

# Furniture in Ancient Western Asia

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ANCIENT FURNITURE, like modern furniture, was most often made of wood and other organic materials that are subject to decay over time. Consequently, archaeological finds of ancient furniture are rare. Only in Egypt, where the dry climate has helped inhibit the decay process, does buried wooden furniture commonly survive. It is fortunate, then, that a number of sites in western and central Asia have yielded the remains of furniture. In many cases, these consist of decorative furniture fittings of ivory or bronze that had once been attached to wood frames. In a few special instances, actual pieces of wooden furniture have survived nearly intact. Beyond this, much can be understood from depictions of furniture in ancient near eastern art and references to furniture in ancient texts. From these incomplete but informative sources, a history of furniture in the ancient Near East can be reconstructed.

Evidence first becomes plentiful in Mesopotamia in the later fourth and early third millennia BCE, although furniture was certainly used in much earlier times. Little is known about this earliest furniture, although the site of Çatal Hüyük in central Turkey provides some evidence for the Neolithic period (circa 6500–5600 BCE). (Refer to the map in "Ancient Western Asia Before the Age of Empires" in Part 5, Vol. II.) In many of the rooms of the houses and shrines of the village, plastered platforms had been built up, extending out from the walls and into the

interior of the rooms. These were of various sizes and shapes, and seem to have served the purpose of benches, tables, and beds. Recesses in the walls served as cupboards in which food and fuel could be stored. Baskets, skins, clay bins, and clay and wooden boxes were used for storage. These practices must have been common throughout the Near East in ancient times and prevail in many areas in the present day.

Although a number of wooden objects were recovered in the excavations at Çatal Hüyük, no wooden furniture was found. This absence, however, does not necessarily indicate that furniture was not used. Statuettes found at the site show figures that are clearly seated on pieces of furniture. One, identified as a male deity (level VI), sits on a small, square stool; another, a voluptuous goddess (level II), is seated on a grand stool supported on both sides by standing felines (fig. 1). This is the first appearance of a seat with animal supports, destined to appear in various forms as seating for gods, royalty, and the nobility throughout the following six millennia.

## FOURTH AND THIRD MILLENNIA (CIRCA 3500–2000 BCE)

Very few pieces of actual furniture survive from the Near East of the later fourth and third millennia, and information about the furniture of this period derives mainly from references in third-



Fig. 1. Goddess seated on a throne supported by two felines. The goddess was found in a grain bin of shrine A.II, Çatal Hüyük, and dates to the sixth millennium BCE. MUSEUM OF ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS, ANKARA

millennium texts and depictions in art. Although furniture seems rarely to have been made of stone, it is largely through this medium that early examples have been preserved—in representations in three-dimensional stone sculpture, sculpted stone reliefs, inlaid panels, and scenes on cylinder seals.

Depictions of furniture begin to occur with regularity on Sumerian cylinder seals of the late Uruk/Jamdat Nasr periods (circa 3500–2900 BCE) and continue to appear on seals throughout the third millennium. The representations are often difficult to interpret because of their tiny size and sketchy appearance. Nonetheless, several types can be identified, with the stool the earliest and most common type shown.

#### Stools

The backless stool is ubiquitous on seals from the late fourth and third millennia, both in simple and more complex versions. Early representations show boxlike stools (fig. 2) that seem to be made either of wood or of reeds (or rush),

often with interior strut work supporting the seat. Other types depicted on seals include stools with sculpted wooden legs joined by horizontal stretchers, folding stools with crossed legs, and stools whose sides are decorated with religious motifs or attributes. One such stool, shown on a seal dating from the Old Akkadian period, has two seated lions on the side, their bodies crossed in a heraldic pose, recalling the stool flanked by felines from Çatal Hüyük.

Representations of stools in sculpture of the third millennium provide more detailed information about their form and the materials from which they were made. Two Early Dynastic statues from Mari (Tell Hariri) depict figures seated on two different kinds of woven reed or rush stools: the singer Ur-Nanshe sits cross-legged on a low, round, cushionlike seat; while the official Ibikhil (fig. 3) sits formally on a tall, cylindrical stool that flares out at the front of the base to accommodate a platform for the figure's feet.

Stools with carved legs and sides are also represented, such as the stools with massive, curving legs on which Gudea sits, the stools with decorative recessed paneling on the stele of Ur-Nammu (fig. 4), and the delicate, carved stools incorporating bull's legs shown on the Standard of Ur (fig. 5). Bull's-leg supports are found on Egyptian furniture from the earliest periods, and lion's-leg supports appear frequently in Egypt in the third millennium; the occurrence of animal legs on Mesopotamian furniture of this period seems to indicate a knowledge of the Egyptian cabinet-makers' work, although the use of animals as supports may have originated in the Near East, the earliest example being the stool with felines from Çatal Hüyük.



Fig. 2. Impression of a cylinder seal dating to the Mesopotamian Protoliterate period (circa 3300 BCE) showing figures seated on stools constructed of wood or rush. PIERPONT MORGAN LIBRARY, NEW YORK

#### Chairs

Depictions of chairs with backs first occur in Early Dynastic times, but it is not until the Third Dynasty of Ur that representations of chairs become common. The design of these early chairs follows that of stools, and common stool types furnished with backs can be recognized. A king shown on an unusual Neo-Sumerian seal dating to the period of Ur-Nammu (fig. 6) sits on a throne with bull's legs at the rear, recalling the stools on the Standard of Ur; the front leg of the king's chair extends up beyond the seat, curves over to form a low arm, and then rises into a straight back that curls out at the top. This suggests comparisons with contemporary Egyptian chairs: these often have backs that project at the top or are shown with cushions thrown over the backs. The Mesopotamian chair back with curled top

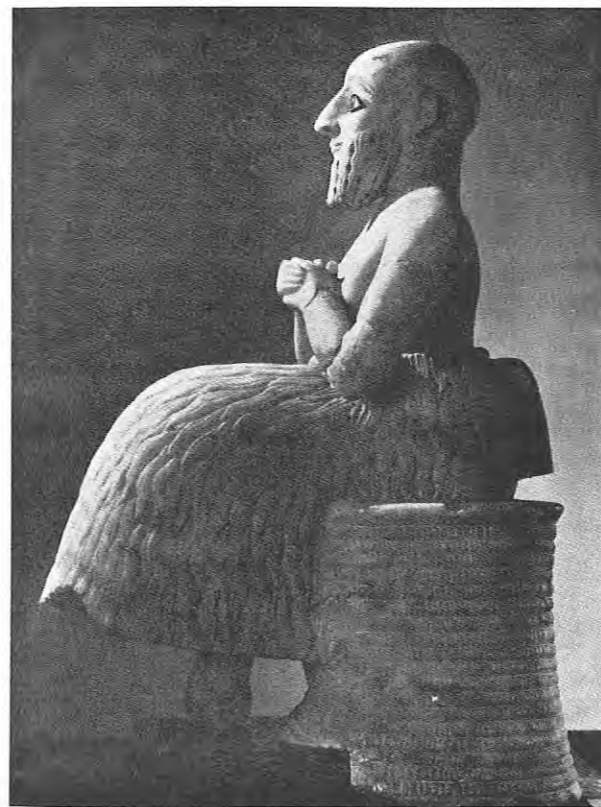


Fig. 3. Statue showing Ibikhil, superintendent of the Temple of Ishtar, Mari, seated on a tall, cylindrical stool, Early Dynastic period. LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS



Fig. 4. Detail of the stele of Ur-Nammu, showing a stand in front of a seated god. The god sits on a stool decorated with recessed panelling recalling the facades of Mesopotamian temples. The stele dates to the Neo-Sumerian period and is currently at the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

perhaps reflects one or both of these Egyptian fashions. (See illustrations in "Furniture in Ancient Egypt" earlier in this volume.)

Many of the references to seats in late-third-millennium texts may denote chairs with backs: textual references mention at least fourteen different kinds of wood from which these seats were made, as well as copper, bronze, silver, and gold for plating or overlay. Chairs of this period could be painted, and their seats could be upholstered with hides or leather. References to sedan chairs first occur in texts of the late third millennium.

#### Tables and Stands

Tables of some sort were in use throughout the third millennium, as is known from their appearance in contemporary art and texts. The rela-

