# OBJECT

## An eloquent substance

"No society is, or was, an island"—to paraphrase a famous pronouncement about the interconnectedness of humankind. "Even small societies in "remote" parts of the world must be studied (if we wish to understand their development) within wider contexts" (Roesdahl, E. [2005], 189). *

So it is that we invite consideration of ivory as a prime indicator of global movement and cultural exchange throughout the pre-modern era. Moreover, this section concerns *walrus* ivory—two overgrown teeth found in both male and female of the species—a valued substance in its own right and yet inextricably bound up with similar substances—elephant incisors from Asia and Africa, spiraled narwhal tusks and even vegetal substances that resemble it in luminosity and coloration.

Elephant ivory is rather the more familiar source, having "been known and used in Europe since antiquity for objects of very high status." (*Ibid*, 184) Around the 9th century, however, it became difficult to obtain, remaining so until the 13th century. During this period, walrus ivory was a workable and lustrous substance that was readily available. Walrus teeth "are not nearly as large as their nearest equivalent—elephant tusks. Unlike [these], they have a yellowish grainy core, which may be seen on deeply-carved objects, as for example, some of the 12th-century Lewis chessmen." (*Ibid.*)

"On the other hand walrus ivory has a smoother and shinier surface than elephant ivory and is more pleasant to the touch." [MacGregor 1985: 14ff).

"It seems extremely probable that the Norse in Greenland supplied the main bulk of ivory to Scandinavia, the British Isles and continental western Europe from around 1000 CE until the demand for walrus ivory" . . . (*all* ivory, in fact) . . . "declined in the 13th century."

"Tusks were frequently brought from the hunting grounds while still in place in the frontal (see left)—a part of the otherwise very solid skull that can be broken or cut off without too much difficulty. . . . The whole was sold, bartered or used as grand gifts. . . .*exotica* used for display", sometimes much carved and even inlaid with gold,. . . decorated and with runic inscriptions." (Roesdahl 1995, 1998*a*)

"Objects of walrus ivory of high quality were carved both for the Church and for the lay aristocracy, as is clear from the wide range of surviving objects. These include reliquaries, . . .crucifixes, crozier-heads, seals gaming pieces, belt-buckles, . . . pins . . .sword hilts and much more. They would have been pleasing to the eye, [as well as] to the hand." (*Op cit*, 189)

*This essay quotes substantially from Roesdahl, E. Walrus ivory—demand, supply, workshops, and Greenland *in* Viking and Norse in the North Atlantic: selected papers from the proceedings of the 14th Viking Congress, Tórshavn, 19–30 July, 2001 [2005]. Gracious permission to reproduce it here granted by the author.