

THE WINGED FIGURES OF THE ASSYRIAN AND
OTHER ANCIENT MONUMENTS.

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The following observations have arisen out of the preparation of one of my Gifford Lectures delivered before the University of Aberdeen during the past winter. In examining the nature of Spiritual Beings as defined and represented in the religions of the world, I was led to examine with more care than heretofore the class of Winged Spirits, and especially those quasi-human forms on the Assyrian monuments whose importance in the history of religious art has been lately coming into view.*

That the winged figures of Assyria were derived from or suggested by those of Egypt, may be taken as the accepted and probable opinion. Egyptian figures of the kind may be grouped in three classes, viz., the winged suns, the winged monsters of the Theban tombs, and the winged deities with human bodies. The Assyrian monuments present well-known forms more or less corresponding to these three classes. Firstly, the sun is represented as a winged plain disk or ring, also with an archer sun-god standing within this circle. Secondly, the animal-monsters have their grandest representatives in the colossal winged bulls and lions, and with these are to be included the winged horse, griffin, &c. Thirdly, we have the human-bodied figures, of which, though they are familiar objects, typical sketches are here inserted (Plate I), from the valuable work of Perrot and Chipiez, "History of Art in Chaldæa and Assyria," and Layard's "Monuments" in order to keep their characteristics clearly before our minds. Some are man-headed, others (to use the ordinary term), eagle-headed. Some are represented with four wings, some with two, which in a measure agrees with the mention by Berossos the Chaldean, of the primæval two-headed men, some with two

* See preliminary letter in *Academy*, June 8, 1889. In following out the subject, I have had the advantage of referring to scholars specially conversant with monumental evidence and chronology, among them Professor Sayce, Professor Percy Gardner, and Mr. E. Wallis Budge. On botanical points I have been able to consult Mr. W. T. Thiselton Dyer and Professor Vines.

wings, and others with four, of whom delineations were preserved in the temple of Bel at Babylon. Looking at the Assyrian figures themselves, it seems a possible conjecture that they may always have been imagined as having four wings even when two only are shown, for these are ill-matched as a pair, while divine figures otherwise similar are represented either with two or four wings. It is not reasonable however to criticize too closely the anatomical adaptation of the Assyrian wings, which may be taken as symbols in a religious picture-writing, indicating that the divine beings who wear them can freely traverse space. As has been well pointed out by Langbehn, they never fly.* It is interesting to notice with reference to the conventional adaptation of these symbolic wings, that the Assyrian human-bodied winged figures follow the analogy not of the Egyptian human-bodied winged figures, but of the winged monster-animals. In Plate II, fig. 13, the Egyptian goddess Nephthys is seen to be constructed on a comparatively natural plan, the bird-feathered wings being attached below the arms and moved by them, in remarkable contrast to the Assyrian figures, in which all scruples as to anatomical possibility are set at nought.

The Assyrian quasi-human winged figures, whether man-headed or bird-headed, two-winged or four-winged, in standing or walking attitude on the walls of royal or sacred buildings, are in frequent apposition with the so-called "sacred tree" or "tree of life," of which a typical form is shown in Plate I, fig. 1 (see also figs 14, 15, 19 and 20). That these tree-figures represent date-palms is now recognized. An early remark to this effect is by Prof. G. Rawlinson: "I suspect that the so-called 'flower' was in reality a representation of the head of a palm-tree, with the form of which, as portrayed on the earliest sculptures (Layard, 'Mon.,' pl. 53), it nearly agrees."† I insert here (Plate II, fig. 11) a copy of the representation of the head of a date-palm in Assyrian landscape, scarcely less conventionalized than in the "sacred tree," which may probably stand for a group or grove of palms. To this group of palms the winged figures are seen presenting an object resembling a fir-cone which they hold in the right hand, while in the left hand they carry a basket or bucket. The likeness of the object to a fir-cone has led

* Jul. Langbehn, "Flügelgestalten der ältesten Griechischen Kunst." Munich, 1881, pp. 31, 39.