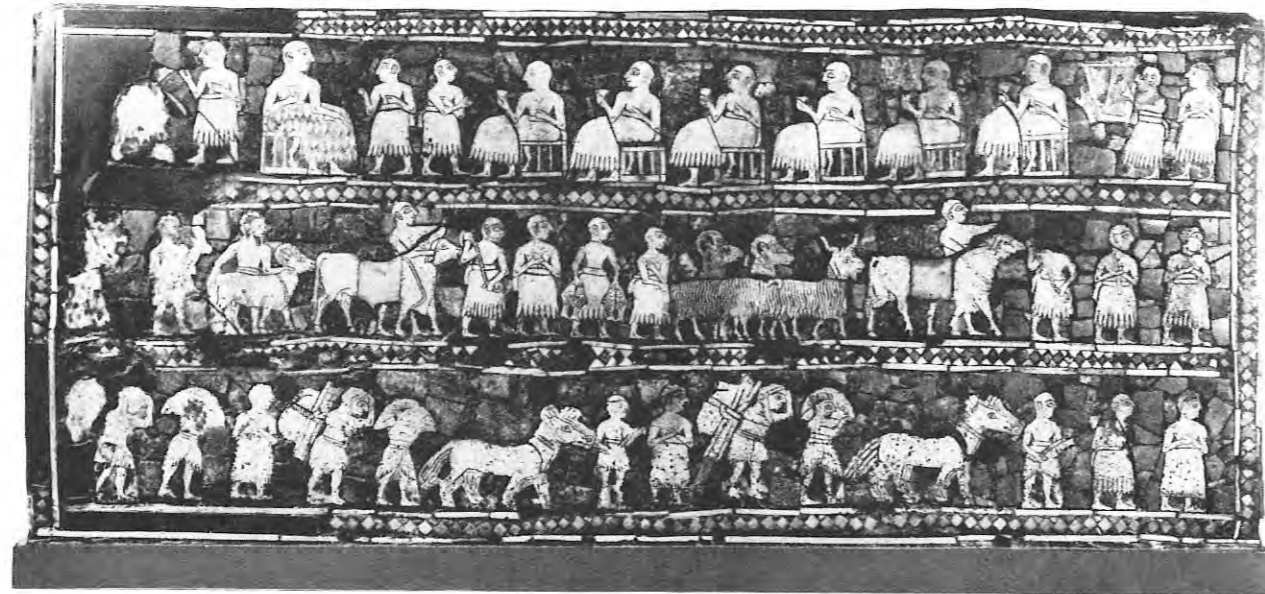


Fig. 5. View of one side of the Standard of Ur, Early Dynastic period, showing banqueters seated on stools. The "standard" was made of wood, overlaid with pieces of shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone set in bitumen. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON



Fig. 6. Cylinder-seal impression showing a king, perhaps Ur-Nammu, seated on a throne with animal legs and a back that curves at the top, Neo-Sumerian period. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

tively few depictions and references that survive are hard to interpret, however, and in two-dimensional representations it is often difficult to distinguish between tables and vessel stands. A common type is of biconical shape, flaring at the top and bottom and pinched in at the middle. A number of tables or stands of this type appear on seals and reliefs of the later third millennium, in some cases serving to receive or hold offerings (fig. 4); some of these seem to be stands holding open bowls, while others may have been proper tables related to the stands, apparently with concave tops.

It is perhaps noteworthy that no tables are shown in the banquet scene on the Standard of Ur, although an inlaid panel from one of the lyres from Ur shows an animal carrying a table laden with food. The table has a thin, flat bottom and a thicker top, supported by vertical and crossed strut work. The table is being used as a kind of tray on a base; actual tables of this type would likely have had tops with upturned rims, facilitating the transport of food. These tray tables would then be related to the tables or vessel stands with concave tops, on which food or offerings could not only be supported but also contained. Tables with concave or tray-shaped tops were to have a long history in the ancient Near East, attested throughout the following two millennia.

Large tables or stands are shown on several third-millennium seals: these have tops, bottoms, and vertical and crossed strut work, resembling the table carried by the animal on the lyre from Ur. In their large size and their position near attendants, these objects look like serving stands or sideboards, with food or vessels sitting on or in their tops. Contemporary texts indicate that tables, like stools and chairs, were made from many kinds of wood and were sometimes overlaid with metal.

#### *Beds and Couches*

Very few representations of beds survive from the third millennium, and since beds are often missing from furniture inventory lists of this period, it has been suggested that people normally may have slept on the floor on straw or reed mats. A number of beds are mentioned in texts from the later third millennium; these were made of reeds and wood and could be overlaid

with gold, silver, or copper. Beds could be painted, and an Old Akkadian source refers to a wooden bed with "fruit decoration" and slender feet.

The resting surface of early beds was woven from rope or other materials. A number of model beds made of terra-cotta and dating to the early second millennium BCE show this woven surface, often with figures lying comfortably on it (fig. 7). Linen sheets are listed in texts as early



Fig. 7. Terra-cotta model of a bed from Mesopotamia, dating to the early second millennium BCE. On the bed are figures that may represent participants in a "sacred marriage." BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

as the Ur III period; and mattresses, cushions, and blankets must have been used, as can be surmised from references in texts of the second millennium. Beds were set up in temples, and the beds made for gods were often so important and well known that they were used in year names: "the year in which the bed of Ninlil was constructed" to describe a year in the reign of the king Shulgi, Third Dynasty of Ur (2094–2047 BCE).

#### Storage Furniture

There is little evidence for storage furniture in the art and literature of the third millennium, and it has been assumed that food and personal possessions generally were kept in boxes, baskets, skins, bins, and in niches in the wall, much as had been the practice during the Neolithic period.

#### Furniture from Ur: The Royal Cemetery

A few pieces of furniture, furniture fragments, and decorative fittings from the fourth and third millennia have been found in excavations; these oldest remnants are precious, providing evidence for the reality behind the reconstructed history of early furniture. Excavations at Ur showed that some of the Early Dynastic tombs of the Royal Cemetery had contained furniture and other objects made of wood and reed, although these organic materials had almost completely deteriorated in the earth. Metal sheathing and stone and shell inlay that had once been attached to wood frames were recovered, allowing many fine objects to be restored. These include lyres, boxes, gaming boards, and a funerary sledge; although none of these can properly be called furniture, they indicate the imaginative sense of design and the mastery of materials and techniques that must have characterized the work of the best Sumerian cabinetmakers.

A few pieces of furniture were recognized by the excavators of the Royal Cemetery from deteriorated remains of wood or reeds in the soil, providing the only evidence of actual Early Dynastic Sumerian furniture. The tomb of Queen Puabi (PG/800) yielded traces of a wooden storage chest, thought to be a wardrobe, the contents of which had decomposed com-

pletely. The chest was decorated on one side, presumably the front, with a band of human and animal figures made of shell and set against a background of lapis lazuli in the same technique as on the Standard of Ur. Near the queen's wardrobe were found a toilet box inlaid with shell and lapis lazuli and two silver lion heads, thought by the excavator to have belonged to a wooden chair, traces of which were found in the earth.

Grave PG/1847 contained the remains of a table that had four wooden legs and a reed top that was plastered with clay. "Offering tables" of stone or terra-cotta found in a number of graves at Ur closely resemble the biconical tables or vessel stands pictured on seals and monuments (fig. 4).

#### Furniture from Palace G, Ebla

Excavations at the ancient city of Ebla (Tell Mardikh) in northwest Syria yielded an archive of more than seventeen thousand cuneiform tablets and tablet fragments dating to the third quarter of the third millennium BCE. The tablets were found in the administrative quarter of the Royal Palace, area G, stacked on floors or stored on wooden shelves that were burned in the fire that destroyed the palace. The basic form of these shelves could be reconstructed, providing the earliest evidence for storage furniture of this sort.

In one of the rooms of the palace (L.2601), wooden furniture fragments were found lying in two groups near the east wall. The wood had been carbonized in the fire, but enough had been preserved to allow the excavators to recognize two ornate pieces of furniture. To the north lay the remains of a table with a rectangular top with a raised rim, the earliest instance of an actual table with a tray-shaped top. Below the top and attached to its underside was a decorative, openwork wood frame incorporating carved scenes of animals in combat, heroes dominating animals, and warriors in battle. The table seems to have had four legs, apparently square in section.

To the south of the table were found fragments of a wooden chair decorated with shell inlay. The sides of the chair were carved in openwork, depicting animals in procession within a latticelike frame. The back of the chair seems to

have been decorated with large carved figures, possibly representing royal portraits. The remains of the table and chair from Palace G at Ebla constitute the earliest intact wooden furniture fragments from the Near East and as such provide the first clear evidence of ancient woodworking techniques in the third millennium BCE.

#### Tables from Horoztepe

Two copper (or bronze) tables, one a miniature table, were excavated from a tomb at the site of Horoztepe in north-central Anatolia. The tables were found in a pile of objects, including copper vessels, figurines, a standard, and broken copper mountings for wooden furniture that had not survived. The larger table had been intentionally crushed, as had many of the objects found with it. The contents of the tomb have been dated to the end of the third millennium BCE.

Both tables had four hollow legs that resembled human legs, terminating in bootlike feet. The legs of each table were arranged in pairs pointing out in opposite directions. The larger table had a flat, oval top with its outer edge turned down; the top of the miniature table was rectangular. The legs of both tables were attached to their tops by means of cylindrical pieces fastened to the underside of the tops; these pieces were then fit down into the tops of the hollow legs, and nails were used to secure the legs to the cylinders.

There is evidence to suggest that the hollow legs had once contained cores of wood, and it seems possible that the top of the larger table, with its downturned rim, had once overlaid a wooden top. This technique recalls the third-millennium textual references to metal plating and overlay on pieces of furniture. The Horoztepe tables are the earliest surviving complete pieces of furniture from the Near East, the ancestors—stylistically and technically—of a long line of western Asiatic tables.

#### SECOND MILLENNIUM BCE

Furniture styles that had prevailed in the third millennium carried over into the second. Stools were still the most common type of seat, and various kinds continued to be used. Compari-

sons can be drawn between second-millennium forms and those of the preceding millennium, noteworthy among these the stool of Shamash on the stele of Hammurabi (see "King Hammurabi of Babylon" in Part 5, Vol. II, for an illustration) and its antecedent on the stele of Ur-Nammu (fig. 4).

Terra-cotta plaques from Mesopotamia dating to the first half of the second millennium show a variety of stools on which musicians and craftspeople are seated. One of these plaques shows a woodworker shaping a table leg with an adze, the earliest representation of a near eastern cabinetmaker (fig. 8). The leg under construction curves at the bottom and ends in a decorative foot, shown braced by the cabinetmaker's toes as he works with the heavy adze. A tenon projects up at the top of the leg, suggesting the means by which the leg would be joined to the top of the table. Dating to the same period as the plaques are a number of terra-cotta furniture models, including chairs, tables, and beds; some of the beds are equipped with small figures, providing a glimpse of the way these pieces may have been used (fig. 7).



