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# SYMBOLISM IN THE SAMARIA IVORIES AND ARCHITECTURE

## ABSTRACT

Situated at the crossroads of great nations, the Land of Israel was exposed to numerous external influences. Samaria, the capital city of Northern Israel, was also situated on a major trade route. Various expeditions uncovered approximately 500 pieces of carved ivory in the palace complex at Samaria. According to the motifs carved in them, these pieces can be divided into two main groups. The first group is categorised by the Harpocrates medallion. The Hah and Isis and Nephtys plaques are also relevant in this case. The second group consists mainly of the so-called Woman at the Window, the Winged Sphinx, Winged Figures in Human Form, Horus and Ma'at, the Lion and Bull Plaques, as well as the Tree of Life Motif in ivory. The latter is also represented in the Proto-Ionic capitals uncovered at many different sites, including Samaria. This article discusses the different cultural influences and motifs, and explains their presence.

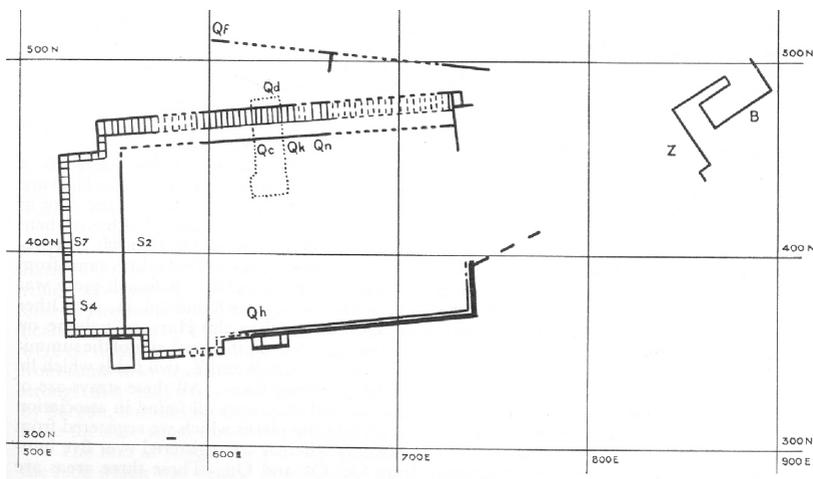
## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Land of Israel is located at the crossroads of great nations. It is therefore not surprising to find a variety of external influences. Samaria, the capital city of Northern Israel, was located on a major trade route which also exposed the inhabitants to external influences (Dorsey 1987:60-61).

The first major excavation project at Samaria was undertaken in 1908-10 by the Harvard expedition led by G.A. Reisner and C.S. Fisher. This expedition uncovered the richness of the available material but unfortunately lacked the expertise to interpret the finds. Another expedition in which the Palestine Exploration Fund, British Academy, the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, the Hebrew University and the Harvard University combined their proficiency and funds led to a fuller and better investigation. This combined effort lasted for three seasons. Thereafter the British members continued excavations for a fourth season. Unfortunately, the olive groves and gardens cultivated on the hill impeded the excavations (Ackroyd 1967:343).

This ground plan from SS 2 (1939:3) gives an indication of where the different expeditions found their ivories.

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During the excavations at Samaria approximately 500 pieces of carved ivory were discovered in the palace complex (SS 2:1; Barkay 1992:320). Ivory was widely used for decorative purposes and many examples were found in Mesopotamia, Syria and Israel as well as in countries in and around the Mediterranean. The Harvard Expedition discovered ivories in the places marked S2, S4 and S7, and the British Expedition found ivories in the places marked Qc, Qk, Qd, Qh, Z and B (SS 2/3). The excavators also found a number of so-called proto-ionic capitals whose design was repeated in some of the ivories.

The main purpose of this article is to illustrate, describe and propose an interpretation of a selection of these decorations.