† G. Rawlinson "The Five Great Monarchies," Vol. II, p. 7, note. 2nd edition, 1871.

to its being generally considered and called the fir-cone. The Assyrian drawing of plants is, however, rough and conventional, and forms more or less like this do duty for several botanical purposes, as appears in Plate II, where fig. 10 shows the branches of a tree, perhaps coniferous; fig. 12, a portion of a vine with leaves and bunches of grapes; fig. 9, the heads of a marsh-plant—all from Layard's "Monuments." The pictorial resemblance of the object in the hands of the winged deities to a fir-cone is thus insufficient proof of its being intended as really such. Also, if the tree which the winged deity approaches is admitted to be a palm, there is no obvious motive in a fir-cone being presented to it, so that writers who adopt this view of the scene have been obliged to treat the whole proceeding as a mystical ceremony. In such cases, however, it is always desirable to look for evidence of that intelligible meaning which underlies religion as it does other institutions. It occurred to me that it might be connected with the artificial fertilization of the date-palm, which has been remarked on by naturalists since antiquity. The principal ancient accounts of this process are the following:—

Herodotus, describing the Babylonian region, writes: "Palm-trees grow in great numbers over the whole of the flat country, mostly of the kind which bears fruit, and this fruit supplies them with bread, wine, and honey. They are cultivated like the fig-tree in all respects; among others, in this. The natives tie the fruit of the male-palms, as they are called by the Greeks, to the branches of the date-bearing palm, to let the gall-fly enter the dates and ripen them, and to prevent the fruit from falling off. The male-palms, like the wild fig-trees, have usually the gall fly in their midst." *Ἐπίσι δέ σφι φοίνικες πεφυκότες ἀνὰ πᾶν τὸ πεδῖον, οἱ πλεῖνες αὐτῶν καρποφόροι, ἐκ τῶν καὶ σιτία καὶ οἶνον καὶ μέλι ποιεῦνται· τοὺς συκεῶν τρόπον θεραπεύουσι τὰ τε ἄλλα, καὶ φοινίκων, τοὺς ἔρσενας* "Ἕλληνες καλέουσι, τούτων τὸν καρπὸν περιδέουσι τῆσι βαλανηφόροισι τῶν φοινίκων, ἵνα πεπαίνη τέ σφι ὁ ψῆν τὴν βάλανον ἐσθύνων καὶ μὴ απορρέῃ ὁ καρπὸς [ὁ] τῶν φοίνικος· ψῆνας γὰρ δὴ φορέουσι ἐν τῷ καρπῷ οἱ ἔρσενες, κατὰ περ ἑῷ οἱ ὄλυνθοι."^{*} It is not necessary to criticize here the historian's erroneous comparison of the fertilization of the date-palm with that of the fig. What is required from him is merely his record of the Babylonian method. The next account is that by Theophrastus, who mentions

* Herodot., I, c. 193. The translation is from Rawlinson's "Herodotus"; see also the notes in Larcher.

the difference between the male and female flowers in a passage of great interest to botanists as distinguishing plant-sex. Further on, after describing the caprification (*ἐρινασμός*) of the fig, he continues: "In the palms these" [aids are given] "by the males to the females. For they cause the staying-on and ripening. Which some call from the similarity *ὄλυνθάζειν*. It takes place in this way. When the male blossoms they cut away the spathe on which is the inflorescence forthwith as it is, and shake down the bloom and flower and pollen upon the fruit of the female. And when thus treated, it keeps on and does not fall away." "Γοῖς δὲ φοίνιξιν αἱ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρρένων πρὸς τὰς θήλειας· οὗτοι γὰρ εἰσιν οἱ ἐπιμένειν ποιοῦντες καὶ ἐκπέττειν· ὃ καλοῦσι τινες ἐκ τῆς ὁμοιότητος ὄλυνθάζειν. Γίνεται δὲ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον. Ὅταν ἀνθῆ τὸ ἀρρῆν, ἀποτέμνουσι τὴν σπάθην, ἐφ' ἧς τὸ ἄνθος, εὐθὺς ὡσπερ ἔχει, τὸν τε χυρὸν καὶ τὸ ἄνθος καὶ τὸν κονιορτὸν κατασείουσι κατὰ τοῦ καρποῦ τῆς θηλείας· καὶ τοῦτο πάθῃ, διατηρεῖ, καὶ οὐκ ἀποβάλλει.* Pliny follows in his "Natural History," remarking on the sexes of the date-palm, and adds that the fecundation is even contrived by man, from the males by the flower and down, sometimes even only by the dust being sprinkled on the females. "Adeoque est Veneris intellectus, ut coitus etiam excogitatus sit ab homine, ex maribus flore ac lanugine, interim vero tantum pulvere insperso feminis." †

