The Salerno Ivories

OBJECTS, HISTORIES, CONTEXTS

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A high priest is made in a setting that, marked by the cross sign, as against the prolepsis that is the Presentation of limited to the epigraphic introduction of the Christus

dent when the Crucifixion in the Museo Diocesano is compared with a plaque depicting essentially the same iconography (but with the addition of Longinus and Stephaton) on a plaque now in the collection of Paul Ruddock, London (Fig. 2). In this case the curve of the left side of Christ’s torso is polished, but not to the same extent, or as long after the Creation scene in the Biblical narrative, as the iteration of the scene in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

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Scholarship on the so-called Salerno ivories has devoted relatively little attention to the representations of buildings on the plaques, limiting the discussion to the possible origins of their peculiar architecture.¹ This contribution will focus precisely on these extraordinary architectural representations, which seem mediated by diverse Mediterranean traditions, and on their use in the creation of an imaginary built environment for most of the Old and New Testament scenes. Looking at these images, a Byzantinist would find a mixture of details recalling the Byzantine tradition to be immediately apparent—but perhaps filtered through a different culture. The use of architecture to qualify the space as an interior or exterior and the abundance of walled cities recall a Byzantine context.² Yet at the same time, the presence of decorative patterns and architectural elements derived from diverse traditions requires a search for possible models from various areas of the Mediterranean. Indeed, a scholar trained in the history of Islamic art would see the architectural backdrops as evocative of the architecture of Fatimid Egypt between the late tenth and mid-twelfth century. As will be discussed further below, this is not to suggest that specific buildings found in the Fatimid realm are represented in the ivories. Rather, the architectural representations reflect a milieu in which Islamicizing elements could easily accompany Christian religious iconography.

In this essay, we will analyze the use of space in the Salerno ivories from a broad perspective, taking into account how architectural elements are used to create the setting for the scene through the representation of a built environment and diverse architectural structures.³ This will lead to a reflection on the technique used in this series of ivories, the meaning of the architectural representations, the identification of the imaginary settings in which these iconographies draw their models and, finally, the environment from which these works of art originate. We will see that the function of architecture in these scenes is to create an illusion for the beholder, an illusion that is, however, meaningful in revealing the iconographer's intentions. (P.B.)


² For example, in the fourteenth-century mosaics of the Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii, Istanbul), the setting for the stories of Christ’s life is rendered by using single architectural elements or views of walled cities in the background. Furthermore, walled cities were a frequent theme in the decoration of late antique mosaic floors, particularly in the area of Palestine and Jordan.

³ For the use of the space of the plaque, see Anthony Cutler’s contribution in this volume.
The use of architectural representations in the Salerno ivories

In the Salerno ivories architectural imagery is found in the majority of the New Testament scenes. Among the thirty-nine extant New Testament scenes, twenty-one include architectural backdrops. Among the thirty-four Old Testament scenes only nine do, as the majority of the Old Testament plaques display large empty areas in the background. These plaques were certainly a finished product, rather than work left incomplete. Thus, the architectural representations were purposely included in the New Testament plaques to add meaning to the represented scenes. In these ivories, the architectural images are usually carved in very high relief. This technical aspect was perhaps aimed at emphasizing the presence of the architecture within the scenes so that, in this way, the constructions do not appear as mere fillers of empty spaces. Especially urban views are carved to create an almost three-dimensional appearance: projecting out from the background while representing specific locations with an abundance of detail, they attract the beholder's attention to the significance of space and setting in the narrative. Thus, in the New Testament plaques, the iconographer created a setting for Christ's story by using detailed and prominent architectural representations. The latter, in turn, helped the beholder locate the scenes from Christ's life in specific architectural settings.

The architectural representations are usually shown in a view from below or at eye level, so that the front sides of the buildings, often decorated with portals or pediments, can be seen. Side views are extremely rare in the Salerno ivories, a fact that removes these architectural representations from late antique antecedents, as well from the Byzantine tradition, and Norman art. Even though the architectural images carved on the Salerno ivories are different one from the other, they contain many of the same elements, arranged in various ways and creating a certain variety and movement in the succession of plaques. Among these elements, there are columns, domed buildings, and canopies.

In the Old Testament scenes, columns are instrumental elements of the composition rather than of the narrative, as on each plaque one column carved in the center creates two areas occupied by scenes in a narrative sequence.

4 Only the tower of Babel, Noah’s Ark, and the Tabernacle (Pls. 8c–d, 9d, 11c, 14a) – all part of the Old Testament group – are carved in verlow relief compared to the rest of the images.


6 In Norman art buildings are represented by including frontal views and side views within the same image, as seen, for instance, in the mosaics of the Palatine Chapel at Palermo. The same applies to the architectural representations in the mosaics of the Cathedral of Monreale.