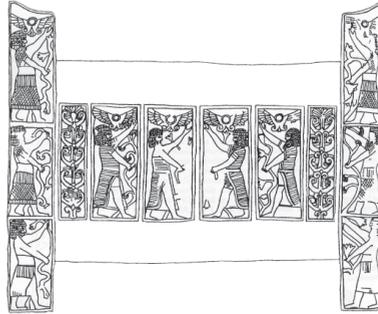
## 2. THE IVORIES

Solomon “made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold” (1 Kings 10:18). “And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon’s wisdom, and the house that he had built ... and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the LORD, there was no more spirit in her” (1 Kings 10:4, 5). Of king Ahab of Israel it is said: “the ivory house which he made ...” (1 Kings 22:39). Amos (6:4) also refers to the Israelites’ “beds of ivory”. From the above it appears that the possession of ivory inlay work, combined with gold, conveyed notions of wealth, luxury and power.

Max Mallowan's (1966:495) discovery of ivories in Nimrud indicates that these were mainly used for inlay work on furniture and wall panels (SSII:1; Williams & Heim 1985:145; Gray 1970:456).



A decorated bedstead  
(Mallowan 1966:495)



A Line drawing of the same bedstead  
(Mittmann 1976:162)

Unfortunately, only a small portion of the ivories found in Samaria could be restored (Kenyon 1960:266). Two main groups of the ivories found at Samaria will be discussed.

## 2.1 First group

This group is characterised by the *Harpocrates Medallion* (Crowfoot, Crowfoot & ELSukenik 1938: plate I:1),<sup>1</sup> the *Horus Ma'at*, and the *Hah* and *Isis* plaques (SS 2:19).

### 2.1.1 The *Harpocrates Medallion*

The *Harpocrates Medallion* represents Horus as an infant framed by two in-curving volutes. Horus sits on (or emerges from) a lotus flower and wears an *atef* crown<sup>2</sup> on spreading ram's horns. In the centre is a bundle of reeds with a

1 Henceforth Crowfoot, Crowfoot and ELSukenik (1938) will be referred to as SS1 & SS 2.

2 According to the British Museum website, the *Atef* crown was a white head-dress decorated with ostrich feathers and worn during some religious rituals.



disc on top, flanked by plumes and *uraeuses*.<sup>3</sup> Around his neck is a necklace and on each arm two bracelets. It appears that he holds a flail in his right hand and holds the finger of his left hand to his lips in a childlike manner. On each side of the lotus flower is a blue water lily leaf (SS 2:12). The volutes curving around the child may symbolise the birth process or perhaps the security within the womb.

The *Harpocrates* plaque was richly decorated with coloured insets and gold foil (SS 2:12).



Harpocrates seated on a lotus  
(SS 2 frontispiece)<sup>4</sup>



Faience plaque depicting an infant king  
emerging from a lotus  
(Iuput II?)  
(Taylor 2000:348)

The example on the right-hand side is a faience plaque depicting a king as a child emerging from a lotus flower (Taylor 2000:348). Two other fragments depicting Horus were also found.

The infant Horus sitting on a lotus flower was a very popular motif in the first millennium B.C. It was also found at Arslan Tash, Tell Nimrud, Phoenicia and on Hebrew seals (SS 2:13). As one of the oldest and most important gods of Egypt, Horus is represented by different names and in different images: As the god of heaven he is sometimes represented as a hawk or a human with a hawk face or even as a human and was considered the god incarnate in the Pharaoh. In the Osiris saga he was the son of Osiris and Isis. In Heliopolis he is merged with Re as Re-Horakhty. As one of the most important and oldest

3 The *uraeus* is a serpent emblem and portrays royalty and deity. It is a symbol of divine authority.

4 This full colour drawing of the *Harpocrates Medallion* was done by Mr. Charbury and is published as the frontispiece to SS 2.

gods, many different shapes and concepts developed in respect of him. As son of Isis, he was known as *Harsiesis*; as the adult Horus, he was known as *Haroeris* (at Kom Ombo); as the child of Isis, he was known as *Harpokrates*<sup>5</sup> (Brunner-Traut 1988:90).

