

The Transmission of Artistic Styles in the Near East through Ivories

La Transmission Des Styles Artistique au Proche-Orient à Travers les Ivoires

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Abstract:

In ancient times, ivory was utilized in the manufacture of multiple rare objects, as demonstrated by ivory artifacts that have survived in good condition; among them are outstanding examples displayed in numerous museums. Ivory objects are among the most remarkable archaeological remains, attesting to human skill across the different civilizations of the Near East. Despite the limited size of ivory compared to other raw materials such as clay, wood, and metals, artisans succeeded in exploiting this material through a variety of techniques. The use of ivory became widespread across various civilizations, with notable achievements in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the cities of the Phoenician coast alike. The influence among these cultures was mutual, as they used similar techniques and revealed creativity in producing distinctive ivories in terms of form and decorative motifs. therefore, the aim of choosing the topic of the article was to demonstrate the nature of cultural influences and the ways in which they were the civilizations of the Near East.

Keywords: Ivory; Artistic styles; Nimrud; Arslan Tash; cultural Interaction.

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Résumé :

À l'époque antique, l'ivoire était utilisé pour la fabrication de nombreux objets rares, comme en témoignent les artefacts en ivoire bien conservés ; parmi eux figurent des exemples remarquables exposés dans de nombreux musées. Ces objets en ivoire comptent parmi les vestiges archéologiques les plus précieux, attestant du savoir-faire humain à travers les différentes civilisations du Proche-Orient. Malgré la taille limitée de l'ivoire comparée à d'autres matières premières telles que l'argile, le bois ou les métaux, les artisans ont su exploiter ce matériau à l'aide de diverses techniques. L'usage de l'ivoire s'est largement répandu dans différentes civilisations, avec des réalisations notables en Égypte, en Mésopotamie et dans les cités de la côte phénicienne. L'influence entre ces cultures était réciproque, puisqu'elles employaient des techniques similaires et faisaient preuve de créativité dans la production d'ivoires distinctifs, tant par leur forme que par leurs motifs décoratifs. Par conséquent, le choix de sujet de cet article visait à démontrer la nature des influences culturelles et les méthodes de leur transmission entre les civilisations du Proche-Orient.

Mots-clés : ivoires ; Styles artistique ; Nimrud ; ArslanTash ; Interaction culturelle.

Introduction

Ivory is considered a precious and rare material that has been utilized by humans since the earliest periods. From prehistoric times, it was used in the manufacture of ivory objects, initially for simple tools. Over time, and with a growing understanding of the properties and features of ivory, which differ from those of animal bone, humans came to appreciate its advantages. Compared to bone, ivory is distinguished by its hardness due to the cohesion of its structure, as well as by the lustre of its color, which is resistant to natural factors.

Although its original white color may gradually shift toward a yellowish hue over time, ivory retains most of its characteristics. It remains solid and does not crack, even when submerged in water for extended periods. The ivory artifacts discovered at several archaeological sites in the Near East continue to bear witness to these qualities. Among the most significant finds are those from ArslanTash and Nimrud, the ivory components of the funerary furniture from the tomb of Tutankhamun, as well as archaeological remains from the cities of the Phoenician coast and beyond, where Phoenicians established their settlements. The problem statement raised in this context is that most Near Eastern ivories share common features in terms of their types, manufacturing techniques, and decorative forms. This similarity makes it difficult for researchers to determine their place of production. Consequently, this prompts the question of whether ivories can be regarded as a model of material cultural interaction and mutual influence among the civilizations of the Near East.? The importance of this article lies in demonstrating the nature of the influences between the civilizations of Near East through the transmission of techniques and autistic styles related to ivory. The article adopted a descriptive historical approach; identifying

and analyzing aspects of the topic to achieve its objectives.

