Metaphorical Allusions to Life-Giving Plants in Neo-Assyrian Texts and Images[1]

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Summary: Metaphorical Allusions to Life-Giving Plants in Neo-Assyrian Texts and Images

In the royal correspondence of late Assyrian kings (8th–7th century BCE), a few letters refer to the so-called "plant of life" (Akk. *šammu balāṭi*) being placed by the king in the mouth or nostrils of his subjects. At the same time, in the royal iconography that goes from Tiglath-pileser III onward (8th century BCE), bas-reliefs and wall paintings often show the ruler holding a plant or flower in his lowered left hand. This paper analyses the portraits of the kings—with a special focus on the reign of Sargon II—in the light of textual evidence in order to identify the meaning and function of the plant of life. A link between texts and images will be proposed, thereby suggesting that the plant was used primarily by the king to express his mercy and metaphorically indicate himself as a life-giving ruler.

Keywords: Assyrian Empire – Metaphor – Plant of Life – Dur-Sharrukin

Resumen: Alusiones metafóricas a las plantas de la vida en imágenes y textos neoasirios

En la correspondencia real de los últimos reyes neoasirios (siglos VII–VIII a.C), se han encontrado cartas que hacen referencia a las conocidas como "planta de la vida" (Akk. *šammu balāṭi*) que el rey situaba dentro de la boca o nariz de sus subordinados. Al mismo tiempo, en bajorrelieves y frescos de la iconografía monárquica desde Tiglatpileser III en adelante (siglo VIII a.C), a menudo se muestra al soberano sosteniendo una planta o flor en su mano izquierda inclinada hacia abajo. A la luz de fuentes textuales, este artículo pretende analizar retratos de reyes—con especial atención

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al reinado de Sargon II—con el fin de identificar tanto el significado como la función de tales plantas. A su vez se propone un posible vínculo entre textos e imágenes que sugiere que el rey utilizaba la planta para expresar primordialmente misericordia y, metafóricamente, auto-señalarse como el único soberano hacedor de vida.

Palabras clave: Imperio asirio – Metáfora – Planta de la vida – Dur-Sharrukin

Metaphor: Theoretical Premises

Metaphor is now considered to be an essential process and product of thought. The power of metaphor lies in its potential to further our understanding of the meaning of experience, which in turn defines reality.[2] In its most practical aspect, the word metaphor is composed of the Greek prefix *meta* which means "beyond," "on the other side of," "across," and the verb *phérein*, "to carry, bear." In the light of this etymological breakdown, the metaphor falls within the category of tropes, namely changes that occur when attributes ordinarily designating one entity are transferred (carried over) to another entity. In brief, metaphor can be seen as a transmission of the properties of one object to another because of their similarity in any aspect or by contrast, with the consequence that metaphor creates a single image and reduces the difference between objects or concepts.[3] Using the words of E. Semino, metaphor is "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else."[4]

As a figure of speech, metaphor has been the focus of the work of several scholars but, in this contribution, I will mostly rely upon theoretical concepts derived from G. Lakoff and M. Johnson's work on what has now taken shape in linguistics as **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**. This approach to metaphor is in a certain sense revolutionary in that it conceived metaphor not only as a question of language but of thinking and consequently of behaving. The theory, in fact, treats the metaphor as a conceptual rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon or a decorative device: metaphor is not solely a language-structure but

[2] Feinstein 1982: 45, 47.
[3] Petrenko and Korotchenko 2012: 535; Ritchie 2013: 4.
[4] Semino 2008: 1.