These columns contribute to the spatial and narrative structure of each plaque. Though their capitals and bases are similar, there are two different types of columns: one that has a spirally fluted shaft and another that has a smooth, plain shaft.8

Similar columns and capitals – but in a more stylized form – are to be found on the lid of the so-called Farfa casket and on other ivories variously attributed to Amalfi, Salerno, or generally to southern Italy (Fig. 1).9 However, in the Salerno group the relief of the carving is extremely high and this differentiates it from contemporary ivories: thus, for these elements, the carver likely adopted models which had already entered the tradition of eleventh- and twelfth-century ivory carving. The same kind of columns and capitals appear both in the Old Testament plaques – where they are used as central elements, separating two scenes, as well as details of cityscapes – and in the New Testament ivories where, however, the same kind of capitals appear on single, double or triple columns. Although the dimensions of the capitals are different from one plaque to the other, they are variations of the same type.

In the New Testament cycle, the plaques with the Visitation, the Magi before Herod, and the Presentation of the Child in the Temple (Pls. 19a, 19e–f, 24a) display capitals with acanthus leaves decorating particularly prestigious interiors or – in the Presentation – the prominent building of the Temple of Jerusalem. Capitals and columns are extremely elaborate in two elongated ivory frames that scholars usually have associated with the sides of the Ascension plaque (Pl. 62).10 Here, their complex form – which features capitals with a double row of acanthus leaves and double spiral columns on high sinuous bases – seems aimed at emphasizing the Ascension of Christ. Just as in the Old Testament scenes, spiral fluted columns are used as framing devices for the most important scenes in Genesis; here they frame one of the most significant scenes of the Christological cycle.

The buildings shown in the Salerno New Testament plaques are examples of domed architecture. In this group of ivories, domes and cupolas dominate urban views and single buildings, becoming the most distinctive feature of the architectural representations.11 Although the Salerno Nativity displays striking similarities with a plaque dated between the seventh and eighth centuries now at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 2) for its general iconography and the typology of buildings represented, hinting at a communal model, the Salerno Nativity shows substantial variations.12

(M. C. C.)

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8 According to Bologna, “Avori medievali,” 62–63, this may suggest the work of two different carvers.
9 See, for instance, an ivory plaque with the Crucifixion and the Entombment (New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. no. 17.190.43) (c. 1100) or a late eleventh-century chess piece now in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, inv. no. 55–305).
10 For the association of the ivory frames with the Ascension plaque, see Hempel’s reconstruction in: Bologna, “Avori medievali,” 146–47, and Braca, Gli avori medievali, 217. Braca notes that, alternatively, the colonnettes may have framed the Crucifixion plaque (Braca, Gli avori medievali, 137). For an earlier reconstruction, see also: A. Carucci, Gli avori salernitani del secolo XII (Salerno, 1972), 317–24.
11 See, for instance, the plaques representing the episodes of the Supper at Emmaus, the Samaritan Woman at the Well, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Magi before Herod, the Flight into Egypt, the Raising of the Widow’s Son, the Journey to Bethlehem, the Healing of the Dropsical, the Blind and the Lame, Christ at Bethany, and Joseph’s Second Dream (Pls. 35a, 28a, 19a, 22a, 26a, 21a, 27a, 35d).
12 In the Dumbarton Oaks plaque the finials of the buildings on the top left show some repairs: J. Hanson, “16. Ivory plaque of the Nativity,” in Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art, 188, cat. 16.
One type of domed building recurs in the Salerno ivories: a central structure with a round dome, characterized by a cornice at its base and a trapezoidal or circular finial at its apex. This form seems to reproduce the view of three sides of a hexagonal or octagonal building with a dome. In a few instances, the cornice at the springing of the dome forms a platform on which the dome itself rests (Figs. 3–4). \(^{13}\) Similar domes appear on the so-called Grado ivories, but within city walls that are quite different. \(^{14}\)

13 In a few instances buildings of this kind also show a door. According to Bologna, the buildings represented on the oliphant now in Zaragoza (Museo de la Sacristia de la Basílica del Pilar: so-called Oliphant of Gastón IV de Bearn) recall the Salerno ivories: Bologna, “Avori medievali,” 87. However, their shape and the very low relief of carving dissociate them from the latter.

riety of domes: bulbous, pointed, or elongated, with different cornices, tufts, or dots at the apex. The abundance of domes, present in almost all the architectural representations, and the variety of architectural backdrops in the New Testament plaques, allows us to rule out the notion that these images reproduce the cityscape of Salerno or Amalfi – cities to which the plaques are connected by historiography. In fact, the existing records of medieval architecture in these cities, such as extant buildings and archive drawings representing single structures and cityscapes, do not show any significant resemblance with the architectural representations of the plaques. However, the Norman architecture of Palermo in the early days of Roger II’s reign (1130–54) may offer substantial comparisons. The contours of the dome of the Martorana, the church built in Palermo in 1143 by George of Antioch, the highest-ranking officer of the Norman king Roger II, come closest to those of the dome recurring on the Salerno ivories (Figs. 4–5). On the other hand, the elongated domes of the plaques may recall the ones typical of Arabo-Norman architecture, an early example of which is the church of San Giovanni dei Lebbrosi, founded in 1071 by Robert Guiscard (r. 1059–85), and which become far more frequent during the reign of William I (1154–66), son and successor of Roger II – see, for instance, the church of San Cataldo in Palermo (1154) and the original dome of La Zisa palace (1165–80) (Figs. 3, 6). These elongated domes appear very close in proportions and dimensions to those linked to Fatimid architecture. To be sure, Islamic architecture also influenced earlier traditions in Sicily, as part of the larger Mediterranean visual culture. The Salerno ivories, in turn, may evoke elements of Norman and Arabo-Norman architectures along with forms from the wider eastern Mediterranean, particularly the Fatimid realm. The elongated domes of the plaques, in fact, are cinched at the bottom, a detail that, as will be seen below, makes for a closer connection to Fatimid domes than to the elongated domes of Norman Palermo.