1. The Source of Ivory According to Archaeological and Literary Evidence

Ivory craftsmanship was known in most civilizations of the Near East. Archaeological research has indicated the presence of elephants during prehistoric periods, and the archaeological remains of ivory objects demonstrate that humans were familiar with methods of exploiting elephant tusks. Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the cities of the Phoenician coast are among the most significant civilizations in which outstanding ivory artifacts have been discovered. The ways of acquiring ivory were diverse. Sources reveal a direct method through

the hunting of elephants in their natural habitats, as well as indirect means through commercial exchange, gifts, or as part of payments made together with precious materials such as gold and silver in the context of tribute.

1.1. The Source of Ivory in Egypt

Egypt is regarded as one of the most important civilizations of the Near East in which both material and written archaeological evidence confirm the use of ivory in the manufacture of multiple types of objects, whether simple or composite. These involve needles, beads, combs, pins, cosmetic containers, amulets, and ivory inlaid furniture, among others¹, from the earliest periods. This is partly interpreted by the fact that elephants were among the animals that lived in Egypt during the Neolithic period². Several archaeological indicators attest to their presence, most notably the remains of elephant bones, as well as scenes depicted on pottery. Furthermore, direct archaeological evidence in the form of ivory artifacts confirms the use of elephant tusks in the Badarian culture and at BeniSalama³.

The nature of the vegetation cover and the climatic conditions were suitable for the presence of elephants in Egypt from the earliest periods. However, changes associated with natural factors and human activity led to a decline in elephant populations and their migration. The natural factors primarily refer to climatic changes, particularly a decrease in rainfall, which resulted in alterations to the vegetation cover, especially from the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty. This led to a reduction in elephant numbers and their movement toward southern regions⁴. As for human intervention, the primary reason lies

in the perception of elephants as a threat to agricultural land. As a result, humans contributed to their displacement toward southern areas by modifying the vegetation cover, their main source of food, through tree cutting, thereby altering the environment suitable for elephant habitation⁵.

Several material and written archaeological sources confirm that the Egyptians exploited elephant tusks prior to the Dynastic period⁶. Ivory was obtained through direct means, as elephants were hunted in open areas before their migration to southern regions. At that time, elephants lived in large numbers in Egypt, a fact confirmed by hunting scenes depicting kings engaged in elephant hunts. This practice reflects the significance of ivory as a precious material. Hunting scenes also depict kings pursuing elephants in southern Egypt, in the land of Kush, after the elephants had migrated southward, as previously noted⁷.

The Egyptians also acquired ivory through tribute, as can be inferred from numerous scenes illustrating the payment of tribute from multiple regions, most notably Nubia and the cities of the Phoenician coast. Such scenes appear on the walls of the tomb of Rekhmire

, dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, where bearers of tribute are depicted. These representations demonstrate that ivory was considered a valuable material, whether presented in its raw form as elephant tusks, as suggested by the tribute scenes. The Egyptians also received elephants themselves as part of the tribute, as evidenced by scenes dating to the reign of Thutmose III during the New Kingdom⁸.

Title: The Transmission of Artistic Styles in the Near East through Ivories

Moreover, ivory was acquired through commercial exchange, particularly during the New Kingdom, owing to the expansion of trade networks. The land of Punt was one of the most significant regions reached by Egyptian maritime trade expeditions, as demonstrated in the scenes of Queen Hatshepsut's commercial voyages, which depict ships laden with multiple goods, including elephant tusks⁹.

Beyond the indirect archaeological evidence that reflects Egyptian interest in acquiring ivory and elephants, written sources also attest to the exploitation of ivory throughout the historical phases of Egyptian civilization. Several texts indicate the antiquity of Egyptian knowledge of ivory and its use, in which it is mentioned under the term "Abu," a designation related to the ivory trade in Upper Egypt¹⁰.

As for direct archaeological evidence, several ivory artifacts dating to different historical periods of Egyptian civilization have been discovered. These range from the simplest objects, such as needles, to some of the finest ivory masterpieces, most notably those found among the funerary furniture of Tutankhamun. Egypt is characterized by the wide variety of its ivory objects, encompassing anklets, kohl applicators, mace heads, hairpins, combs, bracelets, pendants, vessels for storing ointments, rings, spoons, and dagger handles¹¹.

