

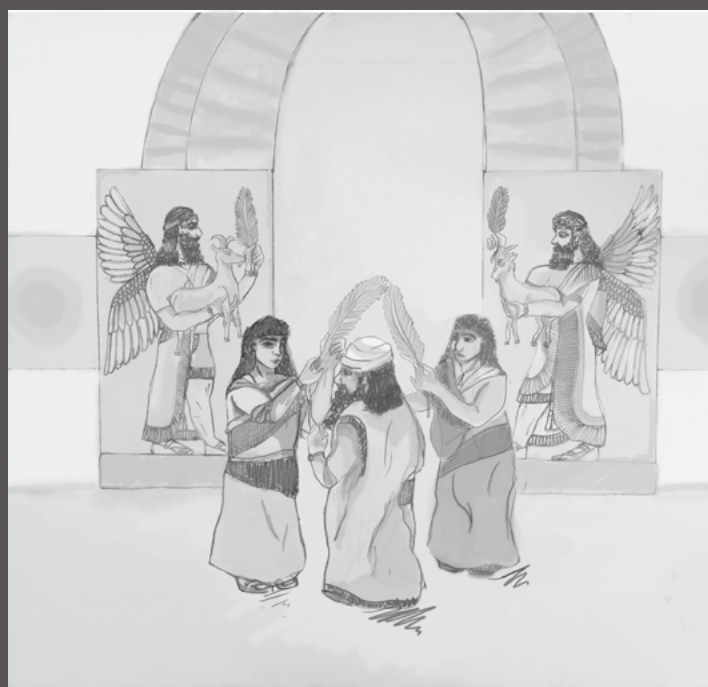
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The Genies of the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II

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Abstract The doors and gates of the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Kalhu were highly guarded by a great variety of protective figures, known as genies. Their protective role derives not only from their simple presence, but also from apotropaic objects they hold: ritual buckets, pinecone-shaped objects, maces, various species of plants, deer, goats, kids, and lambs. From the presence of these assorted attributes, one may deduce that doorways provided not only the settings for ritual activities, but were themselves recipients of and/or participated in actual rituals. On this premise, the article analyses the protective figures and their attributes in the light of textual references in Mesopotamian incantations, rituals and medical prescriptions in order to re-create apotropaic rituals performed at doorways in the palace. Additionally, a link between ritual activity and internal movement will be proposed, thereby assigning specific doors to individual groups of people circulating within the palace. The analysis concludes that rituals and protective figures cooperated to protect the palace and were meant as strategies to cope with collective fear.

The door, as an architectural feature that controls the admittance and rejection to an entrance, is born with ritual significance. Quoting Van Gennep (1960: 20), ‘The door is the boundary between the foreign and the domestic worlds in the case of the ordinary dwelling, between the profane and the sacred worlds in the case of the temple’. Therefore, the act of crossing thresholds and passing doors symbolises the transition from one part of the cosmos to another, from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’, from the ‘seen’ to the ‘unseen’. Through the symbolic act of passing through, one may experience transitions between states, and be ritually transformed from one ‘state’ to another.¹

The symbolism of doors and entrances was obviously experienced by the ancient Mesopotamians, where accesses were conceived as much more than architectural features that simply facilitated entry and exit to a room or place—they were endowed with great ritual significance and exercised essential control over people to be admitted, or rejected.² They were, in fact, full of magic and symbolism, with potentialities either for good or for evil. They were able to make all the difference between the prosperity or ruin of the building, temple, palace or city as the case might be.³ The implication is that protection was felt to be necessary, and the functions of doors went beyond

¹ Turner (1967: 93–94) defines ‘state’ as a ‘relatively fixed or stable condition’ which includes any ‘social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank of degree’, and designates it also as ‘the physical, mental or emotional condition in which a person or group may be found at a particular time’.

² Particularly with respect to the relation between ritual and myth and the function and meaning of gates/doors in early Sumerian literary and administrative texts, see Ragavan 2013.

³ Curtis and Tallis 2008: 1.

the prosaic level of a ‘spatial passage’ and became a ‘spiritual passage’ at a higher conceptual level.⁴

These concepts were vividly expressed in the late Assyrian palaces, where architectural doors protected connections between spaces.⁵ However, in addition to the protection offered by heavy doors and locks, the Assyrians relied on supernatural support in order to secure their entrances. Focusing on the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Kalhu, the aim of this contribution is to analyse the objects the protective figures hold in the light of textual references in Mesopotamian incantations, rituals, and medical prescriptions and to establish a link between ritual activity and internal movement.

Genies: a brief description

In late Assyrian palaces, all major entrances were furnished with sculptures of protective deities or entities. These creatures were largely used to cope with and prevent fear and anxiety from evil demons or other dangers lurking in doorways or sneaking into buildings. Most of these figures were hybrid creatures that combined human and animal body parts (*Mischwesen*), and in the palace of Assurnasirpal II we can distinguish two general categories: colossi, namely *Mischwesen* combining the body of a lion or bull with wings and a human head and, especially, humanoid types, which are anthropomorphic figures often described as genies.⁶ A correlation between the textually-attested *Mischwesen* with those known from iconography remains elusive at the moment, although royal inscriptions and other texts occasionally describe some of these protective figures.

Focusing on the second category of doorway guardians in the palace, that is to say the genies, several were identified through textual sources and associated with the antediluvian *apkallū* sages, and distinguished in human- and bird-*apkallū*.⁷ These

⁴ A number of scholars has treated the question of the cosmic significance, metaphysics and semiotics of the gate space as a liminal area. In detail, for a study of the gates of some Assyrian cities, which bore names of gods, see Pongratz-Leisten 1994: 13-36 and Battini 1996; 1998. For a comparative cross-cultural analysis of the gate space functions in Mesopotamia and the Levant based on textual, visual and archaeological evidence, see May 2014. For an in-depth analysis of the artistic form and cultural value of Neo-Assyrian architectural doors using the three bronze-banded wooden doors from Balawat as a case study, see the PhD dissertation of Jia 2014. For an investigation on the relationships between doorways and the use of protective *formulae* in the monuments of Assurnasirpal II, see Portuese 2017. Finally, for a recent examination on the door and its various symbolisms, see Verderame 2017.

