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Old Friends

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Old Friends

Dale Kinney

In May 2008, I unexpectedly bumped into an old friend in the Metropolitan Museum. In a nondescript case in an ordinary room between the Lehman Collection and the medieval section, my eye caught the glorious ivory panel of the Symmachi, resting quietly and almost unnoticed by passersby.[1] In its temporary setting, in unaccustomed light and in the company of anachronistic neighbors, the ivory relief looked different, albeit – as we always say of old friends when we see them after a long hiatus – as good as ever (fig. 1). This essay is written in appreciation for old friends and serendipitous encounters. It is a particular pleasure to offer it to Thomas Mathews, a friend of even longer standing than the ivory plaque, and one whose scholarship has done so much to make Early Christian art look different by placing it in new and unexpected kinds of light.

I first made the acquaintance of the Symmachi tablet on its previous visit to the Metropolitan Museum for the "Age of Spirituality" exhibition in 1977–78.[2] Then it had a more glamorous display, and art historians flocked to it to enjoy what we thought would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see it reunited with its partner NICOMACHORVM.[3] Prolonged examination was impossible, but the conversations that arose and mingled in front of that display case set me on a course of research that went on for many years.[4] We puzzled over why the two halves of the diptych did not look more alike. In retrospect the differences are visible even in the illustrations to the catalog. There are differences in execution – for example, in the definition and relief of the lotus-and-palmette borders, or in the moldings marking the podium-like ground lines – as well as in conceptualization, including spatial organization and the way the space is inhabited by forms. The hinge-holes in the frames were another puzzle; they didn't seem to line up.[5] In his review of the exhibition, Anthony Cutler questioned whether the panels might have originated as leaves of two different diptychs.[6]

The catalog entries, by Kathleen Shelton, do not acknowledge these discrepancies – they were written before the exhibition was installed – but they do enumerate the spatial and physical ambiguities that, for generations of scholars, made the diptych and especially the plaque of the Symmachi imperfectly classical and therefore, Late Antique:

> The posture of the priestess … who steps into the background but presents her upper body in profile … her large-headed, slightly stocky proportional type … The altar … [whose] top and bottom moldings describe a rectangular solid rendered in perspective, [while] a garland hangs across [it] as if it were a single, flat plane … In both panels, 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.[7]

1 Paul Williamson and Peta Motture, eds., *Medieval and Renaissance Treasures from the V&A* (London, 2007), 16–17.

2 Kurt Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century. Catalogue of the Exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977, through February 12, 1978* (New York, 1979), 186–88, nos. 165–66.

3 In fact, they were reunited again less than a decade later in Frankfurt: *Spätantike und frühes Christentum: Ausstellung im Liebieghaus Alte Plastik, Frankfurt am Main 16. Dezember 1983 bis 11. März 1984* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), 533–35, n. 141 (Dagmar Stutzinger). They were together again in Rome for the millennium: *Aurea Roma: Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*, ed. Serena Ensoli and Eugenio La Rocca (Rome, 2000), 465–68, nos. 68–69 (K. S. Painter).

4 Dale Kinney, "The Iconography of the Ivory Diptych Nicomachorum-Symmachorum," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 37 (1994): 64–96.

5 Kathleen Shelton later explained the hinges: "The Diptych of the Young Office Holder," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 25 (1982): 137–39.

6 Anthony Cutler, review of *Age of Spirituality, American Journal of Archaeology* 85 (1981): 238–40. Cf. the juxtaposition of photographs in Ensoli and La Rocca, *Aurea Roma*, 264.

7 Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality* 187, no. 165.

Fig. 1 Ivory tablet of the Symmachi. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

In 1992, the art dealer Jerome Eisenberg cited some of these features – including the "completely misunderstood priestess' garment," her "awkward stance," and the execution of the altar "as if on a flat surface, while in fact it is on two planes joining at right angles" – in support of his sensational theory that SYMMACHORVM is a nineteenth-century fake.[8] Tony Cutler and I joined forces to refute him.[9] By then I knew the plaque pretty well, as I had trekked to London a number of times to see it at home in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Thanks to Paul Williamson – another old friend – I had been able to study it out of its case, but mostly I stood for hours in the Victoria and Albert Museum's Medieval Treasury, where SYMMACHORVM was installed in solitary spotlit splendor.

