

TREES AND GENDER IN ASSYRIAN ART¹

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The question of identifying cultural symbolism of any period is tortuous without textual or verbal evidence. It is particularly difficult when dealing with an ancient society removed by thousands of years and vast distance in space. Such is the case when interpreting the art of Mesopotamia. Occasionally, textual references help to illuminate possible meanings of imagery. More often than not we are left with nothing but our own culturally conditioned perceptions to explain what we see. However, alternative readings suggested by gender studies raise new ways of approaching familiar scenes.² In a recent article I argued that the appearance of a fruiting date palm in the so-called “Garden Party” relief of Ashurbanipal (r. 668–631 BC) from the North Palace at Nineveh helped to situate the scene within a queen’s garden.³ Despite the fact that the climate in Assyria is unfavourable for date-palm cultivation,⁴ the image of the tree, closely associated with a goddess, symbolized the feminine space of the garden. I would like to take this proposal further and suggest that the fruiting date palm is a marker of femininity in other images from ancient Iraq and, in addition, that the conifer tree can appear as a symbol of masculinity.

It has long been recognized that there is an association in Mesopotamian art and texts between the fruiting date palm and the Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna, considered to be “the one who makes the dates be full of abundance”.⁵ Many of her attributes were shared with Ishtar, goddess of sexuality and warfare, who holds a date cluster on the Akkadian-period (c. 2300–2100 BC) cylinder seal of the scribe Adda.⁶ Another Akkadian seal depicts the goddess seated on a lion-throne alongside a date palm flanked by two figures reaching towards the fruit,⁷ while a fruiting palm tree appears on a further Akkadian seal where Ishtar is shown winged for victory and emerging between two stylized mountains.⁸ That an association between the date palm and its fruit and the goddess lasted for millennia is suggested by a fine Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal that depicts Ishtar with her traditional symbols of weapons, a star representing the planet Venus, and a lioness. In addition she stands beside a fruiting palm tree.⁹ Indeed, Ishtar is actually referred to as a “palm tree” in a seventh-century BC hymn from Nineveh.¹⁰ However, other goddesses can be associated with the produce of the palm tree, judging by the date cluster held by a goddess shown in relief on a vessel fragment of the Early Dynastic period (c. 2500–2300 BC). She is not named in the accompanying inscription but a reference to a brewery and the vegetation emerging from her shoulders has suggested that she is the grain goddess Nisaba.¹¹ In fact the date cluster’s association with femininity appears to encompass both the divine and mortal world. Women and men depicted in Early Dynastic stone reliefs, cylinder seals, and inlay often hold branches, apparently specific to their gender.¹² The branches held by the women have been interpreted as

¹ My thanks are due to Donald P. Hansen for inviting me to present a version of this paper at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University where it benefited from his comments and those of Holly Pittman. My thanks also to Oscar White Muscarella, Jean Evans, Kim Benzel, Jaime Neary and Anne Garner, who read an earlier draft and made useful suggestions.

² For a survey of theory and a detailed analysis of how ancient Mesopotamia defined sexuality and gender roles see Bahrani 2001.

³ Collins 2004. For a discussion of the queen’s garden see Albenda (1976). The relief is now in the British Museum (ANE 124920).

⁴ According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the northerly limit for date palm cultivation in Iraq is latitude 35 degrees, that is, around the region of modern Takrit. http://www.fao.org/documents/show_

[cdr.asp?url_file=/DOCREP/006/Y4360E/y4360e06.htm](http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/DOCREP/006/Y4360E/y4360e06.htm) Table 6.

⁵ Sjöberg 1988: line 7. Thorkild Jacobsen (1957: 108, fn. 32.) made the suggestion, not universally accepted, that Inanna’s name originally meant “The lady of the date-clusters” and that she was goddess of the communal storehouse of dates.

⁶ She is shown full face and winged, a typical representation of the goddess (Collon 1982: 92, No. 190).

⁷ Boehmer 1965: 65, Pl. XXXII, Abb. 383.

⁸ Boehmer 1965: 67, Pl. XXXII, Abb. 379.

