

# IVORY ORNAMENTS OF HELLENISTIC COUCHES

(PLATES 78, 79)

I am presenting here a group of ivory ornaments of a single type, belonging to those handsome and distinctive ancient couches which had one or two rising head or foot boards called by their Latin name, *fulcra*.<sup>1</sup> Their history was sketched in broad outlines by Caroline Ransom.<sup>2</sup> The earliest evidence of their use is provided by two red-figured vases, of which the earlier is a fifth-century kylix showing Prokrustes' bed with rectangular legs and *fulcra* which are decorated above and below by simple volutes.<sup>3</sup> The other is a somewhat later vase scene in which Dionysos and Ariadne ride on a mule's back in a double-ended couch instead of a saddle; this couch has turned legs and arching *fulcra* of which one top, alone visible, ends in a volute.<sup>4</sup> A tomb near Vathy<sup>5</sup> on the island of Euboia (late fourth century B.C.) used stone or marble couches as biers and one couch has lathe-turned legs and a *fulcrum* terminating above in a sort of double volute. Etruscan terracotta and alabaster sarcophagi and urns of late times<sup>6</sup> (2nd and 1st centuries B.C.) sometimes have one or two *fulcra* to anchor their thick mattresses in place, and the ornaments of such *fulcra* are either volutes or, rarely, rudimentary animal heads. Chief among such monuments is the group of large sarcophagi in the tomb of the Volumnii near Perugia,<sup>7</sup> the largest of which has two *fulcra* terminating in ducks' heads.

So much for the representations and copies; now for actual furniture. No complete couch has survived. Of all-wood couches there are but a few fragments. Two pairs of legs and parts of three top rails from Egypt were restored in the Berlin museum as a stool but seem to belong to couches, and they and perhaps a couple more pairs of legs from Egypt are the only lathe-turned couch legs of the kind that was imitated in other materials.<sup>8</sup> Bronze couch fittings, that is, legs, *fulcrum* parts and sheathing for rails, are displayed in many museums, usually restored with modern

<sup>1</sup> The term was adopted following the research of W. C. F. Anderson, *Cl. Rev.*, III, 1889, pp. 322-324. See this article for Classical uses of the word *fulcrum*.

<sup>2</sup> C. L. Ransom, *Studies in Ancient Furniture. Couches and Beds of the Greeks and Romans*, Chicago, 1905, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27, fig. 11; G. M. A. Richter, *Ancient Furniture*, Oxford, 1926, fig. 175.

<sup>4</sup> Ransom, *op. cit.*, p. 82, fig. 44; Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 71, fig. 193. Cf. the scene on a gravestone, *ibid.*, fig. 214.

<sup>5</sup> Ransom, *op. cit.* p. 28 and p. 70, fig. 38; Richter, *op. cit.*, fig. 189; *Ath. Mitt.*, XXVI, 1901, p. 369, pls. XVI-XVII.

<sup>6</sup> Ransom, *op. cit.*, p. 31, fig. 14; G. Q. Giglioli, *L'Arte Etrusca*, Milan, 1935, pl. CCCCI, fig. 1, pl. CCCCX, fig. 4, pl. CCCXCII, fig. 2. One in Palermo is reproduced only in an unsatisfactory drawing in Ransom, *op. cit.*, p. 104, fig. 50; it has lions' heads at top and bottom of the *fulcrum*.

<sup>7</sup> Giglioli, *op. cit.*, pl. CCCCXVII.

<sup>8</sup> Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Ransom, *Jahrb.*, XVI, 1902, pp. 125 ff., figs. 1, 5, 6, p. 139, C.

wood supports. Today most such pieces are correctly restored as couches, but in the recent past the bronzes were attached to double-ended seats since, due to the reduced length of the sheathing, the total length of the couches was not appreciated. Now it is understood that the central section of every couch was plain wood because this part would be concealed by heavy draperies, and that the preserved parts are not from seats but from couches. Sixty-three bronze couches or parts were listed and studied by Greifenhagen,<sup>9</sup> and many others have since been found and published.

The normal end-covering for a *fulcrum* consists of four parts: the frame around the edges of the wood, an upper ornament which is usually an animal's head called a *protomé*, a circular medallion at the bottom next to the reclining person, and a metal sheet, either plain or decorated, behind the frame. Sometimes the *protomé* was cast with the frame as in Plate 79, c, sometimes it was made separately as in Plate 79, e.<sup>10</sup> When separate, the *protomé* should have holes for nailing to wood; as we shall see, the horse of Plate 79, e is exceptional in this respect. Occasionally, and in the earliest times only, the *fulcrum* end was a solid piece with relief decoration instead of the above mentioned frame and inserted sheet.

