IVORIES FROM NIMRUD

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Twenty miles south of Nineveh, great capital of the Assyrian empire under Assur-bani-pal, in whose extensive library were found the famous Flood Tablets and other documents providing our first real knowledge of the Assyrians, is the site of Nimrud. Today little remains of this once flourishing city, known in Biblical history as Calah and to the Assyrians as Kalhu. As one approaches Nimrud, driving along a dirt track across the Assyrian plain, one sees only a great mound of earth, verdant like the plain after the winter rains but the rest of the year an endless beige. Except for fragments of pottery scattered about the surface of the tall, as such mounds are known in Arabic, there is no outward sign of the ancient city or of the treasures that the dust and debris of centuries still cover.

The first historical reference to Nimrud occurs in the annals of Shalmaneser I (1272–1243 B.C.), an Assyrian king who established there the city of Calah. In the ninth century Calah was magnificently rebuilt as the capital of the empire by Assurbanipal II (883–859 B.C.), and later kings, including Sargon and Sennacherib, had palaces there though their capital cities were elsewhere. At the end of the seventh century the Assyrian empire fell to the invading Medes and Babylonians, and by 612 B.C. Nimrud was completely abandoned. We know this from the Anabasis, where Xenophon, in telling of the famous march made by the ten thousand Greeks after their Persian commander had been killed at Cunaxa, mentions Nimrud, then called Larissa: “After suffering this defeat the enemy retired, and the Greeks marched on safely for the rest of the day and reached the River Tigris. There was a large deserted city there called Larissa, which in the old days used to be inhabited by the Medes. It had walls twenty-five feet broad and one hundred feet high, with a perimeter of six miles.”

It was not until the middle of the last century that the Western world discovered what lay within the great talls dotting the Mesopotamian plain. The records of the Bible and the Greek historians provided our only knowledge of the Assyrians until the 1840’s and 50’s. At that time extensive excavations were carried out at Nineveh, Nimrud, and Khorsabad by such men as Sir Austen Henry Layard, Paul Emil Botta, Victor Place, Hormuzd Rassam, and Sir William Kennet Loftus. It is to them that we owe not only the greater part of the Assyrian collections in England, France, and the United States but also the awakening of interest in the study of the ancient civilizations of the Near East.

These excavators unearthed a vast amount of material, but their methods were far from systematic. Consequently, important archaeological evidence and many small objects were lost forever. But by the beginning of the twentieth century the days of treasure-hunting had passed, and archaeology had become a scientific pursuit. In an effort to gain more historical information, and, of course, at the same time more and better-
Parts of a box on which is depicted the Assyrian king in full battle array being greeted by women with cymbals on the battlements of a walled city. Assyrian, 9th–8th century B.C. The fragments on this page are shown actual size. These pieces and all the other objects illustrated in this article, Rogers Fund, 1953.

documented antiquities, excavators turned again to the sites that had been dug by the pioneers.

In the 1930's the Oriental Institute worked at Khorsabad and the British went back to Nineveh. Of the major Assyrian cities Nimrud alone was untouched by recent excavations until 1949, when Professor Max E. L. Mallowan of the University of London, Director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, returned to dig there with the hope of discovering more about the great city from which so many famous works of art had come. Most of the Assyrian reliefs in this Museum, for example, are from the great palace of Assur-nasir-pal, and the huge winged beasts in the Main Hall once guarded its gateways. Both Loftus and Layard had found great quantities of beautifully carved ivories at Nimrud (now in the British Museum), and it was hoped that the new excavations would throw some light on the story of the early ivory craftsmen in the Near East as well as on the history of Assyria in the last centuries of the empire.

Professor Mallowan’s success in his first two seasons encouraged the Trustees of the Museum to contribute to his work there, and they continued to do so until the end of the 1953 season, when excavation was halted for a year for revision and publication. The Museum’s share of the antiquities found is now on exhibition, and it is quite evident that Professor Mallowan’s faith in Nimrud as a site of great archaeological interest was well justified.

