

Fear, Concern and Care in the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II

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Abstract

The doors and gates of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu were highly guarded by a great variety of protective figures. These are known as *lamassu* or *šēdu* (bulls and lion colossi) and *apkallū* (genies), which acted both as architectural elements and as overseers of persons moving in and out. 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 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 and anxiety on different levels, both in space and time.

1. Introduction¹

The door, as an architectural feature that controls the admittance and rejection to an entrance, is born with ritual significance. Quoting Van Gennep, “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.”² Therefore, the act of crossing thresholds and passing doors symbolizes 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.³

The symbolism of doors and entrances was obviously recognized by the ancient Mesopotamians, where accesses were conceived as much more than

1 Author’s note: this paper develops some of the ideas presented in a previous research published in L. Portuese, ‘The Genies of the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II’, *Ash Sharq, Bulletin of the Ancient Near East: Archaeological, Historical and Societal Studies* 4 (2020), 253–291.

2 A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago 1960, 20.

3 Turner 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” (V. Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*’, in: V. Turner (ed.), *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca and London 1967, 93–94).

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.⁴ 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.⁵ The implication is that protection was felt to be necessary, and the functions of doors went beyond the prosaic level of a ‘spatial passage’ and became a ‘spiritual passage’ at a higher conceptual level.⁶

These concepts were vividly expressed in the late Assyrian palaces, where architectural doors protected connections between spaces.⁷ 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 Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu, the aim of this contribution is to analyse the protective figures and their attributes in the light of textual refer-

- 4 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 D. Ragavan, ‘Entering Other Worlds: Gates, Rituals, and Cosmic Journeys in Sumerian Sources’, in: D. Ragavan (ed.), *Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World* (Oriental Institute Seminars 9), Chicago 2013, 201–221.
- 5 J.E. Curtis, N. Tallis, *The Balawat Gates of Ashurnasirpal II*, London 2008, 1.
- 6 Y. Jia, *Imperial Doors of Assyria: Monumentality, Spatiality, and Rituality of the Neo-Assyrian Architectural Doors from Balawat*, Ph.D.-thesis, Harvard University 2014, 256. 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 B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi irub. Die Kulttopographische und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Baghdader Forschungen 16), Mainz am Rhein 1994, 13–36; L. Battini, ‘Un exemple de propagande néo-assyrienne: les défenses de Dūr-Sharrukīn’, *Contributi e materiali di archeologia orientale* 6 (1996): 217–234; L. Battini, ‘Les portes urbaines de la capitale de Sargon II: étude sur la propagande royale à travers les données archéologiques et textuelles’, in: J. Prosecký (ed.), *Intellectual Life in the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the Forty-Third Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Prague, July 1–5, 1996*. Prague 1998, 41–55. For a comparative cross-cultural analysis of the gate space functions in Mesopotamia and the Levant based on textual, visual and archaeological evidence, see N.N. May, ‘Gates and Their Functions in Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel’, in: N.N. May, U. Steinert (eds.), *The Fabric of Cities: Aspects of Urbanism, Urban Topography and Society in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome*, Leiden and Boston 2014, 77–121. 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, *Imperial Doors of Assyria*. For an investigation on the relationships between doorways and the use of protective *formulae* in the monuments of Ashurnasirpal II, see L. Portuese, ‘A New Hypothesis Regarding the Use of *Formulae* in the Ashurnasirpal II Texts’, *Studi Classici e Orientali* LXIII (2017), 29–42. Finally, for a recent examination on the door and its various symbolisms, see L. Verderame, ‘Le symbolisme de la porte dans les rituels assyro-babyloniens’, in: P.M. Michel (ed.), *Rites aux portes* (Études genevoises sur l’Antiquité 5), Bern 2017, 83–92.
- 7 For an examination of doors in the late Assyrian palaces see Curtis, Tallis, *The Balawat Gates*, 4–6, focused on the Balawat Gates of Ashurnasirpal II, and of K. Radner, ‘Gatekeepers and Lock Masters: The Control of Access in Assyrian Palaces’, in: H.D. Baker, E. Robson, G. Zólyomi (eds.), *Your Praise is Sweet: A Memorial Volume for Jeremy Black from Students, Colleagues and Friends*, London 2010, 269–280, on the means, both material and human, employed in the Assyrian palaces to control access.

ences in Mesopotamian incantations and rituals, and to establish a link between ritual activity and internal movement.

2. Protective figures: a description

In late Assyrian palaces, all major entrances were furnished with sculptures and pictures 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 Ashurnasirpal 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 humanoid types, which are anthropomorphic figures often described as genies.⁸ 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.

Proceeding with the first category, the doors in the Northwest Palace were mostly protected by lion and bull colossi. The terms *lamassu* or *šēdu*, the male counterpart, have become conventional among archaeologists to designate these creatures, although the link between iconography and text is not as direct as it might seem, and various texts describe more than two colossi types.⁹ From a semantic point of view, these terms symbolised the expression of 'vital strength' and their etymology seems to be close to the notion of 'protection'. Though texts do not give any indication concerning the appearance of these guardian figures, in the environment of bull colossi it is the term *aladlammû*, attested only in Neo-Assyrian building inscriptions, which perfectly describes the colossal winged human-headed bulls flanking the gates.¹⁰

In the palace, these benevolent demons appear at various focal points and in the most pivotal locations. They always stand on their legs at each side of the main gates and doorways without performing any specific action or gesture. In

8 K. Sonik, 'Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Supernatural: A Taxonomy of *Zwischenwesen*', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 14 (2013), 103–116.