### 2.1.2 The *Hah* Plaque

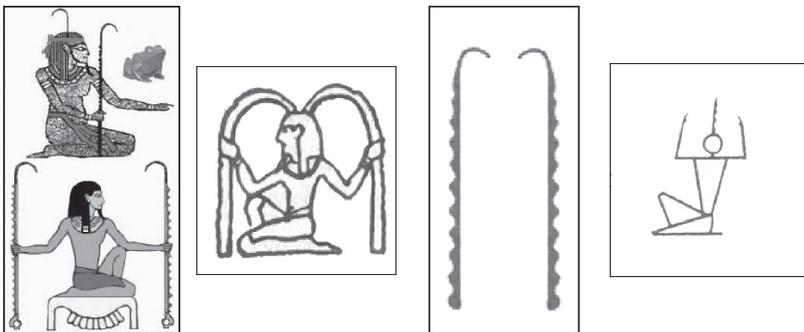


The *Hah* plaque (SS 2 plate II:2)

Hah, the Egyptian god of the sky, personifies eternity. With widespread arms he supports the sky. The hieroglyph is also the symbol for the figure one million. In each hand he grasps a notched stick<sup>6</sup> from which an *ankh* sign hangs. The Egyptians put a notch in branches of the Persea palm to measure the passing years. He and his female consort, Hauhet, were depicted as frogs. They also symbolised infinite time (cf. discussion by Vendel 2008).

The following symbols are associated with Hah:

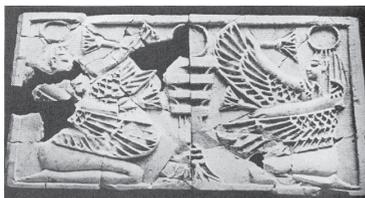
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- 5 The name *Harpokrates* is the Greek derivative of the Egyptian *Harpa-Khruti* (Horus the Child) who was portrayed as a small boy with a finger held to his lips (cf. the *Harpokrates Medallion* above).
- 6 Cf. King (1988/39); Hah grasps two palm branches.



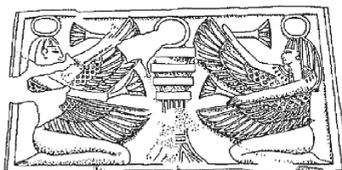
The notched palm branches curl in from both sides to the figure's head. Sometimes Hah is represented as a squatting man with both hands raised, with a stick protruding from his head (Clark 1995:258).

Hah originates from Hermopolis in Upper Egypt and he and his wife were one of four pairs of reptiles created by Thot. Hah has no temple because he represents an abstract spirit. He wears simple clothing and sits on a stool that resembles the hieroglyph for gold.

### 2.1.3 Isis and Nephtys



Samaria open ivory work:  
Isis and Nephtys (4,5 cm)  
(Barkay 1992:322; cf. SS 2 plate III:1)



Line drawing  
(Mittmann 1976:162)

Isis was depicted in human form with the hieroglyph for “throne” or with the sun disk between cow horns on her head (Traut-Brunner 1988:91). She was the wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus (Bonnet 1971:326). As a mother feeding her child, Harpokrates, she is an example of the Madonna and the Child Jesus as seen at Philae (Traut-Brunner 1988:91).

Nephtys was the youngest of four children of Geb and Nut, and the last member of the nine gods of On. Her function was normally regarded as the “lady of the house” (Bonnet 1971:518). Anubis was her son by Osiris.

A plain border frames the plaque. Apart from insignificant fractures, the plaque appears to be quite intact. In the centre can be seen a *djed*<sup>7</sup> symbol, crowned with a disc. On both sides squatting figures decorated with necklaces and crowned with discs can be discerned. The *djed*<sup>8</sup> symbol identifies them as Isis and Nephtys (SS II:16).



Isis



Isis and Horus



Nephtys

The first group clearly shows Egyptian influence and represents a period when Egypt still had a strong influence in Palestine (SS II:49).

## 2.2 Second group

The second group is characterised by the so-called “Lady at the Window”, a winged sphinx, a second sphinx in relief, and the lion and bull plaques (SS 2 plate X:1). It reminds one strongly of the Arslan Tash ivories, discovered by M. Thureau-Dangin.



