



# OBJECTS

The Brink of Extinction

Endangered species are not a new story—the intersection of hunter (humankind) and hunted (animal species whose body parts may have been seen as precious) has occurred to the detriment of populations from very earliest times to the present day (See a number of essays reflecting on the present-day carnage throughout this section of MappaMundi).

In the later pre-Modern era, animals that bore ivory—African and Indian elephants, walrus and other less familiar species (that’s a narwhal pod, in the illustration above)—were hunted to the very brink of extinction. Some populations, such as the walrus along the seacoast of Northern Europe, vanished due to the coveted status of ecclesiastical artifacts fashioned from the substance.



A list of research questions that might occur when contemplating one such object—the Bury St. Edmunds Cross (pictured above) has been provided to us by Dr. Marguerite Ragnow—curator of the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota and a regent of the Consortium for the Study of the Premodern World.



There is no record of measures being taken to limit the hunting of any creature in the pre-Modern. The extensive use of bone as a medium for engraving incised designs during the Late Antique and Early Christian periods does, however, seem to be a function of its plenitude and the dimensions of fragmentary raw materials available, as from carcasses and fossil remains, including mammoth ivory (Williamson 2010, 30 and 31).

In this curated section of the MappaMundi project, documentation of present-day efforts to conserve wild animals in their native habitat maintains a poignancy that must be seen through the lens of history—the advent of what has become an insatiable desire for objects crafted of ivory. One of the reasons to study the past is its undeniable relevance to our present state, how it goads us to accept our responsibility to maintain a global perspective, for all that implies.

We ignore the larger perspective, at our peril. See Filip Vukosavović’s essay about the display of history and the engagement of the viewer from his perspective as museum curator.



