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THE JUDGEMENT OF PARIS

Cylindric vessels - pyxides made of ivory are an important group among the products of antic craftsmanship. The vessels of that type were created using the natural properties of this specific material¹. Boxes or other vessels of that type were later used as jewellery or cosmetics containers for women. The outer surface of pyxides was decorated with relief (often figurative), what further increased their esthetic value². The form of such a cylindrical vessel made from this particular section of an elephant tusk has been known in the Mediterranean area since the bronze age³. It was later also employed in the graeco-roman culture⁴. Obviously ceramic pyxides were also discovered, some decorated with polichromy just as other greek vases, others made of metal with a relief or carved decoration. That cylindrical form of a vessel was also especially popular during the late antic, beginning from the 4th century. During that time reliefs with christian themes started to appear in pyxis decoration

¹ As we know it is a tooth (tusk) and has characteristics specific for that organ – it is built of enamel, dentine and tooth pulp with neural tissue. Any craftsmanship items are only made of hard dentine that encircles the tooth pulp at the base of the tusk. From this particular section, after sawing the tusk sidewise, it is possible to receive an item similar in shape to a cylinder empty inside. A bottom part and cover made of other sections of the tusk are fitted to this semi-finished product, thus producing a precious box. A basic work regarding the techniques of working with ivory is O. Krzyszkowska, *Ivory and related materials*, London 1990; as well as A. Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory* Washington, 1985.

² O.M. Dalton; *Byzantine Art and Archeology*, New York 1961, p.185.

³ R. Barnett, *Ancient Ivories in the Middle East*, Jerusalem 1982, p. 44.

⁴ O.M. Dalton; *Byzantine...* p. 184-185.

alongside pagan scenes and in time the first ones began to play a dominant role in the ornamentation of such boxes, however until the 6th century (it may be assumed until the rule of Justinian, who put an end to the pagan culture closing the Athenian Platonic Academy in 529) scenes inspired by greco-roman myths were also common⁵.

One of the above described artifacts, decorated with a relief illustrating an antic myth, is a vessel currently held in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (USA). The pyxis was also frequently displayed in the past during various thematic temporary exhibitions, e.g. Brooklyn 1941, Baltimore 1947, New York 1967 and when that opportunity occurred was also published in exhibition catalogues and general works regarding late antique art⁶. A documented history of the artifact proves that it had previously changed storage locations twice before it finally found its place in the Baltimore Museum in 1886⁷. Despite so many publications, however, it has never been put to a broader, detailed analysis. Also, not all characters depicted in the relief decorating the pyxis have been identified until now. It is thus worthwhile to make an attempt at a complex study of this artifact and in particular to try to identify all the mythological characters depicted on the other side of the vessel.

The pyxis has no cover and it is preserved well, although it has a number of cracks and scratches running from the top to the bottom as well as traces of repairs conducted later (the upper and lower edges are bound by metal rings). Traces left by metal ferrules that were not preserved are also visible on the corpus of the vessel, they once held a lock binding the cylindrical box with a

⁵ W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters*, Mainz 1976, p. 69-104.

⁶ *Pagan and Christian Egypt*, Brooklyn 1941, p. 36, no. 104; *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Baltimore 1947, p. 40, no. 106; K. Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, New York 1979, p. 137-138, no. 115.

⁷ Previously (until 1880) it was in the Collection of Count G. Possenti, Fabriano and the Félix collection. The pyxis was subsequently published by: H. Graeven, *Pyxide en os*, [in:] *Mon Piot* 6, 1899, p. 160 i 163; *Pagan and Christian Egypt*, Brooklyn 1941, p. 36, no. 104; *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Baltimore 1947, p. 40, no. 106; W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten...* p. 75, tafel 55 n. 104; R. H. Randall Jr., *Late Roman and Egyptian Ivory* [in:] R. H. Randall Jr., *Masterpieces of Ivory from the Walters Art Gallery New York* 1985, p. 80 i 100-101, cat. no. 170 a, 170 b, colorplate 41; W.A.P. Childs, *Pyxis with banquet of gods and Judgment of Paris*, [in:] K. Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, New York 1979, p. 137-138, no. 115; D. Angelova, *Pyxis with the Judgment of Paris*, [in:] I. Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Women and their World*, Yale 2003, p. 256, no. 148.

cover that does not exist today⁸.

The top and bottom edge of the vessel were preliminarily machined with a lathe and individual relief elements were processed with a drill. The preserved height of the cylinder is 8,5 cm while it's diameter is 9 cm.

