5

IVORY THINGS

AFRICAN ELEPHANT TUSK
(transverse section x 3)
Of the elephant, I may tell you,
Good is the skin and good the bones;
Who would burn them in fire,
Know that the smell will drive away
All serpents which may be near,
And have poison in them.
No poison can remain there
Where one burns the bones.
Of the bones they make precious ivory,
Which they fashion in many a way.

Text
A medieval retelling of The Fall, featuring a pachyderm.
From Guillaume, a composite reconstruction of the poem by George C. Druce (1919),
Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc, 13th Century

Image
Marginalia/Illumination
ELEPHANT MS. 14969 (Fr.), BIBL. NAT. PARIS
5 IVORY THINGS

An inelegant flatfooted title, while not necessarily beguiling, may contain more truth than at first apparent.

I might instead have chosen to say “Five Ivory Objects”. That would have been satisfactory. Unambiguous, too.

For an object is – we may think – what it is. And nothing more.

Yet it is certainly more than a description following the accession number in a museum catalog.

Isn’t it?

THEORIZING THE THING IN THE OBJECT

In true revisionist style – and, admittedly, somewhat trendily – I have come to see that couched within the layers of meaning that accrue like so much calcification on the object is an essential meaning, a “thingness” that will be our true object of discussion, of interest to truth-seekers.

Consider for instance a footnote to an otherwise inauspicious essay by Mushegh Asatrian on Ibn Khaldoun in which Al-Azmeh (Asatrian’s mentor) is cited. The very nature of our consideration is “… an intrinsic character which defines a given object, along with ‘the potency imminent in the thing, causing it to unfold the way it does’” (Al-Azmeh, Arabic Thought 10). He also tells his readers – in another work on the historian – that “[i]n fact, Ibn Khaldoun’s refutations of occult sciences ‘are all based upon a basic idea, that these crafts run against the nature of things: against the nature of human intellect, against the nature of properties of matter, and against the truth, and therefore nature, of dogma’”(read “accepted knowledge”) (al-Azmeh, Ibn Khaldoun: 115; Asatrian 120, n. 214)

Acknowledge, then, with me, that it is the “truth” about an object – its essence, its meaning – that we would hope to know. If crafts and the object of their making “run against the nature of things” (Ibíd., 115), we should be suspect – assiduous investigators who take nothing at face value. This hidden nature, clouded by supernatural crafts, is our quarry.
Let’s assume that Asatrian is asking us to cast aside “the veil of the senses” (Ibid., 120), as might some divine, or prophet, or saint – “all the disturbances and the hindrances caused by the body are removed” (Rosenthal, The Muqaddimah, volume 3:254). Not unlike some medieval Claritin ad, where all extraneous pollen is vacuumed away, the researcher is made to breathe in the fresh, clear, clean air of dogma-free nature. Distractions of illusory belief are no more.

Now, what should the researcher’s “human intellect” make of all this, exactly?

Surely this is so we share in a reliable prophetic sense – necromancy, writ small. This is so we can see the true nature of objects. Or, rather, as Bill Brown would have it

“... [w]e look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but –

– and here we touch on our subject –

“– we only catch a glimpse of things.” (Brown on a novel by A. S. Byatt, The Biographer’s Tale, in Things, 4)

A thing, Brown will tell us, is not a window onto anything beyond itself. It just is. And it announces itself, alerts us to an essential and a true nature.

“We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, and the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the surface of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.” (Brown, 4)
These are “chance contingencies”, as Brown says. And they are the stuff of which stories are made, anecdotal as they might appear. But trivial they are not. “You can imagine things … as what is excessive in objects,” he continues to theorize –

“as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, titles, and totems” (Ibid., 5).

Objects, as has been theorized elsewhere and for some time now (Kopytoff 1986, Specter 1993, Donald 2005a [1998], 2005b [1998], Renfrew [as editor of several volumes for the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research], notably) infuse reality with meaning and, if we are to believe the covers of many an archaeological site report and museum catalog, characterize and give substance – physical presence – to the very idea of culture.

I might rather have said embody, for often objects come to represent for us whole perplexes of meaning that cannot be said d’un seul trait – in a single utterance.

I hope to get at these essential meanings of the five singular “things” that are the subject of this brief paper. In doing so, I will write what I mean to be a narrative, a story, about each. This effort, too, has been sounded to some depth in recent years, in what has come to be called “object biography”. Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, has rendered the idea quite accessible in his “A History of the World in 100 Objects: from the handaxe to the credit card” (2010). My effort will not be so far reaching, but I do hope to bring the singular things I shall consider to life, lending them meaning in a larger context of time and place. Each does hold a place in memory – I imagine I shall find – much as Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire do signal and encapsulate signposts in the popular imagination.