One sees what one is looking for, and I was looking for details that might explain the relationship between SYMMACHORVM and the other ivory plaques with which it shares ornamental motifs.[10] I was also seeking some explanation of the awkward features that read as mistakes. Why is the sacrificant's lower body in torsion, when the upper half is in strict profile? Why is the garland on the altar parallel to the picture plane, when the altar is seen obliquely? In passing I noticed that the plaque is very bowed, more so than the other diptych leaves to which it is related. I became fascinated by the play of figure and frame, which also occurs on the related diptychs. The "awkward" rear foot is part of that play, as the outward rotation of her foot brings the woman's body forward, out of the field defined by the frame, and creates a new, sculptural space in front of it. If there is an anatomical problem, it is not the playing foot but the right hand suspended over the *acerra,* which could not be where it is, in the same plane as the left hand holding the container, if the right foot were rotated as far around to the left as the carver has shown it.

"One forgets how beautiful it is," begin my notes from 1983 – inaccurately; it isn't that one forgets, but that the intense visual pleasure of the object subsides and resurges only on new contact. So it was with a thrill of delight that, twenty-five years later, I stationed myself in front of the plaque to take in, yet again, its mysterious details. The plaque had been placed at the

[8] Jerome M. Eisenberg, "The Aesthetics of the Forger: Stylistic Criteria in Ancient Art Forgery," *Minerva* 3, no. 3 (1992): 10–15.

[9] Dale Kinney, "A Late Antique Ivory Plaque and Modern Response," and Anthony Cutler, "Suspicio Symmachorum: A Postscript," *American Journal of Archaeology* 98 (1994): 457–80. A fourth-century date was subsequently confirmed by radioactive analysis; see Paul Williamson, "On the Date of the Symmachi Panel and the So-Called Grado Chair Ivories," in *Through a Glass Brightly: Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Art and Archaeology Presented to David Buckton,* ed. Chris Entwistle (Oxford, 2003), 47–50.

[10] In particular, the Chairete (Three Women at the Tomb) in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan and the Diptych of Probianus in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

Fig. 2 Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, Opus CCCXVI, *Comparisons* (1892). Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Emilie L. Heine in memory of Mr. and Mrs. John Hauck 1940.949

left end of a rectangular case, next to a leaf of the consular diptych of Flavius Anastasius (517). After my reunion with SYMMACHORVM I tried dutifully to move on to Anastasius. Looking back at my old friend from a position to the right of it, I realized that I was seeing a view: a view of the matron from behind, with her firm but womanly bottom cupped by the looping toga, whose folds cascade down her thigh and pool under her left arm. From this angle, the torsion of the lower body is not at all disturbing; it looks right. Moving around to the left, I had another view, not as sensuous as the first – on the contrary – but still interesting. In fact, as if taking advantage of the bow of the plaque, the carving offers an arc of views that is roughly indexed by the planes of the obliquely positioned altar. Viewed from the range of angles between the orthogonals established by the altar's front and side, the relief presents a variety of aspects in which its spatial and anatomical anomalies seem less obtrusive, if they do not entirely disappear. Only the garland on the altar refuses any view and continues to appear like a mistake.

The intended viewers of this artful composition – foremost the patron, traditionally believed to have been the Honorable Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, Quaestor, Praetor, Pontifex Maximus, Governor of Lucania and Bruttium, Count of the Third Order, Proconsul of Africa, Praefect of Rome, and Consul – could not have been expected to appreciate it by pacing laboriously to and fro, as I did.[11] They must have seen it from a comfortable position, like the young lady in the painting by Sir

[11] A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale, and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire,* vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1971), 865–70, s.v. Q. Aurelius Symmachus signo Eusebius 4. The titles are from the base of a statue erected in Symmachus's honor by his son Q. Fabius Memmius Symmachus.

