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Old Friends

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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. In its temporary setting, in uncustomed 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. 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 NICOMA-Chorvm. 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. 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. In his review of the exhibition, Anthony Cutler questioned whether the panels might have originated as leaves of two different diptychs.

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 Weitzmann, Age of Spirituality 187, no. 165.
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. Tony Cutler and I joined forces to refute him. 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. 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

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11 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.
left end of a rectangular case, next to a leaf of the con-
sular diptych of Flavius Anastasius (517). After my re-
union 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 con-
tinues 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 ex-
pected 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 Prosopogra-
phy 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.
Lawrence Alma Tadema that was first brought into the discussion of the diptych by Anthony Cutler (fig. 2).

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). 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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.”

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...
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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,” pugiillas membraei, 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

Fig. 4 Wooden tablet from Egypt. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Bodleian Greek Inscriptions 3018
has shown, *pugillares membranaceos operculis ebores,* “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 flattened 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

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27 Corpus inscriptionum latinam, 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.


30 Graeven, “Heidnische Diptychen,” 246.


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

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. 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. 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

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

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combined with an image of Apollo. 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. 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
up different semantic and functional possibilities. Alan Cameron nicely distinguished a class of “presentation diptychs” but extended it to include all of the diptychs we know. 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. 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. 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. It would be interesting to explore the implications of such a redating for Thomas Mathews’s “clash of gods.”

43 Citti and Ziosi, “‘Diptycha ex eborne,’” 52, 57. Even the range of “diptych” has been dramatically enlarged by Bowes, “Ivory Lists.”
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.