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ASSYRIAN SACRED TREES IN THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

By PAULINE ALBENDA

The Brooklyn Museum houses twelve stone slabs with carved decoration from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II.¹ The motif of a stylized tree — the so-called Sacred Tree (see Figs. 1, 4, 6) — appears on seven of those slabs which come from rooms F, I, L, S, T of the ninth century palace at Nimrud. These tree renderings are representative of the sacred tree-type found in ten rooms of the royal residence and the west wing.² Approximately 96 sacred trees, in two-register arrangement, appeared on the pictorial decorations in room I; the same motif occurred about 75 times in one-register arrangement on the reliefs of the other rooms. The abundance of the sacred tree motif on the wall decorations of the Northwest Palace attests to the significance of this plant. Its design deserves investigation; in Layard's words, "the tree, evidently a sacred symbol, is elaborately and tastefully formed."³

In his study of the Ashurnasirpal II reliefs in American collections, Stearns did not attempt to list the sacred trees, because "variations in the sacred tree occur only in minor details," and "the tree in itself is rarely useful in identifying the location of the reliefs."⁴ These statements make clear Stearns' belief that the sacred trees were nearly alike. Other scholars, notably Weidner and Reade, have pointed out that on a number of slabs now in American and European museums are carvings of matching half trees, therefore indicating that when paired, these trees belonged to adjoining slabs originally.⁵ In trying to match half trees, one finds that individual sacred trees do differ in the rendering of specific details. Bleibtreu, in her analysis of the sacred tree-type, lists three variants of the flower found on the palmette-garland framing the individual tree on three sides.⁶ The present author, after examining the sacred trees carved on the slabs in The Brooklyn Museum, concludes that the design of the tree-type is more varied than heretofore presumed, and that its construction is more complex than indicated in previous descriptions of the subjects.⁷ An analysis of the Assyrian sacred tree-type may lead to possible conclusions regarding its intended image: a stylized palm tree, a cult object, an emblem of vegetation or "tree of life", an imperial symbol, or a combination of those forms.⁸ In addition, one may consider to what extent the rendering of individual trees was the consequence of artistic inventiveness.

This study was initiated by Dr. James F. Romano, Curator, who kindly invited me to examine the Assyrian reliefs during the time when five of them had been temporarily removed from the exhibition galleries for conservation purposes. Dr. Richard A. Fazzini, Chairman of the Department of Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Middle Eastern Art, gave permission to publish the photographs of the Assyrian reliefs (Figs. 1, 4–7), through the courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum. I am grateful to the members of the department and to the staff of the Wilbour Library of Egyptology for their generous support and assistance. The reliefs shown in Figs. 1 (55-150), 4 (55-152), 5 (55-156), are the gift of Hagop Kevorkian. The author is responsible for Figs. 2, 3 and 8.

¹ S. M. Paley, *King of the World, Ashur-nasir-pal II of Assyria 883–859 B.C.* (Brooklyn, 1976).

² The other rooms of the palace are B, C, G, H, N. For the proposed placement of the sacred trees in the royal residence, see: J. Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen und ihrer Anordnung im Nordwestpalast von Kalhu (Nimrud)*. *Baghdader Forschungen* 2 (1981), Pls. 1–3 (B), Pl. 4 (C), Pls. 6–7 (F), Pls. 8–9 (G), Pls. 11–12 (H), Pls. 16–17 (N); S. Paley and R. P. Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction of the Relief Representations and their Positions in the Northwest-Palace at Kalhu (Nimrud) II*. *Baghdader Forschungen* 10 (1987): Pls. 1–2 (I), Pls. 2–3 (S), Pl. 4 (T), Pl. 5 (west wing).

³ A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*. Vol. 1 (New York, 1847), 232–233.

⁴ J. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*. *Archiv für Orientforschung*, Beiheft 15 (Graz, 1961), 68.

⁵ See: E. Weidner, *Die Reliefs der assyrischen Könige*. *Archiv für Orientforschung*, Beiheft 4 (Graz, 1939; repr. 1976), 112–117, 133; J. E. Reade, "Twelve Ashur-Nasirpal Reliefs," *Iraq* 27 (1965): 126 f.

⁶ E. Bleibtreu, *Die Flora der assyrischen Reliefs. Eine Untersuchung zu den Orthostaten reliefs des 9.–7. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (Wien, 1980), 41 f.