The sculptural types of the bronze ornaments derive from the period 200 B.C. or earlier but the actual pieces are mostly later. Fixed dates for them are provided by a coin found with a couch at Taman, South Russia, first half of the third century B.C.; by the destruction of Pella in 168 B.C.; by the wreck off Mahdia, dated by cumulative evidence to the time of Sulla; and by the destruction of Pompeii in A.D. 79. Neugebauer concluded that the couch fragments from Pella were not new at the time of its destruction and that they and certain other pieces, including the couch fragments from Priene, date from the third century B.C., and Dahlén has assigned one *fulcrum* to the fourth century B.C.<sup>11</sup> At the other end of the scale, these couches may be said to have about ceased by A.D. 79, since before this date modification had begun with the addition of tall vertical members above the *fulcra*<sup>12</sup> and subsequent heightening of the *fulcrum*.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A. Greifenhagen, "Bronzekline im pariser Kunsthandel," *Rom. Mitt.*, XLV, 1930, pp. 137-165.

<sup>10</sup> Walters Art Gallery, No. 54.2365. *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, XV-XVI, 1952-53, pp. 48-63, 96; *Rom. Mitt.*, XLV, 1930, pl. 47, No. 53; Sale Cat., Lucerne (August 1936) p. 15, No. 135, pls. 28, 29; Sale Cat., Brummer Collection, part III, Parke-Bernet Galleries (New York, June 8, 1949) p. 8, No. 38.

<sup>11</sup> K. A. Neugebauer, "Delische Betten," *Ath. Mitt.*, LVII, 1932, pp. 29-41; appendix, Greifenhagen, *Zu Plinius Nat. Hist. XIII*, 144, pp. 41-45, where Greifenhagen publishes the only silver *protomé* then known. See also Neugebauer, "Datierbare Entwicklungsphasen hellenistischer Bronzekunst," *Bericht über den VI International Kongress für Archäologie, Berlin 21-26 August 1939*, Berlin, 1940, pp. 417 f. New literature with additional pieces, see I. Dahlén, "Fragments of a Kline from Labranda," *Opuscula Atheniensia*, II, 1955, pp. 37-46. It was slightly earlier than the Pella destruction, in 187 B.C., that the first metal couches were brought to Rome, Livy, XXXIX, vi, 7.

<sup>12</sup> A. Maiuri, *La casa del Menandro e il suo tesoro di argenteria*, 1932, p. 423, fig. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum, *Röm. Mitt.*, XLV, 1930, p. 163, fig. 13; perhaps also Providence, *A.J.A.*, LXI, 1957, p. 167, pls. 62-63. See below, note 33.

So, from a total of nearly eighty bronze couches spanning a period of more than four centuries, one can visualize this article of furniture and appreciate its importance in Graeco-Roman civilization. It is time that more be said about the few very precious contemporary ivory couches. Toward that end I present here eight detached satyr heads in low relief. That which started my researches belongs to the Walters Art Gallery; it is 0.09 m. long, 0.04 m. broad at the widest and 0.01 m. thick (Pl. 78, a).<sup>14</sup> The right edge has a pronounced curve into which the head is squeezed unnaturally and the left side is cut away at a sharp angle so that there is no right ear. The back is flat, roughened for better adhesion of glue and an iron nail which passed through the corner of the mouth and left a stain there served to strengthen the attachment to a flat surface. The lower edge is concave and framed by a narrow border. Comparison with the lion *fulcrum* end (Pl. 79,c) makes the purpose of the ivory obvious; the moulding below the satyr corresponds to that below the lion; the plaque fitted against the top of the *fulcrum* end with the curved lower edge fitted to the central opening of the whole ornament. The broad upper part of the head recalls the volute which occupied this same position on the early couches, those illustrated on red-figured vases. Surely this ivory served the same purpose as the bronze lion of Plate 79,c and the bronze horse of Plate 79,e, though it faces in the opposite direction and so belonged to the other end of a *fulcrum*.

The satyr who looks us full in the face is a jovial though ugly person. His features are coarse—nose broad and stubby with a crease between the eyes, cheek-bones high, forehead wrinkled. His bald pate is crossed by an ivy garland with leaves arranged in a double row and berries at center front, and his long, pointed left ear is bent before the garland. His mustache billows around his mouth and his beard is parted in the center and divided into wavy locks that form a symmetrical pattern as they play against each other. All this is effectively but not meticulously carved and the marks of the tool, a flat chisel or knife, are still visible.