Fig. 8. Old Babylonian terra-cotta plaque showing a woodworker using an adze to make a table leg. LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS

Chairs with backs continued in use throughout the second millennium BCE, attested by the terra-cotta models and by representations of chairs on seals. Vessel stands occur on seals of the period as well, along with tables that are now clearly differentiated from the stands. Many of these tables appear to be ornate, some with curved legs that end in bull's feet, numerous examples of which are found on Syrian and Anatolian seals beginning in the first half of the second millennium.

Contemporary texts provide evidence for the furniture of the second millennium and the materials from which it was made, some of the most detailed early references coming from the archive of cuneiform tablets from the palace at Mari. The tablets name woodworkers associated with projects carried out at the beginning of the reign of Zimri-Lim (circa 1780 BCE), including thrones made for the gods Dagan, Annunitum, Ea, Shamash, and Adad. These thrones seem to have been constructed with frames of wood, which could then be plated with precious metal and inlaid with gems. Royal furniture also appears in the Mari texts; the dowry of Princess Shimatum included two beds, fifteen chairs, three stools, one table, and four serving trays, an indication of the kinds of pieces that would have been found in a well-furnished royal apartment. For traveling, sedan chairs were used; women and children rode in large wheeled beds pulled by oxen. The Mari texts provide evidence for details of furniture construction, including the use of cords, sinews, and glue for the assembly of furniture, and leather for upholstery and appliqué.

Against this background of literary references and depictions of furniture in art may be set numerous fragments of actual furniture from the second millennium BCE. It is the objects themselves that bring to life the furniture of the second millennium, for it is in this period that large collections of wooden furniture and ivory furniture attachments begin to be found.

#### Wooden Furniture from Jericho

Fifty or more pieces of wooden furniture were recovered at Jericho from twenty-two Middle Bronze Age tombs (circa seventeenth–sixteenth

century BCE), constituting one of the largest collections of ancient wooden furniture excavated in the Near East. The wood was mostly in poor condition, having been buried in the earth, but many fragments were well enough preserved to allow complete pieces of furniture to be reconstructed on paper.

Tables (twenty-five or more were identified) and stools (twenty-two or more) were the two main types of furniture represented; three tombs had contained beds. The furniture was undecorated and simple in design, but the elements were finely carved. Tables were generally low, with rectangular tops that could have upturned rims or bordering strips added around the edges. Some of the tables had tops that were clearly concave or that incorporated bowl-like concavities in their upper surfaces. The legs of tables were usually poorly preserved, but evidence suggests that they were often curved and sometimes ended in feet carved to look like boots or, as the excavator has suggested, duck's feet or ram's heads. Stools generally seem to have had woven seats and carved legs. Wooden bowls and boxes were preserved in the Jericho tombs as well, some of the boxes decorated with inlaid bone strips, guilloches, and small plaques.

Details of design and joinery were recovered, revealing for the first time evidence of a variety of ancient near eastern woodworking techniques (fig. 9). Mortise-and-tenon joinery, first seen in the furniture from Palace G, Ebla, was the standard method of joinery used in the Jericho furniture. Sophisticated joinery techniques including mitered bridle joints and butt joints with floating tenons (fig. 9, no. 1) and half-lap joints with through tenons (fig. 9, no. 4) indicate a highly developed state of craftsmanship.

Some of the table legs resembled the leg shown on the Old Babylonian terra-cotta plaque (fig. 8), with a tenon extending up from the top. The top tenons of the legs passed up through carved collars that extended down from the undersides of the tabletops (fig. 9, no. 2). The leg tenons could be secured by wedges driven down from the top and by pins running through both collar and tenon. This complex technique seems related to the joinery of the Horoztepe tables at the end of the third millennium BCE; the technique used at Jericho was long-lived, still em-

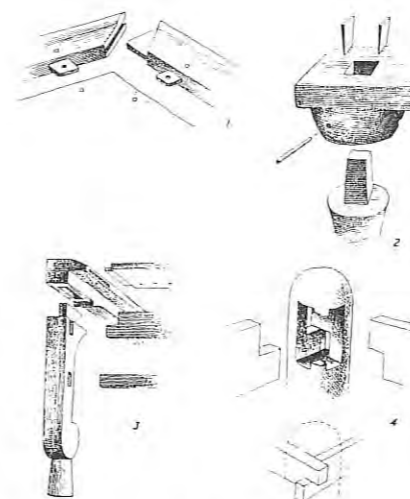


Fig. 9. Joinery details of wooden tables and stools found at Jericho, Middle Bronze Age. KATHLEEN KENYON, *JERICHO I, BRITISH SCHOOL OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN JERUSALEM* (1960)

ployed in the first millennium, in evidence at Gordion and Pazyryk.

#### The Pratt Ivories

The first substantial remains of ancient near eastern ivory furniture date from the second millennium BCE, with the earliest recognizable piece of furniture with ivory fittings represented by a group of ivory furniture attachments given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Mr. and Mrs. George D. Pratt in the 1930s. Originally thought to have been Syrian or Phoenician from the first millennium BCE, the Pratt ivories are now recognized as Anatolian, closely related to an ivory plaque excavated from the site of Acemhöyük dating to the Assyrian Colony period (nineteenth–eighteenth centuries BCE).

Finely carved ivory sphinxes (fig. 10) and lion's legs had been joined to form the legs of a chair; several plaques carved in the same distinctive style may have belonged to the chair as well, including a falcon clutching two deer, sphinxes, kneeling lion-headed figures, and lions eating prey. The pieces are hippopotamus ivory, many with traces of gilding preserved on the surface. Several of the ivories are now pink or red, whether from intentional coloring in antiquity or from staining that occurred while they were buried in the soil.

#### Ivory Furniture from the Late Bronze Age

Numerous ivory or bone inlays from furniture or boxes have been recovered from other Middle Bronze Age contexts, including Ebla and El-Jir in Israel. However, it is the Late Bronze Age strata at several sites in the Near East—notably Alalakh (modern Tell Atchana), Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra), Pahal (Pella), Lachish (modern Tell al-Duwayr), Tell al-Farah, and Megiddo—that have yielded the largest number of ivory fittings. The earliest of these pieces are the ivory plaques that once decorated two wooden boxes, excavated from the site of Pella in Jordan and dating to the fifteenth century BCE or earlier. Although the wood of the boxes had deteriorated, the form of one of them could be ascertained from the position of the plaques in the soil. The shape of this box and the style and subject of the plaques that decorated its surface indicate marked Egyptian influence, evidence



Fig. 10. Part of an ivory chair leg in the form of a sphinx, Anatolia, circa nineteenth to eighteenth centuries BCE. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

of the continuing importance of Egyptian craftsmanship to near eastern cabinetmakers. The largest collections of ivory furniture fittings from Late Bronze Age contexts are those excavated from the sites of Ugarit in Syria and Megiddo in Israel, the finds dating from the fourteenth through twelfth centuries BCE.

#### *Ivory Furniture from Ugarit*

From Ugarit come the remains of a circular table and a headboard or footboard from a bed, found together in a corner of *Cour III* of the Royal Palace (fourteenth–thirteenth centuries BCE). Both were made of elephant ivory. The bed panel was decorated on the front and back, in each case with a series of six carved plaques depicting deities, kings, offering bearers, and other figures. On both sides, the plaques were framed by carved strips at the top and bottom and by openwork sacred trees at the sides. The style of carving and the scheme of the decoration of the bed panel seem to reflect native Syrian traditions, although with clear reference to Egyptian style and motifs.

The top of the circular table was carved with a rosette at the center, surrounded by scenes of animals and mythological beasts. The table top had a raised, decorated rim; it seems to have been supported on a single central leg, probably made of wood. There is evidence that the table-top was inlaid with lapis lazuli and colored glass paste, and it may have been gilded. Other pieces of furniture from the site are represented by thirteen ivory lion's feet found in the area of the palace.

#### *The Megiddo Ivories*

A large number of ivory fragments were excavated from the Canaanite palace at Megiddo (level VIIA) in a three-room section that has been called the Treasury. The pieces were found scattered in a small area and are dated variously within the fourteenth–twelfth centuries BCE, with one of the latest pieces, a model pen case, bearing the cartouche of Ramesses III (circa 1187–1156 or later). A total of 382 ivories has been cataloged and published. These were apparently the remains of wood and ivory furniture and luxury objects that had been disassembled and stored along with other valuable items,

including pieces of gold jewelry and alabaster vessels. The ivories were carved in several different styles and represent many kinds of objects. More than forty pieces are conceivably furniture attachments, including frame pieces for a stool or chair and many carved plaques that must have formed part of the decoration for several pieces of furniture.

One of the most beautiful of the ivory plaques from Megiddo is engraved with a scene showing a ruler seated on an elaborate throne that has a back with curled top (or a cushion thrown over the back) and winged sphinxes at the sides (see illustration in "Administration of the State in Canaan and Ancient Israel" in Part 4, Vol. I). The ruler's feet rest on a footstool. The type of throne depicted on the plaque occurs in another ivory from Megiddo, a tiny throne of the same form. This fanciful design with winged sphinxes as side supports must have been popular in the Levant during the late second millennium; it appears also on the sarcophagus of King Ahiiram of Byblos, which bears an inscription variously dated within the thirteenth through tenth centuries BCE.