⁹ Collon 1987: 166–7, No. 773.

¹⁰ Livingstone 1989: 18, No. 7.

¹¹ Martin 2003.

¹² For votive plaques see Boese 1971): Pls. I.1, V.2, IX, XVII.1; for a cylinder seal see Collon 1987: 124, No. 521. For Sumerian jewellery in the form of the male and female branches of the date palm see Miller 2000: 149–55.

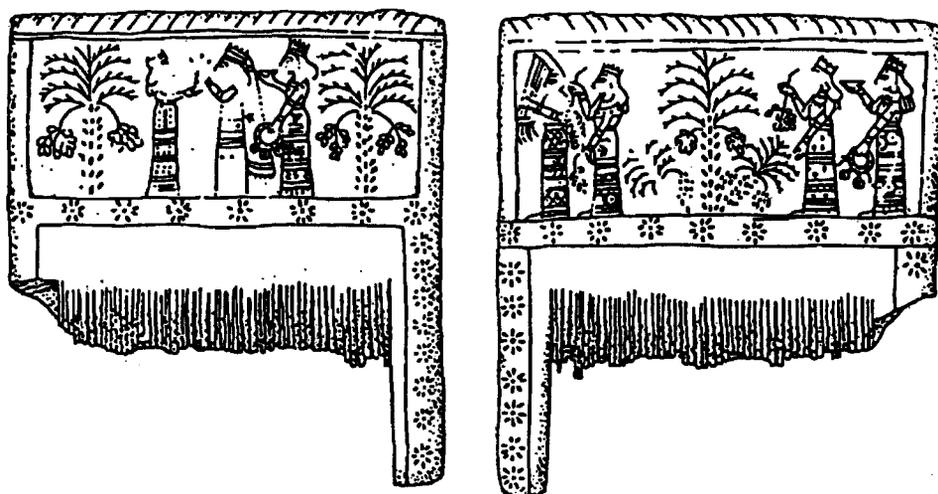


Fig. 1. Drawing of the front (left) and the back (right) of an incised ivory comb from Tomb 45, Ashur. Drawn by C. Gully.

date clusters.¹³ Similarly, among the rare Early Dynastic votive statues where such a date cluster is depicted the figures are female.¹⁴ Women are shown alongside fruiting palms on Akkadian period cylinder seals,¹⁵ and during the late fourteenth to early thirteenth centuries fruiting palms appear on Middle Assyrian cylinder seals alongside a seated female holding an object that may be a mirror and a standing female attendant holding a cloth.¹⁶ By the first millennium BC a link between dates and femininity is suggested by a beautiful cloisonné ornament decorated with a fruiting palm recovered from one of the queens' tombs in the North-West Palace at Nimrud.¹⁷ In addition a fragmentary glazed tile from Nineveh dating to the ninth century BC preserves a figure wearing the crown of an Assyrian queen with a large stylized palmette decorating the left shoulder of her robe.¹⁸ Perhaps through a direct relationship with the date palm and its fruit the women were transported into the divine realm of fertility and abundance.¹⁹

Such an interpretation allows us to review an association made between fruiting palm trees and the goddess Ishtar suggested for a number of objects from a rich private grave at Ashur dating to the Middle Assyrian period (late fourteenth century BC). Walter Andrae uncovered the burial in 1908 south-west of the temple of Ishtar Ashuritu.²⁰ Among the objects recovered was an ivory comb decorated with six figures; four on the back of the comb and two on the front proceed towards a seventh figure facing them (Fig. 1).²¹ The absence of beards suggests that all the figures are female. Three fruiting date palms punctuate the scene. The grave in which the comb was discovered had been used repeatedly and the last two bodies lay on the remains of earlier burials. Moortgat suggests that the bodies, which he believes to be female, belonged to two high priestesses

¹³ Hansen 1963: 164, fn. 98.

