'The Age of Ivory': The Nimrud Project

The British School of Archaeology in Iraq has published five volumes in the Ivories from Nimrud *series, together with a scanned archive of these ivories. Two more volumes are in preparation, as is a computer database.* **Dr Georgina Herrmann FBA**, *Director of the Project, recounts some of the history of the ivories found at Nimrud.*

LITERALLY thousands of ivories were found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the palaces, storerooms and wells of the Assyrian city, Kalhu (modern Nimrud), founded by Assurnasirpal II (883–859). So numerous are the ivories found there that they have given the early first millennium BCE the name of 'The Age of Ivory'. Whole elephant populations must have been slaughtered to provide the quantities of raw material required. Indeed, the Syrian elephant, hunted by both the Egyptian pharaohs in the late second millennium and the Assyrian kings, became extinct in the ninth century. Much of the ivory would have been provided by Phoenician traders exploiting the African elephant.

Ivory was used in many ways, for complete objects and as a veneer. It decorated furniture and formed bowls, dishes, fan-handles or bridle harness. Both life-size chryselephantine statues, foreshadowing that of Pallas Athene, as well as numerous smaller statuettes and animal sculptures were carved in this attractive material. There seems to have been a lust for conspicuous consumption at this time, and ivory itself, although highly prized, was not sufficiently luxurious. Pieces were covered with gold foil and some were coloured, with stains or inlaid with coloured glass or even semi-precious stones. Two of the finest examples are matching plaques, the Lioness and the 'Ethiopian', one of which is on display in the British Museum, although unfortunately the other was in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and was looted in 2002 (figure 1). This dramatic scene takes place in a field of flowers, the flowers inlaid with lapis lazuli and carnelian, the stems overlaid with gold. The lioness holds the fallen man to her with one paw, biting his throat, but in this scene of violence the man seems to be a willing sacrifice rather than a victim. Such a design is derived from the art of Egypt, where it would have represented Pharoah triumphant.

These plaques were found by Max Mallowan in 1951 in the sludge at the bottom of a well (NN) in Assurnasirpal's North West Palace, a century after the first ivories had been found in the same Palace by Austen Henry Layard. Layard, a brilliant amateur archaeologist and later a politician, is principally famous for his recovery of the Assyrian reliefs, many of which are, of course, in the British Museum. Convinced of the site's potential, Mallowan returned to Nimrud in 1949 under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. He worked on buildings on the acropolis from 1949 to 1956, retrieving ivories from a variety of locations, including superb examples from the Palace wells. However, the bulk of the ivories for which the School's expedition is famous was recovered from the palace-arsenal known as 'Fort Shalmaneser', excavated under the direction of David Oates from 1958 to1962. This palace arsenal is located in the south east corner of the Lower Town and was built by Shalmaneser III (858–824), the son and successor of Assurnasirpal. One room was filled with rows of stacked chairs, mostly

Figure 1. This famous plaque, ND2547, is typically 'Phoenician' in style with an obvious debt to the art of Egypt, the lioness representing Pharaoh, and the fallen figure, his defeated enemy. One of a pair, the Iraq Museum version was looted in 2002, the other is in the British Museum. Courtesy of BSAI.

Figure 2. A panel from a chairback, ND6374, found in a storeroom filled with stacked rows of chairs, all decorated with variations on the theme of a man with a plant. This panel belongs to the 'classic SW7' style-group of the North Syrian tradition. Courtesy of BSAI.

decorated with men saluting plants (figure 2), while other rooms contained a mass of broken ivory, from which the gold overlays had been carefully removed. A lesser number were found scattered throughout the Fort in smaller magazines and residential areas.

The most remarkable ivories were retrieved in 1975 by the Iraqi State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage from the depths of Well AJ in the North West Palace, a well investigated by Mallowan, but abandoned because of the danger of collapsing walls. The ivories included superb examples of bridle harness, of pyxides and lion bowls, as well as parts of a statuette of an Assyrian courtier, some 55 cm. high.