9 CAD L, *lamassu*, 60–66; CAD Š, *šēdu*, 256–259.

10 An exact correlation between texts and archaeology has been the focus point of most studies: D. Kolbe, *Die Reliefprogramme religiös-mythologischen Charakters in neuassyrischen Palästen. Die Figurentypen, ihre Benennung und Bedeutung*, Frankfurt am Main, Bern 1981, 1–14; B.J. Engel, *Darstellungen von Dämonen und Tieren in assyrischen Palästen und Tempeln nach den schriftlichen Quellen*, Mönchengladbach 1987; J.M. Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace Without Rival at Nineveh*, Chicago, London 1991, 100–101; V. Danrey, 'Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh: Genesis of an Iconographic Motif', *Iraq* 66 (2004), 134–135; D. Kertai, 'The Creatures that Protected the Doors of Nineveh during the Second Millennium BCE', *Mesopotamia* L (2015), 147–156.

only one instance, however, the lion colossi of the throneroom (B) are distinguished by the objects they hold and the gestures they perform. At door d, the lion centaurs hold a small hooved quadruped clasped to the chest with the left hand, presumably a goat, and a stalk with three tufted rosettes in the lowered right hand. At door c, instead, the lion colossi fold their hands.¹¹

Winged human-headed colossi played a decorative or architecturally functional role, and had an important symbolic potential in protecting doorways and entrances. Tiglath-pileser III tell us, in this regard, that he set up at entrances “(statues of) lions, *šēdu*, (and) *lamassu*” in their splendour and “erected (them there) as objects of wonder (for the people).”¹² A threshold inscription from the royal palace of Sargon II declares: “May the protecting colossus, the guardian god, wield unlimited sway therein, night and day; may they not depart from its side.”¹³ In his inscriptions, Sennacherib refers to colossi as creatures evoking protection and prosperity for the palace and its owner: “May the good *šēdu* (and) the good *lamassu* surround these palatial halls forever and ever. May they never leave them.”¹⁴ In two instances, Esarhaddon even more vividly describes the protective role of *šēdu* and *lamassu*: “[I had stone *šēdus* and] *lamassus*, [whose appearance] repels [evil, placed to the right and the left of their gate(s) as protectors of the walk (and) guardians of the path of the king] who [made them], and their benevolent aspect: “Let the good *šēdu* (and) the good *lamassu*, who guard my royal path (and) who make me happy, last forever and ever in that palace. May they never leave it.”¹⁵ In sum, from texts we clearly surmise that Assyrian kings largely used lion and bull colossi at the main doorways of their palaces for decorative, protective and propitiatory reasons.

The second category of doorway guardians in the palace is represented by anthropomorphic figures, known as genies. Several were identified through textual sources and associated with the antediluvian *apkallū* sages, and distinguished in human- and bird-*apkallū*.¹⁶ The group *apkallū* also includes the

11 L. Portuese, ‘The Throne Room of Aššurnasirpal II: A Multisensory Experience’, in: A. Hawthorn, A.-C. Rendu Loisel (eds.), *Distant Impressions: The Senses in the Near East*, University Park 2019, 72.

12 H. Tadmor, S. Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria* (RINAP 1), Winona Lake 2011, text 47 lines r. 29’b–30’.

13 D.D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia II. Historical Records of Assyria: from Sargon to the end* (Oriental Institute Publications XL), Chicago 1927, 53 (§ 101). See also A. Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad*, Göttingen 1994, 362 lines 137–140.

14 A.K. Grayson, J. Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC)*, Part 2 (RINAP 3/2), Winona Lake 2014, text 40 lines 49’–50’.

15 E. Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (RINAP 4), Winona Lake 2011, text 3 lines v 17’–v 20’; text 1 lines vi 62–vi 64.

16 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,

fish-*apkallū*, a human wearing a fish-cloak, though it has not been found in the palace in question. These 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.¹⁷

While these physical features could suggest that they represent different entities, their functions within the palace do not seem to have depended only on this distinction.¹⁸ 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 cone, alternating tufted rosettes and cones, mace, stag, palmettes, palm frond, kid/lamb, pomegranates, rosettes. In the light of their objects, Kolbe 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).¹⁹

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. In fact, actual Mesopotamian rituals and incantations sometimes allude to the objects the figures hold as used to protect entrances

together with the execution of the 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 J.E. Reade, 'Assyrian Architectural Decoration: Techniques and Subject-Matter', *Bagh. Mitt.* 10 (1979), 35–43; Kolbe, *Die Reliefprogramme*; B. Parker Mallowan, 'Magic and Ritual in the Northwest Palace Reliefs', in: P.O. Harper, H. Pittman (eds.), *Essays on Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in honor of Charles Kyrle Wilkinson*, New York 1983, 33; A. Green, 'Neo-Assyrian Apotropaic Figures: Figurines, Rituals and Monumental Art, with Special Reference to the Figurines from the Excavations of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq at Nimrud', *Iraq* 45/1 (1983), 87–96; F.A.M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits. The Ritual Texts* (Cuneiform Monographs I), Groningen 1992; J.M. Russell, 'The Program of the Palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud: Issues in the Research and Presentation of Assyrian Art', *American Journal of Archaeology* 102/4 (1998), 674–682; C. Nakamura, 'Dedicating Magic: Neo-Assyrian Apotropaic Figurines and the Protection of Assur', *World Archaeology* 36/1 (2004), 11–25; D. Kertai, 'The Winged Genie in its Original Context', in: A. de Freitas (ed.), *Atas do Colóquio Arte da Mesopotâmia*, Lisbon 2015, 44–63.

17 Russell suspects that four-winged figures may have been considered particularly powerful and were favoured for cult areas (Russell, 'The Program of the Palace', 674, 677–682).

18 As pointed out by Battini, protective figures alternate in order to avoid repetition of the same motif (especially in the throneroom B) and much of their distinction depended on architectural specificities (L. Battini, 'Time "Pulled up" in Ashurnasirpal's Reliefs', in: L. Feliu, J. Llop, A. Millet Albà and J. Sanmartín (eds.), *Time and History in the Ancient Near East, Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Barcelona 26–30 July 2010*: 35–46. Winona Lake, 2013, 42–43).

19 Type I is represented by *lamassu* or *šēdu*. Kolbe, *Die Reliefprogramme*, 14–54.

or buildings and persons. In particular, ritual texts may be of assistance to re-create apotropaic rituals performed at doorways and to make a link between ritual activity and internal movement, thereby assigning specific doors to individual groups of people circulating within the palace.