also a way of acting and living, a question of conceptualization, of how the mind structures and organizes concepts in order to express thought linguistically. Lakoff and Johnson, in particular, argue that figurative language emerges from knowledge structures which reside in long-term memory named Conceptual Metaphors, and suggest that there exists a set of primary conceptual metaphors which are pre-linguistic and universal, together with a set of conceptual metaphors which are language-specific. The interaction between universal and language-specific metaphors produces figurative language. The conceptual metaphors are therefore the result of a process which maps aspects of concrete domains of human experience onto aspects of abstract domains of conceptual structure. In brief, conceptual metaphors have an experiential basis and we usually understand them in terms of common experiences because they are largely unconscious. For example, an abstract and complex concept like life is often represented through a simpler, physical experience like journey. Technically, the concrete domain is referred to as the **Source Domain** which is the conceptual domain from which we draw the metaphorical expressions, while the abstract domain is referred to as the **Target Domain** which is the conceptual domain we try to understand. Accordingly, in "life is a journey" life is the target domain, while journey is the source domain. Similarly, in a more complex metaphorical expression like "the committee has kept me in the dark about this matter" language and conceptual structure from the source domain of vision is used to depict a situation in the target domain of knowledge and understanding. Thus, ignorance is associated with darkness as well as other conditions which preclude sight. In sum, the source domain provides a relatively rich knowledge structure for the target concepts, that is to say that the cognitive function of these metaphors is to enable speakers, readers, or even viewers, to understand target A by means of the structure of source B. Any systematic correspondence across such domains are called **metaphorical mappings** through which the understanding takes place.[5]

[5] Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Grady *et al.* 1999: 101–102; Ponterotto 2014: 14–16.

In this paper, the metaphor will be thus analysed as a property of concepts and not of words, used effortlessly in everyday life by people as an integral part of the process of human thought and reasoning. Building on these theoretical premises, I will now turn to the evidence of Neo-Assyrian period to investigate the metaphorical allusions to life-giving plants in texts and images dating to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, which associate the Assyrian king to the so-called **plant of life** (*šammu balāṭi*).[6]

Metaphor in Texts

The first example stems from the reign of Sargon II, where the plant of life is mentioned in a letter sent to the king by Aqar-Bel-lumur, an official working in Babylon:

> *My [...], my people, my wives, [my] son[s], my daughters, whatever property of mine there was [that I had acquired with] my work under the protection of the king, my lord, were [plund]ered, ruined and sold to El[am and] Bit-Yakin. I myself did [flee] alone to [Assyria] and grabbed the feet of the king, my lord; and having been ready to die wi[th the men] of the king, my lord, under the protec[tion of] the gods of the king, I have fulfilled the mission that [the king] gave me, and the king, my lord, has put the plant [of life] in my mouth.*[7]

A second letter dates back to the reign of Esarhaddon. The author is the Babylonian scholar Rashil who praises king's mercy:

> *The king, my lord, has reared me from my childhood until the present day, and ten times has the king, my lord, taken my hand and saved my life from my enemies. You are a merciful king. You have done good to all the four quarters of the earth and [placed] the plant of life in their nostrils.*[8]

[6] CAD: *šammu*, 315; CAD: *balāṭu*, 52–53, 60–61, mng. 6b.
[7] SAA 17 112: r. 8–17; PNA 1/I: 121–122.
[8] SAA 10 166: 6–r. 4; PNA 3/I: 1034–1036.

The Assyrian king Esarhaddon is again associated, through a simile, to the so-called plant of life in a passage of his royal inscriptions:[9]

> *Let [the seed of] my [priestly office] endure (along) with [the foundations of Esag]il and Babylon; let (my) [kin]gship be sustaining to the people forever like the plant [of] life so that I may shepherd their populace in truth and justice; (and) let me reach old age, at[ta]in extreme old age, (and) be sa[ted with] the prime [of li]fe [until far]-off [days]. Truly I am [the pr]ovider.*[10]

Trying to give a univocal definition of the plant of life is far from simple. Terms like the Plant of Rejuvenation, the Plant of Heartbeat, the Plant of Life, the Tree of Life, the Sacred Tree, the Bread of Life and even the Primeval Flower are attested in Mesopotamian literature since the third millennium BCE and, as G. J. Selz notes, they "reflect the more or less successful attempt to render the varying notions behind these vaguely connected Mesopotamian terms."[11] There seems to be no actual description of this plant in regard to its shape and nature, but it is likely that many plants were associated to the notion of life due to their inherent properties. Selz's examination, for example, delves into one of the paramount symbols of Mesopotamian religious thought, the rosette. Selz notes that rosettes are conspicuously abundant in the context of the royal graves of Ur and the Sumerian word for the rosette is probably *ul*, which carries a clear cosmogonic reference:

[9] Although the distinction between simile and metaphor is not always so clearly drawn, in general terms, the simile is regarded as an explicit comparison where the similarities are clearly defined, which can be detected by the use of the term "like," "as" or even "not unlike" in the statement of comparison. Instead, metaphor is an implicit comparison (Way 1991: 11; Stern 2000: 229–232). For some authors, this distinction makes a simile less direct and forceful than its corresponding metaphor (Stern 2000: 232). Both tropes, however, include the element of resemblance or comparison at a fundamental level, with the consequence that they are identical in a cognitive sense and should not be distinguished too sharply (Strawn 2005: 15–16).