#### *The Amarna Letters*

The close ties between the Egyptian pharaohs and Asiatic rulers of the fourteenth century BCE have been documented by the nearly four hundred letters found at the site of Tell al-Amarna in Egypt. Gifts, including furniture, figure prominently in many of the texts. One such gift consisted entirely of a valuable collection of furniture given by the Egyptian pharaoh to the Kassite king Kadashman-Enlil for the Babylonian palace (EA 5); the collection included one bed of ebony overlaid with ivory and gold, three beds of ebony overlaid with gold, ten chairs of ebony overlaid with gold, more than ten footstools of ebony and ivory (some of these overlaid with gold), and several other pieces.

Furniture traveled from the Near East to Egypt as well, with sideboards, beds, and other pieces of furniture (text damaged) recorded in the dowry of a Babylonian princess (EA 13), and a chest of ebony, with a winged disk, overlaid with gold and silver sent from Tushratta of Mitanni as a wedding gift to Pharaoh along with his daughter (EA 22). The Egyptian influence that

has been noted in western Asiatic ivory furniture from the Late Bronze Age is surely a reflection of the cosmopolitan nature of the times, and an indication that imported furniture must have been coveted and collected in many Near Eastern centers.

## FIRST MILLENNIUM BCE

### *Assyrian Furniture*

Furniture is widely attested in the Near East in the first millennium BCE, occurring in texts, depictions, and affirmed by archaeological finds of great variety and the highest quality. Regional styles can now be discerned, many of them related to the court styles of Assyria, which themselves reflect both indigenous traditions and influences from abroad. Fine furniture was highly coveted by the Assyrians and collected in large quantities; furniture must have been commissioned from Assyrian and foreign craftsmen alike, made within the kingdom and imported from without, and was even acquired systematically as plunder and tribute from neighboring nations.

Records of tribute paid to Assyrian kings and booty from conquered territories often list furniture as among the most valuable objects obtained from enemy or vassal states. Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) claims to have carried off tables, chairs, and couches of all descriptions, made from valuable woods and ivory, inlaid or overlaid with ivory, silver, and gold. This fine furniture came from all over the realm, notably from areas to the west, and included the rich furnishings from the palace at Carchemish: beds, tables, and chairs made of *taskarinnu* wood, identified by scholars as boxwood. Sargon II (721–705 BCE), on his eighth campaign, plundered the entire contents of the Urartian temple of Khaldi at Musasir; although translation of the text describing the sack of Musasir is problematic, the Assyrians seem to have acquired at the very minimum an ivory couch, ivory tables, boxwood tables, chairs of boxwood with inlay of silver and gold, and the silver bed of the god, covered with gold and jewels. (See "The Kingdom of Urartu in Eastern Anatolia" in Part 5, Vol. II.) Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE) appropriated "all

movable furniture" from the palaces at Susa (modern Shush), and the spoils from his Egyptian campaigns undoubtedly included furniture as well.

In light of this cosmopolitan setting, it is interesting to note that the furniture shown as booty and tribute on Assyrian reliefs is remarkably consistent in style, virtually indistinguishable from the depictions of furniture used by Assyrian kings and their retinues for ritual, ceremonial, and other occasions. Fragments of a basalt obelisk from Nimrud (Kalkhu), known as the Rassam Obelisk, show the receipt of foreign tribute by Assurnasirpal II. The valuables being transported include plush, upholstered chairs and plain and fancy tables. The ornate tables have legs that end in lion's-paw feet on one table and bull's hooves on two others. Horizontal stretchers connect the table legs at the middle and below the animal feet, with decorative bases below the lower stretcher forming supports for the feet. Vertical struts support the table top at the interior.

On a relief from the palace of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) at Nineveh (Tell Kuyunjik), the king's soldiers carry off eight tables, a chair (or throne), and a bed with a high, curved backrest. The tables are of several types, including two with concave tops and three with flat tops from which animal-head finials project at the front and back. Three of the tables have bull's-leg feet, joined by stretchers and supported on tapering bases in the same manner as those on the obelisk fragments from Nimrud. Gods could be carried away from fallen cities still seated on their thrones, as seen on a relief from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE) from Nimrud. The deities sit on straight-backed chairs with carved legs, resembling the chair on Sennacherib's relief.

The types of furniture shown carried off by the Assyrians as plunder from other lands find counterparts in the chairs, beds, and tables shown in use by the Assyrian military abroad and, in fancier versions, by the king and his court in the palace. The artists recording the spoils of the kings' campaigns appear to have made no attempt to distinguish regional styles of furniture; thus, while much Assyrian furniture is shown on reliefs, it is difficult to identify and characterize an "Assyrian style" and to differenti-

ate indigenous from foreign traditions. Depictions of military camps on reliefs from Nimrud and Nineveh show all of the types mentioned above and more, including vessel stands, stools, low tables, and footstools as well. Many of these pieces had lion's- or bull's-leg feet, either set on tapering bases or resting flat on the ground, connected by stretchers or with legs crossed, the latter suggesting furniture that could be folded up for transport.

Royal furniture appears as ornate versions of these same types. Assurnasirpal sits on a carved stool, with his feet resting on a footstool, apparently taking part in a ritual banquet (see fig. 3 in "Art and Ideology in Ancient Western Asia" in Part 10, Vol. IV). The stool of the king suggests a backless throne, recalling the stools of kings and gods in the third and second millennia. The stool is upholstered with a thick cushion, from which fringe hangs down at the sides. Calf heads project from the seat to the front and back, recalling the animal-head projections on the tables captured by Sennacherib. The vertical legs are connected by a stretcher decorated with opposed volutes. Below this, the legs are carved in a series of moldings, the uppermost element resembling a flower with petals or leaves turned down; the molded section terminates in a cylindrical base that sits flat on the ground. The king's footstool has vertical, hornlike projections at the corners and lion's-paw feet on short bases. The legs are connected above and below by stretchers.

Four magnificent pieces of furniture appear on reliefs from Khorsabad, carried by attendants and presented to Sargon II: two kinds of tables, a chair or throne, and a footstool. The footstool resembles that of Assurnasirpal, although it is more ornate, and the lion's-paw feet rest on tall, conical bases resembling the cones that Assyrian genii use to fertilize sacred trees. The legs of Sargon's tables and chair rest on these conical bases as well, and this form recurs frequently on furniture depicted on Assyrian reliefs. One of the tables presented to Sargon has a concave top, supported by a carved central strut and two figures bracing the underside of the top with raised hands. The other has legs made of superimposed figures, carved floral struts supporting the top, and ram's-head finials projecting at two levels. Both tables have lion's feet with flat front

faces above the paws. The chair or throne carried by Sargon's attendants is an elaborate version of the chairs with backs noted above. The back is decorated with standing figures, and more figures support the armrests. The decoration of furniture with such figures has a long history, first appearing on the chair and table from Ebla in the third millennium BCE.

Ornate Assyrian thrones occur in a number of depictions. One of the most impressive is the throne of Sennacherib, on which the king sits while inspecting the booty after the battle of Lachish. Three tiers of figures cover the sides of the throne, the upper row serving to support the armrests from below. The remains of what has been described as a similar throne were found in the early excavations at Nimrud; the wood of the throne had completely deteriorated, but some of the bronze fittings had survived, including panels containing figures of griffins and winged deities, as well as calf or bull heads said to have decorated the arms.

In the most sumptuous of Assyrian banquet scenes, Assurbanipal's queen sits on this type of throne, with carved legs and stretchers but without supporting figures (see "Clothing and Grooming in Ancient Western Asia" in Part 4, Vol. I, for an illustration). With her feet resting on a footstool, she is seated before a table of the traditional type. Its concave top seems here to be draped with a cover that provides a flat surface for the containers and provisions placed on top. The king reclines on his couch, a more elaborate version of the couches noted above. The legs are decorated at the top with small panels showing women in a windowlike setting, carved moldings, capitals, and recumbent lions, all supported by tapered, conelike feet. The stretchers are carved, not with opposed volutes, but with confronted animals. These details suggest that this depiction may represent a couch imported from Phoenicia or Syria. Such furniture was collected by the Assyrian monarchs, evidence of which has been found in great quantity at Assyrian sites.

#### *The Nimrud Ivories: Phoenician and Syrian Furniture*

Thousands of finely carved ivory figures, implements, vessels, horse trappings, and attachments

## Furniture in the Old Testament

### The Ark of the Covenant

One of the most venerated pieces of furniture from antiquity, and one that has fired the imaginations of countless antiquarians, historians of religion, and archaeologists/adventurers throughout history, was the Ark of the Covenant. As described in Exodus 25:10–22, this was the chest built to contain the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, the testimony of God as given to Moses. The portable chest, measuring approximately forty-five by twenty-seven by twenty-seven inches, was reportedly made of acacia wood, overlaid with gold on the inside and outside, and with a gold molding on the exterior. At the base were four rings of gold, two on each side, through which gold-plated poles were slid as a means of carrying the chest. On top of the Ark was a seat of gold with a hammered gold cherub at each side, the wings of the cherubim spread out above to overshadow the seat. It was on this seat flanked by cherubim that the Lord was said to have been invisibly enthroned (1 Samuel 4:4). Biblical tradition places Moses in the thirteenth century BCE, which would make the Ark of the Covenant a Late Bronze Age construction. Aspects of its design recall furniture from that era: the seat flanked by gold cherubim on top of the Ark must have resembled the throne flanked by sphinxes known

from the Megiddo ivories and the sarcophagus of Hiram of Byblos.

