag eines gallienischen Konsuls," *Festschrift für Friedrich Matz* (Mainz 1962) 123; H. Gabelmann, "Der Tribunaltypus der Consulardiptychen und seine Vorstufen," in G. Schwarz and E. Pochmarski eds., *Classica et provincialia: Festschrift Erna Diez* (Graz 1978) 51–65; J. Engemann, "Akklamationsrichtung, Sieger- und Besiegtenrichtung auf dem Galeriusbogen in Thessaloniki," *JAC* 22 (1979) 150–60; Gabelmann (supra n. 39) 198–207.

<sup>42</sup> Note the similar relationship on the Trivulzio plaque between the one visible foot of the standing woman, over the frame, and the hip of the seated angel, which is tucked under the frame.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. H.W. Janson, *History of Art*, rev. A.F. Janson (New York 1991) 266: "we realize, from small spatial incongruities such as the priestess' right foot overlapping the frame, that these forms are . . . no longer fully understood."

<sup>44</sup> Eisenberg 1992, 12; 1993, 15.

the virtual space of the image unmapably dense and optically inapprehensible.

NICOMACHORVM is more restrained. The carver of that plaque permitted only two discreet intrusions of the image onto the frame: one end of the lower torch on the left, and a cone of the pine tree, now sheared off, on the right. One inference to be drawn from this dissimilarity is that the makers of the two halves of the diptych were different craftsmen, one of whom (the master of NICOMACHORVM) treated relief more illusionistically than the other. In my opinion, this inference is correct. Another possible inference, reflected in the account of SYMMACHORVM as mistake-ridden, is that one craftsman (the master of SYMMACHORVM) was less skilled than the other. Eisenberg, with many others, drew this inference, and conflated with it his own belief that mistakes are a symptom of forgery. Hence his conclusion that SYMMACHORVM must be a fake.

Eisenberg's case against SYMMACHORVM is couched almost wholly in the plaque's perceived infelicities, anomalies, and errors, and on differences between the extant object and the 18th-century engravings published by Martène and Durand and Gori.<sup>45</sup> Prominent among the differences is the "irreparable error in the execution of the right foot," which does not obtrude upon the frame in the engravings (fig. 3).<sup>46</sup> A closer look at the engravings shows why. Neither one records the frieze of lotus and palmettes that ornaments the borders of the existing plaques; nor do they depict the rosettes on the metal door frames of the reliquary, a fragment of which still adheres to the left side of NICOMACHORVM (fig. 1, left).<sup>47</sup> What they do show is a sketchy, bastardized pattern of half-leaves and quasi-rosettes (fig. 3). That both engravings are alike in this respect indicates that one (published by

Gori) was based upon the other (Dom Robert Larcher's, published by Martène and Durand), rather than upon independent observation of the diptych. This means that there is only one record of the plaques in their 18th-century appearance, and it is faulty.

Apparently Dom Larcher did not record the ivory borders in situ, but tried to reconstruct them from memory when preparing his sketches for engraving. If he did not draw the frames, he plainly could not have recorded points at which the images overlap the frames, and none is seen in his engravings—including the two on NICOMACHORVM, which Eisenberg takes to be authentic. It follows that discrepancies between SYMMACHORVM and its engraving cannot be taken as evidence that the plaque is ungenuine; if anything they indicate the opposite, especially when the differences tend in the direction of Late Antique *bizarrerie* and away from the pictorial order of the 18th century. That Eisenberg argues contrarily should make us doubt his logic, not the plaque.

It is Eisenberg's thesis that a 19th-century forger invented the suspect details of SYMMACHORVM on the basis of another 18th-century engraving, of the so-called Fauvel or Ennobertus panel, published by Montfaucon in 1719 (fig. 8).<sup>48</sup> "Of ivory and about a foot [32.5 cm] tall," the Ennobertus panel apparently was in the collection of the Abbé Fauvel in Paris; its present location, or if it survives, is unknown.<sup>49</sup> Eisenberg maligns this plaque as well, but its authenticity seems impossible to disprove. Although its composition is virtually identical to SYMMACHORVM, the border ornament of Fauvel is not the lotus-and-palmette but the equally distinctive stirrup-and-tulip cymatium employed on the Trivulzio Myrophores (fig. 5).<sup>50</sup> This means that whoever invented the Fauvel panel must have had

<sup>45</sup> Of 33 enumerated reasons for suspecting SYMMACHORVM, 20 involve discrepancies between the plaque and the engravings, usually entailing errors; another seven are mistakes only. Eisenberg 1993, 14–17. The reliance on errors was remarked upon as a weakness by Kitzinger (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>46</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 16, no. 30; cf. 15, no. 10 and fig. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Caillet (*supra* n. 5) 105. SYMMACHORVM exhibits stains from this metal mounting: P. Williamson, in litt. July 1993.

<sup>48</sup> B. de Montfaucon, *L'antiquité expliquée, et représentée en figures* 2.1 (Paris 1719) 190, pl. LXXXIII fig. 1; P. Lasko, "An Unnoticed Leaf of a Late Antique Ivory Diptych, and the Temple of Mercury in Rome," in A. Borg and A. Martindale eds., *The Vanishing Past: Studies of Medieval Art, Liturgy and Metrology Presented to Christopher Hohler (BAR-IS 111, Oxford 1981)* 89–94; A. Cameron, "A New Late Antique Ivory: The Fauvel Panel," *AJA* 88 (1984) 397–402.

<sup>49</sup> de Montfaucon (*supra* n. 48) 190: "l'original est d'ivoire & a environ un pied de long"; Lasko (*supra* n. 48)

89, 92.

