BRONZE AND IVORY/LUXURY GOODS
CHAPTER FIVE

PHOENICIAN AND NORTH SYRIAN IVORY CARVING
IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT:
QUESTIONS OF STYLE AND DISTRIBUTION

Part I: Style

Ivory as a material has a unique and fascinating appeal by virtue of its rich warm colour and sheen. Since very early times, ivory has been synonymous with luxury, as witnessed in the Old Testament reference to Ahab’s “house of ivory”, the epitome of luxurious living; in Amos’ imprecation against the rich “that lie upon beds of ivory”; and in Ezekiel’s lament for Tyre, perfect in beauty, where the very benches are made of ivory.\(^1\) In addition, we are told that Solomon’s royal throne was made of ivory, commissioned from Phoenician craftsmen who excelled in this art.\(^2\) Finally, the identification of ivory with luxury and hence corruption is clear in the Homeric allusion to the “Gate of Ivory”, through which dreams pass that mislead.\(^3\)

The discovery of actual ivory objects more-or-less contemporary with the literary references during excavations of the Assyrian palaces at Nimrud in the mid-nineteenth century thus engendered great excitement.\(^4\) The pieces were not only beautiful in themselves; they also brought the ancient traditions to life.

The esteem in which the ivories were held in their own time is clearly reflected in the many references by Assyrian kings to objects and tusks taken in booty or received as tribute, as well as in the care with which such transactions were represented on royal reliefs.\(^5\) Since the early

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\(^1\) *I Kings* 22:39; *Amos* 6:4; and *Ezekiel* 27:6.

\(^2\) *I Kings* 10:8.

\(^3\) *Odyssey* 19:563.