1.2. The Source of Ivory in Mesopotamia

Animal bones and ivory were employed in Mesopotamia from the earliest periods. Animal bones were used prior to ivory, as indicated by the material remains of multiple bone artifacts. Direct archaeological evidence demonstrates that ivory was in use from the beginning of the third millennium BCE¹².

The annals of the Assyrian kings are the most important written sources confirming how they obtained ivory. In Mesopotamia, the main source of ivory was external regions, often associated with the payment of tribute. This was particularly common during periods of expansion, especially in the Assyrian era, which frequently concluded with tribute that included valuable materials such as metals, textiles, ivory, and wood. This is evident from the annals of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal, which record that he received silver, gold, ivory, and elephants¹³ from the kings of the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. In addition to these texts, ivory objects were among the items required in tribute. For example, a text from King Adad-nirari I (805–782 BCE) requests ivory furniture as part of the tribute delivered by King Ben-Hadad III, son of King Hazael of Damascus. The ivory artifacts from ArslanTash also attest to this practice, which will be addressed in detail later¹⁴.

Ivory was employed in Mesopotamia from an early period and became particularly prevalent during the reign of the Assyrian kings, as its acquisition was closely related to territorial expansion and the accumulation of precious materials. Ivory was also one of the most significant raw materials received by kings as gifts, particularly from the cities of the Phoenician coast. Therefore, the most important ivory collections have been discovered in Mesopotamian cities and their surrounding regions¹⁵, encompassing Nimrud, ArslanTash, and Khorsabad. The palaces of their kings were decorated with ivory-inlaid furniture, alongside other ivory objects, whether produced locally as demonstrated by raw ivory remains revealing workshops

and skilled artisans in Mesopotamia or acquired as gifts from the Hittites¹⁶ or through commercial exchange¹⁷.

1.3. The Source of Ivory in the Cities of the Phoenician Coast

The Phoenicians traded in precious materials, of which ivory was one of the most important¹⁸. They were also renowned for their skill in working ivory¹⁹, specializing in carving and decoration. This is confirmed by the multiple ivory objects found both within and outside the cities of the Phoenician coast²⁰. Contemporary sources from the period of Phoenician city-state prosperity, especially Tyre, reveal that ivory was among the list of valuable raw materials, alongside cedar wood and purple textiles. For instance, the Old Testament states: “They made your pars from the acorns of Bashan; they made your seats from inlaid ivory...”²¹ Ivory was widely utilized for inlay and decoration of furniture in antiquity. Phoenician artisans were also responsible for decorating the palace of King Ahab, known as the “House of Ivory,” likely due to the abundance of ivory-inlaid furniture. He is said to have built a palace for his Phoenician wife in the city of Samaria. According to the First Book of Kings: “And all the acts of Ahab, and all his ways, and the House of Ivory, and all the houses he built...”²²

Phoenician artisans specializing in ivory crafts were also responsible for decorating the palaces of the Assyrian kings, most notably the ornamental decorations of the royal palaces at ArslanTash and Nimrud. It is likely that Phoenician craftsmen, skilled in ivory work,

moved to Assyrian cities either as captives or as migrants²³. An ivory collection has been discovered exhibiting diverse cultural influences, along with Phoenician inscriptions, confirming its place of industry²⁴.

Concerning the regions from which ivory was obtained, it is certain that they were situated outside the Phoenician cities, as literary sources provide no evidence that elephants ever lived along the Phoenician coast. Elephant tusks were among the precious materials acquired through trade with multiple regions. For instance, via the Persian Gulf, the Phoenicians obtained ivory from India, and via Egypt, they acquired ivory from Africa²⁵. They also obtained ivory from the kingdom of Mitanni and the land of Ophir, as mentioned in the Old Testament. The ships of Hiram, king of Tyre, sailed to distant regions to procure valuable raw materials: "...for the king had ships at sea with the fleet of Tarshish; once every three years the ships of Tarshish would come bringing gold, silver, and ivory..."²⁶ In addition to ivory from Africa, it is likely that the Phoenicians gained ivory from East Africa via Egypt before expanding into the western Mediterranean. After the founding of Carthage, it became a significant source of ivory. North Africa was notable for its abundant wildlife, especially elephants, as confirmed by archaeological evidence. Elephants have lived in Africa since prehistoric times, as depicted in rock art, and they are also represented on the coins of the Numidian kings.