From these ancient accounts we may pass to that of a well-known traveller of the last century, Thomas Shaw, who in describing the date-palm cultivation, states: "It is well known that these trees are male and female, and that the fruit will be dry and insipid without a previous communication with the male. In the month of March or April therefore, when the sheaths that respectively inclose the young clusters of the male flowers and the female fruit begin to open, at which time the latter are formed and the first are mealy, they take a sprig or two of the male cluster, and insert it into the sheath of the female; or else they take a whole cluster of the male tree and sprinkle the meal or farina of it over several clusters of the female. The latter practice is common in Egypt, where they have a number of males; but the trees of Barbary are impregnated by the former method, one male being sufficient to impregnate four or five hundred females." ‡

* Theophrast. "Hist. Plant.," II, c. 2, 6, c. 7, 4.

† Plin., "Nat. Hist.," xiii, c. 7.

‡ Thomas Shaw, "Travels or Observations relating to Barbary." Oxford, 1738, Part III, chap. i.

The invention of artificial fertilization, however far it may go back in antiquity, presents no difficulty in explanation, being only a facilitation of the natural process. It has been stated in the 17th century that the groves of wild palms in the deserts of Africa without any cultivation produced good and plentiful crops of dates, the wind conveying the pollen from the male to the female palms.* Whether anything of the kind has been observed of late years I have no information, but it is obvious that the produce of such natural fertilization, depending on the number and position of the male palms, must at best be scanty and irregular. It is not to be wondered at that artificial methods have come to prevail generally where the culture of the date is carried on. These methods are seen from the foregoing passages to be three in number. That described by Herodotus consisted in tying male inflorescences to the fruit-bearing branches. In modern times the more economical arrangement of inserting one or two sprigs, mentioned by Shaw, is in general use in date-growing districts. There is an elaborate illustrated description of it by the eminent botanist Kaempfer.† Lastly, it appears that the plan of shaking the pollen from the male over the female flowers not only obtained in ancient, but has been continued in modern times. It is this method which especially concerns the present argument.

I now proceed to examine the form of the male inflorescence which is conveyed to the fruit-bearing date-palm, in order to show its close resemblance to the sculptured cone carried in the hand of the Assyrian winged deity, of which a figure is here inserted (Plate II, fig. 6) from one of the colossal bas-reliefs in the British Museum. In Kaempfer's treatise on the Palm already mentioned, a drawing is given of the male palm-inflorescence, stripped of its spathe and with the flowers open and ripe for scattering the pollen, that is to say, in the precise condition required for comparison; this drawing is here copied (Plate II, fig. 8). Actual specimens are, however, more satisfactory to deal with. By the kindness of my friend Mr. Thomas Hanbury, who has sent me from his famous garden at La Mortola, on the Riviera, several date-palm inflorescences, I am able to exhibit these to the Society, and photographs from them are copied as illustrations

* Prosperus Alpinus, "De Plantis Ægypti," Padua, 1640, p. 25. Julius Pontedera, "Anthologia," Padua, 1720, cites this passage.

† Kaempfer, *Amœnitat. Exoticæ*, Fasc. V. Lemgo, 1712, Fasc. IV.

(Plate II, figs. 5, 7). In comparing the whole series, it will be noticed that Kaempfer's drawing, which represents the flowers open, resembles the sculptures in this respect more closely than my own figures, taken at the stage when the flowers are only beginning to unclose, and this similarity is increased by the conventional drawing of the botanist, which approaches that of the ancient sculptor. On the other hand, the real specimens come closer to the sculptures in showing the cone in its early pointed state, whereas the botanical drawing represents a somewhat later stage, when the point is beginning to break up.