The Well AJ pyxides are elaborately decorated. Attached to the lids are small calves, lying with turned heads and carved in the round. The most elaborate scene is on the 'Banquet Pyxis' (figures 3, 4 and 5) and shows what in other contexts would be considered to be a funerary meal, of a man seated on a sphinx throne with a loaded table in front of him and an attendant. Such scenes are common on grave stele in south-east Anatolia and north Syria at the time, although perhaps the most famous example is on the tenth century massive stone sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Byblos (figure 6). Apart from the style of carving – and of course the material and scale – the scenes are closely similar, but whether the meaning is the same is another question.

Like the plaque showing the Lioness and the Ethiopian, the pyxis was enriched with gold overlays and inlays, although the inlays seem to have been made of stained ivory rather than glass or stone. They are much larger and fixed by means of pegs as well as glue: such distinctive techniques help to establish the production of different workshops.

None of these ivories was made in Assyria: they were imported as part of vast quantities of tribute and booty which resulted from the highly successful campaigns undertaken by the Assyrian kings against the states to the

Figure 3. A nearly complete ivory pyxis belonging to the North Syrian tradition and probably carved in north-east Syria. It shows a banquet scene similar to that on the famous Ahiram sarcophagus in the Beirut Museum and is a remarkable instance of a common motif used by different media across the area. Courtesy of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

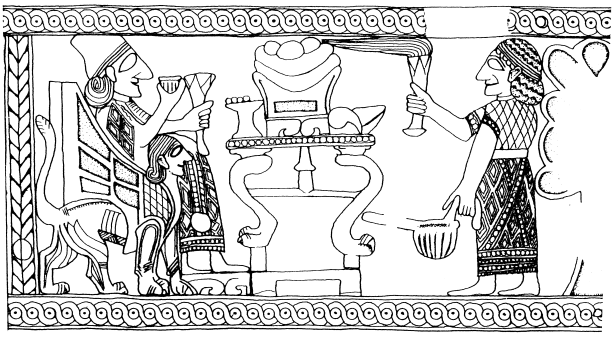
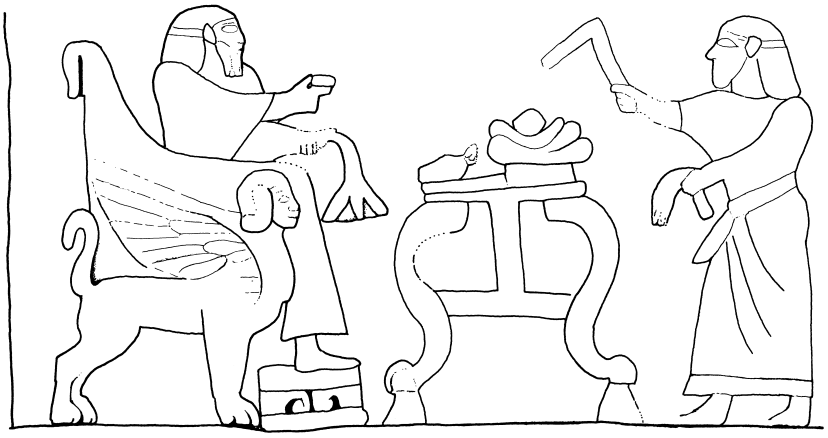


Figure 4. The 'Banquet Pyxis' from Well AJ, North West Palace, found by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage, drawn by Dirk Wicke.

Figure 5. A detail from the 'Banquet Pyxis' showing the enthroned figure on the sphinx throne, a typically Phoenician style of furniture. Courtesy of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

Figure 6. The 'banquet scene' from the Sarcophagus of Ahiram in the Beirut Museum, drawn by Dirk Wicke.