<sup>50</sup> The filling motifs, alternately hanging tulips and five-leaved palmettes, resemble those employed on the fourth(?) century bronze doors of the Curia Senatus, since the 17th century on the basilica of S. Giovanni in Laterano: S. Episcopo, "Il reimpiego di porte bronzee romane al Laterano," in S. Salomi ed., *Le porte di bronzo dall'antichità al secolo XIII* (Rome 1990) 43–54. But the shape and treatment of the ribbed stirrups, and the silhouette of the upright tulips are more like earlier marble examples in the Forum of Trajan: C.F. Leon, *Die Bauornamentik des Trajansforums und ihre Stellung in der früh- und mittelkaiserzeitlichen Architekturdekoration Roms* (Vienna 1971) 61–62, pls. 5.2; 8.2. This seems to be a case of a still-current form refreshed by the ivory carvers by the study of older exemplars. Contrast the debased treatment of the same motifs on the wooden doors of S. Sabina, datable 422–432: G. Jeremias, *Die Holztür der Basilika S. Sabina in Rom* (Tübingen 1980) 102, 115, pls. 20, 26, 32b, etc.



Fig. 8. Engraving of diptych leaf of Ennobertus. (After B. de Montfaucon, *L'antiquité expliquée, et représentée en figures* 2.1 [Paris 1719] pl. LXXXIII. Photo Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)

access to both the compositional prototype of the pagan plaque that wound up in Montier-en-Der and to the ornamental vocabulary of the Myrophores, which survived more obscurely, perhaps in northern Italy. Plausible in Rome around 400, the conjunction is quite unlikely in France 1,200 years later.<sup>51</sup> If the Fauvel panel must on that account be dated around 400, the fact that SYMMACHORVM resembles it more than it does the engraving by

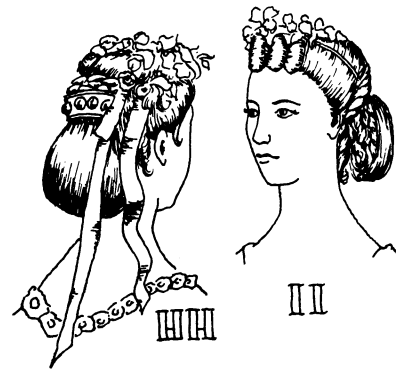


Fig. 9. Hairstyles of 1865. (After R. Corson, *Fashions in Hair* [London 1980] pl. 126, detail. Photo Bryn Mawr College)

Dom Larcher cannot be adduced to prove that SYMMACHORVM is a forgery; on the contrary, it tends to affirm that SYMMACHORVM too is Late Antique.

A case for forgery simply cannot be made on the grounds of "errors" or of discrepancies between an object and the putative style of its claimed time of origin. Such a case must appeal to details that demand another origin, in the time or style of the forger. Although Eisenberg admitted this principle in "The Aesthetics of the Forger," only one of his 33 reasons for doubting SYMMACHORVM points to the 19th century, namely the matron's hairdo.<sup>52</sup> He compares it to plate 126, HH-II of Richard Corson's *Fashions in Hair* (fig. 9), as if this were a telling parallel for the combination of broad ribbons and ivy vine seen on the plaque.<sup>53</sup> To my eye, a second-century relief of a maenad in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme (fig. 10) offers a better comparison, not only for the ribbons and ivy but for the hairstyle itself, which unlike the 19th-century coif does not involve a false chignon.<sup>54</sup>

Since Eisenberg offers no convincing reason to attribute the plaque of the Symmachi to the 19th century, there is no need to scrutinize his case in more detail. His other 32 objections can be addressed categorically, as follows: 1) discrepancies between the extant plaque and the 18th-century engravings prove not that the plaque is a forgery, but that the engravings reproduce it inexactly; 2) differences between SYMMACHORVM and the

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Cameron (supra n. 48) 398–400. The inscription, ENNOBERTVS OBTVL TUOTVM, is a "patently medieval" addition: Cameron 400–401.

<sup>52</sup> Eisenberg 1992, 13; 1993, 14.

<sup>53</sup> R. Corson, *Fashions in Hair: The First Five Thousand*

*Years* (London 1965, rev. 1980) 477–84, 532–33. Richard Owen is the publisher of this volume, not the author as Eisenberg implies.

<sup>54</sup> P. Rendini, in A. Giuliano ed., *Museo Nazionale Romano, Le sculture* 1.1 (Rome 1979) 100–104.



Fig. 10. Relief with a maenad. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano. (Photo Anderson 28858 [detail]; Alinari/Art Resource)

plaque of the Nicomachi indicate that these plaques were carved by different hands, not necessarily at different dates; 3) similarities between SYMMACHORVM and the Fauvel panel suggest a common point of origin, in the fourth century rather than later; 4) some of what appear to be errors—such as the scarf-like treatment of the matron's himation—are details copied from earlier Roman objects and prove nothing about the authenticity of the copy;<sup>55</sup> 5) other apparent errors, including perhaps the planar rendition of the swag on the altar, are indeed mistakes, which seem more characteristic of a fourth-century than of a modern craftsman; 6) still other so-called errors, like the foot, are stylistic mannerisms uncongenial to the modern viewer, and for that very reason they are more likely to be authentic features than “symptoms” of recent manufacture.<sup>56</sup>

It is easier to disprove Eisenberg's reasoning than to dismiss his case. The positive responses to his charge of forgery noted at the beginning of this essay indicate that it has an intuitive plausibility to art historians. In fact, Eisenberg's thesis appears to be

only the mistaken literalization of a judgment of inauthenticity that pervades much anglophone writing on the ivory, from textbooks to works for specialists. Witness the following accounts, by Ernst Kitzinger and the late Kathleen Shelton, respectively:

The carver of these ivories must have studied classical Greek sculptures and their Roman replicas. Indeed, he must have deliberately set out to create an equivalent of such works. The setting, the composition and the figure and drapery motifs can be matched to a remarkable degree on the so-called ‘Amalthea’ relief formerly in the Lateran [fig. 11], one of several replicas of what must have been a well-known Greek original depicting an as yet not satisfactorily identified mythological scene. Already the earlier work . . . has a chilly, academic quality. In our ivory this quality is enhanced. What distinguishes these carvings . . . is that their classicism is so studied and conscious. They are exercises in nostalgia undertaken in the service of a very specific cause.<sup>57</sup>

The posture of the priestess . . . , who steps into the background but presents her upper body in profile, strikes a note of quiet discord. Her posture is masked by elegant drapery passages, but her large-headed, slightly stocky proportional type is one from the Late Antique period. She is attended by a disproportionately small attendant, whose shoulder structure is not clearly understood or executed. The altar . . . demonstrates a certain spatial ambiguity. . . . The illusion of pictorial space is created and simultaneously negated by the postures of the main figures, who, standing and acting within the confines of the panel, overlap the frames with portions of their draperies, their bodies, and their attributes.<sup>58</sup>

In Kitzinger's implicit judgment, the plaque of the Symmachi is inauthentically Classical; in Shelton's, it is failed—or false—illusionism.