The pyxis probably dates to the 6th century and, as it was stated before, it may have been manufactured in alexandrian workshops⁹. The relief composition, with characters depicted frontally and a background depicting a



1. Walters Art Gallery, item no 170b. Egypt. Ivory circular bowl (the author would like to thank the museum for providing pictures for publication)

curtain resembling a theatrical convention (perhaps it was some staging that did not survive to our times was an inspiration for the artist that sculpted this relief)

Two mythological scenes are depicted on the relief – gods banqueting during the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (fig. 1) and a quarrel between Aphrodite, Athena and Hera for the title of the most beautiful (figs. 1, 2). In truth however it is a cause-result sequence and both scenes are connected with one another. None the less, two separate groups of characters may be distinguished. The first group is gathered around a round, tripod table with a round item placed on

⁸ It appears that the ferrule together with the lock was installed at the beginning, at the time the vessel was created. It is proved by a disproportionately depicted hand of Hera (see fig. 1), which was directly where the lock once was and therefore must have been difficult to make for a sculptor.

⁹ W.F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten...* p. 75. He compares the relief style of the above described vessel to other artifacts probably manufactured in Alexandria at roughly the same time – e.g. a pyxis with the depiction of Acteon (currently held in Florence, Bargello) no 99, as well as a depiction of scenes from the life of Josef, son of Jacob (currently held at the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), no. 191.

the table-top – probably an apple. A strict identification of all persons appearing in this scene is unfortunately not possible. It is only possible to certainly identify Athena, sitting on the right side of the table due to a characteristic Attic helmet that the goddess is usually depicted in. She is shown *en trois-quatre* and her head is directed to the left. To her right a woman sitting on an ornate chair – throne with a high head rest is depicted in the foreground¹⁰. She wears a rich draped robe with long sleeves that reaches her ankles. She rests her left hand on the left shoulder while she reaches her right hand in the direction of the table. The woman, who with regard to the context may be identified as Hera, wears a coif-shaped headdress. To the left of her central position behind the table is held by a sitting figure with covered head. Contrary to the opinion of Childs, who sees that character as Zeus¹¹, it seems to be a woman, and taking the whole context into consideration – a goddess. Zeus was not depicted that way, that is with no facial hair and in such a headdress. The father of gods usually had a thick beard and was depicted either with uncovered hair or with laurels on his head¹². Furthermore, the arrangement of the garment on the chest as well as the headdress worn by that figure suggest that it is a woman. A similar headdress is worn by the Aphrodite of Capua (currently in the Museo Nazionale Archeologico in Naples) that is a Roman copy of a greek sculpture from the 4th/3rd century¹³; and the Aphrodite of Leptis magna (currently in the Tripoli Museum) – an original sculpture from the 4th century B.C¹⁴. In the above mentioned examples a diadem is depicted in the goddesses hair, therefore in the case of the pyxis in question the headdress may also be described as such. The above described disputable figure from the pyxis in question, depicted *en face*, wears a garment tightly fastened below the neck with a cape or shawl on her shoulders. She holds a bowl or goblet in her left hand and her right hand stays invisible – probably covered by a different figure. Further to the left a bearded mature man is depicted in a reclining position, He is dressed in a robe thrown

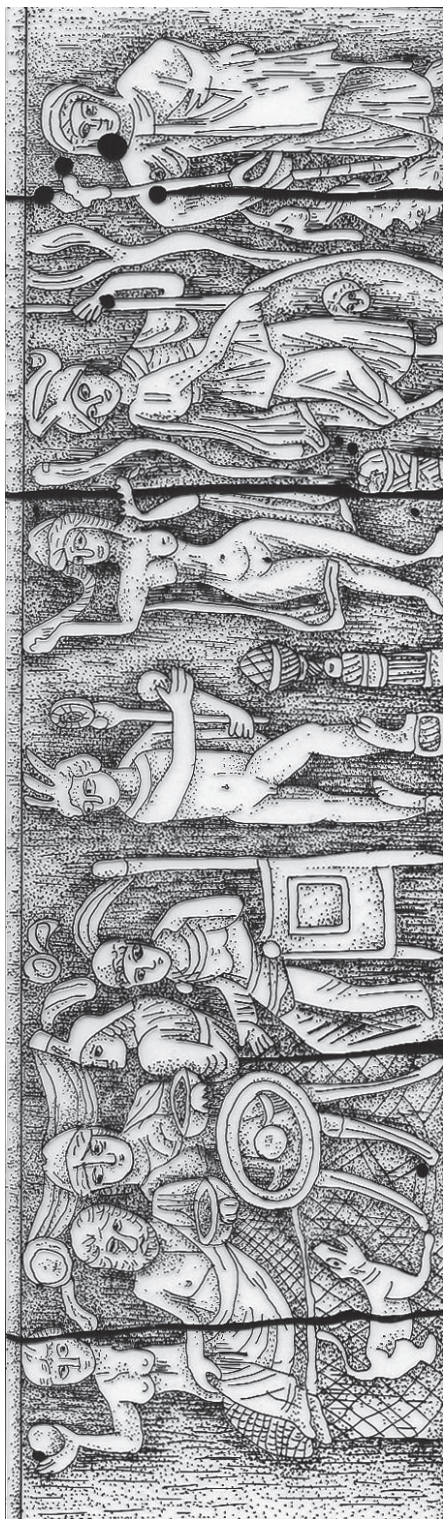
¹⁰ The throne is similar in shape to a throne of the bishop of Ravenna, Maximilian (546-556) known from a later period – see W.F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten...* p. 93-94, n. 140, tafeln 72-74.

