



Book Reviews

ANCIENT IVORY: MASTERPIECES OF THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE BY GEORGINA HERRMANN

Thames & Hudson. 2017. 208pp, 301 colour & B&W illustrations, hb, ISBN 9780500051917, £40.00

Carved ivories constitute one of the most spectacular vestiges of the wealth of the ancient Near Eastern world, a geographical expanse stretching from Iran and Iraq westward to the Mediterranean Sea. Unlike objects made of metals, which are often melted down and reused, or those of wood or textiles, which do not survive the fluctuations of humidity and dryness that mark the Near Eastern climate, ancient ivories have been preserved in large quantities. The vast majority of them come from the early first millennium BC Assyrian royal capital of Kalhu (biblical Calah), known by its modern name Nimrud. In this splendidly illustrated, large-format volume, Georgina Herrmann provides a broad overview of the ivories excavated at Nimrud from the 1840s through the 1980s. Herrmann is uniquely qualified for this task, having spent most of her long career studying and publishing the ivory finds from Nimrud in the multi-volume series, *Ivories from Nimrud*, as well as in numerous articles. Herrmann's longstanding engagement with the material means, on the one hand, that she thoroughly knows the imagery and the archaeological contexts in all their details, yet on the other hand, that she tends to be less open to considering newer directions in ivory studies that have developed in recent years. Indeed, the field of ancient Near Eastern ivories has been quite active in recent years, including studies done by this reviewer.

Herrmann states early on in the volume (p.9) that her intention is 'to illustrate and describe a few of the thousands of superlative ivories found there [Nimrud],' and in this endeavour, she succeeds magnificently. More than 300 illustrations grace the book, many of them in colour, providing exceptional opportunities for looking closely at these often quite small items, along with a diverse range of comparative material. Herrmann also provides useful background information on the history of the Assyrian Empire, the archaeological excavations related to the ivory finds at Nimrud, and the material properties of ivory (derived almost exclusively from elephant tusks in the case of the Nimrud ivories). A map of the Near East during the early first millennium when Assyria dominated the political scene is provided, perhaps somewhat hidden in its placement at the back of the volume (pp.196–197), along with a brief list of suggested readings (p.201) that hew closely to mainstream publications. A more detailed bibliography (pp.202–204), drawn from the endnoted citations, offers a more wide-ranging, though far from

comprehensive, selection of additional resources. The volume thus achieves its goal of providing the reader with an introduction to the Nimrud ivories, many of which Herrmann saliently notes have probably been lost or destroyed during the upheaval in Iraq over the last several decades.

The main body of the text is devoted to chapter-by-chapter overviews of different stylistic-cum-geographic groups, into which the ivories have been divided: Assyrian (Chapter 2), Phoenician (Chapter 3), Syro-Phoenician (Chapter 4) and North Syrian (Chapter 5). A last chapter (Chapter 6) considers the different types of objects to which the ivories belonged – primarily furniture and small toiletry items. It is in the chapters on the regional styles of ivory (which cover more than 100 pages) that Herrmann's epistemological allegiances come to the fore most prominently. Already in the 19th century when the first corpora were unearthed, it was clear that a vast number of the ivories found at the site arrived there from elsewhere as tribute or booty of Assyrian military campaigns. With few comparable finds, the primary scholarly goal became the assignment of the ivories to specific geographical origins. In pursuit of this goal, scholars first sought to classify the ivories into different stylistic groups on the basis of form, motif, and carving techniques – a process that Herrmann surveys in the first chapter. Early in the 20th century, Frederik Poulsen subdivided the then-known Nimrud ivories (substantial numbers of ivories were discovered at Nimrud subsequent to Poulsen's study) into three broad geographical groupings: Assyrian (associated with the Assyrian Empire and its heartland in what is today northern Iraq), Phoenician (linked to the coastal cities of the eastern Mediterranean and generally equated with the modern nation-state of Lebanon) and North Syrian (connected to a series of city-states stretching across the northern Syrian and south-central and south-eastern Turkish area, known by means of their excavated cities decorated with carved stone architectural reliefs). These were supplemented in the later part of the 20th century by a fourth style, which was seen to straddle the Phoenician and North Syrian styles. This fourth regional style has been studied under a number of designations, including South Syrian and Intermediate; in this volume, Herrmann chooses to refer to it as Syro-Phoenician.

Herrmann has been a primary contributor to these studies seeking to pinpoint the geographical origins of the ivories' production. Over the course of her career, she has pioneered a method for discerning more closely defined subgroups within the larger regional groups, which she describes on p.16. Along with her contemporary Irene Winter, Herrmann realized that there was a strong possibility that booty or tribute from a specific campaign (ie, consisting of the conquest of individual cities) might be stored together, and that, therefore, the archaeological findspots of the ivories at Nimrud might provide an initial means of grouping. She thus begins her approach to classifying by first looking for similar pieces from a single room, assuming that multiple pieces of ivories would have originally ornamented larger furnishings and therefore would have been

