CHAPTER SEVEN

IS THERE A SOUTH SYRIAN STYLE OF IVORY CARVING IN THE EARLY FIRST MILLENNIUM B.C.?

The wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be carried off before the king of Assyria.

*Isaiah* 8:4

**Introduction**

The major assemblages of ivory carving preserved from the first millennium B.C. have generally been divided into two groups, Phoenician and North Syrian, and the classic characteristics of these groups are by now quite well established.¹ However, if one defines Phoenicia as corresponding more or less to the coastal strip west of the Lebanon mountains, from the Carmel to Byblos, with the chief cities in antiquity as Tyre, Sidon, Arka, Arwad, Sarafand and Gebeil, and possibly including the Beka‘a Valley and the Anti-Lebanon but certainly not further east; and if one defines North Syria as comprising the city states north of the Orontes Valley and south of the Taurus, from the Ḥabur to the Amanus, including Gozan, Bit-Adini, Carchemish, Kummuḫ, Maraş, Sam‘al, Arpad, Patina/Unqi and possibly Hamath; then it will be noted that the territory occupied by these two regions in no way encompasses the entire Syro-Palestinian Levant. Notably absent is the area of the powerful kingdom of Aram, whose capital was at Damascus, as well as the kingdom of Israel, with its seat at Samaria—both of which geographical and political units figured prominently in the southern

---

¹ This article originally appeared as “Is There a South Syrian Style of Ivory Carving in the First Millenium B.C.?” *Iraq* 43 (1987) 101–130.

coalition of states met by Shalmaneser III of Assyria in 853 B.C. and in subsequent Assyrian campaigns to the West.²

Yet from the Annals of Assyrian kings of this period, we know that booty from Damascus included ivory furniture, not only for Shalmaneser (858–824 B.C.), but also for Adad-nirari III (810–783) and perhaps Tiglath-pileser III (744–727); while Samaria likewise was listed among those kingdoms furnishing ivory to the latter, and Judah, further to the south, to Esarhaddon.³ In addition, there exists not only the direct Old Testament reference to Ahab’s “house of ivory” at Samaria (generally accepted dates: 869–850 B.C.), but also the indirect reference to the men of Samaria “that lie upon couches of ivory”, mentioned in Amos’ attacks on Israel at the time of Jeroboam II (c. 786–740 B.C.).⁴ Both of these images suggest at least the accumulation of luxuries, if not actual manufacture; and indeed the presence of ivory carving of the period has been confirmed by excavation.⁵

Thus we know that there was ivory in South Syria in the early first millennium B.C. The question which remains is whether one may argue that ivory goods were being produced there, or if, instead, they were being imported from outside the immediate region.

In the case of Samaria, since Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, is identified as a Phoenician princess who brought with her many aspects of her native culture, the ivories found at Samaria have generally been assumed to be Phoenician.⁶ As far as Damascus is concerned, there is textual evidence that she maintained close ties historically and politically with the cities of the Phoenician coast,⁷ and the few decorated objects recovered from or attributed to Aram seem to support this—in particular the relief of a walking female sphinx wearing the Egyptian double crown, recovered in secondary context from the wall of the Omayyad Mosque.

---

³ ARAB I, §§ 475–76, 740. Cf. in this context also, the reference in Isa. 8:4 to booty from Damascus and the spoils of Samaria being brought before the king of Assyria, which would also pertain to the period of the second half of the eighth century, and the period from Tiglath-pileser III to Sennacherib, including the fall of Samaria.
⁴ 1 Kings 22:39; Amos 6:4.