

ARTICLE

Assyrian Nimrud and the Phoenicians

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The first ivories at the Assyrian imperial capital of Kalhu/Nimrud in northern Iraq were found by Henry Layard in the mid-19th century. Max Mallowan and David Oates (both professors at the Institute of Archaeology), together with the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, worked there from 1949–1963 and found literally thousands more, both in the palaces of the acropolis and in a large outlying building known as Fort Shalmaneser. During the last 50 years the majority has been published in the *Ivories from Nimrud* series, so that it is now possible to look at this remarkable corpus as a whole. It immediately becomes evident that most were not made in Assyria, but imported from the states conquered by the Assyrian kings in the early 1st millennium BC. Many show a debt to the art of Egypt and can be assigned to the 'Phoenician tradition', thus recording the otherwise little-known art of the Phoenicians, long famed as master craftsmen. 'Syrian-Intermediate' ivories are versions of Phoenician ivories and may represent the art of the recently-arrived Aramaean kingdoms, while the very different 'North Syrian' ivories derive from earlier Hittite traditions.

More carved ivory has been found at the Assyrian capital city of Kalhu, better known as Nimrud, in Northern Iraq than anywhere else in the Ancient Near East. However, the majority was brought there by the Assyrian kings as gift, tribute or booty and forms, therefore, an unparalleled record of the minor arts of the areas conquered or controlled by Assyria. Nevertheless, they present an enormous jigsaw puzzle for so little material has been found on Levantine or Mediterranean sites to enable us to establish their probable places and times of production. Their actual archaeological context only provides a window during which they probably arrived in Assyria, mostly between the reigns of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859) and Sargon II (722–705).

Recent analysis suggests that most of the ivories were influenced by the art of Egypt and can be assigned to the Phoenician tradition of ivory carving. This is not surprising, since the Phoenicians were famed in the Bible and the *Iliad* as superb craftsmen (1 *Kings* 5: 1–12; 2 *Chronicles* 2: 13; *Iliad* 23: 740–745). It is, however, revolutionary for so little has previously been known of the art of this enigmatic group of maritime merchant princes. They lived in cities with good natural harbours, located along a narrow coastal strip between Aradus or Arvad and Akko (**Fig. 1**). Like most Near Eastern people, they were loyal to their cities, which were ruled by Councils of Elders; men of Sidon considered themselves to be Sidonians, while men of Tyre were Tyrians. They did not use the word 'Phoinix' or 'Phoinikes', terms used by the Greeks to describe them. The Greeks, while admiring their craft, despised them as professional traders, a way of life incompatible with their concept of aristocracy and ethics

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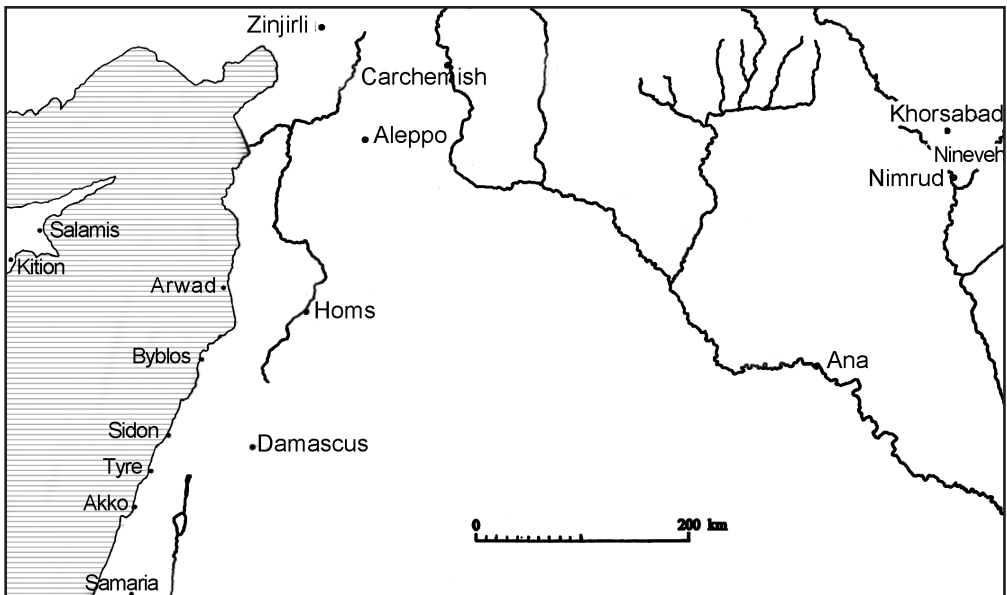