3. Protecting the palace: rituals and incantations

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. Given the potential dangers lurking in gates and doors and the prophylactic measures taken against them, it is not surprising then that passage through entrances required special procedures. In the literary account of the funerary of Ur-Namma, his arrival at the netherworld is featured in the text by his presentation of gifts to the seven gatekeepers: “He gives gifts to the seven great gatekeepers of the netherworld.”²⁰ In some texts gates and gateway guardians, such as sculpted animals, mythical, or divine figures stationed at gates occur as recipients of sacrificial animals. This is suggested for the Shu-Sin’s funerary rites, where also protective spirits at gates received their offerings: “1 goat for the gate of the king, [...], 1 lamb for the gate of the throne [...]”²¹ Texts dating to Ibbi-Sin of Ur show that dates were direct offerings to gates: “midnight offerings: dates for the temple of Nanna (the Ekišnugal), for the “Gate”, for Ḫaya and for the “Place of the Throne””²²

Also visual art from the earlier Sumerian period offers a glimpse on sacrifices and offerings dedicated to doors and gates. On a cylinder seal from the late Uruk period (ca. 3300–2900 BCE), the so-called ‘priest-king’ is shown bringing an animal to a gate structure, followed by an attendant who presents dates.²³ In a similar vein we should probably conceive the scene depicted on the lower register of an Early Dynastic votive plaque from Ur (ca. 2550–2250 BCE.), where a nude male leading a line of four persons is pouring a libation onto an altar, followed by an attendant carrying a kid or a lamb. The scene takes place before

20 Ragavan, ‘Entering Other Worlds’, 204: 17.

21 MVN 13, 120. See also M. Sigrist, *Drehem*, Bethesda 1992, 176; D. Katz, ‘Sumerian Funerary Rituals in Context’, in: N. Laneri (ed.), *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oriental Institute Seminars 3), Chicago 2007, 175; Ragavan, ‘Entering Other Worlds’, 212: 68.

22 M.E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East*, Bethesda 1993, 410.

23 See image in J. Aruz, *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*, New York 2003, cat. no. 10a. Interestingly, Jia notes that the ritual function of dates is occasionally mentioned in texts as ‘for the lustration’ and that the offering of dates may have been extracted as juice and applied to the door-leaves for ritual purposes. In addition, considering its natural red colour the liquid may have invoked sacrificial blood (Jia, *Imperial Doors of Assyria*, 269–71).

the doorway of a building façade, suggesting that door and doorway were the recipients of libations and sacrificial animals for ritual purpose.²⁴

Later examples follow the tradition. The Middle Assyrian Royal Coronation Ritual lists numerous stones presented to a variety of deities as offerings to the gods, and mentions “two (stones) for the lions of the palace, one (for) the Upper Lamassu, one (for) the Lower Lamassu.”²⁵ Lastly, a Neo-Assyrian text describes the purification of the gate and the magical defence against anticipated evil, such as unfriendly visitor, sorcery and ‘entry of the enemy’: “[That the o]ne may be at peace with the other: sprinkle [the threshold with vinegar.] [When some]one’s gate is purified, < sulphur, gypsum, and red paste together you shall crush, > [...] you shall smear, [...]. Sorcery will not approach the house of the man.”²⁶

Enlightened by these examples and having ascertained that *apkallū* and *lamassu* were, without question, designed to exclude or expel malign influences, sickness or misfortune, 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.²⁷ In fact, most of the objects the figures hold were used in actual rituals both for entrances or buildings and for persons. Though the texts mentioned were written well after the construction of Ashurnasirpal 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 (incantations, exorcistic rituals, medical prescriptions, etc ...) 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

24 See image in Aruz, *Art of the First Cities*, cat. no. 33. See also Jia, *Imperial Doors of Assyria*, 276–277.

25 S. Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals and Cultic Texts* (SAA 20), Winona Lake 2017, text 7 lines r. iii 31–32. Each stone must have had its own properties. In fact, this offering is reminiscent of the combat myth narrative *Lugal-e*, in which Ninurta evaluates the stones in accordance to their good or bad properties (B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Religion and Ideology in Assyria* [Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 6], Boston and Berlin 2015, 438: 198).

26 Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 125 (text IV) lines iv’ 1’–10’.

27 Reade wittily notes that also the so-called stylized 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” (Reade, ‘Assyrian Architectural Decoration’, 43).

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.

3.1 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 (figs. 1a-b).²⁸ It is largely attested in apotropaic rituals to avert evil, performing the role of ‘protection’ and ‘atonement’.²⁹ In the *bit rimki* ritual we read: “by means of a *mašhultuppû* you purify the palace”³⁰ and in the *bit mēseri* ritual it is stated: “To avert evil I set up a scapegoat opposite the gate.”³¹ In the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations, a sentence clearly shows the direct connection between *lamassu* 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.”³²

28 CAD M, *mašhultuppû*, 365–366.

29 Parker Mallowan was the first scholar to posit the identification of the *mašhultuppû* with the animal held by the genies (Parker Mallowan, ‘Magic and Ritual’, 37–38). See also Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 77, and Portuese, ‘The Throne Room of Ashurnasirpal II’, 72–73.

30 CAD M, *mašhultuppû*, 366. The *bit rimki* (“House of Ablution” or “Bath-house”) ritual is a series of texts that deals with ritual ablution. Although a true *bit 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, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 697; D. Schwemer, *Der kontraintuitive König: Zum babylonisch-assyrischen Badehaus-Ritual*, Mainz 2019). 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 (C. Ambos, ‘Rites of Passage in Ancient Mesopotamia: Changing Status by Moving through Space: *Bit Rimki* and the Ritual of the Substitute King’, in: C. Ambos, L. Verderame (eds.), *Approaching Rituals in Ancient Cultures. Questioni di Rito: rituali come fonti di conoscenza delle religioni e delle concezioni del mondo nelle culture antiche. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Rome, November 28–30, Pisa/Rome* [Supplementi alla “Rivista degli studi orientali” LXXXVI], Pisa, Rome 2013, 39).