It was not always so. William Maskell, in 1872, called SYMMACHORVM “probably the most beautiful antique ivory in the world”:

[T]he whole figure is extremely graceful and dignified; the expression of the face earnest and devotional; the form of the figure rightly expressed beneath the drapery, and the hands and feet well and carefully carved.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 14–15. The probable iconographic source of SYMMACHORVM, which exhibits the same treatment of the himation, is discussed at length in my article, “The Iconography of the Ivory Diptych Nicomachorum-Symmachorum,” forthcoming in *JAC* 36 (1993).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Kitzinger (supra n. 4). In this enumeration I have addressed all of Eisenberg's objections but six, two pertaining to epigraphy (25–26) and four to material (30–33). These are treated below by Anthony Cutler.

<sup>57</sup> E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of*

*Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977) 34. The second-century “Amalthea” relief, also identified as Leucothea and the child Dionysos, actually depicts neither according to H. von Steuben (in Helbig<sup>4</sup> I, 726–27). It still appears as “Amalthea” in *LIMC* I, 582.

<sup>58</sup> K.J. Shelton, in K. Weitzmann ed., *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York 1979) 187.

<sup>59</sup> Maskell (supra n. 12) xxxiv, 44.





Fig. 11. Relief with "Amalthea." Vatican Museums, Lateran collection. (Photo Anderson 1841; Alinari/Art Resource)

Riegl, in 1901, described both plaques of the diptych as "virtually classically conceived," and Arthur Haseloff, in 1903, saw in them "the pure flame . . . [of] hellenistic stylistic sensibility . . . flaring up for the last time."<sup>60</sup> In 1933 Ernst Gombrich wrote of "a feeling for space exceeding in intensity that of even the most illusionistic Roman triumphal re-

liefs," which he believed to be typical of the best fourth-century ivory carvings, including SYMMACHORVM and the diptych of Probianus.<sup>61</sup>

Gombrich found the indications of illusionistic space in foreshortenings and overlappings; specifically on SYMMACHORVM, in the way "the figure of the child is seen behind the obliquely posi-

<sup>60</sup> A. Riegl, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*<sup>2</sup> (Vienna 1927) 203: "Schlechterdings klassisch gedacht ist das Relief des Symmachorum-Nicomachorum-Diptychons." A. Haseloff, "Ein altchristliches Relief aus der Blütezeit römischer Elfenbeinschnitzerei," *JPKS* 24 (1903) 55: "Die reine Flamme, in der das hellenistische Stilgefühl in diesen

Schnitzereien zum letztenmale aufblüht."

<sup>61</sup> E. Gombrich, "Eine verkannte karolingische Pyxis im Wiener Kunsthistorischen Museum," *JKSW* N.F. 7 (1933) 4: "einem Raumgefühl, das selbst jenes der illusionistischsten römischen Triumphalreliefs an Intensität noch übertrifft."



Fig. 12. Stele of Hegeso. Athens, National Archaeological Museum. (Photo Hirmer 561.0441)

tioned altar, and behind him the tree.”<sup>62</sup> He did not attend to the overlapping of the frame, however, which has become for later viewers an overriding sign of just the opposite: spatial negation, and illusionism’s abandonment or failure. The privileging of one sign over the other is arbitrary, or dependent on the viewer’s expectations of the object; if this were not so, the very similar overlappings of the frame on Classical Greek stelae would not be so generally ignored. The chair of Hegeso, for example (fig. 12), is no less spatially incongruent than the extended foot of the SYMMACHORVM matron, yet the stele is known to be Classical, therefore rational and naturalistic, and the contrary indication

<sup>62</sup> Gombrich (supra n. 61) 4: “wie . . . hinter dem übereck gestellten Altar die Knabenfigur, hinter dieser der Baum sichtbar wird.”

<sup>63</sup> Athens, National Archaeological Museum, 3624; D. Buitron-Oliver, in *The Greek Miracle. Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy* (Washington, D.C. 1992) 150: “the chair and the maid frame the composition . . . the two figures are placed within [sic] an architectural frame

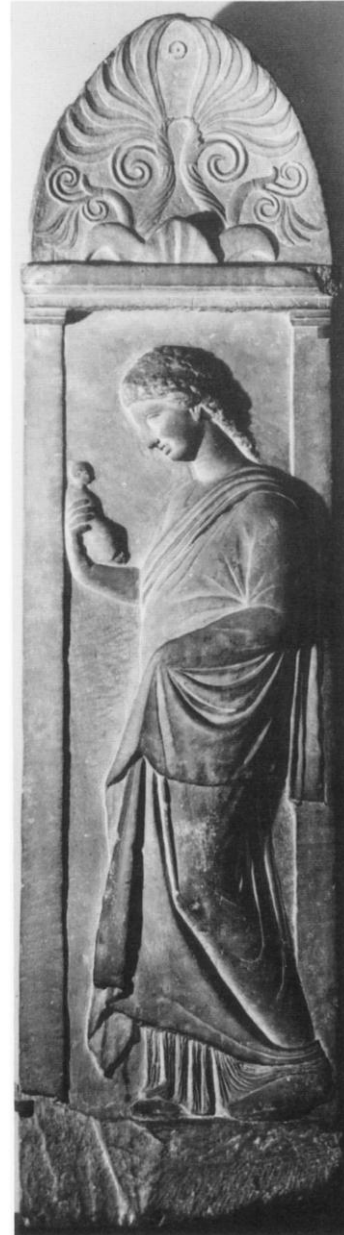


Fig. 13. Stele of Aristomache. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland. (Photo NGS)

of the chair is consequently repressed.<sup>63</sup> It is ironic that the same mannerism should be noticed and construed as a signal of irrationality and error on

formed by two pilasters supporting a pediment.” Janson (supra n. 43, 188) cites this stele as an example of “illusionistic space” in Greek relief; but cf. S. Karouzou, *National Archaeological Museum. Collection of Sculpture. A Catalogue* (Athens 1968) 77: “toward the end of the 5th century B.C. . . . the bodies touch the doorposts or appear in some strange way outside them. The feeling for space has not yet become compelling.”