¹¹ W.A.P. Childs, *Pyxis...* s. 137.

¹² Comp. e.g. the Jupiter (Zeus) Verospi in the Vatican; Zeus in the Capitoline Museum.

¹³ See R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, New York 1991, p. 81, ill. 105.

¹⁴ R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic...* p. 75, ill. 87.



2. Walters Art Gallery, item no 170b. Egypt. Drawing of the decoration of the ivory circular bowl (drawing by Emilia Smagur)

over his left shoulder in such a way, that his entire chest and right shoulder is uncovered. He rests his right hand on his thigh and knee. In his left hand, bent in an elbow resting on a bed (*kline*) on which he reclines, he holds that same vessel (goblet) that the person on the right. A dog lies in front of the god in the foreground and raises his head in the direction of the table, whereas further to the left, beyond the stretched legs of the god a standing naked woman is depicted that holds a round object in her right raised hand – that same object that lies on the table in front of the gods, that is an apple. A horizontally folded draperie is hanging above the feasting figures, which is used in antique art to signify that a scene takes place inside a house or palace.

Three women and one man are depicted on the other side of the pyxis. An identification of characters is much easier here than in the previous scene since it undoubtedly depicts the judgement of Paris. A naked Aphrodite stands on the left side of the scene as a central character, depicted in a strong contrapost (ponderation on the left leg) in a Hellenistic manner of Aphrodite Anadyomene¹⁵, raising from sea mist and wringing water from her hair. She is depicted against a fabric (a cape or cloak) hanging from her shoulders. To the left walks Athena dressed similarly as in the previous scene – in an armour and helmet. Additionally she holds a spear with a gorgoneion. A basket is depicted between the two goddesses. It is possibly linked to Aphrodite and it may contain clothing that the goddess just stripped off. Hera is depicted further to the left of Athena in a robe that covers her body fully. The goddess holds an oblong object in her hand – probably a sceptre. A bird resembling a peacock stands between Athena and Hera. It is a symbol of Hera that additionally proves that the woman should be identified as the wife of Zeus. Hermes stands to the left of Aphrodite. He may be recognised by a headdress with wings and by winged shoes as well as a caduceus in his left hand. The messenger of gods wears a cloak (*chalmys*) on his shoulders and holds a round object in his right outstretched hand – an apple identical to the one on the table. Hermes walks in the direction of Aphrodite. A cubical altar or basket with an object similar to a cone is depicted between him and the goddess of love.

It is certain that the scenes carved in relief should be interpreted beginning from the naked woman on the left side of the group of feasting gods holding a

¹⁵ Comp. R.R.R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, New York 1991, p. 81, ill. 105.

round object in her hands, who may be identified with Eris, the goddess of discord, with whom the whole depicted story starts, the object being the famous ‘apple of discord’.

The judgment of Paris was described by various poets. Homer alluded to that topic (The Iliad, XXIV, 25nn) and so did Ovid (Heroides, XVI, 71-73; V, 35 – a short mention). Pseudo-Apollodoros wrote more on that topic (Bibliothèque, Epitome III, 1-2), but it was Lukian that described it in depth and with irony in his Dialogues of the Gods in the 2nd century A.D., 20 - „The judgement of goddessess”. It is worth mentioning that the famous Chest of Kypselos that Pausanias saw in Olympia, which dated to the 6th century B.C. Was decorated with depictions of Hermes leading three goddesses to be judged by Alexander-Paris (Pausanias, V, 19, 5). Eris „looking particularly unsightly”, as the author described her (V, 19, 2) was also depicted on the same object. In Homer’s (Il. IV, 440) work Eris is the sister of Ares, in Hesiod’s (Theogony, 225, Works..., 15 nn) she is the daughter of Night and mother of other worries (Hunger, Pain, Brawl, Fight, Murder and so on), that is Kakodaimones¹⁶

