

Carolingian Motifs from the School of Ivory Carving at Canterbury

Cyril Hart

Benedictines; Canterbury; Ivories; 10th–11th century; Aratea

In 1972 when Beckwith published his pioneer corpus of 155 early medieval English ivories, he identified a small group as being associated with the 10th-century Continental Benedictine reform. He noted: “Unlike some Continental schools, the different styles and layers of stylistic influence (of the English ivories) cannot be associated with any particular locality. It is improbable that it will ever be possible to make a distinction of this kind.”

Recently I noted the dependence of a particular motif in one of the finest ivories in this group on illustrations to the *Cicero-Aratea*, a star catalogue of classical origin which had circulated widely in Carolingian Gaul (Mc Gurk, Miscellany 67). This catalogue is notable for the late antique character of its 23 drawings personifying the constellations, which are thought to derive from an exemplar from the 4th century AD. The drawing of each constellation is given a full page, at the foot of which appears a Latin translation by Cicero of a verse composed by the Greek poet Arator. Each drawing is also accompanied by scholia derived from Hyginus, consisting of a fable, followed by a list of stars for the particular constellation. The resulting catalogue is well known as a notable example of the transmission of classical art and culture in medieval Europe.

The exemplar of all known English versions of the catalogue is a 9th-century Lotharingian manuscript, copies of which were transmitted to Canterbury from Fleury-sur-Loire in the third quarter of the 10th century. At Canterbury, motifs from the catalogue drawings were made use of by artists illuminating a range of of luxury manuscripts. Comparison of these with similar motifs appearing in the decoration of late 10th-century insular ivories it has led to the identification of several individual mem-

bers of this group as being sculpted at Canterbury. I offer here a preliminary review of five of best of these ivories and their Canterbury associations. In the course of time a more thorough treatment of the whole corpus will be needed.

I, II Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cod. lat. 323. Beckwith 1972, Cat. 23, 24.

These paired late-10th-century ivory plaques are used as book-covers for a Carolingian Evangelistary dating from the mid-9th-century. They may have been designed for that specific purpose, after the codex had reached Canterbury. The front cover bears a representation of Christ



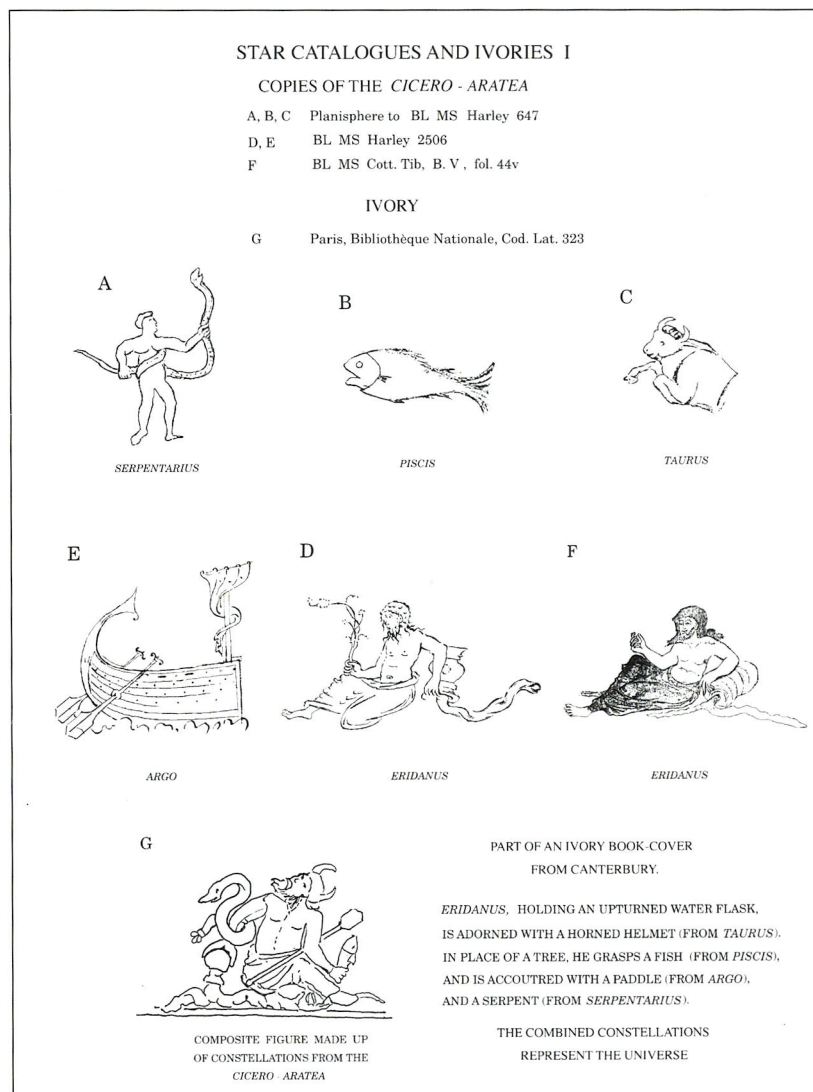
Figure 1.