¹⁴ Of twelve excavated figures holding branches, from sites in the Diyala region, only one is male and, as on reliefs and inlay, his vegetation may be gender specific (perhaps the male date inflorescence). Frankfort 1939: Pl. 67 Nos. 79, 84, 85; Pl. 70, No. 99; Pl. 81, Nos. 114, 115, fragmentary statue, sex unknown: Pl. 65, No. 78 (Pls. 65 and 66 are identified as the same seated figure but in fact appear to be different statues); Frankfort 1943: female figures: Pl. 26, No. 250; Pl. 37, No. 271; Pl. 38, Nos. 273, 274, male figure: Pls. 35–6, No. 270. For a standing female figure holding a date cluster from Nippur see Orthman 1975: No. 21c. For a seated female with cluster from Kish see Moorey 1964: 83–98, Pl. XXIII. For examples of female figures with clusters from Mari, see Parrot 1956, Pl. XXXVII, Nos. 647–826, Pl. XLI, Nos. 341, 147, 265, 1025.

¹⁵ Boehmer 1965: 125, Pl. LIX, Abb. 708–10.

¹⁶ Matthews 1990: 110, Nos. 509, 511, 518.

¹⁷ Hussein and Suleiman 2000, p. 42. More conveniently, the plaque is illustrated on the cover (left) of Oates and Oates 2001. The piece was one of three similar hinged plaques that formed an elaborate headdress. The palm-tree element was on the right of a central plaque decorated with a "sacred tree" (see fn. 45). The piece on the left has lost its inlay but perhaps was another palm tree.

¹⁸ Reade 1987, p. 139, Fig. 1. Albenda 2005, p. 109, n. 85. Stylized palmettes appear to have been symbols of abundance, see Winter 2003. Indeed, on wall reliefs from the North-West Palace palmettes decorate the robes of the king, male officials and genies who were considered to be the source of abundance, see below fn. 57.

¹⁹ For a discussion of performativity and substitution as recorded in Mesopotamian art see Bahrani 2001: 137–8.

²⁰ Andrae 1954.

²¹ Vorderasiatisches Museum (VA Ass 1097). Andrae 1954: 136–7, Fig. 163a, b; Aruz 1995a.

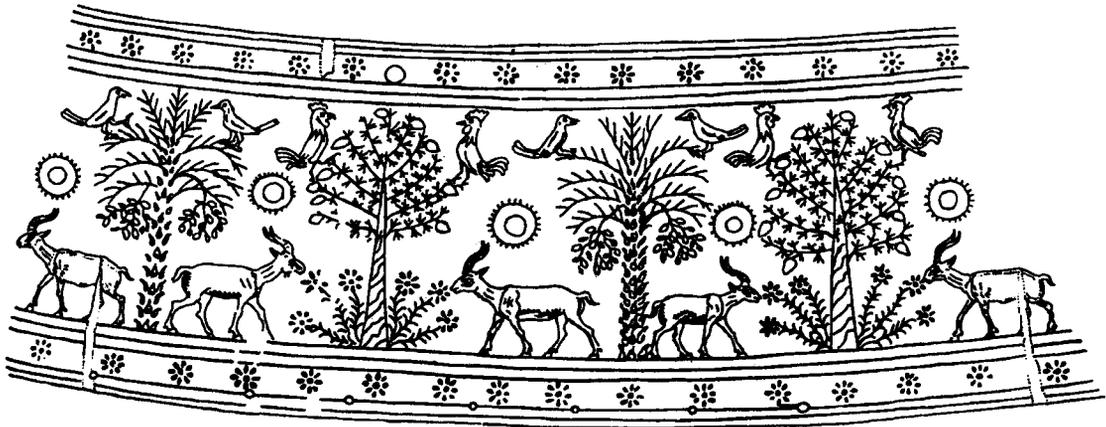


Fig. 2. Drawing of incised decoration on an ivory pyxis from Tomb 45, Ashur. From Haller 1954: Fig. 161.

of the Ishtar temple, presumably because their grave was located close to the temple building.²² Following this conclusion, Barbara N. Porter makes a firm association between Ishtar and the images of fruiting palms on objects from the grave.²³ However, the last two skeletons in the grave were not sexed at the time of excavation, nor is it clear that all the objects belonged to them.²⁴ Nonetheless, even if a direct link cannot be established between the tomb owners and Ishtar, as a marker of femininity the presence of the fruiting date palms on the comb itself might confirm the sex of at least one of the grave's inhabitants.²⁵