the ivory plaque, especially when the ivory carver could have learned it by observing good Classical exemplars like the Edinburgh stele of Aristomache<sup>64</sup> (fig. 13).

In my opinion, the lexicon of space and illusionism is no longer a productive critical vocabulary for this diptych, if it ever was so. One reason is that the vocabulary itself has been debased in repetition (and may have been already impaired in the transfer from the German semantic context of Wickhoff and Riegl).<sup>65</sup> Moreover, it undoubtedly does not approximate the terms in which the diptych was conceived and received in the fourth century. We cannot know precisely what those terms were, of course, but we can be certain that they were not those of the Albertian window. These are not views on life, actual or invented. They are images of art and art's conventions.

The object itself yields terms of reference that can be used, at least provisionally, to elucidate its aesthetic qualities for the modern or postmodern eye.<sup>66</sup> Structurally, the diptych and its relatives (figs. 1–2, 5, and 7) can be described as a dynamic or contention of theme and ornament. They are unusually ornamental, with dense, elaborate patterns that compete for optical attention with the figures that constitute the narrative or iconic subject. The manual artistry demanded by the intricate decorations is no less than that required by the figures; both offered equivalent arenas in which the craftsmen could display their virtue and viewers could enjoy the spectacle. Subject asserts itself in this carnival only through the priorities established by overlapping, as with the matron and the frame of SYMMACHORVM; or by its absence, as in the frontal pose of Probianus. At key points, when subject and ornament coincide, ornament cedes; elsewhere, especially on the panel of the Myrophores, the crisply

perfect patterns present themselves as strongly as the figures.

The referent, or content of the carving, is past art; this is as true of the floriate patterns on the frames as of the figures. In this respect the critical topos of "classicism" may be apropos. But it is important not to confuse fourth-century classicism with our own, or even with that of the second century. The nature of fourth-century classicism is precisely what must be deduced from the ivory diptych, and from the identification of its sources. These sources are multiple and diverse, including statuary, architectural ornament, coins, and votive objects.<sup>67</sup> Invention consisted in literally finding (or choosing) models and in their artful (re)combination; thus a Hellenistic statue, on NICOMACHORVM, was redressed in the garb of a Greek Classical relief, and a second-century coin type, on SYMMACHORVM, was robbed in first-century drapery. Unlike the Neoclassical "Amalthea" (fig. 11), which reproduces a single exemplar in a homogeneous (albeit "chilly") style, the ivory diptych (re)presents an array of styles and sources in vibrant tension.

The desired reaction to this opulent, eclectic, and historicizing aesthetic is indexed on the Trivulzio Myrophores (fig. 5). The imaged witnesses, the awakened guards on the roof of the tomb, react with amazement, and dawning delight, to what they see. They also acknowledge what they do not see—the absent body—and in that they are models for us art historians, whose job is precisely to recollect the no-longer-seen traditions that these objects so dexterously re-present.

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<sup>64</sup> National Gallery of Scotland, NG 686; O. Cavalier, "Une stèle attique classique au musée Calvet d'Avignon," *RLouvre* 38 (1988) 286–91. I am grateful to A. Weston-Lewis of the National Gallery for supplying a photograph and bibliography.

<sup>65</sup> See the important remarks on this subject by O. Brendel, *Prolegomena to the Study of Roman Art*<sup>2</sup> (New Haven

1979) 62–65.

<sup>66</sup> In what follows I am inspired in part by Michael Roberts's recent work on Late Antique poetry: *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca 1989).

<sup>67</sup> The models for the principal figures are identified in the article cited *supra* n. 55; for the ornamental patterns see *supra* ns. 17, 50.

## *Suspicio Symmachorum: A Postscript*

ANTHONY CUTLER

Dale Kinney's response to Jerome Eisenberg so cogently presents the stylistic and historical case against the charge that the SYMMACHORVM ivory (figs. 1, right, and 2) is a forgery that one might fairly suppose any further rejoinder unnecessary.<sup>68</sup> Since, however, there are those, including Delbrueck himself,<sup>69</sup> who have distrusted stylistic analysis and many others who prefer to see it supported by "objective" argumentation, I am happy to comply with her suggestion that I comment on Eisenberg's "technical examination"<sup>70</sup> of the leaf. Inasmuch as his objections to it are largely based on a comparison with its counterpart in Paris, I shall discuss these first. But because his remarks ignore some critical similarities and dissimilarities between the two parts of the diptych, I shall incorporate in the discussion observations that, first, do not appear anywhere in the huge literature on these objects<sup>71</sup> and, secondly, have direct bearing upon the authenticity of SYMMACHORVM. Any adjudication on this matter couched in terms of the putative "aesthetics of the forger"<sup>72</sup> is by definition one-sided and incomplete. It is surely no less important to understand the materials and working methods of the *eborarius*. Indeed, without this, there is no basis on which hypotheses of falsification can be grounded.