The widespread use of domed architecture in the Salerno ivories, which was clearly inspired by models that were not part of the Western or Byzantine traditions, reveals the iconographer’s interest in iconographies that incorporate elements linked to southern Mediterranean architecture. While these architectural representations echo buildings depicted in the so-called Grado group, they also show substantial variations on that model. At first sight, they present an oriental or Islamicizing look that evokes Fatimid examples of elongated domes, especially in the monuments of Cairo built after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969, without reproducing these examples in detail. This illusion of exotic central buildings, which find their closest models in the Fatimid period, shows the iconographer’s ability to create such an illusion, an inspiration taken from such architectural models, or a combination of these two elements.

(P. B.)

Canopies and pediments

The use of canopies and pediments in the architectural backdrops of the Salerno ivories appears related to the visualization of majesty and royalty. In the Magi before Herod, the king is seated on a throne under an elaborate


In two cases, the Entry into Jerusalem and The Healing of the Dcropsical, the Blind and the Lame, a building features a kind of lobed dome (Pls. 28a, 27a). In Christ Blesses the Apostles at Bethany and Joseph’s Second Dream (Pls. 35d, 21a) the domes are spheroidal, feature a roundel in the center and walls decorated with various patterns, perhaps based on a specific cityscape.

Fatimid examples of elongated domes, especially in the monuments of Cairo built after the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969, without reproducing these examples in detail. This illusion of exotic central buildings, which find their closest models in the Fatimid period, shows the iconographer’s ability to create such an illusion, an inspiration taken from such architectural models, or a combination of these two elements.

Inspired by the fine paper delivered at the Amalfi meeting, “L’architettura degli avori,” Braca notices similarities with the cupolas on the tenth- and twelfth-century coinage of Salerno and Amalfi and the architecture of Salerno Cathedral: Braca, Gli avori medieva-

The dome of the Martorana arises from a polygonal drum that displays two decorative bands at the top. Similarly, the kind of dome recurrent in the plaques – which can be seen in the scenes with the Drunkenness of Noah, God blessing a Patriarch, the Samaritan Woman at the Well (Pls. 11e, 15f, 26a) – presents a base with horizontal bands recalling a polygonal platform decorated with longitudinal elements.

The dome of the palace of La Zisa is now hidden under later structures. For elongated domes, see the episodes of the Magi before Herod, the Nativity, the Flight into Egypt, the Supper at Emmaus, the Healing of the Dcropsical, the Blind and the Lame, the Raising of the Widow’s Son, the Pious Women at the Sepulcher (Pls. 19f, 22a, 35a, 27a, 26a, 31a). A variation on the same kind of dome, which does not appear to rise from a platform, can be seen on the plaques with Joseph’s Second Dream, the Visitiation, Christ at Bethany, the Healing of the Blind Man, the Entry into Jerusalem, and the Healing of the Dcropsical, the Blind and the Lame (Pls. 21f, 19f, 35d, 31e, 28f, 27a).


canopy that conveys the idea of an apse conch. Court ceremonial in Byzantium, as well as in Norman Sicily and the Fatimid caliphate, required curtains hanging from the canopy to be drawn aside when the ruler appeared in majesty. In other scenes, namely in the Massacre of Innocents and in Sarah and Abimelek King of Gerar (also interpreted as the Pharaoh Gives Sarah back to Abraham) (Pls. 23a, 12a), where the king is not represented during an official reception, there is no canopy above the throne. The reception of the three Magi, however, entailed the use of architectural structures such as the canopy with curtains appropriate to the ceremonial of the imperial reception. Similarly, in the Adoration of the Magi the Virgin and the Child are seated on a throne, the back of which forms a canopy of sorts above their heads, conveying the Virgin and Child’s status of majesty and supreme power (Pl. 20a). Thus, the ceremonial use of the canopy – and of curtains at imperial receptions – was well known to the designer of this scene. The same concept is expressed in the elaborate acanthus leaf cornice surrounding Christ in the Adoration of Christ by the Angels (Pl. 26a). It frames Christ’s figure, so as to emphasize the value of the scene as the celebration of Christ’s majesty and supreme kingship. This example leads us to consider the use of canopy-like structures within buildings or cities. As Natalia Teteriatnikov has shown, the Holy Sepulcher is presented with baldachin- and canopy-like structures, which convey the holiness of the sepulcher itself. In the other architectural representations canopies appear as single elements (Fig. 4), as elements of interiors (Fig. 7), or as elements of cityscapes or groups of buildings. They are often used as monumental frames for domed structures. The canopies’ elaborate forms and high relief carving attract the attention of the beholder, indicating the importance of the architecture within each scene. The symbolic importance of the canopy – and by extension, of the architectural elements derived from the circle, such as domes, and cupolas – in the Salerno ivories points to the culturally mixed milieu in which they were designed and produced.

