

THE PROMETHEUS BONE CARVING FROM AREA B

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During the course of the 1976 excavations at Tell Heshbân, from out of a loose soil layer off the Area B.7 staircase, came to light the key artistic find of the season—a bone carving depicting the “Prometheus Bound” myth. The importance of such a carving is not immediately evident, for it requires analysis in order to determine its implications in relation to Heshbon as a major city in the ancient world. The results of a stylistic analysis of the Prometheus plaque will be not only to deliver further support to the pottery dating of this locus (Early Byzantine, A.D. 324-450), but also to designate a center of manufacture and tentatively suggest possible trade between Heshbon and Egypt (see Pl. XIX:B).

The story of Prometheus, a Titan, which was very popular in the ancient world, is often found represented on Greek and Roman vases, reliefs, and coins. Hesiod tells us that this demigod first won his reputation by creating man out of clay, and it was only natural that he should regard his own creation with favor. But at this time Zeus had little affection for mankind and oppressed them by depriving them of fire. Prometheus rescued humanity by stealing fire from heaven and carrying it to earth. This act, combined with Prometheus’ teaching mankind all manner of arts, thus raising them above their bestial condition, could only have resulted in the wrath of Zeus coming down upon the head of the guardian of man. Taking stern measures, Zeus had Hephaistos carry Prometheus to an isolated mountain peak and there chain him to a rock. Daily an eagle visited him and tore out his liver; every night the liver grew back, thus making

the torture unending. This curse continued for thirty thousand years and was terminated only after Prometheus divulged the secret cause of the fall of Zeus, who subsequently sent Herakles to free the Titan.¹

Bone carvings from the ancient Near East are of two types: first, a bone plaque which has been dressed in order to serve as an inlay for a box; second, the bone which retains its natural convex shape and functions either as a handle or as a decorative panel for furniture. The Heshbon carving is of the latter type, a form which, though employed by the early Christians, had its precedents in pagan art.

The rendering of Prometheus on the Heshbon carving is the standard motif employed throughout ancient art in depicting this myth. The Titan leans against what appears to be a mountain face, with his arms shackled and his right foot resting on a small rock (our only indication of the environment). He gazes down at a rather benevolent looking eagle, which impassively sets about the task of tearing out the demigod's liver. The artist has chosen to render a subject which has its origins in Greece but in its conception shows a process of assimilation between Hellenistic motifs and early Christian and Oriental styles resulting in a cultural reinterpretation. The figure is thus transformed from a classical model into a type which reflects the beginnings of a "weakened sense of proportion"² and movement.

The body has taken on a massive character in which the squat proportions common in early Christian art are emphasized. It is of a linear style in which musculature and folds in the flesh are for the most part executed with incised lines, sacrificing some of the modeled, breathing quality found in Hellenistic art. This linearity also holds true in the depiction of the eagle, which,

¹ H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Dutton, 1959), pp. 54-56.

² Kurt Weitzmann, *Ivories and Steatites: A Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Medieval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, 3 (Washington, D.C., 1972): 25.

rather than reflecting the malevolent nature of his mission, appears content to sit upon Prometheus' knee and hold discourse.

The head of the Titan takes on hieratic proportions at the expense of the limbs, which are sketchily rendered and diminutive in relation to the body and head. Occurring both in Oriental and early Christian art, this idea of hieratic proportion is one in which attention is primarily paid to the execution of the head and its features, while sacrificing what the artist must have considered superfluous.

The designation of a center of manufacture in the case of the Heshbon bone carving is at best mere guesswork, for during the period ascribed to our plaque, the artistic centers for ivory and bone carving workshops were numerous. Since Egypt and Syria were within the Byzantine empire at this time, it was natural that Alexandria and Antioch, important artistic and industrial centers in the Near East where the Hellenistic spirit continued, should take the lead in this artistic medium.³ Thus, studied in conjunction with contemporary pieces found at these centers, the Heshbon carving seems likely to be an import from the Syro-Egyptian artistic province. Subject matter and shared artistic elements such as the subtle treatment of the body, pronounced facial features, and the environmental concept, indicate that the carving was probably executed in a Coptic workshop in Alexandria, for it was in just such workshops that similar plaques, dating from the third to fifth centuries A.D., and depicting classical pagan figures, were found in large numbers.⁴

Through stylistic analysis, the Prometheus carving comes to

³ Ormonde Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), p. 183.

⁴ Ormonde Dalton, *East Christian Art: A Survey of Monuments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), p. 208. For ivory plaques from Coptic Egypt in which composition and carving techniques are similar, and which depict classical themes, see Weitzmann, *Ivories and Steatites*, vol. 3, Pl. VII and Fig. 11 (Herakles knife handle); Margaret Longhurst, *Ivories in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: 1927), pp. 16-26, Pl. V, A14-1925 (draped dancing woman); Renate Rosenthal, "Late Roman and Byzantine Bone Carvings from Palestine," *IEJ* 26 (1976): 96-103.

possess a twofold importance for the archaeologist. The characteristic manner in which the figure is rendered places it within a category of bone carvings which are traditionally dated from the third through the fifth century A.D., a date which coincides with that indicated by the pottery accompanying it, A.D. 324-450. Further study of the essential features and their relationships to contemporaneous bone carvings found throughout the Near East allows for an ascription to a center of manufacture. Common themes and artistic styles appear to designate an Alexandrian workshop. This evidence may possibly denote trade with Egypt.



A. Scarab 2525 from Early Roman Tomb F.31: Views from top, bottom, side. Photos: Paul H. Denton.



B. Prometheus Bone Carving 2295 from Loculus B.7:19. Photo: James J. C. Cox.