It would not be inappropriate to speak of the resonance of each of these objects. They are so far from mute, inert. Jodi Joy, a recent commentator, calls our attention to “the drama of object lives” (2009). As he notes that “archaeologists have become more interested in relationships between people and objects” (540), he challenges the assumptions of what is appropriate and academic publication. He’s excited, obviously. I think he must be strongly
influenced by oral narrative and its “performance” – the ethnological focus for some of his colleagues – even though he himself can have no oral respondents, being as he is a specialist in the prehistoric – everyone that might talk to him is dead or frozen.

What I find exciting about Joy’s commentary is its sense of providing a corrective to a useful concept that has in a very brief period of time outlived its own useful life. Outside of the references mentioned above, relatively little exists in the literature to guide us in the making of oral narrative. Joy does mention characteristics of what might be called a new form of inscribed narrative (my term) – nonlinear progression, multiple lives, disjunctivity – even the lack of “coherence” – “entanglement” and fragmentation (as it was not treated by Chapman, the “go to” volume on the subject [Chapman and Gaydarska, 2007]). These characteristics are typical of orality – the way we talk and exchange information about objects with which we are very familiar and that form part of our everyday experience. Both the everyday and the transcendent are here contained, and it is in this respect that so-called “object biography” is most of all pertinent to the present discussion.

Little in the literature seeks to evoke these qualities. The scholar, after all, aims for “an objective account”, stripped of impressionistic emotionalism. To seek to reintegrate such values or qualities in the written record is not dissimilar from the original impulse of many of those who inscribed their thoughts – or those of their rulers or their gods – in clay, on stone, on mountain escarpments, or more formally in objectified architecture (Hamilakis 2010, Hormanşah 2013). What is it we seek to “re-inscribe”? What was Janet Spector looking for, when feminist archaeology led her to ask “what this awl means” (Spector 1993)?

I wager it is none other than the human presence, an evocation of the originator of the message we receive whether written, or realized in three dimensions. We must deem ill-advised any enterprise that would seek to be totally objective, devoid of the very impulse that is at the origin of the utterance or of the manufacture of the object.

Two sanctified concepts that occur in the literature do have pertinence here and prove useful in the work of archaeology and I shall draw on them from time-to-time, not necessarily naming them – that of the chaîne opéraire as conceptualized by Mauss and Leroi-Gourhan,
most particularly as it regards the manufacture of any given object (see esp. Leroi-Gourhan 1943) and “use-life” analysis of objects for evidence of wear and damage (Dobres and Robb 2000). We seek in other words signs in the archaeological record that mark the intersection of human life and the life of the object itself; it is at these junctures that the very reason for existing of the object springs to life. This is the “drama” of the object biography that Joy demands be present and palpable. All too often, “this interplay between people and objects is missing . . .” from object biography (Joy 1999, 542). He reminds us that this use-life may “extend [. . .] over a series of human lifetimes” (Ibid., 543). Little wonder this aspect of the object biography might be slighted; we archaeologists usually encounter objects at the very end of their social lives – in the tomb, the midden or as discard in some random, unexpected by-way.

FINDING THE NARRATIVE IN THE OBJECT

I first came upon an object crafted in ivory in the Royal Storehouse at Urkesh (Tell Mozan, Northern Syria). Totally unexpected, like a flake of snow in the desert. It’s a “miniature”, as I characterize such objects—not as large as the fingernail on my little finger. Back then, not knowing, I said it was “probably ivory” (Hauser 2008 [2007], 225). There was no doubt, however, that this diminutive object had a place in the typology of terra-cotta figurines I was cataloguing.

Its value, however, was representational, not notational in the manner of those exemplars I included in the Canis (dogs) corpus.
That is where my conceptual troubles began. If I could tease out an approach for this artifact dating from some 2000 years before the “medieval window” that looks out on the “5 ivory things” that are the subject of this essay, I might have identified a useful protocol.

I had thought to study Canis 203 A6.274 because I found the object so beguiling. It was anomalous, and for that very reason, attractive. It would be an admirable first step in my discovery of the story behind and in the object—its “thingness”, if you will.

Come to find out that teasing out such meaning—the biography of an object, the story it has to tell—is not at all an obvious intellectual gesture. Description dies hard. And that is exactly what I have been doing all these years. In crafting the catalogue of animal representations at Urkesh, I had perfected a mode of thinking about material culture. It became second nature to me—the patient researcher. I eventually became quite adept at saying what an object was.

Or so I thought.

In this context, I skip over details that would otherwise be necessary to “read” this figurine. Its manufacture may be informative, however. Very few of the Urkesh figurine corpus are carved reductively, as is this small piece, although some pieces are shaved and then formed additively from cylinders or flat pieces of clay. The medium of ivory, of course, is vastly different from clay and imposes different sculptural techniques.

The object appears to have been drilled through, in the manner of cylinder seals, from both the top and the bottom of the torso. The bottom part of the perforation is drilled in two or three passes, as ridges remain. Both top and bottom of the perforation taper inwards, as if drilled from either end to center with a tapering bit.