within a mandorla, enthroned and supported by two angels, presenting a book to St Paul and keys to St Peter (Figure 1). Christ Church was the dedication of Canterbury cathedral; SS. Peter and Paul were the patron saints of the early monastery at Canterbury, later known as St Augustines, where (it seems) these covers were made. Beneath the mandorla is a unique composite figure representing *Eridanus*, a classical river-god, adorned with a horned helmet, emptying a waterpot and accoutred with a paddle, a serpent, and a fish. This remarkable figure is made up of motifs taken from illustrations of star constellations in Canterbury copies of the *Cicero-Aratea* (Figure 2). It represents a development of a late 9th-century Reims/Metz tradition in which the Sea is represented by Eridanus, brandishing a paddle and riding the star-studded Greek sea-monster *Coetus* (another of the constellations of the *Cicero-Aratea*, see Figure 3). He faces a companion figure representing Mother Earth (the mythological *Terra Mater* of Tacitus), one arm entwined by a snake, the other grasping a leafy branch. The Heavens are depicted by gold-studded stars, so setting the backdrop to the whole panel. Evidently the three mythological components of Earth, Sea and Sky are intended to represent the Universe, presided over by Christ in Majesty.

The back cover of the Evangelistary is clearly from the same workshop. It depicts the Virgin enthroned, holding the Christ-child - another allusion to the cathedral's dedication. Here the motif pointing most definitely to a Canterbury origin is the Virgin's veil, wound round the head like a turban, with the free end hanging over the shoulder. Beckwith noted its similarity to the veil of *Luxuria* in a Canterbury copy of the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius. It is closer still to the headdress of *Luna* in one of the Canterbury copies of the *Cicero-Aratea*. The veiled Winchester figures of this period are in a different tradition.

III, IV London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Metalwork, 253-254, 1867. Beckwith 1972, Cat. 21, 22.

These leaves of a late 10th-century ivory diptych have been recarved on the backs of two ivory panels (not necessarily a pair) bearing English carvings of the early 8th century. The first leaf shows the Transfiguration, the second the Ascension. Their style is very similar to that



of No. 1 above; the treatment of the double mandorla, with a round extension at the base, is especially noteworthy, and peculiar to these ivories as far as I can ascertain. The narrow acanthus borders invaded by the edges of the central figures are also very similar, as are the folds of drapery, showing the rather protruberant abdomina characteristic of Carolingian motifs used by the Canterbury school (evidently the monks did well in the Continental refectories). Beckwith (46-47) thought that all four panels (my Nos. I-IV) might have come from the same workshop, and he compared their figures percipiently with those of drawings from Canterbury and Ramsey.

What I find particularly convincing is the similarity of posture of SS. James and John in the Transfiguration panel, kneeling in adoration beneath the figure of Christ, to that of the two self-portraits of Archbishop Dunstan and the Master 1 of the Ramsey Psalter (on whom, see

Figure 2.