produced together as a matched set. To this point, her approach is logical. However, problems begin to emerge with the next step, when Herrmann arranges the sets into larger groups that she calls ‘style-groups.’ As she moves farther away from the initial set, adding less directly related pieces to the group, the boundaries and defining criteria for each style-group become fuzzier. This issue has been noted for some time (Winter 1992, 136–138; Winter 1998, 152; Feldman 2014, 21–31), yet remains stubbornly resistant to resolution. Compounding the issues of the ‘style-groups’ is the final step in which Herrmann associates a style-group with a specific geographical locale, working under the assumption that every city-state had a workshop producing a distinctive style. It should be noted that while this volume presents Herrmann’s conclusions as given, she has altered her opinions regarding these last two analytical steps over the years of her research. For example, in 1986 Herrmann herself cautioned against trying to assign to the ivory groups ‘too specific a geographical or ethnic basis’ in her publication of ivories found in room SW37 of Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud, advocating to replace the geographically linked terminology of Phoenician, North Syrian, and Syro-Phoenician with, respectively, ‘northern tradition’, ‘southern tradition’, and ‘intermediate’ (Herrmann 1986, 6).

While the volume provides a general overview of all the Nimrud ivories, Herrmann is explicit (eg, p.17) in privileging the Phoenician ivories, which – if they can indeed be ascribed solely to Phoenician crafting – would represent one of the largest corpora of Phoenician artistic production in the early first millennium (evidence of Phoenician artistic production increases substantially in the 5th century BC and later). The identification of a pre-5th century Phoenician artistic corpus, however, has recently been questioned, as has been the very notion of a singular, distinctive Phoenician cultural identity in the early centuries of the first millennium (see especially, Martin 2016; Quinn 2017; and Feldman forthcoming). While Phoenician arts have been traditionally identified by a high presence of Egyptianizing elements (p.58), our inability to localize these arts within the Phoenician homeland, their absence among the excavated materials from Phoenician colonies, and the occurrence of Egyptianizing elements on luxury products found throughout the Levantine region, especially in the south, makes an exclusive association of this group of ivories with Phoenicia difficult to support. The geographic slipperiness of equating Egyptianizing with Phoenician is apparent even in the evidence that Herrmann brings in support of this assumption. On the one hand, she points to the arts from the kingdom of Ugarit in the preceding Late Bronze Age period, although the city lies farther north, outside of the traditional boundaries of Phoenicia (p.58). On the other hand, she considers one of the few large-scale (and hence probably immobile) artistic products to have been found within the geographic borders of Phoenicia, the sarcophagus of Ahiram from Byblos, which however is only slightly Egyptianizing and appears closer to the ivories ascribed to the Syro-Phoenician rather than the Phoenician group (p.58). When highly Egyptianizing ivories have been found in a Levantine context, as they have been at the ancient Israelite site of Samaria, they are

assumed to be Phoenician imports (p.64). This assumption, too, has been recently challenged, with increasingly convincing grounds for recognizing a local Israelite ivory-working tradition (Naeh 2015; Uehlinger 2005. Herrmann herself, in her earlier study of the Fort Shalmaneser SW37 ivories, suggests there may have been a tradition of ivory carving at Samaria (1986: 52)).

The designation ‘Phoenician’, a Greek term never used as a self-identification, further complicates the application of it to specific ivories. Herrmann is fully aware of the many limitations of the designation ‘Phoenician’, noting that the term covers multiple, independent city-states rather than a single, unified polity (p.55). Her solution to this situation is to assume that the ivories that she attributes as Phoenician were produced in only a single Phoenician city, namely Tyre, which historically was the dominant city during the early part of the first millennium. Herrmann is not entirely consistent in this proposition, also arguing that each independent Phoenician city probably ‘produced their own artifacts in their own workshops’ (p.88) and that while the ‘very finest’ Phoenician ivories were made at a single centre (identified as Tyre, p.192), ‘those that, while still obviously Phoenician in style, differ significantly in detail, suggesting production at a different center’ (p.181). She does not, however, provide specific criteria for separating the ‘finest’ from the less fine.

For a volume so beautifully produced, it is a shame that several typographical and a few factual errors have crept into it. Most of the typos are minor, although a few referring to specific ivories or illustrations could cause confusion for the reader. For example, on p.114, reference to figure 160 should be 170; on p.132, repetition of ND#10316 instead of referencing figure 188; on p.177, BM 118253 is missing its reference to figure 280; and on p.184, the first sentence of the second paragraph is incomplete. Among the factual errors, on p.32, reference to the ‘hinged component of a necklace’ illustrated in fig. 111 (p.94) should be the hinged components of a head ornament similar to those depicted on ivories of women (eg, p.107, fig. 154 and p.130, fig. 186), and on p.189, the item inscribed for Hazael at Eretria is a bronze blinker not frontlet.

In sum, Herrmann has produced a beautiful volume that introduces a general audience to a little known and currently threatened ancient corpus of art. The book also serves as a general encapsulation of the results of Herrmann’s long career studying these ivories, although it does not always document her own changing opinions about classification and methods of analysis. As a summation of Herrmann’s past scholarship, the volume may be of less use for specialist scholars, although they are sure to find many observational gems among the text and to derive new insights from the close looking afforded by the excellent images. It should certainly belong in the collection of anyone with an interest in ivories and the ancient art of the Assyrian Empire.

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