

Slide 1:

Today, I'll be presenting on female frontality as displayed by ivory sphinxes from Khorsabad, and we will explore new interpretations regarding their use and significance in the ancient city. Through this examination, I will discuss some of the problems with current frameworks for analyzing foreign ivories in Assyrian contexts and put forth other directions for further study.

Slide 2:

First, some context and history. We'll be referencing a few primary locations—Damascus in Southwestern Syria; Nimrud, a city in northern Iraq that used to be the Assyrian city of Kalhu; and Khorsabad, also in northern Iraq and formerly the ancient city of Dur-Sharrukin. Kalhu and Dur-Sharrukin were both once capitals of the Assyrian empire under different kings. The Assyrian Empire refers to a prominent Mesopotamian civilization that began as a city-state in the 21st century BCE and became a major empire in the 14th century BCE, lasting until the 7th century BCE. The period between 911 and 609 BCE is typically referred to as the Neo-Assyrian period, and this is when the empire reached its peak. It was during this time that Kalhu was the capital from 884-706 until King Sargon II moved it to Dur-Sharrukin. Sargon II ruled from 722-705 BCE, and the Empire reached the extent shown on this map during his reign.

Let's move to more recent history—since the 1840s, thousands of ancient ivories have been excavated at several sites throughout the modern-day countries of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The largest hoard of ivories was found in Nimrud. In examining this massive group of ivories, it became clear from their artistic styles that they were foreign, so archaeologists hoped that by studying their appearance and forms, they could identify the people who originally made them before they came to the Assyrian site.

Slide 3:

Based on common Egyptian elements and motifs in many of the ivories, they were originally misidentified as Egyptian in origin, but a later archaeologist, RD Barnett, determined those that look Egyptian with more slender and finer modeling were likely Phoenician (seen on the left) while others with rounder features and wider proportions were North Syrian (on the right). Not everything fully fit those broad categories, though, so in 1981, art historian Irene Winter proposed that there is a third major grouping (represented by the middle sphinx), which she called South Syrian, that might come from Damascus. This group has also been called Intermediate or Syro-Phoenician because it could be thought of as an integrated combination of Phoenician and North Syrian elements, executing Phoenician-style compositions in more slightly broader proportions with a fuller use of space. In that regard, British archaeologist Georgina Herrmann has proposed that Syro-Phoenician ivories are Syrian renderings of Phoenician originals made by Aramaean communities in Southern Syria. Some scholars have even analyzed the stylistic minutiae of the ivories to classify them into smaller sub-groupings. Broadly, this is the foundation of how these ivories are treated in the field today, but it is important to note that no excavations have found substantial evidence of systematic large-scale ivory production at Phoenician sites or in Syria. None of these attributions can really be verified

at the moment, so I posit that it is more productive to focus on where and how these ivories were received and used rather than where they originated.

To do that, I am focusing on one of the subgroupings that I mentioned—the so-named Wig and Wing group, a classification of Syro-Phoenician ivory carvings. This center sphinx, with a beaded wig, elaborate wings, and a frontal, feminine face, is part of that group. While the largest hoard of ivories was excavated at Nimrud, a smaller collection of Wig and Wing ivories dating to the ninth and eighth centuries BCE have been identified at the modern city of Khorsabad.

Slide 4:

These ivories were excavated in the 1930s, during the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute's excavations of ancient Dur-Sharrukin (modern-day Khorsabad). As I noted previously, Dur-Sharrukin was the Assyrian capital under king Sargon II from 706-705 BCE after it was moved from Kalhu. Among these ivories are a set of elaborate, expressive sphinxes, measuring less than 5 inches tall and about 4 inches wide. The naturalistic faces of these sphinxes are so striking because they stare out at the viewer, the head emphasized by a woven wig and patterned collar. This visual emphasis calls attention to the feminine and frontal nature of their faces. This phenomenon of female frontality, as displayed by these sphinxes, is relatively unexplored in ancient Near Eastern art more generally, and its prominence in this Wig and Wing subgrouping of ivory carving is intriguing.

Slide 5:

As I mentioned, Syro-Phoenician ivories are generally noted for their similarities to Phoenician compositions. However, while Phoenician ivory sphinxes share a similar striding stance—though it may be difficult to see in their fragmented states—Phoenician sphinxes are typically rendered in profile, nearly always wearing this headdress (called a *nemes*) and an Egyptian double crown. The Wig and Wing ivory sphinxes are distinctive for their frontal gaze, striking pose, and feminine faces. I argue that these features constitute an original adaptation that distinguishes these sphinxes from previous models. To explore this idea, we'll continue discussing their formal features and the potential cultural associations or symbolic significance these specific sphinxes could have had in ancient Dur-Sharrukin.