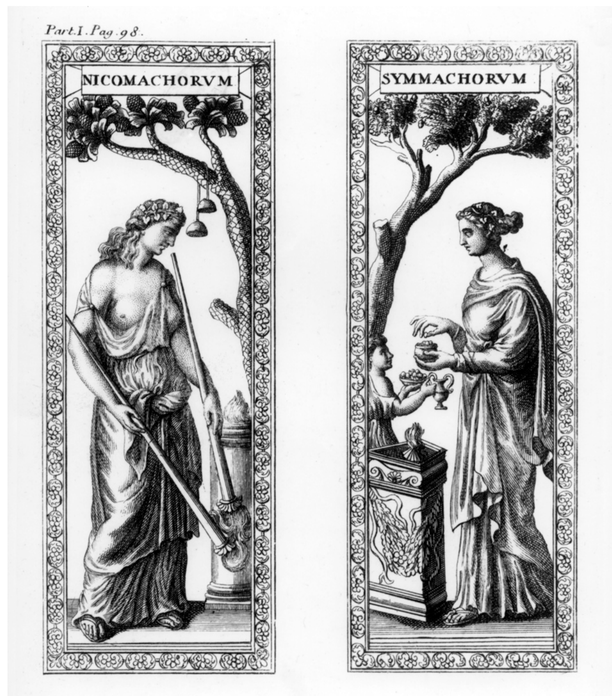

Fig. 3 Tablets of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi as drawn by Dom Robert Larcher, in Edmond Martène and Ursin Durand, *Voyage littéraire de deux religieux bénédictins de la Congregation de Saint Maur* (Paris, 1717), part 1, 98

Lawrence Alma Tadema that was first brought into the discussion of the diptych by Anthony Cutler (fig. 2).[12] Cutler's point was that the Victorian painting is no more or less accurate about the diptych than the supposedly documentary engravings from the eighteenth century, which, among other changes, correct the position of the woman's projecting right foot (fig. 3).[13] Despite Alma Tadema's "strenuously archaeological" approach, his depiction of the diptych in use is nothing like the image conjured by centuries of sober scholarship. But how wrong is it?

The image of domestic female leisure – spent in reading something inside the diptych rather than admiring the carvings outside – is the antithesis of the picture reconstructed by scholars, in which the diptych functioned in the public, official world of men. This picture goes back at least to the mid-eighteenth century, when Antonio Francesco Gori tried to explain the diptych by reconciling the inscribed names, the iconography, and the style, all of which seemed at odds with one another; in particular, he thought the style was too early for the families named.[14] Gori identified the subject of the reliefs as the *trieterica Bacchi,* not the orgiastic (and hardly propitious) rite described by Ovid, but a wedding sacrifice performed by two women of different grades of Bacchic initiation.[15] On this basis, he proposed that the diptych was made originally as a wedding gift and then reused "in a subsequent era, perhaps to contain the commendations [*laudes*] of the most distinguished consular men of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi, written on parchment pages and inserted."[16] Gori proposed that the reuse of the diptych was also as a gift, perhaps on the occasion of a Bacchic ritual or offering sponsored by those illustrious fourth-century men.

Gori's dual proposal – that the diptych was a wedding present and (then) a form of religious offering – became competing alternatives. In 1883 the editor of Symmachus's letters, Otto Seeck, claimed that the diptych was a *sportula,* a gift "distributed to friends when the nuptial celebrations were completed," when the two families intermarried, as they did twice between 387 and 401.[17] Hans Graeven (d. 1905) rejected this idea largely because of the imagery, which, as he painstakingly worked out, relates to the mysteries of Eleusis, Dionysus, and Magna Mater; he concluded that the diptych "was offered to the divinity [he could not fix precisely which one] when some members of the Symmachi and Nicomachi families received the initiation to which the reliefs refer."[18] Richard Delbrueck (1929) advanced the notion of a "priest-diptych," which like a consular diptych served to "notify those of similar rank of one's accession to office [i.e., to a priesthood] and to

12 Cutler, "Suspicio Symmachorum," 473–74, fig. 14; Vern G. Swanson, *The Biography and* Catalogue raisonné *of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London, 1990), 247, no. 354; color reproduction in Russell Ash, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London, 1989), pl. 25. The painting is in the Cincinnati Art Museum and was made in 1892.

13 Edmond Martène and Ursin Durand, *Voyage littéraire de deux religieux bénédictins de la Congregation de Saint Maur* (Paris, 1717), part 1, 98.