7 The *Djed* pillar is a symbol of the god Osiris, and symbolises his backbone.

8 Cf. Vincent Brown ([vincent+pyramidtextsonline.com](http://vincent+pyramidtextsonline.com)).

## 2.2.1 The Woman at the Window



The Woman at the Window  
(SS 2 plate XIII:2)



Another example of  
The Woman at the Window  
(Mallowan 1966: facing 434)

The Woman at the Window on the left was discovered at Samaria. It appears that the Samaria artisans who made this example were not so well trained. Better examples were found elsewhere.



Phoenician, 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.  
From Nimrud, northern Iraq.  
Excavated by A.H. Layard



Another example from Arslan Tash  
(Monson 2000:33)

The example on the left was found with other objects by Henry Layard at Nimrud and was once part of a panel inlaid in furniture from the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (the site of the ancient Assyrian capital of Kalhu) (Layard 1849: plates 88-91).

The woman's hairstyle is clearly Egyptian and she appears to be looking out of a window. This often indicated sacred prostitution associated with Astarte or Ishtar and the fertility cult. The meaning of this depiction is not clear.<sup>9</sup>

The Woman at the Window reminds one of Jezebel's action during the revolution of Jehu. "When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; and she painted her eyes, and adorned her head, and looked out of the window" (2 Kings 9:30).

The Deuteronomist is clearly somewhat prejudiced against Jezebel and reminds the reader of other women who looked through windows under similar negative circumstances. Judges 5:28: "Out of the window she peered, The mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice." Furthermore, when David brought the Ark to Jerusalem his wife Michal looked down at him with disdain through the window:

As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart (2 Samuel 6:16; cf. Gaines 2000).

The Deuteronomist appears to call all unpopular women to mind, applying the notion to Jezebel. Perhaps he also tries to connect the appearance of Jezebel at the window to sacred prostitution. However, it is clear that he uses the power of suggestion in this instance. Jezebel is never described as someone committing adultery and the connection to sacred prostitution must be ruled out in this instance.

It is also interesting that Jezebel seems very regal in appearance and in her remarks. She calls Jehu Zimri, because Zimri was in the true sense a usurper and committed regicide by killing king Elah (1 Kings 16:10). Omri, on the contrary, returned from his battle against the Philistines at Gibbethon to defend the throne against Zimri. In the meantime the army made Omri king while still on the battlefield (1 Kings 16:16).

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9 Versions of these panels can be seen decorating the legs of a couch on which King Ashurbanipal reclines in the "Garden Party" scene at Nineveh. Cf. Website, British Museum; Layard (1849: plate 88.).

### 2.2.2 The Winged Sphinx



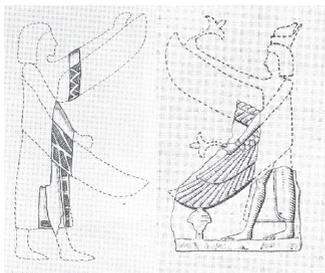
The Winged Sphinx (PEQ 1933:65, 23)



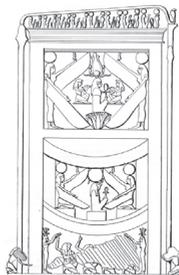
The Winged Sphinx from Arslan Tash  
(Borowski 1995:36)

Three examples were found, with the one on the left practically intact. A threefold frame can be seen above and below. The Sphinx walks through what seems to be a lotus thicket wearing a flattened double crown, a wig and a patterned kilt (or apron, cf. King 1988:34). These figures are reminiscent of the temple built by Solomon. According to 1 Kings 6:23-29, he put two winged *cherubim*, made from olive wood, in the inner sanctuary. He also carved figures of *cherubim* and palm trees as well as open flowers on the walls of the temple. The doorposts at the entrance were also decorated with “carved *cherubim* and palm trees and open flowers” (1 Kings 6:35).