(M. C. C.)

Cities and places

The representations of walled cities show a great variety in shape and appearance. Surely these cities represent particular places – Haran and Bethlehem, among others – yet


22 Nevertheless, in these scenes the throne forms a kind of niche around the body of the king, indicating his status in the context of the narrative.

23 The cosmic symbolism and ceremonial use of the canopy at imperial receptions is clarified in a sixth-century poem written by the court poet Corippus in praise of Emperor Justin II (Flavius Cresconius Corippus, ed. Cameron, 187–88).

24 See Natalia Teteriatnikov’s contribution to this volume.

25 See, for instance, the plaques representing the episodes of the Healing of the Paralytic at Bethesda, the Healing of the Dropped, the Blind and the Lame, and Joseph’s Second Dream (Pls. 30a, 27a, 21f).

the cityscapes do not seem to reproduce buildings that ever existed in those locations. Rather, they evoke features like crenelated walls and city gates that would have been plausible in those places at the time the Salerno ivories were produced. A comparison with cities represented adjacent to a scene – specifically Jerusalem, Nain, and an Egyptian city (Pls. 28f, 26a, 22a) – shows that the carvers of the ivories aimed to carefully differentiate the locations by creating diverse urban views, albeit ones that are dominated by similar elements. The high relief of the carving, with the cityscapes projecting from the surface of the plaques, makes them essential elements within the narrative, because they emphasize the specific place and space within which a scene is situated. This confirms that the architectural representations were, indeed, created in order to evoke specific locations.

In the Flight into Egypt (Pl. 22a), Cairo may have been evoked as a background to stand for the region as a whole. From 969 until 1171, the city was the capital of the Fatimid dynasty that had founded al-Qahira as a palatial extension of the earlier Islamic settlements in the area. The architectural backdrops in the Salerno ivories seem to evoke the architecture of Cairo. However, today’s concentration of Fatimid architecture in Egypt is deceiving to some extent, as it creates the impression that the style originated in Cairo. Fatimid presence was not limited to Egypt: the dynasty started out in North Africa and at times spread as far as northern Syria. Of al-Mahdiya, the Fatimids’ second capital founded in 921 between Sfax and Susa (in today’s Tunisia), just a few traces remain. Only the Great Mosque still stands on the site, although as a reconstruction completed in the 1960s. In Syria and Palestine, Fatimid presence was more ephemeral, yet overall the architectural presence of the dynasty must have been quite distinctive around the eastern Mediterranean, as the monuments of Norman Sicily confirm.

Hence, it is impossible to tell to what extent the backdrops were chosen to specifically represent Egypt, or whether they were part of a pervasive shared culture across the Mediterranean at that time, involving the Norman, Byzantine, and Fatimid courts, as Oleg Grabar described it. The transfer of such motifs could take several routes, often by way of objects through gift exchange and trade. These transfers took shape in different media, including woodcarvings, paintings, ceramic, and – most prominently – textiles. The difficulty in assessing the exact mode of transfer in the case of the Salerno ivories is the scarcity, in Fatimid art, of architectural representations. Hence, it may be possible that the artist in question had visited Egypt, or seen drawings of the city of Cairo, although records of this have not come down to us.

In the Flight into Egypt (Pl. 22a), we see two different architectural images: in the foreground a city where the angel leads the Holy Family, and at the top, in a more distant background, a small representation of three buildings. The urban view is carved in very high relief as if to underline the significance of this city in the context of the scene. The vegetal element emerging from an oculus in the cityscape enhances the illusion of depth, while at the same time suggesting a flourishing exotic city, at least to the eye of the modern beholder. In this case, the urban scene does not stand for a particular city but rather for Egypt in general, whose personification – or, simply, an inhabitant of the city – welcomes the Holy Family. Still, in this image, which seems absolutely fantastic at first sight, we may identify some adherence to eleventh-century Fatimid architecture. This is particularly evident in the representation of the central building at the bottom, whose terrace-like structure and elongated cupola seems a simplification of a mausoleum, such as a group of mausolea in Aswan (Fig. 8), that may date to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Mausolea in Cairo with similar domes, such as