Fig. 1: Map of the area with most sites mentioned in text.

(Aubet, 2001: 127–128). This is very different to the Biblical appreciation of Tyre, ‘the crowning city, whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth’ (*Isaiah* 23: 8).

As far as is known, the Phoenicians created no land-based empire but developed a series of settlements around the Mediterranean, wherever suitable good harbours could be found, in the manner of the much later Venetians. Unfortunately, since they chose such fine sites, these have continued in use to the present day – Arwad/Tartus for instance serves today as a Russian maritime base. Access to Phoenician levels is therefore problematic.

History of discovery and study

The first ivories were found at Nimrud in December 1845 by that great archaeological pioneer, Austen Henry Layard, on only the second day of his excavation in what proved to be the North West Palace. Layard remains a shining light in the archaeological history of the Ancient Near East. Working with limited funds and on his own in a wild area, he meticulously recorded not only the Assyrian palace reliefs, many of which he brought

back to the British Museum, but also the numerous small antiquities he found, noting their relative positions, a feat all too rarely followed by his successors. He immediately recognized Egyptian influence on the ivories (**Fig. 2**), although he realized that they were not made there. He speedily published his finds at many levels (1849a; 1849b; 1853; 1867). His popular books were exciting reading and widely read (1852; 1853; 1867) and he himself was a celebrity. Layard’s successor, W.K. Loftus, found a ‘horse-load of ivories’, all burnt and smashed, in what turned out to be the Burnt Palace. However, Loftus died before he was able to publish them, and as a result his finds were essentially forgotten until the mid-20th century.

Various suggestions about the origins of the ivories were made in the late 19th century, but it was the German scholar F. Poulsen in the early 20th century who identified two Levantine groups, the Phoenician and a new group found among the Loftus ivories related to sculptures found along the Syro-Turkish borders, now known as ‘North Syrian’ (Poulsen, 1912). There are, of course, in addition ivories decorated in the easily recognizable Assyrian style.

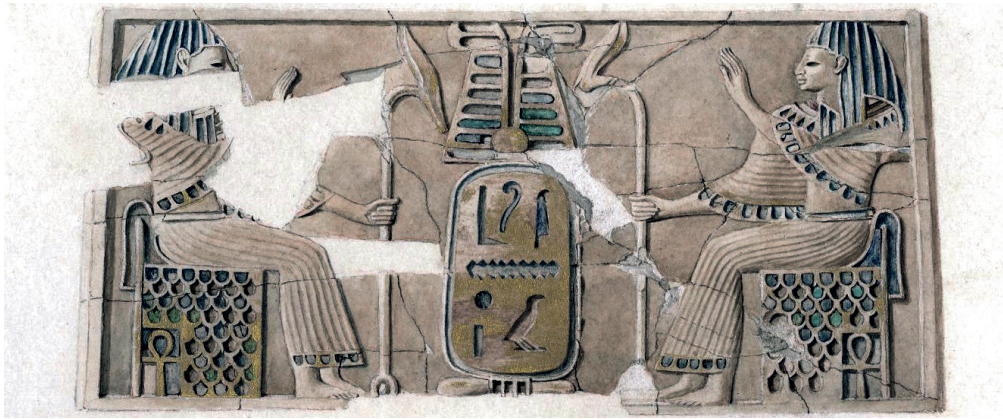


Fig. 2: ‘Egyptianizing’ ivory of seated goddesses flanking a crowned cartouche, discovered by Henry Layard in the North West Palace and drawn by E. Prentis, in 1848 (Herrmann and Laidlaw, 2009: Colour Plate B).