[10] RINAP 4 104: vi 1–vi 15.

[11] Selz 2014: 655. Here, an episode in the story of Gilgamesh is significant. In his search for eternal life when Gilgamesh reached Uta-napishtim, the latter disclosed to him a secret that there exists a thorny plant in the depth of the Apsû, a *šam-mu ni-kit-ti* "a plant of heartbeat." A. George (2003: 895), in this respect, summarizes: "The plant is thus one which ensures the fundamental sign of life, the healthy heartbeat of youth and the strong pulse that accompanies it."

the most common usage of the word *ul* is in the phrase "since time immemorial" in Sumerian *u*$_4$*-ul-è-a-ta*, literally "since the day when the (first) blossom/rosette came forth." Thus, since the rosette refers to the beginning of life and the creation of the world, Selz suggests that the rosette-flower must be interpreted as a stylized representation of whatever blossom had connotations of a magically ensured general notion of life.[12] The significance of the rosette becomes clearer once one observes the rosette in nature. In fact, as noted by I. J. Winter: "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."[13] Thus, the rosette represents that which endures and generates, and is an appropriate symbol for goddesses associated with fertility, such as Ishtar.

In much the same way, the plant of life may have not referred to a specific plant, but to a variety of plants or blossoms that had connotations of a magically ensured general notion of life. As a consequence, the notion of the plant of life must have been a very powerful symbol of life, a kind of elixir *vitae*, which had an emotive force referring to the cycles of nature, and thus comparable with the Egyptian *ʿAnch* sign, or with the Lotus-flower of Hinduism or Buddhism.[14] In this sense, it is reasonable to believe that this long-standing tradition highlights a more metaphoric use of plant terms referring to life or the renewal of youth rather than literal, suggesting that this figurative language emerges from knowledge structures which reside in long-term memory.

The Neo-Assyrian textual evidence seems to show a clear basic tenet. The senders of the letters move from death to life and appeal to the Assyrian king, who represents the factual source of life. In turn, "life" is metaphorically depicted by the action of placing the plant of life in the nostrils or mouth of the needy. Since metaphor is here defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain, the scribes talk and think about life and rejuvena-

[12] Selz 2004: 201; 2014: 664.
[13] Winter 1976: 46.
[14] Selz 2004: 201.

tion (target domain) in terms of a plant (source domain) proffered to the needy. Therefore, the action of **saving the life** is partially structured, understood, performed and talked about in terms of **offering the plant of life**. In this light, I contend that the plant of life can be conceived as a conventionalized expression used to indicate the thaumaturgic powers of the Assyrian king capable of proffering protection and assistance to his subjects.

However, there is a single reference in which the plant of life acquires a more literal connotation. In a letter sent to the king Esarhaddon by the Babylonian astrologer Kudurru, the plant is referred to in these terms:

> *When I acquired the plant of life of the eclipse of Tammuz (IV), it disappeared in the king's presence. [I dispat]ched it [to the king], my lord, in th[e han]ds of Šumaya son of [Kabt]iya, in Nisan (I) last year, (yet) [up t]o now [the king] has given no order to me.*[15]

Such a textual reference somehow questions the metaphorical meaning of the plant of life and suggests that the plant might have been also an object concretely used by the king when meeting his subjects.

Metaphor in Images

Moving to visual evidence, the metaphor—using the words of H. Feinstein—"urges us to look beyond the surface, to generate associations and to tap new, different, or deeper levels of meaning."[16] The metaphoric process indeed synthesizes often disparate meanings and attributes of one entity which are transferred to another by comparison, by substitution, or as a consequence of interaction. To give a practical example, I will turn to modern art. Frida Kahlo said: "I have suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a streetcar ran over me…

[15] SAA 10 371: 12–r. 1; PNA 2/I: 633; PNA 3/II: 1281.
[16] Feinstein 1982: 45.

