Nimrud, ancient Kalhu (Calah of the Bible) was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), and is located in northern Iraq. Fort Shalmaneser was established during the reign of his son, Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), and was restored by Esarhaddon (680–669 BC), who resided at the site during his reign. The site was abandoned after it was destroyed twice – in 614 BC and then again in 612 BC by invading Babylonians from the south and the Medes from the east.

Excavations of Fort Shalmaneser, initiated during 1957 under the direction of Max Mallowan and the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, continued until 1963. It took archaeologists almost four years to clear the building, which consisted of two hundred rooms around four major courtyards. In the process, they uncovered thousands of ivory fragments. Room SW37, where the three carvings in the University of Melbourne Collection were found, contained close to 1,800 pieces, painstakingly removed from almost two metres of sun-baked broken mud brick debris.

The ivory carvings were originally decorative elements of wooden furniture, boxes and statues, collected as booty and tribute by the Assyrians while on military campaigns in the west, in Syria, Palestine and Phoenicia (modern day Lebanon). The items were kept within the storerooms of Fort Shalmaneser, where it is thought they were looted during the sack of Nimrud in 614 BC.

Subsequent damage inflicted by those looking for treasure during the destruction of the city in 612 BC resulted in the chaotic and confused interior of the room. Many of the carvings were originally covered with gold leaf, most of which was removed during looting of the storerooms. Other pieces were decorated using inlays of glass, stone and coloured paste. Manufacture of the pieces involved the use of a range of tools and techniques. Saws were used to cut the rough shape of the piece and chisels, drills, gouges and knives were employed to complete the fine and intricate details. The ivory was affixed to its wooden support in a variety of ways: the most common method employed an adhesive such as bitumen, fish glue, animal glue or gesso. As an alternative to adhesives, the carvings were also affixed using tenons, mitres, dowels and keyhole slots.

The style and motifs of the three ivories in the University of Melbourne Classics and Archaeology Collection belong to the Southern, or Phoenician Tradition, which is characterised by its use of Egyptian imagery. The lotus flower, seen alone on one of the ivories and being grasped by the human figure in another, is a typically Egyptian element frequently used by Phoenician craftsmen.

The figure of a cow – usually accompanied by a calf, which is missing from the example in the University Collection – relates to the Egyptian myth of Isis and her son Horus, who were equated in Phoenician religion with Astarte and her son Melqart.
In 1930 during her second visit to the site of Ur, located in southern Iraq, the popular crime writer Agatha Christie met a young archaeologist called Max Mallowan. Max, assistant to the famous archaeologist Leonard Woolley, was charged with entertaining Agatha while she was at the site. Agatha, being the shy and unassuming person she was, thought the 25 year old had better things to do with his time:

…everybody seemed to agree it was perfectly natural that a young man who had worked hard on an arduous dig ... should sacrifice himself and drive off into the blue to show a strange woman a good many years older than him ... the sights of the country.6

Nevertheless, he and Agatha spent four days driving around the countryside, and it was after spending time in her company and seeing how well she coped with life in the Middle East, that Max decided that Agatha would make an excellent wife for an archaeologist. After some time, and with much persuasion from Max, he and Agatha were married in 1930 and from then on, Agatha accompanied Max on every excavation he undertook and was a valuable team member. She was involved with the cleaning, conservation and registration of objects, acted as site photographer and ran an ever-increasing household, all the while maintaining her tradition of producing at least one book a year.

During the 1930s, the Mallowans spent three more seasons excavating in northern Iraq at Nineveh and Arpachiyah, before moving into northern Syria and to the sites of Chagar Bazar and Tell Brak. Agatha’s book, Come, Tell Me How You Live, was based on her experiences at both these sites and provides us with a window into what her archaeological life was like. This book is an answer. It is the answer to a question that is asked me very often. “So you dig in Syria, do you? Do tell me all about it. How do you live?”7

After the Second World War Max re-opened excavations at the site of Nimrud. Once again, Agatha accompanied him and was there in 1957, during Max’s final season as director, when excavations began on Fort Shalmaneser. Work at the site had already uncovered hundreds of ivory carvings from the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal, some of the most beautiful pieces coming from a well in Room NN. However, the greatest amount came from Fort Shalmaneser, greatly delighting Agatha whose task it was to clean and care for the objects:

I had my part in cleaning many of them. I had my own favourite tools … an orange stick, possibly a very fine knitting needle … and a jar of cosmetic face-cream, which I found more useful than anything else for gently coaxing the dirt out of the crevices without harming the friable ivory. In fact there was such a run on my face-cream that there was nothing left for my poor old face after a couple of weeks!8

The final word on her life with Max and her intimate involvement with archaeology should come from Agatha herself: ‘I am thinking, I say to Max, that it was a very happy way to live …’9

Suggested reading:

Christine Elias The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002

1 The Illustrated London News, 30 November 1937, p. 934.
3 Herrmann, p. 56.
4 Herrmann, p. 56.
5 Herrmann, p. 50.
8 Christie, p. 472.
9 Christie Mallowan, p. 204.