⁷ For example, see: B. Hrouda, *Zur Herkunft der assyrischen Lebensbaum*, *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 3 (1964): 40–41; H. York, *Heiliger Baum*, *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 4 (1972–1975): 277–278; Bleibtreu, *ibid.*, 37–38.

⁸ For the various views expressed, see: H. Danthine, *Le Palmier-Dattier et les arbres sacrés dans l'iconographie de l'Asie occidentale ancienne* (Paris, 1937), 164 ff.; A. Moortgat, *Tammuz. Der Unterblichkeitsglaube in der altorientalischen Bildkunst* (Berlin, 1949), 134–136; Paley, *King of the World*, 23–24; W. G. Lambert, *Trees, snakes, and gods in ancient Syria and Anatolia*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48, part 3 (1985): 438–439; B. N. Porter, *Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52 (1993): 132–133; S. Parpola, *The Assyrian Tree of Life*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52 (1993): 165–167.

The Northwest Palace sacred tree-type

General observations

We will assume that the model for the sacred tree on the stone reliefs was an object of concrete form. The central element of the tree is a trunk set upon a base. It is surmounted by a plant motif which consists of seven large fronds arranged into a palmette. The trunk is generally divided into three tiers (two on the trees in room I and four on those in rooms G and N) of varying heights and widths, with each tier appearing to be an independent element. The trunk is probably made from separate pieces of timber which are fastened at the joints by a device that is decorative yet functional. The binding device has two components: a prominent three-ringed band and, between the band and the ends of the timber on either side, a C-shaped brace showing petal-like decorations along its outer length.

A ribbon-like stem, immediately above the three-ringed bands, extends outward on either side, terminates in an up-curve and connects to a second stem to form a volute, similar to the single twist of a guilloche. Within the volute or swirl is a ringed disk. Continuing from the volute, the second stem extends further to touch a palmette of the garland which surrounds the tree on three sides, from the level of the ground up. More stems, some with swirls, connect the other palmettes of the garland to the tree trunk. In addition to their obvious decorative aspect the stems and garland, together, may function as a means to prop up the trunk of the tree.

Surface decoration consists of chevroned lines on the tree trunk and on the petals of the palmette. Furthermore, a border band occurs on all the individual parts of the sacred tree, from the smallest petal to the outer edge of the tree trunk. There is no visual evidence to indicate that color was added to portions of the sacred tree shown on the stone relief.⁹

Notable differences exist among the individual sacred trees. They occur in the shape of the trunk base, in the distinctive pattern formed by the arrangement of the ribbon-like stems, and in the way the individual palmette-flowers and bands of the garland are attached together. Those differences account for stylistic variations although, as a type, the sacred trees of the reliefs remains the same.¹⁰

The iconographical styles of the sacred trees on the slabs at The Brooklyn Museum is the focus of the discussion below.

The Brooklyn Museum sacred trees

General observations

Where the sacred tree motif occurs one or more times on the seven slabs from The Brooklyn Museum, five represent complete trees and nine show half trees. Four of the complete trees are on a relief with two registers of decoration (55·146) and the fifth is on a one-register relief (55·150).¹¹ Among the half trees on the reliefs, four are matching half trees (55·147 right and 55·148 left, 55·151 right and 55·152 left).¹² Of the remaining half trees, four have been matched with those carved on slabs housed in other museums or discovered at Nimrud (Zurich 1911 + Nimrud 34 right and 55·147 left, Bowdoin 1860·4 right and 55·151 left, Dresden Heermann-Verzeichnis 22 right and 55·156 left, 55·156 right and Zurich 183 + Nimrud F·5 left).¹³ This leaves one half tree on slab 55·152 right, without a match (see below).

Three iconographical styles are identifiable among the individual renderings of the sacred trees in The Brooklyn Museum.

55·150. This slab originates from room S and shows a complete sacred tree skillfully carved in flat relief (Fig. 1). Its three-tiered trunk, tilting slightly to the right, rests upon a base shaped as two back-to-back crests which curve outward (Fig. 2). Each crest has petal-like decorations along the

⁹ Color — black, red, white — is still visible on a number of surviving slabs from the royal residence, particularly on parts of the body and garments of the king and genies. For an idea of how the sacred tree in color may have been conceived in antiquity, compare the decorated knobbed plates dated to the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (in this instance, yellow glaze is substituted for the red pigment of the reliefs); see, P. Albenda, *Decorated Assyrian Knob-*

Plates in the British Museum, Iraq 53 (1991): 49–50, Pls. V top center, VI center, VII–X.