The Layard and Loftus ivories were published in 1957 by R.D. Barnett, Keeper of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities in the British Museum (Barnett, 1957). While Barnett was at work on the considerable task of the conservation and cataloguing of this large assemblage, Max Mallowan, Professor of Mesopotamian Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, began a major series of campaigns at Nimrud from 1949–1963 under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI). He deliberately chose to follow in Layard’s footsteps and started in the North West Palace, locating the room in which Layard had found most of his ivories. Mallowan found some superb ivories, including the famous ‘Mona Lisa’ and the ‘Ugly Sister’, many recovered from the sludge at the bottoms of two wells (Mallowan, 1966: vol. I). Unfortunately, it was at the time too dangerous to empty the third well, the walls of which were likely to collapse. This was only achieved in 1975 by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage, who found and published the finest ivories ever discovered in the Ancient Near East (Safar and Sa’ied al-Iraqi, 1987; Herrmann and Laidlaw, n.d. [2009]: 49–51, 179–208). Additional discoveries were made by Muzahim Husain in the 1990s, when continuing the excavation of the North West

Palace (Husain, 2008; 2009). Many antiquities were recovered both from a complex of vaulted underground rooms, possibly tombs, and from Well 4 in an adjacent courtyard. In addition to numerous skeletons it contained a number of bone and ivory kohl tubes.

The majority of the ivories were, however, not found on the acropolis but in an outlying building in the lower town. By 1958 Mallowan had handed on direction of the project to David Oates, also Professor of Mesopotamian Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, who succeeded in a series of campaigns in recovering the plan of a huge building, a palace arsenal or *ekal masharti*, known today as Fort Shalmaneser. Most of the ivories, literally thousands, were found in three great storerooms in the South West Quadrant, Rooms SW7, SW37 and SW11/12, with a fourth, Room T10, located in the Throne Room block. Smaller groups were found in a variety of contexts throughout the Fort.

The Nimrud assemblage

It is questionable if it is worse for an expedition to find too little or too much. Certainly the BSAI found an embarrassing wealth of riches, which quite overwhelmed its small staff. While much of the initial conservation work on the ivories was finished in 1968,

the registration and photography is still incomplete today. This is partly because the majority is stored in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad, which has been hard of access or inaccessible for much of the last 40 years. Their publication has, therefore, been spread over 45 years so far, during which seven volumes of *Ivories from Nimrud* have appeared,¹ in which they have been catalogued in different ways, by function and style, but principally by provenance.

With the publication of the ivories found in the North West Palace and the Fort, it is now possible to begin to establish the broad outlines of the collection as a whole and to see what general conclusions about this remarkable body of material can be drawn. Surprisingly, despite amassing ivory, the Assyrian kings themselves appear to have had little liking for the material. This is instantly obvious by comparing the slim volume dedicated to *Ivories from Nimrud II, Ivories in Assyrian Style* with the other *Ivories from Nimrud* volumes with their thousands of non-Assyrian pieces. Furthermore, the distribution of Assyrian ivories is entirely different from that of the Levantine pieces. Assyrian ivories, especially those carved in their narrative style, were found near throne rooms and other ceremonial areas (Mallowan and Glynne Davies, 1970: 101–104; Herrmann and Laidlaw, n.d. [2009]: 101–109). There were none in the storage magazines of the South West Quadrant. Equally, there was a similar absence of ivory in the truly remarkable tombs of the Assyrian queens, discovered under the floors of the North West Palace by Muzahim Husain (Husain and Suleiman, 2000).

Ancient art served the serious purpose of protecting its users from the various hazards of life. Obviously the Assyrians chose to decorate their sculptures, doors, furniture, vessels and jewellery in their own style. The imported ivories on the other hand, whose prophylactic power had clearly failed, were stripped of their gold overlays and deposited, mostly in a broken state, in large maga-

zines. Their collection reflected the deliberate Assyrian removal of the 'property of his palace' from defeated kings, thus removing from them the attributes of royalty.