West. Their discovery at Nimrud can, therefore, tell us nothing about their place or date of production, although we can establish their probable time of arrival at Kalhu, but even this is fairly flexible. Booty was brought to Nimrud from the time of Assurnasirpal II to that of Sargon II (721–705), after which the capital was moved first to Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad) and then to Nineveh. Kalhu enjoyed a second period of prosperity during the reign of Esarhaddon (680–669), although Nineveh remained his favourite residence. Esarhaddon conquered Egypt and captured the Pharaoh Taharqa, whose scarab (figure 7) was found in Fort Shalmaneser, so some ivories could have been deposited at Nimrud by Esarhaddon, but not later. The Assyrian cities were sacked in 614 and 612, with only squatter occupation in the following years.

The Levantine World

Most of the Nimrud ivories came from relatively recent or revitalized polities established in the Early Iron Age in south-east Anatolia, Syria, the Lebanon and Palestine by the heirs to the Hittites, the Luwians and the Neo-Hittites, by the Phoenicians and the Aramaeans and by the rising powers of Israel and Judah. These polities illustrated their independence and economic and political success by building fortified cities with palaces and temples. Neo-Hittite centres, such as Carchemish with an unbroken line of rulers from the time of the Hittite empire, continued Hittite conventions, setting massive lions and sphinxes in gateways and lining walls with carved orthostats. These kingdoms supported numerous artisans producing both major and minor arts, although their ostentatious wealth is best illustrated by what can be considered to be their almost mass production of ivories at this time. They are indeed the most important

Figure 7. The half-scarab of the Pharaoh Taharqa, ND 7624, found in Fort Shalmaneser. Taharqa was captured by Esarhaddon and pictured on a series of victory stele. Courtesy of BSAI.

record of their art, preserved ironically thanks to the Assyrian policy of a deliberate 'removal of the treasures of his palace'.

It was recognized early in the twentieth century that there were two principal groups of ivories, those with a heavy debt to the art of Egypt, like the plaque with the lioness, called 'Phoenician' or 'Levantine', and those more closely linked to the sculptures of south-east Anatolia and north Syria, known as 'North Syrian', with a more powerful and less elegant design, of which the pyxis is an example. In the intervening years a new 'Intermediate' or 'Syrian' group has also been recognized, as have a number of sub-groups within the three main 'traditions'. What separates the groups are the proportions, style and technique of carving, fixing and decoration rather than subject, for the majority of ivories display a surprisingly limited repertoire of subjects, such as men saluting trees, sphinxes and griffins, ladies gazing out from windows, contest scenes, and animals such as cattle and deer.

A similar overall homogeneity of iconography but with stylistic differences can be seen in the carved orthostats of the North Syrian states, for instance at Ain Dara, Aleppo, Carchemish or Tell Halaf. It is at least a working hypothesis, therefore, that the different ivory groups that can be established among the Nimrud ivories reflect the different artistic languages of the polities of the day. Each employed a similar iconography to express common ideological concepts, but each commissioned a distinctive regional style to identify their different states.

While establishing coherent groups is an essential first step in organizing the ivories, allocating such groups to the relevant powers is another matter. However, there is in one case a happy marriage between a distinctive style of orthostat and a group of ivories. Tell Halaf was discovered by the German diplomat Baron Max von Oppenheim before the First World War when he was trying to establish the best route for a railway to link Berlin and Baghdad. He found there an extraordinary and imaginative range of sculptures and orthostats, which exhibit similar stylistic conventions to the 'flame and frond' group of ivories from Nimrud: indeed, fragments of similar pieces were found at Tell Halaf. The Well AJ pyxis shown above is an excellent example of this group, with its characteristic physiognomy of the humans and the muscle markings on the animals.

The Assyrian annals suggest the probable time of production of the ivories. Bit Bahiani (Tell Halaf) is mentioned in the reign of Assurnasirpal, who demanded tribute. Being sited uncomfortably close to Assyria, Bit Bahiani was incorporated into the empire during the reign of Shalmaneser III. The ivories were, therefore, probably carved between the tenth century, when the state was established, and the mid to late ninth centuries, for independent production must have ceased with the Assyrian take-over.

