CHAPTER VII

FURNITURE RECONSTRUCTIONS, PROVENANCE, DATING, SETTING, AND FUNCTION

The wood fragments and related veneers and plaques of ivory and bone from Kenchreai are, in part, unique. To the authors’ knowledge, no other examples of Roman ivory and/or bone veneered crossed-leg wood chairs of this type have survived.¹ Plaques on small caskets and components of bone beds are preserved²; but, with the exception of the chest from Qustul, the range of decoration found on the ivory and bone veneers from Kenchreai is attested only by isolated plaques. A substantial number exist, but most lack specific provenance or evidence of date. And of the surviving examples of caskets and chests decorated with ivory and/or bone inlays or attachments, none, save the one from Qustul, come close to the large size that the Kenchreai plaques might have decorated nor show such an array of high quality—if extremely fragmentary—veneers, plaques, and attachments. On the other hand, quite a few representations of chairs, caskets, and armaria are known, although most do not provide much detailed information about the decoration. Parallels in metal provide valuable information, as there is evidence for the relationship of objects made of silver to ones made of bone and ivory.³ Unfortunately, the surviving consular diptychs, helpful though they are as models for the poses, drapery, and other details of figures, all were made later than the second third of the fourth century, when the Kenchreai furniture was likely produced.⁴ Hindered by the lack of surviving parallels and the fragmentary condition of the objects themselves, the authors have been unable to determine some aspects of the design and construction of the Kenchreai furniture and its decoration.

On the other hand, there are possible explanations for the use of these furnishings and good evidence for the period to which they can be dated. The early view of the excavators that the furniture had been discarded or even thrown from above into the apsidal room,

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¹ In “Sellae Curules” del Teatro di Ercolano 143, Schäfer points out that Richter refers to wood chairs in error in Ancient Furniture 126. Etruscan examples include an ivory fragment from the Tomba Montagnola in Quinto Fiorentino, a fairly complete ivory sella curulis from the Tomba dello Sgabello in Bologna (Museo Civico, Inv. no. 17274), remains of a wood sella in Cerveteri (Museum, unpubl.), and evidence of others from the bronze fittings used to connect the legs and to protect the feet of the legs. The bronze sellae curules from Herculaneum (Naples, Inv. nos. 73152 and 73153) are examples of the same type of backless type; see Schäfer, Imperii insignia 2-9, 46.

² For caskets with incised bone plaques, see Loverdou-Tsigarida, Ορτείνα πταξίδια; Albertoni, Lastrine di Rivestimento. For low-relief plaques, see Marangou, Bone Carvings from Egypt. For lecti, see Nicholls, A Roman Couch; Nicholls, More Bone Couches; Letta, Due letti funerari.

³ St. Clair, Carving as Craft 15-6.

⁴ The preserved diptychs extend from the consulship of Probus in 406 to that of Basileus in 541, when the consulship ended.
which they believed to be an unroofed fountain court, seems unlikely. The main deposit of chairs was located near the center of the space, as if placed together there, and not along the entrance wall or near the perimeter of the room. Also, if—as seems likely in view of its mosaic floor and its function as suggested by the floor plan—the room was a roofed oecus/stibadium, casual discard seems even less plausible. It seems more apt to be the case that these broken furnishings remained where they had been used or, if moved from another location, were placed in this room either because they were hopelessly damaged and/or because the function they had served ceased to exist and repair, even if possible, was irrelevant. For example, if the suggestion made above in Chapter VI is correct, that the cabriole legs, bone rings, and miniature architectural elements were from an elaborate armarium for scrolls and codices, the widespread public book burnings and destruction of private libraries by their owners known to have been carried out in 371, or at some other time, might not only have caused damage to an armarium but also eliminated any further use for it.\(^5\)

This chapter presents some additional thoughts about reconstructions based on objects that share a relationship—stylistic, iconographic, or both—that may have bearing on the provenance and the date(s) when the objects were produced. Determining a precise provenance through stylistic analysis of local styles is complex because of the Roman practice of commissioning objects from (and for) remote sources, as is doubtless the case for both the Kenchreai glass opus sectile and the furniture.\(^6\) The conclusion suggests the possible use to which these furnishings were devoted, the function of the room in which they were found, and the sort of owner who may have possessed such luxuries.

A. RECONSTRUCTIONS

No group of fragments catalogued in the preceding chapters can be reassembled into a complete object, but there seem to be materials catalogued in different categories that can be shown with some likelihood to have belonged together. These connections provide the basis for suggestions about the original appearance of some objects, although not complete or certain reconstructions. Even in the case of the figural panels, most of which are extremely fragmentary, there are either no, or few, similar complete examples to provide evidence of content and composition. However, certain subjects on the Kenchreai fragments occur in other mediums, especially mosaic and silver, and these offer assistance in reconstructing some of the panels. The association of certain subjects in these representations also provides evidence

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5 Amm. Marc. xxxix. i.41; ii. 4; in view of the cruel executions carried out on people suspected of practising sorcery under Valentinian I, ownership of even straightforward scholarly books might have made their owners nervous, see A.A. Barb, “The Survival of Magic Arts,” in Momigliano, Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity 116-7. Not everyone was as prudent as Libanius, who apparently censored his correspondence from 365 to 388, thus avoiding trouble when his correspondence was inspected in 371 (Or. i 175-7); see Norman, Book Trade 125; Liebeschuetz, Antioch 30. The risk posed by the contents of an armarium during the reign of Diocletian is preserved in the Gesta apud Zenophilum consularem, CSEL 26:186-8.

6 Thomas, Late Antique Egyptian Funerary Sculpture 105 n. 11.