### 2.2.3 The Winged Figures in Human Form



The Winged Figures in Human Form  
(SS 2 plate IV, 1a & 3a)

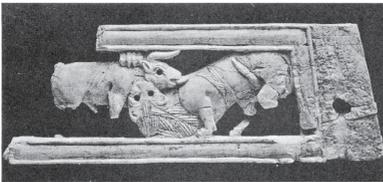


Horus and Ma'at  
(SS 2:19)

Although the figures from Samaria were very fragmentary they could be restored by comparing them to the example found in the temple of Khons in Karnak. On the right the top image shows a figure seated on a lotus flower holding an *ankh*. On his head is a crown similar to the crown on the head of the infant Horus on the *Harpocrates Medallion*: an *atef* crown on spreading ram's horns. On both sides are kneeling figures crowned with a *uraeus*. The larger figures are clearly representing Ma'at. Her emblem, a feather, can be seen in the hands of the female figures. Ma'at was depicted in human form and was the personification of law, order and truth. She was the daughter of Re (Traut-Brunner 1988:91).

In the bottom image the flanking female figures are seated, still holding the Ma'at feathers. The central figure can now be identified as Horus. He still holds the *ankh* but he no longer sits on a lotus flower [SS 2:19]. Presumably this is the reason for depicting him as an adult in this instance.

## 2.2.4 The Lion and Bull Plaques



Samaria Ivory  
(SS 2 Plate X:1)

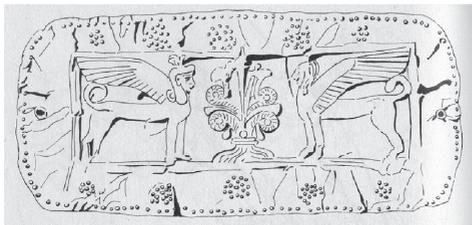


Arslan Tash (?)  
(Singer 1992:52)

This scene was very fashionable in ancient art. The lion symbolised power and majesty and was also used in language. Jacob compared his son Judah to a lion: “Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, thou art gone up; he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion, who shall rouse him up?” (Gen. 49:9) (cf. Singer 1992:52). “They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion” (Psalm 22:13). “A lion which is strongest among beasts, and turneth not away from any” (Proverbs 30:31).

### 2.2.5 The Tree of Life Motif

According to Shiloh (1979:26), the basic pattern underlying this motif, on both the capitals and the ivories, is the palm tree. He also regards this motif, in all its manifestations, as a typical ornamental feature of Western Asia. The “Tree of Life” motif was found at different sites in the Middle East (Shiloh 1979:26-42). It was used in architecture (the so-called proto-ionic capitals), as decorations on pottery vessels, cylinder seals and ivory inlay work. It can also be seen in different stylised renderings.

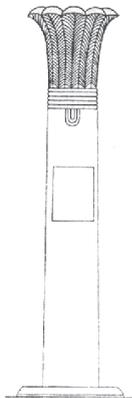


Figures on gold leaf from Enkomi in Cyprus  
(Keel 1984:64)

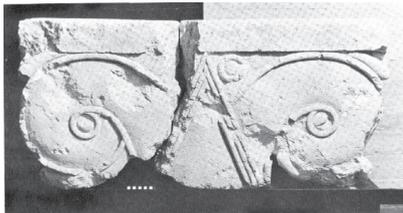


Egyptian relief from Abusir.  
A goddess in the form of a palm tree feeding the dead  
(Keel 1984:65)

According to Keel (1984:64), the goddesses of love in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Ishtar and Hathor, were embodied in the palm tree. A palm branch symbolised the enjoyment of life in paradise. The palm motif was also used in different cultic practices (Lev. 23:40; Neh. 8:15-16). He also suggests that palm branches were used to symbolise triumph. Examples of this can be seen in Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (John 12:13) and the triumphant rejoicing of the peoples around the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev. 7:9). Solomon also made use of the palm motif as decoration in the temple he built (1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35). The use of this motif was not limited to Palestine but was common in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.