Literary sources further demonstrate that Carthage possessed elephants and trained them for use at the forefront of its armies during the Punic Wars. This is confirmed by The Treaty of Zama: Article

Three of the treaty stipulated that Carthage surrender all of its elephants and prohibited the future training of elephants, indicating that North Africa was indeed a suitable environment for elephant habitation²⁷.

2. Phases of Ivory Preparation

Ivory is a rare raw material with distinct features, especially its hardness, limited length, and small size. The craftsman worked with a highly unique material that required exceptional skill and precision²⁸.

Ivory was regarded as one of the most precious materials obtained by humans in ancient times. It comes from the elephant, specifically the elongated, protruding part of the upper jaw, which is harvested by separating it with a sharp tool. Tusks vary in length and size, mainly relying on the elephant's gender and the environment in which it lived. Male elephant tusks are generally longer than those of females, while some Asian female elephants may not develop tusks at all. Conversely, African elephants may have tusks exceeding 1.82 meters in length, with a weight of up to fifty kilograms²⁹.

Elephant tusks generally share a common structure: a thick, solid longitudinal shaft at the upper part, tapering to a hollow tip³⁰. One of ivory's most significant features is its glossy white color, which may gradually yellow over time while retaining its shine. Ivory is described in numerous sources as white, and even in tribute records, its color is often specified, demonstrating admiration for its enduring hue. Ivory is highly resistant to moisture, a factor that impacts most other materials such as certain metals and wood. Thanks to its hardness and

composition, ivory remains durable under multiple conditions and does not deteriorate even when exposed to humidity or submerged in water for extended periods. These characteristics are affirmed by ivory artifacts that have survived in museums in excellent condition for thousands of years³¹.

2.1. Techniques and Tools

Working with ivory required specialized techniques and tools, which researchers have determined through the marks left on ivory objects. These tools included axes, chisels, and drills, adapted to the hardness and limited size of the material. Novice ivory sculptors initially learned carving techniques on wood³² before progressing to ivory. Due to the limited working surface, tusks rarely exceeded two meters in length and were narrow in diameter, craftsmen had to choose specific tools for cutting, carving, incising, shaping, and drilling. Tools were sharp and small to accommodate the constraints of the raw material.

Ivory craftsmen utilized small axes in the initial phase to prepare the raw piece, which often consisted of various sections. Tusks were segmented according to the shape and size of the intended ivory object, as their length and diameter were not always suitable for inlaying decorative components, such as furniture inlaid with ivory. They also employed saws with sharp, curved teeth, designed to match the cylindrical shape of ivory. Researchers have determined the use of saws through the presence of successive V-shaped grooves, which are traces left by the saw teeth during cutting³³.

Title: The Transmission of Artistic Styles in the Near East through Ivories

In addition to cutting tools, the craftsman utilized specialized tools to refine ivory pieces, ensuring they appeared smooth and harmonious. This phase necessitated the use of files, which made composite pieces seamless and free of imperfections. The assembly of various sections did not reduce the aesthetic quality of the ivory object, as the finished piece retained the smoothness and visual consistency of the raw material. This technique was also commonly employed in woodworking. Joining composite pieces required the use of drills. To connect two ivory parts, the craftsman would create holes on opposing sides and insert a third ivory piece as a peg to secure the two sections. This prevented the composite pieces from coming apart. This technique was likewise used in woodworking³⁴.