Another fine ivory object discovered in the same grave as the comb is a pyxis incised with a design of fruiting date palms alternating with conifers laden with cones (Fig. 2).²⁶ The frieze creates a rhythmic pattern. Similar patterns formed by chains or bands of palmettes, cones, and composite trees appear on Neo-Assyrian (c. 1000–612 BC) sculptured reliefs as well as wall paintings and glazed bricks. They reflect an interest in repetitive patterns that express abundance.²⁷ That such schemes were part of a Mesopotamia tradition is suggested by a wall painting from Mari in Syria of the eighteenth century BC that depicts a scene flanked by composite creatures, a flowering tree and a fruiting date palm with a bird in its branches.²⁸

From at least the first millennium BC, conifers were used to indicate the land of Assyria, since the tree is repeatedly shown in Neo-Assyrian narrative reliefs that depict events taking place in that country.²⁹ The conifers on the reliefs are not shown with cones. However, an earlier reference in art to the conifer as a symbol of Assyria is found on a stone relief recovered from a well in the Ashur temple at Ashur and dating to the first half of the second millennium BC. It depicts a male mountain god, perhaps the god Ashur himself, holding two branches each ending in three lobes that may be interpreted as scaly cones of a conifer. A further pair of lobed branches emerges from behind the deity.³⁰ On the Ashur pyxis, pairs of walking gazelle flank the conifers, nibbling at

²² Moortgat 1963: 113. It is likely that those buried in the tomb were related to a certain Babu-aha-iddina, the central figure named in clay tablets associated with the burial (Wartke 1995: 82).

²³ Porter 1993: 138.

²⁴ Wartke (1995: 82) considers that both skeletons are female because of the absence of "objects such as weapons that generally characterize male burials".

²⁵ Combs are objects that are used to mark gender in many cultures. For example, in contemporary western society men's combs are smaller than those used by females, while women's combs used among the Lurs of western Iran have two rows of teeth whereas men's combs only have one row, see Mortensen 1993: 331, 344, 360. I am grateful to Oscar White Muscarella for this reference. There is insufficient evidence to determine if the shape of Assyrian combs played a role in their use by specific genders. It may be

significant that a comb with a single row of teeth is represented on two Assyrian Lamashtu plaques as one of the gifts given to this female demon (Amiet 1980: Figs. 568, 574). They may however have been given by men rather than intended for use by the demon.

²⁶ Vorderasiatisches Museum (VA Ass 1099). Andrae 1954: 135–7, Fig. 161; Moortgat (1969: 115) identifies the trees as larches; Aruz 1995b.

²⁷ Winter 2003; Albenda 2005: 84–118.

²⁸ Stommenger 1964: Pl. XXIX.

²⁹ In the same way fruiting palm trees are used on the narrative reliefs to indicate lands where they thrive, such as Babylonia and Elam (Collins 2004: 2, n. 18).

³⁰ Moortgat 1969: 111–12, Pl. 236. Two goats, each eating a cone, flank the mountain god. Goats may have had a symbolic association with the god Ashur (Unger 1965: 437–41).

flowers branching from the base of the trunks.³¹ With horns that are long and curving, the animals may be males; the horns of the female Saudi gazelle are shorter and straighter than those of the male, while the female goitred gazelle does not have horns.³² Clearly male in gender are a pair of jungle fowl cocks that sit in the branches of the conifers. This contrasts with the date palms where birds, possibly hens, perch.³³ A relationship is therefore established on the pyxis between the conifer and masculinity (the cocks and gazelle) just as between the date palms, with the hens, and femininity.