¹⁰ Bleibtreu, *Die Flora der assyrischen Reliefs*, 53–59.

¹¹ Paley, *King of the World*, 56, 70, Pls. 8, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62, 63, 76, Pls. 13–15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50, Pl. 1; Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen*, 37, 70–71.



Fig. 1. Brooklyn Museum, 55.150.



Fig. 2 Brooklyn Museum, Detail: 55-150.



Fig. 3 Brooklyn Museum, Detail: 55-150.

outer edge. The shape of the double-crested base is probably a decorative version of the large basal fronds of the palm tree which are occasionally included in artworks showing trees.¹⁴ Along the trunk of the tree are two sets of binding devices, each consisting of the three-ringed band and C-shaped braces;

¹⁴ See: N. Beaux, *Le Cabinet de curiosités de Thutmosis III. Plantes et animaux du "Jardin botanique" de Karnak*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 36 (Leuven, 1990), 205–206; A. Moortgat, *Vorderasiatische Rollsiegel. Ein Beitrag zur*

Geschichte der Steinschneidekunst (Berlin, 1940), Nos. 548 (Syrian), 688 (Babylon); *idem.*, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia. The Classical Art of the Near East* (London, 1969), Pl. K, 7 (Middle Assyrian).



Fig. 4 Brooklyn Museum, 55-152.

lacking is the stem with volute terminals. At the top of the tree trunk where it supports the large palmette, the binding device consists of two upper half braces secured by a broad band with upper and lower rims. Immediately above, a stem showing curled terminals extends outward on either side and may represent the calyx of the palmette (Fig. 3). The plant is composed of an arc with chevron center surrounded by seven large fronds or petals.

Multiple ribbon-like stems of the tree emerge from the trunk on either side and are arranged in axial symmetry. Stems with and without a single swirl alternate in regular sequence; all the stems

with swirls terminate in a palmette, while those without swirls touch a flower of the garland. The visual effect created by the symmetrical pattern of the stems may be described as “rayed” (see Fig. 8a). The palmette-garland is formed by independent curved bands whose curled ends touch the flower, below the calyx (Fig. 1). Furthermore, where the garland surrounds the palmette of the tree, the pattern of overlapping bands imparts an illusion of spatial depth.

The rayed style of the sacred tree carved on slab 55-150 recurs on other surviving reliefs whose proposed original location is room S of the Northwest Palace.¹⁵ The rayed style seems to have been restricted to that room, although a related version was adapted for the sacred trees carved on the slabs assigned to room T, as well as for the tree shown on slab B-23 of the throne room (on the latter, see below).

55-151 and 55-152. These adjoining slabs come from room T of the Northwest Palace (see Fig. 4). Each slab shows a half tree on the left and right sides, respectively. When combined into a complete tree, the matching half trees on slabs 55-151 right and 55-152 left depict a variant of the rayed style (Fig. 8b). Several features of the sacred tree in room T have been modified: the binding device at the top of the tree trunk shows two C-braces, and a stem with volute terminals surmounts each of the binding devices on the body of the trunk and on the crested base.

The half tree at the right side of slab 55-152 (Fig. 4) shows an unusual pattern made from three stems with swirls aligned in succession and, near the bottom, two plain stems that cross one another. The pattern of the Brooklyn example matches that on the half tree of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts slab 33-371.¹⁶ Both slabs 55-152 and 33-371 show a left-facing winged genie. From this it is concluded that the slabs do not adjoin, since genies positioned on either side of a sacred tree either face the tree or face away from the tree.¹⁷ But elsewhere in the same chamber slabs T-3 and T-4 show two genies facing left and between them is a sacred tree.¹⁸ Another argument against assigning slab 33-371 a position to the right of slab 55-152, is the rendering of a helmet with two horns on the Boston genie — all the other surviving genies of room T wear a helmet with three horns — and the beard. We may remark that a sculptor familiar with the two-horned helmet style was probably responsible for the carving of the winged figure on the Boston slab.¹⁹ As for the beard of the genie on the Boston slab, as well as that of a wingless genie carved on a slab in Williams College, the strands of hair are twisted rather than striated — a ninth century iconographical style — and this detail is exceptional. The former style was standardized in Assyrian art after the middle of the eighth century; nonetheless on at least two other reliefs, including one discovered face down in a trench dug by Layard, the rendering of the beard of a winged genie and an Assyrian archer, respectively, shows the strands twisted.²⁰

