CHAPTER IV

CATALOGUE AND ANALYSIS OF DECORATIVE PLAQUES AND VENEER

This chapter includes segments of ornamented rings, strips cut in a spiral design, and plaques and flat strips decorated with floral and geometric patterns. Figurative elements, where they occur at all, are minor elements within a decorative scheme.

A. DECORATED RINGS

Forty-four richly decorated curved bone segments from rings are preserved. Most of these segments can be placed with enough others of similar design, sometimes adjoining, to reconstruct the rings. The reconstructions suggested below for one almost fully preserved ring and portions of at least nine others appear to account for most of the fragments. There may have been more rings than proposed here. There are two basic decorative schemes: an interlaced swastika pattern (Pl. IV.1) and a leaf pattern (Pl. IV.2). Continuous grooves are cut parallel to the outer and inner circumferences on the rings with swastika patterns, and convex moldings are cut along the outer and inner circumferences on the leaf-pattern rings. The swastika pattern encloses alternating 8-petal and 4-petal flowers. The leaf pattern rings are enriched with flowers, fruits, and human heads.

The preservation of one almost complete ring suggests a possible system of production. The first step was the standard process of removing the ends of whatever long bones were used and then sawing them into flat longitudinal strips of roughly trapezoidal shape. The next step was likely the fitting and gluing tightly together of a number of these trapezoids, possibly on a wooden support, to form a flat solid blank. Ring 1, the most completely preserved, was made up from four such trapezoidal pieces, glued together along angled joins (Figs. IV.1, IV.12). Using a lathe, the outer circumference of the blank was reduced from an irregular polygon to a circle, the outer and inner continuous grooves were cut, and finally the inner circumference was cut and the ring removed from the spindle of the lathe. Evidence for this method of production is that the angled joins must have been made before the designs were carved, because the pattern is continuous in each case where adjacent strips with angled ends are preserved. Most of these ends also carry score marks to key the adhesive for the preliminary fitting.

2. For the preliminary steps in bone working and the use of standard pre-shaped blanks, see Chapter II.
3. Two additional cuts, along a single diameter, were made later as described below, resulting in the six pieces preserved of this ring. St. Clair, *Carving as Craft* 53 supports the use of wood matrices to hold pieces for turning.
The difficult task of cutting annular designs or regular leaf patterns on a ring made up of several small pieces (Fig. IV.5) was thereby simplified by the procedure of cutting at least some of the geometric portions of the decoration on the blank while it was turning on a lathe. As discussed above in Chapter II, the use of lathes for turning wood, ivory and bone, glass, silver, and bronze is well attested from the Greek period on. The moldings along the edge and other continuous patterns could have been cut fairly rapidly on the end of a turning blank. The leaf pattern could have been produced while the blank rotated on a lathe, and the reciprocating motion of some Roman lathes also would have lent itself to the carving of alternating clockwise and counter-clockwise leaf patterns. Variety was achieved after the ring was removed from the lathe by the addition of different subsidiary elements, including human heads, flowers, grapes, and pomegranates.

Of the ten rings, two have exterior diameters of 19 cm and interior diameters of just over 14 cms (Nos. 4 and 5) with some evidence for a third. Seven share an exterior diameter of just under 15 cm and an interior diameter of about 10 cm (Nos. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10). One has a smaller diameter of ca. 12 cm (No. 8). Of the two large Rings, 4 and 5, one is decorated with the leaf pattern and one with the swastika pattern. Of the seven middle-sized Rings, 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10, four are decorated with the leaf pattern and three are decorated with the swastika pattern. The single smaller example, Ring 8, is poorly preserved, and its possible twin may be represented only by some minuscule fragments, among those in Cat. no. 191, that could not be identified with certainty as belonging to this group of curved strips. There are mainly two sizes of rings as reconstructed, the smaller of which almost fits inside the larger. The bone blanks must thus have been cut into standard sizes in the same workshop.

In addition to the angled cuts at the ends of most of the strips, there are also radial cuts at the ends of some strips, e.g., on Cat. nos. 146, 147, 149, and 150, that are perpendicular to the diameter or vertical, not angled. There is clear evidence for these vertical cuts only on Rings 1 through 4 (see below). In the best-preserved example, Ring 1, a narrow portion of the design is missing at the vertical cuts, unlike at the angled cuts where the design is complete. These vertical cuts, of which no more than two occur on a single ring and which fall on opposite ends of the same diameter, must have been made after the decoration of the ring was complete. There are several possible causes for this sequence in production. As is known for mosaic emblemata and silver tondos, the rings might have been shipped elsewhere to a furniture producer for attachment. Subsequently, a ring might have been sawn in half to be fitted around a large, projecting boss, as an escutcheon. Or, before or after the ring was mounted along the center closure of a cabinet and divided between two single-leaved doors, or along the hinged adjoining leaves of double-leaved doors, or along the body and lid of a chest, it might have been cut so that half of the ring could move separately.

Throughout antiquity, rings are a common design on chests and caskets. A spectacular example of inlaid decoration with multiple rings occurs on a flat-topped chest excavated at

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4 For use of lathe, see Chapter II, esp. nn. 90-91.
5 Typically, cupboards were inlaid with woods, ivory (and bone), and/or were painted; Pliny, HN 16, 232; Sulp. Sev., Dial. 1, 21, 4.