Analysis of the ivories has been underway since the 1970s, although based, of course, on incomplete publication. The first advance was to realize that the Phoenician/North Syrian division required refining, and in 1981 Irene Winter collected a number of ivories belonging to a derived Phoenician group, with influence from both North Syrian and Phoenician pieces. She called these ivories 'South Syrian' and suggested that they were made in Damascus (Winter, 1981: 101–130). Since that time this intermediate group has been greatly expanded and is now known as 'Syrian-Intermediate'. The three main Levantine groups or 'traditions' are, therefore, the 'Phoenician', the 'Syrian-Intermediate' and the 'North Syrian'. Each of these 'traditions' consists of a series of defined groups, such as the easily recognizable 'Egyptianizing' ivories of the Phoenician tradition.

Most of the ivories were used in sets of similar panels, a fact which made their initial grouping much simpler. Furthermore, it is easy to see that a number of hands, often of varying competence, were employed to carve the various panels or plaques belonging to a single set: this suggests, unsurprisingly, that ivory workshops consisted of a number of artisans, perhaps a master and his pupils. However, while it is relatively easy to recognize the work of different hands, it is harder to isolate the work of the same hand and to carry it across from set to set or across different sites. This has been achieved by Elena Scigliuzzo of Pisa University. She recognized that some Syrian-Intermediate panels were carved by the same hands and that similar panels had been distributed both in Nimrud and in the Nabu Temple at Khorsabad, founded by Sargon II (Scigliuzzo, 2005: 557–607).



Fig. 3: A 'Classic Phoenician' version of a 'hero fighting a griffin' on the left, and a 'Syrian-Intermediate' version on the right (drawing: A. Searight).

Phoenician ivories

Most of the ivories found at Nimrud belong to the Phoenician tradition. These consist of a series of distinct but related style-groups, often with designs of pairs of figures arranged symmetrically. The figures, whether human or animal, tend to be relatively tall and 'leggy' with, for instance, the height from the head to the waist and the waist to the feet of a human figure, or from the wings to the top of the shoulder and the shoulder to the paws of sphinxes being c.1:2. Proportions of Syrian-Intermediate figures, on the other hand, are approximately equal. The use of space is also characteristic, with areas left empty to empower the design, and there is a relative absence of violence, even in a violent scene, again sharply differing from Syrian-

Intermediate ivories. This is well illustrated by two versions of a popular subject, a 'hero' slaying a griffin (**Fig. 3**).

When lists of the different traditions of ivories were drawn up in *Ivories from Nimrud VII* (Herrmann and Laidlaw, 2013: chapters 2–5, with the lists at the ends of the chapters), it immediately became evident that there were at least twice as many Phoenician ivories as ivories of the Syrian-Intermediate, North Syrian and Assyrian traditions combined. This large corpus of Phoenician ivories can be divided into two approximately equal groups, those closest to the art of Egypt, known as 'Classic Phoenician', and the other Phoenician ivories, still clearly Phoenician in style but often of slightly lower quality.

Classic Phoenician ivories

Classic Phoenician ivories are an exceptionally coherent group, linked by subject, elegant style and sophisticated techniques of carving and inlaying, for which it is possible to suggest not only that they were made in workshops located in a single centre, but also in which centre they may have been carved.

The most immediately recognizable style-group of the Classic Phoenician tradition is the Egyptianizing, of which about 100 examples have been identified. Unlike the rest of the series, most designs are unique and are carved on single panels, often of unusual shapes. Designs tend to be set in flowering fields of papyrus or in sun-boats, or consist of scenes of worship (**Fig. 2**), and are clearly directly derived from Egypt. **Fig. 4a** shows one such scene. Two Ba-birds with Egyptian crowns ride in a sun-boat with papyrus prows saluting the central sun disc and *wedjat* eye, which is crowned with a triple crown flanked by *uraei* or cobras. The design reflects a theological design seen on the jewelry of Tutankhamun. Another Egyptianizing panel, of an unusual shape, shows a maned lioness suckling one cub with another cub in front of her, the whole set in a field of papyrus (**Fig. 4b**). Both these panels would have been overlaid with gold and highlighted with elaborately-shaped, coloured inlays.

