

\* BONE-CARVINGS WITH FLORAL \*  
DECORATIONS FROM ROMAN EGYPT

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It is well known that in Roman items<sup>(1)</sup> when Indian ivory became a rare and an expensive material, the use of bones of big animals in works of art grew common. Products of common bone replaced ivories since it resemble ivory in its structure and white colour. Moreover, it was a cheap substitute in the local market<sup>(2)</sup>. The craftsman had frequently to work in the narrow space afforded by the hard brittle bone<sup>(3)</sup>. For economical reasons the craftsman had to join many oblong flat plaques together with glue or rivets in order to form a large continuous plaque for carving<sup>(4)</sup>.

It is worth noticing that often camel bone was used for being large and very white<sup>(5)</sup> reminding of ivory by its structure.

Little is known of the method employed in the actual process of carving but it is assumed that often pointed tools were used in the rendering of the figures. Sometimes the imperfections were covered with colouring<sup>(6)</sup>.

Artistically speaking, bone carvings possess a character of their own depending on the degree of its perfection and the quality of its relief which is strongly affected by the skill and experience of the craftsman and the quality of the bone itself.

Most of the bone carvings found in Egypt were executed in Alexandria. The collection found by Wace in his excavations on the Government Hospital site<sup>(7)</sup> gives us the proof for both the variety of using bones of animals instead of ivory in Roman times and the high skill of Alexandrian craftsmen in cutting and carving bones for decorative purposes. Wace assigned the collection to the third and fourth centuries A.D.<sup>(8)</sup>.

In her pioneering study about " Bone-Carvings from Egypt ", Marangou mentioned that most of those carvings belong to the Roman period and were assigned to the reign of Hadrian<sup>(9)</sup>. The lack of carved bones belonging to the first century from Roman Egypt does not mean that objects carved in bone had ceased to be produced in Egypt, but it means that it is difficult to point out a chronological feature for the artistic style in absence of dated examples. Meanwhile references<sup>(10)</sup> have already been made that the earliest date of bone carvings from Roman Egypt belong to the Hadrianic era in which the Roman craftsmen were admirers of Hellenistic art since the emperor himself was a great philhellene.

In spite of the fact that, bone-carvings are numerous, those with floral decorations from Roman Egypt either in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria or in other museums are few and they were certainly inlaid in the furniture, boxes, or decorated utensils or weapons<sup>(11)</sup>.

The favourite motives as depicted in the collection of the Graeco-Roman Museum are rosettes, braided tendrils, lotus flower as well as acanthus leaves<sup>(12)</sup>.

One fragment (Plate Ia) of a flat bone plaque with winding branches of tendrils<sup>(13)</sup> and rosettes is executed very carefully. It reflects the tendency of the classicising period of Hadrian. In other words, the tendency of preference for the classical conventions of Attic art<sup>(14)</sup> and under that philhellene Emperor, Roman art experienced a nostalgic return to Greek classical ideals, not merely in style but also in content<sup>(15)</sup>. It is enough to examine the bust of Hadrian in Ostia Museum datable to

the early years of his reign<sup>(16)</sup>, to show to what extent the style was inspired by the classic canons.

Here, it is obvious that the relief and motifs filled with life and movement, the illusion of the depth is successfully achieved, there is softness in the outlines. This must be the work of a bone-carver aesthetically influenced by the atmosphere he was working in.

Another fragment<sup>(17)</sup> (Plate Ib) is composed of two parts: the upper part represents a winding branch with floral decorations carved in low relief but the details and outlines are plastically rendered in a high degree of perfection. The lower part was filled by means of deep incisions. We can trace adaptations of classicism, the spirit of the Hadrianic epoch is clear as in softness, ease and grace of the spirit of the figures which are represented skillfully and in plastic rendering of the details. Generally speaking, plastic rendering<sup>(18)</sup> was a technical mature introduced by Hadrian in portraiture and other types of sculpture and traces of that change can be shown in bone carvings also. Chronologically, these fine pieces of bone-carvings could be assigned to the Hadrianic era.

Yet contrary to the Hadrianic tendency, there is a category of bone carvings which presents new features such as the coarseness, simplification and even vulgarization of Greek themes<sup>(19)</sup>. This category mostly reflects different tendencies in artistic taste of which some carvers were no longer interested in the classical beauty. A flat oblong bone with floral decoration in the Graeco-Roman Museum (Plate Ic) is a good example of that tendency. A five-leaved rosette is carved in a very

low relief with the simplification touch by means of incisions. The space is filled with floral coarsely-carved elements<sup>(20)</sup>.