Such combinations of the alternating fruiting palm tree and conifer along with male and female animals and humans are known in similar garden “paradise” scenes from Assyria. For example, the trees act as the backdrop for a scene of a lion and lioness on a seventh-century BC relief from Nineveh.³⁴ Indeed, the image of Ashurbanipal and his queen on the “Garden Party” relief suggests that the presence of the conifer may relate to the king as much as the land of Assyria. While references to such idyllic images appear to be lacking in the military rhetoric and narrative nature of the royal inscriptions,³⁵ they are known in the wider literature. The association between landscapes of trees and the sexual love between males and females is found, for example, in such texts as the seventh-century BC love lyrics of Nabu and Tashmetu, where the sexually charged descriptions include the delight of shade provided by cedars and junipers while birds twitter in the trees.³⁶

A further representation of alternating date palms with trees interpreted as conifers is found on a painted potsherd from Ashur dating to the fourteenth century BC.³⁷ Here, however, the trees are stylized. Stylized trees formed from volutes and tendrils are a characteristic of Mitannian art of the fifteenth to fourteenth centuries BC.³⁸ They are the ancestors for stylized trees found in the imagery of the Middle Assyrian period where, towards the end of the fourteenth century BC, volute-trees on cylinder seals were elaborated by clusters of volutes placed at intervals along the stem. Occasionally volutes form a continuous garland around a separate inner tree.³⁹ Humans and/or bird-headed genies, sometimes holding buckets, flank the tree, when it is centered in the scene.⁴⁰

Although rare, these Middle Assyrian images are clearly part of the ancestry of Neo-Assyrian depictions of what is often called by scholars the “sacred tree”, commonly formed from palmettes and occasionally pomegranates or grapes.⁴¹ Some of the rooms in the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BC) at Nimrud, for example, have the palmette “sacred tree” repeated

³¹ During the 14th and 13th centuries a popular image on Assyrian cylinder seals was an animal shown moving towards a tree (Collon 1987: 66). Aruz (1995b: 84) suggests that the animals occupy a position taken by winged divinities when a stylized tree is depicted. However, the “sacred tree” appears to be derived from the date palm not a conifer, see below.

³² The UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre list two species of gazelle present or formerly present in Iraq: Saudi gazelle; goitred gazelle. http://www.unep-wcmc.org/index.html?http://www.unep-wcmc.org/latenews/Iraq_2003/threatened_species.htm~main

³³ Jungle fowl, the ancestors of modern chickens, originated in east India and south-east Asia where they roost in trees. They were possibly known in the Near East as early as the late third millennium BC (Ehrenberg 2002) but only appear on Near Eastern seals and in Egyptian art from the 14th century BC where they serve to emphasize the exotic nature of the landscape (Porada 1986; Collon 1995).

³⁴ Barnett 1976: Pl. XV. The relief appears to be part of a larger scene set within a garden with alternating trees that also include a procession of female musicians and beardless men holding mastiffs (Barnett 1976, Pl. XIV).

³⁵ One exception in the royal inscriptions occurs in the so-called “Banquet Stele” text from Nimrud in which Ashurnasirpal II lists varieties of trees and plants and continues, “Streams of water as (numerous as) the stars of heaven flow in the pleasure garden. Pomegranates which are bedecked with clusters like grape vines ... in the garden

... [I.] Ashurnasirpal, in the delightful garden pick fruit like ...” (Grayson 1991: 290).

³⁶ Livingston 1989: 35–7, No. 14. For a discussion of sexuality and landscape in Mesopotamian art see Leick 1999.

³⁷ Moortgat (1969: 115, Fig. 85) notes it as a forerunner of the “Garden Party” relief from Nineveh.

³⁸ For a review of forms and connections of the tree see Kepinski 1982.

³⁹ Matthews 1990: 91–2.

⁴⁰ Matthews 1990: 91. For a Middle Assyrian representation in a wall painting, see Andrae 1923: Pl. 3.