⁵ For an examination of doors in the late Assyrian palaces see Curtis and Tallis 2008: 4-6, focused on the Balawat Gates of Assurnasirpal II, and of Radner 2010 on the means, both material and human, employed in the Assyrian palaces to control access.

⁶ Sonik 2013.

⁷ Some figures and their role have been identified through clay and metal statuettes of protective spirits, sometimes supplied with short inscriptions, which were buried underneath the thresholds in various buildings. Although the iconographic parallels are not always exact, some of the figurines resemble types of orthostat genies exposed in the Assyrian palaces, and scholars have suggested various names found in ritual texts describing the figurines. These statuettes, together with the execution of the

figures are differentiated in several ways and, although a small group can be identified as female, the majority are male. A further notable distinction is between those wearing the horned crown of divinity, or a headband decorated with rosettes, and with the head of a bird. Occasionally the figure with the horned crown is depicted with four wings, instead of the usual two, and in only few instances, there are wingless genies.⁸

While these physical features could suggest that they represent different entities, and their functions within the palace depended on this distinction accordingly,⁹ other aspects may have played an important role. The figures are actually more commonly distinguished according to the objects they carry. In addition to their physical features, genies often perform specific gestures, such as raising the right hand in a greeting gesture, and hold a variety of objects: goat, tufted rosettes, bucket and pinecone-shaped objects, alternating tufted rosettes and pinecone-shaped objects, mace, stag, palmettes, palm frond, kid/lamb, pomegranates, rosettes.¹⁰ Throughout the palace, the figures appear to have been distributed in a spatially significant way, and the precise meaning of this distribution seems depending on the importance of their objects and posture, but also on the function of the room.¹¹ In fact, actual Mesopotamian rituals and incantations sometimes allude to the objects the figures hold as used to protect entrances or buildings and persons.

Genies were, without question, designed to exclude or expel malign influences, sickness or misfortune. However, enlightened by previous Mesopotamian examples,¹² I feel that they may have been also the beneficiary of the apotropaic rituals taking place around them rather than only a source of protection in themselves.¹³ Though some of the texts

appropriate rituals, were believed to offer protection and to exclude or expel malign influences, sickness or misfortune. For the identification of apotropaic figures known from large-scale wall reliefs and buried figurines, see Reade 1979: 35-43; Kolbe 1981; Parker Mallowan 1983: 33; Green 1983: 87-96; Wiggermann 1992; Russell 1998: 674-682; Nakamura 2004; Kertai 2015a.

⁸ Russell (1998: 674, 677-682) suspects that four-winged figures may have been considered particularly powerful and were favoured for cult areas.

⁹ As pointed out by Battini 2013: 42-43, protective figures alternate in order to avoid repetition of the same motif (especially in the Throne Room B) and much of their distinction depended on architectural specificities.

¹⁰ In the light of their objects, Kolbe (1981) identified and separated all these humanoid types into six categories: bucket and cone (Type II); an animal (Type III), a flower (Type IV), a mace (Type V), or a bucket (Type VI). Type I is represented by colossi (*lamassu* or *šēdu*).

¹¹ Battini 2013.

¹² Already around the time of the late third millennium BCE, literary and administrative texts show that doors and entrances could be the recipients of offerings and the focus of ritual activities. See, for instance, the literary account of the funerary of Ur-Nammu, whose arrival at the netherworld is featured in the text by his presentation of gifts to the seven gatekeepers (Ragavan 2013: 204 fn. 17). In some texts, gates and gateway guardians occur as recipients of sacrificial animals, as in Shu-Sin's funerary rites, where also protective spirits at gates received their offerings (MVN 13 12 0. See also Sigrist 1992: 176; Katz 2007: 175; Ragavan 2013: 212 fn. 68).

¹³ Reade (1979: 43) wittily notes that also the so-called stylised tree frequently attested in the Neo-Assyrian palaces was presumably 'a beneficiary of the apotropaic and other rituals going on around it rather than a source of protection in itself'.

mentioned were written well after the construction of Assurnasirpal II's palace, they describe rituals that apparently refer to objects that are found in this palace, and it seems reasonable to suppose that such rites served the same function earlier. Therefore, this article relies on a polyphonic reading of textual sources to reconstruct rituals that took place at doorways—on genies, building and persons—when the palace was in use. This analysis is merely hypothetical and, for a twofold reason, the reconstructions proposed cannot be taken as indisputable conclusions. Firstly, the heterogeneity of written sources I use may be deceptive, since they do not always refer to actual rituals performed in a building. Secondly, there is no explicit or concrete evidence, especially archaeological, that demonstrates the performance of rituals, or points out when and how often these took place. Thus, beyond the symbolic significances lying behind each object, the written sources here analysed have been selected and used because 1) they highlight the apotropaic character of some of the objects present on the protective colossal figures, 2) they can help us envisaging their involvement in actual rituals taking place at doorways in the palace to protect the palace.

Goat

Let us begin with the goat, an uncommon object that was identified with the *mašhultuppû*, 'scapegoat' or 'goat hitting evil', and found as attribute of both human-*apkallû* and lion colossi (Figures 1a-b).¹⁴ It is largely attested in apotropaic rituals to avert evil, performing the role of 'protection' and 'atonement'.¹⁵ In the *bīt rimki* ritual we read: 'by means of a *mašhultuppû* you purify the palace'¹⁶ and in the *bīt mēseri* ritual it is stated: 'To avert evil I set up a scapegoat opposite the gate'.¹⁷ In the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations, a sentence clearly shows the direct connection between colossi and *mašhultuppû*: '[...] may the protective spirit (^d*lamma*) of health approach (the victim) with a healthy goat, may (the patient) be wiped clean like copper [...]. Make the healthy goat into a 'scapegoat' [...]. Sacrifice the healthy goat as a scapegoat, recite an incantation (over) the scapegoat's hide [...]. Bind the sash of the scapegoat on his head'.¹⁸

¹⁴ Parker Mallowan (1983: 37-38) was the first scholar to posit the identification of the *mašhultuppû* with the animal held by the genies. See also Wiggermann 1992: 77 and Portuese 2019: 72-73

¹⁵ CAD M, *mašhultuppû*: 365-366.

