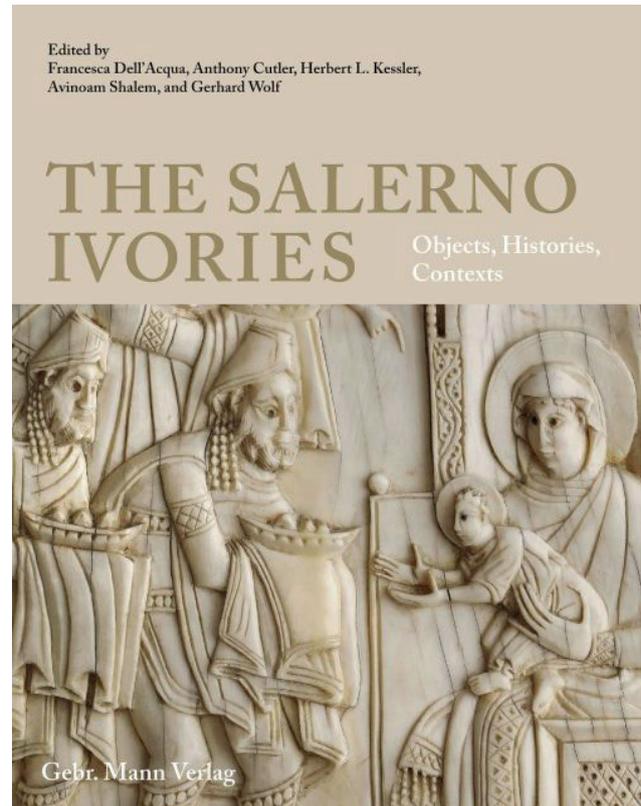


Francesca Dell'Aqua, Anthony Cutler, Herbert L. Kessler, Avinoam Shalem, and Gerhard Wolf (eds): *The Salerno Ivories. Objects, Histories, Contexts*, Gebr. Mann Verlag: Berlin, 2016. 368 pp.

The Salerno ivories, a work of art as significant as it is enigmatic, are a group of 33 ivory plaques illustrating Old and New Testament scenes, with a further 13 smaller plaques consisting of the busts of Apostles and orants, symbols of Evangelists, and decorative elements. Today, the Salerno ivories are preserved in the Cathedral of Salerno except for individual plaques in museums in Hamburg, Berlin, Budapest, New York, and Paris. Obviously, they originally formed the covering of a highly prestigious object, which most scholars consider to have formed a part of the authentic or slightly later furnishing of San Matteo, the Cathedral of Salerno, inaugurated in 1085. The cathedral became the reference point of the art of the area for centuries to come. Situated in a favorable position in the middle of the Mediterranean, Salerno, like other Southern Italian

coastal cities, played an important role in the economic and cultural exchange between the East and the West, the South and the North. The connection of the Salerno ivories to the influential cathedral and the variety of cultural influences the carved plaques appear to embody make this work one of the key monuments of Southern Italian art.

Despite the importance of the Salerno ivories and the large quantity of studies devoted to them over the years, many of the basic questions surrounding them remain unresolved. As no early written documents concerning the Salerno ivories survive, the objects themselves form the most important and, it must be said, most ambiguous source material for their history. The main bones of contention can be divided into four categories. The first concerns the patron of the Salerno ivories: were they commissioned by an ecclesiastical or lay magnate, by a bishop, by a prince, by an abbot, by a prominent merchant, or perhaps by the pope himself? The second problem concerns the exact time of production of the ivories. Should they be connected to the time of the inauguration of San Matteo in 1085, or to the flowering of the Southern Italian Norman culture in the mid-twelfth century? The third question relates to the object which the ivory plaques were intended to decorate. Was it a door or a cathedra, a reliquary or an antependium, a dossal or some other object? The fourth difficulty is more general and covers questions about the artistic reference points of the Salerno



ivories. On which models and paragons did their artists draw? What links did they have with Egypt, the Holy Land, Sicily, the monastery of Montecassino, Rome, and Spain? Which techniques were used in their making and what messages do the images carved in them convey?