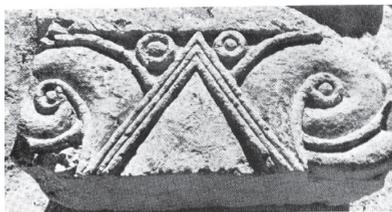
The Palm capital from Egypt  
(Traut-Brunner 1988:161)



Jerusalem capital  
(Shiloh 1979: plate 15.1)



An example from Cyprus  
(Shiloh 1979: plate 17.1)



Ramat Rahel capital  
(Shiloh 1979: plate 14.1)

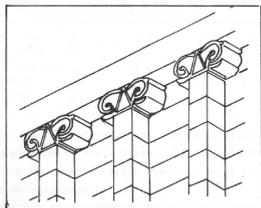


Ramat Rahel window balustrade  
(Shiloh 1979: plate 14.3)

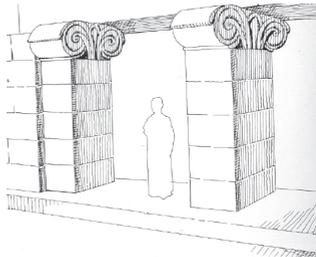


Hazor Capital  
(Shiloh 1979: plate 1.1)

The proto-Ionic<sup>10</sup> capital was usually associated with gate complexes. Several examples were found at Hazor; the reconstruction of the entrance to the citadel illustrates the point (Yadin 1975:168). The examples found at Samaria can also be associated with the entrance structures (Shiloh 1979:86)



Reconstruction of columns with proto-Ionic capitals at Samaria (SS 1, fig. 7)



Reconstruction of a citadel entrance at Hazor (Yadin 1975:168; Shiloh 1979:24)



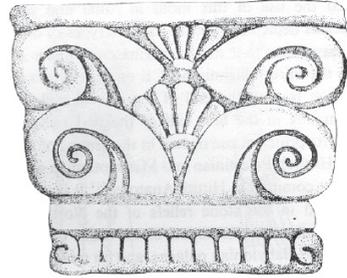
Ivory from Samaria (SS 2: plate XX:1)



Ivory from Samaria (SS 2: plate XX1:1)

10 This architectural feature is also known as Proto-Aeolic and palmette capital (Drinkard 1997:249).

## 2.2.6 Other variations of this motif

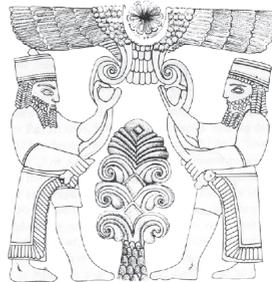


Etruscan capital from Chiusu  
(Shiloh 1979:41)

This ivory carving (on the left) was found at Arslan Tash and dates from 850-750 B.C. In heraldic style the two sphinxes flank the centrally placed tree with the now common tree with volutes (Williams & Hein 1985:145). The sphinxes clearly show the Egyptian influence as they both have stylised ram heads reminiscent of the ram god Chnum (Traut-Brunner 1988:89). It also confirms that the Egyptian motif is combined with the popular sacred tree/tree of life motif common in Syro-Palestine. It also reflects contacts with other Mediterranean countries.



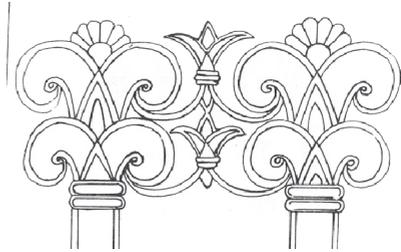
Nineveh, depiction of a palm tree  
(Shiloh 1979:26)



Hittite depiction of a palm tree  
(Shiloh 1979:28)



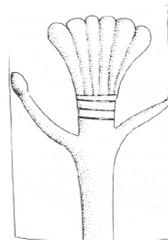
Carcemish, Ornamental orthostat  
(Shiloh 1979:28)