The most striking objects from Nimrud are the ivories—exquisitely carved heads that once must have ornamented furniture in the royal palaces; boxes inlaid with gold and decorated with processions of small figures; decorative plaques; delicately carved small animals, amazingly naturalistic when one thinks of the cold and rather stiff conventions of the stone reliefs, the works of art best known to us from the As-
syrian world. Ivory, as we know both from excavation and from historical records, was highly prized and in extensive use at the time of the Assyrian empire. The classical Biblical reference is, of course, Ahab's house of ivory at Samaria, where modern excavations revealed ivories related to those from Nimrud. Contemporary inscriptions provide many records of ivories sent as tribute to the Assyrian kings and of the use of ivory by them. We read of Assurnasir-pal taking "couches of ivory overlaid with gold" from a city on the western Tigris and receiving tribute of "elephant tusks and ivory thrones overlaid with gold and silver." "All Phoenicia" sent gifts, including ivory and elephants, to him. In the inventory of loot taken from Damascus by Adad-ninari III are listed beds and stools of ivory from the royal palace. Sargon is said to have had a palace of ivory, and included in the tribute paid by Hezekiah of Judah to Sennacherib in 701 B.C. were couches of ivory and the tusks and hides of elephants.

There were several possible sources for the great quantity of ivory being used in this period. Some may actually have been of local origin, as it is known that elephants were numerous in Syria during the second millennium and that ivory was plentiful for some time after that. In the first millennium the sources in the Sudan, Somaliland, and India increased in importance, the Syrian herds apparently having been exterminated by the eighth century. Much ivory was imported by the great sea merchants of the ancient world, the Phoenicians. The ivory found at Samaria, for example, was apparently brought by them from the Sudan.

The Phoenicians furnished not only ivory but also the technique of working it, which they had probably learned from the Egyptians, the first people in the ancient world to use it to any great extent. Phoenician ivories, showing strong Egyptian influence, are the earliest of those found in the Near East, and in that region the Phoenicians remained for centuries the most skillful ivory-carvers. Many of the pieces found in Assyria (for instance, the lower fragment on the opposite page) are clearly Phoenician. Some of them were received as tribute. Some, however, may have been made locally by Phoenician craftsmen, perhaps brought there by the Assyrian king to help in furnishing his great palaces. This would not be surprising as the itinerant craftsman is typical of the Near East even today.

Many of the ivories at Nimrud, however, are distinctly Assyrian in style. It is possible that these also were carved by Phoenician craftsmen, but it is equally possible, in fact probable, that local guilds of ivory-carvers were growing up in emulation of the Phoenicians. We know from evidence found in 1953 that at least some of the ivories ordered by Sargon (722–705 B.C.) for his palace at Khorsabad were carved at Nimrud, and it is possible that by this time a local tradition had developed.

It should be noted, however, that none of the Assyrian ivories antedate the reign of Assurnasir-pal, the first Assyrian king to establish and maintain close contact with the Phoenician coast.

The work of the ivory-carvers was supreme among that of ancient craftsmen. The small bull above, with its fine detail and precision of execution, is one of the finest examples of carving known from the ancient world. It was found, with four others like it, in a private house that must have belonged to some administrative official of the time of Assur-bani-pal (668–633 B.C.) or even later. Judging from their style, the ivories, part of a large group found in the house,
were made in earlier centuries. They must have been kept as heirlooms and may originally have come from one of the royal palaces.

Perhaps the most impressive object in the Metropolitan's share of the Nimrud ivories is a large female head (5½ in. high), which was found in the sludge of a well in the palace built by Assurnasir-pal (the northwest, or Juniper Palace), where it had been thrown when the palace was sacked, probably at the end of Sargon's reign. This fine head is the second largest in ivory from the Near East. The largest (6½ in. high), which came from the same well at Nimrud, is now in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad; the latter has an archaic smile in contrast to the rather austere expression of the Metropolitan's piece, but both are superb examples of the skill of the eighth-century ivory-worker. On both heads even the grain of the ivory was used to fullest advantage, the concentric graining falling on cheeks and chin to accentuate the roundness.

A large collection of ivories was found in this well; all were a rich brown color from chemical action in the water or well sludge. In this group are two magnificent plaques depicting a lioness killing a Nubian and inlaid with gold, lapis lazuli, and carnelian. One is now in the British Museum and one in Baghdad. In the Metropolitan is the lovely fly-whisk handle illustrated on page 238, which, as we know from Assyrian reliefs, is like those carried by Sennacherib's attendants in his campaign against Jerusalem in 701 B.C. and is even more like the ones that kept flies from the royal personages in the famous relief of Assur-bani-pal's feast, which is illustrated beside it.