### King Solomon's Throne

The Ark of the Covenant, originally kept in the Tabernacle, was brought to Jerusalem by David and subsequently enshrined in Solomon's Temple. The Temple and Palace complex, as described in 1 Kings 5–8 and 2 Chronicles 1–7, was built with the help of Phoenician craftsmen provided by Hiram I of Tyre, its construction traditionally dated to the tenth century BCE. Within the temple complex was the throne portico in the Hall of Judgment, and it was presumably here that Solomon's great throne was set up. The throne was made of ivory, overlaid with gold (1 Kings 10:18). It is described as having six steps with twelve standing lions, one placed at each end of each step. The throne had armrests decorated with lions, and a calf's head adorned the back. Because of Solomon's association with Hiram I of Tyre and his Phoenician artisans, it has often been supposed that the ivory throne was Phoenician. However, the collection of ivory furniture attachments found at the Israelite capital of Samaria, which may include pieces made locally, suggests the possibility that Solomon's throne could have been a native production.

for furniture and other objects have been excavated at Assyrian sites, the great majority found at Nimrud in the remains of the Northwest Palace, the Burnt Palace, and Fort Shalmaneser, the arsenal southeast of the citadel. The first ivories were found at Nimrud by Austen Henry Layard in the Northwest Palace in 1845, on his second day of excavation. The group subsequently uncovered by him there has been termed the "Layard series," which includes many ivory furniture attachments carved in Egyptianizing styles that have long been attributed by scholars to Phoenician workshops. The backs of some of the pieces in this group are inscribed with fitter's marks in the form of letters in the West Semitic alphabet. The series includes plaques depicting animals, sphinxes, griffins in floral settings, seated figures, and "women at the window," recalling the decoration at the top of the carved legs of Assurbanipal's couch.

In 1855 W. K. Loftus excavated a large collection of carved ivories from the Burnt Palace, the building to the west of the Nabu and Ezida temples in the southeast section of the citadel of Nimrud. The collection, known as the "Loftus group," includes pyxides, bowls, ornate handles, and furniture attachments carved in what has been recognized as Syrian style. The pieces were burned black in the fire that had destroyed the building, apparently in 614–612 BCE, when the city fell.

Excavations at Nimrud were reopened in 1949 by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. Archaeologists uncovered many additional ivories from the Northwest and Burnt palaces, including a spectacular discovery of furniture fragments that had been thrown into a well in room NN of the Northwest Palace, apparently during the sack of the city. The well had contained two gilded and inlaid plaques depicting

a lion killing an African boy in a papyrus thicket, the "Mona Lisa of Nimrud," the "Ugly Sister," and many more finely carved pieces.

In 1957–1963, excavations were carried out in the arsenal of Nimrud, named Fort Shalmaneser by the excavators after its founder, Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE). Several rooms in this building proved to be repositories for the great collections of ivory furniture amassed by the Assyrian monarchs, substantiating the kings' claims of plunder and tribute from neighboring states as detailed in the ancient records. One large storeroom, SW7, contained the remains of nineteen magnificent pieces of furniture found in situ. These seem to have been chairs, the ivory backs of which were preserved in position in the soil. The backs were constructed of plaques framed

by vertical and horizontal bordering strips; the plaques were carved with figures shown standing or seated and holding tendrils, often beneath winged disks. On several examples (fig. 11), the figures were framed by trees with volute branches. This recalls the design of the Late Bronze Age ivory bed from Ugarit. One of the backs from SW7 was decorated with three volute trees, and with this back was associated a long carved stretcher that may have belonged to a bed. The stretcher was carved with scenes of animals in combat, reminiscent of the carved stretcher on the bed of Assurbanipal. The ivory furniture from SW7 is thought to have been made in a north Syrian workshop in the ninth or eighth century BCE.

Related to the ivory furniture attachments



Fig. 11. Ivory chair back from Room SW7, Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud, circa ninth to eighth centuries BCE. The chair back, now in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad, incorporates panels carved in north Syrian style. MAX MALLOWAN AND GEORGINA HERRMANN, *IVORIES FROM NIMRUD*, FASC. 3 (1974)

found at Nimrud are collections excavated from a number of other near eastern sites, including the Assyrian site of Khorsabad; Arslan Tash and Zincirli in the area of north Syria; Hasanlu in northern Iran; Salamis on Cyprus; and Samaria (modern Sabastiyah). One of the largest of these collections was that found at Samaria, established as the capital of Israel in the ninth century under Omri and destroyed by the Assyrians in 722–720 BCE. From this site come ivory furniture fittings in the form of plaques carved with figures and floral elements in several different styles, related to the styles found at Nimrud. Two recumbent lions with mortises in their backs must have formed supports for vertical struts, recalling the lions on the legs of the bed of Assurbanipal. As at Nimrud, several of the pieces are inscribed on the back with letters in the West Semitic alphabet. The variety of styles represented in this collection suggests that at least some of this furniture was imported into Samaria; other pieces may have been made locally. Omri's son Ahab was married to Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, and it is tempting to see in the ivory fittings evidence of Phoenician furniture that Jezebel might have brought with her to Israel.

From Arslan Tash comes a series of ivory furniture attachments related to those found at Nimrud. Many of these pieces have fitter's marks on the back, carved in the West Semitic alphabet, and a number bear Aramaic inscriptions, one reading "[. . .] the son of 'Ammā for Hazael our lord," who has been identified with the ninth-century king Hazael of Damascus. Found in one room of the *Bâtiment aux ivoires* was the ivory sheathing for two rectangular frames that must have been the remains of beds or couches; many of the furniture fittings found in the vicinity may have decorated these beds, while other plaques may have belonged to additional pieces of furniture.

The diverse styles of the ivories found at these sites have long been of interest to scholars, many of whom have worked to establish stylistic groups and then to associate these groups with presumed centers of near eastern ivory carving. A north Syrian tradition has been identified, to which belongs a large number of ivory furniture attachments, including many of the ivories from the Loftus group and the furniture from SW7,

Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud. A southern tradition has been discerned, comprising "Phoenician," south Syrian, and possibly Israelite styles; associated with these styles are many of the ivories from Samaria, Arslan Tash, and the related ivories from Nimrud, including many of those from the Layard series and from SW37, Fort Shalmaneser. In addition, a group of Assyrian-style ivories from Nimrud, most of which are engraved plaques, can be clearly differentiated from the imported pieces.

Beyond this general characterization of regional styles it has been difficult to proceed. Many of the ivories in question are inscribed, but these inscriptions often consist only of letters in the West Semitic alphabet, and whether the carver spoke Hebrew, Phoenician, or Aramaic often cannot be understood. We cannot, for instance, form a clear picture of Phoenician ivory furniture, although in the remains of the furniture from Salamis on Cyprus, an island heavily settled by Phoenicians, some have seen evidence of the Phoenician style.

#### *Furniture from Salamis, Cyprus*

Tomb 79 in the necropolis at Salamis had held two burials, both dating to the late eighth century BCE. The stone tomb chamber had been robbed, but the *dromos* that led to the chamber had been left nearly intact. It was here that excavations were carried out in 1966, uncovering the remains of one of the richest tombs ever discovered on Cyprus. The finds, including dishes containing food remains, amphorae for offerings, iron firedogs and twelve iron spits (*obols*), remnants of weapons and armor, and hearses and chariots pulled by horses, provide evidence for an elaborate funerary ritual that recalls in many details the grand burial of the hero Patroklos in the *Iliad*.

Among the offerings that had been placed in the *dromos* were several pieces of fine furniture. The wooden frames had disintegrated, but the outlines in the earth could be discerned; fragments of the ivory and metal sheathing and decorations were recovered, allowing a bed, three chairs, and two stools to be identified. A single ivory lion's leg from another piece of furniture, perhaps a table, was preserved as well. The bed and one of the chairs (throne Gamma) were



sheathed in ivory, with details carved in the ornate Egyptianizing style found at Nimrud that has been thought to represent the Phoenician school. Both of these pieces have been reassembled in tentative reconstructions.

Far more unexpected are the two other chairs and the stools, their form and dimensions reconstructed from the deteriorated remains in the soil. One of the chairs (throne Delta) and the stool found next to it were made of wood with ivory decoration. The chair had an arched back and no arms; the stool had four projections that extended from the legs as a continuation of the seat frame, curving up above the level of the tops of the legs. Hypothetical reconstructions of these two pieces have been made, incorporating ivory strips and disks found in the area, arranged along the legs and back of the chair and on the frame of the stool. Throne Alpha (fig. 12) was made of wood, covered with silver plating and decorated with gilded studs. It, too, had completely disintegrated, although stains in the earth allowed it to be reconstructed. The flamboyant design has no known counterparts; the survival of this unique piece can be attributed to the careful excavation of its remains. It must have been furnished with plush cushions, although no trace of these was found. Next to the silver chair was a silver stool, with curved legs that ended at the top in horn-shaped projections, resembling those at the top of Assyrian footstools and some of the north Syrian chair backs from Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud (fig. 11).

#### Wooden Furniture from Gordion, Turkey

The furniture excavated at the Phrygian site of Gordion constitutes one of the most important finds of furniture from the ancient world. Excavations carried out in 1900 by a German team and subsequently by the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania have yielded the remains of more than fifty pieces of carved and inlaid wooden furniture, many in a remarkable state of preservation. Stools, chairs, tables, serving stands, a bed, and a log coffin were excavated from tombs dating to the eighth century BCE, and fragments of furniture were found on the city mound in the destruction level dating to the same period. Wood spoons, plates, bowls, and



Fig. 12. Throne Alpha, found in Tomb 79 at Salamis, Cyprus, late eighth century BCE. The throne was made of wood, plated with silver, and decorated with gilded studs. DEPARTMENT OF ANTIQUITIES, CYPRUS

boxes were preserved as well, evidence of the many wooden objects that were made and used in ancient times but have not generally survived.