STAR CATALOGUES AND IVORIES II

COPIES OF THE *CICERO - ARATEA*

A, C, D British Library, MS Harley 2506

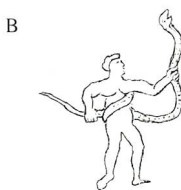
B Planisphere to British Library, MS Harley 647

IVORY

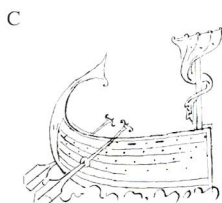
E London, Victoria and Albert Museum 250 - 1867



ERIDANUS



SERPENTARIUS



ARGO



COETUS



WATER, EARTH AND THE HEAVENS
FROM THE BASE OF AN IVORY
BOOK COVER FROM METZ

WATER

ERIDANUS rides COETUS
and brandishes an oar
from ARGO

EARTH

MATER TERRA carries a
SERPENT and holds a
branch from ERIDANUS

THE HEAVENS

represented by stars (gold studs)

Figure 3. below) in contemporary line drawings from Glastonbury and Ramsey (St Dunstan's Class-book; St Gregory, *Homilies on Ezekiel*). Dunstan seems to have brought this style with him from Glastonbury (where he had been abbot) to Canterbury. Illustrations of these figures appear in my forthcoming book, *'Learning in Late Anglo-Saxon England'*.

V London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Sculpture, 7943-1862.
Walrus Ivory 12.5 cm x 10.9 cm; Cross 18.5 cm x 13.4 cm.
Beckwith 1972, Cat. no. 20; Backhouse et al, *'Golden Age'* Cat. no. 118.

The magnificent crucifixion drawing by the Master of the Ramsey Psalter, dated c. 978, has been illustrated and described many times. That it was inspired by the same iconog-

raphy as that of the equally outstanding late 10th century ivory depicted in Figure 4 has long been realised, but the direct dependence of both the ivory and the drawing on the same Metz exemplars (typified by V & A 250 -1867, illustrated in Williamson, *Medieval Treasury*, p. 72) has not been fully appreciated. The feet of both figures rest on a hexagonal *Suppedaneum*. I would not accept the suggestion that the head on the ivory carries a crown of thorns; the surviving carving appears to be that of a cruciferous halo (as with the drawing, and ultimately its Metz exemplar). The draping of the loincloth with a knot at the waist is more fully developed in the Canterbury ivory, and provides yet another example of the distinctive Carolingian influence which became a marked feature of the Canterbury style; see particularly the *Sherborne Pontifical*, a Christchurch manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 943).

The ivory is mounted on a cedarwood cross covered on both sides with gold foil, but the sheets on the front and back are of markedly different origin and metallurgical composition. Small enamelled roundels of evangelist symbols are mounted on the arms of the cross, in the tradition of a group of 10th-century enamelled brooches from S.E. England (Backhouse nos. 92-3). Ultimately this derives from the enamelled Kentish jewellery of the pagan period. The rest of the front surface is decorated with gold filigree wire. The back sheeting is of Continental origin, applied at a later date.

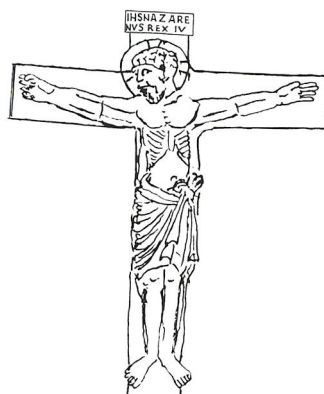
The upper arm of the cross is surmounted by a rectangular enamelled plaque bearing the inscription *IHS Nazarenus*, and I am of the view that this was inspired directly by the plaque shown in a similar position on the Ramsey Crucifixion drawing, inscribed (in the Carolingian and Ottonian tradition) *Hic Est Nazarenus Iesus Rex Iudaeorum*. I do not know of any other English crucifixion figures of this period that bear plaques with an inscription incorporating the word *Nazarenus*. I argue that this demonstrates another direct association of both the ivory figure and its cross with motifs from Carolingian art.

The Master of the Ramsey Psalter

The Ramsey Psalter (London, BL Harley 2904) is thought to have been written and illustrated in or before 978 (Temple, *AS Manuscripts*

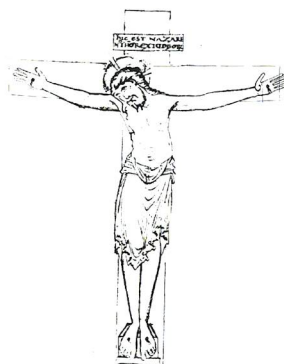
IVORIES AND DRAWINGS OF THE CRUCIFIXION : ORIGIN OF THE CANTERBURY STYLE

PART OF CRUCIFIXION PLAQUE FROM
IVORY BOOK COVER : METZ, LATE 9th CENTURY
LONDON, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM 250 - 1867