Also from the well is the ivory cheekpiece for a horse shown on page 239. It was originally stained with a dark pigment, recalling a passage from the Iliad: "As when some women of Maonia or Karia stain ivory with purple, to make a cheekpiece for horses, and it is laid up in the treasure chamber, and many a horseman prayeth for it to wear; but it is laid up to be a king's boast, alike an adornment for his horse and a glory for his charioteer; even in such wise, Menelaos, were thy shapely thighs stained with blood and thy legs and thy fair ankles beneath." Certainly the poet must have seen an ivory like the one from Nimrud; both its date and its Phoenician style relate it closely to the time and area of the Iliad reference. The cheekpiece from Nimrud might well have been "laid
The second largest ivory head ever found in the Near East, discovered in a well in Sargon's palace. It must have been used as some sort of decorative object. The eyes and eyebrows were once inlaid, and the pendants on the necklace had centers of gold. Assyrian, VIII century B.C. Almost actual size.
up to be a king’s boast,” as we know from wall reliefs that such an object was not ordinarily used in the horse harnesses of the period. It was found in the palace with a collection of ivories some of which were certainly made for King Sargon.

A great part of the ivories from Nimrud appear to date from the time of Sargon. Those from the Burnt Palace, many of which were blackened in the fire that destroyed it, came from a level that, judging from the archaeological context, may quite reasonably be attributed to this period. They may be as late as the reign of his son and successor, Sennacherib, but this is unlikely as Sennacherib confined his architectural efforts to rebuilding and enlarging Nineveh, apparently preferring it to Calah. Sargon, on the other hand, lived at Nimrud while he was building Khorsabad and used the Juniper Palace, where many of the ivories were found. We read in his annals: “The Juniper Palace of Calah, which Assur-nasir-pal, a prince who lived before me, had built, . . . through rains and the downpours of heaven . . . had become dilapidated. . . . I cleared its site. . . . From its foundation walls to its top I constructed and completed it. The plunder of the cities, acquired through the success of my weapons, which I hurled against the foe, I shut up therein and filled it to bursting with luxuries.” It was obviously part of this loot that Layard found a century ago in a storeroom in this palace—a collection of embossed and engraved bronze bowls, a large quantity of armor, swords and daggers, ivories, elephant tusks, and glass and alabaster vessels inscribed with the name of Sargon. This evidence contributed to the dating
Cheekpiece for a horse. On the head of the sphinx is a sun disk with a uraeus, or cobra; in front is a winged cobra, also with a sun disk. In the cartouche, attached to a lotus plant, is the name “Djunen.” Phoenician in style, about 715 B.C. The piece has been partly restored with wax. Actual size
ABOVE: The side of a box lid, decorated with palm trees and ostriches. The lid is illustrated on the opposite page. Assyrian, about 715 B.C. About actual size.

BELOW: Detail of a stone relief showing Assyrian scribes counting heads after a battle. The bearded scribe is writing on a hinged board, probably covered with wax, like the ones discovered at Nimrud. From the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, about 700 B.C. In the British Museum

of similar material, including ivory, in other rooms in this palace and in the Burnt Palace.

A well in this same storeroom excavated in the 1953 season produced a further link with Sargon. The material found there, fragments of sixteen hinged ivory writing boards, together with fragments of similar boards made of walnut, is, aside from its connection with his reign, of great archaeological interest. The boards are rectangular (13\(\frac{1}{4}\) in. long, 6 in. wide), with a raised edge, the inner sunken portion having been scored to hold wax, which furnished a writing surface (see relief at the left). They are of especial importance since they provide the oldest known evidence of writing on wax, antedating the earliest Greek examples by almost five centuries. It was known from textual sources that wax was used as a writing material in Babylonia and Assyria, but the Nimrud discovery provides the first material proof. In fact, owing to the amazing preservative quality of the well sludge, fragments of the wax were actually found—beeswax mixed with orpiment (arsenic sulphide) to make it easier to write on—and minute cuneiform characters were still legible on some of them. This was an unusual discovery since wax and wood deteriorate rapidly and are never found under ordinary circumstances in Mesopotamian excavations.

Bees were not native to Mesopotamia. It is known from an inscription on a stele found in Babylon that they were introduced from the mountains to the north by an official named Shamash-resh-usur sometime during the eighth century. Since they were native to Anatolia it is probable that wax tablets were used by the Hittites at an even earlier date, but we have no
Blackened box lid whose side is shown on the opposite page. The rosette was originally overlaid with gold, and there were ivory ornaments that fitted into the dowel holes. Right: Palace-ware drinking cup, one of the objects found in the cupboard illustrated below. The cupboard was abandoned when Nimrud was sacked in 612 B.C.

proof. Hittite stone reliefs show scribes with wooden tablets. These may have been covered with wax, or they may have been written on with ink.