Another example is an oblong bone plaque with lotus-shaped decoration (Plate Id) reflects coarseness in the artistic taste of the bone carver. The carving is in low relief with other floral elements set vertically. Although that fragment reflects an attempt to render the outlines in a plastic manner but the linear execution of the details is evident<sup>(21)</sup>.

This change that happened in the artistic spirit may be due to the new status in Roman Egypt as well as in the Roman Empire during the fourth century distinguished by the religious policy of Constantine the Great and his consequences. Naturally, we find the artistic reflection of the repercussions of the policy of Constantine<sup>(22)</sup> on bone carvings dated to the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

Hence the natives in Egypt had been given the chance to express their own preference in art, and during the fourth century, Christian art developed slowly due to the Greek culture that formed the basis of mentality in Egypt and always, there was a return to the paganism<sup>(23)</sup>. And by the fifth century, the style became increasingly coarse and simple.

It is significant that numerous of churches built in Alexandria in the fourth, fifth and even the sixth centuries<sup>(24)</sup>, gave great importance to luminosity inlaying of precious and other needs of these churches<sup>(25)</sup>. Generally speaking, early Christians merely borrowed the symbolism of their pagan neighbours to express their own beliefs. So, adoption of ancient pictorial forms and compositions into Christian art is

very common. Therefore, subjects of purely Christian content are rare in the repertoire of bone carvings from Roman Egypt in that period<sup>(26)</sup>.

Coarseness and vulgarity of Greek themes can be observed better in the carvings representing vintage scenes, the most popular theme in early Christian art.

I drew comparisons with different examples in sculpture concerning the appearance of vintage scenes to provide chronological basis of bone carvings displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum. I found that vintage scenes appeared as an important ornament on the capitals<sup>(27)</sup>, friezes<sup>(28)</sup>, arcade-like niches<sup>(29)</sup>, and as a favourite motive on painted jars<sup>(30)</sup> belonging to the late fifth and sixth and even seventh centuries A.D. Accordingly, bone carvings with the vintage scene displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum<sup>(31)</sup> can be assigned to the fifth century, since its coarse relief resembles to a great extent the vine scrolls of fifth century column drums in Istanbul dated to the fifth century<sup>(32)</sup> and resembles also the vine scrolls from the figures represented on a silver chalice from Syria dated to the first half of the sixth century A.D.<sup>(33)</sup>.

It is also common to be found the braided tendril in the form of a series of figures surrounds grapes and the four-leaved rosette represented in a high relief.<sup>(34)</sup> Parallels can be seen in the Graeco-Roman Museum.<sup>(35)</sup> and in the Staatliche Museum<sup>(36)</sup> (Plate IV). They indicate the popularity of that floral motive. The bone carver modelled the grapes plastically and the leaves with light incisions in order to render the veins. The close comparison between vintage scenes on bone carvings, I am dealing with, and those in the throne of Maximian at Ravenna<sup>(37)</sup>, can lead to an

important conclusions for my attempt to establish chronological artistic features for bone carvings with floral decoration from Roman Egypt. Since scholars judge from such a comparison that most probably origins of ivory carvings of the Early Byzantine period may well lie in the workshops of the bone carvers from Roman Egypt<sup>(38)</sup>.

From the artistic point of view, one can confirm that ivories in Maximian throne and bone carvings from Alexandria dated to the late fifth century are doubtless so related in their realistic narration, plastic volumes with vigorously systematized internal modeling known in Alexandrian ivories in that time<sup>(39)</sup>.

Here it must be remembered that, in the sixth century there was no rigid homogeneity of style in Constantinople and art was still eclectic. So it can be assumed that there was a school of ivory carvers working for the emperor<sup>(40)</sup> and on account of their superiority in producing a masterpiece of art such as Maximian throne, it is legitimate to believe that those carvers were from Roman Egypt, it was them who can produce Christian styles within Hellenic influence and their old experience through many centuries in bone carving qualified them to reach that specific status.

Moreover many examples displayed in the Staatliche Museum<sup>(41)</sup> of Berlin represent another artistic tendency depending on stylization of forms in a linear manner as in the examples representing acanthus leaves and lotus flower<sup>(42)</sup>. Parallels to those examples displayed in Graeco-Roman Museum<sup>(43)</sup> show that the work is on the whole carefully made in a plastic manner and the details are rendered in a high degree of perfection (Plate IIa).

An unique plaque from Egypt displayed in the Staatlich Museum of Berlin published by Marangou (44) of a very high degree of perfection. The floral elements represented (45) are, acanthus-leaves and winding tendril with a lotus-shaped flower(46). Though figures are represented in low relief, the plaque considered a remarkable example(47) (Plate III d).