14 Antonius Franciscus Gorius, *Thesaurus veterum diptychorum consularium et ecclesiasticorum,* ed. Io. Baptista Passeri (Typ. Caietani Albizzini, 1759), 1.203–7.

15 Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* VI.587.

16 Gorius (1759) 203: "Sequiore tamen aevo adhibitae fuisse videntur, ut laudes forsitan clarissimorum Virorum Consularium NICOMACHORVM, et SYMMACHORVM, membraneis paginis scriptas et insertas, continerent; quae Tabulae, ut opinor, iisdem vel dedicatae, vel dono datae sunt."

17 Otto Seeck, "De Symmachi vita," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica; Auctores Antiquissimi,* vol. 6 (Berlin, 1883), LIXn242. On the dates of the marriages, see Jean-Pierre Callu, *Symmaque: Lettres,* vol. 1 (Paris, 1972), 12.

18 Hans Graeven, "Heidnische Diptychen," *Roemische Mitteilungen* 28 (1913): 266.

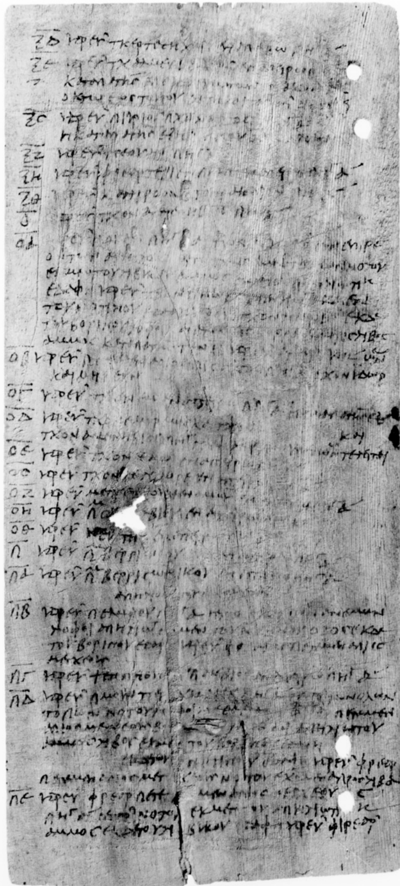

Fig. 4 Wooden tablet from Egypt. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Bodleian Greek Inscriptions 3018

invite them to the sacred ceremonies."[19] And so on into the twenty-first century. Although there have been variations, permutations, and even refutations of these seminal ideas, no one has proposed that the families made the diptych for their own use or enjoyment. Always it is assumed that it was "distributed," "offered," "given," "issued," or "sent."[20]

Paradoxically, the consensus that the diptych was distributed in order to "notify" or "invite" is accompanied by claims that it would not have contained any writing.[21] It has been said that diptychs of this size are too big and heavy to be used as writing tablets, and that the recess on the verso is too shallow to hold wax.[22] Actually, at just under 30 cm tall and just over 12 cm wide, the Symmachi plaque is slightly smaller than the panels of a perfectly utilitarian wooden notebook now in the Ashmolean Museum (fig. 4), and the recess on the writing side is viable, as Paul Williamson kindly reminded me. Since one could also write on ivory tablets directly (an eye-saver, according to Martial), lack of wax would not have been a problem in any case.[23] Like Gori, however, Alma Tadema envisaged something different: the diptych as a container for parchment sheets.[24]

Scholars of the book agree that parchment "tablets," *pugillares membranei,* were the book's most important precursor; another was the *codex,* multiple tablets of wood (or sometimes ivory) bound together.[25] The diptych of the Symmachi and the Nicomachi was a codex. Parchment tablets seem to have been an innovation of the first century, when Martial extolled their compactness and portability.[26] Gori imagined, and Alma Tadema

[19] Richard Delbrueck, *Die Consulardiptychen und verwandte Denkmäler* (Berlin, 1929), 209–15, no. 54.

[20] Alan Cameron, "Pagan Ivories," in *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire* (Paris, 1986), 41–72 ("distributed in memory," 51); Massimiliano David, "Elementi per una storia della produzione dei dittici eburnei," in *Eburnea diptycha. I dittici d'avorio tra Antichità e Medioevo,* ed. Massimiliano David (Bari, 2007), 13–43 ("partecipazione di nozze," 20).

