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SACRED TREES, DATE PALMS, AND THE ROYAL PERSONA OF ASHURNASIRPAL II*

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THE tree scene shown in carvings from the Northwest Palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) at Nimrud (ancient Kalḫu) has become one of the classic problems of Assyrian art history. The scene shows two winged figures, sometimes with birds' heads (fig. 1) and sometimes with men's heads and the horned hats of gods (fig. 2). Each of the winged figures holds a bucket and reaches out with an oval object toward a stylized tree-like object between them.

Although there is a long history in Mesopotamian art of scenes involving trees or bushes in a variety of settings, this particular tree scene is distinctive and requires its own interpretation—one which accounts for its distinctive constellation of elements. The signature marks of the scene are the bucket and oval object held by the figures and the peculiarly shaped tree between them, consisting of a central trunk topped by a large palmette with a network of branches leading from the trunk to smaller palmettes forming an arch around the central trunk. Both the scene and the tree itself occur almost exclusively in Assyrian contexts and have, I will argue, a distinctively Assyrian meaning reflecting the political and economic concerns of Assyria in the ninth century B.C., when the scene first achieved prominence in Assyrian art.

The scene was an important motif in Assyrian art in two media: in cylinder seals dating from the ninth to the seventh centuries B.C. and in wall carvings from the Northwest Palace, dedicated by Ashurnasirpal II in about 867 B.C. to serve as a government center and royal residence for the new Assyrian capital city of Kalḫu.¹ The tree scene appeared as the main motif in the massive stone carvings lining the walls of the state apartments in the center of the palace. In Room I, for example, the tree itself was depicted ninety-six times, both as part of the scene and as a spacer between tree scenes, which were the room's sole motif.² In other rooms, carvings of the king and his courtiers alternated with carvings

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¹ For this date, see J. E. Reade and J. N. Postgate,

"Kalḫu," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 5, pp. 311 and 320. For a similar scene on a ninth century seal, see pl. 33, seal a, in Henri Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals: A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1939), dated to ca. 850 B.C. (p. 190). For later examples, see pl. 117 in Edith Porada, *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections: The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library* (Washington, D.C., 1948).

² For a reconstruction of the original placement of the palace's carvings, see Janusz Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Relieffdarstellungen und ihrer Anordnung im Nordwestpalast von Kalḫu (Nimrud)* (Mainz am Rhein, 1981) and Samuel M. Paley and Richard Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction of the Relief-representations and Their Positions in the Northwest-Palace at Kalḫu (Nimrud)* (Mainz am Rhein, 1987).



FIG. 1.—Bird-headed figures and tree from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud. Courtesy of Bowdoin College Museum of Art (1860.1)



FIG. 2.—Winged figure with bucket and oval, from the Northwest Palace, Nimrud. Courtesy of Bowdoin College Museum of Art (1860.2).

of the tree scene, of the tree alone, or of the winged figures with their characteristic apparatus and gesture.³ The tree scene and its elements dominated the state apartments of the palace, creating a striking visual environment for Ashurnasirpal's public appearances. It is the meaning of the scene as it appears in these carvings and the significance of its close association with the figure of the king in this period which is our concern here.

The close relationship of the tree scene to the king is underlined by its use as the focal point of the palace's throne room (Room B), a long hall whose walls were ornamented with bands of small carvings showing the king engaged in hunting and warfare.⁴ These small carvings were overshadowed, however, by large carvings of the tree scene placed at two strategic points in the throne room,⁵ the first (slab 13), directly opposite the throne room's main entrance, where it was the first thing a visitor saw as he entered the king's presence, and the second (slab 23), behind and above the throne dais itself, where it framed the king as the visitor turned to face him on his raised throne at the end of the long room. The king himself was depicted in these two carvings, standing between the winged figures and the tree, as if to emphasize his intimate involvement with the scene.

While the importance of the scene in the Northwest palace is evident, the message it was meant to convey is still debated—somewhat surprisingly, since, for over fifty years, most art historians accepted an interpretation of the scene first proposed by Edward B. Tylor in 1890.⁶ Tylor, noting the resemblance of the stylized tree to a date palm, argued that the scene represented an agricultural process essential to raising dates, that is, the artificial pollination of female date palms with pollen from male flower clusters.