For engraving, chisels³⁵ were mainly used. Despite its hardness, density, and fine grain, ivory is suitable for detailed carving³⁶. This is apparent in many ivory artifacts that display intricate details, indicating the craftsman's precision and skill in rendering both raised and recessed properties. Craftsmen handled ivory with exceptional care and expertise, skillfully exploiting the natural grain formed by the interwoven fibers³⁷ to fulfill precise carving and engraving.(see figure 7)

Additional techniques and tools were used relying on the type of decoration. The craftsman sometimes employed pigments to highlight specific details, such as facial characteristics on ivory figurines. For instance, black was utilized for the eyes to create a natural appearance, while red, green, and other colors were applied depending on the piece. Coloring ivory,(see figure 2.and5) given its hardness, required

special pigments that adhered to the smooth surface³⁸. As Homer notes in the *Iliad*, horse ornaments inlaid with ivory were dyed with costly purple pigment, a material the Phoenicians were renowned for extracting from murex shells³⁹. Through such multicolored decoration, the craftsman added aesthetic appeal to the piece⁴⁰.

Other materials were incorporated as well, such as gold leaf, which was employed to cover certain ivory artifacts and fill gaps as a form of inlay. Colored glass and gemstones, such as lapis lazuli and ruby⁴¹, were also used, as referenced in the Old Testament: "...white ivory covered with ruby..."⁴² Given the precious nature of ivory, the craftsman had to master both carving and decorative techniques to produce ivory objects with exceptional aesthetic qualities⁴³.

Notably, ivory was employed as an inlay material on metal objects, especially the handles of daggers and knives. Examples of such inlaid objects have been discovered. The inlay work necessitated simple, undecorated ivory pieces, precisely fitted to the metal elements so that no gaps were visible. This process required significant skill, precision, and artistic sensibility.

Moreover, ivory was utilized for inlaying wooden furniture. This type of decorated object is mentioned in numerous literary sources. For instance, ivory-inlaid seats are referenced in the Phoenician city of Tyre in the Old Testament: "...they made your seats from ivory inlaid

Title: The Transmission of Artistic Styles in the Near East through Ivories

in boxwood from the orchards of Kittim...⁴⁴”(Boxwood refers to a type of wood).

Concerning material evidence from ivory artifacts, decorative pieces have been found that, according to numerous researchers, were employed to inlay furniture made from perishable materials such as wood. Most of these pieces were discovered within the remains of royal palaces. Some of the most significant examples of these decorative pieces were found at Nimrud⁴⁵ (see figure 6). Notably, craftsmen skillfully used all parts of a single elephant tusk, excelling in joining various pieces without visible seams or imperfections. Smaller ivory fragments, resulting from detailed carving and engraving, were also employed for decorative purposes or practical applications such as dental cleaning⁴⁶.

The techniques utilized to prepare ivory objects were similar across numerous civilizations, including Egyptian, Phoenician, and Mesopotamian. This demonstrates the existence of cultural and technical exchanges, facilitated by trade or possibly by the movement of specialized artisans. The Phoenicians played a crucial role in transmitting techniques for ivory use and Eastern artistic styles. For example, ivory artifacts found in Carthage display Eastern artistic influences, particularly from Egypt, in North Africa⁴⁷.

Preparing an ivory object demanded great skill and precision, particularly when assembling various pieces. The pieces were organized employing symbols such as small holes, notches, or letters

to facilitate proper arrangement. Thin ivory pins served as pegs, and adhesives were also used to secure the pieces⁴⁸.

2.2. Ivory Collections

Ivory is a precious material obtained from elephant tusks in multiple regions of the Near East and was employed to produce some of the finest artistic objects⁴⁹, many of which are still preserved in museums today. Thousands of ivory artifacts of varying sizes have been discovered at several archaeological sites. These objects once adorned the palaces of kings and the homes of the wealthy. What distinguishes them is that they depict themes related to most civilizations of the Near East⁵⁰.