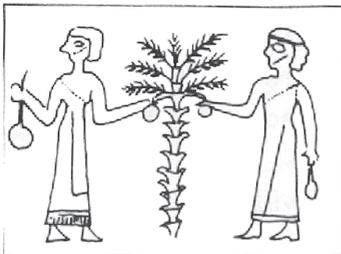
Babylon. Relief of glazed brick  
(Shiloh 1979:31)



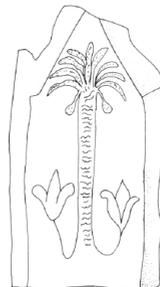
Nimrud. Relief from northern palace  
from Assurnasirpal II  
(Shiloh 1979:29)



Hazor, carved bone handle  
(Shiloh 1979:40)



Cylinder-seal from the Acadian Period  
(Shiloh 1979:40)

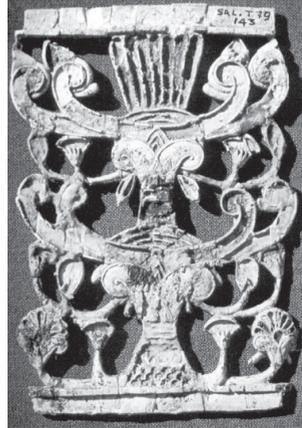


Punic stele  
(Shiloh 1979:40)

## 2.2.7 Phoenician ivories from Cyprus



The Winged Sphinx from Salamis,  
Cyprus.  
(Bikai 1989:205)



Tree of Life?

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

- The first group clearly shows Egyptian influence and represents a period when Egypt still had a significant influence in Palestine (SS II:49).
- The local artisans combined the Egyptian influence with their own popular motifs. For many centuries Egyptian cultural influence dominated the scene in the Levant and the cultural heritage it left was not totally eradicated by their loss of power. Despite the Egyptian influence it did not escape the local adaptation by indigenous artisans (Givon 1978:42). The local artisans added their own style to the Egyptian motifs as seen in the two ivory examples found at Salamis on Cyprus.
- Taking into account the area where these ivories were found, the religious influence should not be considered as a major development. The ivories were found in a palace complex and therefore the idea of style and fashion should be considered in this instance despite possible Egyptian religious motifs. If they were found in a temple this argument could be reconsidered. There may be a religious connection but it appears that it is mainly of cultural-historical nature.

- In Samaria there was also another find suggesting a diplomatic gift to the House of Omri. This find is part of an alabaster vase with traces of the cartouches of Osorkon II. Osorkon II could not successfully establish his authority over Egypt, let alone lead a conquest to establish an effective counter balance to the emerging common enemy, Assyria. He had, therefore, to resort to diplomacy (Kitchen 1973:293-300). This coincided with the policies initiated by Omri who eventually established a line of Allied Nations from Phoenicia in the north, through Israel and Judah to Egypt. This not only isolated and neutralised the Philistines on the Coastal Plain but also allowed Israel to strengthen her north-eastern boundaries with Syria (Pienaar 1981: 151-57)
- The widespread use of the Tree of Life motif leads to the following possible conclusions:
  - According to Keel (1984:64), the goddesses of love in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Ishtar and Hathor, were embodied in the palm tree.
  - The motif also symbolises power, triumph (Keel 1984:64) and abundance (Ornan 1995:38).
  - The stylised palm tree clearly expresses a feeling of beauty and art.
  - The palm branch was used in different cultic practices (Lev. 23:40; Nehemiah 8:15-16; Festival of the Booths/Tabernacles) (Keel 1984:64).
  - Because the use of this motif was so widespread Shiloh concludes that it originated in the Syro-Palestinian-Mesopotamian area (1979:43)
- The sphinx-like figures are reminiscent of the cherubim of the Old Testament and therefore they may convey the idea of power and holiness (1 Kings 6:23-29; Ezekiel 41:18-20). According to Ornan, sphinxes reflected royalty in Egypt while elsewhere the composite figures were protective beings.
- These motifs in ivory, gold leaf, bone, bricks and stone became a metaphor for expressing ideas concerning religion, law, order, righteousness and many other cultural activities.
- The power of fashion should never be underestimated, as it is a typical human trait to keep up with fashion.

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