Tylor's interpretation was widely accepted until C. J. Gadd, in 1948, raised strenuous objections and proposed an alternative interpretation.⁷ Rejecting the idea that the stylized tree-like objects resembled date palms, Gadd also observed that some winged figures in the palace extended the oval toward open doorways, toward statues of guardian figures, or toward the figure of the king himself—hardly suitable objects for pollination, Gadd suggested. Concluding that the scene had nothing to do with either date palms or pollination, Gadd proposed instead that the winged figures were somehow deriving a "magic virtue" from the trees, which they transferred to the king or others by smearing them with the oval. Although a few historians still accept the date palm theory, Gadd's objections raised such doubts that by 1961 John Stearns could write in his study of the Northwest Palace that the pollination theory had been largely supplanted.⁸ Recent commentators remain cautious about connecting the scene to date palm pollination. Irene J. Winter, for example, in her 1981 study of the throne room, accepts an in-

³ For example, Room F (Meuszyński, *Rekonstruktion*, pls. 6–7), includes one carving of the king with bird-headed figures and fourteen of the birdmen alone or with the tree. Room G (*ibid.*, pls. 8–10) includes carvings of the king, alone or with courtiers, flanked by winged figures; of the tree alone; and of male figures with a mace or flowers.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pls. 1–3 and plan 3.

⁵ The significance of their placement was first noted by Irene J. Winter, in "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 10.

⁶ Edward B. Tylor, "The Winged Figures of the Assyrian and Other Ancient Monuments," *Proceed-*

ings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology 12 (1890): 383–93.

⁷ C. J. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East*, Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1945 (London, 1948), pp. 91–92.

⁸ John B. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 15 (Graz, 1961; Osnabrück, 1984), p. 71. Historians who still accept the date palm pollination theory include, among others, Edith Porada, *Ancient Near Eastern Seals*, vol. 1, pp. 76 and 93, and Samuel M. Paley, *King of the World: Ashur-nasir-pal II of Assyria, 883–859 B.C.* (New York, 1976), whose comment on p. 22 implies a cautious acceptance.

terpretation of the scene as an "emblem of the provisioning of the land and the role of the king in relation to it," without mentioning date palms.⁹ Similarly, Julian Reade, although conceding that the form of the Assyrian stylized tree may be "distantly derived" from the date palm, suggests a resemblance of the oval to both the male date flower cluster and to pine cones and also points out that some representations of Assyrian stylized trees show them bearing ovals or pomegranates in addition to palmettes, or even in place of them; he therefore interprets the Northwest Palace scene without reference to date palm pollination, describing the stylized tree simply as "a symbol of fertility and the cosmic order upheld by the king."¹⁰

Such caution might be justified in the case of some Assyrian cylinder seals that show a tree so abstract that its identity as a date palm is indeed ambiguous.¹¹ In the large carvings in the Northwest Palace, however, the designer seems to have gone to some lengths to present his stylized tree as a date palm, always topping the central trunk with a clearly recognizable palmette and always surrounding the trunk with smaller palmettes, emphasizing the link to date palms. This emphasis suggests that in the Northwest Palace the date palm shape was essential to the Assyrians' understanding of the scene. I propose, then, to defend the old date palm pollination theory, convinced that no other interpretation satisfactorily accounts for both the representation of the tree in the Northwest Palace carvings as a date palm and for the characteristic apparatus—the bucket and oval—that are signature marks of the scene.

It is important in this connection to recognize that the representations of the tree in the Northwest Palace that raise questions about its identity as a date palm are not so much the large images of trees that dominate those carvings but, rather, are the variants of the tree that appear in the specialized context of small decorative patterns lightly incised on the clothing of some figures in the palace carvings. It is in these decorative embellishments that the tree once lacks a palmette top and in other instances is surrounded by an arch of ovals, rather than palmettes.¹² These stylized trees in clothing decoration may indeed represent the development Reade implied—the creation of "hybrid" stylized trees which were less emphatically linked to date palms in form and were beginning to evolve into images of generic "fruitful trees." These trees in clothing decoration, however, are only a few inches high and are so lightly incised as to be almost invisible, acting as a sort of whispered variation in miniature on the stylized trees in the full-sized carvings that dominate the Northwest Palace and convey its basic message to viewers.