¹⁶ CAD M, *mašhultuppû*: 366. The *bīt rimki* ('House of Ablution' or 'Bath-house') ritual is a series of texts that deals with ritual ablution. Although a true *bīt rimki* should be outdoors away from the city, so that any demons washed away will be unable to find refuge indoors in the palace, the texts also describe ablutions that take place in the palace (Russell 1998: 697). This ritual is attested on tablets from Babylonia and Assyria of first millennium BCE, but which certainly belongs to an older tradition reaching back into the second or even third millennium. In addition, the ritual is often alluded to in letters from scholars and officials to the kings of the Neo-Assyrian empire from the 8th and 7th centuries BCE (Ambos 2013: 39).

¹⁷ The *bīt mēseri* ritual was performed for encircling a house with protective magical figurines. Meier 1941-1944: 150 lines 213-214; see also Cavigneaux 1995: 60; Parker Mallowan 1983: 37.

¹⁸ Geller 2016: 3, 413-417, lines 72-73, 77, 80-81, 98. This is tablet 12, which is included in the canonical series which was known to Assyrian and Babylonian scholars in first millennium BCE. The *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations represent an extensive collection of incantations to ward off or counteract the effects of evil demons, especially those causing ill-health.

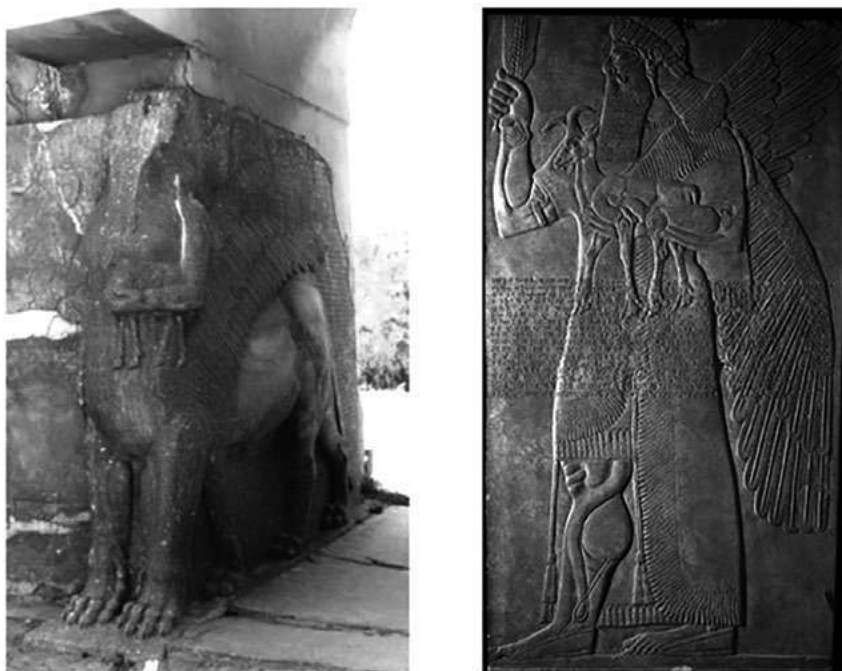


Figure 1a. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): to the left, lion colossus holding goat, from the Throne Room (B), door d (B-d-1) (Russell 1999: fig. 85a); to the right, winged genie holding goat and palm frond, from corridor Z, door a (Z-a-1) (Budge 1914: pl. 27)



Figure 1b. Reconstruction of the ritual for people (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

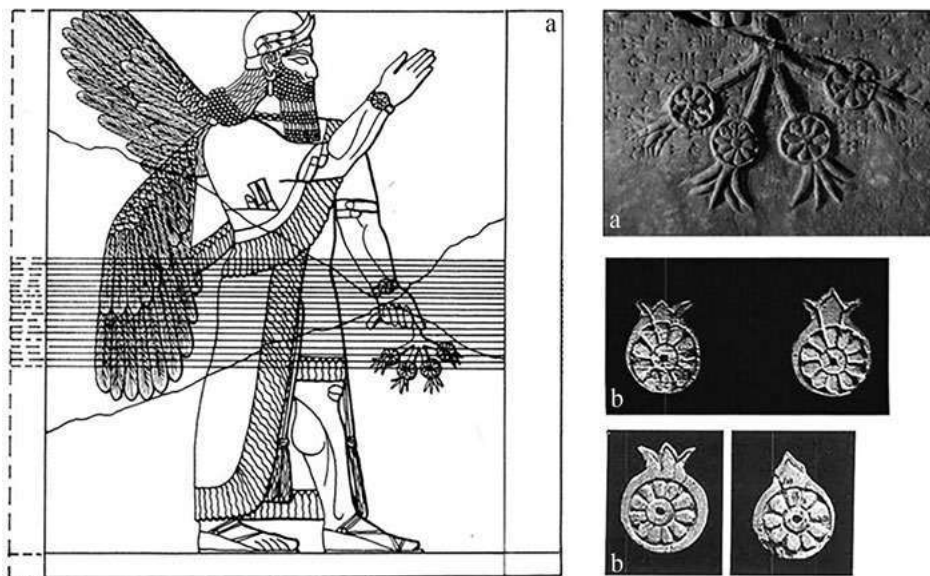


Figure 2. a) Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding tufted rosettes, from room S, door b (S-b-2) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>); b) silhouette elements or pieces of inlay, shaped like pomegranates and containing rosettes (Hermann 1992: 57, pls. 6/51, 7/52)

Tufted rosettes

A less clear item is the debated stalk of tufted rosettes, which at the moment is still difficult to identify (Figure 2a).¹⁹ However, relying on Peter Bartl's observations, I believe that such a plant/flower is not real but rather represents a combination of a flower shaped like pomegranates containing rosettes.²⁰ Similar examples were indeed found in some ivories coming from Kalhu (Figure 2b).²¹ Therefore, I propose two readings: 1) its presence might be purely symbolic being also not shown as ready for use, or 2) it might represent various plants used in actual rituals to purify and repel evil, thereby a 'hybrid' plant which combines the medical and apotropaic features of distinct plants.