From the Nimrud point of view completing the recording of the ivories themselves is the priority. However, equally important are the recent great advances in our understanding of the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age in Syria. The sacking and abandonment of Ugarit among other sites at the end of the Late Bronze Age had led to the assumption that there was a general collapse or 'Dark Age' from 1200. However, new discoveries are challenging this concept and suggesting a varied pattern of occupation across the area. There is little proof, for instance, of a major division between Late Bronze Age Canaanites and Early Iron Age Phoenicians, while the discoveries of tenth century temples at Ain Dara and Aleppo and the recently established continuity of kingship at Carchemish fills in other 'blanks'. Equally, although Assyria suffered a decline in the eleventh century it was not an eclipse. This more realistic picture of variable continuity across the area – the area around Ugarit remained unoccupied – helps to explain the similarities of some ivories found at Nimrud with those from Late Bronze Age Megiddo in Palestine or Enkomi in Cyprus. It suggests that traditions and iconography were maintained across the centuries.

Continuity may also help explain the remarkable parallelism between the design on the small Well AJ pyxis with that carved on Ahiram's sarcophagus, recently dated to the tenth century, a parallelism which reinforces our suggestion of a regional iconographic language with dialects. This later dating of the sarcophagus also helps fill in the pattern of occupation and production in the Phoenician cities and suggests that ivory production in these centres may have continued from the Late Bronze Age through into the seventh century.

With new archaeological information defining major centres within the Levant, with ongoing discoveries of new sculptures and assemblages of ivories (for instance recently from Til Barsib), and with more detailed studies of the material itself by a new generation of younger scholars, we can hope

Figure 8. A trapezoidal plaque, ND10543, part of a set of 6 or 8, making up a 'cup-stand'? It shows a sphinx striding over a fallen man, a similar motif to that on Plate 1, but in a different style. Courtesy of BSAI.

that the years ahead will establish the artistic map of early first millennium Syria and enable us to begin to understand the significance of the various images being employed. For instance, plaques showing lions slaying men (figure 8) carved in a school of the Intermediate Tradition (probably located in western or southern Syria) are unlikely to have represented Pharaoh defeating his Asiatic enemies, as they would have done in Egypt.

We should not leave Nimrud without mentioning another of its claims to fame – the incredible treasures recovered from the mainly undisturbed tombs of the Assyrian queens, found by the Iraqi archaeologist, Muzahim Mahmud, in the late 1980s and 1990s. His discovery ranks with that of the tomb of Tutankhamun, although, unfortunately, modern political problems have resulted in its importance being little recognized. The jewellery alone will rewrite the books on ancient technology and might also have an effect on modern design, while new light is being shed on many aspects of Assyrian life and death. Interestingly, from our point of view, there was hardly any ivory in these tombs – just ivory inlay on a mirror handle. And this, together with the relative paucity of ivories carved in Assyria itself and with the fact that most ivories were found in store rooms rather than residential areas, raises an interesting question. Did the Assyrian kings actually like or use the ivory they acquired in such quantities or were they simply removing the attributes of kingship?

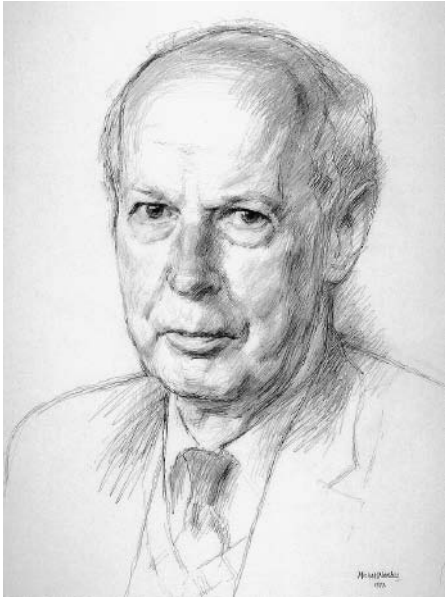
The Nimrud Project is supported by the BSAI. Copies of the scans of published and unpublished ivories have been provided both to the Iraq Museum and to Interpol to aid the quest for looted ivories.