The wedding of Peleus and Thetis was described in the 1st century A.D. by Pseudo-Apollodoros (Bibliothèque, III, 13) but without mentioning the apple, which appeared in the work of Hyginus in the 2nd century A.D. (Fabulae 92): „*Iovis cum Thetis Peleo nuberet, ad epulum dicitur omnis deos convocasse excepta Eride, id est Discordia, quae cum postea supervenisset nec admitteretur ad epulum, ab ianua misit in medium malum, dicit, quae esset formosissima, attolleret. Iuno Venus Minerva formam sibi vindicare coeperunt, inter quas magna discordia orta, Iovis imperat Mercurio, ut deducat eas in Ida monte ad Alexandrum Paridem eumque iubeat iudicare. Cui Iuno, si secundum se iudicasset, pollicita est in omnibus terris eum regnaturum, divitem praeter ceteros praestaturum; Minerva, si inde victrix discederet, fortissimum inter mortales futurum et omni artificio scium; Venus autem Helenam Tyndarei filiam formosissimam omnium mulierum se in coniugium dare promisit. Paris donum posterius prioribus anteposuit Veneremque pulcherrimam esse iudicavit; ob id Iuno et Minerva Troianis fuerunt infestae. Alexander Veneris impulsu Helenam a Lacedaemone ab hospite Menelao Troiam abduxit eamque in coniugio habuit*

¹⁶ A full set of sources and depictions of Eris was collected by H. Giroux, LIMC 3/1, 1986, p. 846–850, s.v. Eris.

cum ancillis duabus Aethra et Thisadie, quas Castor et Pollux captivas ei assignarant, aliquando reginas”.

Naked Eris about to throw an apple she holds on the table is depicted on the pyxis. Further to the right a feast is visible, where the gift of the goddess was directed with an appropriate caption. A limited surface of the pyxis that could not contain all the participants of wedding party forced the artist to only include main characters in the depicted scene. Furthermore, the message had to be clear and understandable for a viewer, therefore it was pointless to include characters not connected to this particular scene.

The three above mentioned goddesses wanted the apple and it is them that are depicted on the pyxis. Only Athena (a goddess wearing an armor and a helmet) may be identified without question¹⁷. Some of the scholars identify the goddess depicted behind the table to the right as Hera¹⁸. To complete this “set” we only lack Aphrodite – in a way the leading heroine of the story. I identify her with the person to the left of Athena – holding a goblet, with a diadem or coif on her head. It is worth mentioning that the same headdress is worn by Aphrodite depicted on the second side of the pyxis (see fig. 1). For similar reasons (clarity of the message and restriction to the essential characters only) I identify the lying man depicted to the left of the table as Zeus¹⁹. He represents the rest of the gods participating in the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and is the one to make specific decisions in connection with the quarrel that arose. The father of gods orders Paris to give a judgment, which in turn is depicted on the other side of the pyxis.

Hermes was the executor of Zeus’ orders – he was the one to lead the goddesses to the Ida Mountain, where one of the mortals – Paris – was to make a choice. This fragment of the myth is shown on the pyxis in the part where Hermes (being simultaneously a link between the first scene, where the quarrel started, and the second one, where it was to be judged), heading with that same apple in his hand in the direction of the above mentioned goddesses. It is clearly marked which of them is the winner – it is Aphrodite showing her beauty in a coquettish gesture that is the central figure of the scene. Resentful Athena

¹⁷ W.A.P. Childs, *Pyxis...* p. 137.

¹⁸ W.A.P. Childs, *Pyxis...* p. 137; D. Angelova, *Pyxis...* p. 256.

¹⁹ Contrary to W.A.P. Child, who sees him as Poseidona – see W.A.P. Child, *Pyxis...* p. 137.

and Hera walk away to the right, at the same time looking jealously backwards in the direction of Aphrodite. In comparison to the mythic prototype we don't see Paris in this scene – the judge in this quarrel that is not necessary in the described scene, since it is clear from the context who the winner is. The role of an arbiter was to some extent taken over by Hermes, since he takes the apple, a symbol of victory, to Aphrodite.

That strictly “female” topic of the relief may also point to a specific purpose of the box. In this case the pyxis may have been meant as a cosmetics (or jewelery) container that served it's owner to increase her physical qualities and to become more beautiful and attractive than other women (just as the Goddess of Love)²⁰.

Including a dog in a feast scene seems a rather enigmatic issue. The animal is not present in scenes depicting the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, on the other hand it may be justified to include it in the scene of the judgment of Paris. After all Paris was a shepherd and he owned dogs that guarded his flock. Did the artist intend on depicting the feast in a “realistic” way, adding a dog that could be present just as it could be present at a feast of mortals?

²⁰ D. Angelowa, *Pyxis...* p. 256.