31 The *bit mēseri* ritual was performed for encircling a house with protective magical figurines. G. Meier, ‘Die zweite Tafel der Serie bit mēseri’, *AfO* 14 (1941–1944), 150 lines 213–214; see also A. Cavigneaux, *Māš-hul-dub-ba*, in: U. Finkbeiner, R. Dittmann, H. Hauptmann (eds.), *Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Vorderasiens. Festschrift für Rainer Michael Boehmer*, Mainz am Rhein 1995, 60; Parker Mallowan, ‘Magic and Ritual’, 37.

32 M.J. Geller, *Healing Magic and Evil Demons. Canonical Uduḡ-hul Incantations* (Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen 8), Boston and Berlin 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.

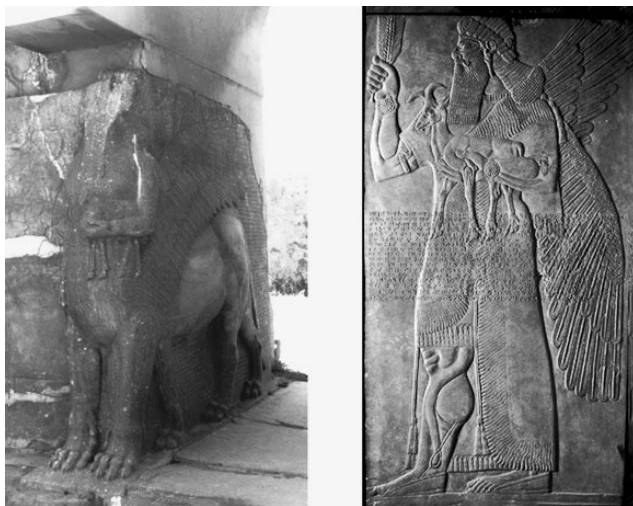


Figure 1a Northwest Palace (Kalhu): to the left, lion colossus holding goat, from the throneroom (B), door d (B-d-1) (J.M. Russell, *The Writing on the Wall. Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions* [Mesopotamian Civilizations 9], Winona Lake 1999, fig. 85a); to the right, winged genie holding goat and palm frond, from corridor Z, door a (Z-a-1) (E.A.W. Budge, *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum: Reign of Ashur-nasir-pal, 885–860 B.C.*, London 1914, pl. 27)



Figure 1b Reconstruction of the ritual performed on persons (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

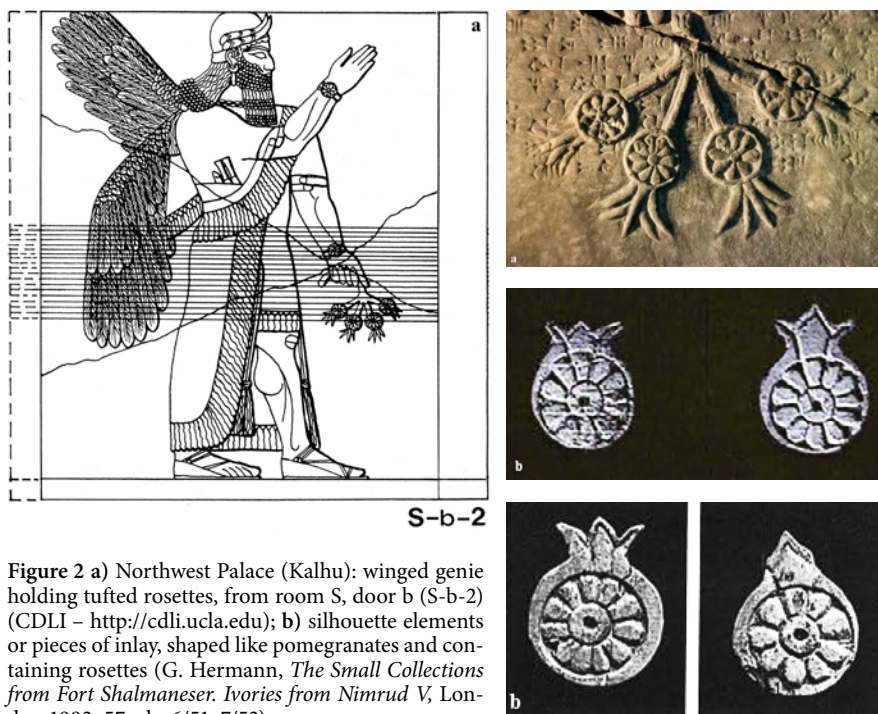


Figure 2 a) Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie holding tufted rosettes, from room S, door b (S-b-2) (CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>); b) silhouette elements or pieces of inlay, shaped like pomegranates and containing rosettes (G. Hermann, *The Small Collections from Fort Shalmaneser. Ivories from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

3.2 Tufted rosettes

A less clear item is the debated stalk of tufted rosettes, which defies any botanical identification (fig. 2a).³³ 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.³⁴ Similar examples were indeed found in some ivories coming from Kalhu (fig. 2b).³⁵ There-

³³ 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, 'The Program of the Palace', 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*" (A.K. Grayson, J. Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC)*, Part 1 [RINAP 3/1], Winona Lake 2012, text 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.

³⁴ Bartl's observations concern the incised decoration on figures' garments depicted on the reliefs of the Northwest Palace of Kalhu (P.V. Bartl, *Die Ritzverzierungen auf den Relieforthostaten Assurnasirpals II. aus Kalhu* [Baghdader Forschungen 25], Darmstadt 2014, 32–33).

³⁵ The ivories are described as silhouette elements shaped like pomegranates and containing rosettes.

fore, 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.