Once the curious form of this plaque is understood, others of similar purpose suggest themselves. A beautiful ivory, slightly larger, was found in the Athenian Agora in 1957 in a cistern which had been abandoned by the middle of the second century B.C. (Pl. 78,b).<sup>15</sup> The head is in profile to the right, wearing on its bald top an ivy crown with wavy stems and beautifully formed leaves but no berries. The features are the same—again the creased forehead, the high cheek-bones, the snub nose, and the mouth the coarseness of which is less apparent. The carving is much finer and no tool marks show. Four holes were for nailing to a background. There is no border below but the concave lower edge would fit the frame of a *fulcrum*. So, there can be little doubt that this second plaque was, like the plaque in the Walters, from a couch.

<sup>14</sup> Walters Art Gallery No. 71.616.

<sup>15</sup> *Hesperia*, XXVII, 1958, pl. 46,c. I am indebted to Dr. Homer Thompson for this photograph.

A third ivory satyr carving was found that same season, 1957, in the excavations at Mirmeki in the Crimea.<sup>16</sup> The head is in profile to the left and the ears are human and the brows so heavy as to suggest evil temper. But the general effect of caricature is the same, and surely a satyr is intended here also. The beard is less curly and less patternized. The garland, of ivy once more, consists of berries and a few leaves on a tightly drawn stem. The lower edge of the plaque is curved even more decidedly than before; therefore, though there is no border, we can see that it fitted a *fulcrum* and a hole, so close to the eye that it disfigures it, was for nailing to this *fulcrum*. This plaque was unhesitatingly dated in the Mirmeki reports to the end of the third century B.C., and though the Agora plaque was mentioned we may be sure that the excavators had independent data for the assignation.

Now that three pieces have been identified various other ivories in museums are seen to be functionally the same. Plate 78,c is a very beautiful piece in the British Museum.<sup>17</sup> The satyr's head is in profile to the right; the features are as before but more carefully and realistically carved; the eyebrow is delicately hatched, the eyelid heavy and bulging above the eye. Instead of the ivy garland there is a double round fillet with a couple of leaves added. The lower end of the plaque is slightly concave. A narrow piece of ivory was chosen by the carver so that the back of the head was suppressed. Then, there is another satyr in the Cabinet des Medailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale (Pl. 79, a) that has a curved lower end with a moulding, resembling the lion of Plate 79,c and undoubtedly used in the same way.<sup>18</sup> This head lacks a back and its bald crown is concealed by a sort of star of ivy leaves and berries. The eyebrow is delicately hatched; the eye beneath seems quizzical partly because it is not correctly foreshortened.

The curvature of the lower end has identified these five *fulcrum* plaques but others without this distinguishing feature served the same purpose. A satyr plaque formerly in the Borelli Bey Collection (Pl. 79,b) is like them except that the lower end is cut off square.<sup>19</sup> This satyr has the same pointed ear, is again bald with ivy crown, and has the same snub nose and long beard and the same expression as the others. Nothing is needed for its use on the end of a *fulcrum* except a separately made lower part to fit the curve of the bolster end, and such we may suppose it to have had. Also, two handsome plaques, apparently a pair, in the British Museum need the same additional piece (Pl. 79,d).<sup>20</sup> One is badly damaged and the other somewhat worn,

<sup>16</sup> *B.C.H.*, LXXXII, 1958, p. 352; *Atti del Settimo Congresso Internazionale Classica*, III, p. 71, pl. IV, 8.

<sup>17</sup> British Museum No. 73, 8-20, 661; photograph reproduced here by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

<sup>18</sup> Photograph A8785, which I owe to the kindness of J. Babelon.

<sup>19</sup> Sale Catalogue, Borelli Bey Collection, Paris, 1913, pl. XXXV, No. 398. I feel doubtful of the authenticity of the horse head published with it, *ibid.*, No. 399.

<sup>20</sup> British Museum, No. 59, 3-4, 44 and 45. Formerly Hertz Collection. Probably the same as

yet they still give an impression of dignity and grandeur. The complete plaque is larger than the others, about 0.12 m. total length, to which something would have to be added. The iris of the eye is neatly traced and above is a brow hatched to suggest hairs. The long ear is pointed and cocked forward before the crown of ivy which almost conceals the bald part of the head. The nose is broken off. The locks of the beard form a rhythmical pattern. It is easy to imagine these satyrs mounted on the couch fulcrum, from which position each looked at the floor and away from the reclining banqueter or sleeper.

