

# NETWORK

Tracking Origins

From the first centuries of the so-called “Christian era” to the pinnacle of the High Middle Ages, some parts of the globe were always “estranged” and separate. There existed whole regions that knew little beyond natural boundaries—those towering mountains, that vast desert, the limitless sea.

That was destined to change. With the emergence of trade networks that brought diverse peoples into contact with each other, “edges” became more malleable, less certain. What once had been exotic, desirable for its difference, became familiar. It was possible to possess what once was unattainable.

This intermingling of culture and aspiration across natural barriers—this *globalization*—defined itself by a simultaneity of differing tastes and traditions, styles and design.

That is to say it was possible to trace *origins*, to pinpoint where an object came from, to value difference and even to exalt this quality.



Ivory played an important role in this transformation, although we tend to lose sight of why and how this is so. Objects crafted in the lustrous animal substance bear a signature that lends depth to the “biography” of the piece, replacing impressionistic glosses that obscure both origin and manufacture.



In something of an oblique compliment, we have called this era the “pre-modern”. Rather, we might think of these 1000 years as an annealing tank, a period of ferment, of exchange and re-assignment of cultural givens. Far-flung networks that criss-cross the globe, permeable boundaries that beckon the adventurous, not monolithic borders. A new world order—a Renaissance born from differences, the surprising and the little-known.



Tansen Sen, a medievalist with a special interest in the archaeology of the Silk Road, has highlighted “the role played by . . . intermediary states and peoples in linking various parts of Asia during the first millennium of the common era.”

An unprepossessing example (above) of the traces of early exchange was retrieved by two of our team members amongst ivory manufacturing discards and artifacts from Al-Baleed in the Arabian Peninsula. The object dates from sometime near the end of the 9th century CE.

It has not yet been possible to source the raw ivory itself (Asia? Africa?), but associated finds link the worked artifacts stylistically to the Chinese mainland.