55-147 and 55-148. These slabs originate from room L and each shows a matching half tree. The sacred tree formed by the paired half trees rests upon a base constructed from a triple binding device — three ringed bands, two upper half braces, and a stem with a volute terminal on either side (Fig. 6). The multiple stems of the tree trunk are without swirls and intersect in a criss-cross pattern which may be described as the “lattice” style (Fig. 8c). The treatment of the garland bands and

¹⁵ Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, Pls. 7, 8, 33, 56, 57, 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Pl. 25, p. 32; E. L. B. Terrace, *The Art of the Ancient Near East in Boston*. (Boston, 1962), Pl. 78.

¹⁷ Paley and Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction of the Relief Representation*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Pl. 4. The carvers of the sacred trees were not necessarily the same as those of the genies and human figures. The two groups of subject matter may have been carved on the reliefs at slightly different times.

¹⁹ Genies wearing two-horned helmets were positioned in the adjacent room Z. In addition, compare the renderings of the elongated beard on genies from room L, who likewise wear helmets with two horns (Paley, *King of the World*, Pl. 22, c; Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, Pls. 9, 31, 34). The present author suggests position T-9 for the Boston slab and T-10 for the Williams College slab, based upon the following evidence: matching half trees, the standard Type B 19-line inscription (see J. E. Reade, *Texts and Sculptures from the North-West Palace, Nimrud, Iraq* 47

(1985): 208–209), the comparative measurements of the two slabs and plinths (Paley and Sobolewski, *ibid.*, 50, 73, plan 5). It may be noted, too, that the Boston and Williams College slabs were removed from the Northwest palace in the early 1850s, at about the same time as the many other stone reliefs which shortly thereafter were shipped to colleges in the United States. On this subject, see: Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, 2–3, 5–16; D. S. Francke, in V. E. Crawford, P. O. Harper, and H. Pittman, *Assyrian Reliefs and Ivories in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1980), 40–46.

²⁰ See: Porter, *JNES* 53 (1993); Fig. 4. This relief possibly originates from room S of the Northwest Palace: Paley, *King of the World*, 70–71; R. D. Barnett and A. Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculpture in the British Museum* (Toronto, 1975), Pl. 34 (detail of B.M. 124579). Barnett describes the relief as originating from the “Throne Room”. Reade, however, suggests room WM or another room of the west wing for the relief’s provenance; *Iraq* 47 (1986): 211.



Fig. 5 Brooklyn Museum. 55-156.

flowers is the same as that depicted on the sacred trees of rooms S and T. The lattice style recurs on other surviving sacred trees of room L.²¹

55-146. A simpler version of the lattice style was adapted for the four sacred trees carved on this slab, originating from room I. All the trees show only one binding device on the body of the trunk, and the omission of the second binding device may be an artistic refinement resulting from the reduced size of the individual tree. One detail that differs significantly is the method of attaching the stems and garland bands to the individual flowers of the garland. In this instance the stems and garland bands are tied to the palmette which lacks the calyx. The sacred trees carved on the other surviving slabs from room I show similar features.²²

²¹ Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II*, Pls. 9, 17, 18, 31, 34, 40; Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen*, 66–71, Tafel 14.

²² See: Stearns, *ibid.*, Pls. 73, 78, 81. The sacred trees on the

slabs in room H are similar to those in room I, except that there are two binding devices on the body of the trunk; *ibid.*, Pls. 75, 80.



Fig. 6. Brooklyn Museum. Detail: 55·147



Fig. 7. Brooklyn Museum. Detail: 55·156.

