CHAPTER NINE

NORTH SYRIAN IVORIES AND TELL HALAF RELIEFS: THE IMPACT OF LUXURY GOODS UPON “MAJOR” ARTS

There are striking similarities in overall style, detail, and subject matter between certain of the early first millennium ivory carvings attributed to North Syrian manufacture and the reliefs from Tell Halaf (ancient Guzana), a site located in the Ḥabur River basin. Ivories of North Syrian type have actually been found in fragments at Tell Halaf itself, as well as at various other sites: Nimrud, Hama, Zincirli, and Hasanlu, to name the most well known. These parallels led Helene Kantor to argue in 1956 that in fact the ivories, and possibly other minor arts, must have served as the models for the stone reliefs of what was essentially a provincial and culturally backward local center.¹ Such a scenario reverses the usual direction of influence from one medium to another—a direction generally understood as moving from the so-called major arts to so-called minor arts, with scale often determining what is considered “major.”² Nevertheless, I believe a number of factors can be adduced in support of the original hypothesis, and I should like to offer these brief notes as a tribute to the extraordinarily sensitive visual observations and historical perceptions of Helene Kantor, whose work on many aspects of the art of the early first millennium B.C. laid the foundations for much of my own.


² See, for example, the study of M.-Th. Barrelet, “Etude de glyptique akkadienne,” Orientalia 39 (1970): 213–51, in which she suggests that seal engravers of palace and temple workshops would have had direct access to the major monuments of the times, and that specifically cult statuary and reliefs provided the stimulus for certain imagery on Akkadian seals (cf. p. 217).
Tell Halaf was intermittently excavated under the direction of the Baron Max von Oppenheim from 1899 to 1929. In a royal Aramaean inscription of the tenth to ninth centuries B.C., the site was referred to as the kingdom of Pali; however Assyrian texts make reference to Guzana (bibl. Gozan), capital of Bit Bahiani, which eventually was incorporated into the empire as the province of Guzana, extending from Ras al Ain to Nisibis on the modern Turkish-Syrian border.

In terms of archaeological assemblages, both Tell Halaf and the neighboring site of Tell Fakhariyeh, excavated briefly by McEwan for the Oriental Institute in 1940, show the same pattern as a number of other North Syrian sites in the early first millennium B.C.: a pre-Assyrian phase with definite affinities with the west, and then a subsequent eighth to seventh centuries phase with ties to Assyria.

The picture is complicated somewhat by the complex history of the region during the second millennium, during which time a strong Middle Assyrian presence had been pushed back by the arrival and settlement of the Aramaeans in the late eleventh–early tenth centuries. Sometime in the reign of Adad Nirari II of Assyria (911–891 B.C.), however, Assyrian power had been re-established up to the Ḥabur, and with the western campaigns of Tukulti Ninurta II (890–884), an Assyrian presence was felt between the Ḥabur and the Euphrates—thus preparing the way for the move of his son, Assurnasirpal II (883–859) into Syria beyond the great river.

The region of Guzana/Bit Bahiani is mentioned in Neo-Assyrian texts of 894 (Adad-Nirari II), 882 and 867 B.C., prior to the specific

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5 C. W. McEwan et al., *Soundings at Tell Fakhariyeh*, OIP 79 (Chicago, 1956).

6 One could only wish that the Tell Halaf material had been recorded with as much care as that from Tell Fakhariyeh; (cf. review of B. Hrouda, *Tell Halaf IV*, by J. V. Canby in *AJA* 68 (1964): 71–72. Nevertheless, Helene Kantor, in writing on the Fakhariyeh pottery, states that the orientation of the Ḥabur area is clearly toward the west in the early part of the first millennium B.C. She notes that the Iron Age pottery at both sites is virtually identical to that from the Amuq plain, and similar to some Palestinian Iron Age pottery as well (H. J. Kantor, “The Pottery,” in McEwan et al., *Soundings*, pp. 25–29).