In 2007, a commanding group of scholars and institutions set to work to examine the present state of these questions and to endeavor to find more exhaustive answers than before. The driving force behind the project was Francesca Dell’Aqua from the University of Salerno. Together with Herbert L. Kessler, Avinoam Shalem, and Gerhard Wolf she organized three conferences within the framework of the research project ‘Mediterranean Cross-Currents: the So-Called “Salerno Ivories” as Examples of Artistic Interaction in the Middle Ages’, coordinated by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck Institut. The meetings, which took place in Salerno, at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, and in Florence, brought together an impressive gathering of scholars dedicated to the study of ivory carving and the history of the Mediterranean cultural sphere. The book under review is the end product of the long collaboration. It contains the essential papers presented and commented on in the workshops. The wide selection of articles reviews the Salerno ivories from many angles, both technical and iconographical, general and specific. There are also a number of articles which do not discuss the Salerno ivories as such but other works of art related to them. In the present review, I will address the latter only in passing.

To what kind of object were the carved ivory plaques attached? The question and possible answers are outlined by Ruggero Longo and Elisabetta Scirocco in the article ‘A Scenario for the Salerno Ivories: The Liturgical Furnishing of the Salerno Cathedral’ and in Francesca Dell’Aqua’s ‘The Hidden Sides of the Salerno Ivories. Hypotheses about the Original Object, Program, and Cultural Milieu.’ Without offering a definitive answer, they state that while the west door of the cathedral and a dossal appear possible alternatives, the most probable use of the ivories would be the decoration of a movable chair. As well as Longo, Scirocco, and Dell’Aqua, Jill Caskey is one of those who touches upon the question in her article ‘Miracles and Matthew: Potential Contexts for the Salerno Ivories.’ Caskey too considers a chair the most likely object, albeit suggesting that it would have been located in the crypt of the cathedral rather than the main apse as is generally thought.

As the object which the Salerno ivories originally adorned is long gone, scholars must look for clues of the original composition of the plates within the depicted scenes themselves and their iconography. Several articles in the book deal with reconstructions of a possible pictorial program as well as the reading of the biblical scenes depicted in the Salerno ivories. In his essay “‘Veteris testamenti typos evengelicae veritati profecisse monstravimus’: Realia and Spiritualia on the Salerno Ivories’, Herbert L. Kessler takes as his starting point Otto Demus’ claim that in the biblical mosaic cycles in the Norman basilicas of Sicily (Monreale and Cappella Palatina), which are related to the Salerno ivories, the Old Testament scenes should be taken as literal depictions of historical events, not as allegorical or typological references to the deeds of Christ in the Gospels. Kessler states that this is obviously not the case either in the Sicilian biblical cycles or in the Salerno ivories. He goes on to analyze a number of examples where the Old Testament scenes are presented as prefigurations of the Gospel scenes, arguing that ‘the types of the Old Testament establish the truth of the Gospels’ in the Salerno ivories. Kessler’s observations, shared by a number of authors in the

book, are important because they presume that the biblical scenes were arranged in a meaningful way so that the relation between the Old Testament ‘types’ and their New Testament fulfilments were visually perceptible. The recognition of such rules of composition offers tangible guidelines for any attempt to reconstruct the original pictorial program of the Salerno ivories. While all the reconstructions of the program remain hypothetical, Dell’Aqua offers an in-depth discussion of the subject in her article.

Iconographical questions shed light on the traditions on which the Salerno ivories drew. Many articles in the book focus on the objects that potentially functioned as models for the Salerno ivories. One of the most intriguing among the potential models is a set of ivory plates commonly known as ‘Grado chair’ or ‘Grado ivories.’ This set of ivories derive, in all probability, from a chair which Emperor Heraclius (610–641) donated to the Cathedral of Grado, situated at the northern end of the Adriatic Sea in Veneto. The Grado ivories are discussed mainly in the articles of Francesco Tasso, ‘The Grado Chair: A Review of the Historical and Documentary Sources’ and Antonio Milone, ‘Angelo Maria Bandini (1726–1803) e gli avori di Grado e Salerno.’ Besides Tasso and Milone, Anthony Cutler dwells on the Grado ivories to an extent in his article ‘The Fabric, Factice and Enduring Enigma of the Salerno Ivories.’