The hardness of this type of ivory had to be reckoned with, if this medium were indeed the cementum of an ivory tusk (see caption). The leg division of A6.274 appears almost to have been sliced or chipped away in a sliver, rather than carved; and the details of the muzzle seem to have been “worn into” the surface, as by repeated and prolonged abrasion, rather than by actual carving. Both these observations point to a recalcitrant, hard medium, not easily worked.
The surface of this diminutive object was abraded to a smooth finish; light scratches remain on the surface and are visible under the magnifying glass. Armed with new knowledge, I might take these striations to be the so-called “Schreger lines”, minute, regular striations that capture the regular and continual growth of the tusk.

At Mozan, Bökényi documented the presence of hippopotamus (a canine fragment), an animal having to do “neither with food consumption nor herd protection” (2001, 2). This tusk fragment may have come from the “uppermost reaches of a . . . Levantine population.” It may, however, have been imported, rather than living on the steppe; its existence at Mozan may point to Egyptian contact. (Bökényi, 1994 and 2001).

Craftsmen prized hippopotamus ivory for its whiteness (Moorey 1994, 115) and A6.274 is striking for that quality. Other supposed examples of hippopotamus ivory I have seen have suffered from depositional damage and range in color from dark orange-brown to deep gray.

Moorey says there is no evidence for the existence of the animal in Mesopotamia (Moorey 1994, 115), although he does cite some Late Bronze Age ivory artifacts from Tell Brak. Bökényi, in the works cited, notes many examples where evidence of the animals has been found, even as late as the Iron Age.

We need not look so far, perhaps—elephant ivory has been recovered at Umm al-Marra, Syria in late third millennium context (Schwartz et al, 2006); that is, coeval with Urkesh. Also, we are told, “Egyptian pharaohs went as far as Syria to trap elephants. The Syrian elephant, a smaller relative of the Indian (or Asian) elephant, could thus have been hunted from Mari.” (Aruz, 143) Still, imports from the Indus Valley can’t be ruled out.

Whatever its source, the tiny hound depicted in this ivory chip had to have come from a larger tusk. I wager it was a clever “save” from a discard. Ivory was simply too valuable a commodity to ignore even the tiniest scrap. But what is even more remarkable about this little guy is that he was found in the Royal Storehouse—a place where frivolous—refined—objects
would have been uncomfortable. This was where animal stock was accounted for, herds and flocks came and went and so did their herder dogs (the spitz).

In due course, I was challenged by a local notable to say what the figurines were used for. “They were toys”, he ventured flatly. “After all, such playthings are found throughout the ages in every context—Mali, say.”

Such cross-cultural direct references are more often than not specious. Context and circumstances change all—one simply can’t argue across cultural boundaries and assume the presence of constants that delimit and inform interpretation. Besides, what children might have come to this workplace?

I am now ready to entertain the thought that they might have been brought to the storehouse by their caretaker, either the Queen Mother, Uqnitum (“lapis-lazuli girl”, a translation suggested by P. Steinkeller, Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 1995/6, 16), or the children’s nurse, Zamena. What for? Why, to see the animals, of course. And the child’s toys came in tow. The ivory dog fell from a dawdling hand, fallen open in a moment of distraction. It was left behind, soon to be trampled underfoot in a layer of other discards.

I would not have ventured such an interpretation prior to this moment, were it not for the need to explain the anomalous presence of the ivory dog in the storehouse. The occasion was special but simple enough; and it could account for a find not otherwise explicable.

An intervening human presence.

The life biography of the object, as I now tentatively reconstruct it, leads me to say this, whereas before I never in my wildest moments of fantasy would have entertained this possibility.
Now we know where the child’s plaything ended its active life and we have a sense of what might have transpired before its loss (the Royal Residence is at hand). It began life, I now venture, in a local Syrian workshop that processed ivory from elephants that roamed the Syrian steppe in the third millennium B.C.E. And it was carved from the leavings of a tusk that yielded other objects, perhaps a sculpted contribution to the so-called “Treasure of Ur” recovered at Mari (see Aruz 2003, 142). The master piece would have followed the route of letters exchanged between the two cities. But the ivory chip that became Canis 203 A6.274 stayed behind and was presented to the royal child.

Fantasy? To an extent, yes. But the exercise has served in my mind to break down the silos of separate research units at Urkesh—an isolation not willed, of course, but de facto. And there is plenty of ambivalence, disjunction, hesitancy, multiple layered meanings and coincidence to evoke the structure of lived oral narrative as we have been alerted to it by Joy. And the working of this complex social event occurs within a local context (as Pauketat [2005] would have it), and need not be explained by recourse to foreign import or an unlikely parallelism with a dissimilar culture from another time and place.

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Now that I have applied this new methodology to an object known to me, I am ready to enter unfamiliar territory and to attempt to construct the object biographies of 5 ivory things, rather more exotic.

THE MOUNTAIN MOVED

At least I think it moved. From this distance, it is hard to tell.

Through the glass, it definitely moved. The beast turned our way and rolled its eye in our direction.