The similarity of the sculptured cone to the real palm-inflorescence, taken together with the fact of its being shown as carried to the date-palm, might be considered to prove that the scene at the sacred tree represents the artificial fertilization. The further examination of the monumental evidence, far from invalidating the argument, confirms it by consistent details. The basket or bucket held in the left hand corresponds with the basket carried at present in the East by the cultivator to hold his supply of pollen-bearing inflorescences when he climbs the fruit-bearing palms to fertilize them; this is the more necessary from the dropping of the flowers and the shedding of the pollen, much of which would be lost if the cones were carried loose. Thus sometimes the bucket carried in the hand of the winged figure serves to identify the scene even when the cone is not shown in the other hand. This is the case in Plate IV, fig. 20, an impression of a cylinder (from Lajard) which has the interesting peculiarity that the palm-tree is drawn realistically below the winged sun, showing clearly that the conventional trees usually forming part of the scene were well understood to be palms.

The conventional outlines and combinations of the various parts of the palm-tree, though difficult to follow, especially when they have passed into ornament, often seem to show that the artist has the sense of their meaning. Thus on Plate IV, fig. 19, the inflorescences on their long bending stalks may be intended as partly seen through the opening of the split spathe, and they are often more conventionally rendered in ornamental borders. Or they may be shown without the spathe, as on the royal robe from Nimrud, of which a portion is here figured (Plate III, fig. 15). My attention has lately been called to Sir George Birdwood, in his dissertation on "The Knop and Flower Pattern," having identified the long-stalked cones which flourish out from the fan-like head of the



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

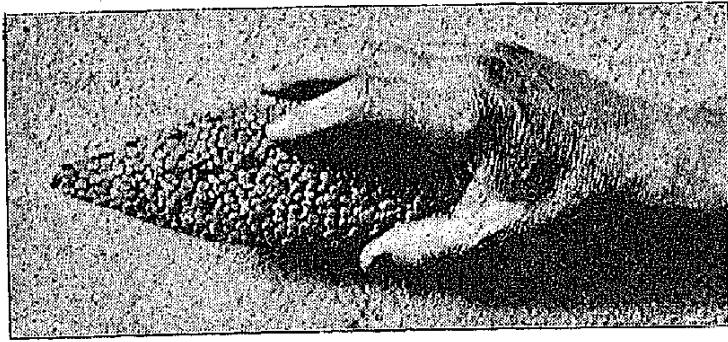


Fig. 5.

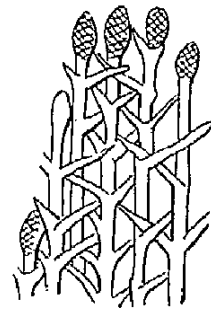


Fig. 9.

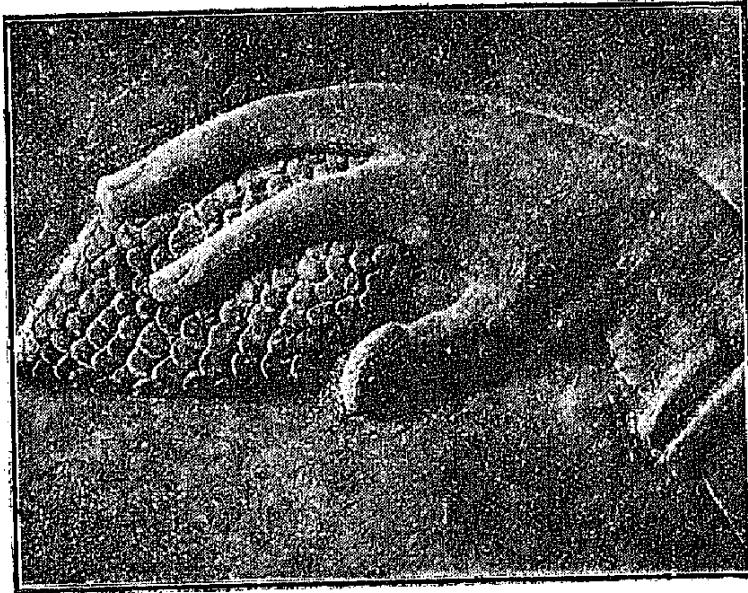


Fig. 6.



Fig. 10.