Tumulus K-III, excavated in 1900, contained several carved wooden furniture fragments, some of which were inlaid or decorated with bronze studs; the wood deteriorated after its removal from the tomb, however, and the types represented by these fragments cannot now be determined. The finest and most complete pieces of furniture come from Tumulus P, Tumulus MM, and Tumulus W, excavated in 1956, 1957, and 1959, respectively.

Tumulus MM, the largest burial mound in the Gordion necropolis, was called the "Midas Mound" by the excavators, who thought that it might have covered the tomb of Gordion's most powerful ruler, King Midas himself. (See "Midas

of Gordion and the Anatolian Kingdom of Phrygia" in Part 5, Vol. II.) Midas appears in Assyrian records as a contemporary of Sargon II in the late eighth century BCE, and he was known to the Greeks as the first foreigner to dedicate an offering at the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi: he dedicated a piece of furniture, the throne from which he gave judgment. The Tumulus MM burial consisted of a wooden tomb chamber covered by a huge mound of clay. The clay had served to shield the tomb from excessive moisture, helping to preserve the wood of the chamber and the offerings that had been placed inside. The king had been buried in a massive log coffin; with him were found a large number of bronze vessels, fibulae, and belts, and at least

fourteen pieces of wooden furniture, including nine tables, two serving stands, and the remains of what seem to have been two stools and a chair.

The tables were banquet tables, with tray-shaped tops, a type in evidence at Ebla in the third millennium BCE. The legs were attached to the table tops by means of tenons fit into collars carved from the underside of the tops, a method of construction found in the wooden furniture from Jericho (fig. 9, no. 2), perhaps ultimately related to the Horoztepe copper tables from the late third millennium. Eight of the tables from Tumulus MM were undecorated; the ninth was ornate, made of boxwood and inlaid with juniper in intricate geometric patterns, a tour de force of ancient cabinetry (fig. 13). The top of the inlaid

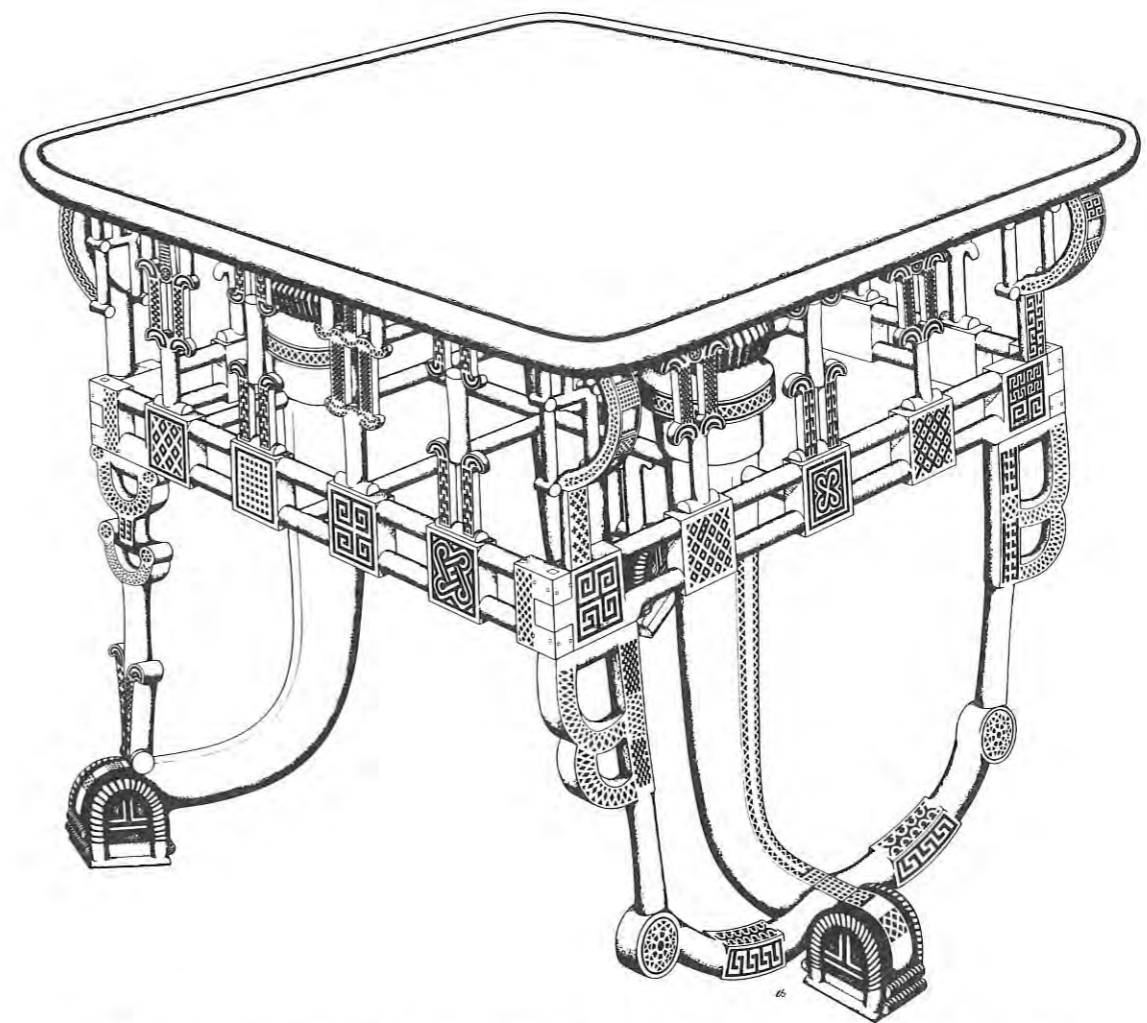


Fig. 13. Phrygian inlaid table, Tumulus MM, Gordion, eighth century BCE. The table, made of boxwood, juniper, and walnut, is here reconstructed in a drawing. MUSEUM OF ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS, ANKARA

table was walnut, supported by four handles and fourteen carved struts that rose from the carved frame, recalling the openwork frame of the table from Ebla. The three legs were stylized renditions of near eastern lion's legs, and from the feet rose three decorative struts that supported the four corners of the frame from below. The inlaid designs on the table included rectilinear and curvilinear motifs, all totally abstract; several of the designs have been identified as mazes, perhaps of mythological or religious significance.

The two serving stands from Tumulus MM had faces made of boxwood, inlaid with juniper in swastikas and other square designs set within a lattice of thousands of tiny diamonds and triangles (fig. 14). Most of the swastikas and squares exhibit a special kind of symmetry, allowing them to be turned and flipped to obscure an underlying pattern. Set into the face of each stand is a rosette supported by lion's legs. The

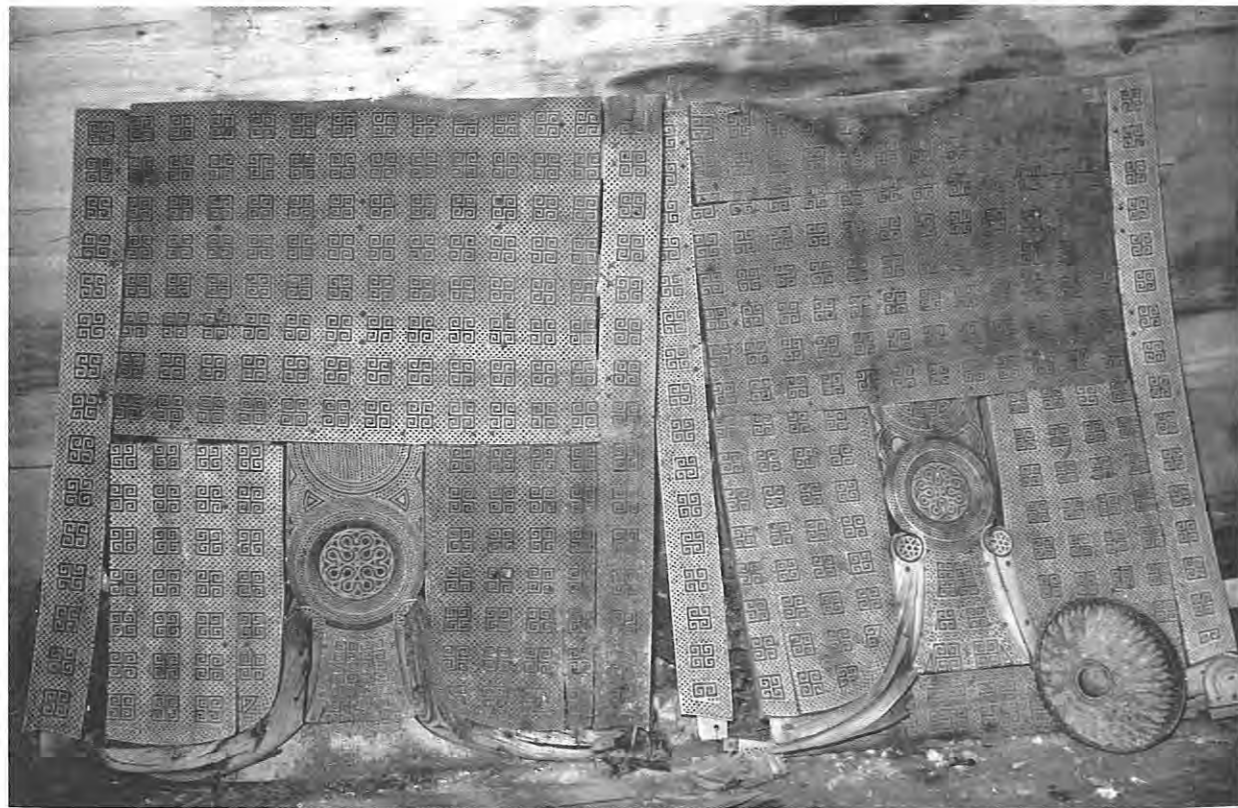


Fig. 14. Phrygian inlaid serving stands in situ in Tumulus MM, Gordion, eighth century BCE. MUSEUM OF ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS, ANKARA

rosette has been identified as a symbol of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, based on the resemblance between the stands and several monumental carved rock facades in western Phrygia where the goddess was worshiped in a niche carved into the face of the monument. Each stand had a top shelf supported by a single back leg (fig. 15). The shelves were carved with three open rings to hold round-bottomed bronze cauldrons, ten of which were found in the tomb. The serving stands, banquet tables, and the many bronze vessels found in the burial seem to be evidence of a funerary banquet held in honor of the king. The inlaid table and two serving stands from Tumulus MM have been reconstructed for display in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara.

