

## **COPTIC BONE AND IVORY CARVING**

Following the lead of Alexandrian art, and concurrently with its decline at the close of the seventh century, the [Copts](#) made extensive use either of [ivory](#) or of bone as a material appropriate for sculpture in relief.

When, in its beginnings, [Coptic art](#) still depended on Alexandrian art, Hellenistic themes were frequent: [Greek](#) gods or goddesses, nereids, *putti*, and dancers male and female, whose proportions in [Coptic art](#) were often sacrificed to a concern to fix the essential features. In addition, technical elements like spindle whorls and bobbins were often adorned with interesting lines or small circles marked with a point at the center, the lines being traced by incision. The heads of hairpins were carved to represent a human head or male or female bust, a bird, a fruit, or an amphora in proportional, small dimensions. Without any pretension to artistic intent, a large quantity of narrow and flat human figures, without arms or with stumps of arms and the features of the face reduced to the indispensable, were used as magic dolls by the poorest people.

But a certain group, small plaques or combs, whose style is Coptic, stands out from this somewhat mixed and sometimes rudimentary whole.

Plaques first served to form caskets, according to a tradition that was also Alexandrian. They were joined to one another according to the form [intended](#) for the object. One of the best examples is a casket in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, dating from the sixth century. On it, standing [personages](#) follow one another between columns. A number of these small plaques exist separately in various museums, representing subjects such as a Parthian horseman, a dog pursuing a hare, and birds face to face.

There are also Christian subjects such as a standing angel clothed in a long tunic with ascending bands rising from the bottom (Wulff, 1909, pl. 20), or a haloed Saint George, with a round head, full-face on a horse in

profile, from the Mamluk period (Wulff, 1909, no. 1613) and an unequalled Virgin with Child between two angels of the ninth century, a first “Virgin of Tenderness” (*Early Christian and [Byzantine Art](#)*, no. 160).

Another type of small plaque had a vegetal decoration, the stems of which usually rose in interlacing work from a vase against the vertical rectangular background. A whole evolution of style can be observed here, from the naturalism inspired by the Coptic stone reliefs of friezes that rose in tiers inside or outside churches as at BAWIT, to a mechanical design of the seventh to the eighth centuries, in the Louvre or in the [Musée](#) des Beaux Arts in Lyons.

In combs with a handle, either inserted between two sets of teeth or commanding a single row of them, the intermediary or principal part may have been ornamented in relief with the same subjects that have been mentioned in regard to the caskets. One of the most notable examples of the second type is in Cologne (Beckwith, 1963, pl. 131). In a toilet accessory of the eighth century, a foliage of interlacing vines starts from the base and, passing the front paws of two lions placed back to back, rises above the head of each animal, separated by the space that accommodates the handle.

There are also some specimens of cylindrical [boxes](#) cut from a solid piece of material, with a cover fastened by a piece of metal. The body was covered with reliefs tracing a double row of interlacing vine branches, between two borders of flowerets; at various places a [bird](#) pecks at them (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 136-1866). Another example is a flat case with slide-bars with Fatimid vegetal decoration.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beckwith, J. [Coptic Sculpture 300-1300](#). London, 1963.
- *Early Christian and [Byzantine Art](#)*. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, 1947.

- Wulff, O. *Altchristliche und mittelalterliche Bildwerke*. Königliche Museen zu Berlin. Berlin, 1909.

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