Bucket and pinecone-shaped object

Bucket and pinecone-shaped object represent the most common combination of objects (Figures 3a-c). They were identified from texts with the *banduddû* (ritual bucket)

¹⁹ The only textual reference to a flower that can be used to interpret the plant in the hands of apotropaic figures is found in texts of Sennacherib, which describe palace doorways guardian figures holding the *illuru* flower (Russell 1998: 675, 677). The translation proposed for this flower is 'poppy': e.g. 'At their gates, I stationed apotropaic figures of alabaster (and) elephant ivory, whose *folded* hands hold *poppies*' (RINAP 3/1 17: lines vi 32-vi 33). This rendering would fit the Akkadian dictionary description, which outlines the *illuru* flower as a plant with characteristic red flower and berry (CAD I, *illuru*: 87-88). The tufted rosettes, however, does not remind the silhouette of the poppy.

²⁰ Bartl's observations concern the incised decoration on figures' garments depicted on the reliefs of the Northwest Palace of Kalhu (Bartl 2014: 32-33).

²¹ The ivories are described as silhouette elements shaped like pomegranates and containing rosettes.



Figure 3a. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding cone and bucket, from room G, door d (G-d-2) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>)



Figure 3b. Reconstruction of the ritual for entrance/building (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)



Figure 3c. Reconstruction of the ritual for people (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

and *mullilu* (purification instrument or cleaner).²² The action performed by genies was most likely that of sprinkling by dipping the purifier in the bucket, and then flipped

²² Parker Mallowan 1983: 33.



Figure 4a. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding a stalk of alternating tufted rosettes and cones, from the Throne Room (B), door b (B-16) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>)



Figure 4b. Reconstruction of the ritual for persons (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

onto whatever or whoever was to be purified.²³ A Neo-Assyrian prescriptive document that describes the responsibilities and duties of persons in their daily activities of a typical Neo-Assyrian temple, lists the cleanliness of some temple spaces such as the door: ‘To sweep the area from the Kunuš-kadru gate to the threshold, to guard the gods of the *šahūru* anteroom, to fill the purification cones, [...] is the responsibility of [...]’.²⁴ Although there is no explicit mention of the actual use of the purification cones, it seems that they belong to the area of the door and the anteroom, suggesting that they were perhaps used in connection with this space. A closer relation with doorways and gates is apparently shown in a further ritual taking place in the temple of Assur, which states: ‘At the Anzû Gate water [for the purification cone I placed in the king’s hands]’.²⁵ In rituals we read also that the effect is the release of the threatened man by means of holy water sprinkled by the purification instrument or cleaner: ‘take the bucket, [...], bring water from the mouth of the twin rivers, over that water cast

²³ The nature of the *mullilu* is still unclear, male inflorescence of the date-palm (Reade 1983: 27-28; Porter 1993: 129-139), or cone of a coniferous tree (see literature in Stearns 1961: 24 fn. 43), but the latter is largely accepted. In fact, although the Akkadian term *mullilu* does not give a clue, Wiggermann (1992: 66-67, 84) observes that the fir-cone (*terinnatu*) is attested as an instrument bringing about the release of sin. This suggests that the object that looks like a pinecone in the hands of genies might be a pinecone (see also Russell 1998: 691-692).

²⁴ SAA 20 50: lines ii 20-ii 25.

²⁵ SAA 20 2: lines i 4'-i 5'.

your holy spell, purify it with your holy incantation, and sprinkle that water over the man [...].²⁶

A stalk of alternating tufted rosettes and pinecone-shaped objects held raised as to sprinkle the passer-by can replace the pinecone-shaped object (Figures 4a-b).²⁷

Stag and palm

Undoubtedly, the most unusual animal is the stag, described by the Akkadian words *ajalu* or *lulīmu* (Figures 5a-c).²⁸ The stag appears in a variety of texts, although not in relation to doorways but often in connection with its power to drive away evil. For instance, in a list of the equipment needed for a ritual to exorcise a house when its construction came to an end, antlers of a stag (*lulīmu*) are included.²⁹ In some Assyrian medical texts, the *ajalu* is mainly mentioned in reference to treatments for ill patients: ‘you grind stag’s horn, mix it in oil, smear (it) on, spread it, and he (the patient) will get well’³⁰ or ‘[...] stag horn, soiled rag, [...] <You mix> (them) together. If you fumigate him (with it) over coals, he will get well’.³¹ The *lulīmu* is listed with other plants to clean the patient of evil in *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations: ‘powder of the horn of the stag [...] (all) cleanse the patient [...] they bind whatever causes evil’.³²

Along with the stag is a stalk of palmettes held in the upraised right hand (Figures 5a, c) as ready to be used identified with the *libbi gišimmari* ‘palm offshoot’.³³ Beyond the long established connection of the date palm tree to Ishtar, goddess of sexual fertility, the offshoot of the date-palm is included among the already mentioned equipment for rituals to make evil depart a building.³⁴ In addition, also in the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations the palm offshoot was used in exorcism to purify the patient: ‘It is the

²⁶ Wiggermann 1992: 66.

²⁷ The act of sprinkling (*zarāqu*) is found in a number of Assyrian ritual and cultic texts, and the liquid sprinkled is sometimes fragrant and sweet oil (SAA 20 27: line r. 37). Russell notes that the combination of pinecone-shaped objects and tufted rosettes may have been considered to possess particularly potent protective powers (Russell 1998: 707). In addition, however, one should speculate that specific plants were logically chosen for their properties as soapworts—that is, for their fragrance—as attested in many ritual texts (Magen 1986: 76-77). The protective powers therefore must have depended on the intrinsic cleansing properties of plants and flowers.