55·156. This slab has been assigned a position in room F of the Northwest Palace and shows a half tree on the left and right sides, respectively (Fig. 5). The half tree on the left side matches the half tree on a relief in Dresden (Heermann-Verzeichnis 22) and that on the right side matches Zurich 183 + Nimrud F-5 left. The design of the complete tree may be described as the “double-garland” style (Fig. 8*d*). The rendering of the trunk and its component parts is similar to that of the sacred trees in room L. Multiple stems without swirls extend from the trunk in a criss-cross pattern and, arranged in pairs, terminate in a palmette. The paired stems are tied together at the base of the flower which now shows a calyx (Fig. 7). Framing the sacred tree on three sides is a palmette-garland whose bands with pointed ends are tied to the individual flowers. Stems of short length connect the palmette crowning the trunk to the garland. The double-garland style of the sacred tree recurs on other surviving slabs assigned to room F.²³

An ornate variant of the double-garland style, showing stems with swirls that transect other stems, was adapted for the rendering of the sacred trees on the corner slabs in room B, the throne

²³ Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen*, 37, Tafel 7.

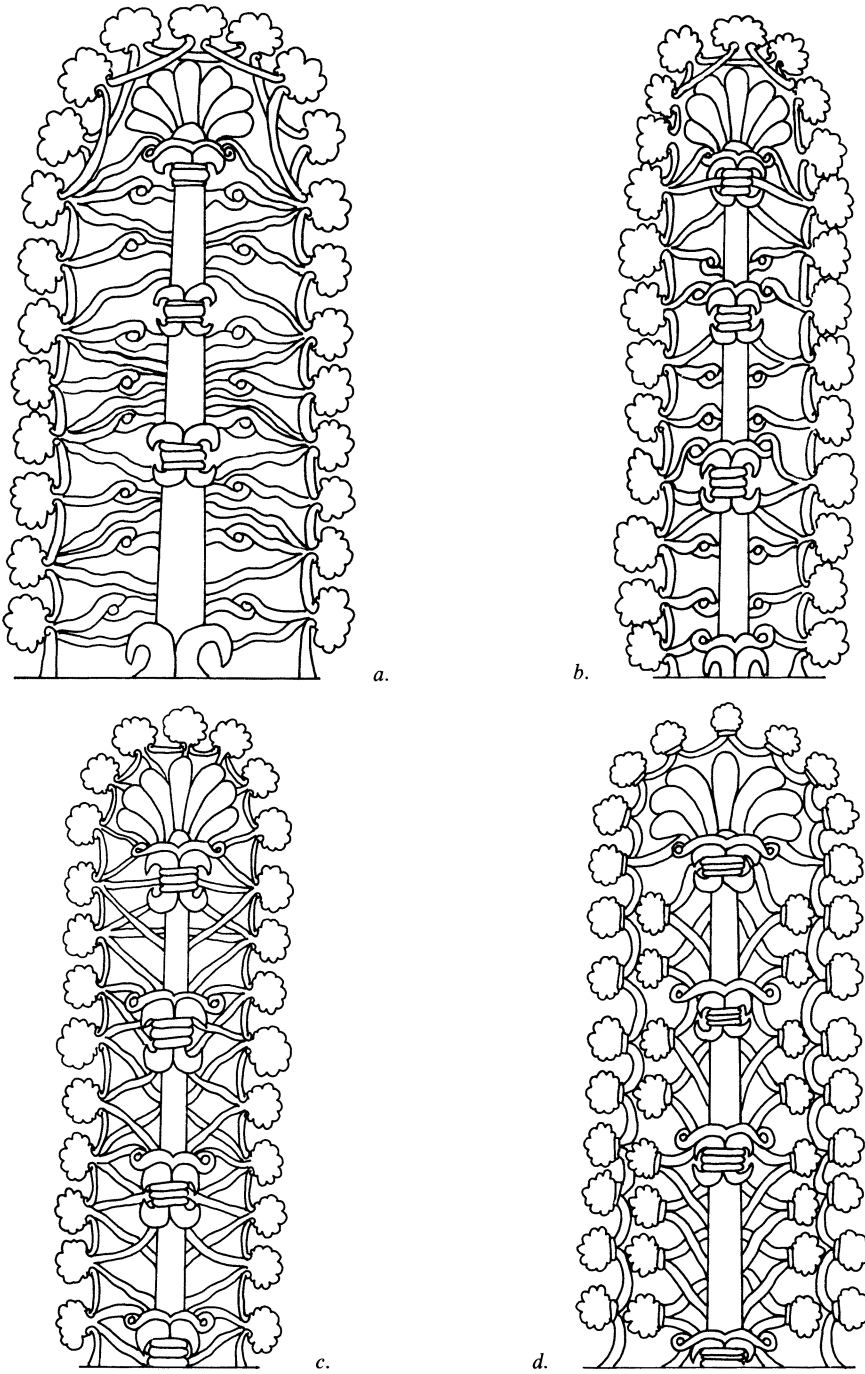


Fig. 8 Line drawings of *a*: 55·150; *b*: 55·151 right and 55·152 left; *c*: 55·147 right and 55·148 left; *d*: 55·156 right and reconstructed left.

room of the palace.²⁴ Elsewhere in the same chamber, however, the sacred tree shown on slab B-23 relates to the rayed style of room S and T.²⁵ The design of that sacred tree, flanked by the Assyrian king and a winged genie, is a fine example of the axial symmetry adopted for the sacred tree motif. Its component parts, including the alternating stems with and without swirls, are arranged

²⁴ J. Meuszyński, The Throne-Room of Aššur-našir-apli II, (Room B in the North-West Palace at Nimrud), *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 64 (1975): 54, 56, 63, 66, Figs. 9–12, 15–16, 18 (slabs B-21, B-25, B-31), Pls. I, II, IX.

²⁵ Barnett and Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculpture*, Pl. 13. A similar tree is depicted on slab B-13; Meuszyński, *ibid.*, Fig. 6.

according to a regular harmonious scheme. The trunk is set upon a base composed of two outward-curving crests and a stem with a volute terminal on either side. The single binding device on the trunk shows plain C-braces secured by three ringed-bands; lacking is the stem with volute terminals. An additional pair of braces may be represented by the tips of two curved forms which emerge upward from behind the trunk. A similar detail appears below the binding at the top of the trunk, but here it turns downward. The palmette crowning the trunk is unusual for its nine fronds.²⁶