Before I limit myself to points of technique, however, I may perhaps be allowed to exploit one piece of evidence concerning the history of the ivory that has not, to my knowledge, been previously introduced into the argument. Since Eisenberg believes it helpful to contrast what he supposes to be a 19th-century forgery with an early 18th-century engraving

of it (fig. 3), he might ponder the implications of comparing SYMMACHORVM with the use made of it in a canvas painted a mere 27 years after the plaque was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum. In a painting of 1892 (in the present circumstances, ironically entitled *Comparison*), Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema depicted a young Roman woman gazing at an open diptych and a second woman who holds a closed example on the seat beside her while her left arm rests on a codex (fig. 14).<sup>73</sup> Both women study the concealed verso of the diptych, the recto of which is clearly based on the leaf in London. Now the scene as a whole is a fantasy but one that is strenuously "archaeological" in detail, involving the juxtaposition of at least three identifiable artifacts.<sup>74</sup> To the extent that the painter faithfully copied SYMMACHORVM, his creation has documentary value certainly no less than that of the engraving published by Martène and Durand that Eisenberg employs as a touchstone against which to measure the "plethora of mistakes"<sup>75</sup> in the ivory that we have. Kinney, in turn, has shown the ways in which this engraving (and the copy published by Gori) is "faulty." If the author of the argument against SYMMACHORVM would reject Alma-Tadema's version on the grounds that the painter depended on a forgery, he should at least take into account the fact, established by Kinney, that the version that he trusts is deficient. The point is that any drawing, painting, or photograph,<sup>76</sup> no matter how "disinterested" its author may set out to be, is inevitably an expression of the time in which it was made<sup>77</sup> and, to this extent, potentially deceptive when used as a standard for comparison.

<sup>68</sup> Supra 457–72. Eisenberg 1992, 1993.

<sup>69</sup> On Delbrueck's "tiefe Misstrauen gegen jede Art von Stilanalyse," see the obituary by his pupil, H. Drerup, in *Gnomon* 30 (1958) 414.

<sup>70</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 16.

<sup>71</sup> The most useful bibliography, as well as the most succinct discussion of the issues raised by the provenances of the two leaves, is to be found in Caillet (supra n. 5) no. 48.

<sup>72</sup> Eisenberg 1992.

<sup>73</sup> Cincinnati Art Museum 1940.949, reproduced in R. Ash, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London 1989) pl. 25.

<sup>74</sup> The combination of picture and text on the rear leaf of the Symmachi ivory is based on the seventh-century additions to the diptych of Boethius (cos. 487; J. Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*<sup>2</sup> [Harmondsworth 1979] fig. 66). The plaque on the bench showing a Roman charioteer between two fragmentary inscriptions is derived

from a bronze diptych leaf in the Louvre, Weitzmann (supra n. 58) no. 94 (S.K. Zwirn).

<sup>75</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 14.

<sup>76</sup> On the limitations of photography as a medium for the study of ivory carving, see A. Cutler, "Theory and *Theoria*: The Ivories of the Forty Martyrs as Models of Historical Understanding," in M. Mullett ed., *The Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia* (forthcoming).

<sup>77</sup> As, for example, the Y in the *tabula* of SYMMACHORVM, which Eisenberg 1993, 16 describes as "miscopied" by the forger, "perhaps because he was unfamiliar with the letter, since it is a Latinized Greek name." He contrasts this with the letter as reproduced by Martène and Durand and Gori that shows "the proper late Roman form of the 'Y'." In fact the engraver "naturalized" the letter, rendering it in the form with which *he* was familiar in the early 18th century.



Fig. 14. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Comparison*. Cincinnati Art Museum. Gift of Emilie L. Heine in memory of Mr. and Mrs. John Hauck. (Photo Museum)

The most obvious defect in Alma-Tadema's version, at least in the opinion of some modern scholars, is the position that he assigns to the London ivory. Working long before Delbrueck insisted that SYMMACHORVM must be the rear leaf of the diptych,<sup>78</sup> the painter still conveys a sense of the object's scale and texture, qualities that cannot be derived from the old engraving and absent from Eisenberg's dry account of the relative size of NICOMACHORVM and SYMMACHORVM. His statistics are in any case misleading. He notes that "the Nichomachi [sic] panel is  $29.5 \times 12.8$  cm, being about seven per

wider" (scil., than its counterpart).<sup>79</sup> Given that his purpose is to show that the two leaves do not match, it is curious that he ignores the disparity in height between them. This is a matter of only a few millimeters but it is a difference that is clearly recognizable in Martène and Durand's version. More importantly, such variations in no way support the contention that one leaf is a forgery. While the two parts of the Berlin Probianus (fig. 7) are identical in size ( $31.7 \times 12.9$  cm), leaves of diptychs as different as the Milan Justinian<sup>80</sup> and the Monza Stilicho<sup>81</sup> display considerable departures: in the latter case, one

<sup>78</sup> Delbrueck no. 54. This thesis depends upon the notion of a "Hauptseite" derived from the inscriptions on consular diptychs. For the inappropriateness of such a criterion to NICOMACHORVM-SYMMACHORVM and other diptychs, as well as a useful account of Delbrueck's changing opinion on the matter, see Shelton (supra n. 33) 141–44.

<sup>79</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 16: "mistake" no. 29. Measurements

given in publications vary considerably. Shelton (supra n. 58) no. 165, suggests dimensions of  $29.6 \times 12.6$  cm for NICOMACHORVM, while Caillet (supra n. 5) indicates  $29.9 \times 12.4$  cm. My own measurements of this leaf, made in September 1981, are the same as Shelton's.

<sup>80</sup> Cutler 1984, 78 and fig. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Delbrueck no. 63, who, as often, ignores the difference in size between the leaves.

leaf is more than half a centimeter (18.5%) taller than the other.

The failure to adduce comparative evidence before assessing the significance of the phenomena that Eisenberg notes is no less evident in the other “mistakes” that he believes to be evinced by SYMMACHORVM. The contrast between its relatively undamaged condition and that of NICOMACHORVM, “badly cracked, with many pieces missing,” is hardly surprising in light of the 70 years that it spent at the bottom of a well at Montier-en-Der as against SYMMACHORVM, which emerged from a private collection (in the same town). He remarks on the virtual absence of wear on the leaf in London,<sup>82</sup> yet ignores the fact that its Parisian counterpart, notwithstanding its fragmentary condition, is similarly little abraded. Ivory, like other materials, wears most quickly where the relief is most prominent—in the case of NICOMACHORVM, at the figure’s chest (fig. 15). Yet this area is in almost pristine condition, allowing us to observe the skill with which the sculptor exploited the grain to model the figure’s breasts and even to suggest her nipples.