Eight examples suffice to establish the satyr type as standard decoration for *fulcra*; undoubtedly there are more like them. Of the eight, two (those from the Athenian Agora and from Mirmeki) are dated by external evidence to the period 200-150 B.C. or earlier, and study of the style would have led to the same date. The type of satyr or silen is further indication of the chronology. It reminds us of portraits of Socrates and the resemblance is more than a casual one, extending as it does to details of the arrangement of the beard and of the hair behind the ears. This curious similarity of certain satyrs to Socrates has been noted and discussed before and it is unnecessary to consider the whole problem here and decide how much the Socrates portraits depend upon the satyrs and when and how satyrs were modified to look like Socrates. All known portraits of the philosopher fall into three types, of which the best and the most frequently copied is attributed to Lysippos;<sup>21</sup> all have somewhat the same features, expression, hair and beard. With them, and most closely with the "Hellenistic" ones, archaeologists have associated a group of minor works of art, chiefly terracotta and bronze,<sup>22</sup> including a satyr on a circular medallion, belonging to the lower part of a *fulcrum*, which must date in the third century B.C.<sup>23</sup> In Plate 79,f I illustrate another, a bronze medallion almost certainly from a *fulcrum* medallion with a satyr who is the perfect example of the Socrates type. Many *fulcra*, and other works of art as well, are decorated with satyrs whose beards have developed from this Socrates type to become stylized tubes cross-cut by diagonal lines.<sup>24</sup> Their date

H. Graeven, *Antike Schnitzereien auf Elfenbein und Knochen in photographischer Nachbildung*, 1903, p. 49 and *Bull. dell' Ist.*, 1843, p. 88. Photograph here by courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

<sup>21</sup> M. Bieber, *Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age*, 1955, pp. 45 ff.

<sup>22</sup> K. Schefold, "Sokratische Wolkenverehrer," *Antike Kunst*, II, 1959, pp. 21-26.

<sup>23</sup> E. Diehl, "Bronzener Silenskopf von der Lehne eines römischen Betts," *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz*, VII, 1960, pp. 208-213. I am not convinced that it is from a child's bed. The small size may be further indication of its early date, since all the ornaments on the early couches are small, relative to those on the Roman couches.

<sup>24</sup> Walters Art Gallery, 54.876. H. 0.078 m., diameter 0.055 m. For the later type on couches see Greifenhagen, *Röm. Mitt.*, XLV, 1930, pp. 153-159, who considers many late, even Hadrianic; also Picard, *Rev. Arch.*, ser. 6, XXVII, 1947, pt. 1, p. 201 who apparently considers them all Hellenistic. My article *Hesperia*, XXVII, 1958, pp. 315 f., pl. 56 compares a couch attachment and a wrestler with a beard; I consider them both Roman. For Socrates on late antique furniture see C. Vermeule, *Cl. Jour.*, LIV, 1958-1959, pp. 29-50.

does not concern us now. What is important for our purpose is the fact that a true Socrates-satyr belongs in the middle Hellenistic period and that our eight ivory plaques are of this type and therefore of this date.

Ivories of this shape destined for this use have not been unknown previously. Years ago Graeven recognized several (including two satyrs, probably our Pl. 79,d) as coming from this position.<sup>25</sup> He illustrated a plaque with a standing youthful Dionysos, a pair of ducks' heads in very low relief (with a snake in each beak) and another duck's head in slightly higher relief and he also mentioned a "Perseus." One duck's head has concave lower edge but two are cut off straight and have a relief decoration at the lower end suggesting an ornament which appears frequently on the bronzes, as Plate 79,c and e. The "Perseus" is known only from an inadequate illustration.<sup>26</sup> Rather similar to it is a plaque in the Bibliothèque Nationale, a figure wearing a mantel with hood, fastened before his throat like a *Telephore*. Can it be *Athys* or *Mithra*? Its lower edge is concave, with moulding. Graeven made no attempt to date these low-relief ornaments. It might be noted that the motive of a duck or other water bird biting a snake or other small animal domiciled among marsh weeds is peculiarly Augustan. Ducks' heads are common on the bronze couches; according to Greifenhagen they occupied positions on the back, the concealed end of the *fulcrum*, and usually there was no corresponding lower decoration on these *fulcra*, merely a plain bronze disc.<sup>27</sup> One of Graeven's ducks, the one with neck turned back in an almost Egyptian pose, with a beak in rather higher relief than the others, resembles the bone ornaments on a couch in the Metropolitan Museum, a piece to which we shall shortly return.<sup>28</sup> The hooded subject does not seem early. On the whole, then, the low relief ivories that Graeven discussed are later than the satyrs.