[21] An exception is Kim Bowes, "Ivory Lists: Consular Diptychs, Christian Appropriation and Polemics of Time in Late Antiquity," *Art History* 24 (2001): 338–57.

[22] Graeven, "Heidnische Diptychen," 202, 245–46; Anthony Cutler, "Il linguaggio visivo dei dittici eburnei. Forma, funzione, produzione, ricezione," in *Eburnea diptycha,* 143–44.

[23] The dimensions of SYMMACHORVM are variously given as 29.6 x 12.6 cm and 29.9 x 12.4 cm; cf. Cutler, "Suspicio Symmachorum," 474n79. The wooden notebook is Bodleian Greek Inscriptions 3018, published by Peter J. Parsons, "The Wells of Hibis," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 57 (1971): 165–80; its nine leaves measure 30.5 x 13.7 cm each. Martial, *Epigrammata,* XIV.5 attests writing on ivory: "Lest somber wax dim your failing eyes, let black letters paint snow-white ivory for your use"; trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, Mass.), vol. 3, 229.

[24] Swanson, *The Biography and* Catalogue raisonné *of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema,* 247.

[25] Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London, 1983), 11–14; Joseph van Haelst, "Les origines du codex," in *Les débuts du codex. Actes de la journée d'étude organisée à Paris les 3 et 4 juillet 1985 par l'Institut de Papyrologie de la Sorbonne et l'Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes,* ed. Alain Blanchard (Turnhout, 1989), 15; Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages,* trans. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and David Ganz (Cambridge, 1990), 20; Francesco Citti and Antonio Ziosi, "'Diptycha ex ebore': osservazioni per uno studio lessicale," in *Eburnea diptycha,* 51–52. The "libri elephantini" supposedly in the Bibliotheca Ulpia in the fourth century would have been codices: Flavius Vopiscus, *Tacitus* VIII.1–2 (Scriptores Historiae Augustae); cf. Jocelyn Penny Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity* (London, 1997), 48; Citti and Ziosi, "'Diptycha ex ebore,'" 52.

[26] Martial, *Epigrammata,* I.2; van Haelst, "Les origines du codex," 20–21.

has shown, *pugillares membranaceos operculis eboreis,* "parchment tablets in ivory covers," as they are called in an inscription found outside Reggio Calabria, itemizing a bequest to the temple of Apollo.[27] Parchment sheets could have contained all of the communications usually attributed to the diptych – announcements, invitations, a list of offerings, a C.V. – as well as many more literary ones.

Before going further, I should make clear that I am not advocating that Alma Tadema's painting is a vision of how the diptych "really" was used. I do believe, however, that we should not ignore his visual proposals just because he was not a philologist. (In fact, he was a highly proficient amateur who left a collection of over 4,000 books, mostly on Antiquity, to the Victoria and Albert Museum.)[28] The painting is useful because, unlike the philological discussions that set the course of scholarship on diptychs, it is visually concrete.[29] Its precise visualization raises possibilities that are worth entertaining, if only to test unexamined assumptions: women? reading? at home?

One obvious use of the ivory codex would be to deliver letters; Symmachus left over nine hundred letters, after all, and he wrote many more. Graeven remarked that the genitive form of the names inscribed on the plaques also occurs on smaller (in his view, more functional) diptychs and is appropriate to objects that circulate and must be returned to their owners.[30] The bishop of Hippo may have been jesting when he apologized to one addressee for sending a letter on "skins" (parchment) because "the ivory tablets that I have were sent to your uncle with [another] letter," but the joke requires that someone was using ivory tablets, if not he.[31] For letters the normal material was papyrus (*charta*) rather than parchment; Augustine was low on that too. Symmachus used papyrus. One of his correspondents flattered him that his letters should be transcribed onto "codices of oak or tablets of linden" for greater permanence, since letters passed through many hands and papyrus was not very durable.[32] For missives of special importance, an ivory codex would have been useful.