⁴¹ Matthews (1990: 107) traces the tree’s ancestry. Pomegranates (on cylinder seals, e.g., Collon 1987: Nos. 341, 879; on glazed bricks, e.g., Reade 1963: 37–47), a fruit widely used as a symbol of fertility (Winter 2003: fn. 26), and possibly grapes (Amiet 1980: No. 809), are occasionally included with, or replace, palmettes on the “sacred tree”. A number of Middle Assyrian incised ivory fragments from Ashur depict pomegranate trees and what may be a conifer or palmette variety of tree; the excavator arranged them as a frieze (Andrae 1931: 5) that, if a correct reconstruction, may relate to the theme of alternating trees. For a discussion of grapes in Assyrian reliefs and their possible divine connection, see Albenda 1974. A spectacular combination of gold pomegranates, rosettes, grape vines and blue grapes, along with gold figures of winged goddesses, form a crown discovered in Tomb III of the Queens’ Tombs at Nimrud (Oates and Oates 2001: Pl. 4a).

along all the walls.⁴² It is generally agreed that the Assyrian palmette “sacred tree” derives from the actual date palm.⁴³ The tree is apotropaic, carved in relief to defend vulnerable parts of the palace such as corners and doorways and is repeated across walls to protect the space magically. Like fruiting date palms, these “sacred trees” have been plausibly associated with the goddess Ishtar,⁴⁴ suggesting that as symbols of abundance and fertility the stylized palms embody concepts of femininity.⁴⁵

In Assyrian reliefs at Nimrud the “sacred tree” can be depicted in isolation or, more often, flanked by approaching *male* genies (Fig. 3).⁴⁶ They hold in their left hand a bucket and in the raised right hand a cone-shaped object. Ashurnasirpal II can also participate in the scene.⁴⁷ The action of the genies has been interpreted as the fertilization of the female flowers of the date palm with the male flower cluster.⁴⁸ The male and female reproductive structures of date palms are on separate trees. Since airborne pollination is too unreliable in date plantations, the male flowers are often taken by human hand and shaken over the female flowers to ensure pollination. However, while this interpretation seems viable, neither the palmette of the “sacred tree” nor the cone-shaped object held by the genies resemble date flower clusters. The male flowers take the form of bunches that do occasionally look oval, but generally have the appearance of branching fronds rather than the compact, scaled cone held in the finger tips by genies.⁴⁹ On Sumerian votive plaques, sculpture and cylinder seals of the third millennium BC (i.e. from southern Mesopotamia where date palms flower and fruit), the clusters are held in a clenched hand as would be necessary for such a large object.⁵⁰ The identification of the cone with a date flower cluster can also be questioned because date palms were not cultivated in Assyria and the practice of hand fertilization known in southern Mesopotamia would not have been relevant.⁵¹ Indeed there are no references in Assyrian texts to the pollen cluster of the date palm. In reliefs, genies holding cones are not always associated with the “sacred tree” and sometimes flank doorways or an image of the king.⁵² In these representations an interpretation of the cone as a pollinator makes no sense. When dealing with imagery describing the supernatural world it would be unwise to interpret any scene as necessarily reflecting an actual practice rather than one that represents a symbolic system. An alternative approach is that the object is a fir cone used for purification,⁵³ perhaps using liquid from the bucket.⁵⁴ In Assyrian texts the object held by the genies is called a “purifier” (*mullitu*),

⁴² For the reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II, see Paley and Sobolewski 1987. Three common variations of the palmette “sacred trees” have been identified at Nimrud, see Albenda 1994: 124–32. The “sacred tree” is known from subsequent reigns, see Bleibtreu 1980: 75, 89–90, 114–15, 190, 235.

⁴³ For a review of the extensive literature, see Russell 1998: 689–96. See also Winter 2003: 253 and fn. 6. Parpola’s controversial explanation of the mystical and mathematical origins of the “sacred tree” is not relevant to the present discussion (Parpola 1993).

⁴⁴ See Porter 1993; Albenda 1994; Albenda 2005: 108–11.

⁴⁵ Parker Mallowan 1986. An ornament from Queens’ Tomb II at Nimrud and part of a headdress with two other plaques, one of which had surviving inlay depicting a fruiting palm tree, mentioned above (fn. 17), is adorned with a “sacred tree” formed from palmettes and pomegranates (cover right of Oates and Oates 2001).