On the horizon, this huge specimen of Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus looked something like a ruddish grassy knoll. The animal must’ve weighed upwards of 4,000 pounds. The inspiration, kids would think, for Jabba the Hutt, a “loathsome slug of a gangster”, to quote starwars.com, marketing site for LucasFilm.
Once located—that moveable outcropping of mountainous flesh, or from the sound of its reverberant bellows—the walrus was easy pickings. If you live in the 21st century, have 7000 bucks or so to spend for a day’s hunt, a light rifle and multiple rounds of ammunition, a native guide.


Unless you are on foot and alone.

And happen to elude the polar bears, who themselves don’t fare so well in tusk-to-tooth combat with walruses—
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPl1x95dBCE — one of several animal combat films from Animal Planet).

Subject of endless speculation.

It’s hard to know whether to laugh, chuckle, scream, or run. Certainly, our imagination is captured; in that, we’re no different from 16th century cartographers, who pictured the beast ravaging Scandinavian inlets.
The supply of walrus tusks was fairly continuous during the Middle Ages—(http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goiv/hd_goiv.htm)—and before the demand greatly diminished populations worldwide, such ivory often augmented objects made of African elephant ivory. As the animal is a sea creature of arctic climes, one would have thought that a main supply route would have come around Scandinavia, from the North Atlantic, into the North Sea and down the Rhine River to the ivory workshops of Cologne, whose domestic artifacts, such as mirrors, date from at least the 11th century. Until recently, however, archaeological evidence documenting the processing of walrus ivory in the Far North was lacking. Now we have well-preserved stratified tusks dating from the Vikings (AD 950–1050), in a hall at the early settlement site of Aðalstræti in central Reykjavik, Iceland. There are tool marks on this “unused craft material” (Pearce 2009, 57–58).

After Espinoza and Mann 1992, Figure 13, 15.

Depending upon where it is sectioned, walrus tusk can look like “classical ivory” or it can take on a “marbled or oatmeal-like” appearance (Espinoza and Mann 1992, Figure 13, 14). It was almost impossible to avoid one or the other of these patterned substances, as walrus tusks are not exceptionally large, thus the carved surface would perforce expose varying textures. These contrasting characteristics lend an unpredictable variety of effects to the surface of artifacts made of walrus ivory (things, nēs “objects”).

Interestingly, a large number of ecclesiastical objects were made of ivory. My thought is this may have to do with fact that in general walrus ivory is less costly than elephant ivory; yet it appears lustrous and warm. As the chancel and the nave and the persons of the officiates and their appurtenances needed to be adorned with what would appear to be precious (and pure) decoration, walrus ivory, particularly at Cologne, would be readily available, at least until the resurgence of African ivory, early in the 13th century.
Look at the object—a seal matrix marked with the thingness of all we know about the walrus and its tusks.

On the obverse, note that there is a “darker pattern”. Walrus ivory is to blame—the edge of the secondary dentin cavity—and some traces of the “tapioca” pattern of secondary dentin (St. Clair and McLachlan 1989, 89).

Thus, we can assume that the seal was cut laterally across the surface of the tusk, not in transection. There was not room to do otherwise, given the size of the tusk that was delivered to the workshop, else the saint’s impression would have been hopelessly compromised, lost in the patterning of the secondary dentine. So in essence the craftsperson was enlisted in the ecumenical performativity of the Church’s acolytes, messengers from God.

The demand for decoration from the Cologne ivory workshops must have been unparalleled—think of all those castles and churches, and commemorative chapels and such down along the Rhine, stretching across the very expanse of Europe—The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, into Italy and from thence to the sea!
The authors conclude that St. Martin’s Seal Matrix is “a beautiful [!] example of the warm, light cream color of walrus ivory which takes a fine sheen” (St. Clair and McLachlan 1989, 90). One must overlook the expostulatory impressionist language of the commentators: “beautiful”—!? How do we measure along that scale?

We should also note that the carving technique is intaglio, “which would have resulted in a wax impression in relief with the inscriptions and figures a mirror image of the matrix” (Ibid., 90). Imagine what skill and mastery of carving technique this must have taken—carving in mirror image! But of course it was necessary, as the matrix would have been impressed on various yielding surfaces proffered by the Faithful, leaving the positive image behind. It would not have done to have an image of God’s messenger, not to say his titles and message—flipped!

The sanctuary that held the image and spirit of St. Martin was devastated in WWII. Parishioners and townspeople voted to reconstruct the sanctuary. At the convocation, many must have held tokens struck from the seal matrix with Abbot William of Gross St. Martin. That walrus ivory should have served as matrix for this powerful symbol of Christian resurgence is itself humbling and remarkable.
Eventually, the vogue for walrus ivory would pass. “Around the second quarter of the 13th century, the trade routes that provided elephant ivory . . . once again opened” (Gaborit–Chopin 1992: 205, cited in Pearce 2009, 60).