32 In post-iconoclastic iconography, the Holy Family is welcomed by a woman standing in front of an Egyptian city, who bows reverentially before the group. This woman is sometimes identified as Aegyptica by an inscription, clarifying her role as a representative or personification of Egypt. In line with tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine iconography, the woman of the Salerno plaque outstretches her veiled hands toward the Holy Family as an act of reverence. However, here she does not wear a crown, a detail that would have unquestionably identified her as a personification – as we see in the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina at Palermo; G. Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art, 2 vols. (London, 1971), 1: 119–20; G. Wolf and M. De Giorgi, “Dalla Fuga all’ingresso. La parete meridionale della Cappella Palatina,” in La Cappella Palatina in Palermo, 127.
the Mausoleum of Muhammad al-Ja’fari and Sayyida ‘Ati’ka (c. 1122), were particularly frequent in the first half of the twelfth century, even though only few extant examples are securely dated. In the Flight into Egypt, the arch and the elongated tower seem to recall the eleventh-century monuments of Cairo in their major components: this is particularly true for the tower, whose relative dimensions and top are similar to those of the minaret of the Al-Hakim mosque, which was completed in 1013, especially when looking at the latter from a distance (Fig. 9). On the interior side of the Bab al-Futuh, one of the Fatimid gates on the northern wall of Cairo, an arch is decorated with a similar zigzag pattern (Fig. 10). Based on these considerations, we may see in the representation of Egypt in the Salerno ivories a reference to eleventh-century monuments linked to the ruling dynasty of Egypt, the Fatimids. Should this hypothesis prove to be true, it would constitute a *terminus post quem* for the production of our ivories.

Furthermore, it would allow some speculation about the iconographer’s or carver’s background and perhaps even about the place of manufacture. In fact, the representation of Fatimid architecture may have been a conscious attempt on the part of a designer or carver, who knew these monuments first-hand or had access to images of them, to characterize Egypt based on the peculiar features of its most recent artistic developments – even though no architectural representation from the Fatimid period has survived. If the designer knew Fatimid architecture by personal experience, he probably created an evocative but inaccurate image on purpose, in order to diminish the overall Fatimid effect in the architectural representations. If the designer had seen reproductions of
Fatimid architecture, we may assume, rather, that he reproduced an image of those places or a model of, indeed, based his representation on the memories of someone who had actually seen Fatimid architecture.

The representation of Egypt is extremely revealing in the context of the Flight into Egypt itself. If we compare the urban view with the buildings in the background, the latter appear to belong to a different tradition. The pediment structure and the colonnade are in fact among the basic features of classical basilicas; they are represented next to one another as two separated buildings, perhaps to create the impression of a densely built environment. At the same time, this display of adjacent structures may serve to characterize the architectural representation in the background based on the major elements of the most typical expression of classical religious architecture, the basilica.37

The centralized building on the side, in the same scene, may represent either the basilica apse, or a baptistery.38 In fact, this is most likely a concise representation of Palestine, whose architecture during the Middle Ages was still characterized by basilicas built at holy sites, such as in Bethlehem and Nazareth. It could even be interpreted as a representation of Bethlehem, which the Holy Family left to escape to Egypt. Its most famous building for a Christian was the Nativity Basilica whose major components were, indeed, a façade with pediment, an interior colonnade and a central building over the Nativity cave.39 The vegetal elements in this scene are consistent with this interpretation: the vines at the top may represent Palestine, well known in the Biblical narrative and ancient tradition for its wine, while the vegetal element coming out of an oculus in the depiction of the elongated cityscape associates the latter with features evoking a faraway land.40

This image may be the most telling of the Salerno ivories, as it clearly shows how the plaques aim to differenti-ate between places. Yet in both architectural images, the group at the top and the city on the side, the allusion to distinct places is a subliminal message of sorts that does not distract the beholder's attention from the protagonists, the Holy Family. In the Salerno series the intention to differentiate locations does not result in the representation of realistic urban views. The single architectural units forming the cityscapes are similar yet vary from plaque to plaque to create diverse urban settings. In this way, the iconographer was able to create an illusion of realism for the viewer, although one that has no counterpart in the medieval reality of those cities, not even one combined with the Islamic architecture that these unique urban iconographies seem to evoke.

(P.B.)

Noah’s Ark

Among the Old Testament ivories, Noah’s Ark appears in four scenes, either as a trapezoidal box – when the ark is under construction – or as a cubic structure with a vaulted roof (Pls. 7a, 7e, 8a, 9a). It lacks the boat with double bows that supports the Ark in Northern European and Norman iconography.41 Nevertheless, we may find some similarities between the Ark under construction of the Salerno ivories and that in the Norman mosaics of Monreale, for both have a very compact trapezoidal shape. The representation of Noah’s Ark in the Salerno ivories, however, is much closer to that found in the thirteenth-century mosaics of the atrium of St. Mark in Venice, where it is again trapezoidal and floats in the waters without being supported by a boat. In an eleventh-century manuscript from Mount Athos we find a similar structure,42 a big box floating on the waves, albeit one that is still lacking the vaulted roof. The latter comes from an earlier tradition.