The other accident is Diego."[17] Frida actually had first a bus accident and was skewered by a metal handrail that entered her hip, and second a tempestuous marriage with the painter Diego Rivera. Moving to visual, in the self-portrait The Broken Column (**Fig. 1**), Kahlo substitutes an ancient broken column in place of her damaged spine; the pain is depicted as countless nails puncturing and covering her body, torn open to reveal the crumbling column. The column looks phallic, the sexual connotation is all the more obvious and a violent sexual act is implied: Kahlo's psychological and sexual health are implicated.[18] Kahlo feels like a broken column, which is a metaphor for her feelings or sensations.

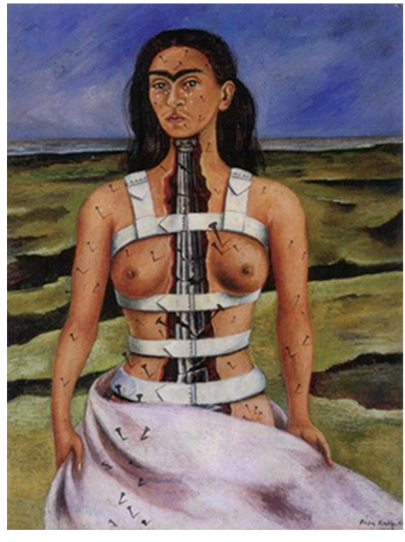

Fig. 1.
The Broken Column, Frida Kahlo, 1944 (© Tate, London 2018).

Going back to ancient Assyria, the interlocking between textual and visual is more explicit than we may expect. The king Ashurnasirpal II, for instance, is described as follows in his royal inscriptions: "worshipper of the great gods, ferocious dragon, conqueror of cities and the entire highlands."[19] The bas-reliefs present the king in the same three

[17] Lindauer 1999: 3 citing Herrera 1983: 107.
[18] Lindauer 1999: 56–58.
[19] RIMA 2 A.0.101.23: 12.

roles, namely the king as the maintainer of divine order through the care of the stylized tree, the king as vanquisher of wild bulls and lions, the king as warrior.[20] Less direct and more metaphorical is the link between the royal epithet "marvellous shepherd" and the portrait of the Assyrian king holding the long staff (**Fig. 2a**).[21]

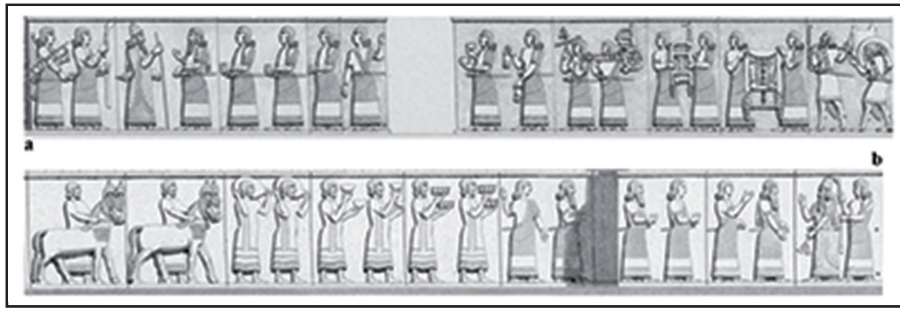

Fig. 2.
Dur-Sharrukin Palace: procession of court members, from façade L (**a**);
procession of western tribute-bearers and court members, from façade N (**b**).
(Botta and Flandin 1849a: pls. 10, 29).

Among these roles, to date, no authors have posited a link between texts and bas-reliefs for the "plant of life." One reason might be that it is only from the 8th century that palace bas-reliefs and wall paintings show the Assyrian king holding a plant. On some Tiglath-pileser III's bas-reliefs from his Central Palace at Kalhu and Til-Barsip wall paintings, the plant resembles a blossoming flower with long leaves.[22] In only one instance, a drawing representing a Tiglat-pileser III's bas-relief shows, instead, a plant which was described as a triple flower of pomegranates or poppy heads.[23] A very similar plant, but perhaps fragmentary,