Slide 6:

Unlike Nimrud, where excavations uncovered thousands of ivories, fewer than fifty fragmented ivories were recovered at Khorsabad, and most were concentrated in one area of the site, where the city's temple to the god Nabu once stood. Nabu is the Mesopotamian god of wisdom, and he was considered an especially important figure during the Neo-Assyrian period. The twenty-eight ivories uncovered in the Nabu Temple comprise fifteen frontal sphinxes, nine ivories with what we call the woman in the window motif shown on the left, three panels with standing figures, and a single sphinx in profile. Most Levantine ivories found at Neo-Assyrian sites are panels that were once attached to wooden furniture, and those found in the Nabu Temple are all consistent in terms of style, size, and iconography, suggesting they may have constituted a single item of furniture. Between all of these ivory pieces, this item would have had

a remarkable number of frontally rendered feminine faces, which would have stood out against the comparative lack of female frontality visible in Neo-Assyrian art from the same time.

At one point, it was assumed that the hoards of foreign ivories at Neo-Assyrian sites would have been piled in storerooms after being obtained as tribute or booty, but textual records indicate that ivories were highly valued and utilized for luxury furniture in the Assyrian court. Depictions of foreign ivory show it in an Assyrianized style, telling us that foreign objects become Assyrian in a sense and were incorporated into the site for specific decorative or useful purposes.

While we don't know exactly how these ivories were used, comparison to Nimrud suggests that they could have comprised an ivory throne in the Nabu temple's throne room. In the throne room of Nimrud's Nabu Temple, excavators recovered *in situ* a collection of Assyrian ivories that were once attached to a wooden throne. These ivories present an interesting parallel to Khorsabad because excavators found two feminine ivory heads carved in the round, suggesting the presence of female frontality in the throne room at Nimrud. At Khorsad, no ivories and no throne were found in the throne room, but the grouping of these ivories suggests that they could have been used in the Nabu Temple's throne room and dropped in a passageway when the site was hurriedly abandoned in 705 BCE.

During Sargon II's reign, the Nabu Temple was a very important building. It stood separately from the site's other temples, and it's the only temple that would have had a throne room. When he designed the plan for the citadel at ancient Dur-Sharrukin, Sargon included a personal access bridge that connected his palace to the temple, suggesting an unprecedentedly intimate relationship between Sargon and the god Nabu. Because Nabu was so important during this time, his domains of wisdom and specialized knowledge were also prioritized. The ivories' presence within such a significant space tells us that they held value and meaning, and they may have been related to the power and wisdom that Nabu represented.

Slide 7:

With this relationship to Dur-Sharrukin and the Nabu Temple in mind, let's explore the frontality of these sphinxes. Even though they are small, their frontal gaze would have been eye-catching, drawing the viewer in and inviting visual, emotional, or even tactile interaction. As you look at them, they look back at you, establishing a humanizing bond that can augment one's visual experience by engaging the viewer within the composition. There isn't much action here, so the emphasis is on the face and on the act of looking itself.

In this way, vision is a social phenomenon that emphasizes the relationship between the viewer and who or what they are looking upon. In ancient Mesopotamia, vision was associated with emotionally significant occasions or locations in literature and art. Consider, for example, Sumerian votive figures whose massive eyes are connected to the act of continuous prayer and worship. Similarly, the sphinxes and the woman and window compositions have broad, rounded eyes that are emphasized through deep incisions. When we take into account the importance of

looking, these types of artworks have the potential to intensify the viewer's emotional reaction to or intellectual consideration of the object through its bold stare.

Slide 8:

In addition to the cathetic and affective nature of looking, vision has an intimate relationship with scholarly and artistic knowledge in Neo-Assyrian culture, which establishes an even stronger connection to the god Nabu. Nabu, the god of wisdom and writing, is often associated with scholarship and craftsmanship in Neo-Assyrian literature. Intriguingly, these realms of knowledge can be linked to accessibility and privileged vision, which is demonstrated in the Nabu Temple's architectural plan. A series of courtyards and chambers limited access to portions of the temple, creating conditions of restricted visibility as sections were often blocked by walls or required one to maneuver around corners. This was partly to control physical and visual access to important ritual objects in cult rooms and scholarly records in the inner chambers. The throne room suite specifically (rooms 42 and 39 on this plan), is characterized by a bent-axis orientation, requiring entrants to change orientation once inside the room. This arrangement means that one cannot see the short end of the throne room where the throne would be located before entering—only those permitted to enter the room would be able to view the throne. In this way, limited visual access, whether the ability to read a document or see an object, accompanied the privileged and specialized knowledge that was associated with Nabu. The act of looking implied by the frontal faces of the sphinx ivories and their potential presence within a restricted portion of the Nabu Temple at Dur-Sharrukin becomes all the more significant within this architectural context with the suggestion that their frontal gaze became referential to the specialized knowledge and wisdom embodied by Nabu and his temple.