38 The absence of a cross on these buildings does not necessarily invalidate their identification as different parts of a basilica, as in the Salerno ivories no building shows a cross, and medieval architectural representations of churches, in the East as in the West, did not always bear crosses.
40 This analysis of the vegetal elements does not contradict Maria Evangelatou’s interpretation in this volume. Rather, the complex character of the ivories’ iconography opens up several layers of meanings. Here, we intend to highlight the perfect balance of architectural and vegetal elements that concur in expressing the narrative of the scene.
42 The Romance of Barlaam and Josaphat, Athos, Iviron, Ms. 463, fol. 25r: The Treasures of Mount Athos: Illuminated Manuscripts. Miniatures-Headpieces-Initial Letters, ed. S. M. Pelekanidis et al., 2 vols. (Athens, 1975), 2: 306–22; for the manuscript and its recent dating to the eleventh cen-
that merged with the Salerno ivories. In the late sixth-century Ashburnham Pentateuch, as well as in the eleventh- and twelfth-century Octateuchs from Constantinople, the roof of the Ark is also vaulted. 43

Leaving aside the issue of a possible influence of the Cotton Genesis on the Salerno ivories, 44 the images of Noah’s Ark indicate that the designer of the ivories may have drawn on an ancient, possibly late antique tradition or on a Byzantine prototype.

**Temple and Sepulcher**

The depiction of the Temple (Pl. 24a) is extremely telling with regard to both the possible antecedents for this iconography and the meaning of the scene itself. It distances the Temple from both the Byzantine and the Norman tradition, where it is represented as a canopy structure over an altar. 45 Indeed, the Temple of the Salerno ivories bears a striking resemblance to the late antique iconography of the Holy Sepulcher (Fig. 11). 46 As in late antiquity, the Sepulcher was usually depicted as a building with columns and a sloping roof, often placed under a dome or a vault – representing the aedicula over the Anastasis rock and the Rotunda –, while the Temple of the Salerno ivories is made up of the same elements and inserted into a circular court (Fig. 12 and Pl. 24a). The only different feature are the towers at the sides, which can be seen in Western images of the Sepulcher and appear in the Cappella Palatina at Palermo. 47 The cross on the altar is peculiar to Byzantine representations of the Temple, which were, however, absorbed into the tradition of ivory carving generally attributed to Amalfi. 48 Remarkably, in the Salerno ivories both the Temple and the Sepulcher feature the same tile-like decoration on the roof, in both cases surmounted by a lantern (Pl. 31f). 49 By representing the Temple as Christ’s Sepulcher, the idea of sacrifice already inherent in the Presentation of the Child in the Temple is amplified.

An evocation of the Holy Sepulcher may be present in other plaques. As a hypothesis, in the absence of clear comparisons, we would like to propose an interpretative key for two architectural motifs that appear to be abstract, rather than images of specific sites: those in the scenes representing Joseph’s first and second dream. In Joseph’s Second Dream (Pl. 21a) we may see either a representation of Bethlehem – where Joseph had the dream – or a prefiguration of Egypt, as in the twelfth-century mosaics of the Palatine Chapel and in Monreale. 50 However, the

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49 In the Salerno group, this kind of roof is found only in these images. The lantern, however, is already visible on an early fifth-century ivory depicting the Ascension (Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, inv. no. MA 157, see W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* [Mainz, 1976]), cat. 110.

50 For the buildings in Joseph’s Second Dream as a prefiguration of Egypt in the Cappella Palatina: Wolf and De Giorgi, “Dalla Fuga all’ingresso,” 126.
architectural setting of the scene is formed by a building on the left that is clearly separated from the group on the right. The latter are particularly difficult to interpret. They are very different from the depiction of Egypt in the Flight into Egypt. Nor do they seem to represent the city of Bethlehem, which shows different features in other scenes – as in the Journey to Bethlehem and the Nativity. In this image, the big dome covers a central building with a conical roof, a feature found neither in the Salerno group nor in actual architecture. As we have seen, this was the late antique iconography for the aedicula over the rock of the Anastasis and the Rotunda above it, the Holy Sepulcher. Indeed, here the group with the central building covered by an enormous dome may be a reinterpretation of the Anastasis Rotunda iconography.

Furthermore, the enormous dome features a roundel. In the Salerno ivories such roundels are rare on domes and appear only in the representations of Bethany and Bethlehem (Pls. 21a, 35d). Since the fourth century, Bethlem and Bethany were places of veneration of holy caves, around which major sanctuaries arose: a basilica ending in a central building built by Constantine and Helena over the Nativity cave in Bethlehem; a basilica centering on the rock where Lazarus’s sister Mary met Jesus and built next to the cave tomb of Lazarus in Bethany, as Egeria reports at the end of the fourth century. In the Salerno ivories the roundels on the domes may mark holy caves that were the object of particular veneration. The

Fig. 11 The Presentation in the Temple, eleventh–twelfth century, ivory, detail of the Temple, Salerno, Museo Diocesano

Fig. 12 Anastasis rock and the Rotunda, lead ampulla, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Museum, inv. no. BZ.1948.18

51 The similarities between the Nativity of the Salerno ivories and the above-cited plaque from Dumbarton Oaks (Pl. 22a and Fig. 2) suggest that the former could be a copy of an already established iconography, thus ruling out that the buildings on it are intended to specifically characterize the city of Bethlehem. Moreover, the architectural representations are all different, as if to distinguish the various moments of Biblical history, while at the same time creating a certain variety and animation on the object, which the ivory plaques originally decorated.