To complete the record, let us look at another class of couches, those of which all visible portions are of bone, mostly lathe-turned or carved in relief. Necessarily bone replaced ivory here, for large pieces were required. Two such couches were found in tombs near Ancona with material generally Graeco-Roman and in one tomb was a coin which can be dated to the time of the 168 B.C. Roman campaign in Macedonia.<sup>29</sup> The couch from that tomb has delicately constructed *fulcrum* ends with dogs and horses as *protomai*, and it seems comparable to the couch from Pella, destroyed that same year. The other couch is much heavier built, and the *fulcra* have enormous lion heads constructed of several pieces as upper ornaments and putti in place of discs; it

<sup>25</sup> Graeven, *Antike Schnitzereien*, pp. 49, 100, pls. 31, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Sale catalogue, Castellani Coll., Rome, 1884, No. 726.

<sup>27</sup> Greifenhagen, *Röm. Mitt.*, XLV, 1930, p. 152.

<sup>28</sup> Metropolitan Museum, No. 17.190.2076a and b. Formerly Morgan Collection, acquired by Morgan in 1912. Said to have been found in the garden of Livia. Richter, *Ancient Furniture*, fig. 313, opp. p. 132. This couch is now reconstructed to full length.

<sup>29</sup> *Not. Sc.*, 1902, pp. 445-463. For reconstruction of the lion-and-putto couch, see I. dall'Osso, *Guida Illustrata del Museo Nazionale di Ancona*, Ancona, 1915, p. 370.

seems comparable to the bronze "Capitoline bisellium," a heavy bronze couch.<sup>30</sup> The excavator of the Ancona tombs, E. Brizio, concluded merely that they dated from the last century of the Roman Republic. I would date one Ancona couch in the second century B.C., the other in the first century, possibly as late as the start of the Empire. There are also bone couches that differ from the above in having, in addition to all the usual members, huge lions' heads obviously intended to be attached to backgrounds and many little standing figures in relief on curving plaques of bone. Besides many detached ornaments, there exist three fairly complete reconstructed couches of this type: one from Norcia found with a coin of Augustus and now in the Terme in Rome;<sup>31</sup> one from Orvieto in the Museum of Natural History, Chicago;<sup>32</sup> and one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, reputed to come from the garden of Livia in Rome (see note 28). The standing figures are believed to be from the legs of the couches, while the lion heads are still disputed but may belong on the front below the top rail. These three couches and the parts from others are certainly of imperial times.<sup>33</sup>

As we imagine the couches to which the satyrs belonged let us not limit the decoration to any dull or simple scheme. We have a right to assume that the couches were magnificent in every respect, and even many-colored. A century earlier the father of the orator Demosthenes was manufacturing couches lavishly decorated with ivory.<sup>34</sup> Odysseus' bed of olive wood was decorated with silver, gold and ivory.<sup>35</sup> Another material used, perhaps merely for biers in tombs, was alabaster. The legs of an alabaster couch were discovered at Bolsena; they were of the same form as the bronze legs from Mahdia and elsewhere, but no *fulcrum* was found with them.<sup>36</sup> Now the object which I illustrate in Plate 79,e shows that there might have been a *fulcrum*—an alabaster *fulcrum* with bronze attachments.<sup>37</sup> It is a bronze horse *protomé* resembling those on the Priene couch and others, except that this horse, unusually, wears an ivy garland. The date can only be approximated; the naturalism seems late but the

<sup>30</sup> Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Now reconstructed, *A.J.A.*, LVI, 1952, pl. 12 and *Fasti Arch.*, IV, 1949, No. 224, fig. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Pasqui, *Mon. Ant.*, I, 1889, cols. 233 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Ransom, *Couches and Beds*, pp. 57 f. No *protomai* are preserved from either of these couches but there are maenads from the medallions and pieces of frame from the *fulcra*.

<sup>33</sup> Still later pieces, from ivory couches of other type: British Museum. E. S. Strong, *Art in Ancient Rome*, II, London, 1929, p. 43, fig. 313; Th. Eckinger, "Knochenschnitzereien aus Grabern von Vindonissa," *Anzeiger für Schweizerische Altertumskunde*, XXXI, 1929, pp. 241-256.