If the “irregular brown colour throughout much of the [NICOMACHORVM] panel” in contrast to the “uniform light ivory” of SYMMACHORVM<sup>83</sup> is explicable by the different conditions under which the two ivories passed much of the 19th century, the difference in tone is no greater than that of other diptych leaves that have long been apart. Normally, such variation is apparent between the recto and verso of leaves when the former has been exposed (usually in a museum) to light. But the obverses of the two leaves that once constituted the Basilus diptych<sup>84</sup> show a scarcely less remarkable difference: the (almost) complete leaf in Florence ranges in color from chalky white to light brown while the fragment in Milan presents an overall buff surface.<sup>85</sup> Of course, ivory, being highly hygroscopic, absorbs salts and other minerals from any liquids with which it comes in contact. The deep brown of the Nicomachi leaf is scarcely surprising in view of its long subterranean residence.



Fig. 15. NICOMACHORVM leaf, detail. Paris, Musée national du Moyen-Age, Thermes de Cluny. (Photo author)

Light and heat have contributed to what Eisenberg calls the “crackle” evident on SYMMACHORVM. Both forms of energy, as well as air, serve to accelerate the process by which ivory (and especially its constituent collagen) dries out and eventually fractures.<sup>86</sup> He seeks to suggest that the “forger” of the London leaf attempted to give the ivory an ancient appearance by imitating crackle with a knife (an experiment that, in good scientific fashion, Eisenberg reproduces), while sparing critical areas, presumably to enhance the object’s material beauty.<sup>87</sup> Yet it is misleading to suggest that crackle “is absent on all the facial features of the priestess”

<sup>82</sup> Even while he ignored the rubbing on the projecting corner of the altar (fig. 19). Here the right volute and the leaves on the swag below are worn in relation to the carving elsewhere on this object.

<sup>83</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 16 (“mistake” no. 30).

<sup>84</sup> Delbrueck no. 6.

<sup>85</sup> Even more telling contrasts are offered by long-separated Byzantine diptych leaves and triptych wings. Compare, e.g., the unpleasant yellowish cast of the “Emperor

plaque” now at Dumbarton Oaks with the handsome *café au lait* color of its counterpart in Gotha (A. Goldschmidt and K. Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X. bis XIII. Jahrhunderts* 2 [Berlin 1934] nos. 36–37).

<sup>86</sup> For an illustrated description of this process, see A. Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory: Sources, Techniques, and Uses in the Mediterranean World: A.D. 200–1400* (Washington, D.C. 1985) 11–13.

<sup>87</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 16 (“mistakes” nos. 31–32).





Fig. 16. SYMMACHORVM leaf, detail. London, Victoria and Albert Museum. (Photo courtesy David H. Wright and Dumbarton Oaks)

when fissures run down her forehead, cheek, and neck, and arrays of shallower cracks descend the sleeve of her left arm, her right hand, and that of her attendant (fig. 16). The author of the forgery hypothesis believes that he has made a winning observation in noting how the crackle “avoids the eye of the priestess even though it runs up to both eyelids.” The reason for this is that the lids and the eyeball, being fuller, rounded areas, have (at least till now) impeded the progression of the cracks. Most clefts of this sort start at points where the craftsman has admitted air by puncturing the material.<sup>88</sup> This is the case shown in figure 16 where such clefts were generated by the desire to denote the hairline, the neckline, folds of drapery, and spaces between the fingers. For the very same reason, material has been lost from NICOMACHORVM (fig. 1, left), follow-

<sup>88</sup> Cutler (supra n. 86) 13.

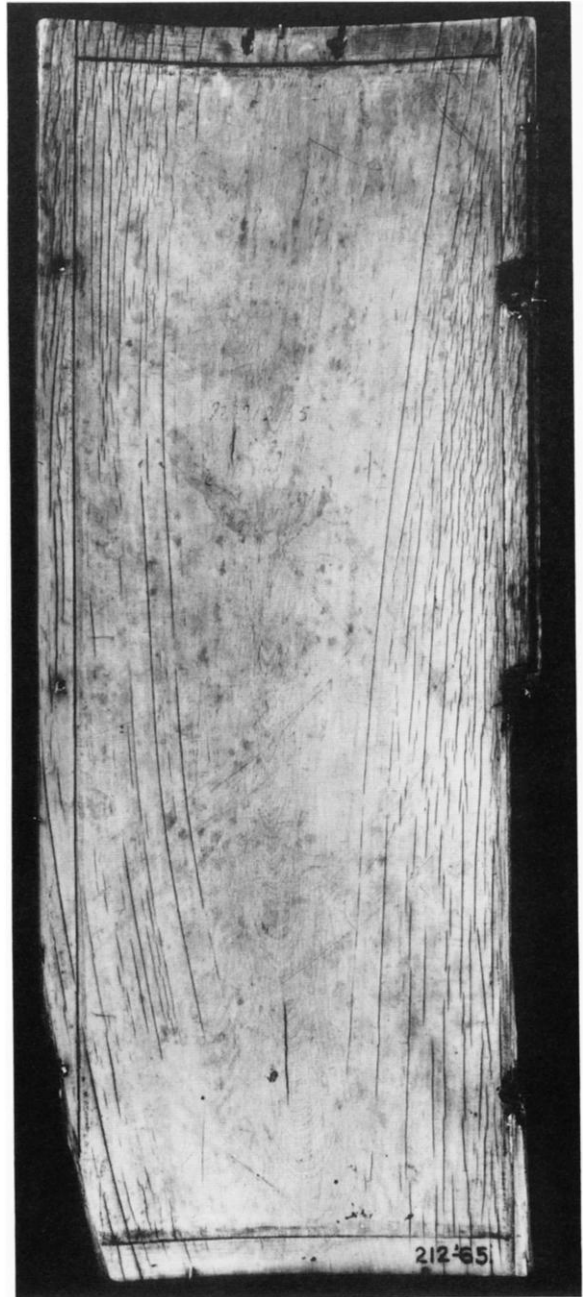


Fig. 17. SYMMACHORVM leaf, reverse. (Photo author)

ing the contours of the figure’s right side, the left edge of her right foot, and, most painful of all, the major part of her face.