²⁸ Van Buren (1939: 40-42) identified this stag with the fallow deer (*Dama dama*), the only species which retains a spotted coat and mature antlers (rather than shedding them annually) into adulthood. These attributes characterise only the adult male (Kawami 2005: 108). Which word—*ajalu* or *lulīmu*—is appropriate to describe the anatomical features of the fallow deer is unclear. See, in this regard, Parker Mallowan 1983: 37; Albenda 2008: 62-70; Portuese 2019: 73-74.

²⁹ Ambos 2004: 100-101 lines 52’-58’’; see also Ambos 2010: 234.

³⁰ CAD A, *ajalu*: 226, mng. 1c.

³¹ Scurlock 2006: 595 (text 279).

³² Geller 2016: 487, tablets 13-15 lines 214’-216’.

³³ Parker Mallowan 1983: 38; Magen 1986: 62-64; Wiggermann 1992: 68-69, 77-78; Volk 2003-2005: 283-292; Portuese 2019: 73-74.

³⁴ Ambos 2004: 100-101, lines 52’-58’’; Ambos 2010: 234; Porter 1993: 138.



Figure 5a. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding stag and palm offshoot, from the Throne Room (B), door d (B-30) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>)



Figure 5b. Reconstruction of the ritual for entrance/building (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)



Figure 5c. Reconstruction of the ritual for people (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)



Figure 6a. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding goat and palm frond, from corridor Z, door a (Z-a-1) (Budge 1914: pl. 27)



Figure 6b. Reconstruction of the ritual for people (drawn by M.P.M. Portuese)

incantation for binding the date-palm offshoot on the patient [...] and put [...] a date-palm heart at his head'.³⁵

The palm is also found in the form of a palm frond, identified with the *ara gišimarri* 'frond of the date palm' (Figures 6a-b).³⁶ It occurs in hemerology texts of Neo-Assyrian period where it is associated to gates: 'The 29th day: let him erect midribs of the date palm at his gate, he will prevail over his adversary'.³⁷ The palm frond occurs also in a prophylactic ritual of the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations: 'Split the date-palm frond and bind the limbs of that man. Cast the restorative incantation, so that an evil death and headache will not draw nigh to him'.³⁸

³⁵ Geller 2016: 475, 477, tablets 13-15 lines 144, 159. For the general apotropaic value of the date-palm, see Parker Mallowan 1983: 38 and Russell 1998: 687-696.

³⁶ Parker Mallowan 1983: 38; Wiggermann 1992: 69-70, 77.

³⁷ SAA 8 234: lines 3-4. Here the term is, however, *zine gišimarri* 'rib of palm-frond' (Landsberger 1967: 25). The text is unassigned, but it belongs to the Assyrian tablets group (SAA 8: xviii). That the palm frond was used to purify a place by sweeping it clean is confirmed by other Neo-Assyrian textual sources, such as the magical prescriptions concerned with expelling ghosts (Scurlock 2006: 45, 379).

³⁸ Geller 2016: 477, tablets 13-15 lines 160-163.

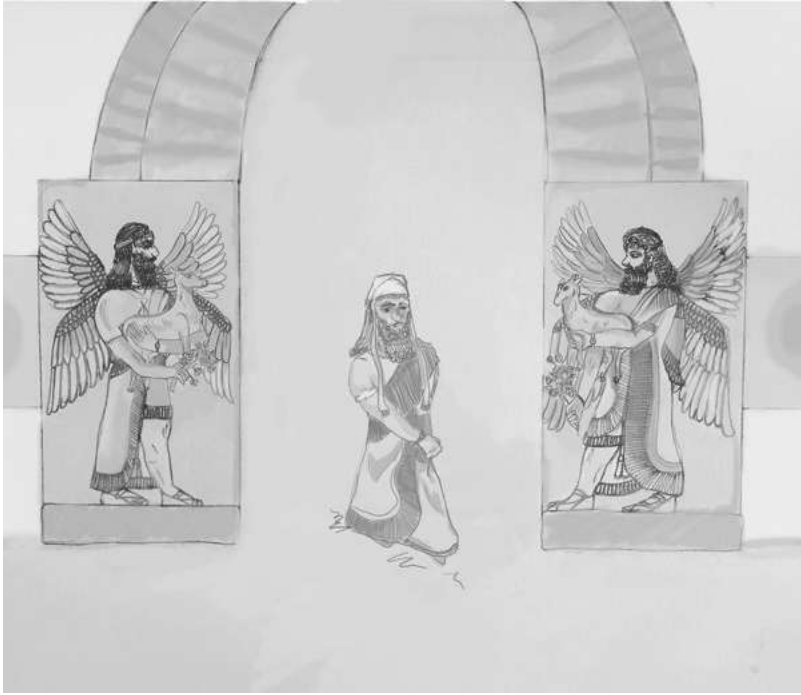


Figure 7. Reconstruction of a door decorated with genies carrying kid/lamb and protecting the king (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

Kid/lamb

The presence of genies holding a kid or lamb is hypothetical in the palace but plausible (Figure 7).³⁹ The kid or lamb, *unīqu* and *puḫādu* in Akkadian,⁴⁰ both do occur in ritual texts but especially in relation to the king and the palace gate. In the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations it is stated: ‘spin a double-strand thread in the palace gate, spin a multi-coloured twine of hair of a virgin kid and virgin lamb, bind the limbs of the king, son of his god [...]. May the evil Udug, Alû, ghost, Sheriff-demon, god, and Bailiff-demons, not enter the palace, nor approach the side of the palace, nor come near the king [...]’.⁴¹ The kid is, however, also the preferred animal to be offered to gods, even in early iconography. It is an example, a cylinder seal from the late Uruk period (ca. 3300-2900 BCE), where the so-called ‘priest-king’ is shown bringing a kid or lamb to a gate

³⁹ Paley and Sobolewski (1992: 17-20) have reconstructed the central door of the Throne Room (B) in the Northwest Palace, and placed a four-winged figure carrying a kid or lamb and stalk of ‘hybrid’ plant between pairs of colossi. The position of such slab is hypothetical, but was actually found in this location on Assurnasirpal II’s Central Building façade, so the presence of some such figure here seems very likely (Barnett and Falkner 1962: pls. 126-127; see also Russell 1998: 706).