It is worth mentioning that there was a revival of excellence representing itself in many ways such as the high relief modeling of floral elements, fine and vivid execution and it is easy to notice the heavy branches from tendrils swirling in opposite direction (Plate III a,b,c,f), the illusion of movement increased by the very deep carving and the superiority of the bone-carvers in Roman Egypt especially in Alexandria can be strongly emphasized by a very fine bone-carving (48) displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum representing unique floral element in the shape of the conch shell (Plate II b) which was common in early Christian art as a religious indication of sanctity(49) and it continued to be found in sculptural niches on plaques(50) or tomb reliefs(51) dated to the sixth century A.D. The carving displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum is finely executed. The fine carving of the radiating shape of the conch shell to fill the space of the conch in a high degree of perfection, recalls the wave of classicism of the second century A.D. The same floral element appeared on another piece preserved in the Graeco-Roman (52) Museum (Plate Ic) but is not in the same degree of perfection, but it shows the continuity of use of that motive to give a religious effect in minor arts in the Christian era.

To Sum up, bone-carving with floral decorations from Roman Egypt reflect the artistic tastes of the carvers who were greatly influenced by the time they working in.

Judging from the study of the carving displayed in Graeco-Roman Museum and comparing mainly with those published by Marangon, I can say that those belong to the Hadrianic era represented the classicism of the second century, but those belong to Fourth, century represented the spirit of the new status in the Roman Empire in the reign of Constantine, and by the time through the fifth and sixth century, coarseness and traces of adaption of the old wave of classicism formed a dualism in the artistic style on bone-carvings from Roman Egypt.



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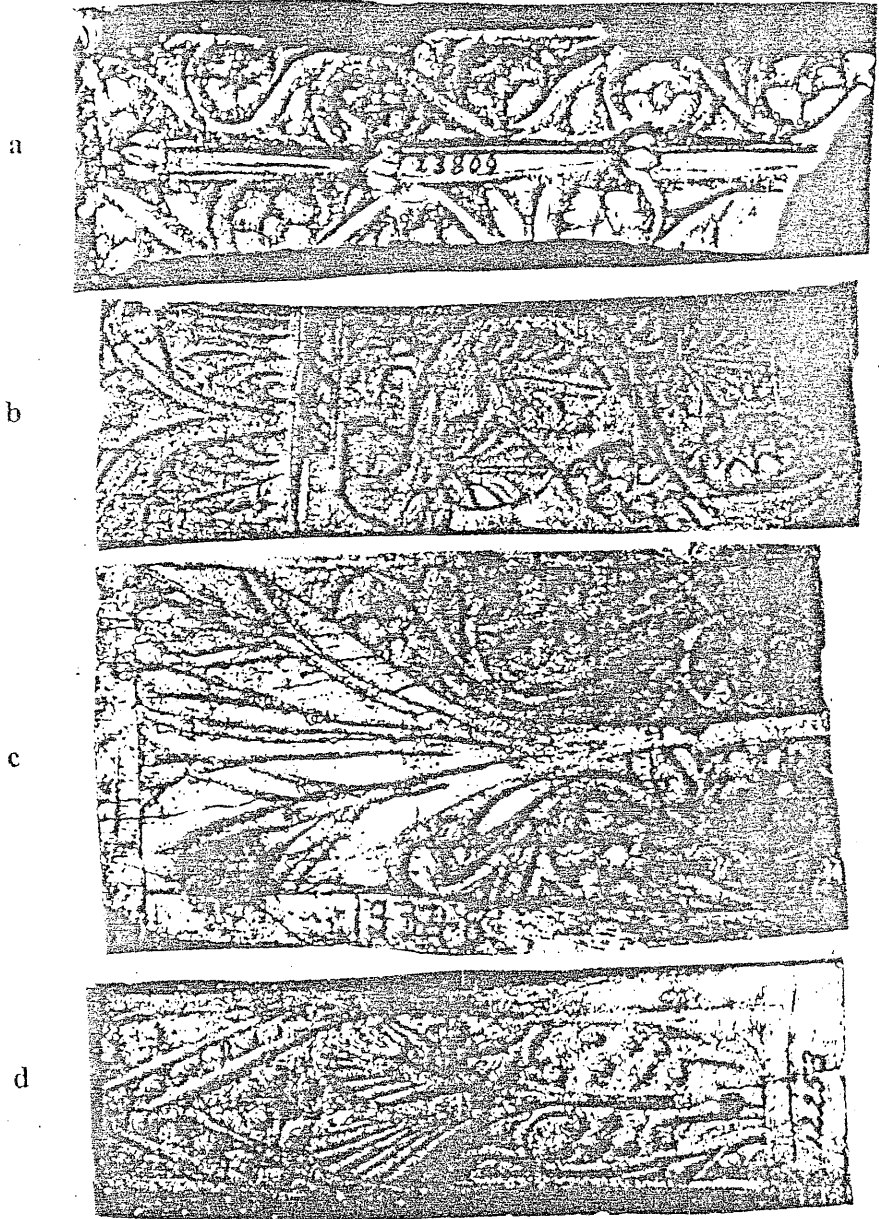
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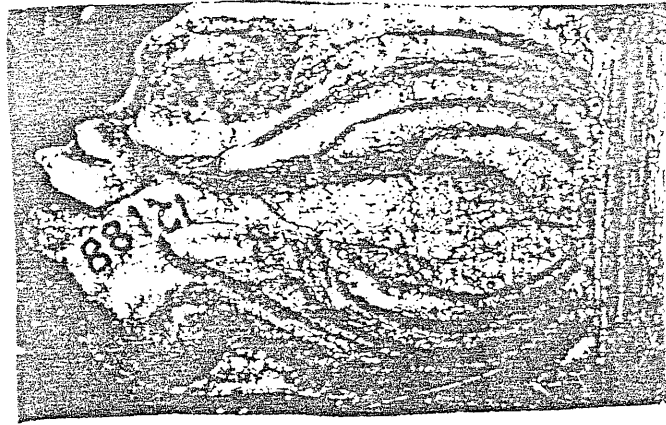
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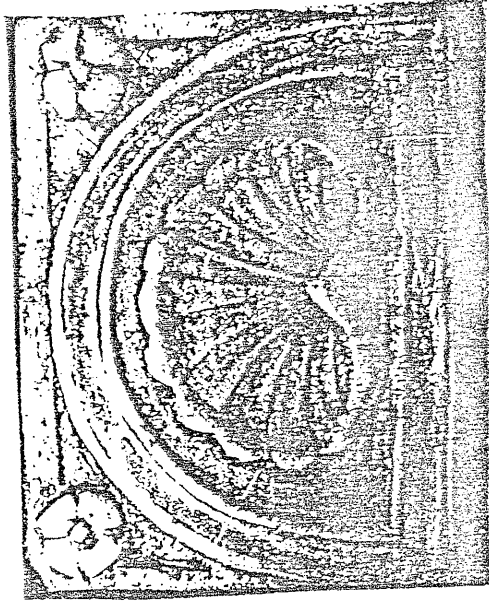