A small group of panels with goddesses and some three-sided furniture elements connects the Egyptianizing group with other Classic Phoenician ivories (**Fig. 5**). The goddesses with tripartite wigs and long, loose,

shawled garments or mantles were once thought to form part of the Egyptianizing group, so close in subject, design, style and technique are they. However, they form parts of sets rather than being unique. They are linked to some furniture fittings with a design of a central youth flanked by side panels with similar goddesses (**Fig. 5**). The youths themselves form close links with other Classic Phoenician groups, the Pharaoh statuettes (**Fig. 6**), which are versions in the round of the youths, panels with Pharaohs with sceptres and jugs (**Fig. 7**) and panels of the so-called 'Ornate Group' (**Fig. 8**). Diagnostic are their short Egyptian style wigs, decorated with inlays held by raised pegs and known as 'pegged wigs', and their short skirts with sloping overskirts and elaborate aprons. The aprons are decorated with a central, chevroned section and pendant *uraei*. However, while these diagnostics form a useful pointer to building sets and groups, they must be reinforced by other factors, including style and proportion, framing, the carving of the backs, the presence/absence of fitter's marks and methods of fixing.

The Pharaoh statuettes (**Fig. 6**) were meant to be seen from the front and sides, since the backs were left relatively rough: there are no signs of any fixing. They are shown standing with one arm flexed, the hand on the chest holding some staff or sceptre, the other by the side, probably holding an *ankh*. One leg is in front of the other in a typical Egyptian stance. They wore the Egyptian double crown set on a pegged wig, an elaborate collar and



Fig. 4: Two 'Egyptianizing' panels with scenes set in the marshes, found in Room SW37, Fort Shalmaneser.