⁴⁰ CAD U, *unīqu*: 159-160, mng. 7’b; CAD P, *puḫādu*: 478, mng. 2’b.

⁴¹ Geller 2016: 521-523, tablet 16 lines 80-98’.

structure, followed by an attendant who presents dates.⁴² In a similar vein, the upper register of an Early Dynastic votive plaque from Ur (ca. 2550-2250 BCE.) shows a seated deity approached by a file of people led by a nude male figure. The lower register, instead, shows a nude male leading a line of four persons who is pouring a libation onto an altar, followed by an attendant carrying a kid or a lamb. The scene takes place before the doorway of a building façade, suggesting that door and doorway were the recipients of libations and sacrificial animals for ritual purpose.⁴³ The long established association of the kid and lamb to gods might make clear its connection also with the king.

Pomegranates

There is one instance in which genies hold a stalk of pomegranates, *nurmû* in Akkadian (Figure 8).⁴⁴ It is clear that both in the Near East and in the classical world, pomegranates seem mainly associated with female characters, sexuality, and abundance, and largely limited to goddesses, such as Ishtar, Kubaba, Aphrodite, Hera and Persephone/Kore.⁴⁵ A closer visual example is shown on one of Sennacherib's rock reliefs at Bavian where two deities, male and female, are carved. The goddess, at right, is represented carrying a staff topped by a finial within which is inscribed an image of a composite tree with radiating branches terminating in pomegranates.⁴⁶ In addition, the pomegranate was used as female ornaments in jewellery objects of the Queens' Tombs and in sculptures.⁴⁷ The association of the pomegranate with women and sexuality is found also in Neo-



Figure 8. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie carrying a stalk of pomegranates and holding a mace, from room S, door d (S-d-1) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>)

⁴² Aruz 2003: cat. no. 10a.

⁴³ Aruz 2003: cat no. 33.

⁴⁴ CAD N, *nurmû*: 346, mng. 2b. As for the botanic 'legibility' of pomegranates and poppy-heads in Assyrian reliefs and related literature, see Hnila 2002.

⁴⁵ Rova 2008: 562; Nigro and Spagnoli 2018.

⁴⁶ Winter 2003: 258; see, instead, Hnila 2002: 130.

⁴⁷ Hussein 2016: pls. 16e, 17, 44, 89b, 119.

Assyrian ritual texts, where the plant is associated to the potency incantations and to the woman: 'It's ritual: over either a pomegranate or an apple you recite the incantation seven times, then give (it) to the woman'.⁴⁸ The pomegranate motif with its multiplicity of seeds, suggests indeed that this was a symbol for fertility. Often the pomegranate is associated to female goddesses: 'baskets of pomegranates [...]: all this is (for) [the wedding night of] Mullissu'.⁴⁹ The pomegranate also occurs in anti-witchcraft rituals dealing with potency problems and sexual impurity (Old Babylonian),⁵⁰ and in some medical prescriptions, and pomegranate juice is advised as therapy to treat ghost-induced roaring in the ears, inflammation, heaviness, suppuration, and bleeding from the ears.⁵¹

Mace

In few instances, genies hold a mace, identified with the *e'ru* 'cornel(-stick) mace' (Figure 9),⁵² used in the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations by the exorcist to drive away evil evoking the notion of 'protection': 'He thus placed the exalted *e'ru*-wood staff of Anu on his (the patient's) head. May the good spirit and good genius be present at his head [...]'.⁵³ In another ritual of *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations addressed to protect the king, it is said: 'Of the palace gate, [.....] is called 'evil' [.....], organise the mighty *e'ru*-wood mace and noises at his head, cast the Eridu-spell [...]. May the evil [...] not enter the palace, nor approach the side of the palace, nor come near the king'.⁵⁴

Rosettes

Occasionally we find the stalk of rosettes, associated by scholars with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (Figure 10).⁵⁵ In this respect, Irene Winter (1976: 46) notes that 'as with the lotus, the significance of this particular plant becomes clear once one observes the



Figure 9. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding a mace and performing a blessing/greeting gesture, from the Throne Room (B), door d (B-26) (Budge 1914: pl. 10)

⁴⁸ Biggs 1967: 70-74.

⁴⁹ SAA 20 52: lines r. v 26'-28'.

⁵⁰ Abusch and Schwemer 2011: text 2.5 lines 4, 6.

⁵¹ Scurlock 2006: 69.

⁵² Wiggermann 1992: 60, 67-68; Russell 1998: 675; Portuese 2019: 86.

⁵³ Geller 2016: 473, tablets 13-15 lines 134-135.

⁵⁴ Geller 2016: 522-523, tablet 16 lines 87'-88', 93'-96'.

⁵⁵ Barrelet 1955: 244; Albenda 1978: 9; Russell 1998: 696, 707.

rosette in nature. Plants that grow with radiating leaves lying close to the ground (called basal leaves, or rosettes) are among the hardiest of the plant kingdom, living in conditions unsuitable for most plants, resisting weather changes, and reproducing rapidly'. Thus, the rosette represents that which endures and generates, and is an appropriate symbol for goddesses associated with fertility. Additionally, Gebhard Selz has noted that the Sumerian word for the rosette is probably *UL*, which carries a clear cosmogonic reference. In fact, the most common usage of the word *UL* 'rosette' is in the phrase 'since time immemorial' in Sumerian *U₄-UL-È-A-TA*, literally 'since the day when the (first) blossom/rosette came forth'.⁵⁶ Therefore, the rosette-flower must be interpreted as a stylised representation of whatever blossom had connotations of a magically ensured general notion of 'life', which might be compared with the Egyptian 'Anch sign, or with the Lotus-flower of Hinduism or Buddhism.⁵⁷ As a consequence, its presence is more symbolic than practical.