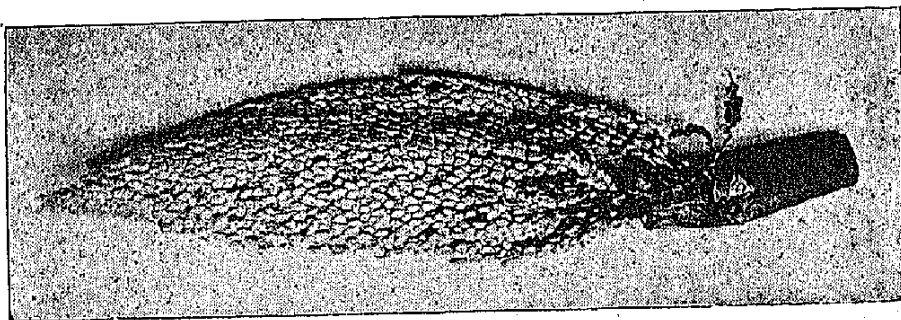


Fig. 7.



Fig. 11.

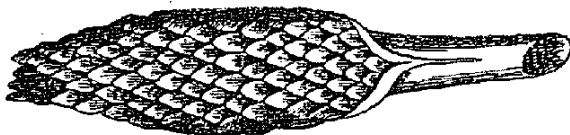


Fig. 8.

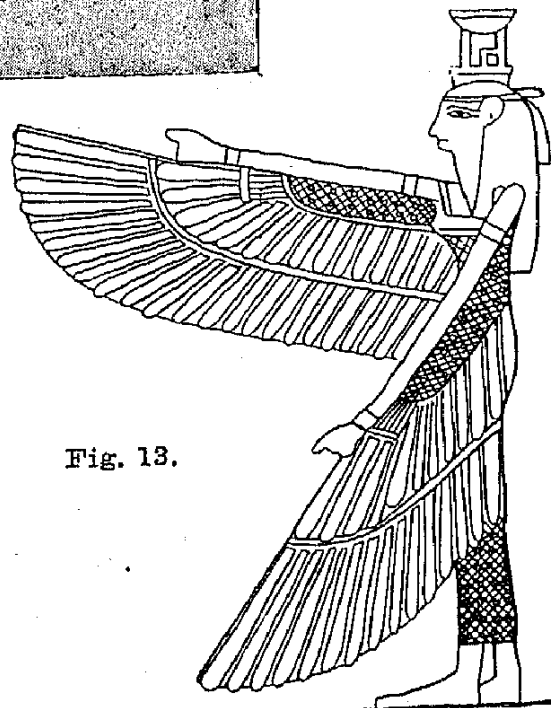


Fig. 13.



Fig. 12.

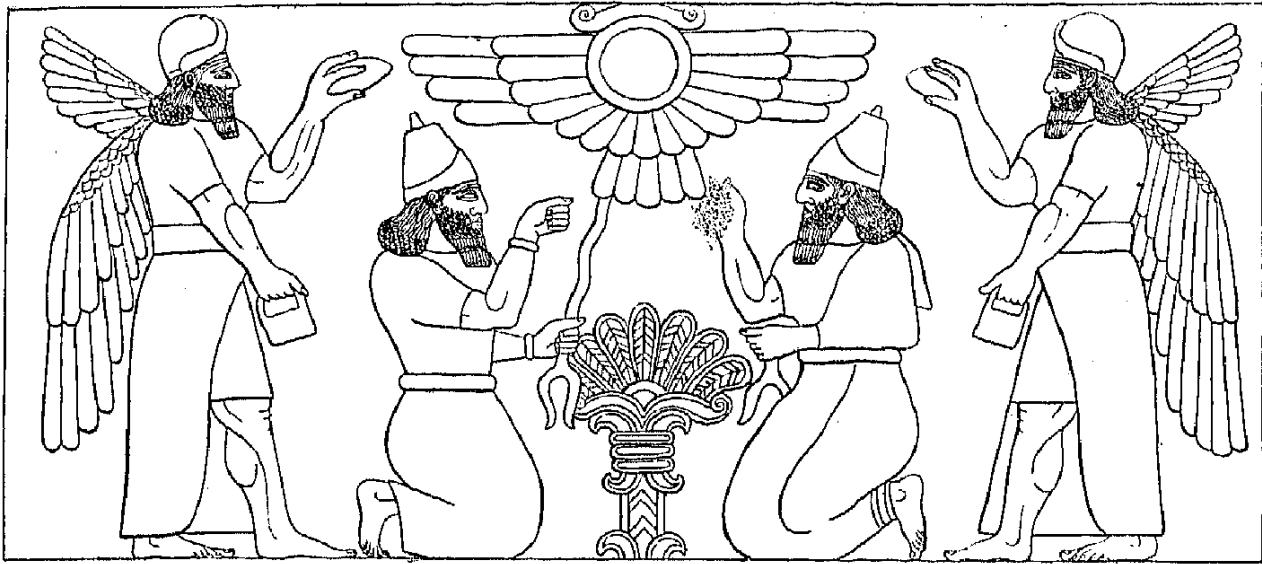


Fig. 14.