Still another, plain variant of the double-garland style was adapted for the sacred trees depicted on the wall reliefs in the two adjoining rooms G and N. The slabs were discovered *in situ* and are unpublished. However, the reconstructed drawings show that the trees in those two chambers are noteworthy for the four-tiered division of the trunk, the absence of stems with swirls, and the increased size of the individual palmettes which are attached to the paired stems and to the garland framing the tree.²⁷

Conclusion

The above analysis of the sacred trees depicted on the stone reliefs housed in The Brooklyn Museum demonstrates that the plant motif had several iconographical styles. On the Brooklyn examples three styles and their variants are identified — rayed, lattice, double-garland. Those styles recur on other extant reliefs showing sacred trees, originally placed in the same and nearby rooms of the Northwest Palace. We may surmise that the designers of the plant motif created several acceptable styles, each adapted for one or more rooms of the royal residence. Artists responsible for the outlining and carving of the subject matter on the slabs produced sacred trees that were not entirely identical.

Although the sacred tree of the stone reliefs varies in style, one important constant feature is the palmette. The palmette crowning the trunk may indeed represent the fronds of a palm tree rendered in decorative fashion. Or, the palmette may represent the cross-section of a flower of the *Compositae* Family, or perhaps the *Rosaceae* Family; the rosette, a motif common in ancient Near Eastern art, also derives from a flower of the *Compositae* family.²⁸ Is there a possibility, then, that the palmette itself is the essential “sacred” motif? The trunk may represent the stand or pedestal upon which the flower rests and, together, the palmette and stand are shaped to resemble a palm tree.²⁹ In every instance the palmette is replicated on the garland framing the tree, regardless of the various methods of attachment. In most other Assyrian art works of contemporary date the palmette on its stand lacks the framing garland, and occasionally it is depicted without additional features.³⁰

A polychrome painting on a clay vessel discovered in Ashur shows a ritual ceremony accompanied by female musician(s), and centered in the scene is a large winged disk over a palmette of equal size.³¹ The winged disk is identified with a specific male deity and Šalmu, a name for the sun-god, has been established.³² The palmette, expanded into a tree, may be identified with a specific female deity. The goddess Ishtar is proposed here. A Late Assyrian hymn to Ishtar of Nineveh describes her as the goddess of the “palm tree”;³³ the iconographic evidence goes back to the Old Assyrian period at Tell al Rimah.³⁴ The importance of Inanna/Ishtar as the goddess of the date-harvest has been demonstrated.³⁵

²⁶ Sacred trees of the 8th century show nine fronds; see Bleibtreu, *Die Flora der neuassyrischen Reliefs*, Pl. 6, Fig. 42.