<sup>34</sup> Demosthenes, *Against Aphobos* I, 10, and 30 ff. On the materials see Ransom, *op. cit.* pp. 39 f.

<sup>35</sup> *Odyssey*, XXIII, lines 195 ff.

<sup>36</sup> *Not. Sc.*, 1893, p. 67. Cf. the legs from Mahdia, *Röm. Mitt.*, XLV, 1930, p. 148, fig. 2. Other examples, Richter, *op. cit.*, figs. 308-310, opp. p. 130 and *J.W.A.G.*, XV-XVI, 1952-53, p. 49, fig. 3; p. 50, fig. 4; p. 51, fig. 5; *Rivista del R. Istituto d'Archeologia e dell'Arte*, II, 1930, pp. 92 f., figs. 1, 2.

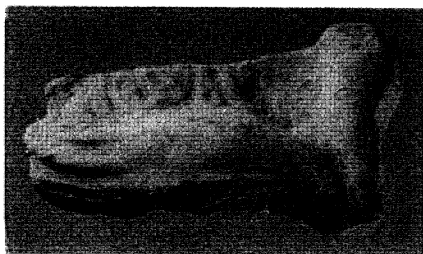
<sup>37</sup> Walters Art Gallery No. 54.2204. H. 0.185 m. Formerly Dattari Collection. Sale Catalogue (Paris 1912; with Lambros Collection), No. 447. Left ear missing, right repaired.

small size suggests an early date, so perhaps the first century B.C. would be correct. What is unique about this *protomé* is the contents of the back (Pl. 79,e, right): alabaster, part of the alabaster *fulcrum* from which it was torn. If the dead could have a couch of two-tone effect, golden bronze glimmering on translucent alabaster, what might not have been the color scheme of the seven couches to which the eight satyr plaques were attached? Light wood to match or dark wood to contrast with them, or wood stained to delicate tints? Was there gold and silver on the couches with these ivories?

DOROTHY KENT HILL

THE WALTERS ART GALLERY





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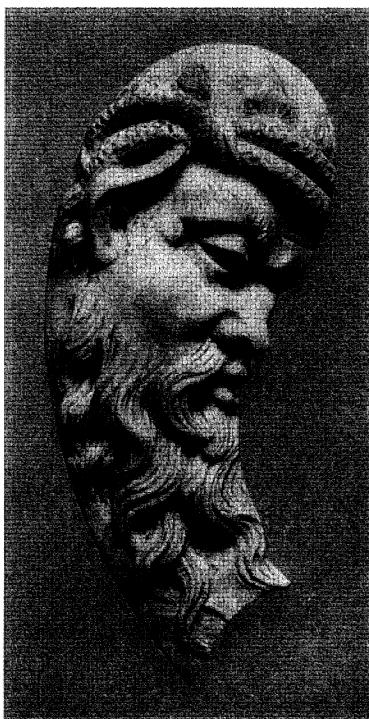
DOROTHY BURR THOMPSON:  
THREE CENTURIES OF HELLENIS-  
TIC TERRACOTTAS, III B, GROUP  
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a. Ivory plaque, Walters Art Gallery.

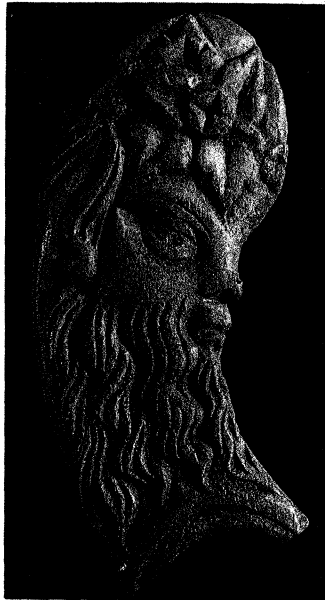


b. Ivory plaque, Agora Excavations.



c. Ivory plaque, British Museum.

DOROTHY KENT HILL: IVORY ORNAMENTS FROM HELLENISTIC COUCHES



a. Ivory plaque, Bibliothèque Nationale.



b. Ivory plaque, formerly Borelli Bey Collection.



c. Lion, detail from bronze couch, Walters Art Gallery.



d. Ivory plaques, British Museum.



e. Bronze horse head, Walters Art Gallery.



f. Bronze medallion, Walters Art Gallery.