⁴⁶ These figures are usually associated with the term *apkallu*, “wise sage”, an apotropaic demon or minor divinity (Wiggermann 1992: 65–7). They are depicted as bearded males or with the heads of birds but wearing the same costume. The active male relationship with the “sacred tree” is also evident on a glazed brick panel from Nimrud where the tree is flanked by rampant bulls (Reade 1963). A few pairs of genies flanking the “sacred tree” in Room I of the North-West Palace are beardless and wear ankle length robes (Paley 1976: 105, fig. 21b). It is significant that these possibly female genies do not hold the cone but rather a bracelet that has been associated with Ishtar (Paley 1976: 26, n. 20; Kolbe 1981: 55–62; Russell 1998: 676–7).

⁴⁷ Two almost identical reliefs from the throne room of

the North-West Palace (Room B) depict Ashurnasirpal II flanking a “sacred tree” (Meuszyński 1981: Pls. 1–2). The king raises his right hand towards the tree and/or the image of a god in a winged disc above the tree. The scene is flanked by human-headed genies holding a bucket and cone paralleling the stance of the king.

⁴⁸ Porter 1993. Both sexes produce spathes, flattened sheaths up to 27 inches (70 cm) long, narrowing at the ends. The sheath opens to reveal the flower clusters (inflorescence).

⁴⁹ Compare Porter 1993: 135, Fig. 3, with Miller 2000: 152, Fig. 4.

⁵⁰ See above, fns. 11–14.

⁵¹ Russell 1998: 688–9.

⁵² See above fn. 47.

⁵³ Layard (1849 II: 471) hesitates when identifying the object as a fir cone but offers no alternative. However, for an interpretation of the object as a fir cone see Bleibtreu 1980: 61, 93, 123; Wiggermann 1992: 67; Russell 1998: 674–5, 691–2; Albenda 2005: 107–8. Paley (1976: 39) suggests that the cone resembles a bunch of grapes as depicted on later Assyrian reliefs. However, while the internal details of the cones do vary in the reliefs, the scales of a fir cone appear to represent the best explanation.

⁵⁴ The bucket, identified as the *banduddû* of ritual texts, appears to have been filled with water effectuating “release” (Wiggermann 1992: 66–7). The fact that some genies can hold the bucket and not the cone (see below, fn. 63) suggests that the two objects may not be dependent on each other, although it should be noted that the cone is never held without the bucket. Images of human priests holding a



Fig. 3. Alabaster relief panel with a winged genie approaching a “sacred tree”, from Nimrud, reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 883–859 BC, 2.349 × 1.562 m. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1931 (31.72.1).

and the fir cone (though never explicitly identified as the *mullilu*) is credited with apotropaic qualities that bring about the release of sin.⁵⁵ Thus the genies approach and purify, I suggest, a symbol of femininity, the palm-inspired “sacred tree”, using the produce of a conifer,⁵⁶ a symbol of masculinity. To emphasize this male role, the genies’ robes, as well as those of the king and his officials, are decorated with motifs that include “sacred trees” ending not in palmettes but cones.⁵⁷ Such symbolism does not require the image of genies approaching the tree to be read as a sequential event that results in the palm’s fertilization: the desired result of abundance is already present in the form of the “sacred tree”. Therefore the reliefs repeatedly depict an image that states that abundance has been and is (rather than will be) achieved through the agency of the gods.