[20] See images and discussion in Winter (1981: 21; 1983: 24). See C. D. Crawford (2014: 241–264) for a detailed review of previous studies on the image-word dialectic relations in the ancient Near East. With special regard to Assyria, see: Russell 1999; Winter 2016: 208–211; Matthiae 2018: 245–254.
[21] RIMA 2 A.0.101.23: 2; Portuese 2017: 113.
[22] See R. D. Barnett and M. Falkner (1962: 10, pls. VIII [it was misunderstood as a fan], XVIII, XIX) for the bas-reliefs of Tiglath-pileser III. See F. Thureau-Dangin and M. Dunand (1936: pl. XLIX) for the wall paintings from Til-Barsip. See L. Portuese (2017: 111–128) for the dating of the Til-Barsip wall paintings and related bibliography.
[23] Barnett and Falkner 1962: 24, pl. LXIII.

occurs also on Til-Barsip wall paintings.[24] Clearer evidence of the latter comes from a single bas-relief of Tiglath-pileser III, who is shown on his chariot, and more extensively from Sargon II's bas-reliefs at Dur-Sharrukin, where the triple flower is distinctively represented as a lotus flower (**Fig. 3**).[25] The surviving figurative programs of Sargon's successors do not show clear examples of similar plants as royal *insigne*.[26] In only one instance, however, Ashurbanipal is shown holding a lotus flower in the famous garden scene from his North Palace at Nineveh.[27]

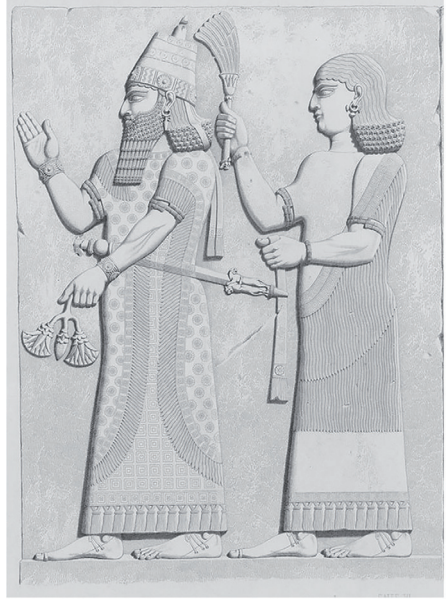

Fig. 3.
Dur-Sharrukin Palace: Sargon II holding a lotus flower accompanied by a eunuch attendant, from room 6 (relief 11). (Botta and Flandin 1849b: pl. 105).

[24] Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936: pl. LII.
[25] See P. Collins (2008: 67) for the bas-relief of Tiglath-pileser III. See P. Albenda (1986: fig. 84) for a photography of Sargon II's bas-relief.
[26] A bas-relief from the South-West Palace at Nineveh shows Sennacherib holding what has been described as "a kind of flower, or ornament in the shape of the fruit of the pine" (Barnett *et al*. 1998: 66, pls. 91, 108). What the thing is, remains uncertain but can hardly be compared with the visual evidence listed here.
[27] Collins 2008: 136–137.

As for their significance, U. Magen judges it unlikely that they stand for mere symbols of power and, relying on ritual texts for the purification of the army, proposes a cleansing and purifying function for these plants.[28] Accordingly, the blossoming flower is identified with a palm offshoot, the *libbi gišimmari* of rituals and incantations, used for its purifying properties by the king and also directed towards his army.[29] Magen further extends this explanation to the lotus flower held by Tiglath-pileser III and especially by Sargon II. M. Van Loon suspects, instead, that the meaning of the lotus flower might refer to the receiving of life (the smelling of the lotus) on the one hand, and the bestowing of life (the proffering of the lotus) on the other.[30]

Personally, I do not exclude these interpretations, which are quite compelling, but I feel that the issue needs further investigation. In particular, most of the visual evidence confidently indicates that kings held at least a lotus flower. However, since Sargon II seems to have used this motif excessively in his palace at Dur-Sharrukin, whose structure is moreover well known, the examination will focus on the figurative program of this king. In detail, my observations rely on the theoretical concepts of metaphor discussed above and, in particular, on the notion that metaphors are **contextually conditioned**, that context includes both semantic and cultural contexts and that conditioning impacts the construction, reception, and interpretation of metaphor. This means that if we say that "time is money," it does not imply that all cultures treat time as a commodity that can be spent, saved, or wasted in a kind of metaphor.[31] With this in mind, following three remarks, I would like to offer a new explanation on the motif of the king holding the lotus flower.