The value of the gaze and symbolic importance of the face is further attested in Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, which were carved into the walls of temples and palaces. One such inscription is carved into the walls of multiple thresholds in Dur-Sharrukin's Nabu Temple, which demonstrates Sargon's piety to the god. It reads in part, "O Nabu...look steadily with firm heart and direct your just face towards him." This inscription uses the Sumerogram IGI.BAR, which in this case likely stands for the verb *naplusu*, an imperative form of "to look" that became popularized during Sargon's reign. It typically accompanies a plea for the divine gaze, as it does here, demonstrating how essential the divine gaze is to Neo-Assyrian rulers. Additionally, the request that Nabu directs his face toward Sargon speaks to the centrality of the face as it relates to the act of looking. Though the Khorsabad ivories were not created at Dur-Sharrukin, it becomes increasingly likely that they held a place of some importance and acquired a symbolic relationship to the gaze and privileged looking that were important features of the Nabu Temple under Sargon.

Slide 9:

Frontality as a compositional motif plays a huge role at Dur-Sharrukin, furthering the notion that frontality and the gaze were especially significant under Sargon, who was responsible for the overall design of the capital city. This site features several colossal figures in frontal poses, most notably the lamassu, massive winged bulls with human heads that served as divine guardian

figures. Their faces look boldly out to stare down whoever approaches, but their calm expressions, striding poses, and gently upturned wings draw a compelling visual comparison to the small, delicate ivory sphinxes. The pose is so consistent that archaeologist Max Mallowan refers to it as “a technique attributable to Sargon”. In another instance, Mallowan actually refers to an ivory sphinx in this pose as a lamassu. There are clear similarities between the colossal lamassu and the ivory sphinxes, but the lamassu, as guardian figures, are thought to stand this way in order to intimidate anyone who approaches the city. In contrast, the diminutive sphinxes are unlikely to be seen as physically imposing in any impactful way despite their confidently staring faces, suggesting that further investigation is necessary to understand their potential connotations and effects within the context of the Nabu temple.

Slide 10:

In addition to their frontality, the sphinxes from Dur-Sharrukin differ from the more traditional male sphinxes that precede them in their gender presentation. In contrast, the long woven wigs worn by the Wig and Wing sphinxes are markedly feminine, and they have softer facial features that most scholars have interpreted as feminine as well. In comparison to Phoenician and Assyrian males, the faces of the Dur-Sharrukin sphinxes are distinctively female-presenting, establishing yet another divergence from the Phoenician ivories. Furthermore, the ivories' presence in Dur-Sharrukin stands in stark contrast to the disproportionate representation of women in Neo-Assyrian artwork, so the femininity of the ivories would have stood out.

Slide 11:

The Neo-Assyrian court valued and likely used foreign ivories—including those with frontal females—which likely were kept in part as souvenirs or proof of military victory. In addition to evidence that the Nimrud ivories were displayed and engaged with as noted above, records, descriptions, and depictions of ivory furniture taken as booty or tribute indicate that foreign ivories had rhetorical and social value within the Neo-Assyrian court. Neo-Assyrian depictions of ivory furniture, such as reliefs, are typically stylistically Assyrianized, but historical documentation indicates that these scenes likely represent foreign objects. One such example appears in the well-known Garden Scene Relief from Nineveh, the Assyrian capital after Dur-Sharrukin was abandoned, which depicts the Assyrian king and queen sitting on furniture after the defeat of Elam. The chair, table, and couch match descriptions of furniture with ivory fittings, and the scenery also illustrates the foreign site of military victory. Intriguingly, the couch and chair atop which the king and queen recline bear images of what appear to be long-haired frontally-oriented women.

Slide 12:

While some scholars have proposed the figures are beardless eunuchs, they bear more resemblance to the women at the window motif rendered in an Assyrian manner. Additionally, the box on the table in the scene also has sphinxes with longer hair, but it is difficult to tell whether they are shown frontally or in profile. The Garden Relief indicates at least a visual presence of these designs at Nineveh, and it demonstrates that female frontality may have had a conspicuous presence in the Neo-Assyrian court.