²⁷ Meuszyński, *Die Rekonstruktion der Reliefdarstellungen*, 44–49, 73–76, Tafel 8, 9, 16. It should be noted that the sacred trees on slabs N-15, N-16 show the rayed style.

²⁸ See: Beaux, *Le Cabinet de curiosités de Thutmosis III*, 108. Compare the profile view of a rosette disk which extends from the headband of a genie; Barnett and Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculpture*, Pl. 4.

²⁹ Here, a practical method of attachment may have been similar to that used for mirrors, see: P. Albenda, *Mirrors in the Ancient Near East, Source. Notes in the History of Art* IV/2–3 (1985): 5–7; K. R. Nemet-Nejat, *A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk*, in Cohen, Snell, Weisberg, eds., *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (Bethesda, 1993), 163–168.

³⁰ For example, see Bleibtreu, *Die Flora der neuassyrischen Reliefs*, Figs. 16, 22. For discussion of the daisy-like and

palmette flowers, see B. P. Mallowan, *Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs*, in P. O. Harper and H. Pittman, eds., *Essays on Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in Honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson* (New York, 1983), 37–38.

³¹ J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1969), 326, Fig. 628.

³² S. Dalley, *The God Šalmu and the Winged Disc*, *Iraq* 48 (1986): 88–89.

³³ A Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, *State Archives of Assyria* 3 (Helsinki, 1989), 18.

³⁴ T. Howard-Carter, *An Interpretation of the Sculptural Decoration of the Second Millennium Temple at Tell Al-Rimah*, *Iraq* 45 (1983): 64–66, Pl. IIa.

³⁵ T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness, A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven and London, 1976), 34–37, 135, 140–141. The date palm connection with Ishtar is also discussed by Porter, *JNES*, 138–139.

An incantation text uses the phrase, “the mighty date palm, with heroic strength”, which is a metaphor intended to depict the tree with similar descriptions of Ishtar.³⁶ In the context of the wall reliefs of the Northwest Palace, there is evidence for an association between the sacred tree and the cult of Ishtar. One relief from room I of the palace shows two female genies flanking the sacred tree.³⁷ They are adorned with necklaces composed of disks decorated with an eight-pointed star, a design generally identified with the goddess Ishtar.³⁸ A similar female genie is shown on a relief in room L of the palace.³⁹ In the decorative arts knobbed plates for wall attachment in the temple of Kidmuri at Nimrud, the temple of Ishtar, were painted with garlands composed of buds and leafy flowers, decorations appropriate for the goddess.⁴⁰

Accepting the identification of the sacred tree on the wall reliefs as a divine symbol, the so-called pollination scene must then portray the Assyrian king and genies as receiving energy and power *from* the tree, rather than fertilizing it, as is generally thought.⁴¹ In this regard, it is worthy to observe that Ashurnasirpal II has an identical gesture — raised right hand clenched with one finger extended — when he faces the sacred tree and deity in the winged disk on slab B-23, and the five symbols of deities on his stele from the Ninurta temple.⁴²

³⁶ M. J. Geller, A Middle Assyrian Tablet of UTUKKŪ LEMNŪTU, Tablet 12, *Iraq* 42 (1980): 35, 41.

³⁷ Barnett and Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculpture*, Pl. 17.

³⁸ K. R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Western Asiatic Jewellery*, c. 3000–612 B.C. (London, 1971), 140–143, 151–152.

³⁹ S. Paley, *King of the World*, 63–64.

⁴⁰ Albenda, *Iraq* 53 (1991): 46, 52–53, Pls. VII, VIII, IX, X.

⁴¹ Gadd gives a similar conclusion by noting that the tree is itself the source of magic virtue. Without further comment, he dismisses the identification of the tree as a palm. See, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East*, (London, 1948), 91–92.

⁴² Barnett and Lorenzini, *Assyrian Sculptures*, Pls. 2, 13.