Tumulus P, the tomb of a child, contained at least twenty-two pieces of wooden furniture, including a boxwood serving stand carved in openwork and inlaid in geometric patterns with

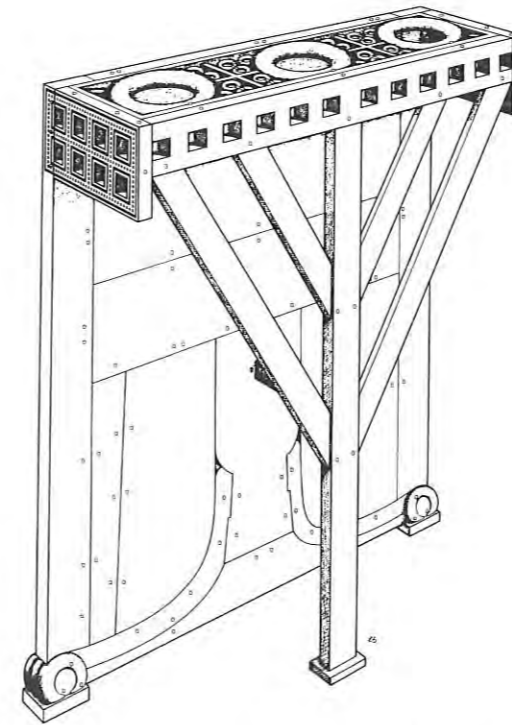


Fig. 15. Reconstruction drawing of the back view of one of the serving stands ("Screen A") from Tumulus MM, Gordion. MUSEUM OF ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS, ANKARA

juniper and yew (fig. 16). As on the Tumulus MM stands, the face of the Tumulus P stand featured a rosette supported by lion's legs. The top shelf incorporated two open rings to hold bronze cauldrons, supported from below by a curved back leg that ended in a stylized lion's-paw foot. Near the stand was found an inlaid stool that had been made from alternating strips of yew and boxwood, inlaid in contrasting woods (fig. 17). The front and back faces were identical in form, although the front face was more intricately inlaid and was decorated with bronze studs. The design of this stool is unprecedented, each face being a two-dimensional representation of a three-legged table like the inlaid table from Tumulus MM (fig. 13).

The finds from Tumulus P included several tables, one of boxwood inlaid with blocks of yew and another of boxwood with a large tray top and fancifully carved legs. A small chair, several stools, and two footstools had been placed in the

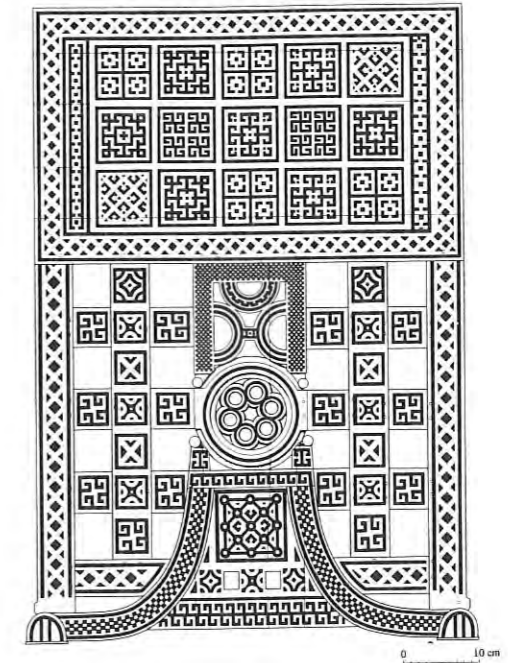


Fig. 16. Reconstruction drawing of the face of a Phrygian inlaid serving stand, Tumulus P, Gordion, eighth century BCE. MUSEUM OF ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS, ANKARA

tomb as well, and the child had been buried on a carved, inlaid bed. Tumulus W had contained a serving stand made of boxwood, the face of which was carved in openwork geometric patterns and decorated with bronze studs. The form

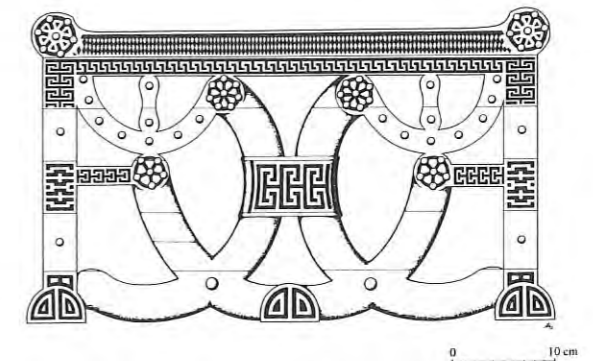


Fig. 17. Reconstruction drawing of the front face of a Phrygian inlaid stool, Tumulus P, Gordion, eighth century BCE. MUSEUM OF ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS, ANKARA

of the stand has been difficult to ascertain because of the fragmentary condition of the piece.

A wood-species analysis of the Gordion furniture has indicated that boxwood, juniper, yew, walnut, maple, poplar, oak, cedar, and pine were among the woods used by Phrygian cabinetmakers. Advanced joinery methods and inlay techniques were known, and the surfaces of all the pieces were finely finished. The design of the furniture from Gordion is unique, both in its form and in its decoration. The lion's legs and carved struts find counterparts in the furniture of other near eastern centers, but even these elements are stylized in the Phrygian manner almost beyond recognition. Religious symbols incorporated prominently into the designs attest to the importance of these pieces and the seriousness with which the woodworker's craft was regarded. The luck of preservation, careful excavation of the site, and a long-term effort to conserve and study the Gordion wood have contributed to the recovery of this collection, adding immeasurably to our knowledge of ancient furniture.

#### *The Assyrian Legacy: Urartian Furniture*

Furniture was highly regarded in Urartu, as elsewhere in the Near East, and special pieces were kept in temples, as is clear from the inventory of valuable furniture taken by Sargon II in his sack of the Temple of Khaldi in the Urartian city of Musasir (714 BCE). Although the style of these pieces cannot be inferred from Sargon's account, furniture attachments found at Urartian sites indicate what this furniture must have looked like. Urartian furniture seems to have resembled the court furniture of Assyria in many of its details; the finely made pieces do not appear derivative, however, exhibiting a stylistic integrity of their own.

While many Urartian sites have been shamelessly plundered, yielding fine bronze furniture fittings without a context, scientific excavations at the sites of Adilcevaz and Altintepe have unearthed the remains of several pieces of furniture found in situ. Chamber Tomb I, Slope H, at Adilcevaz contained the remains of three wooden tables. In two cases, only the legs were found; these ended in bull's hooves, and on one of the tables the hooves stood on molded bases

with leaf capitals. The third table was preserved in its entirety. It had a round wood top with three legs ending in schematized animal feet; the legs had top tenons that fitted into collars extending down from the underside of the tabletop, much like the construction seen at Jericho (fig. 9, no. 2) and at Gordion.

One of the three stone subterranean tombs at Altintepe was discovered with its contents intact. Tomb 3 contained the burials of a man and a woman, dated to the late eighth or seventh century BCE. Many fine offerings had been placed in the tomb, including two stools with silver-plated wooden legs, a wooden couch with bronze fittings, and at least four wooden tables. Although the wood had deteriorated, the form of several pieces could be ascertained from the metal fittings. The silver-plated stools and at least one of the tables had legs that ended in molded bases with leaf capitals, and the stools had stretchers decorated with bronze volutes, recalling the details on Assurnasirpal's throne. Bronze bull's and lion's legs were recovered from tombs 1 and 3, and carved ivory furniture attachments were found in the temple at Altintepe.

The most famous but least understood piece of Urartian furniture is the so-called throne from Toprakkale (Rusakhinili), unearthed piece by piece in the late nineteenth century in illicit digging and in brief excavations subsequently carried out by the British Museum. The remains came from the area of the Temple of Khaldi, as indicated by the inscribed shields with which they were associated; the dedicatory inscriptions on the shields have been dated to the seventh and possibly the eighth centuries BCE. Some of the bronze fittings for the "throne," now thought to belong to more than one piece of furniture, were acquired by the British Museum, through purchase and excavation, with the remainder dispersed to collections in Paris, Berlin, Brussels, St. Petersburg, and New York.