The notion that a Neo-Assyrian audience would have appreciated ivories with female frontality is also supported by the beauty standards held in the Neo-Assyrian court. As the Assyrian empire at this time stretched west to the Phoenician coast, the Neo-Assyrian court had access to a variety of Levantine luxury goods, and Assyrian elites would even take Levantine wives. When combined with the fact that depictions of Levantine women adorned the ivories owned by Neo-Assyrian royalty, it is clear that the ivories resonate with Assyrian concepts of beauty. The prominent heads, exaggerated eyes, and detailed hair of the Levantine ivories—the Dur-Sharrukin ivories included—embodied cross-cultural features of idealized beauty. These descriptions are consistent with Assyrian love lyrics and with the conventions used to depict women in the few Neo-Assyrian examples we have. The Neo-Assyrian court likely valued Levantine ivories with depictions of women not only for the value of the ivories themselves but also because they align and, to an extent, may even have influenced Assyrian beauty standards.

Slide 13:

The cross-cultural appreciation of female frontality is best demonstrated through the prominence of the woman at the window motif, which is identified in all of the major Levantine ivory carving traditions found at Nimrud. In addition to the fifteen frontal sphinxes in Dur-Sharrukin, nine of the ivories are “woman at the window” motifs like I showed earlier. Visually, a comparison can be drawn between the female frontality of both the sphinxes and the women at the window. The woman at the window ivories bear similar facial features and long hair like the sphinxes, and they are stylistically congruent as well. The female frontality of both motifs likely had consistent or related implications. The woman at the window motif has been the subject of abundant iconographic study, and while not everyone agrees on the composition’s symbolic significance, most agree that the common pattern would have had specific and meaningful connotations in a variety of cultural contexts. Some scholars have interpreted the woman and the window as representing the meeting of male and female at a threshold as described in tales of courtly love, which may have sexual implications. Irene Winter has also reexamined earlier analyses to suggest that the woman at the window represents a powerful and affective gaze that brings atypical visibility to women and their faces—much like these sphinxes.

Slide 14:

While the faces of the sphinxes and the women at the window are feminine with soft features and markers of gender, the overall figure is not explicitly sexual. In fact, most complete examples of Wig and Wing sphinxes have the suggestion of male genitalia. It is relatively common for the few depictions of Assyrian queens to be somewhat masculine in their flat-chested appearance, but the combination of explicit femininity and masculinity is somewhat unprecedented. Composite creatures like sphinxes are the perfect ground for exploring complex and fluid ideas like gender presentation and sexuality because they invite creative subversions. Composite creatures are fragmented and fantastical yet complete and powerful all at once, so they allow craftsmen and consumers to seamlessly combine people and monsters as well as male and female-presenting features in a way that more straightforward subjects might resist.

The sphinxes bear intriguing patterns of androgyny, gender play, or even dual sexuality that is as of yet unexplored in Levantine, Aramaean, or Neo-Assyrian contexts.

While it is unclear what this combination of features could have meant in a Levantine context, it could have held significance in its Assyrian context of practice. If it is the case, as I have suggested, that the Dur-Sharrukin ivories were displayed and used within the Nabu Temple's throne room, then the sphinxes' androgyny and frontality, along with the women at the window ivories, could have had symbolic importance for the temple's akitu ceremony. In Neo-Assyrian settings, the akitu-festival was the annual performance ritual celebrating the divine marriage of Nabu and his consort Tashmetu, a goddess associated with wisdom and sexual attraction, using the ceremony to affirm the king's legitimacy and continuing divine favor. The throneroom suite of the Nabu Temple was a part of this ceremony, serving as a location for the divine marriage. In this case, the dual sexuality of the sphinxes could have become referential to this ceremony in a symbolic way, representing the union of Nabu and Tashmetu, of male and female. While it is not certain that the ivories were held or used in the throne room, the throne room of the Nabu Temple at Nimrud not only had ivories depicting sphinxes but also two ivory female heads carved in the round, offering one form of female frontality that may have been involved in the akitu-festival there. These examples from Nimrud serve as a precedent for the female frontality displayed by the sphinxes and the women at the window in Dur-Sharrukin's Nabu Temple. As Dr. Virginia Herrmann has put it, the woman at the window motif represents the "meeting of the sexes at the opening between the inner realm of women and the outer realm of men," in the same way that a marriage may signify a gendered union. The dual gender of the sphinxes may also then serve to embody this meeting of the sexes, joining male and female visually. Just as the sphinx's body joins masculine and feminine features, the feminine frontality acts in a similar way. Like the marriage ceremony between Nabu and Tashmetu brings together wisdom and sexuality, the female frontality of the Khorsabad sphinxes also serves as a visual union of the same qualities.