Letters were not the only literary form that traveled among readers in Antiquity, however. Authors sent works of all kinds to their friends and patrons; this is how literature was vetted for publication and also how it was published.[33] Both Symmachus and Virius Nicomachus Flavianus were prolific writers and both would have participated in this social exchange of poems, biography, history, and copies of the classics.[34] Another social aspect of reading is implied by Alma Tadema's *Comparisons:* emendation. Emendation was a perpetual concern for living authors intent on maintaining the accuracy of the copies of their works in circulation, as well as for readers of texts whose authors were long dead.[35] It was an aspect of textual criticism that boys learned in school, that is, in public; women would have read and edited at home, in private libraries.[36] Even so, it was

[27] *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum,* vol. 10, no. 1 (Berlin, 1883), 4, no. 6; Graeven, "Heidnische Diptychen," 213; Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex,* 25n2. I am grateful to my colleague Darby Scott for advice about this inscription.

[28] Jennifer Gordon Lovett, "A Life Colored by Art," in *Empires Restored, Elysium Revisited: The Art of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema,* ed. Jennifer Gordon Lovett and William R. Johnston (Williamstown, Mass., 1991), 23. The books were subsequently given to the University of Birmingham.

[29] On the philological cast of the scholarship, see Dale Kinney, "First-Generation Diptychs in the Discourse of Visual Culture," in *Spätantike und byzantinische Elfenbeinbildwerke im Diskurs,* ed. Anne Effenberger, Anthony Cutler, and Gudrun Bühl (Wiesbaden, 2008), 149–66.

[30] Graeven, "Heidnische Diptychen," 246.

[31] Augustine, *Epistula* 15, ed. K. D. Daur, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Epistulae I–LV,* Corpus Christianorum, series latina 31 (Turnhout, 2004): "Non haec epistula sic inopiam chartae indicat, ut membranas saltem abundare testetur. Tabellas eburneas quas habeo, avunculo tuo cum litteris misi. Tu enim huic pelliculae facilius ignosces . . ." Graeven, "Heidnische Diptychen," 246; Roberts and Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex,* 24; Citti and Ziosi, "'Diptycha ex ebore,'" 52. That Augustine was joking was suggested to me many years ago by Mario Torelli.

[32] Symmachus, *Epistula* IV.34, ed. Jean-Pierre Callu, *Symmaque: Lettres,* vol. 2 (Paris, 1982), 117–18; Cristiana Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus: A Political Biography* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2006), 62.

[33] E. J. Kenney, "Books and Readers in the Roman World," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature,* vol. 2, *Latin Literature* (Cambridge, 1982), 3–32; Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind,* 26–35.

[34] Herbert Bloch, "The Pagan Revival in the West at the End of the Fourth Century," in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century,* ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford, 1963), 210–17. Whether these literary efforts were as pedestrian and weak as claimed by Alan Cameron is not relevant to my argument: see Cameron, "Paganism and Literature in Late Fourth Century Rome," in *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident* (Geneva, 1976), 1–40, and "The Latin Revival of the Fourth Century," in *Renaissances before the Renaissance: Cultural Revivals of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,* ed. Warren Treadgold (Stanford, Calif., 1984), 42–58.

[35] Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind,* 29–32.

[36] H.-I. Marrou, "La vie intellectuelle au Forum de Trajan et au Forum d'Auguste," *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'histoire* 49 (1932): 93–98; Cameron, "Paganism and Literature in Late Fourth Century Rome," 27–28 (citing the case of a manuscript collated in the house of St. Melania). On the extent, level, and logistics of women's reading in this period, see Jane MacIntosh Snyder, *The Woman and the Lyre: Women Writers in Classi-*

Fig. 5 Relief on the base of a marble candelabrum, in *Annali dell'Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 22 (1850). Tav. d'Agg. D

hard to keep up; Symmachus excused himself to Ausonius for sending him an uncorrected transcription of Pliny, of which he had several copies but not enough time to review them.[37]

Less persuasive than the idea that the diptych could have been a vehicle for reading matter is the image of a reader holding it in her hands to read. The ivory plaques show very little wear from handling, and if they were used to convey sheets of papyrus or parchment, the sheets would have been removed upon arrival. When not in use the diptych would have been regarded from the outside, whether closed – so that it displayed one face or the other – or open. While I would not go so far as Cutler in claiming that this and other diptychs "operated primarily as vehicles of visual rather than verbal communication," certainly they were "pictorial" as well as tactile.[38] In that mode, what did they say?