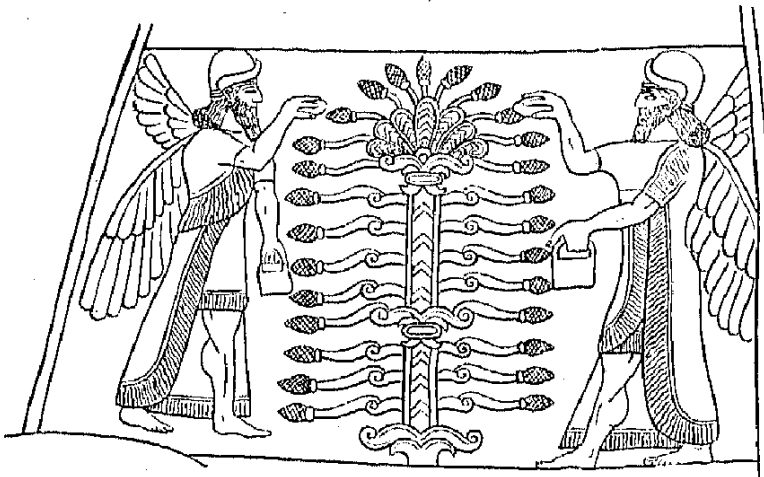


Fig. 15.

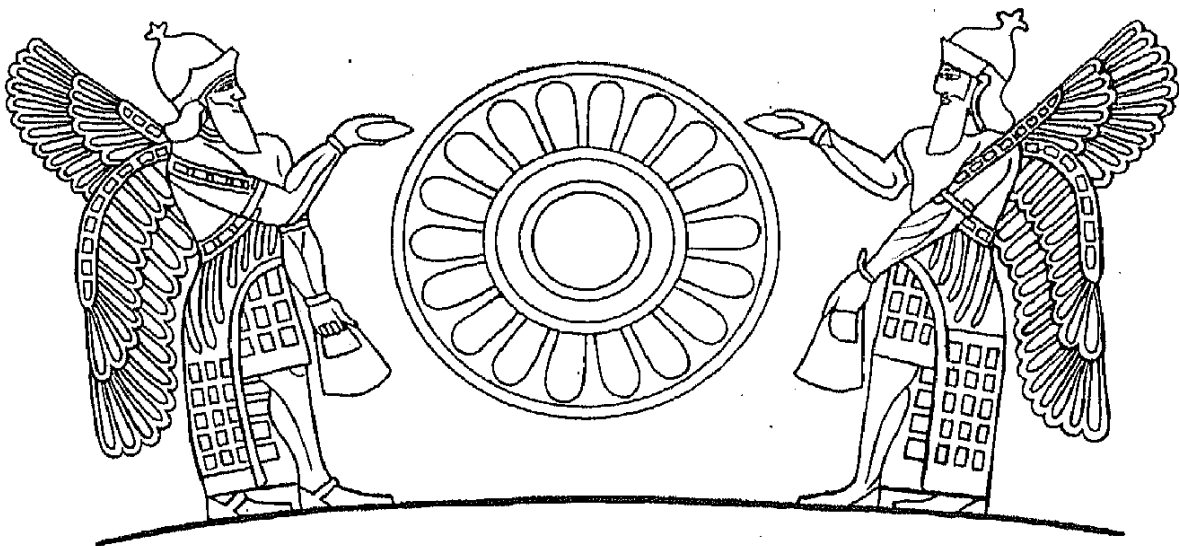


Fig. 16.