(Plate I): Bone-Carvings displayed in Graeco-Roman Museum

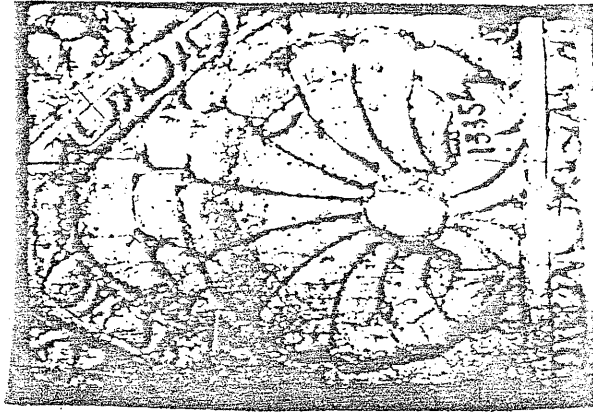
BONE-CARVINGS WITH FLORAL  
DECORATIONS FROM ROMAN EGYPT



a



b



c

(Plate II): Bone-Carvings displayed in  
Graeco-Roman Museum (cont.)

BONE-CARVINGS WITH FLORAL  
DECORATIONS FROM ROMAN EGYPT



a



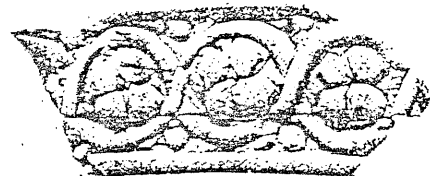
b



c



d



e



f

(Plate III): Bone-Carvings displayed in Staatliche Museum,  
After Marango, L. "Bone Carvings from Egypt", Athens, 1974, a, b. in  
pL. 69 nos 242.246 c in pl. no 236 d, e, f, in pl. 70 nos 238.239.240



BONE-CARVINGS WITH FLORAL  
DECORATIONS FROM ROMAN EGYPT



a



b

(Plate IV): Bone Carvings displayed in Staatliche Museum,  
After Marango, L. Bone Carvings from Egypt", Athens, 1974, PL. 63  
nos 226, 227