One recurring theme in the book is the conceivable role of Montecassino in the history of the Salerno ivories. Caskey relates the Salerno ivories to the friendship between Archbishop Alfanus and Abbot Desiderius of Montecassino (d. 1087). Fabrizio Crivello emphasizes the role of the abbey as a possible source of inspiration for the late eleventh- and early twelfth-century Salernitan ivory works in his article ‘Gli avori di “Amalfi/Salerno”: considerazioni sui presupposti artistici, sulla cronologia e la localizzazione.’ From the Chronicle of Montecassino, we know that Byzantine masters in the art of ivory carving came to work on the decoration of the abbey’s new basilica, inaugurated in 1071. Stylistically, the Salerno ivories differ from the earlier Cassinese works, but in the field of iconography, scholars have observed clear congruencies between the two. In her essay ‘When Art Depicts Ritual: The Salerno Plaque with the Women at the Tomb’, Natalia B. Teteriatnikov concentrates on one such example, the iconography of the scene of the Women at the Tomb, which clearly drew on the Cassinese tradition.

The relation between Montecassino and the Cathedral of Salerno brings us to the last major enigma concerning the Salerno ivories, that is, their exact historical context: when did the object containing the biblical program come to the cathedral? Who were the persons responsible for the donation of the material (the ivory) or for the commissioning and design of the object?

In the article, ‘The Tusk: Origins of the Raw Material for the Salerno Ivories’, Sarah M. Guérin proposes that all the plaques originated from a single tusk, which Robert Guiscard, the Norman ruler of Salerno had received from Sicily either as loot or as a gift. According to her, Robert would have donated the tusk to the Cathedral of Salerno. There, Archbishop Alfanus or some other member of the cathedral chapter then decided to what kind of object the ivory would be used for, what kind of iconographical program the object would have, and who the artists employed for the task would be. Guérin’s theory, first put forward by Robert Bergman in 1980, would make the Salerno ivories an emblem of the socio-political changes and their implications in Salerno in the last quarter of the eleventh century. In 1076, Normans had conquered the city and in the process subjugated

its old Lombard aristocracy. Within the ecclesiastic sphere, the Lombard aristocracy was able to hold its ground better, as many members of the leading families withdrew to monasteries, particularly to Montecassino, or held high positions in the hierarchy of the secular clergy. Culturally, the interaction between the new Norman rulers and the ecclesiastical institutions led by old Lombard families proved fertile. The inauguration of the new Cathedral was a major manifestation of this rapport and if Robert was behind the donation of the material of the Salerno ivories, it would make the latter a tangible product of this cooperation between the old and the new elites of Southern Italy.

Many articles in the book share the basic view that the Salerno ivories should be connected to the inauguration of the basilica, even if the authors do not necessarily take any stance on the possible role of Robert Guiscard in the process. However, Francesca Dell'Aqua takes the view that the work of art should be dated later. In general terms, she recognizes the same cultural impetus behind the Salerno ivories as do others. While analyzing the typological reading of the biblical scenes of the Salerno ivories and their possible order in the original setting, Dell'Aqua notes that the manner of organization which the scenes follow is first encountered in the Cassinese cultural milieu in the late eleventh century. She nevertheless emphasizes that later this pictorial method appears in the mosaic decoration of the Norman basilicas of Sicily (the Palatine Chapel in Palermo and the Cathedral of Monreale) as well as in a number of other Southern Italian churches. Stylistically, Dell'Aqua connects the Salerno ivories to the Sicilian mosaics. She thus proposes a date around the middle of the twelfth century. In her view, the Salerno ivories would be a fruit of the political stability and cultural flowering of the city under the Norman rule during the episcopacy of either William of Ravenna (1137–52) or Romuald II (1153–81).

In summary, the book provides the reader with an exciting survey of the present state of studies on the Salerno ivories. The collection of articles reviews the main questions concerning this ambiguous work of art, and, in many places, pushes further the limits of what can be said of them with some certainty. The studies highlight the status of the Salerno ivories in their contemporary setting, the richness of the pictorial language of the plates, and the variety of cultural impetus visible in them. At the same time, the book brings clearly to the fore the basic problem regarding the Salerno ivories: the lack of written records of them compels the scholars to turn their eyes to the context in the search for useful evidence. There is so much room for interpretation that many questions remain without definitive answers, even after the present work, and will probably remain so in the future. That being said, the book is a testimony to the importance of the studies on the Salerno ivories for our understanding of Southern Italian and Mediterranean cultural interaction in the central Middle Ages.

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