The first remark concerns the **iconographic context** in which the lotus flower appears. As it was already noted, there is a basic and constant peculiarity on Sargon's bas-reliefs when the king receives guests: in the presence of parades exclusively composed of court members, the

[28] Magen 1986: 84–91.

[29] See B. Parker Mallowan (1983: 38), Magen (1986: 62–64) and F. A. M. Wiggermann (1992: 68–69, 77–78) for the identification of the *libbi gišimmari* with the palm offshoot.

[30] Van Loon 1986: 250.

[31] Strawn 2005: 10.

king holds only the long staff; instead, when the king receives processions of court members and foreign tribute-bearers, he always holds only the lotus flower in the left hand, without the long staff, and performs the blessing/greeting gesture with the right hand (*karābu*) (**Fig. 2**).[32] This difference entails a different symbolic implication and, accordingly, a different addressee: the meanings and values of the long staff are addressed or linked to insiders, while those of the lotus flower are addressed or linked both to insiders and more especially to outsiders.[33]

The second remark concerns the **cultural context** in which the lotus flower is used as artistic motif, namely its origin. The lotus flower belongs to a Levantine iconographic tradition and, on Syro-Hittite monuments, the lotus flower appears as held by human figures such as rulers both in the upraised hand but especially in the lowered left hand.[34] In Assyria, the lotus is held by men and seated women on a number of North Syrian ivory carvings dating to the early first millennium BCE from Fort Shalmanser at Kalhu.[35] The motif as a royal *insigne* appears only on Neo-Assyrian bas-reliefs and wall paintings from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III; then it is extensively used by Sargon II, and sporadically found in later king's bas-reliefs. In the light of this picture, a western influence of the motif on the Assyrian culture seems undeniable. Moreover, historically the imperial expansion west began in earnest under Tiglath-pileser III, who reduced the area to the status of client or province, and the same policy was continued by Sargon II. In particular, the lotus flower is used as iconographic element on monuments from Sam'al, the small Aramaean city-state in

[32] See Wiggermann (1992: 61, 78) and C. G. Frechette (2012: 35–38) for the identification and description of the *karābu* gesture.
[33] Portuese 2017: 121, 123.
[34] The lotus is held by human figures on a number of western monuments. See, in particular, the sarcophagus of king Ahiram from Byblos dated about 1000 BCE (Van Loon 1986: 245, pl. 59, fig. III.2; Bonatz 2000: 62, 101, fig. 20). The orthostat of king Kilamuwa from Sam'al dating to the late 9th century BCE (van Loon 1986, pl. 59/III.3; Bonatz 2000: 102; Gilibert 2011: 79–84), the orthostats of king Barrakib from Sam'al shown in an audience and a banquet scene, dated to 733/32–713/11 BCE (Gilibert 2011: 212–213, figs. 66, 69). The funerary stele from Sam'al dating about to 825–730 BCE (Bonatz 2000: 21, 23, 100, pls. XVII/C46, XXIII/C72; see also pls. XIII/C28 and XIX/C52).
[35] Winter 1976: 25–54.

southern Anatolia, whose king Barrakib was allied with Tiglath-pileser III and who probably continued his cooperation with Sargon II. No traces of a violent destruction of Sam'al can be dated from Sargon's period, thus its annexation must most probably have been peaceful. Since Sam'al was a province in the reign of Sargon, and not in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, it is likely that it was annexed by Shalmaneser V.[36] These concordances are, in my view, more than a mere coincidence: the historical background strongly supports the notion that the model for the lotus flower on Assyrian bas-reliefs of 8th century BCE should be looked for in western iconographic tradition.

The third remark concerns the **theoretical context**, that is the meaning of the lotus flower on Assyrian bas-reliefs, which I feel its original western significance was still preserved. Firstly, there is good reason to believe that Assyrians in the west perceived and interpreted the lotus flower as a mere symbol of power, being held also by rulers. Thus, it was primarily used as a royal *insigne*. Secondly, since the lotus flower (*Nymphaea caerulea*) opens and closes daily, flowering from sunrise to midday, it was suggested that in the west it acquired the meaning of constant reminder of regeneration and immortality, acting as a symbol of hope for living and dead.[37] Now, considering that in the Mesopotamian tradition the life-giving plants or plant of life are well attested, the lotus flower, for its inherent properties, well embodies the connotations of a magically ensured general notion of life, thus acting as a constant reminder of regeneration also in the Assyrian culture. This aspect was additionally furthered by its blue colour (still preserved on a drawing by M. E. Flandin **Fig. 4**) which was highly valued because of the association with lapis lazuli. This in turn was a standard metaphor for unusual wealth and was for long synonymous with gleaming splendour, an attribute of gods and heroes.[38]