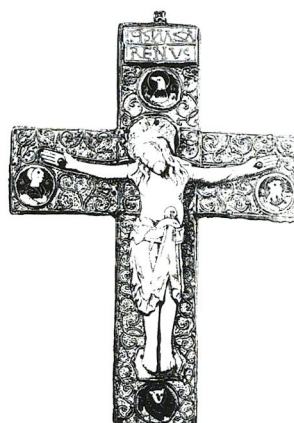
Inscription: IHS NAZARE
RVS REX IV[DEORUM]

DRAWING OF THE CRUCIFIXION
BY THE MASTER OF THE RAMSEY PSALTER
LONDON, BL HARLEY 2904, FOL. 3V



Inscription: HIC EST NAZARE
I[ESUS] REX IV[DEORUM]

THE CANTERBURY CRUCIFIX RELIQUARY
IVORY ON CEDAR CROSS, COVERED WITH GOLD FOIL.
LONDON, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM 7943.1862



Inscription: IHS NAZARE
RVS REX IV[DEORUM]

Figure 4.

p. 64). The illustrations include the Crucifixion Drawing described above, which forms its frontispiece, and many illuminated capitals, all the work of an Englishman who was an undoubted Master, working perhaps at Ramsey itself. Noel (*Harley Psalter*) has claimed recently: "There was no greater artist in Late Anglo-Saxon England than this man, and none was so to affect the development of Anglo-Saxon art." The Ramsey Psalter has been described by Temple as "one of the most important manuscripts in the history of Anglo-Saxon illumination ... (it) ... introduces a number of features which are a break with the earlier English tradition in book painting." Our understanding of the beginning of the artistic revival at Canterbury would be considerably enhanced by a full-scale study of the activities of this enigmatic individual. Although there is no direct evidence that he ever worked at Canterbury, his style suggests strongly that he was trained there, and was then sent by Dunstan to the newly-created monastery at Ramsey in the eastern fenland. He may also have visited St Augustines Abbey during journeys between Ramsey and Fleury, and one supposes that he was well acquainted with the work going on in the abbey's scriptorium. He certainly knew and contributed to some of the manuscripts that arrived there in the early stages of the Benedictine revival. His drawing technique was based in part on study of the illustrations

in the early 9th-century Carolingian codex known as the *Utrecht Psalter*, undertaken probably at Fleury, some time before this seminal manuscript reached Canterbury (see van der Horst, William Noel and Wilhelmina Wustefeld, (eds) *The Utrecht Psalter*).

For much of his time the Master of the Ramsey Psalter travelled around on the Continent, visiting Fleury and other centres, producing works commissioned by patrons. In c. 1000 or a little earlier he illustrated at Fleury-sur-Loire a *Cicero-Aratea* manuscript now preserved as BL Harley 2506. He based his drawings of some of the constellations (particularly *Coetus*) on an exemplar similar to BL Harley 647, the Carolingian prototype of all the English copies of the *Cicero-Aratea*, which arrived soon afterwards at St Augustines, Canterbury. For the most part however, his illustrations broke away from the Harley 647 tradition. It has been postulated that he was dependent for these on a different exemplar, but in my view they represent his own original composition.

The fully-painted works of the Ramsey Master included a contribution to the Boulogne Gospels, executed at St-Bertin. Other work by the same artist is to be found in Orléans, Bibliothèque Municipale MSS 175 (152) (Gregory, *Homilies on Ezekiel*), and in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library M 827 (the *Anhalt-Morgan Gospels*). These illustrations also show familiarity with the motifs of the *Utrecht Psalter*.

Canterbury and Fleury

Finally, I would draw attention to the fundamental role played by the monastery of St-Benedict-sur-Loire in the transmission to Canterbury of Carolingian and Ottonian tracts and illustrated codices, including such seminal works as the *Utrecht Psalter* and the *Cicero-Aratea*. The revival of activity in the Canter-

bury Schools of Illumination and Ivory Carvings stemmed directly from their reception of such books as these from Fleury, the Continental power-house of the Benedictine reform. In the course of time this was to develop into a busy two-way traffic, for the artistic products of the Canterbury schools became much sought-after in Northern Europe (Hart, *Canterbury Schools*).

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Address

Cyril Hart
Goldthorne Caldecote Road, GB–Stilton Peterborough PE7 3RH