OBJECT

The Bury St. Edmunds Cross

Building an Object Biography

Incipit

At the invitation of the curator of the "Global Ivory" exhibition in MappaMundi, Marguerite Ragnow, Curator of the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota—and a member of the Consortium for the Study of the Premodern World—revisited her years as a graduate student, when she found herself enthralled by a resplendent artifact at The Cloisters.

The Bury St. Edmunds Cross.

Maggie (not yet Ragnow) stood there and asked herself all manner of questions. They follow, reproduced here at the remove of several decades.

Let them serve as guide, an outline of possible avenues of appreciation of an ivory object some have called "unprepossessing".

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Does the cross have a bibliography? What is it? Are there other web sites devoted to the cross where I could learn more? What are they?

Can I see the cross in person? Where?

ORIGINS: the name

What is the etymology of the term "ivory"?

What is the Latin name for "ivory"? In other European languages of the Middle Ages? What did non-Europeans call "ivory"?

When I read about "ivory" in the Middle Ages, is the reference to walrus ivory only? Or was it a generic term, like "corn"—actually, not the corn or maize that we know today.

ORIGINS: provenance

Who made—actually, "carved"—the cross?

Were they the first "owners" of the cross? Or did they make it for someone else?

Why was the cross made? How was it used?

Where did the cross get its name? Is this the only name it has? If not, what else has it been called?

Who bought carved walrus ivory? Were these carved objects for the *élite* only? Or did those who harvested the tusks make and keep carved objects for personal pleasure?

ORIGINS: provenience

Can you date walrus ivory? If so, how?

Where did people in the Middle Ages get walrus ivory?

Who harvested walrus ivory? How was walrus ivory harvested?

Did all peoples use ivory in the same way? Was it, for instance, a luxury item for everybody? Or was there a more mundane, utilitarian incarnation?

Did people eat walrus meat? Is there such a thing as "walrus oil"?

If you lived in Northern Europe with easy access to walruses, would you have had more access to ivory objects?

If walrus ivory is harvested only in specific locales, was there a trade in walrus ivory? If so, who was involved? What were the trade routes? How extensive was it?

What are some other examples of objects carved from walrus ivory? Where can they be found? What are their dates?

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY: the worked object

What was the size of the cross? How tall, how wide?

How is walrus ivory different from elephant ivory?

Were walrus ivory tusks ever used for scrimshaw?

What happens to ivory as it ages? Does it get more brittle or soft? Does it yellow? Will exposure to sunlight bleach it?

Are there any stories or legends attached to the cross? What are they?

MANUFACTURE

Should a walrus be a certain age before the tusks are harvested? Does "harvesting" kill the animal? Can you carve the tusks of a walrus that has died a natural death?

Is walrus ivory easy to carve?

How was it made? What tools were used?

How long would it have taken to make? How many people would have been involved?

What level of skill was necessary to make the cross? How much and what kind of training was needed to carve something like the cross?

Was there an ivory carving guild?

SUBSTANCE

Why did the makers choose walrus ivory?

What is "walrus" ivory, exactly? Does it come only from walruses? Or are there ivory substitutes— similar substances that might be used in place of walrus ivory?

At what age do walruses start growing tusks? Do both males and females have tusks?

How did the skin of the animal figure in? What was it used for? Did it have any value?

VALUE

Was something carved out of walrus ivory expensive?

If you had lived in northern Europe (say), where walruses actually lived, would you have had more access to intricately worked objects? Would they have been cheaper than if the object were obtained elsewhere?

Do we use walrus ivory now? If not, why not?

What is the cross worth today?

Excipit

IF ONE WERE to choose a single work of art of comparable scale in all the collections of the world that would most perfectly typify the art, the history, and the theology of the late Romanesque period in England, one could do little better than to select the Cloisters cross. It is the spirit and essence of its times.

—Thomas P.F. Hoving