Some years ago, in another serendipitous encounter, while looking for an article in a nineteenth-century periodical I came across a line drawing of a relief that could have been the model for the woman in profile on SYMMACHORVM (fig. 5).[39] In further serendipity, the relief was later published by Hans-Ulrich Cain opposite the photo of a bare-breasted maenad, creating a thematic juxtaposition resembling that of the ivory diptych (fig. 6).[40] Both figures appear on the bases of pre- or early Imperial marble candelabra. The draped woman holds a sheaf of wheat rather than an *acerra,* and her right hand is restrained by the sling of her mantle. Otherwise, the dress, the hairdo, and the pose are essentially the same as on the ivory tablet – except for the right foot, which adheres firmly to the law of the plane. Perhaps extrapolating from the hint of torsion in the woman's hip, the ivory carver created a figure moving in real space, reversing the effort of his predecessor to reduce the movement of a three-dimensional prototype to planarity. The reversal is not bad classicism but post-classicism, not an inability to copy old conventions but a demonstration that old rules and old forms were available to the contemporary artist for his own purposes, including subversion.

Cain identified the draped woman as a priestess, depicted in a well-known statue type (which, among other adaptations, was used in the second century for a numismatic type of *Pietas*). On the candelabrum she is

cal Greece and Rome (Carbondale, Ill., 1989), 122–51; Philip Rousseau, "'Learned Women' and the Development of a Christian Culture in Late Antiquity," *Symbolae Osloenses* 70 (1995): 116–47; Emily A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona docta: Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London, 1999); Mark Vessey, "Response to Catherine Conybeare: Women of Letters?" in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages,* ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, Ill., 2005), 73–96.

[37] Symmachus, *Epistula,* I.24; Catherine Conybeare, *Paulinus Noster: Self and Symbols in the Letters of Paulinus of Nola* (Oxford, 2000), 28–29.

[38] Josef Engemann argued that diptychs made in the West were designed to be seen open, with the decorated faces side-by-side: see "Zur Anordnung von Inschriften und Bildern bei westlichen und östlichen Elfenbeindiptychen des vierten bis sechsten Jahrhunderts," in *Chartulae. Festschrift für Wolfgang Speyer* (Münster Westfalen, 1998), 125–26; Cutler, "Il linguaggio visivo dei dittici eburnei," 144.

[39] *Annali dell'Instituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica* 22 (1850), Tav. d'Agg. D, illustration to H. Brunn, "Base triangolare di candelabro," 60–66.

[40] Hans-Ulrich Cain, *Römische Marmorkandelaber* (Mainz am Rhein, 1985), 179, no. 84 (Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano Inv. 1186); cf. 176, no. 77 (Rome, Palazzo dei Conservatori Inv. 1115). My thanks to Paolo Liverani for helping me track down the candelabrum in its present location.

Fig. 6 Bases of two marble candelabra, in Hans-Ulrich Cain, *Römische Marmorkandelaber* (Mainz am Rhein, 1985), pl. 57

combined with an image of Apollo.[41] The maenad, by contrast, belongs to the repertoire of ecstatic companions of Bacchus, who were ubiquitous in the Hellenistic and Roman decorative arts at least to the seventh century C.E. In its forced combination of Apollonian and Dionysian iconographies, the photographic plate not only points to the fundamental problem of the diptych but also suggests a possible solution. The problem is that the two halves do not match, not in subject matter any more than in style. One depicts an Eleusinian goddess, the other a conventional Roman sacrifice; only the most basic commonalities – religion, female – tie them together.[42] The possible solution is that like the book plate, which for practical reasons combines reliefs from two different candelabra, the diptych joins plaques from different codices, just as Cutler suggested after seeing them together in New York.