52 Apart from these examples, in the Salerno group roundels are also used as decorations of doors: see the scenes of Noah Leaves the Ark, the Visitation and the Doubting Thomas (Pls. 9a, 19a, 33a).


depictions of Bethlehem in the Journey to Bethlehem and in Joseph’s Second Dream (Pl. 21a) are certainly different because of their changing significance in the narrative. In the former, Bethlehem is a distant walled city, a final destination as Christ’s birth approaches; in the latter, it is the location of a dream announcing a far more perilous journey, the Flight into Egypt, and the threat to the child’s life. However, the roundel marks it as a distinctive feature. In the plaque representing Joseph’s Second Dream, the sole domed building on the left may indicate the place where the dream happened, Bethlehem, while the group on the right may evoke the Holy Sepulcher itself (Pl. 21f), also marked by a roundel referring to the Anastasis cave. In the group of structures on the right, the arch over another central building outside the cave may refer to the Golgotha chapel, located within the complex of the Holy Sepulcher, but outside the Anastasis Rotunda. Here, the large dome on the right shows a roundel and the one on the left a single dot, just as the buildings of Bethany (Pl. 35d). Both places featured a venerated rock and a venerated cave: in Jerusalem, the Anastasis cave and the rock of the Cavalry, in Bethany the cave of Lazarus’ tomb and the rock where Mary met Jesus.

In the Salerno ivories concentric circles and dots appear to be more than simple decorations. Taking this argument a step further, the big dome over the aedicule, with its pointed shape without finial (Pl. 21f), may also evoke the conical roof of the Holy Sepulcher, as it was rebuilt by Constantine Monomachos following the monument’s destruction by the Fatimids in 1010, with an oculus in the roundel, which here may be based on memory.

Thus we find several levels of meaning in Joseph’s Second Dream: the dream of a fantastic cityscape, Egypt; the notion of the location for the dream, Bethlehem; but possibly also an evocation of the Holy Sepulcher as the prefigured end of Christ’s life, which would culminate in the Crucifixion and the Ascension, two major themes within the Salerno ivories.

This interpretation of the cityscape in Joseph’s Second Dream may also provide a key to the scene of the first dream. In Joseph’s First Dream (Pl. 20a), the central structures between the two colonnades at the sides defy easy deciphering. Following the Biblical episode, the cityscape could be interpreted as Bethlehem or Nazareth, but, in fact, the group of buildings does not really allow for identification with a particular city at all. However, its individual elements may be interpreted as different views of the main components of the Holy Sepulcher. The triple arcade may represent the propylaeum; the vaulted fantastic building may reflect either the silhouette of the Holy Sepulcher as viewed from afar or a plan of the eleventh-century building. The roundel may refer to the cave of the Anastasis, as in the other cases, and the double arcade to the double colonnade of the Anastasis Rotunda. Although this is just a hypothesis, a reference to the Sepulcher in both of Joseph’s dreams may indicate once again an inherent logic of the ivories which are designed to culminate in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to save humanity, and in his Ascension. The hidden allusion to the Holy Sepulcher could provide the connection between the plaques of Christ’s childhood and the other scenes. Due to the prominence of the Crucifixion and the Ascension, which are the only scenes to completely or almost completely cover the surface of the plaque, it may be assumed that these scenes had a central location on the object originally decorated with the Salerno ivories.

55 In the plaque representing the Journey to Bethlehem the roundel adorns a gate of sorts and is shown in a more elaborate form, encircled by four more dots. In this way, the designer marks the city with a distinctive feature, the roundel, while at the same time creating the illusion that this is the decoration of a city gate. The roundel thus becomes a sign indicating the city where one of the most important events of Christ’s life takes place.
57 In early Christianity, concentric circles and dots had a protective function and an apotropaic meaning. As such, they were found on building entrances and everyday objects, such as mirrors and combs; E. Dauterman Maguire, Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House (Urbana, and Chicago, IL, 1989), 5–7. In the Salerno ivories, concentric circles are also found on doors in the plaques depicting the Visitation and the Doubting Thomas, two episodes where Christ’s divine presence is revealed (Pls. 19a, 33a). Hence, the concentric circles in these scenes obviously do not indicate caves and may be merely decorative elements with a protective function on doors, though linked to closed spaces where Christ’s divinity was revealed.
59 The city here may represent the place where, most likely, the dream happened, Bethlehem (according to Matt 1:20–23) or Nazareth (according to Luke 2:4, where there is no mention, however, of the dream).
60 For the plan and reconstruction of Constantine Monomachos’ building: Ousterhout, “Rebuilding the Temple,” fig. 7; idem, “Architecture as Relic,” fig. 7.
Furthermore, the meaning of roundels and dots on cupolas as referring to particularly venerated places of pilgrimage of the Holy Land—Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and especially Bethany—may suggest a link between the Salerno ivories and those places. Though not one of the triad of caves mentioned by Eusebius, yet a major site in the Holy Land visited by pilgrims—especially in the period following the Latin conquest of Jerusalem in 1099—Bethany may have had a particular significance for the patron for whom the plaques were created.