2.3. Decorative Features of Ivory Objects

Most ivory objects across the civilizations of the Near East share similar decorative properties, encompassing vegetal, animal, and geometric motifs. This is apparent in several ivory artifacts, which often demonstrate similar decoration, size, and themes influenced by overlapping cultural traditions. The patterns reflect consistent Eastern artistic styles, so much so that at first glance, it is not evident that some pieces are consisted of mixed influences. This indicates the craftsman's skill and mastery of various techniques. This complexity has raised questions among archaeologists when discovering ivory collections, as it is often impossible to identify their exact place of manufacture. The ArslanTash ivories are regarded as one of the most significant examples, found in a region under Assyrian control during the reign of King Adad-nirari (809–782 BCE) and his son Hadad III⁵¹. The palace where these ivories were discovered contained a diverse

collection of ivory pieces with decorations revealing non-Mesopotamian influences, raising questions about their origin. As archaeological objects, ivory pieces cannot be conclusively attributed to a specific place of manufacture grounded solely in the material, as elephant ivory from Asia and Africa does not differ significantly in its features. Therefore, researchers encounter challenges that necessitate historical knowledge of trade, military expansion, and political relations, often gleaned from literary sources that offer information on ivory as a traded commodity, tribute, or royal gift⁵².

A general feature of ivory objects, in terms of motifs and decoration, is the interplay of cultural influences. Egyptian motifs appear outside Egypt, and similarly, Mesopotamian influences are visible in ivories beyond Mesopotamia. Among the main themes are the birth of the god Horus, winged animals particularly the winged lion, lotus and water lily flowers, the crowned ram, the Egyptian crown, papyrus plants, and palm trees.

3. Ivory Collections in the Near East

Ivory collections in the Near East are often named after the regions where they were discovered. They are particularly crucial in archaeological studies due to their quantity, diversity, and the distinctive blending of Eastern artistic styles. Notable collections involve the ivories from Canaanite cities such as Megiddo and Ugarit, as well as cities in Mesopotamia, encompassing Nimrud, ArslanTash, and Khorsabad⁵³.

3.1. Examples of Ivory Collections

Researchers have focused on studying ivory collections in terms of their decorative themes, as most collections were produced employing similar techniques found across the civilizations of the Near East⁵⁴.

Ugarit Ivories

These ivories are attributed to one of the most significant Canaanite cities, which reached its golden age between 1440 and 1300 BCE. Remains of its royal palace have been discovered at the archaeological site of RasShamra. Among the most important finds is a group of ivory objects found within funerary furniture, demonstrating Egyptian and Aegean cultural influences. One example is a box shaped like a duck, with its head facing inward. In general, Ugarit ivories are marked by a mixture of Aegean, Hittite, and Egyptian influences, reflecting the city's role as a major commercial port⁵⁵.

Megiddo Ivories

These ivories are attributed to one of the most powerful Canaanite cities, notable for its strategic location linking the trade route between Egypt and Damascus. Megiddo is mentioned in the annals of Pharaoh Thutmose III. Archaeological excavations at Megiddo started in 1903 and continued until 1937. During these excavations, researchers discovered over 400 ivory objects, encompassing cosmetic boxes, buttons, combs, decorative panels of varying sizes, and scenes such as a figure playing a musical instrument⁵⁶, as well as spoons and game pieces. What distinguishes the Megiddo ivories is that most bear diverse Egyptian influences, including lotus plants, winged lions, and palm trees⁵⁷.

The Megiddo ivories were found within the remains of a palace built in the early 12th century BCE⁵⁸, though their production may date back to the 13th century BCE. Their importance lies in the cultural influences they reflect, especially Egyptian animal and plant motifs, such as winged lions, lotus flowers, and wigs depicted on some human heads. This demonstrates links between the two regions during this period. Aegean influences are also apparent, particularly in scenes of animal combat and plant motifs, such as palm trees (see figure)⁵⁹.