3.3 Bucket and cone



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

Bucket and cone represent the most common combination of objects (figs. 3a–c). They were identified from texts with the *banduddû* (ritual bucket) and *mullilu* (purification instrument or cleaner).³⁶ The action performed by genies was most likely that of sprinkling by dipping the purifier in the bucket, and then flipped onto whatever or whoever was to be purified.³⁷ 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

³⁶ Parker Mallowan, ‘Magic and Ritual’, 33.

³⁷ The nature of the *mullilu* is still unclear, male inflorescence of the date-palm (J.E. Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*, 1st ed, London 1983, 27–28; B.N. Porter, ‘Sacred Trees, Date Palms, and the Royal Persona of Ashurnasirpal II’, *JNES* 52/2 1993, 129–139), or cone of a coniferous tree (see literature in J.B. Stearns, *Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II* [AfO Beiheft 15], Graz 1961, 24: 43), but the latter is largely accepted. In fact, although the Akkadian term *mullilu* does not give a clue, Wiggermann observes that the fir-cone (*terinnatu*) is attested as an instrument bringing about the release of sin (Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 66–67, 84). This suggests that the object that looks like a pinecone in the hands of genies might be a pinecone (see also Russell, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 691–692).

[...].³⁸ 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].³⁹ 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 your holy spell, purify it with your holy incantation, and sprinkle that water over the man [...].⁴⁰



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

38 Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals*, text 50 lines ii 20–ii 25.

39 Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals*, text 2 lines i 4'–i 5'.

40 Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 66.



Figure 3c Reconstruction of the ritual performed on persons (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

A stalk of alternating tufted rosettes and cones held raised as to sprinkle the passer-by can replace the cone (figs. 4a–b).⁴¹

41 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 (e.g. Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals*, text 27 line r. 37). Russell notes that the combination of cones and tufted rosettes may have been considered to possess particularly potent protective powers (Russell, 'The Program of the Palace', 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 (U. Magen, *Assyrische Königsdarstellungen – Aspekte der Herrschaft, eine Typologie* [Baghdader Forschungen 9], Mainz am Rhein 1986, 76–77). The protective powers therefore must have depended on the intrinsic cleansing properties of plants and flowers.



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



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

3.4 Stag and palm

Undoubtedly, the most unusual animal is the stag, described by the Akkadian words *ajalu* or *lulimu* (figs. 5a–c).⁴² 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

42 Van Buren 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 (E.D. Van Buren, *The Fauna of Ancient Mesopotamia as Represented in Art* [Analecta Orientalia 18], Rome 1939, 40–42). These attributes characterize only the adult male (T.S. Kawami, 'Deer in Art, Life and Death in Northwestern Iran', *Iranica Antiqua* 40 [2005], 108). Which word – *ajalu* or *lulimu* – is appropriate to describe the anatomical features of the fallow deer is unclear. See, in this regard, Parker Mallowan, 'Magic and Ritual', 37; P. Albenda, 'Assyrian Royal Hunts: Antlered and Horned Animals from Distant Lands', *BASOR* 349 (2008), 62–70; Portuese, 'The Throne Room of Ashurnasirpal II', 73–74.



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

to exorcise a house when its construction came to an end, antlers of a stag (*lulimu*) are included.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴ or “[...] stag horn, soiled rag, [...] <You mix> (them) together. If you fumigate him (with it) over coals, he will get well.”⁴⁵ The *lulimu* 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.”⁴⁶

Along with the stag is a stalk of palmettes held in the upraised left hand (figs. 5a, c) as ready to be used identified with the *libbi gišimmari* ‘palm offshoot’.⁴⁷ Beyond the long established connection of the date palm tree to Ish-tar, goddess of sexual fertility, the offshoot of the date-palm

43 C. Ambos, *Mesopotamische Baurituale aus dem 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Dresden 2004, 100–101 lines 52’–58’; see also C. Ambos, ‘Building Rituals from the First Millennium BC. The Evidence from the Ritual Texts’, in: M.J. Boda, J. Novotny (eds.), *From the Foundations to the Crenellations. Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible* (AOAT 366), Münster 2010, 234.

44 CAD A, *ajalu*, 226, mng. 1c.

45 J. Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Ancient Magic and Divination III), Leiden and Boston 2006, 595 (text 279).

46 Geller, *Healing Magic*, 487, lines 214’–216’.

47 Parker Mallowan, ‘Magic and Ritual’, 38; Magen, *Assyrische Königsdarstellungen*, 62–64; Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 68–69, 77–78; K. Volk, ‘Palme’, in: D. O. Edzard, M. P. Streck (eds.), *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, Berlin, New York 2003–2005, 283–292.; Portuese, ‘The Throne Room of Ashurnasirpal II’, 74.



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

is included among the already mentioned equipment for rituals to make evil depart a building.⁴⁸ In addition, in the *utukkū lemnūtu* incantations the palm offshoot was used in exorcism to purify the patient: “It is the incantation for binding the date-palm offshoot on the patient [...] and put [...] a date-palm heart at his head.”⁴⁹

48 Ambos, *Mesopotamische Baurituale*, 100–101 lines 52”–58”; Ambos, ‘Building Rituals’, 234; Porter, ‘Sacred Trees’, 138.

49 Geller, *Healing Magic*, 475, 477, lines 144, 159. For the general apotropaic value of the date-palm, see Parker Mallowan, ‘Magic and Ritual’, 38 and Russell, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 687–696.



Figure 5c Reconstruction of the ritual performed on persons (drawn by M.P.M Portuese)

The palm is also found in the form of a palm frond, identified with the *ara giši-marri* ‘frond of the date palm’ (figs. 6a–b).⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ The palm frond occurs also in a prophylactic ritual of the *utukkū lemnūtu* incanta-

50 Parker Mallowan, ‘Magic and Ritual’, 38; Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 69–70, 77.

51 H. Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* (SAA 8), Helsinki 1992, text 234 lines 3–4. Here the term is, however, *zinē gišimmarri* ‘rib of palm-frond’ (see B. Landsberger, *The Date Palm and its By-products according to the Cuneiform Sources* [AfO Beiheft 17], Graz 1967, 25). The text is unassigned, but it belongs to the Assyrian tablets group (Hunger, *Astrological Reports*, 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, *Magico-Medical Means*, 45, 379).



tions: “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.”⁵²

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



Figure 6b Reconstruction of the ritual performed on persons (drawn by M.P.M. Portuese)

⁵² Geller, *Healing Magic*, 477, lines 160–163.