Elephant ivory was always the medium of choice, except when the vagaries of trade dictated otherwise.

And by circa AD 1400, there was a temporary collapse in demand for all types of ivory (Roesdahl 1998, 2005 and 2005, cited in Pearce 2009, 60).

PHYSICAL MEMORY OF “THINGNESS”

Running our thumb across the surface of St. Martin’s matrix and then turning the piece over and over, we marveled that the “thingness” of the object was both visible and palpable. We knew, by any number of signs (some not discussed above) that the matrix had been cut from the upper canine of a formidable sea creature.

How this knowledge may have enhanced the appreciation or the understanding of a dévot, I won’t venture to say—except that I know we know together this churchly thing was from somewhere around here—it felt like our lands, and it had survived the many disasters visited upon the spires of St. Martin’s, as had our people.

Objects, in their very thingness, hold onto memories. They collude with the body to commemorate, as Connerton might say, social and political meanings. But this body is etherealized, and while it may be seen to be socially constituted, the ambiguities of its constitution and its entanglement with objects tends to go unexamined (Connerton 1989, on the concluding page of his provocative essay, 104).
Practices and behavior are constantly being assimilated to a cognitive model. The ambiguity of meaning in the words constitution and construction tend to be glided over. . . . To argue for the importance of performances, and in particular habitual performances, in conveying and sustaining memory, is among other things, to insist on . . . [the] ambiguity [of objects].

I have admittedly appropriated to my purposes an observation that pointed elsewhere, to the constitution of the social. What I see in Connerton’s querulous (I thought) construction is an invitation to look deeper into material reality, into the “thingness” of objects so that we may better understand their peculiar hold on us. I mean to say we should make an effort to identify the visible yet unexamined markers that inform our apprehension of an object. In the case above, I would further say that the physical properties of ivory that mark the object/thing we hold in our hands have unexamined power that take us through the object, if you will, into the physical world of its creation.

This is not as obtuse as it may sound. I am saying that the nature of the material from which an object is crafted dictates and limits first of all the physical form the object may take, but more importantly, an apprehension of the nature of this making informs our understanding of both immediate context and some past meaning with which we are entangled. It behooves us to examine the chaîne opératoire—the steps in the production process that inform practice.

Pierce tells us that objects of walrus ivory from earlier than the 11th century are rare; but there is a sharp increase in the number of preserved ivory pieces around the year 1000, roughly the same time Greenland was settled. . . . To compensate for the differences in walrus ivory, new practices evolved in Romanesque carving such as carving in low relief and building large objects out of several smaller panels. . .(Pierce 2009, 60).

Thus, our very apprehension of the physical world—the visual culture—is intimately tied to a making that is entirely local, appropriate to a time and a place and constitutive of our identity and of our community.
One example will set questions aborning. I present it here only in that light, not suggesting that some final answer is called for. It’s the process of looking and seeing the thingness in the object that I wish to highlight.

So. Here is this astonishing—I permit myself the impressionism—sculpture carved in walrus ivory—

(http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129420/judas-at-the-last-supper-fragment-unknown/).

This is Judas at the Last Supper, receiving (sucking in, I dare say) a crust of bread from the hand of a (seemingly) reticent Christ. The netsuke-like object (somehow, it looks as if it should open up and reveal compromising contents) dates from AD 1200–1220.

We can admire or not the sculptural technique, but it is undeniably remarkable how, in a very small space (8.5 x 7 x 4.5 cm), so much passion, fawning regret and longing can be conveyed. In this sense—reconceptualizing the traditional story of betrayal—the object would seem to tell its story complete, with no need to look further for a vaunted “thingness”.
But wait. Closer examination of the sculpture (made in England, we are told [Hoffmann 1970, 59]) embroils us in pattern and the precarious nature of its avoidance in the manufacture; here, when the object is rotated to upside-down, is a substantial section of secondary dentine (that “marbled” texture); it is a cancerous presence from below (left), hidden in the very heart of the sculpture, dissolving the interior structure of the object, yet somehow benign. From above (below right), it appears almost to be eating away, like an acid in some Tale from the Crypt, invading the narrative, working against the telling of the tale.

Thus, in the very nature of the practice and the push/pull of the avoidance of the embrace of the secondary dentine—somehow Blob-like (the 50s movie, I mean) in its active presence—the thingness of the object overflows its container, calling attention to itself and to the violence of the shattered bestial host that projects the narrative of Christ’s betrayal.

THE THING IN THE GESTURE

What considerations did the medieval English craftsman have in mind when s/he first sliced into into the walrus tusk s/he was given to carve? I wager s/he must have been at first disheartened, even angry, that the piece was so compromised, and so very difficult to carve. But then s/he warmed to his task.