Gender, frontality, and use are exciting avenues for interpretation of many of the Levantine ivories found in Neo-Assyrian contexts, but what can this project tell us about Syro-Phoenician ivories more broadly? I argue that it provides an alternative to the frameworks of originality and hybridity that dominate studies of ivory classifications.

Slide 15:

As I described earlier, a leading theory about the origin of Syro-Phoenician ivories is that they are copies and adaptations of Phoenician originals. In general, the use of certain compositions, motifs, and details like the shape of flowers or patterns on clothing support this claim, and British archaeologist Georgina Herrmann argues that this practice of adopting and adapting motifs would be a way for the Aramaean communities in what is now Southern Syria to establish independent state identities through arts. The adaptation and manipulation of pre-existing imagery would be an easy way for growing states to quickly assert their own artistic tradition, and its association with Phoenician art would likely have legitimized its artistic authority. It is with this conclusion that most prior analyses end.

This line of reasoning, though, places more emphasis on the ivories' geographic origins rather than focusing on their most salient visual characteristics. While the ivories do present adaptations to an extent, they ultimately distinguish themselves through transformational changes like their female-presenting frontality. Furthermore, to view these ivories as solely emulating Phoenician originals disregards their relationship to Neo-Assyrian contexts. The frontal gaze and effeminate features of the Du-Sharrukin ivories may have been especially desirable to Sargon at that time. The presence of furniture covered with Wig and Wing ivories in a place of importance, the Nabu Temple, indicates that these ivories were valued for their own merits. With their bold pose and confronting gaze, the Dur-Sharrukin ivories afforded opportunities for interaction that were not possible with the Phoenician ivories. In all probability, the Neo-Assyrian royal court valued these ivories for their own qualities rather than a relationship to Phoenician art. Whatever the setting, their frontality and femininity allowed them to take on meanings that diverge from those a Phoenician profile sphinx may have. These ivories do not simply borrow from Phoenician originals; through their innovations, they become original works capable of evoking emotion and specific associations that differ from their Phoenician counterparts.

We cannot thoroughly interpret these ivories when we focus solely on their relationship to Phoenician models; it is more productive to explore what purpose or connotations the striding sphinxes held in their local contexts or as part of ancient Dur-Sharrukin than it is to attempt to understand these ivories as primarily mobilizing Phoenician Conventions.

As a whole, the South Syrian or Syro-Phoenician group of ivories was originally described as a combination of Phoenician and North Syrian compositions and stylistic features. The conceptualization of the Syro-Phoenician group as a hybrid style is part of the reason it is difficult to recognize the distinct characteristics and innovations made in these works.

Hybridity can be a valuable lens through which to approach art because it calls attention to the social interactions that style can reflect. Defining visual hybridity as the visible and recognizable blending of cultural imagery, it can be a way to describe the visual impact of shared styles and imagery, pointing to interaction between multiple communities. While the term 'hybrid,' can have negative connotations or imply a lesser value of the work, a negative valuation is not inherent in the notion of visually blending cultural imagery. Rather, visual hybridity can indicate the positive and intentional interactions of people from different cultures.

However, this perspective only provides information about the production of these works. The consumption and contextual significance of sphinx ivories found at Khorsabad cannot be explained through the notion of hybridity because hybridity is, in a sense, unidirectional. The conception of the Syro-Phoenician style as a hybrid between Syrian and Phoenician traditions provides little information about the other interactions that these ivories may have been a part of. The focus is on the combined Phoenician and Syrian imagery rather than on the ivories themselves. If these differences, such as the sphinxes' frontal poses and feminine wigs, are

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AATAW Final Presentation Script
About Face: Female Frontality in the Khorsabad Ivories

emphasized rather than their similarities to other groups, these ivories can be seen in terms of their innovations and their relationships to other communities.

Ultimately, by focusing on the ivories' unique features and their relationship to ancient Dur-Sharrukin, we can see that female frontality significantly transforms the sphinxes, bringing to bear new questions about their gaze, their gender, and what specific connotations they may carry depending on their context of practice. Through research on these topics, I hope to create a foundation for other avenues of study of the somewhat overlooked characteristics of the Khorsabad ivories and to begin a broader conversation about the affective nature of female frontality and its role in the ancient Near East.