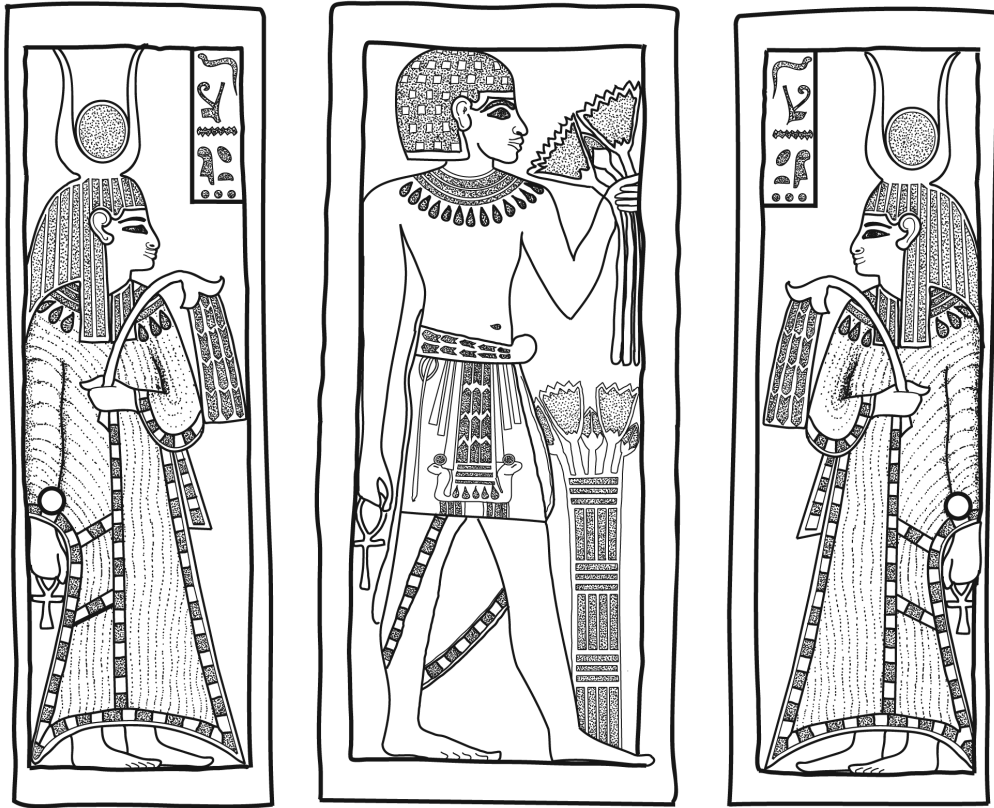


Fig. 5: Reconstruction of the designs on a three-sided furniture panel with a central youth flanked by goddesses (drawing: D. Wicke).

an aproned skirt. They were usually but not always inlaid. They were made up from a number of sections, cut according to the size of available ivory, such as the crown, the head, body and the arms and legs, and are of varying sizes. Unfortunately, no complete Pharaoh statuette has survived, although the head and chest survive of the 'Blue Boy', one of the largest examples, while the monochrome ND 7987 from SW37 is relatively complete, although missing head, arms and lower legs.

Similar Pharaoh figures (**Fig. 7**) are carved on two sets of panels found in Room SW11/12. These show pairs of Pharaohs equipped with ram-headed sceptres and jugs flanking stylized trees, above which are friezes of *uraei* and winged discs. The motif of a 'worshipper raising the ram-headed staff in one hand and holding a pitcher in the other'

was a popular one, once again originating in Egypt and then travelling across the Levant (Cecchini, 2005: 243–264; Herrmann and Laidlaw, 2013: 34, 57–58, figs 3a-b, and 90, fig. 4j). In addition to the Classic Phoenician panels, there are Phoenician as well as Syrian-Intermediate versions.

The two sets illustrate the relatively subtle differences between Classic Phoenician and Phoenician versions of this motif. The Classic Phoenician versions are carved on rectangular panels of a standard size with double frames at top and bottom, while the Phoenician examples are of varied sizes, shapes, proportions and framing. Equally, the dress differs, the Phoenician Pharaohs wear a shawled upper garment and *shendyt* kilt instead of the pleated apron skirt, so typical of the Classic Phoenician workshop.



Fig. 6: Parts of two Pharaoh statuettes: the head and chest of the 'Blue Boy' (H. 17.7cm), once crowned with the Egyptian double crown, forming part of one of the largest statuettes from SW11/12; and the body of a rare example lacking inlays (H. 17.0cm), from SW37.



Fig. 7: Two versions of the popular motif, a pair of Pharaohs with sceptres and jugs flanking a stylized tree, with the 'Classic Phoenician' example on the left, and the 'Phoenician' on the right.



Fig. 8: Three 'Ornate Group' panels: (a) a winged youth holding an *uraeus*, inlaid with blue; (b) a male with falcon headdress and elaborate apron with red and blue inlays; and (c) a winged, human-headed sphinx striding over a youth, the wigs with blue inlays and some ivory cylinders held by the pegs, the rest with red and blue inlays.

One of the largest Classic Phoenician groups, and perhaps the most attractive, is the Ornate Group (Fig. 8). This consists of sets of mostly openwork panels with tall elegant figures pleasingly located within double frames. Double frames are, surprisingly, a significant diagnostic, essentially confined to Classic Phoenician pieces. An equally important clue to identifying Ornate Group pieces is the pegged wig. Not all Ornate Group wigs are pegged, some may be inlaid with strips of glass, but the majority is, both on human figures and on sphinxes.

By far the most popular subject is the Pharaoh or youth, sometimes winged and shown standing or occasionally kneeling. He may wear the Egyptian double crown, sometimes set on a pegged wig, or a falcon headdress. Sometimes he spears a griffin, without apparent force (Fig. 3a). Rampant griffins and sphinxes were also popular, as were sphinxes striding over fallen youths – again a motif derived from Egypt with the sphinx representing Pharaoh triumphant. The sphinxes and griffins may flank stylized trees or altars.

