

North Syrian Ivories

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North Syrian ivories were first identified by Fredrik Poulsen in 1912. He compared them to sculptures found along the Syro-Turkish border and noticed that they lacked the Egyptian elements typical of Phoenician ivories. North Syria in the early first millennium B.C. consisted of a number of Neo-Hittite and Aramaean kingdoms, the most important of which was Carchemish. There was a tradition of walled cities, palatial architecture, monumental sculpture and regionalism, reflected both in their major and minor arts. However, the rising power of Assyria gradually led to the conquest, submission or absorption of these states into the Assyrian empire from the mid-ninth to the late eighth centuries.

A number of different style-groups of North Syrian ivories can be identified and can be linked to the sculptural traditions of the different city-states. Only a few examples were available to Poulsen, but the group he identified as North Syrian consisted of fragments of pyxides and fan-handles found by Loftus in 1855 in the South East (later Burnt) Palace at Nimrud, published by Richard Barnett. Thousands more ivories were found during Mallowan's excavations from 1949-1963 at Nimrud, both in the palaces on the acropolis and in the palace arsenal in the Lower Town, Fort Shalmaneser, although the finest and best-preserved examples were found by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage in Well AJ of the North West Palace.



Fig. 1. Sphinx pyxis from Well AJ, IM 79514.

Poulsen's ivories belong to the largest and most varied group. This is one of the easiest to identify because of the distinctive musculature incised on the animals and mythical beasts and the physiognomy of the human figures, as well as an important range of technical features: it is called 'flame and frond' because of two of the many criteria, the flame markings on the haunches and the frondy foliage. While small objects, such as pyxides (Fig. 1), flasks and fan handles, were found in the



Fig. 2. Furniture panel with stag, ND 6379, from Room NW 15, Fort Shalmaneser,

Burnt Palace and the wells of the North West Palace, only furniture elements (Fig. 2) were recovered from Fort Shalmaneser. The walls of the pyxides were decorated with sphinxes and stylized trees, or banquet and offering scenes. The small figures of calves crouched on the lids. There were also flasks, lion bowls and fan handles, all of which were partially gilded, some were simply modeled, while others were decorated with pegged inlays. This unusual range of luxury objects probably all served a ceremonial purpose. Furniture elements consisted both of openwork panels, carved on both sides and decorated with a variety of motifs including stags, oryx (Fig. 2) or seated lions, as well as the legs of chairs or couches.

The characteristic musculature and human physiognomy of the ivories can be paralleled on sculptures found at Tell Halaf, the capital city of the Aramaean kingdom of Guzana or Bit Bahiani. Located on the Upper Khabur, it was uncomfortably close to the expanding power of Assyria and was probably incorporated into that empire during the reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824). The site consisted of a citadel with palaces and temples and elite tombs with a remarkable and strongly individualistic architecture and sculptural tradition, as well as an extensive lower town. There were two phases of sculptures, small, earlier cruder slabs followed by superb slabs with animals. Fragments of 'flame and frond' ivories were found in some of the tombs. It seems probable that 'flame and frond' ivories were the minor art of that kingdom.

Unlike the 'flame and frond' group, only relatively few examples survive of

another distinctive, but much smaller North Syrian group, the 'roundcheeked and ringletted'. It is salutary to realize that it was only the retrieval of the outstanding ivories from Well AJ that revolutionized our understanding of this group, because they were first known only from some two dozen rather crude panels found in Fort Shalmaneser. These were of varied shapes and sizes with human figures (Fig. 3) and sphinxes, which filled the entire surface: there were no frames and they were remarkable principally for their lack of uniformity. They all have round and fleshy faces with arching eyebrows and wide noses and often have ringletted hairstyles.

The finds from Well AJ consisted of a panel with a lion, similar to the Fort Shalmaneser examples, but included a massive and magnificent cosmetic palette



Fig. 3. A bearded human from Room SW37, Fort Shalmaneser

(Fig. 4) and a remarkable silhouette. The palette was carved from a single piece of ivory and is unique. Its purpose is a small bowl in the centre: the rest of the surface, top, sides and bottom is covered with an exuberant mass of animals, mythological, fantastic, wild and domestic. The silhouette showed a siren, depicted frontally, attacking a goat, which was being eaten by vultures. These two pieces illustrate the accident of discovery. The carving of the palette and the silhouette is immeasurably superior to that of the panels. Yet all are stylistically linked by the fleshy faces, ringlets and plump bodies, as well as by their fixing by a distinctive type of pegged dowel. Some of the human figures with pointed hats and the sphinxes can be compared to sculptures from Zinjirli, ancient Samal, and it is possible that these ivories were the minor art of that centre.

Fig. 4. Cosmetic palette, IM 79501, from Well AJ.



Fig. 5. A 'Classic SW7' chairback, ND 7904, from Room SW7, Fort Shalmaneser

Perhaps the most remarkable find of North Syrian ivories at Nimrud was made in Room SW7 of Fort Shalmaneser. Behind a pile of corroding bronze and iron scale armour were four rows of what proved to be chairs, stacked one on top of the other. The basic structure of the chair was of wood, which had decayed. What survived were the panels of ivories decorating the backs. Most of the complete pieces consisted of a curved central section of between 4-6 panels, supported between tall side posts. Although there are variations in the forms of the chairs, the underlying iconography was standard. All the figures, male and female, were saluting a stylized tree or plant, often under the protection of a winged disc of Syrian type.

Once again, there are a number of different groups, reflecting the regionalism of the area. The principal, most sophisticated and largest group was the 'Classic SW7' group with the finest example being carved on every surface (Fig. 5). The panels on the side posts and centre depict men in cutaway coats with a central winged lady: above is a winged disc, below a dynamic scene of charioteers hunting bulls. The type of chair can be paralleled at Zinjirli. But there are much cruder versions of the same scene, such as the clumsy bearded males of ND 7913 (Fig. 6), clearly the production of a provincial centre.

The early first millennium was a time of political flux and changing alliances. The new states aimed to identify themselves with a distinctive public architecture and art, which we see reflected in the many different styles of ivory carving employed in the area.

References

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Fig. 6. A provincial panel, one of a set of four, ND 7913, panel 3, from Room SW7, Fort Shalmaneser,