3.5 Kid/lamb

The presence of genies holding a kid or lamb is hypothetical in the palace but plausible (fig. 7).⁵³ The kid or lamb, *unīqu* and *puḫādu* in Akkadian,⁵⁴ 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 [...].”⁵⁵



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

53 Paley and Sobolewski have reconstructed the central door of the throneroom (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 (S.M. Paley, R.P. Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction of the Relief Representations and Their Positions in the Northwest-Palace at Kalḫu (Nimūd) III (The Principal Entrances and Courtyards)* [Baghdader Forschungen 14], Mainz am Rhein 1992, 17–20). The position of such slab is hypothetical, but was actually found in this location on Ashurnasirpal II’s Central Building façade, so the presence of some such figure here seems very likely (see image in R.D. Barnett, M. Falkner, *The Sculptures of Aššur-našir-apli II (883–859 B.C.), Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.), Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.) from the Central and South-West Palaces at Nimrud*, London 1962, pls. 126–127; see also Russell, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 706).

54 CAD U, *unīqu*, 159–160, mng. 7’b; CAD P, *puḫādu*, 478, mng. 2’b.

55 Geller, *Healing Magic*, 521–523, lines 80–98’.

3.6 Pomegranates

There is one instance in which genies hold a stalk of pomegranates, *nurmû* in Akkadian (fig. 8).⁵⁶ In Neo-Assyrian ritual texts 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.”⁵⁷ 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.”⁵⁸ The pomegranate also occurs in anti-witchcraft rituals dealing with potency problems and sexual impurity (Old Babylonian),⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

3.7 Mace

In few instances, genies hold a mace, identified with the *e’ru* ‘cornel(-stick) mace’ (fig. 9),⁶¹ used in the *utukkû lemnûtu* incantations by the exorcist to

56 CAD N, *nurmû*, 346, mng. 2b. As for the botanic ‘legibility’ of pomegranates and poppy-heads in Assyrian reliefs and related literature, see P. Hnila, ‘Pomegranates or lotus fruits? (Assyrian genii and their hanging attributes)’, *Anodos. Studies of the Ancient World 2 in Honour of Mária Novotná*, 121–131.

57 R.D. Biggs, ŠĀ.ZI.GA Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations (Texts from Cuneiform Sources, Vol. II), Locust Valley 1967, 70–74.

58 Parpola, *Assyrian Royal Rituals*, text 52 lines r. v 26’–28’. Both in the Near East and in the classical world, pomegranates seem mainly associated with female characters, and largely limited to goddesses, such as Kubaba, Aphrodite, Hera and Persephone/Kore (E. Rova, ‘Mirror, Distaff, Pomegranate, and Poppy Capsule: On the Ambiguity of Some Attributes of Women and Goddesses’, in: H. Kühne, R. M. Czichon, F.J. Kreppner (eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, 29 March – 3 April 2004, Freie Universität Berlin, Volume 1: The Reconstruction of Environment: Natural Resources and Human Interrelations through Time; Art History: Visual Communication*, Wiesbaden 2008, 562). 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 (I.J. Winter, ‘Ornament and the “Rhetoric of Abundance” in Assyria’, in: I. Eph’al, A. Ben-Tor, P. Machinist (eds.), *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 27 [Hayim and Miriam Tadmor Volume], Jerusalem 2003, 258; cf. Hnila, ‘Pomegranates’, 130). In addition, the pomegranate was used as female ornaments in jewellery objects of the Queens’ Tombs and in sculptures (M.M. Hussein, *Nimrud: the Queen’s Tombs*, Baghdad 2016, pls. 16e, 17, 44, 89b, 119).

59 T. Abusch, D. Schwemer, *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals 1* (Studies in Ancient Magic and Divination 8/1), London and Boston 2011, text 2.5 lines 4, 6.

60 Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means*, 69.

61 Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 60, 67–68; Russell, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 675; Portuese, ‘The Throne Room of Ashurnasirpal II’, 86.



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>)



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

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 [...].”⁶² 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.”⁶³

62 Geller, *Healing Magic*, 473, lines 134–135.

63 Geller, *Healing Magic*, 522–523, lines 87’–88’, 93’–96’.

3.8 Rosettes

Occasionally we find the stalk of rosettes, associated by scholars with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (fig. 10).⁶⁴ In this respect, Winter notes that “as with the lotus, the significance of this particular plant becomes clear once one observes the 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.”⁶⁵ Thus, the rosette represents that which endures and generates, and is an appropriate symbol for goddesses associated with fertility. Additionally, rosettes are conspicuously abundant in the context of the royal graves of Ur and, according to Selz, 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.’⁶⁶ Therefore, the rosette-flower must be interpreted as a stylized 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.’⁶⁷ As a consequence, its presence is more symbolic than practical.

3.9 Gestures

Besides objects, two gestures are performed by protective figures. The gesture of blessing or greeting, *karābu* in texts, always done with the right hand by genies (figs. 9–11),⁶⁸ and perhaps used as sprinkler when accompanied by the ritual bucket, and folded hands, performed only by lion colossi (fig. 12). The latter’s

64 M.-T. Barrelet, ‘Les déesses armées et ailées’, *Syria* 32/3–4 (1955), 244; P. Albenda, ‘Assyrian Carpets in Stone’, *JANES* 10/1 (1978), 9; Russell, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 696, 707.

65 I.J. Winter, ‘Carved Ivory Furniture Panels from Nimrud: A Coherent Subgroup of the North Syrian Style’, *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 11 (1976), 46.

66 G.J. Selz, ‘Early Dynastic Vessels in ‘Ritual’ Contexts’, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 94 (2004), 201.