ArslanTash Ivories

Named after the site reached by the Assyrian armies, which became an Assyrian city where royal palaces were built for the kings' residences during their campaigns. The city flourished during the reign of King Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE), who constructed royal palaces and temples there. Excavations at the site uncovered remains of the old palace, encompassing a collection of well-preserved ivory objects, considered among the finest ivory artifacts. One notable set consists of decorative pieces with a total length of 195 cm and a width of 96 cm, composed of sections no wider than 8 cm⁶⁰. It is likely that this was a decorative component of a royal bed inlaid with ivory. Over time, some pieces fell due to wood decay. This complete series originally adorned the wooden frame and represents one of the most significant ivory collections found in good condition. Other decorative pieces, likely also part of the bed, were discovered broken and scattered. One piece bears an incomplete inscription containing the name of King Ben-Hadad of Damascus, dating to approximately 842 BCE, which helped identify both the date and origin of the ArslanTash ivories⁶¹.

The ArslanTash collection is characterized by decorative properties that raised questions when it was discovered within the borders of Assyrian expansion. Nevertheless, the content, style, and forms of the decorations are predominantly Egyptian in character, encompassing motifs such as the birth of Horus, the winged lion, palm trees, the double Egyptian crown, and bundles of papyrus flowers. Phoenician letters are inscribed on many pieces, likely for the purpose of organizing the elements. As previously noted, ivory objects are often composed of various pieces due to the limited size of the material. Craftsmen would shape several parts and then reassemble them. Researchers have interpreted these inscriptions as evidence that the objects may have been of Phoenician manufacture, possibly delivered as tribute to the Assyrian kings⁶².

These ivories are attributed to the city of Nimrud, built by the Assyrian kings during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II. Royal palaces were constructed there, and the site has attracted archaeological interest since the mid-19th century. Excavations continued throughout the 20th century, yielding thousands of ivory artifacts that reflect the city's importance as a royal capital. The finds encompass inlaid furniture, jewelry, boxes for precious cosmetics and perfumes, and containers for storing jewelry. Decorative motifs are varied, including vegetal designs among others⁶³.

3. Examples of Ivory Artifacts

Despite the rarity and limited size of ivory, which rarely exceeds two meters and is less flexible than other precious raw materials, craftsmen across different civilizations were able to produce a wide

range of artistic objects serving diverse purposes, encompassing human figurines of varying sizes and details, animal figurines, personal adornments such as combs, pins, mirrors, fans, bracelets, rings, pendants, and jewelry boxes, as well as furniture like beds and chairs inlaid with ivory, handles for daggers and knives, and multiple decorative items such as amulets, pins, and beads; many of these ivory artifacts were discovered among royal palace furnishings and within royal tombs⁶⁴.(see figure 1.4.)

3.1. Combs and Pins

Combs and pins represent some of the earliest objects crafted by humans, initially from animal bones before the widespread use of ivory. They can be considered among the oldest ivory artifacts. Numerous examples have been found across the Near East, with similar designs and decorations also discovered in Carthage and archaeological sites in the Iberian Peninsula. Their simple forms did not require complex techniques. Pins, with rounded ends and elongated shapes, required filing using a rasp, while combs were found in two types: single-row teeth combs and double-row teeth combs. What distinguishes these combs is their simple decoration, consisting of geometric shapes, lines, circles, and occasionally animal motifs⁶⁵, reflecting overlapping Eastern and Aegean influences.

3.2. Cosmetic Boxes

Craftsmen paid particular attention to crafting boxes for cosmetics, such as containers for kohl. Multiple types have been found, particularly in Egypt and the cities along the Phoenician coast. These boxes exhibit different forms, which allow scholars to identify the techniques utilized in their construction. Often, the craftsman would create separate elements: the lower part served as a hollow base, while

the upper part, or lid, was carefully crafted and assembled. It is likely that interlocking techniques, similar to those employed in woodworking, were used to join the parts. One notable example is a box from the city of Sidon, shaped like a duck, in which the assembled elements are clearly visible (see Figure 3). Similar examples of this type of box have been found in Egypt and along the Phoenician coast, differing only in minor details for instance, a small bird on the lid with its head turned backward⁶⁶.

Furthermore, some boxes were made from a single piece of ivory, only a few centimeters in size, with a smooth, polished surface. These were likely employed during religious rituals⁶⁷.