The bronze attachments include small figures of recumbent winged bulls, standing winged griffins and winged sphinxes (fig. 18), deities standing on the backs of animals, recumbent lions with and without wings, and a royal attendant. The faces of most of the figures were inlaid in stone, and much of the bronze shows evidence of gilding. Bronze furniture legs, corner brack-

#### *The Assyrian Legacy: The Furniture of Babylon and Persia*

Few works of Babylonian art have survived from the first millennium BCE, and consequently representations of furniture are scarce. Two pieces are depicted on a stone tablet of the ninth-century Babylonian king Nabu-apla-iddina, which shows the sun-god Shamash seated in his shrine on a magnificent backless throne, the seat supported by vertical legs and two bull-men. The god's emblem, a large sun-disk, is displayed in front of the shrine on a table with tapered legs and molded feet. Evidence for an actual piece of furniture was found at Babylon by Robert Koldewey, who discovered the imprint of an ornate wooden throne imbedded in the top of a statue base in one of the chambers of Esagila, the temple of Marduk. The legs of the throne were supported by figures holding flowing vases, and other figures had been used as supports and decoration. These Babylonian thrones incorporating small figures recall Assyrian thrones, and the connection between the furniture of the two kingdoms is further strengthened by literary evidence.

As recorded in an inventory text, the throne and bed of Marduk and Zarpanit were carried off from Babylon to Assyria by Sennacherib and dedicated to the god Assur. The throne and bed were subsequently rededicated to the original Babylonian gods by Assurbanipal, as is known from a later version of the text. Although the text is fragmentary and the translation problematic, it is clear that the furniture had moldings of gold and was decorated with carnelian and lapis lazuli. At the head of the bed was a dragon; and the legs of both pieces incorporated female genii in conjunction with animal feet and/or cone-shaped elements. Some of the female figures apparently held flowing vases.

Assyrian records contain many more references to Babylonian furniture, which was highly esteemed and coveted by Assyrian monarchs. When Sennacherib looted the contents of the palace of Marduk-apla-iddina II, he not only made off with gold, silver, the king's wife, harem, and entire court, but also beds, chairs, and sedan chairs, as well as all of the artisans of the palace. The capture of the palace artisans suggests that Babylonian-style furniture was



Fig. 18. Urartian bronze furniture attachment in the form of a sphinx, from Toprakkale, circa seventh century BCE. HERMITAGE MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG

ets, and part of a chair arm also belong to the group, as well as many finely carved ivory figures. The furniture legs are of two types, one with moldings and bands of hanging leaves, and a second in the form of lion's legs with flat front faces; both of these leg types find counterparts in Assyrian furniture. The small bronze figures recall the supporting genii on Assyrian thrones, such as the magnificent throne on which Sennacherib sits to view the booty from Lachish.

A satisfactory reconstruction of the Toprakkale furniture fittings has never been made. The idea that they came from a throne originated in the late nineteenth century, and a letter written in 1884 documenting the find describes the throne as monumental, covered with cuneiform inscriptions and gilding, and decorated with a great number of figures. A reconstruction of this fabulous throne may now be impossible because, as the letter states, the local inhabitants shattered many of the figures from the original find, employing the bronze to make shovels, plowshares, and other more useful objects.

made and used in Assyria, and one wonders whether the furniture of these two nations differed markedly and in which respects.

Babylonian furniture was still worth noting in the fifth century BCE. The Greek historian Herodotus described the contents of the lower shrine at Babylon, apparently Esagila, in which a gold image of Zeus (Marduk) was set up, seated upon a gold throne and with a gold table nearby (1.183). In the shrine on top of the ziggurat, no image was present, but only a great, richly covered couch and a gold table; the Babylonians said, but Herodotus did not believe them, that the god visited the shrine and rested on the couch (1.181–182).

The Achaemenid Persians emulated the furniture of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, developing a style in conscious imitation of their predecessors and using it for their own political ends in the propagandistic depictions of monumental furniture on the reliefs of Persepolis. (Refer to "Art and Archaeology of the Achaemenid Empire" in Part 10, Vol. IV, for examples of works discussed here.) Huge stools serve as platforms on which the Persian monarchs sit enthroned, protected by embroidered baldachins that rise on posts from the edges of the seats. The beautifully carved legs of these stools end in lion's-paw feet with flat front faces, supported on bases with moldings and hanging leaf capitals, recalling the same combination on Assyrian furniture. The upper parts of the legs have turned moldings, however, which were not a regular Assyrian feature; also non-Assyrian are the lion's-paw feet on Persian stools and thrones (these were limited to tables and footstools in Assyria). The small figures that had supported the seats and armrests of Assyrian thrones appear on the monumental Persian stools as figures of subject peoples of the realm. The same kind of stool appears on the facade reliefs of the royal tombs at Naqsh-e Rostam.

Depictions of the actual thrones of the Persian rulers show the same elegant style of furniture, without the supporting figures (fig. 19). The stretchers that connect the legs appear to be turned, and the backs and seats are opulently upholstered. Persian royal furniture was made of precious materials and was undoubtedly among the most lavish of all ancient furniture; the Persian taste for luxury amazed the Greeks, as indi-

cated in Herodotus' well-known account of the gold and silver couches, tables, and other magnificent banquet furnishings found in the abandoned tents of the Persians after the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE (9.80–82).

#### *The Frozen Tombs of Pazyryk, Siberia*

One of the greatest of all archaeological discoveries was the group of tombs found in the Pazyryk Valley of the Altai Mountains, the contents of the chambers frozen soon after the time of burial. Barrow 1 was excavated in 1929, followed by the excavation of barrows 2–8 in 1947–1949 by the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Hermitage Museum. The grave goods, including leather, fur, clothing of all types, rugs, tapestries, wooden objects and furniture, and fully outfitted horses, were almost perfectly preserved and are now in the Hermitage Museum (a carpet from the Pazyryk Valley is illustrated in "Textile Arts in Ancient Western Asia" earlier in this volume). Imported objects and motifs tie the Altai burials to the neighboring civilizations of Persia and China; most of the finds, however, exhibit a strong, indigenous style related to the "animal style" associated with Scythian and other nomadic tribes that lived north and east of the Black Sea. The furniture found in the Pazyryk tombs constitutes one of the most important collections of well-preserved ancient wooden furniture; although found far to the east, it demonstrates continuity in ancient near eastern woodworking traditions.

The rich burials of barrows 1–5, now dated to the late fourth–third centuries BCE, contained the remains of at least twelve small wooden tables and five solid wooden objects identified as pillows or stools. Each table had four legs and a tray-shaped top. In most cases, the legs were secured to the tabletops by means of the collar-and-tenon joinery used at Jericho (fig. 9, no. 2), Gordion, and Adilcevaz in Urartu. The legs were not pinned in the collars and seem to have been detachable for easy transport. This suggests that the collar-and-tenon system may have been developed originally for nomads' tables, although paradoxically the only such examples that have survived, the Pazyryk tables, are the latest in the series.

The legs of the tables were either carved in



Fig. 19. Relief showing an enthroned king identified as Darius, from the Treasury, Persepolis, circa late sixth to early fifth centuries BCE. ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, TEHRAN

fine decorative moldings or were plain, with the exception of two tables that had legs in the form of standing tigers (fig. 20), a variation on the ancient near eastern lion's leg. Four of the tables, including the two with tiger legs, had tops colored red with cinnabar, and two more tables were entirely colored bright red, an ancient tradition perhaps reflected in the red painted furniture of Central Asian Turkoman tribes still made today.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN FURNITURE

A history of furniture in the ancient Near East is dependent on depictions of furniture in other media, references in ancient texts, and the rare surviving examples of actual furniture, these sources providing evidence only for furniture



Fig. 20. Wood table from Barrow 2, Pazyryk, Siberia, dating to the fourth century BCE and now in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. SERGEI RUDENKO, *FROZEN TOMBS OF SIBERIA: THE BURIALS OF IRON-AGE HORSEMEN* (1970)

used by the wealthy and powerful: heads of state, the nobility, priests, and even deities. The furniture of ordinary households must have been much simpler and perhaps even scarce. Those who could not afford such costly items or were not accustomed to their use would have done without them, sleeping and sitting on the floor, on platforms or on benches, making use of mats, mattresses, rugs, and cushions, as in the Neolithic settlement of Çatal Hüyük and much of the Near and Middle East today. Evidence for the history of furniture in the ancient Near East is thus selective, and it is this selective evidence that serves to underline the value and importance of the fine furniture made and used by the ancient peoples of western Asia.

Ancient texts refer to thrones, footstools, tables, and beds belonging to gods, covered with precious metals and inlaid with gems; and furniture was regularly kept in temples. Heads of state possessed royal thrones from which they officiated and pronounced judgment, the thrones themselves symbolizing the monarchs' power. These royal thrones could be set up in temples and sanctuaries, as was the throne of King Midas, which was sent as a dedication to Delphi. Conquered peoples suffered the loss of their furniture from temples and palaces, and the furniture of deities could be appropriated by the conquerors, in some cases usurped as dedications for their own gods. Gifts of valuable furniture were exchanged by monarchs and received as tribute; and rulers amassed huge collections of furniture, seemingly more than they could ever use, which were then laid away in palace storerooms. Finally, royalty and members of the nobility went to their graves accompanied by suites of fine furniture, evidenced by the rare and precious finds recovered from excavated tombs.

The esteem in which furniture was held in the ancient Near East would thus seem greater than we in the twentieth century might be able to imagine, with our modern concepts of fine and decorative arts, with furniture consigned to the latter. From the ancient perspective, as the evidence overwhelmingly indicates, fine furniture was among the most valuable of possessions, the prerogative of wealth and status, an attribute of royalty and divinity and, as such, one of the most important classes of objects from the ancient near eastern world.

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