67 G.J. Selz, ‘Plant Metaphors: on the Plant of Rejuvenation’, in: S. Gaspa, A. Greco, D. Morandi Bonacossi, S. Ponchia, R. Rollinger (eds.), *From Source to History. Studies on Ancient Near Eastern Worlds and Beyond. Dedicated to Giovanni Battista Lanfranchi on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday on June 23, 2014* (AOAT 412), Münster 2014, 664; L. Portuese, ‘Metaphorical Allusions to Life-Giving Plants in Neo-Assyrian Texts and Images’, *Antiquo Oriente* 16 (2018), 93–116.

68 Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits*, 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 (C.G. Frechette, *Mesopotamian Ritual-prayers of “Hand-lifting” (Akkadian Šuillas): An Investigation of Function in Light of the Idiomatic Meaning of the Rubric* [AOAT 379], Münster 2012, 35–38).

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.⁶⁹



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>)



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>)

⁶⁹ Magen, *Assyrische Königsdarstellungen*, 40–45, pl. 6, figs. 2–8; M. Cifarelli, 'Gesture and Alterity in the Art of Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria', *The Art Bulletin* 80/2 (1998), 216.

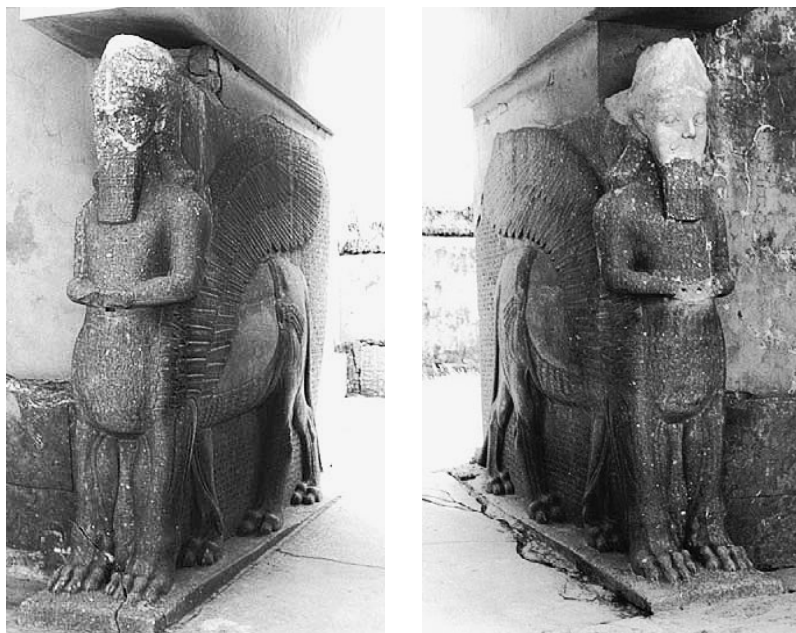


Figure 12 Northwest Palace (Kalhu): lion colossi with folded hands, from the throneroom (B), door c (B-c-1, B-c-2) (Russell, *The Writing*, figs. 83a, 84a)

All the objects can be tabulated as follows, according to their distribution throughout the palace (Table 1; fig. 13):⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The apotropaic figures examined here were placed both at the jambs of the door and at each side of the passage.

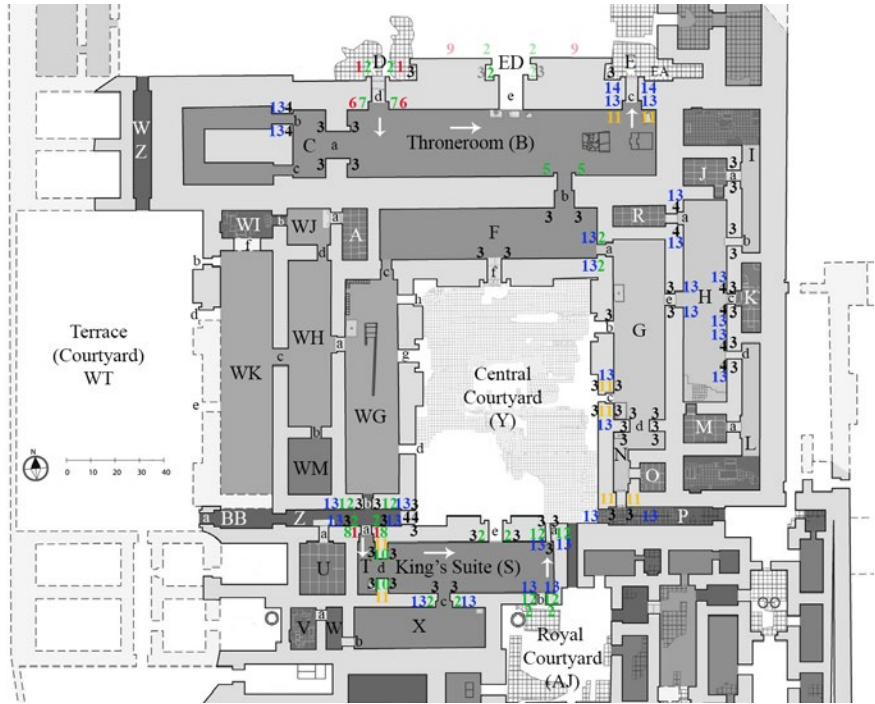


Figure 13 Northwest Palace (Kalhu): distribution of objects and gestures of apotropaic figures according to table 1 (adapted from D. Kertai, ‘The Architecture of Connectivity: Ashurnasirpal II’s Late Assyrian Palace in Kalhu’, in: D. Kurapkat, P. I. Schneider, U. Wulf-Rheidt (eds.), *Die Architektur des Weges: Gestaltete Bewegung im gebauten Raum*, Diskussionen zur Archäologischen Bauforschung 11, fig. 3) NOTE: due to space limitations, the position of numbers on plan does not always indicate the exact location of the apotropaic figures

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; ⁷¹ ED/B-e; ⁷² 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

71 Lion Colossi.
72 According to the reconstruction of Paley, Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction*, 17–20.