These larger trees, as we have seen, are consistently presented as stylized date palms, and it is this identity which provides a clue to the meaning of the scene and the reason

⁹ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," p. 10.

¹⁰ In Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 3 (Helsinki, 1989), frontispiece caption. For discussion, see Reade's *Assyrian Sculpture* (London, 1983), pp. 27–28.

¹¹ See, for example, seals a, e, f, and h, pl. 33, in Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*; and pls. 92, 94, and 117 in Porada, *Ancient Near Eastern Seals*. The stylized tree of Porada's seal no. 648, for example, is represented by an almost diagrammatic pattern of lines with little

resemblance to any natural tree.

¹² See, for example, pls. 18b and 19 in Jeanny Vorys Canby, "Decorated Garments in Ashurnasirpal's Sculpture," *Iraq* 33 (1971): 31–53; for a tree with ovals on Ashurnasirpal's clothing, see Henri Frankfort, *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, 4th ed., rev. (Baltimore, 1969), fig. 41; for a tree with palmettes, pomegranates, and ovals, see Reade, "A Glazed-brick Panel from Nimrud," *Iraq* 25 (1963): 38–47 and pl. 9.

why the bucket and oval appear in it. A United Nations study of date palm cultivation in the modern Near East and Africa, published in 1982,¹³ provides a detailed account of modern date palm pollination techniques; the pollination techniques described there suggest that the ancient carvings not only depicted an actual agricultural process, but did so with remarkable accuracy. The study reports that one common method of pollinating date palms in the Near East is to cut a ripe male flower cluster, carry it up the female tree, and shake it over the female flowers to fertilize them, finally leaving sprigs of the male flower among the female flowers to ensure full fertilization.¹⁴ The male flower clusters are oval in shape (fig. 3) and bear a marked resemblance to the oval object in the ancient carvings (fig. 4).

Water also plays a role in the process of pollination. When the male flowers have been collected ahead of time, they may grow dry and are then dipped in water to make them less fragile during pollination; if dried pollen is used instead, it is common practice to sprinkle water over the female flowers after dusting them to keep the pollen from blowing away before complete fertilization occurs.¹⁵ In both cases, a bucket of water is part of the standard apparatus of date palm pollination.

While no description of the techniques of date palm pollination used in ancient Mesopotamia survives, we know from documentary evidence that date palm pollination was indeed practiced in Mesopotamia as early as the Old Babylonian period, and probably earlier, and that it was understood to be important in providing an abundant crop.¹⁶

It seems reasonable to conclude that the tree scene carved on the walls of Ashurnasirpal's palace did indeed represent the pollination of date palms. But what message was the scene meant to convey? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the characteristics of date palms themselves. Dates were an important food in Mesopotamia, rich in calories and easily preserved. Date palms bear fruit abundantly, in heavy clusters, with a single tree often yielding more than one hundred pounds of fruit per year over a productive lifetime of one hundred years or more.¹⁷ It is no wonder that Akkadian synonyms for date palm included "tree of abundance" (*iš mašrê*) and "tree of riches" (*iš rašê*), appropriate names for a tree which is a natural emblem of agricultural abundance.¹⁸

¹³ Food and Agriculture Organization, *Date Production and Protection with Special Reference to North Africa and the Near East*, prepared by the Horticultural Crops Group, Plant Production and Protection Division, based on the work of V. H. W. Dowson, FAO Plant Production and Protection Paper, no. 35 (Rome, 1982).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For references to date palm pollination, see *Ak-kadisches Handwörterbuch* (AHw.), s.vv. *rakābu(m)*, G5 and D1, *tarkibutum*, and *tarkubtu(m)* 1; and CAD, s.v. *išu* 1,2a'. Law 65 of Codex Hammurabi reflects an awareness that failure to pollinate will produce a greatly reduced crop. On hand fertilization and the Akkadian terminology for date palm flower parts, including pollen, see Benno Landsberger, *The Date Palm and Its By-products according to the Cuneiform Sources*, Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 17 (Graz, 1967), pp. 18–19.