Figure 10. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding a stalk of rosettes and performing a blessing/greeting gesture, from room S, door b (S-6) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>)

Gestures

Besides objects, a particular gesture is performed by genies, and one is associated with colossi. The gesture of blessing or greeting, *karābu* in texts, always done with the right hand by genies (Figures 9-11),⁵⁸ and perhaps used as sprinkler when accompanied by the ritual bucket, and folded hands, performed only by lion colossi (Figure 12). The latter's meaning is unclear and does not find explanation in textual sources, although scholars suggested that it may have represented a gesture indicating prayerfulness and respect.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Selz 2004: 201.

⁵⁷ Selz 2014: 664; Portuese 2018.

⁵⁸ Wiggermann 1992: 61, 78. The identification seems valid. The *karābu* gesture could be described as a raising of the hand, since several expressions for 'to lift the hand' occur in the context of a greeting expressed by *karābu*. In addition, one Akkadian text describes divine beings enacting a *karābu* gesture with their right hands, perhaps intended as directed to humans or other subordinates (Frechette 2012: 35-38).

⁵⁹ Magen 1986: 40-45, pl. 6, figs. 2-8; Cifarelli 1998: 216.

Figure 11. Northwest Palace (Kalhu):
genie holding bucket and performing a
blessing/greeting gesture, from room H,
door e (H-1) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>)



Figure 12. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): lion colossi with folded
hands, from the Throne Room (B), door c (B-c-1, B-c-2) (Russell
1999: figs. 83a, 84a)



All the objects can be tabulated as follows, according to their distribution throughout the palace (Table 1; Figure 13):⁶⁰

Description, Number on plan, Akkadian Name	Northwest Palace Doorways (room/room-door letter)
Goat (1) <i>mašhultuppû</i>	D/B-d; Z/T-a
Tufted Rosettes (2)	D/B-d; ⁶¹ ED/B-e; F/G-a; S/AJ-b; S/X-c; S/Y-e; Z/T-a
Bucket and Cone (3) <i>banduddû</i> and <i>mullilu</i>	B/C-a; B/F-b; F/Y-f; P/N; N/G-d; G/Y-c; G/Y-b; G/H-e; H/L-d; H/K-c; H/I-b; I/J-a; Y/Z; Z/T-a; Z/WG-b; T/S-d; S/X-c; S/Y-e; S/Y-a
Bucket (4) <i>banduddû</i>	C/ramp-b; H/L-d; H/K-c; H/R-a; Y/Z
Stalk of Tufted Rosettes and Cones (5)	B/F-b
Stag (6) <i>ajalu/lulimu</i>	D/B-d
Stalk of Palmettes (7) <i>libbi gišimmari</i>	D/B-d

⁶⁰ The apotropaic figures examined here were placed both at the jambs of the door and at each side of the passage.

⁶¹ Lion Colossi.

Palm Frond (8) <i>ara gišimarri</i>	Z/T-a
Kid/Lamb (9) <i>unīqu/puhādu</i>	ED/B-e
Pomegranates (10) <i>nurmû</i>	T/S-d
Mace (11) <i>e'ru</i> 'cornel(-stick) mace'	E/B-c; G/Y-c; P/N; S/T-d
Stalk of Rosettes (12)	S/Y-a; S/AJ-b; Z/WG-b
Blessing/Greeting Gesture (13) <i>karābu</i>	E/B-c; C/ramp-b; F/G-a; P/N; G/Y-c; G/H-e; H/R-a; H/K-c; H/L-d; S/Y-a; S/AJ-b; S/X-c; Z/T-a; Z/WG-b; Y/Z
Folded Hands (14)	E/B-c ⁶²