3.3. Decorative Pieces

Researchers have discovered various ivory pieces that were likely attached to perishable materials, such as wood. Most of these artifacts were found among the remains of royal palaces, where they were employed to decorate furniture, encompassing cabinets, beds, and thrones. Key archaeological sites include Khorsabad, ArslanTash, and Nimrud in Mesopotamia, as well as Samaria and Megiddo⁶⁸.

The most remarkable ivory pieces, often rectangular in shape, were discovered at the royal palace in ArslanTash. One such piece measures 195 cm in length and 96 cm in width, with individual sections no wider than 8 cm. Based on its form and dimensions, this piece may have been attached to furniture, possibly a royal bed employing inlay techniques. What distinguishes these decorative ivory

Title: The Transmission of Artistic Styles in the Near East through Ivories

pieces is their elaborate ornamentation, featuring vegetal motifs such as palm trees and animal motifs such as the winged lion⁶⁹.

Conclusion

Ivory artifacts represent artistic models that combine diverse cultural influences from the Near East and Mediterranean civilizations, encompassing Egypt, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, the Aegean islands, Greece, North Africa, especially Carthage, and the Iberian Peninsula. Craftsmen across these regions relied on similar techniques, tools, and decorative styles, which is apparent in the comparable size and ornamentation of numerous ivory objects, whether featuring vegetal or animal motifs. Identical or closely similar examples demonstrate the existence of cultural links, including trade exchanges. Barter facilitated the movement of multiple products, and imitation was common. Furthermore, items delivered as tribute contributed to the transmission of different artistic styles. Human mobility also played a role, as skilled craftsmen traveled between civilizations of the Near East. Phoenician artisans, for instance, moved beyond the coastal cities of Phoenicia, renowned for their ability to combine different artistic styles and produce cohesive works incorporating Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Aegean motifs, sometimes within a single ivory piece. Military expansions further contributed to the direct transfer of ivory artifacts between civilizations, since ivory was considered a precious material employed as tribute or gifts among kings. Therefore, ivory can be considered a material source that indicates cultural exchange and the transmission of artistic influences between the civilizations of the Near East, as well as between major centers of civilization in the East and West.

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Appendices

Figure 1.An ornate panel from a royal throne, featuring gold leaf



Source:Fadystephan.op.cit.p172.

Figure 2.A woman's head with prominent features

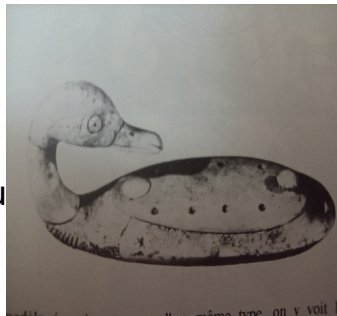
Source:Fady Stephan.op.cit.p.226

Figure 3. A cow turning its head while suckling its calf



Sou...i.op.cit.p.410.

Figure 4.A cosmetic box featuring a bird's head turned inwards, with engraved eyes, beak, and neck. Fitted with two knobs: one for gripping and the other serving as a pivot.



Sou...p.81.

Figure 5. A beast walking to the right with its head lowered toward the ground, magnificently modeled; the antlers meet the frame, which also rests on its back.

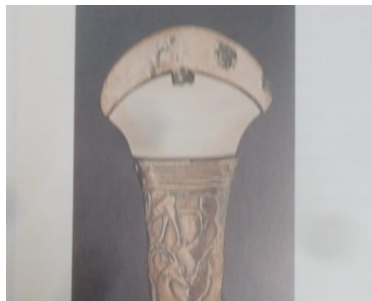


Source: André Parrot and Maurice Chéhab, *Les Phéniciens: L'expansion phénicienne*, Carthage, Gallimard, p.132, 1975.

Figure 6. Decorative panel from a royal throne, featuring Egyptian-style motifs



Figure 7. A gold dagger inlaid with ivory



***Title: The Transmission of Artistic Styles in the Near East through
Ivories***

Source: Henri Stierlin, *Le Monde des Pharaons*, Éditions
Princesse, p.27.1978