In June 2004 Professor Herrmann convened a three-day conference bringing together experts to consider themes in the history and archaeology of western Central Asia. The volume arising from the conference, *After Alexander: Central Asia before Islam*, edited by Georgina Herrmann and Joe Cribb, is being published by the British Academy as *Proceedings of the British Academy*, volume 133.

English Episcopal Acta

In 2005 the Academy published the 30th in its ambitious series of volumes containing the texts of all English episcopal acta *to survive for the period between the Norman Conquest and the emergence of bishops' registers during the course of the thirteenth century.* **Professor Barrie Dobson FBA**, *current Chairman of the* English Episcopal Acta *editorial committee, reviews the progress of this enterprise and indicates its importance for all branches of medieval studies.*

ON 22 May 1973 the late Professor Christopher Cheney wrote from the British Academy to Dr David Smith, then a comparative newcomer to the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research of the University of York, inviting him to become General Editor of a 'new project' – to publish a comprehensive collection of all surviving charters and other formal documents or *acta* issued in the names of English bishops between the Norman Conquest and the emergence of episcopal registers during the thirteenth century. Christopher Cheney, quite as scrupulous in matters of business as of textual scholarship, was careful to point out that there was no guarantee of financial support at all. Nevertheless, 'I can see no serious danger of the Academy drawing back provided that our Committee can show that the work goes forward.' Thirty years and thirty volumes later no one can doubt that the confidence of Christopher Cheney and of the Academy a generation ago has proved to be well founded. Although not yet complete, the *English Episcopal Acta* series is certain to be consulted – and indeed venerated – for centuries rather than merely decades to come.



Professor Christopher Cheney

In retrospect the decision by Christopher Cheney and his colleagues to embark on a comprehensive edition of all these episcopal *acta* must seem a remarkably ambitious leap in the dark, not least because it is only now beginning to be clear exactly how many such *acta* (more than 5,000 indeed) survive. Admittedly the significance of the latter as one of the few absolutely major documentary sources for the study of the post-Conquest English church had long been appreciated by a handful of English medievalists, if usually only in a very general way. Thus, although Sir Frank Stenton made an eloquent plea for the uniform publication of all extant episcopal *acta* in a celebrated article of 1929, for a generation thereafter it seemed inevitable that they would continue to be published piecemeal if at all, and in slow and erratic fashion. The decision to create a unified Academy episcopal *acta* series not only foreclosed on that possibility: it demonstrates to perfection, like other Academy Research Projects of the last fifty years, the massive scholarly achievement attainable when – and only when – a national institution is prepared to lend properly long-term support to a project so vast that it could otherwise never hope to be viable at all.

Many of the *acta* project's greatest personal debts are accordingly to the staff of the Academy, and to the many Fellows who have appreciated its value, although not at all medieval *acta* scholars themselves. Those benefactors and well-wishers, far too many to list here, range from the late Sir Geoffrey Elton, the Academy's Publications Secretary and his successors, to Professor Rees Davies, the last Chairman of the Committee of Academy Research Projects before that committee's demise in 2000. Even more important as the project has gathered momentum during the last decade has been the careful attention each of its thirty volumes has received from the Academy's Publications Department. Few scholars would deny that in their familiar red bindings the episcopal *acta* volumes are among the most handsome as well as 'reader friendly' of all volumes in the Academy's research series.

The seal of St Hugh of Avalon, bishop of Lincoln

Although the Academy's good will has always been – as it still is – crucial to the success of the *Acta* project, it is only very intermittently that the latter has secured the funds to employ a full-time Research Assistant. Unlike most modern research programmes in the arts and humanities, the episcopal *acta* enterprise has mainly relied for material assistance on the willing and unpaid labours of the scholars involved and on the support