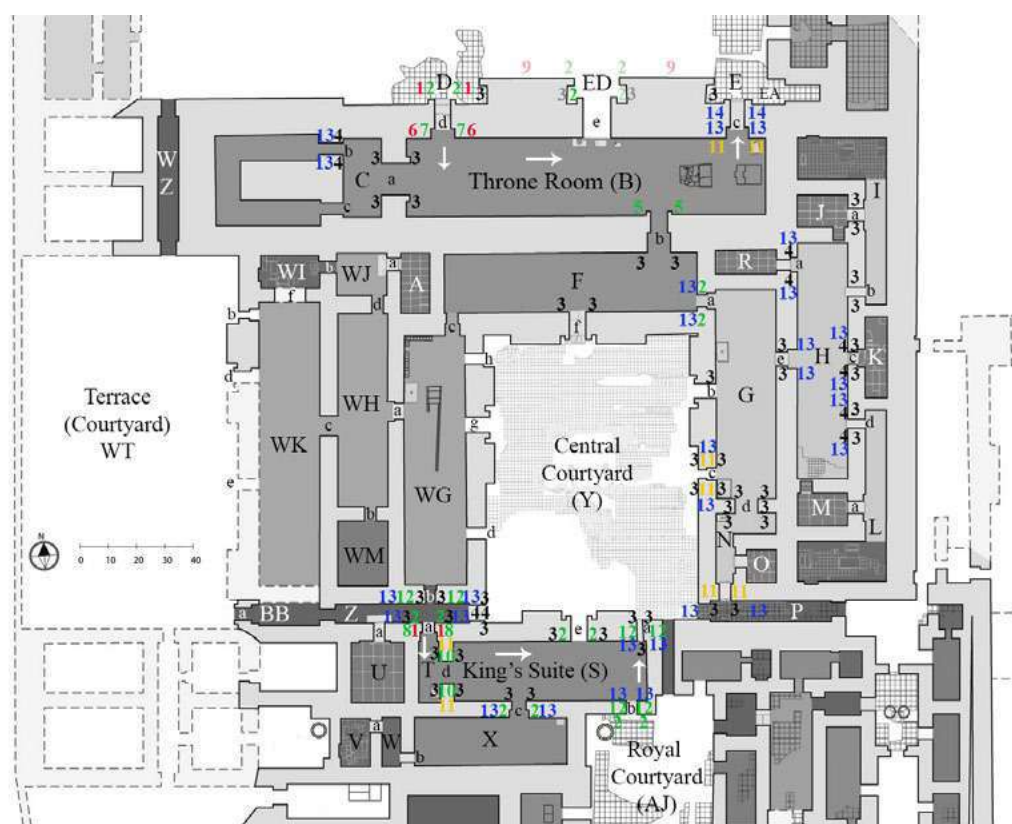


Figure 13. Northwest Palace (Kalhu): distribution of objects and gestures of apotropaic figures according to table 1; transparent colour numbers indicate hypothetical reconstructions (adapted from Kertai 2014: fig. 3). NOTE: due to space limitations, the position of numbers on plan does not always indicate the exact location of the apotropaic figures

⁶² Lion Colossi.

Northwest Palace: doorways and circulation

In the light of the evidence collected so far, it seems that the arrangement of the apotropaic figures is unlikely ever to have been indiscriminate, and one may observe it was consistent with relative secrecy and function of the room/suite. For instance, it has been argued, and I think correctly, that outsiders were received in the Throne Room (B) by entering door d and going out by door c.⁶³ In fact, at door d a high concentration of purifying materials such as goat, tufted rosettes, stag, stalk of palmettes was used firstly to purify and protect the door and secondly to expiate, heal and rid passers-by of evil. By contrast, at the opposite door c genies hold the mace to repel the evil from stepping in and performs the *karābu* gesture, while lion colossi fold their hands in a gesture of obeisance. Ideal gestures to greet passers-by leaving the room who, at that stage, did not need to be purified.

It has been also suggested that the central and monumental door e was usually kept closed. Presumably, this doorway was reserved for the king in state occasions.⁶⁴ This assumption finds support in the hypothetical genie guarding this door, which carries kid or lamb explicitly used in rituals to protect the king.

A similar analysis can be applied to the South Suite of the palace, which was defined the King's Suite.⁶⁵ The presence of goat and palm frond suggests that both doorway a in room T and passers-by underwent purifying and protective rituals. By contrast, guests left the room by doorway a in room S, where genies greet and bless who left the room. Russell (1998: 705) suspects that in the King's Suite, the king received his high court officials and entertained palace women. Although this interpretation is very hypothetical, confirmation of this assumption might be found in the stalk of pomegranates, which evokes the notion of healing, potency, fertility, and possesses propitious meanings, and in the stalk of rosettes, which may have represented a plant of rejuvenation, conveying propitiatory and fertility concepts.

Lastly, the East Suite was said to represent the secluded context of the Northwest palace and, accordingly, its audience was more restricted and internal.⁶⁶ Protective figures are coherent with this picture. The doorways lack genies holding animals, but

⁶³ See discussion and related bibliography in Portuese 2019: 70 fn. 8.

⁶⁴ Russell (1998: 713), in particular, pointing out that opposite this door was a duplicate image (B-13) of the image behind the throne base (B-23), suggests that on occasion the king could sit here as well, as was the case in the Throne Rooms of the earlier palace at Mari and the later palace at Babylon. He therefore suspects that this door was not used as an entrance when the king was enthroned at the end of the room, but rather only when the king positioned himself opposite it. Di Paolo (2003: 531) expands this interpretation by wittily suggesting that the central door e could be used by the king to leave the room or in religious ceremonies in honour of the god Ninurta, whose temple was over the northern side of the palace. See also Paley and Sobolewski 1992: 13; 1997: 334.

⁶⁵ Kertai 2015b: 40-41. Reade (1980: 84) remarks that the genies carrying goats are the only figures who occupy almost directly equivalent positions in different palaces, namely at service entrances.

⁶⁶ Porter 2010: 144-145; Kertai 2015b: 39.

most of the figures performs the *karābu* gesture to bless, and holds bucket and cone to purify. Only in few instances, the genies hold the mace. This attribute occurs at specific doorways connecting with the outside to repel evil.

Conclusions

Bringing this all together, one may readily deduce that the presence of these numerous countermeasures expresses inherent fear and anxiety for the safety of something or somebody. For some reason—perhaps the relocation of the royal court from Assur to Kalhu or, more likely, a general change and a significant increase of the apotropaic practices bound to political reasons—the need of protection was particularly expressed in the palace of Assurnasirpal II compared to his successors. The conspicuous presence of ritual objects strongly suggests that doorways and gates in the palace provided not only the settings for ritual activities, but were themselves recipients of and/or participants in actual rituals. Moreover, in the specific context of the royal palace, these countermeasures were certainly coping strategies used to deal with potential threatening situations that might be related to a collective level. In fact, the king was responsible before the gods for the welfare of mankind and, as a consequence, Assyria remained stable and successful provided the king was able to fulfil his responsibilities. The palace was the place where the king resided and the seat of many activities: administrative, bureaucratic, industrial, and ceremonial as well as residential. As a consequence, the protection of the king and his palace was felt essential to prevent damaging incidents and situations that would have fallen on the collective, that is to say the whole of humanity. In this regard, an obvious way of conducting further research on this topic would be to explore the real threats Assyrian rulers experienced throughout their history, and how these were prevented. Menaces could take the form of a disease, of sexual contagion, of disgusting things, of foreigners. Each threat may accordingly have affected the use of new protective means, such as apotropaic figures and rituals, but also new rules of behaviour, implying a change in manners and etiquette. In other words, the fear of something new and uncontrollable could twist the psychological responses to ordinary interactions, leading Assyrian rulers and people to behave in unexpected ways.

Abbreviations

CAD: Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (1956-2010)

MVN: Materiali per il vocabolario neosumerico

RINAP 3/1: see Grayson and Novotny 2012

SAA 8: see Hunger 1992

SAA 20: see Parpola 2017

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