¹⁷ In a California study, the weight of fruit borne on single branches of 12-year-old Deglet Noor palms varied from 2.3 to 12.7 kg, or ca. 5–28 lbs. (FAO, *Date Production*, p. 45); 50 lb. clusters of dates on a single branch are not unknown (Paul B. Popenoe, *Date Growing in the Old World and the New* [Altadena, California, 1913], frontispiece). Female trees begin to bear fruit between the ages of four and twenty years and do so until their death at somewhere between 100 to 150 years of age (FAO, *Date Production*, pp. 35 ff.). Yield per tree varies with variety. In a 1913 study, the average yield per tree in U.S. orchards was 100 pounds per year; in Algeria, for Deglet Noor palms, about 88 pounds; and in Baghdad, 100 pounds or more, with a crop of 300 pounds from a single Zakidi or Barban tree being not unusual (Popenoe, *Date Growing*, p. 163).

¹⁸ Hh. III, 237 and 273 f.; Lie, *Sargon*, 335; and ZA 43, 50:56. See CAD, s.v. *gišimmaru* a and e; and Landsberger, *Date Palm*, sec. B and commentary.

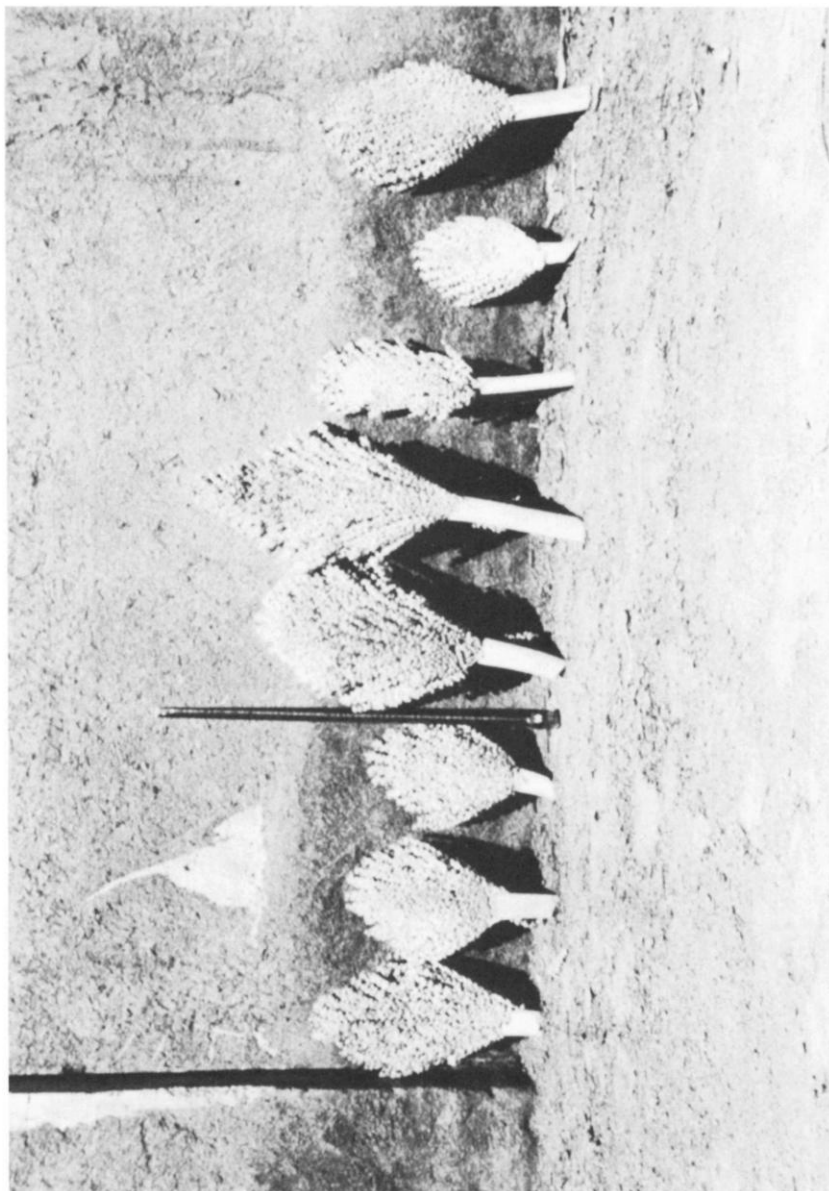


FIG. 3.—Flower clusters from male date palms drying in the sun. Shahdad, Kerman, Iran. Courtesy of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, from *Date Production and Protection with Special Reference to North Africa and the Near East*, F. A. O. Plant Production and Protection Paper, no. 35 (Rome, 1982).