And it overtook him (her).
The object biography of this Virgin crafted from elephant ivory would have to include a side-trip of some centuries, when we catch up with her and her charge in an inventory from 1534. Where had she been—lo! those 300 years since her making in 1250–75? Perhaps only clerical error kept her from being counted. The centuries cannot have been uneventful, however. This Virgin and Child were the centerpiece of a group of three adoring angels. One has been lost to the ages, ravaged by revisionist hands in the Revolution. She came to Louvre vitrines not from Saint-Denis, but by way of Saint Clou, where she and the angels had been built into a reliquary. The reliquary itself was restored, as were the angels (new wings) and the Virgin and Child were parted from their heavenly attendants. They fell into the hands of private collectors and then became a sort of item of commercial trade, being acquired at last in 1924 for the Taft Collection.

The Virgin and Child now reside in Cincinnati.

The remaining two angels have surfaced in Rouen.

How unusual.

She bends away from the child—rather to the side in (notice) the same plane. It’s a playful, gestural stance, the mother bending as the child might wish—not precipitously, but gently, in a curve that coaches the gestural language of the child reaching for the flower (?) she holds down and away from him—“a little double rose attached to a wand, as in a bouquet” (Barnet 1997, 125).
It’s easy to see how the figure as it occupies space drew the viewer in. It’s as if the figure were *aspirant*—to welcome a void (as the literal translation of the French goes).

This is a stance that has come to be called—amongst art historians of Italo-European bent—*contrapposto*. Because the figure is somewhat off-balance and twisted away from a central axis, there’s liveliness to the posture—or rather, a *life*-like impression is overlaid on the iconic (if the carver had a sense of the heroic). Of course, it’s a deliberate choice on the part of the carver to cast his character in this ambivalent—“any-balance”, is it?—mode.

But what else could s/he have done?

Elephant ivory of recent millennia cannot not proclaim its origin in a real world far from the present time and place—the jungle, the bush, the savannah. With respect to representations of the Virgin, we have learned to call this presence something else, to identify grace where there is necessity. Thus, the lissome figure of the Virgin of Saint-Denis invites a different sort of attention.

In order to clarify this observation, we must consider another aspect of life history—the *form* of the elephant tusk as it was delivered to the carver. If the Saint-Denis Virgin is 34.8 cm. tall, and was carved from that part of the tusk that is beyond the pulp cavity, the size of the animal’s upper incisor before it was “harvested” (let us say) before tapering precipitously to its tip must have been in excess of one meter.

Now, how did the carver receive the tusk? Lying flat its side, most likely. Just in from West Africa, from somewhere along the Swahili Coast. There’s probably a middle man between merchant and carver. The tusk would have been wrapped in a soft cloth, as if to imply that care had been taken to preserve the tusk intact.

The craftsperson hefts it—ivory is dense and heavy—a medium-sized tusk would weigh more than, say, a package of premium cat food these days (an estimate based on Parker and Martin 2009, *passim*). How does s/he hold it?
I imagine that the first view would be “flat-on”, with the tip of the tusk above, pointed away from the viewer, so that the receding surface of the tusk could be seen in its fullest extent. When displayed in catalogs, tusks are never shown this way; they usually lie on their side, something like a bagged duck, so as to emphasize length and the full extent of the graceful arc of the tusk. An artist, on the other hand, must assess the physical extent of the mass of what s/he has to work with.

This will be the last time the tusk will be given and taken in so ample a consideration. Carving will take care of that.

Once an incision was made in the tusk, there was no turning back. The figure had to occupy exactly the space allotted. And that space curved.

Although, surprisingly, not much is made of the elephant’s tusk in medieval literature and drawing (the occasional fantastic flourish when the elephant meets his nemesis, Draco, aside) the medieval craftsperson displays a thorough and unyielding respect for the exigencies dictated by the medium.

“It is clear”, as Barnet remarks, that ivory carvers, like woodworkers, preferred to go with the grain—in other words the long axes of ivories, vertical and horizontal, follow the length of the tusk. Sectioning elephant ivory would not compromise the medium so radically as it would walrus (as we have seen); and we do occasionally find the traces of the nerve canal in the finished art work.

But rarely.

To greater or lesser degree, many medieval ecclesiastical ivories exhibit this characteristic curvature.
Take the *Corpus of Christ* (Barnet 1997, 36, ca. 1300).

Christ swoons on the cross—it is the moment of His death, “eyes closed and slumped to one side”. Although “the sculpture is carved in the round, [it is] flattened at the back in the manner of an appliqué figure (*Ibid.*, 185, both citations). That is to say, the dentine alone is carved, limited in front by the tusk itself, which is girded by the cementum; and abruptly sectioned in back by the actual pulp cavity for about the first third of the tusk length. The torso will have been carved reductively; the back of the figure, by contrast, must align with the inner limit of the dentine.

Had the executor of the piece been able to undo the structure of the tusk that was presented, s/he might have done so. Some times, we are told, the curvature of a tusk was flattened out, after some process of softening. But we are not told how this was done for sure. In modern times, a vinegar solution has been used. (St. Clair 2005, 6). The medieval recipe has not survived, if indeed it ever existed.