In conclusion, the architectural representations of the Salerno plaques show conflicting forms, compositional schemes and uses of perspective of Eastern and Western art. In spite of their apparent Islamic look, their models defy identification and seem inspired by the Mediterranean context at large, evoking at times Byzantine, Islamic (Fatimid), Romanesque and Norman architecture. Small details may reveal a source of inspiration in the so-called Amalfi ivory carving school or in the Grado chair models. At the same time, the designer operates in an extremely eclectic way, never simply borrowing elements from different yet contiguous traditions, but rather always reinterpreting them. In this way, the iconographer was able to create architectural images with Byzantine, Western, and Islamicizing elements that were recognizable for observers of different cultural traditions.

Thus, while creating the illusion that the architecture, with its great variety of forms, simply represents different places of Biblical history, the designer also creates the impression of particularly exotic places by including Islamicizing domes. More important, the choice of an architecture derived from the circle, as exemplified by the wealth of domes, cupolas, and canopy structures, suggests that particularly monumental and sacred spaces were depicted. Meanwhile, the subtle use of high or low relief reveals the centrality of the architectural imagery within the scenes, as this was imbued with meaning transcending its function of providing a setting for the Biblical stories.

All these observations suggest that the designer was a learned person who had probably travelled the Mediterranean and been exposed to its different cultures. References to court ceremonial and diverse architectural traditions may point either to a particular political era, when, for instance, the Holy Sepulcher was of major concern—such as the years immediately preceding or following the Latin conquest of Jerusalem in 1099—or to exegetical questions. The apparent familiarity with Fatimid architecture as well as with late antique and Byzantine iconography points to a rich and eclectic cultural milieu, perhaps akin to the one that fostered the flourishing of the arts in southern Italy during the reign of Roger II.

Although our discussion here has touched only on a few major aspects of the architectural representations in the Salerno ivories, clearly this extraordinary architectural imagery is charged with a strong evocative power, suggesting that it originated from a learned cultural milieu capable of creating multiple levels of meaning beyond the mere illusion of a backdrop for Sacred Scripture.

(M. C. C.)

61 Among others, Abbot Daniel visited it as early as 1106–07 and provided a detailed account of the site; see J. Wilkinson et al., Jerusalem Pilgrimage 1099–1185 (London, 1988), 134. A few decades later, the site underwent substantial modifications and, by 1138, it was incorporated into a Benedictine convent (Pringle, Churches of the Crusader Kingdom, 1: 122–37). Because of the popularity of the cult of Lazarus in the twelfth century, the church of Autun was modeled after the complex at Bethany: L. Seidel, Legends in Limestone. Lazarus, Gislebertus, and the Cathedral of Autun (Chicago, IL, 1999), 33–62.
Fig. 12: D. Dalla Barba Brusin and G. Lorenzoni, L’arte del patriarcato di Aquileia dal secolo IX al secolo XIII (Padova, 1968); Fig. 13: G. Orofino, I codici decorati dell’Archivio di Montecassino, 4 vols. (Rome, 2000), II/2: pl. XLVIII; Fig. 14: G. Schlumberger, Sigillographie de l’orient latin (Paris, 1943), p. 74, plate I, fig. 8.

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Fig. 1: Jill Caskey; Figs. 2–6: © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Roberto Sigismondi; Fig. 7: A. Carucci, La Cattedrale di Salerno (Marigliano, 1986).

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Figs. 1–2: © Luciano Peditici, Archivio dell’Arte; Fig. 3: A. Carucci, L’iconostasi nel Duomo di Salerno (Salerno, 1971); Figs. 4, 8 a, 10, 13, 17 b: Elisabetta Scirocco; Figs. 5–7, 9, 11–12, 15, 18: Ruggero Longo; Figs. 8 b, 16 a–b: G. Bergamo, Costruzioni e ricostruzioni nell’archidiocesi di Salerno, III, Il Duomo di Salerno, 5 vols. (Battipaglia, 1972); Figs. 14 a, 14 c: © Napoli, Archivio Fotografico Soprintendenza BAPSAE; Figs. 14 b, 14 d, 17 a: M. De Angelis, Il duomo di Salerno nella sua storia, nelle sue vicende e nei suoi monumenti. Notizie documentarie sui restauri e sulle modifiche subite dall’edificio (Salerno, 1936).

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Credits for the Plates