FIG. 4.—Winged figure with oval object. Detail, courtesy of Bowdoin College Museum of Art (1860.2)

A second clue to the meaning of the scene is that the trees which appear in the scene in the Northwest Palace are highly stylized, like no palm trees on earth, while the winged figures are not ordinary farmers but divine beings, probably the minor protective deities known as *apkallus*.¹⁹ Clearly, the scene is not intended to depict a real pollination but depicts instead an act of pollination occurring in the divine sphere (or perhaps a ritual re-enactment of such divine pollination).²⁰ The scene, for all its links to real agriculture, is in its essence an emblem, representing the gods' gift to mankind of abundant crops and, by extension, of the security such agricultural success provides. When the winged figure reaches out with his oval flower cluster toward the figure of the king, he is thus not literally pollinating the king but, rather, metaphorically bestowing on him abundance and security as a gift from the gods—a meaning which would have been easily grasped from the picture because it represented an agricultural process whose consequences were well understood.

There is still one problem, however. The choice of date palms as an emblem of agricultural abundance for an Assyrian palace seems strange when one realizes that the Assyrians did not raise date palms as a crop. In the relatively cool climate of Assyria, grains were the staple crop. It was only farther south, in Babylonia, that date palm orchards flourished, providing dates for all Mesopotamia.²¹ Was the tree scene borrowed from Babylonian art, despite the uniquely Assyrian form of the stylized tree? Perhaps so, but remarkably few examples of the scene are known from early Babylonia; while stylized trees somewhat resembling date palms appear as garment decoration on figures on two eleventh century Kassite *kudurrus*, the scene as a whole is so far attested only on one Late Kassite cylinder seal.²² The absence of the scene as a significant element in

¹⁹ For the physical appearance of *apkallus*, see CAD, s.vv. *apkallu* 2,2'b and *iššūru* 1e. The text KAR 298 gives directions for making plaques depicting *apkallu* figures, including some "with the faces of birds and wings" (l. 12), to be buried beneath the floors of houses as guardians. Such figures have, in fact, been found beneath the floors of palaces at Nimrud (for example, M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and Its Remains* [London, 1966], vol. 1, pl. 191 and pp. 226–29). The human-headed figures that replace the bird-headed figures in some Northwest Palace carvings probably represent either a different type of *apkallu* or a similar protective deity.

²⁰ No recognizable description of such a ritual survives in documents, but there is evidence to suggest that the tree scene was eventually enacted as ritual. A Late Assyrian cylinder seal (BM 134770, illustrated by Anthony Green, in "A Note on the Assyrian 'Goat-Fish', 'Fish-Man', and 'Fish-Woman'," *Iraq* 48 [1986]: pl. 10a) shows a person approaching the stylized tree carrying a bucket and oval and wearing what appears to be a fish suit; he is clearly not a "fish-man," since fish-people, complete with tails, face him across the tree. The depiction of a person in a suit suggests the scene here was intended to represent a ritual involving the tree. Moreover, in KAR 298:12 and parallel passages, bird-headed *apkallus* are said to carry a "purifier" (*mullilu*) in the right hand and a special "bucket" (*banduddū*) in the left,

both usually associated with rituals (see CAD, s.vv. *mullilu* and *banduddū*). I am grateful to Richard Ellis for bringing this to my attention.

²¹ The northern limits of cultivation of date palms for fruit in Iraq and Syria are, along the northeast foothills, the town of Taza Khurmatu (35° 18'N), with a few trees as far north as Erbil (36° 15'), occasionally killed by frost; along the Tigris, Samarra (34° 12'), with a few as far north as Tekrit; and along the Euphrates, Rawa (34° 30'N), again with a few exceptions (FAO, *Date Production*, p. xv, table 1). Current scholarly opinion is that climatic conditions in the area were not significantly different in Assyrian times.