To sum up, to understand even our oldest friends it sometimes helps to change the frame of reference. We do not have to remain within the narrow range of uses connoted by the single word "diptych" to explain the plaques of the Nicomachi and the Symmachi; Romans had other words to denote such tablets, words that open

[41] Cain, *Römische Marmorkandelaber*, 102, s.v. "Apollon 5"; 134 "Priesterin 1"; on the *Pietas* type: Kinney, "The Iconography of the Ivory Diptych Nicomachorum-Symmachorum," 67–69.

[42] On the identity of the woman on NICOMACHORVM see Robert Turcan, "Corè-Libera? Éleusis et les derniers païens," *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres, Comptes rendus des séances* (1996): 749–53. To make a connection between the plaques, he argued that the priestess on SYMMACHORVM is the goddess Libera. Erika Simon made an even less persuasive case that the two plaques represent "Cora-Venus" and "Cora-Iuventas" in a syncretistic "allegory on the 'mysterium' of … marriage": "The Diptych of the Symmachi and Nicomachi: An Interpretation," *Greece & Rome* 39, no. 1 (1992): 56–65; followed by Charles W. Hedrick Jr., *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin, Tex., 2000), 73–79. Bente Kiilerich resorted to generalization, calling the plaques "a symbolic syncretistic illustration of pagan religion as such": see "A Different Interpretation of the Nicomachorum-Symmachorum Diptych," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 34 (1991): 122.

up different semantic and functional possibilities.[43] Alan Cameron nicely distinguished a class of "presentation diptychs" but extended it to include all of the diptychs we know.[44] Let's retract that last move. Not every surviving diptych was necessarily a presentation diptych; this is only an assumption, and it leads to the further assumption that all carved ivory plaques were made to mark a life event. If the iconography is unsuitable for a promotion in government, some other transition is sought: a priesthood, a marriage, and recently death.

The idea that the plaques were made by Memmius Symmachus in 402 to "commemorate" Virius Nicomachus Flavianus, dead since 394, and the newly deceased Quintus Aurelius Symmachus is no more plausible than the priesthood or the marriage hypothesis.[45] How likely is it that a memorial to two men would depict only two women, even if one were a goddess? Not very. The male honoree might be shown in the company of a female, as on the "Poet and Muse" diptych in Monza, which some think honors the poet Claudian.[46] He might appear at the circus, as on LAMPADIORVM, or in the splendor of his office, like Probianus. But he would not have been simply left out, not even named.

If we admit the possibility that the ivory codex was not made for any particular occasion, not distributed or gifted but owned by the families named on it, we lose the dates to which it has been anchored: 387, 401, 402. Given this opportunity, I would be inclined to push it back to the 360s or 370s, closer to the time when the ivory of SYMMACHORVM was probably harvested, in the first quarter of the century, and in a moment when the cultural climate was much more conducive to this kind of iconography.[47] It would be interesting to explore the implications of such a redating for Thomas Mathews's "clash of gods."[48]

[43] Citti and Ziosi, "'Diptycha ex ebore,'" 52, 57. Even the range of "diptych" has been dramatically enlarged by Bowes, "Ivory Lists."

[44] Alan Cameron, "Consular Diptychs in their Social Context: New Eastern Evidence," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 11 (1998): 398–403.

[45] Cameron, "Pagan Ivories," followed by Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus,* 85. Similarly Kiilerich, "A Different Interpretation of the Nicomachorum-Symmachorum Diptych," though she argued for a commemoration of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, and Turcan, "Corè-Libera?" (Praetextatus and his wife Fabia Aconia Paulina).

[46] On the Monza diptych: Citti and Ziosi, "'Diptycha ex ebore,'" 57; others think it is Carolingian: Engemann, "Zur Anordnung von Inschriften und Bildern," 116n63. On another man-and-muse diptych, see Kathleen J. Shelton, "The Consular Muse of Flavius Constantius," *Art Bulletin* 65 (1983): 7–24.

[47] For the date of the ivory: Williamson, "On the Date of the Symmachi Panel," 47–48; on the cultural ambience: P. Bruggisser, *Symmaque ou le rituel épistolaire de l'amitié littéraire: Recherches sur le premier livre de la correspondance* (Fribourg, 1993).

[48] In addition to the friends mentioned above in notes 27 and 40, I am grateful to Tony Cutler and Paul Williamson for years of helpful exchanges and support.