**The Ivory Throne of the Levantines**

**Project Proposal by Liat Naeh**

In ancient Near Eastern and Levantine traditions, thrones were material objects that connected the realms of the divine with monarchy on earth. Rather than being a symbolic trope, in the Levant, the act of sitting on a throne was considered performative, transforming gods and mortals into *de facto* kings. Being at the focal point of the royal audience, thrones were platforms for visual messages conveyed by the ruler – divine and human – to gods, court, subjects, and foreign visitors. So far, archaeologists have discovered ample evidence for Levantine-styled ivory thrones from the 1st millennium BCE, chiefly from the Assyrian capital of Nimrud, ancient Kalhu. These ivory thrones clearly evoked earlier, 2nd millennium BCE thrones, known from various *depictions* on Levantine ivory inlays and objects, and indicated a continuity in Levantine royal identity and practice, while also pointing to the significance of ivory both in the construction of Levantine thrones and as a platform for depicting them. Yet, to date, there has been no material evidence for the existence of full-sized thrones from the Bronze Age Levant – let alone ivory ones – leaving a wide gap in our understanding of local royal and cult practices. Now, for the first time, I am able to remedy this lacuna by identifying new fragments of ivory thrones from the Bronze Age Levant, from both published and unpublished contexts at the sites of Jaffa, Jericho, and Hazor.

The purpose of this project is, therefore, threefold: First, to publish what I believe to be the missing link—namely, ivory thrones from southern Levantine sites; second, to reconstruct and contextualize these new thrones by situating them within the spectrum of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian ivory thrones in the encyclopedic collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), which exemplify both similarities and differences in the production and consumption of ivory thrones across the area; and third, to explore the ivory throne not only as an international tradition, but also as an embodiment of Levantine concepts and ideology.

To achieve these objectives, I will employ a comparative, art historical, and archaeological approach, while also consulting relevant contemporaneous texts. In my reconstruction of the new Levantine ivory thrones, I will refer to artifacts from the Met’s collections as much needed models to inform the restoration of the new Levantine examples, as the latter were oftentimes discovered and excavated in an extremely fragmentary state. Moreover, the Met’s rich collections offer an invaluable opportunity to study ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian ivory thrones together, facilitating both a synchronic and diachronic vantage point that illuminates the new Levantine ivory thrones in their broader setting, their construction techniques, imagery, and contexts, as well as their evolvement from the 2nd to the 1st millennium BCE. I will focus on:

1. The Pratt ivories, a group of Bronze Age items of Anatolian origin which were recently reconstructed by Elizabeth Simpson as a sphinx throne with lion legs.
2. Ancient Egyptian chairs and thrones, most prominently ivory-inlaid chairs from New Kingdom Thebes, including the chair of Reniseneb, and the arm panel of the ceremonial chair of Thutmose IV – some also share the common iconography of a sphinx and lion legs. With their unparalleled preservation of wood infrastructure, these specimens serve as rare models for the reconstruction of the new Levantine thrones. They also provide complex context for the daily and ritualistic use of furniture, and showcase the enigmatic custom of depicting miniature enthronement scenes on top of full-sized ones – a custom that I suggest became significant in Levantine ivory examples, evoking a range or ritualistic interpretations.
3. Levantine-style ivory inlays and complete throne backs from 1st millennium BCE Nimrud, believed to represent the trappings of Levantine kings. These thrones are key for characterizing of the ivory throne as inherently meaningful to the Levantines; some also depict miniature thrones, exemplifying how deeply rooted this localized tradition became.

Through this comparative lens, the research will address such issues as the definition of a throne, and the use of thrones by royals and elites in receptions and in funerary rites, as well as by statues of gods. While analyzing the international exchange of thrones and the ways in which similar throne imagery may have been accepted differently in each cultural context, special emphasis will be given to the salient symbols of the sphinx and lion legs. These, while often featured on ivory thrones of many cultures, were associated with alternative meanings in Anatolia, Egypt, and the Levant. For instance, in the Anatolian Pratt ivories, the sphinx is positioned under the lion, thus representing a mythical hierarchy utterly different than the Egyptian and Levantine ones, where the sphinx is positioned above it; in addition, in ancient Egyptian contexts, the sphinx was an embodiment of the king, while in the Levant, the sphinx was often featured protecting goddesses.

Hence, this research will offer a nuanced portrayal of the semiotic nexus between ivory as raw material, and throne imagery – arguing that the symbolism of the ivory as an enlivened, powerful substance, combined with the throne’s anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and hybrid features – were instrumental in establishing the Levantine throne as a live placeholder for its king. In the process, the enigmatic depiction of miniature enthronement scenes in ivory become better elucidated, as it is suggested that these miniatures signified their owner’s enthronement even when absent, and were executed in ivory to mimic the life potency of the full-sized throne. This, in turn, strengthens the notion that miniature depictions of enthronement known from several Levantine ivory panels may have also once originated from thrones.

The project will result in a book manuscript, to be finalized during 2019; the topics covered in the individual chapters are detailed in the attached timetable. I intend to write three chapters during the fellowship period. The study presents answers to issues raised in my previous works, including my paper on Iron Age ivory art in the southern Levant and its Bronze Age legacy (Naeh 2015, recipient of the Dever Prize), and my co-edited volume on thrones from ancient Near Eastern till Islamic cultures (in preparation, forthcoming 2019). The project will not only illuminate Levantine notions of mythical kingship, but will also provide a powerful insight into the idiosyncratic ways in which globally-exchanged objects may have been perceived differently on a local level. It is therefore my hope that this application will be considered for the Bard Graduate Center Research Fellowship of 2018-19.

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**Timetable Accompanying Project Proposal by Liat Naeh**

[Preparational work]

*July - August 2018* Obtaining full documentation of new throne assemblage from Hazor, Jericho, and Jaffa, including written descriptions, photographs, and illustrations, prior to travelling to the Bard Graduate Center; these will be consulted throughout the period of the fellowship.

Writing chapter one: ‘*The Levantine Throne as a Performative Object of Kingship*’.

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[At Bard Graduate Center]

*September 2018* Writing chapter two: ‘*The Jericho Throne and Funerary Rituals in the Levant*’, addressing issues of thrones’ use in funerary rituals and tombs inventory; comparison to ancient Egyptian New Kingdom chairs from Theban tombs at the Met.

*November 2018* Writing chapter three: ‘*The Jaffa Throne and the Question of Local Ideology*’, addressing issues of international, and especially Egyptian colonial influence over the design of thrones, and the shaping of local royal imagery; comparison to the Pratt ivories and Egyptian thrones at the Met, portraying the changed perception of the symbols of the sphinx and the lion in varied locales; and comparing to Assyrian thrones at the Met, discussing continuation of Levantine traditions from 2nd to 1st millennium BCE.

*December 2018* Writing chapter four: ‘*The Hazor Throne and the Live Ivory*’, addressing issues of the ivory throne as an animated, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic object, and the use of hybrid and animal iconography; discussing the sphinx and lion imagery of the Pratt ivories at the Met; the ways in which ivory thrones in both the Levant and Egypt were adorned by miniature images of themselves, especially ones executed in ivory, while also drawing on examples from Egyptian and Assyrian thrones at the Met.