In the same well was found another example of unusual preservation, a bronze axe with traces of the original rope binding still intact, and in the other well were found pieces of oak beams from the well derrick and many jars with rope still attached to them, leading one to think at first that they must be relatively modern jars. They were unquestionably Assyrian, however, and the rope had survived these many centuries.

The ivory writing boards are of further interest in that we know the text with which they had been inscribed. A great stroke of luck provided what might be called the title page to the book; the polished outer surface of one of the ivory boards was inscribed: “Palace of Sargon, King of the World, King of Assyria. He caused the work called Enuma Anu Enlil to be inscribed on an ivory tablet and set up in the palace at Dur-Sharrukin” (Khorsabad, the city Sargon built as his capital but never completed). The Enuma Anu Enlil is a well-known astrological text, one which was consulted by the Assyrian kings on all critical occasions. It was many thousands of lines in length and must have covered at least sixteen boards. The boards were hinged together with leather, probably in groups of three or four, as sixteen together would have been very unwieldy.

The Assyrian cuneiform on the wax, like the writing on the more common clay tablets, must have been inscribed with a blunt-ended stylus, not with a pointed stylus like that exhibited with the writing boards. A pointed stylus, with
Clay figurine, of a type buried under the floors of Assyrian houses to keep away evil spirits. IX century B.C. It represents the same figure, with wings and eagle head and holding a bucket, that appears on Assyrian reliefs standing next to the “sacred tree,” as shown at the right. Relief, Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1932

The Nimrud excavations yielded many other objects, of which the Museum has a share. Among these are several very fine pottery vessels of eggshell thinness made for use in the royal palaces, alabaster jars, shell ornaments, and clay figurines, one of which is illustrated above. These figurines were buried in small clay boxes under the floors of Assyrian houses to purify the house and to protect it from evil spirits. Several kinds were found, “warriors” and “fishmen” singly and an eagle-headed, winged type seven to a box. They were originally painted white, and the backs of the winged ones had stripes and winglike markings in black.

The winged figurines represent the same demon as the figures carrying buckets and fir cones that are shown flanking the “sacred tree” in Assyrian wall reliefs. The fir cone has sometimes been called a date spathe and the scene interpreted as the fertilization of the date palm. In some texts, however, the word used for it has the sense of a “purifier,” and it seems more likely that the ritual is either lustration or a magical drawing of force from some spiritual being symbolized by the tree—perhaps the national god Assur, as his symbol is often associated with a tree in scenes on cylinder seals. These winged figures also appear in wall reliefs standing next to the king or flanking doorways in the palace.

The clay figures also have associations with the sacred tree, which, according to ritual texts, was cut with gold and silver axes as part of the ceremony accompanying their making and consecration. The same texts (which are rituals for the purification of a house) describe the clay figures clearly: “Seven statues of the Wise Ones, furnished with faces of birds, carrying in their right hands a ‘purifier’ and in their left a ritual bucket, clad in gypsum, cloaked with wings of birds on their shoulders, bury in the foundations of the house . . . . Recite before them the incantation: ‘Ye statues of Wise Ones, watchers.’ ” It is interesting to note the number seven in this prophylactic ritual; it is found later in the New Testament in the story of the casting out of the seven devils.

An object related to the statuettes is the small bronze dog illustrated here, found in the same well as the fine collection of ivories. Such figurines, made of clay or bronze, were symbols of Gula-Ninkarrak, goddess of healing and defender of homes. They were also buried beneath the floor, usually under the doorstep, to scare away evil spirits and demons, and an incantation
called “Fierce Dogs” was recited during the ceremony. Many of the dog effigies had their names inscribed on them. One in the British Museum is called: “Don’t stop to think, bite him!”

Clay tablets, seals, pottery, and various other small objects round out the group from Nimrud. The Museum now has, in fact, a collection that provides a great deal of insight into the life and art of the late Assyrian empire. It is not complete and never could be. The objects recovered by archaeologists working in the Near East represent but a small fraction of what existed in a given period. Nevertheless, with material from a carefully conducted excavation, association of objects and stratigraphy furnish clues which the isolated pieces can never reveal. We have not only a striking collection but one that, in its procuring, has added several chapters to the history of Assyria.