The larger if unasked question is why there are fewer cracks in the area of the head and body of the



Fig. 18. SYMMACHORVM leaf, detail. (Photo courtesy David H. Wright and Dumbarton Oaks)



Fig. 19. NICOMACHORVM leaf, detail. (Photo author)

woman than there are toward the edges of the London leaf. Eisenberg relates that he was “informed that an examination under the microscope indicated that there is an actual crackling [sic] of the ivory” and wonders if this was “artificially induced as on other forgeries.”<sup>89</sup> Yet we are dealing here not with a painted surface (where the term crackle is more aptly applied) but with a three-dimensional object that can be turned over and inspected. One does not need a microscope to see that the fissures on the back of the plaque (fig. 17) correspond in position, length, and curvature with those that are most in evidence on its obverse. This is because they inhabit older and therefore dryer dentine, relatively far from the vicinity of the tusk’s central axis. In turn, this collagen-filled core is represented on the reverse by the series of arcs that belonged to the tusk’s essential vascular system; on NICOMACHORVM, the central third of the plaque, save for the face,<sup>90</sup> is in better shape than its lateral portions. Given that our plaques are transverse sections of tusk the edges of which consist of dryer zones of dentine, it is not surprising that they have suffered grievously. These areas were pierced to allow the insertion of the original hinges and secondary attachment holes—both classes of injury suppressed in the sanitized 18th-century depiction (fig. 3). But, as Kinney points out, the notorious obtrusive right foot of the matron is similarly ignored in the engrav-

ing. Damage to the frame here results from the weakened state of the area following the sculptor’s decision to define the contour around the foot. Losses of the lower corners are evident on many surviving leaves<sup>91</sup> and probably due as much to the strain of repeated handling in a normal manner (fig. 14) as they are to dropping.

Eisenberg’s final technical objection to SYMMACHORVM concerns the relative thickness of the cracks on the frame of the *tabula*, the oak leaves and acorns below it, and the inscribed area within the *tabula* (fig. 18).<sup>92</sup> The reason the vegetable details have suffered less than the linear elements above them is their plasticity, the quality that, as I suggested above, likewise protects the matron’s eye. The same phenomenon is apparent on the Justinian diptych in the Metropolitan Museum of Art where the raised rosettes and cyma moldings display many fewer fissures than the letters that the latter enclose.<sup>93</sup> As our detail photograph shows, it is quite untrue to claim that the inscription is unaffected by cracks. Here as elsewhere, these result from punctures in the smoothed surface: they begin at and proceed mostly from the *hastae* of the letters and/or the serifs that decorate them. Indeed, the amount of cracking in this area is markedly greater than in the corresponding zone of the Nicomachi leaf (fig. 19). But the letter forms on the two leaves display remarkable similarities, although one of these is

<sup>89</sup> As *supra* n. 87.

<sup>90</sup> Heads, precisely because they are given prominence in Late Antique carving, have often proved susceptible to loss. This is particularly true of pyxides where all carving occurs near the circumference of the tusk’s horizontal sec-

tion; for examples, see Cutler 1993, figs. 12–15, 17.

<sup>91</sup> Delbrueck nos. 5, 9–12, 20 and *passim*.

<sup>92</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 17 (“mistake” no. 33).

<sup>93</sup> See the detail photographs in Cutler 1984, figs. 9–11.

quite misinterpreted by Eisenberg. Beside the H of the Paris leaf he notes "a small horizontal scratch" that the "ivory forger misread . . . as a possible form of the letter and added a hesitant side bar to the letter."<sup>94</sup> Far from being a scratch then replicated in SYMMACHORVM, the mark is a part of the letter, a serif as was sometimes added to the crossbars of letters in fourth-century glyptic.<sup>95</sup>

Before turning to the ways in which the two leaves do differ, ways that have nothing to do with one being a modern forgery, it would be well to note two telling resemblances that support the propriety of the comparison with the Probianus diptych (fig. 7) suggested by Kinney. One reason why the inscriptions on our diptych and that in Berlin appear so elegant is that the rounded portions of letters (B, C, O, P, R, and S) are all carved with an arc-bladed tool, as against the often clumsy attempts on other late fourth- or fifth-century diptychs to produce such rotundities with a straight-edged implement.<sup>96</sup> An even more striking similarity between SYMMACHORVM and NICOMACHORVM is the cutting of their *tabulae* as inclined planes. Both the inscription plaques are cut much thicker at their upper than at their lower edges, as if the diptych were intended to be mounted high on a wall and read from below. Be that as it may, this feature has two consequences pertinent to our present concern. First, since it has not previously been observed (at least in print) and is not deducible from the two-dimensional 18th-century engraving, there is no way that the person who carved SYMMACHORVM could have known these technical details other than by the close, autoptic inspection of NICOMACHORVM that allows me to make this observation. Secondly, the slanting plane of the *tabulae* on these leaves is unparalleled in any other diptychs of their time save for the Probianus.<sup>97</sup> (On every other inscribed example of the period that I have exam-

ined, the table is parallel to the plane of the plaque as a whole.) Whether or not this aspect is recognizable in Kinney's overall photographs, it is clearly detectable in figures 18 and 19.

