

Alexander Barker's Sapi-Portuguese Oliphant

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Since Ezio Bassani and William Fagg published their provisional catalogue raisonné of Afro-Portuguese and other associated ivories in *Africa and the Renaissance* (New York: Center for African Art, 1988) further examples have come to light. The creation of the catalogue has played a part in this, since it provided illustrations of the ivories that have enabled museum curators and private individuals to identify similar objects in their own collections. The most recent addition to the corpus is a Sapi-Portuguese oliphant¹ that formerly belonged to the nineteenth century English art collector and dealer Alexander Barker.²

The evidence that Barker owned such an oliphant has been buried in an obscure pamphlet published by the Arundel Society in 1867 for the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education. It is entitled *Classified List of Photographs of works of art in the "South Kensington Museum"* (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) and in other public and private collections, "for the use of schools of art" and "the general purposes of public instruction."³

Among the photographs listed is one, numbered 2309, of two ivory horns said to have been lent to the Museum by Alexander Barker (Fig. 1). The first was described as a "Hunting-horn, in ivory, carved with hunting scenes, crocodiles, and angels supporting a shield of arms. Oriental work"; the second as a "Horn, in carved ivory, with animals, and reptiles, in relief, with inscriptions." To anyone familiar with the Afro-Portuguese ivories, these descriptions would immediately suggest that the two ivory horns were Afro-Portuguese and from Sierra Leone. Hunting scenes, crocodiles or other reptiles, and European coats of arms are typical elements in the decoration of Afro-Portuguese oliphants from that area. Moreover, in the mid-nineteenth century

such ivory carvings were often supposed to be from the Portuguese enclave of Goa in India, which might explain the phrase "oriental work."

What of the photograph itself? Surely that would settle the matter one way or the other. But here there was a difficulty. Although the 1867 pamphlet states that a complete set of the photographs was available to be consulted in the National Art Library in the V&A, this proved (in 2010) no longer to be the case. All museums periodically engage in "weeding out" operations, in which material deemed to be "surplus to requirements" is disposed of. This seemed from my initial inquiries to have been the fate of the photographs on the 1867 list. The Museum had retained only those photographs in its records which were of objects in its own collections. The others—it was said around 100,000 in total—had been loaned in the 1970s to a university as

(opposite page)

1 Two oliphants in the possession of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in 1860, formerly the property of the English art collector Alexander Barker (ca. 1797–1873). Photo originally published in the pamphlet *Classified List of Photographs in the South Kensington Museum*.

2 Oliphant (mouthpiece not original)

Ivory; carved. H. 46 cm, D. 9 cm

Inv. no. F-635

The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Photo: Konstantin Sinyavsky © The State Hermitage Museum





3 Detail of lower oliphant in Figure 1.



4–5 Details of inscriptions on oliphants in Figure 1 (bottom) and Figure 2.



a picture resource. Although they were apparently returned to the Museum in the late 1990s, they were unsorted and in limbo, with no-one seeming quite to know where they were. And in the absence of the photograph of Barker's horns, one couldn't be certain that they were Afro-Portuguese; or, if they were Afro-Portuguese, that they weren't among those already included in Bassani and Fagg's catalogue raisonné.

There the matter rested until October 2014, when Ella Ravi-ious, who was researching the Museum's photographic collections in its archives at Blythe House and knew of my interest in Alexander Barker's ivory horns, tracked down the photograph in an old museum guardbook. It confirmed my suspicion that the two horns were Afro-Portuguese from Sierra Leone. However the first, the hunting horn with angels supporting a shield of arms, was



certainly *not* lent to the Museum by Alexander Barker, since it is unmistakably an ivory horn that has been in the British Museum since the mid-eighteenth century. It formerly belonged to Sir Hans Sloane and was listed among his *Miscellanies* in the 1740s. The statement that it was a loan from Barker was clearly a mistake.⁴

However it is the second Sapi-Portuguese horn that is the real find (Fig. 3). It is a previously unknown example. It is related to a group of horns numbered 81 to 85 in *Africa and the Renaissance*. The one most like it is an oliphant—no. 85 in the aforementioned group—now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (Fig. 2). Both horns (to judge by what one can see from the photograph) have the words *spes mea in deo meo* (“my hope [is] in my God”)—the motto of the Portuguese king João III (1521–1557)—inscribed in a band around the horn, the only examples in the entire Afro-Portuguese corpus to do so (Figs. 4–5). The Hermitage horn is incomplete: it has lost its finial mouthpiece held in the jaws of an animal. It may also have lost a whole section at its open end, since it terminates abruptly in the inscribed band—the latter edged with a protective metal ring, probably European—whereas in Barker’s example there is a section beyond this, on which is carved the armillary sphere that was an emblem of the House of Aviz, the Portuguese royal family. One assumes that there are other heraldic emblems on the side of the horn not visible from the photograph. In addition, around the rim one can make out letters in old Gothic script, apparently SYNO but the full inscription is open to conjecture. The two horns differ in minor details of the hunting scenes carved in low relief, but there are certainly grounds for thinking that the two horns were the work of the same carver, and that Barker’s horn, in its relatively intact state, shows how both horns would have looked

when originally carved.

It would be satisfying to say in conclusion that we know what became of the horn and where it now is. But for the present that remains a mystery. Following Barker’s death in October 1873, his art collections were auctioned by Christie, Manson, and Woods in two tranches, June 6–11, 1874 and June 19–21, 1879, but there is no record of an ivory horn among the objects auctioned. Throughout his career Barker had sold as well as bought works of art, and the Sapi-Portuguese oliphant might have been traded or sold on to another collector during his lifetime. However, the 1860s photograph shows it to have been in excellent condition at that date, and I am hopeful that the publication of the image may catch someone’s eye and trigger a memory of having come across the oliphant in a museum or in someone’s private collection.

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Notes

¹ The term Sapi-Portuguese has come to be used of ivories carved in Sierra Leone.

² Among other works acquired by the National Gallery in London from Barker’s collection are two of its most famous paintings: *Mars and Venus* by Botticelli and *The Nativity* by Piero della Francesca.

³ There were three such lists published. The first covered drawings, paintings and sculpture; the second, precious metals, enamels and ivory carvings; and the third, pottery, porcelain, glass and embroidery. Barker’s oliphant is in the second of these.

⁴ That the attribution of the first horn to Barker is an error raises the possibility that the attribution of the second horn to Barker may also be erroneous. It seems more likely, however, that it was because the second horn had been lent by Barker that Sloan’s horn was mistakenly assumed to be Barker’s also.