As Assyrian texts and images make clear, abundance was believed to have issued from the gods through their chosen king.⁵⁸ This becomes clear from the reliefs at Nimrud where the king is often the focus for the genies with cones. Ashurnasirpal II stands between the genies and the “sacred tree” in reliefs from the throne room at Nimrud (Room B) and it is thus through him that the gods actively achieve abundance.⁵⁹ The role of the king in this scheme is also represented by the organizational arrangement of the palace rooms and their decoration. In Room G, genies wearing horned helmets and holding cones in their raised right hands, flank a scene of the king seated and holding a bowl in his raised right hand with officials standing either side of him; this is identified as a representation of the king in the role of high priest of his people, making a libation on their behalf.⁶⁰ The king is also shown standing, holding a raised bowl but flanked only by officials. In the same room reliefs show genies flanking the king who stands holding a bow in his left hand and arrows in raised right hand, representing the king as warrior and hunter.⁶¹ Thus the principal roles of the king as high priest and successful hunter and warrior are achieved through the active participation of the gods. Room G leads into Room H, where reliefs depict the standing king holding the warrior’s bow in his left hand and the high priest’s bowl in his raised right hand, but now he is flanked by genies wearing headbands, without the presence of officials.⁶² Significantly the genies hold only a bucket and raise their empty right hand to greet the king.⁶³ The active involvement of the gods is therefore not apparent in Room H, suggesting that the king, in combining both aspects of his duties, has fulfilled them for the gods. Thus the layout of certain rooms of the palace and their decoration suggests a route along which the king would progress and, through divine support, symbolically achieve success and abundance, further emphasized by the some of the reliefs in Room I (which leads off Room H), where human-headed genies without buckets and cones adore the “sacred tree”.⁶⁴

Markers of gender such as the conifer and palm tree fit a binary opposition that structures Mesopotamian representation where females are equated with passivity while males are considered beings with agency.⁶⁵ The ideology of gender in Mesopotamia was subject to male rules in which the female image was a sign of sexuality, embodied, I would suggest, in the fruiting date palm and as a manifestation of abundance in the “sacred tree”, while the conifer stood for Assyria, the

bucket and perhaps a sprinkler appear on some Old Babylonian cylinder seals where they may be performing an act equivalent to that of the later genies (Collon 1986: 34–5).

⁵⁵ For the *mullilu*, fir-cone (*terinnu*) and date palm inflorescence (*rikbu*) see Wiggermann 1992: 67.

⁵⁶ Conifers are trees that produce cones. Most conifers are monoecious, that is the male and female reproductive structures are on the same plant. Strictly the cone is the female structure that holds the seeds. Albenda (2005: 108) suggests that the depiction of the cone in Assyrian reliefs reflects the monoecious nature of conifers and symbolizes Ishtar’s embodiment of both male and female characteristics.

⁵⁷ Vorys Canby (1971: 31–53.) considers that much of the incised imagery was created by non-Assyrians who “missed the Assyrian point” when representing such images as the sacred tree with cones. No comprehensive study has been made of the “embroidery”. I am grateful to Joan Aruz for showing me her records of the garment patterns on Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (unpublished apart from a drawing in Crawford *et al.* 1980:

31, fig. 24). No comprehensive study has been made of the “embroidery”. A recent article by Bartl (2005) has compared incised decoration on reliefs from Nimrud with the excavator’s drawings. It should be noted, however, that two armllets from one of the queens’ tombs (Tomb II) at Nimrud have inlaid designs of genies with buckets and cones flanking rosette shaped “sacred trees” decorated with cones (Oates and Oates 2001: Pl. 6a).

⁵⁸ Winter 2003.

⁵⁹ See above, fn. 47.

⁶⁰ Meuszyński 1981: Pls. 8–9; Russell 1998: 686–7.

⁶¹ Russell 1998: 684–6.

⁶² Meuszyński 1981: Pls. 11–13.

⁶³ Genies with headbands rather than horned helmets never hold the cone, often simply raising their right hands in a gesture of greeting (*karabu*), see Wiggermann 1992: 61. These protective spirits also passively hold a bucket, or a mace, or branching vegetation. A few examples hold a deer or goat cradled in one arm.

⁶⁴ Paley and Sobolewski 1987: Pls. 1–2.

⁶⁵ For a discussion see Bahrani 2001: 68.

king and masculinity, and through whose active role abundance was achieved. Such a relationship between the active male and the passive female palm tree was long established in Mesopotamian art and can be found as early as the third millennium BC, when fruiting palms are depicted in Sumerian stone reliefs as a plant set before deities and watered by the king or a male priest.⁶⁶ In Assyria, the palm with its dates and the conifer with its cones were thus methods of envisioning gender difference.

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⁶⁶ For example, Moortgat 1969: Nos. 114, 116. For late third-millennium BC examples see Vorys-Canby 2003, and Harper 1992.

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