A shared feature of this sort does not require that the leaves in London and Paris were carved by the same *eborarius*: common instructions to and training of different individuals would suffice to produce the degree of likeness between them. As against the unquestioning assumption in the earlier literature that the two leaves issued from one pair of hands, recognition of their differences, interpreted by Eisenberg as evidence that SYMMACHORVM is a forgery, led to the suggestion, now espoused by Kinney, that it and its partner were made by distinguishable craftsmen.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, nearly a quarter of a century ago, a rash young art historian proposed that the two leaves could have come from different diptychs.<sup>99</sup> Seeing that the quantities in which such pairs were issued is an open question,<sup>100</sup> this is still a theoretical possibility and one, for all the above reasons, likelier than the hypothesis that SYMMACHORVM is a creation of the 19th century. We now know a good deal about "diptychs" made in modern times:<sup>101</sup> in every case the differences between them and their exemplars are much greater than those between the plaque in the Victoria and Albert Museum and that in the Musée Cluny. Not only this but, in facture and style, the gulf between discernible forgeries and genuine Late Antique plaques is certainly wider than the demonstrable differences between the leaves of diptychs that we know to have been issued as multiples.<sup>102</sup>

Contemplating the constraints under which a "re-creator" (scil., forger) operates, Eisenberg idealizes the conditions in which the original creator, the *eborarius*, labored. Far from being "limited only by his talent as a craftsman,"<sup>103</sup> for our present purposes their nature matters less than the pragmatic consid-

<sup>94</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 16 ("mistake" no. 26).

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., the form of the letter A(VG) on a triple solidus of 326 (J.P. Kent and K.S. Painter eds., *Wealth of the Roman World: Gold and Silver, A.D. 300–700* [London 1977] no. 392). Such serifs were often added to H in Greek. Thus in the word EMMA/NOYHA on an onyx in Vienna (D. Stutzinger ed., *Spätantike und frühes Christentum* [Frankfurt 1983] no. 174).

<sup>96</sup> An economy of effort particularly noticeable on the diptychs of Astyrius, Basilius, and Boethius (Delbrueck nos. 4, 6, and 7).

<sup>97</sup> Inclined *tabulae* have been observed on a sixth-century diptych: Cutler 1984, 111.

<sup>98</sup> These proposals are listed and endorsed by Caillet (supra n. 5).

<sup>99</sup> A. Cutler, review of *Age of Spirituality* (supra n. 58) in *AJA* 85 (1981) 240.

<sup>100</sup> Cutler 1993, 186–87.

<sup>101</sup> See J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, "Le diptychon leodiense du consul Anastase et le faux des Musée royaux d'art et d'histoire de Bruxelles," *RBArch* 49–50 (1980–1981) 5–19, and Cutler 1993, 183–85. The tests used in such acts of authentication cannot be applied to the Fauvel ivory (fig. 8), which is known only from an engraving.

<sup>102</sup> Cutler 1984, 92–95.

<sup>103</sup> Eisenberg 1993, 18.



Fig. 20. SYMMACHORVM leaf, detail. (Photo courtesy David H. Wright and Dumbarton Oaks)

eration that, for their products to be useful, workshops would have been required to manufacture possibly multiple copies in a period no longer than the interval between their commission and the occasion for which they were destined. The employment of different craftsmen for ivories produced in series, or even *unica* needed in a hurry, would be a natural response to such demands. In my view, this is the optimum solution to the problem raised by that combination of affinities and differences presented by the two leaves now in question.

Apart from, but also to some extent underlying, the variations in style that have been observed by

Kinney and others, technical distinctions evident on the obverses alone<sup>104</sup> include the use of incised forms (the so-called negative relief) on NICOMACHORVM—noticeable, for example, in the pinecone immediately below the N of the inscription (fig. 19)—as a device that adds to the illusion of the relief. This technique is missing from the ivory in London, except for the hair at the nape of the neck (fig. 16) where it does not enhance the sense of plasticity as do the curls in the corresponding area on NICOMACHORVM. SYMMACHORVM, on the other hand, offers folds of drapery that vary more in width and depth than they do on the Paris leaf, and presents them in many different planes (fig. 20) whereas on NICOMACHORVM they form a shallower, more uniform screen (fig. 21). Different tools would have been used to produce these effects and although no doubt both were available in the workshop,<sup>105</sup> it is such preferences that suggest the activity of distinct individuals. It is also evident that the crimped folds, cut with an inshave<sup>106</sup> at the hemlines of the women's undergarments, exhibit two different forms: on SYMMACHORVM they are left open, while the single, large instance between the feet on the other leaf is closed. Other examples of differing approaches are to be found in the inscriptions. On NICOMACHORVM generally broader strokes are employed than on the London leaf, but even more telling is the ruling, faintly incised yet



Fig. 21. NICOMACHORVM leaf, detail. (Photo author)

<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, because of the leaf's condition, the reverse of the Nicomachi has never been photographed. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge it has never been seen by anyone alive today. An examination of the craftsman's approach to the pristine ivory would make for an enlightening comparison with the data offered by our figs. 5–6, discussed above. But even the demonstration that the

two plaques were "butterflied" from the same section of tusk (cf. Cutler 1984, 84–86) would not in itself prove or disprove that their carver was one and the same person.

<sup>105</sup> On the equipment and working methods of *eborarii*, see Cutler 1984, 87–92.

<sup>106</sup> This tool, called a scorper by modern cabinetmakers, is used to produce undercutting.

still evident at the base of the letters (fig. 19); the carver of SYMMACHORVM dispensed with this guideline.

Not one of these differences, or others unmentioned in this brief report, justifies the belief that the London leaf is derived from Martène and Durand or produced at any time remote from that of the Nicomachi. Neither the engraving nor any other source would inform a forger that while both plaques are 9 mm thick at the top, they both diminish markedly toward their bases. Even though equivalents of Roman tools were available to the Victorians,<sup>107</sup> and even though among sculptors of

that period there probably existed one able to match the extraordinary skill with which the hair of the matron on SYMMACHORVM is carved, equipment and expertise are insufficient qualifications. Missing from the notion that this is a 19th-century ivory is the opportunity for that awareness of the craft that reveals itself to patient scrutiny at the end of the 20th century.

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<sup>107</sup> For these, see the standard Victorian work by C. Holtzapfel, *Turning and Mechanical Manipulation*, 2 vols.

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(London 1864).