²² For the *kudurrus*, both probably from the reign of Marduk-nādin-aḥḥē (1098–1081 B.C.), see Eva Strommenger and M. Hirmer, *The Art of Mesopotamia* (London, 1964), pl. 270–71, and Ursula Seidl, *Die Babylonischen Kudurru-Reliefs* (Göttingen, 1989), pl. 27. The seal (Yale Babylonian Collection NCBS 416, formerly Newell 416) shows the figure of a king saluting a palm-like tree while a second figure, wearing a fish suit and carrying a bucket, reaches out toward the tree, whether with oval or empty hand is unclear (photo in Hans H. von der Osten, *Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell*, OIP 22 [Chicago, 1934], pl. 28, and drawing in Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, fig. 65). Porada (*Ancient Near Eastern Seals*, vol. 1, pp. 641–44), dating it to

Babylonian art until well after the period of the Northwest Palace suggests that the motif was originally of minor importance in Babylonia.

What made the Assyrians decide to adapt this obscure Babylonian artistic motif as the dominant theme of Ashurnasirpal's palace, when Assyrians themselves did not raise date palms? I think the answer is here again suggested by the highly stylized form the date palm is given in the scene. Assyrians depicted date palm trees quite naturalistically when they chose to, as in scenes from narrative bas-reliefs in the Northwest Palace itself and in later palaces at Nineveh.²³ But in the pollination scenes in the Northwest Palace, the Assyrians chose instead to depict a highly stylized tree, suggesting, I think, that they conceived of the tree in that scene from the outset as a figural tree, seizing on the idea of the date palm and its pollination precisely because it was not part of their daily agricultural life, but was already at one remove from it and was thus readily transformed in their art into an emblem of agricultural abundance as a divine gift.

A second factor in their choice of date palms as an emblem associated with Ashurnasirpal's rule may have been the long established connection of the date palm tree to Ishtar, goddess of sexual fertility, whose association with date palms, even in Assyria, is reflected, for example, in grave goods found near the precincts of the Middle Assyrian Ishtar temple at Assur that are decorated with various images of the goddess and date palm trees, in a later Neo-Assyrian seal showing Ishtar standing on her heraldic lion before a date palm, and in documents such as the Late Assyrian hymn to Ishtar that addresses her as "palm tree, daughter of Nineveh, stag of the lands."²⁴ Ashurnasirpal built three temples to Ishtar during his reign. In choosing to use the date palm as an emblem of agricultural fertility in his palace, he may have been alluding to Ishtar also, adding to the scene additional overtones of her presence as a force for fertility in the world he dominated.²⁵

When the king himself is pictured in the scene in the throne room, the message of the carvings is completed. Here it is still the gods who reach out to fertilize the tree, but the king is now represented as the link between them.²⁶ The scene becomes a visual meta-

the Late Kassite period on stylistic grounds, suggests that it is the earliest known example of the tree scene. The appearance of the king in the scene suggests an association of kings with date palms in Kassite Babylonia. The appearance of stylized palm-like trees in the palace decoration of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244–1208 B.C.) may thus be yet another example of that king's efforts to introduce elements of Babylonian culture into Assyria. The Assyrian king Ashur-rēsh-ishi (1133–1116 B.C.) reports that he, too, used a date palm motif in his palace decoration. The use of scenes of date palm pollination in Assyrian royal iconography, however, seems to begin with Ashurnasirpal.

²³ For example, in slab B17, NW Palace (Meuszyński, *Rekonstruktion*, pl. 1); and on reliefs from Sennacherib's palace, Nineveh, figs. 60 and 93, in Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*.

²⁴ For Grave 45 from Assur, see Anton Moortgat, *Die Kunst des alten Mesopotamien* (Cologne, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 72–74 and figures. He dates the grave to the fourteenth century and suggests that its occupants were priestesses from the Ishtar temple; grave goods included a comb showing a procession, bordered by

date palms and rosettes, an emblem of Ishtar (fig. 33); an ivory pyxis on which date palms alternate with rosette-bearing conifers (fig. 34); an alabaster vase with a somewhat palm-like stylized tree (fig. 31); and a vase showing a voluptuous goddess with rosette device on her crown. For the seal, BM 89769, see Frankfort, *Art and Architecture*, pl. 119a. The Ashurbanipal hymn to Ishtar is translated by A. Livingstone, in *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 3 (Helsinki, 1989), no. 7.