In the light of these remarks, given that Neo-Assyrian texts state that the king used to bless his servants using an unidentified plant of

[36] Lipiński 2000: 246; Melville 2016: 65; Elayi 2017: 25, 98.
[37] Winter 1976: 45; Bonatz 2000: 100–102.
[38] Moorey 1994: 85; Winter 1999: 43–58.

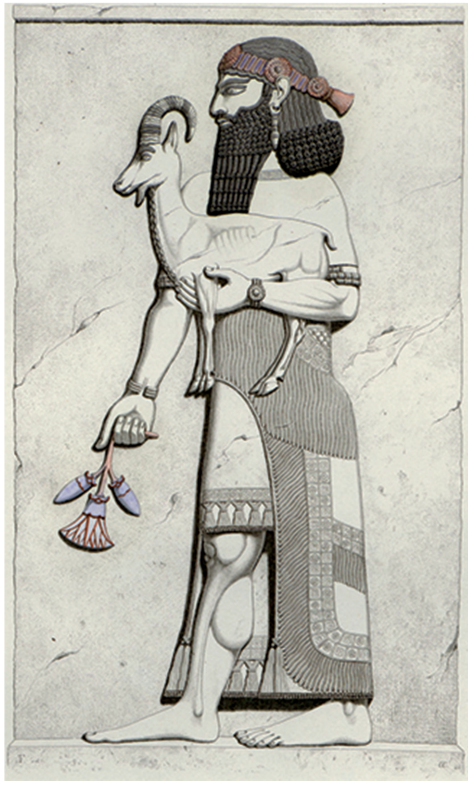

Fig. 4.
Dur-Sharrukin Palace: genie holding a lotus flower and carrying a goat, from the Central Courtyard (VI), door g (relief 4). (Botta and Flandin 1849a: pl. 43).

life, it may be that the lotus flower was used to express this notion. If so, the lotus flower might be identified with the "plant of life" as used in Neo-Assyrian texts. The link between texts and images suggests that the lotus flower was used metaphorically by the king to indicate his status/role as a **life-giving ruler**. The visual evidence, furthermore, mirrors the textual references not only by reproducing the lotus flower on bas-reliefs, but the whole notion of movement from death to life described in texts was visually materialized in the long procession of figures moving towards the life-giving king (**Fig. 2b**). Moreover, the

tribute-bearers emerged out of the corner due to the visual trick of hiding the edge of the first bas-relief, thereby giving the impression of an endless parade, representing the whole of humanity.[39] In brief, these metaphorical allusions enable us to see in the parades of figures the actual movement of human beings from death to life, the latter being represented by the king and the lotus flower he holds.

Conclusions

In the light of this examination, first and foremost I would point out that this kind of metaphor was well-established in the Near Eastern tradition, since the lotus was similarly conceived in the Levantine and Egyptian tradition. As a consequence, Assyrian artists adopted specific strategies to make the metaphorical message widely understandable. Additionally, it must be noted that the lotus was held by the king especially in the presence of western tribute-bearers. This leads to the suspicion that the display of a western iconographic motif had the disguised intention of manipulating minds—especially of westerners[40]—in two ways: ideologically, by presenting the Assyrian king as the sole human being able to bestow life on his subjects; and politically, by making the empire's dominion more acceptable in order to turn foreigners into Assyrians. It is not without reason that in a passage of his palace inscriptions, Sargon II declares that he wished to unify the vast diversity of the peoples of his empire in the language, culture, and religion of Assyria:

> *Peoples of the four regions (of the world), of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland, all that were ruled by the Light of the gods, the Lord of all, I carried off at the command of Ashur, my lord, by the might of my scepter. I*

[39] Kertai 2015: 104.

[40] Westerners are depicted on the bas-reliefs lining the northwest wall of façade n, in the upper registers of bas-reliefs lining corridor 10, and the bas-reliefs decorating rooms 6 and 11. For the identification of these foreigners as westerners, see: Wäfler 1975: 177–189; Reade 1976: 97; 1979: 83; Gopnik 1992: 65; Russell 1991: 238; Bär 1996: 199–200, 206–207; Muscarella 1998: 149–157; Collins 2012: 78.