This is a clear example of medium as iconographic destiny. And craftspersons are practical people. You don’t waste valuable resources by working against the medium. Practice (making, over and over again) contributes to perfect (insofar as we can accomplish this ideal).

Even undisputed masterpieces are so marked, however subtle the manipulation may be. This is often taken as a matter of style, either different pieces the work of one master (see Guérin for a series of compelling arguments on this matter: “. . . It is inconceivable that two sculptors working in mid-thirteenth century France could share precisely the same approach,” 397 ) or as the stylistic imitation of a workshop or school. Just so, the Virgin and Child from the Sainte Chapelle. Same curve. Taller and slenderer by a full 6.2 cm than her sister sculpture from Saint Denis.
The raw tusk from which the iconographic Saint-Chapelle Virgin and her child were carved must have been impressive indeed.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY AS PROTOCOL

I have spent some time on the physical nature of the carver’s medium and how it may be visibly embodied in the finished carving not because I am writing an art historical treatise, but for the very reason that such considerations contribute to an understanding of where the object has been over its life and its presence at periodic stages in the manufacturing process. Imagine history as a very long (flattened?) elephant tusk, sectioned at junctures that are most propitious for carving. This is Leroi-Gourhan’s chaîne opératoire as it helps to define a production sequence, significant moments in time that mark the present state of the object. Each of the anomalies of carving we have encountered are embodied in the resultant form of the object and contribute to our fuller understanding of its thingness.

This reflection is a necessary one at this juncture. As I was working on the curvature of medieval ecclesiastical ivories, I may as well have left the narrative I had proposed to construct. And yet, I have somehow (to my mind, anyway) picked up the thread.

I am beginning to understand that these sidebars are part of the making of object biography, an experience of the thingness that boils over the confines of the object and calls for attention.

GHOST OF THE SAVANNAH
It may not have had to come to this.

Yet I could not escape the feeling that ivory, this lustrous glowing precious substance whose forms are so multifarious, has its origin in violence. For elephants are hunted. Tusks on dead animals are rare enough in the savannah; by the time one happens upon the carcass, the tusk will have desiccated to something like a withered, flaking stick. The cone-in-cone structure, so luminous when lubricated with fluid collagen, will have undone itself like so many fallen leaves.

Conditions of preservation in arctic regions do permit the “resuscitation” of fossil tusks.

One cannot, however, extract a tusk without harming the live animal. It is unclear (in my reading, at least) whether the animal will die as a result of this extraction. Chopping off an elephant’s tusk is something like having a root canal without anesthetic in humans; and if left exposed, the wound will become infected, inflicting excruciating pain. Since the tusk is alive, it does regenerate, only if the tusk is trimmed, at about the rate of 7 inches/year; this is a standard veterinary practice.

Back to hunting.

The process has not changed much over the aeons, particularly if you are on foot and share the elephant’s habitat. You are probably a Pygmy. You could have planted a large spear in the path of the elephant and then driven him to impale himself—a risky business. Perhaps you will have smeared odorous plants all over your body to cloak your human stink. Then, you slip in under his belly and slit the motor nerve of one leg, so the animal cannot run. Attack. Three or four hundred spear thrusts should do it. Platforms in trees, heavy logs with spears attached and swung between two trees, large pits covered with sticks, leaves and dirt—the result was the same (all methods from Harms 1981, 41–43).
Ivory from the African interior.

Traded by local hunting peoples to herders in settlements on the east coast. The Swahili Corridor (trade route), as it was called, emerged in the 10th century and lasted until the 16th (Barnet 1997, 4). Later, early in the century, ivory from the Upper Zaire moved westward to the west coast of Africa, following the slave routes (Harms 1981, 26). Tusks were bound from thence by sea to European workshops. Asian ivory from India would have entered the trade route network somewhere along the East African coast or below Arabia near the entrance to the Red Sea.

Now, remember.

The object biography of some exquisite ivory object we admire always begins in the same way.

With the death of an elephant.

Such a subject can be transformed into art, of course.

Here’s an excerpt from George Orwell about the death of an elephant that he finds he has to shoot:

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the
elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say – he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

—George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”

Intertextual reference is also part of object biography. As this form approaches that of an oral history, we think that rubrics or perhaps whole chapters might be spoken/recorded. “Etherealized.” I know that the elephant roar (an MP3) that I found early on in this research was strangely moving. As was Orwell’s penultimate line—a written memoir—which evokes the pride and the agony of a dying wild creature . . .

But where were we headed?
Oh, yes.
Here.

A hero died as he lowered an oliphant much like this from his lips.
But that’s another story.
Part of the Object Biography known perhaps to Sheikh Sa’ud, who acquired this ivory thing for his collections (inv. No. IV.11.1998.KU).
But perhaps not.
Perhaps this oliphant keeps its secrets.