²⁵ The date palm may have been an emblem associated with other Assyrian gods as well. Posts flanking the entrance to the eighth-century Assyrian temple of Sin at Khorsabad were decorated with patterns suggesting date palm bark (see Gordon Loud, *Khorsabad*, vol. 1, OIP 38 [Chicago, 1936], pp. 98 and 105), and similar patterns decorated engaged columns in the early Assyrian temple at Tell Rimah (see David Oates, "The Excavations at Tell al Rimah, 1966," *Iraq* 29 [1967]: 70–79). These date palm patterns, however, may have been simply decorative.

²⁶ B-23 and B-13 (Meuszyński, *Rekonstruktion*, pls. 1 and 2).

phor for the king's role as the gods' regent on earth, the conduit through whose actions their gift of abundance could reach Assyria and her empire. The tree scene, dominating the visual world of the palace by its position in the throneroom as well as by repetition, emphasized the abundance that Ashurnasirpal's rule could provide with the gods' help and was a fitting motif to be associated with the king of a nation that evidently still thought of itself as essentially agricultural and had not yet grasped the full economic implications of its expanding empire.²⁷

In the decoration of later Assyrian palaces, the tree scene was to disappear almost entirely. While the winged figures with their bucket and oval remained as echoes of the tree scene, they now appeared almost always without the tree, their protective function no longer explicitly linked to the agricultural activity which had given them their original meaning.²⁸ In Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh, the last great palace of the Assyrian Empire, the tree scene is reserved for decoration on the king's clothing, still intimately connected with the image of the king but now almost completely overshadowed by the wall carvings showing the king as conqueror and as receiver of booty. The emphasis was now on the image of the king as leader of the military campaigns which had gradually replaced agriculture as the foundation of Assyria's now imperial economy. In Ashurnasirpal's day, however, Assyria had been poised at the beginning of this transformation, and the walls of his Northwest Palace, surrounding the king with images of date palm pollination, underlined his central role in obtaining from the gods the agricultural abundance on which Assyria's prosperity had for so long depended.

²⁷ Ashurnasirpal's inscriptions make explicit reference to his role as the provider of conditions favorable for agriculture in Assyria, both as builder of a major canal to Nimrud (called the "Canal of Abundance") and as patron of orchards (A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, vol. 2 [Wiesbaden, 1976], CI1, par. 591; CI9, par. 619; and CI14). His role as patron of a royal garden (described in CI14) had a somewhat different significance. David Stronach argues, I think correctly, that Assyrian palace gardens, stocked with exotic plants collected during foreign campaigns, were representations in miniature of distant parts of the empire, thus emblems of conquest, not of Assyrian agricultural abundance ("Visions of Paradise: Images of the Garden in the Ancient Near East," Leventritt Lecture, 11 April 1991, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University; and "The Garden as a Political Statement: Some Case Studies from the Near East in the First Millennium B.C.," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4 [1990]: 171–80).

²⁸ By the time of Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad, the scene had already lost importance, appearing only twice, according to surviving evidence, although winged figures with bucket and oval and a few trees remained as echoes of the scene (Pauline Albenda, *The Palace of Sargon, King of Assyria* [Paris, 1986],

p. 57; some carvings from this palace, however, were lost and never recovered). In the palace of Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.) at Nineveh, both the tree and the scene are absent, leaving only the winged figures (in Courts H and VI and Room XIV); see John Russell, "Sennacherib's 'Palace without Rival': A Programmatic Study of Texts and Images in a Late Assyrian Palace" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1985), pp. 332 and 360–61. Russell kindly informs me, however, that the Iraqi Department of Antiquities has recently discovered remains of a carving in a niche directly opposite the main entrance to the throneroom, analogous to the placement of the tree scene in Ashurnasirpal's throneroom. While the surviving traces, representing feet, would permit the conclusion that the carving represented the tree scene, similarly placed niches in Sargon's palace were bare, and the traces here are so fragmentary as to make any identification highly conjectural. Current evidence suggests that the tree scene disappeared from Assyrian palace decoration after the time of Sargon II, except as garment decoration (see, for example, Moortgat, *Die Kunst*, vol. 2, frontispiece, detail from relief in Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh). Cf. the comments of I. J. Winter on this near-disappearance of the motif in "Royal Rhetoric," pp. 26–31.