

Introduction

When the first nineteenth-century excavators uncovered the palaces at Nimrud and Khorsabad, in northern present-day Iraq, they discovered large numbers of ivory panels. These were scattered everywhere in the rubble, and it was assumed that they had been thrown there by Babylonian and Elamite looters, who had defeated the Assyrian empire in the years 614–612 BCE. Apparently, the vandals had stripped the ivories of their gold fittings and then abandoned them in the debris because the ivory was of no further value to them. But, for the researchers, these ivory panels were of great significance, as they provided a direct view of the ancient world. The immense charm of the images still enchants us. The engraved pictures evoke a dream world of mythological figures and idyllic landscapes. Most of the ivory panels have an Egyptian appearance. We see sphinxes or rams lying on either side of a sacred tree; they usually wear the Egyptian double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and are apparently the personification of the figure of the pharaoh. We see the Egyptian goddesses Isis and Nephthys on either side of the Horus child, sitting on a lotus flower with a finger in his mouth. A cow suckling and lovingly licking her calf; two pharaohs tying heraldic plants together in the *sema tawy* ritual of binding the two lands. All these figures are set in an exuberant Nile landscape of papyrus and lotus plants and swaying palmetto trees. But the image that still fascinates us the most, and which appears on more than a hundred of the ivory specimens, is that of a woman smiling mysteriously, her head richly adorned. She is positioned in a recessed frame above a number of columns (three to five) and she has come to be known in the literature as the ‘Woman at the Window’ (Fig. 1.1).

Where did these ivories come from, and what was their significance? This enigma has puzzled researchers for almost a century. It was clear that the Assyrian kings had taken the ivories back to their palaces as spoils of war during their many campaigns to the west. This was extensively recorded in their annals. But where had these ivory artefacts been made, and who had commissioned them? Early on, researchers divided the ivories into three major groups: an Assyrian, a Syrian and a ‘Phoenician’ group of ivories. The *Assyrian group* was of a later tradition, and easy to recognise because the pieces were carved in the same tradition as the palace reliefs, with images of Assyrian soldiers and scenes from the Assyrian world. The *Syrian group* of ivories had more similarities with images on monumental reliefs in northern Syria and Anatolia from the first millennium. The ‘*Phoenician*’ group was by far the largest and was characterised by Egyptian and Egyptianizing motifs. Although the iconography of most of these Phoenician ivories could be related to the Egyptian culture, scholars did not situate their origin in Egypt itself,

but always associated them with the Phoenicians who lived in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, during the first millennium BCE. However, no other ivory artefacts with equivalent features have been found in this territory of the Phoenicians. Egypt, on the other hand, seems more likely to be the country where the ivories originated. The Nile Delta was a thriving cosmopolitan area where carving techniques such as *cloisonné*, *champlevé*, *ajouré* (openwork), the use of Egyptian blue and the art of glass inlay had been known for a long time. These techniques are also associated with the ivories found in Nimrud and Khorsabad. Also, the iconography of the ivories would appear to be more at home in Egyptian surroundings than in any of the Phoenician city states on the eastern Mediterranean coast, most particularly during the troubled times of the Third Intermediate Period (1070–664 BCE). No king in a Phoenician city state would be pleased by these pictures of divinized Egyptian royalty and sphinxes trampling Phoenician-looking enemies. This study will defend the hypothesis that all the ivories in this collection of the Assyrian palaces with Egyptian and Egyptianizing features form a coherent whole and originated from Egypt itself. They were taken by the Assyrians when they invaded Egypt and plundered the capital Memphis in 671 BCE. This city must have been phenomenally rich. The palaces of the pharaohs in Memphis are the only context in which these ivories make sense. This means that the collections of ivory panels found in the Assyrian



Figure 1.1. Ivory panel, *ajouré*, excavated in Nimrud, Fort Shalmaneser. H. 9.3 cm. (Herrmann 1992, plate 18, 102. ND; Iraq Museum, IM 61875, Courtesy of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq.)

The 'Woman at the Window' Came from Egypt

palaces ended up there only after the looting of Memphis, in 671 BCE. That is a much later date than that to which the Phoenician ivories are usually dated. After the plunder of Memphis, no new 'Phoenician' ivory plaques with these Egyptian dreamscapes were made. They disappeared and have never been dug up in Egypt. After the invasion of Egypt, the Assyrian kings may have given some of the looted ivories away to provincial governors and vassals to instil in them the idea that their king was invincible, having, after all, managed to defeat even the king of the most awe-inspiring country in the world at that time: Egypt. The Assyrian kings never presented their subordinates with ivories of the other two groups, the Syrian or Assyrian ivory plaques, as only the ivories of Egyptian provenance could make the right impression.

Only if we relate the assemblage of 'Phoenician' ivories from the Assyrian palaces to the environment of the Egyptian pharaohs of the Third Intermediate Period can we better understand the iconography of these precious artefacts. Then it will also become possible to understand the mysterious 'Woman at the Window', whose identity emerges naturally from this Egyptian mythical landscape.