The even, fine pattern of striæ splaying outward from the nerve cavity (canal) in the arc of a circle that characterizes African ivory. When fresh, the minute pores (1/15,000 inch diam.) that define the lozenge-shaped spaces are filled with an oily substance (collagen, Cutler 1985, 16) that renders carving easier and that is responsible for a “beautiful and transparent polish” (Penniman, 13). The striations can be seen with the aid of a glass and serve to distinguish African ivory.

Page 6. From Hauser (2008 [2007]), 225. *Canis* 203 A6.274. Left median, partial cranial view. Manufacturing details are visible in this photograph, showing reductive cutting, as opposed to additive modeling. This detail is telling, as it would indicate that the artifact was carved from an intractable medium; or else the tools available in the figurine workshops of Urkesh were not able to achieve greater refinement, being adapted to the clay medium. I rather doubt the latter, knowing as I do the subtlety of the seal impressions recovered at the site. However, I do take Cutler (1985, 3–4) to mean that the “bark” or cementum (the outer layer of the tusk, often discarded) was indeed carvable, if oftentimes damaged and desiccated (*Ibid.*, 6). Perhaps this was the medium from which the Mozan exemplar was extracted.

Page 8. “Schreger lines” in elephant ivory. Ivory Identification Guide Forensics Laboratory (http://www.lab.fws.gov/images/elepschr.jpg). I include the image here, simply because it fascinates. The regularity of the pattern is no less diagnostic than is the crystalline structure of minerals. “The relatively small amount of lateral branching combined with consistent parallel grouping of the tubules (the “pores” referenced in the cover illustration that provide nourishment from root to tip of the tusk) gives ivory its characteristic pattern of alternating light and dark striations in longitudinal section and intersecting arcs in cross-section (cover illustration).

Page 9. Sealing q2, Royal Consorts DAM Tukpiš. The Queen holds one of the royal children, gesturing as if in response to the King’s (his/her father’s) toast or perhaps in play—not so unlikely, given the unusually detailed domestic scenography. From Buccellati & Kelly-Buccellati 1995/6. Taken together, the reconstructed sealings of the Royal Family at Urkesh provide an unparalleled glimpse of the daily life of a Hurrian royal family and their retainers.
"Polar Bear Killing a Walrus" from C. F. Hall, *Life Among the Esquimaux* (1864). Fantastically silly as this engraving appears, it is based on fact. According to eyewitnesses, when polar bears lost their prey, they flailed about in frustration, hefting far whatever loose rock or dirt mass might be available. Occasionally, one of these random missiles hit their prey.

“Ros marus piscus” as pictured on Olaus Magnus’s *Carta Marina*. The concealed reference is to the terrible chunk of flesh the walrus was expected to take from its victims. marus → mors → mordre → "to bite".

Cross-section, ivory tusk. After Espinoza and Mann 1992. Figure 13, 15. Note the “tapioca”-like texture of the secondary dentine.

Seal Matrix with Abbot William of Gross St. Martin (obverse) and Saint Martin (reverse), The Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.193. Obverse and reverse, with impressions.

*Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus*. Formidable.

Judas at the Last Supper (8.5 x 7 x 4.5 cm). AD 1200–1220. View of secondary dentine from below.

Judas at the Last Supper (8.5 x 7 x 4.5 cm). AD 1200–1220. View of secondary dentine, as it obtrudes into the sculpture from above.

Virgin and Child (with Two Angels) from Saint-Denis.1250–75. French (Paris). The bend of the Virgin is actually more pronounced if viewed from the back.

Ivory tusks and carved artifacts recovered in Ghana by Interpol (2013).

Diagram of an elephant tusk. After Barnet Fig. 1-2, 4. Note the pulp cavity. I have estimated here that it accounts for some 1/3 of the length of the tusk, meaning to emphasize that the actual “use” volume of the tusk is not as extensive as it might appear.

*Corpus of Christ*, ca. 1300. French (Paris) or English (London). Barnet 1997, 184. Note the desiccation of the artifact, as evidenced by the vertical striations.

Virgin and child from the Saint-Chapelle. French (Paris).

Polaroid photograph. Chinaka Miyamoto. YouTube, flickr, FlavorWire, various online galleries. No © information.

Piece of fossil mammoth ivory from Cassington gravels (Oxford), showing cone-in-cone fracture. After Penniman 1952, Plate 4.1. The “edges” of the “cones” correspond to the striations known as “Schreger lines”.
Page 25. Map of East African trade routes during the Middle Ages. After Barnet, Fig. I-1, 4.

Page 25. After Africa Addio (uploaded 2008) hunting elephants and hippos (film clip). Ogrishforum. The footage is quite graphic. This image, with spears embedded in the eye of the elephant, spoke—it seemed to me—to the violence of the mise à mort.

Page 26. Oliphant (olifant). Sheikh Sa’ud Collections (inv. No. IV.11.1998.KU). The horn was likely clad in metal (greenish blotches testify to this. The reference to the “hero”, of course, is to Roland, protagonist of an exemplary chanson de geste.
5 IVORY THINGS

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