Description, Number on plan, Akkadian Name	Northwest Palace Doorways (room/room-door letter)
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/lulīmu</i>	D/B-d
Stalk of Palmettes (7) <i>libbi gišimmari</i>	D/B-d
Palm Frond (8) <i>ara gišimarri</i>	Z/T-a
Kid/Lamb (9) <i>unīqu/puḥādu</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 ⁷³

4. 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 throneroom (B) by entering door d and going out by door c.⁷⁴ 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

73 Lion Colossi.
74 M.E.L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains* (Vol. 1), London 1966, 103 was the first scholar to suggest that doors d and c were the entrance and the exit of the throneroom (B), followed by Paley, Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction*, 25: 67. Russell, ‘The Program of the Palace’, 705–707, 713 concludes that the west doorway d, with its apotropaic figures holding scapegoats to intercept evil forces, may well have been the entrance for visitors, while the east doorway c, with its more powerful figures giving the impression of vigilance, was unlikely to have been used as an entrance. S. Di Paolo, ‘All’udienza regale: funzione e gerarchia degli ingressi nel progetto figurativo della sala del trono di Assurnasirpal II a Nimrud’, *CMAO* 9 (2003), 523–536 suggests that the furthest entrance was earmarked for subordinates, while the closest one to the throne was intended for the highest authorities.

and secondly to expiate, heal and rid passers-by of evil.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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 suspects that in the King's Suite, the king received his high court officials and entertained palace women.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ Protective figures are coherent with this picture. The doorways lack genies holding animals, but most of the figures performs the *karābu* gesture to bless, and holds bucket and cone to purify. Only in few instances, the genies hold

75 See Portuese, 'The Throne Room of Ashurnasirpal II' for an examination on the rituals performed in the throneroom (B) of Ashurnasirpal II, according to material and textual evidence.

76 Russell, 'The Program of the Palace', 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 thronerooms 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, 'All'udienza regale', 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, Sobolewski, *The Reconstruction*, 13; S.M. Paley, R.P. Sobolewski, 'The Outer Façade of the Throne Room of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrūd (Kalhu)', in: H. Waetzoldt, H. Hauptmann (eds.), *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten, XXXIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Heidelberg 6.-10. Juli 1992* (HSAO 6), Heidelberg 1997, 334.

77 D. Kertai, *The Architecture of Late Assyrian Royal Palaces*, Oxford 2015, 40–41. Reade remarks that the genies carrying goats are the only figures who occupy almost directly equivalent positions in different palaces, namely at service entrances (J.E. Reade, 'The Architectural Context of Assyrian Sculpture', *Bagh. Mitt.* 11 [1980], 84).

78 Russell, 'The Program of the Palace', 705.

79 B.N. Porter, 'Decorations, Political Posters, Time Capsules, and Living Gods', in: A. Cohen, S.E. Kangas (eds.), *Assyrian Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II: A Cultural Biography*, Hanover and London 2010, 144–145; Kertai, *The Architecture*, 39.

the mace. This attribute occurs at specific doorways connecting with the outside to repel evil.

5. Conclusions

Bringing this all together, one may readily deduce that the presence of these numerous countermeasures expresses inherent fear and anxiety, or care and concern, for the safety of something or somebody. For some reason – perhaps the relocation of the royal court from Ashur 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 anticipated by Ashurnasirpal II and was consistent with his general religious beliefs as expressed in the decorations of the walls of his palace (e.g. the East Suite). 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.

As a final thought, it must be stressed that these coping strategies might be related to a collective level both in time and space. In the spatial axis, the location for the different ritual-apotropaic manifestations was chosen with discretion: figures were placed and rituals performed at different spots but always in proximity of the palace rooms decorated with reliefs. These palatial spaces were expected to be toured by a varied audience, both of insiders and outsiders, and were accordingly provided with counter-evil measures to protect the palace inhabitants. As a consequence, the versatile nature of the apotropaic figures and their different paraphernalia mostly depended on the space they guarded and its accessibility, leading to the conclusion that the most accessible room/space was the most protected. Furthermore, the ritual-apotropaic manifestations in stone might lead to speculation on nuances of objects and situations that were feared by the king and the palace inhabitants. For instance, the presence of animals and palm at doorways leading into audience rooms, such as the throneroom (B) and the King's Suite, was linked to the real fear and concern for the access of any untoward pollution into the palace brought by external visitors or specifically

non-Assyrians. By contrast, bucket and cone were used as standard paraphernalia to protect the palace from the daily activity of any unspecified evil entity.

Moving to the temporal axis, any Assyrian royal palace was the actual eternal residence of the king, where the memory of his kingship perpetuated and was passed down through generations. In fact, by following the “evolutionary process” of the palace, from its building to its abandonment, Assyrian kings painstakingly describe each phase: texts provide information on the idea that came up in king’s mind to found a new city, the reason leading a king to build a new residence, the start of construction works, the main building activities, the dedication on completion, the fear for the potential abandonment after owner’s death materialized in blessings and curses.⁸⁰ It is precisely this fear that was manifested in the apotropaic rituals and figures that were intended to protect the palace through time: any king laying the foundation of a new edifice was certainly aware that after his death a new ruler could reside in his building, and protective figures along with the reiteration of appropriate rituals were conceived as essential strategies to cope with the fear of losing the memory of the former king. Therefore, the king himself appealed to rituals and protective figures to keep alive his name and image engraved on the stone as well as to protect his heirs.

To conclude, an obvious way of conducting further research on this topic would be to include the evidence coming from later royal palaces to shed light on changes in the use of protective figures, related rituals, and inner circulation.

80 See, in particular, A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 BC)*, (RIMA 2), Toronto, Buffalo, and London 1991, text 17 lines v 1–103. For an in-depth analysis of curses against the Northwest Palace destruction inscribed on the Ninurta Stele, see M. Karlsson, M., ‘The Cursed Destruction of the North-West Palace’, *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* XXIII (2017), 55–66.