Other Classic Phoenician pieces include the 'Unusually Shaped Ivories', of which there are, as usual, both inlaid and monochrome examples (Fig. 9). Their form is non-standard, and their purpose is hotly debated. They were carved on concave panels with outward curving sides, designed to be seen from the front, since the backs were rough. They were fixed at top and bottom, not at the sides. They are of varying sizes, and there are both solid and openwork examples. The principal motifs were set within the expanded, arching branches of an abbreviated stylized tree and were usually a pair of griffins, back to back (Fig. 9a), although typical Egyptianizing motifs such as a Horus sitting on a lotus, sphinxes or scarab beetles were also employed.

It is possible, although unproven, that two of the finest plaques found in Well NN of the North West Palace formed the central feature of an unusually large version of the panels, the famous pair of a lioness killing a fallen youth with a pegged wig (Fig. 9c). In typically Phoenician fashion, this shockingly violent scene seems more an act of love or



Fig. 9: Three 'Unusually Shaped Ivories': (a) richly inlaid with a pair of griffins, back to back; (b) a seated, human-headed sphinx; and (c) one of a pair of panels from the North West Palace showing a lioness killing a youth.

voluntary sacrifice than a youth having his throat ripped out.

Despite the strong linkage to Egypt and Egyptian art, the range of subjects illustrated on Phoenician ivories is surprisingly limited. There is no narrative art: instead there is a focus on ritual. Although Phoenician craftsmen borrowed Egyptian motifs and designs, they did not slavishly copy them but adapted them to serve their own purposes and meanings. Even those ivories closest to the art of Egypt, the Egyptianizing ivories, show sufficient deviation from the accepted canon that both Layard in the 19th century and Kitchen in 1986 (in Herrmann, 1986: 37–46) dismissed the idea that they were made in Egypt.

Many Classic Phoenician ivories were like jewels, with colour achieved by finely shaped glass inlays set on a frit bedding within cloisons covered in gold foil. A range of sophisticated techniques was employed, such as the raised pegs of the pegged wigs, holding coloured cylinders, or ribs of alternately raised ivory and inlaid cylinders, or even with the design worked in reverse, when the background was left high and the design hollowed out and subsequently filled with a frit bedding and an inlay. The work was of the highest standard and is confined to Classic Phoenician ivories, none being recognized among the standard Phoenician ivories. However, not all Classic Phoenician

ivories were highlighted with inlays. As has been mentioned above, nearly every group included modelled examples, which themselves would have had sections overlaid with gold.

Most Classic Phoenician panels would have been used to decorate furniture, the backs of chairs, the footboards of beds, or chests. But there was, unsurprisingly, also a range of small objects, including a series of plaques, making up hexagonal or circular stands, a range of small boxes, women flasks and bowls, as well as some bridle harness. Sets of superbly carved bridle harness blinkers and frontlets (**Fig. 10**), found in the wells of the North West Palace, are strongly linked to Egypt. The hinged frontlets with friezes of *uraei* show winged goddesses in Hathor crowns on tripartite wigs above gods crowned with solar discs flanked by *uraei*. The blinkers are decorated with winged and seated sphinxes crowned with sun discs and *uraei*. Both frontlets and blinkers are embellished with cartouches with hieroglyphs, as are many Phoenician ivories.

Distribution and date

More examples of Phoenician art have been found at Assyrian Nimrud than anywhere else. The few examples found elsewhere known to date are confined to Samaria, Salamis in Cyprus, the Idaean Cave in Crete and the Bernardini tomb in Etruria, all areas