> *unified them and settled them therein. Assyrians, fully competent to teach them how to fear god and the king, I dispatched to them as scribes and sheriffs (superintendents).*[41]

In other words, the king invited his subjects to forget their provenance, in a kind of demonization of their past, to integrate themselves within the Assyrian empire and begin a new life under the protection of the Assyrian king. Following these lines of thought, I believe that Assyrian scribes and artists unconsciously rejected the popular model of metaphor's **decorative function**, and adopted the model of metaphor's **influential function**, that is to say that metaphor was conceived not solely as an embellishment or decoration to thought, but also as an instrument to actively influence the thought it helped to articulate, giving it a form and shape that can define or alter it in fundamental ways.[42] This was the manner metaphor was used to manifest a kind of "friendly persuasion"—using the words of B. N. Porter—in order to persuade non-Assyrians to remain among the Assyrians.[43]

A second point that I would like to make centres on a comparison of the Assyrian tradition of the lotus flower with the Classical tradition. In fact, this metaphorical message is somewhat reminiscent of the popular literary passage of the lotus-eaters, or Lotophagoi, in the Odyssey, an apparently "friendly" people who invited Odysseus' comrades to eat of the mysterious plant. Those who did so were overcome by a blissful forgetfulness from the narcotic properties of the lotus:

> *They departed at once and mingled with the Lotus-eaters; nor did the Lotus-eaters think of killing my comrades, but gave them lotus to eat. And whoever of them ate the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus no longer wished to bring back word or return home, but there they wished to remain among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus, and to forget their homecoming*.[44]

[41] ARAB 2.86; Fuchs 1994: 311, ll. 49–54.
[42] Steuter and Wills 2008: 5.
[43] Porter 2003: 180.
[44] Od. 9, 91–96. We know from Egyptian textual and iconographic evidence that the blue lotus was certainly used as an ornamental and for its sweet smelling aroma, but also for its narcotic

In this instance, the phrase "to eat lotus" is used metaphorically to mean "to forget," or "to be unmindful."[45] In other words, foreigners both in the Assyrian empire and in the Odyssey are lured into forgetting their homeland or into appreciating the new homeland, making them stay forever with the new group. We see here that the lotus is conceived as metaphor of three actions: losing memory and forgetting, growing fond of a new status or place, living a new life.

This comparison leads to a third and concluding point that emphasises the political and cultural choices and preferences of Sargon II. It was already noted that in his new capital city Dur-Sharrukin, Sargon had imported a number of western traditions, such as the *bīt ḫilāni*, of North Syrian tradition, a royal garden like Mt. Amanus, and large stone column bases of North Syrian form.[46] Moreover, the location of the city itself, at the foot of the first large mountain east of Nineveh, evoked the hills of the Upper Euphrates and the mountains of Lebanon. It seems therefore reasonable to think, as J. M. Russell suggests, that Sargon may well have wanted to express his power over the west by blending together traditional Assyrian forms with the most desirable features of western capitals in his new city.[47] Therefore, the extensive use of the lotus flower motif and its metaphorical allusions falls within the general craving of Sargon for the west and its traditions. By contrast, although later texts mention the plant of life, Sargon's successors seem to have reduced or even abandoned the lotus motif from their figurative programs. The fascinating corollary is that Sargon's reign can be seen as a particular and important **cultural bridge** between east and west.[48]

properties (Emboden 1978: 404; Benson Harer 1985: 49–54; Teissier 1996: 181).

[45] Hogan 1976: 200.

[46] Novák 1999: 145.

[47] Russell 1999: 241.

[48] The renunciation to Sargon's artistic choices by his successors was already highlighted in the abandonment of the portrait of the king holding the long staff (Portuese 2017: 123). This might be connected to the general disengagement from the past in the political behaviour of later kings, especially Sargon's son Sennacherib.

Abbreviations

ARAB: Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia
CAD: The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago
PNA: The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire
Od: Homer Odyssey; translation by A. T. Murray 1995, 1st ed. 1919
RIMA: The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Assyrian Periods
RINAP: The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
SAA: State Archives of Assyria

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