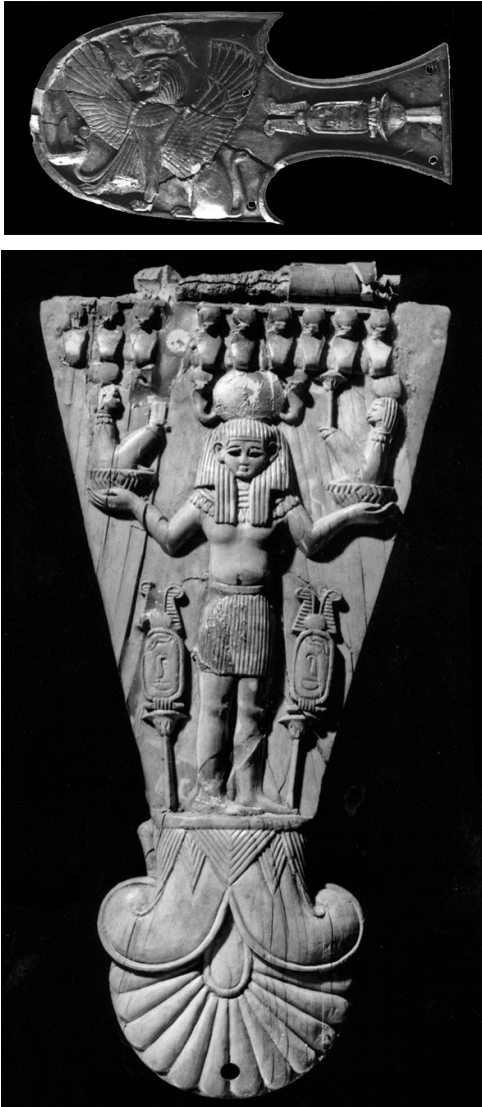


Fig. 10: 'Classic Phoenician' bridle harness: a blinker with a seated, winged sphinx with *uraeus*; and below, the lower section of a hinged frontlet with a god supporting Ma'at figures on his hands, crowned car-touches beside him.

within the Phoenician trading network. The greatest range was found at Samaria, unfortunately in a disturbed area, with Egyptianizing ivories, a goddess panel, fragments of Ornate Groups and Unusually Shaped Ivories: their context only suggests a date

probably before the sack of Samaria in c.720 (see survey in Herrmann and Laidlaw, n.d. [2009]: 79–81). Equally, a series of fine panels found in Tomb 79 at Salamis are similarly dated to the late 8th century. These include two superb Ornate Group panels, one showing a sphinx and the other a stylized tree, whereas a series of gilded and modelled panels probably decorated the footboard of a bed. Fragments of a Pharaoh figure, the face and part of the body, were found in the Idaean Cave in Crete. Finally, a number of Classic Phoenician inlaid fragments were found in the Bernardini tombs in Etruria, a goddess figure and some inlaid wings. Unfortunately, none of these help to define the time or place of production.

The Phoenicians were famed in antiquity as skilled craftsmen, particularly of bronze and silver bowls. A reference in the *Iliad* shows how highly regarded such bowls were for it records that Achilles offered a large silver krater 'a masterpiece of Sidonian craftsmanship' as a prize at the funeral of Patroclus (Aubet, 2001: 100). Sidon was the pre-eminent Phoenician centre in the 11th century, being superseded by Tyre in the 10th during the reign of Hiram, King of Tyre (971–931). Phoenician craftsmanship was so well regarded that Solomon asked Hiram to send him a skilled artisan to help to build the Temple (*Chronicles* 2: 13). The most probable centre, therefore, for the production of the 'finest ivories found at Nimrud' is probably one or both of the two most important and well-known Phoenician cities, Sidon and/or Tyre. These flourished from the 11th century, so Classic Phoenician ivories were probably being made at Sidon and/or Tyre between the 11th and late 8th centuries, by which time most were probably deposited at Nimrud.

Note

- ¹ The seven fascicules in the *Ivories from Nimrud* series are: Orchard, 1967; Mallowan and Glynn Davies, 1970; Mallowan and Herrmann, 1974; Herrmann,

1986; Herrmann, 1992; Herrmann and Laidlaw, n.d. [2009]; and Herrmann and Laidlaw, 2013.

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How to cite this article: Herrmann, G and Laidlaw, S 2013 Assyrian Nimrud and the Phoenicians. *Archaeology International*, No. 16 (2012-2013): 84-95, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ai.1611>

Published: 24 October 2013

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