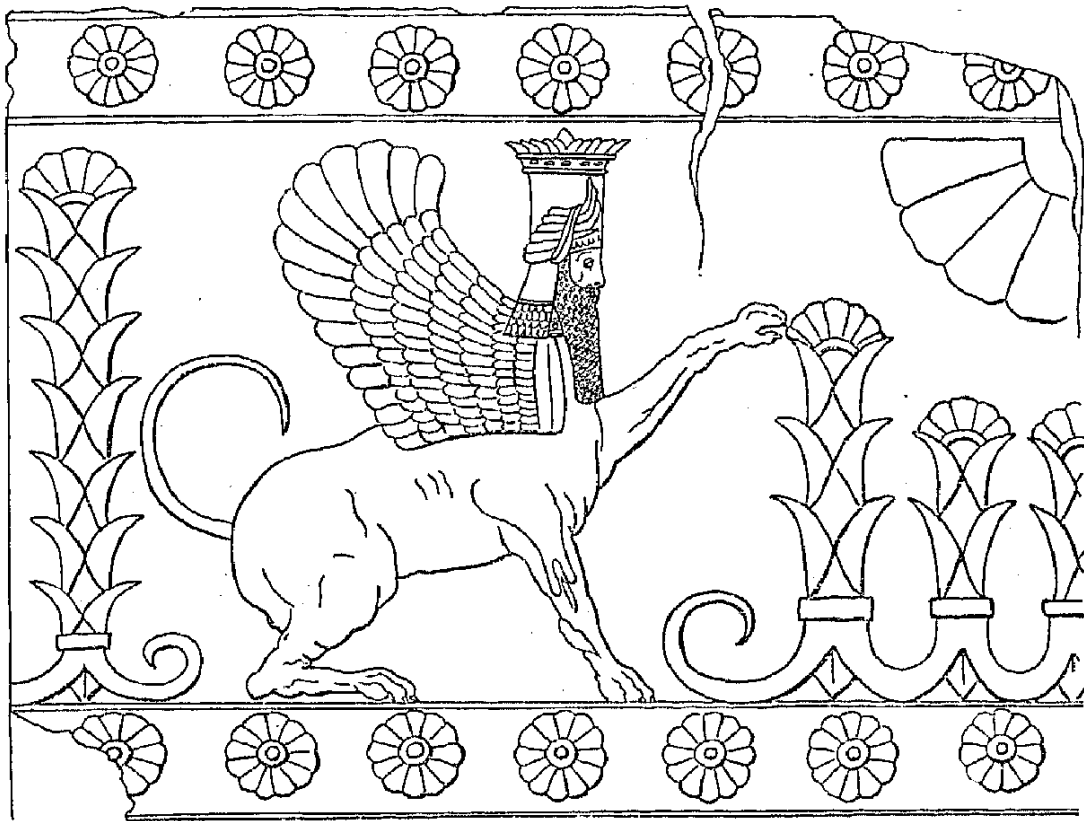


Fig. 17.

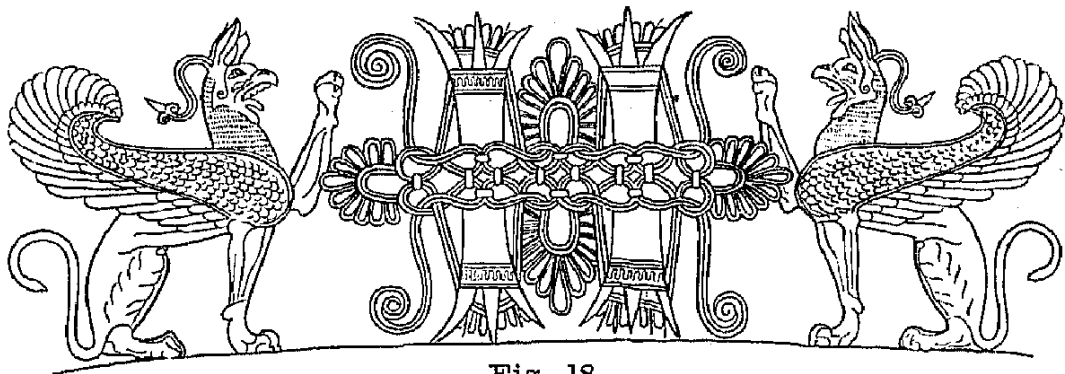


Fig. 18.

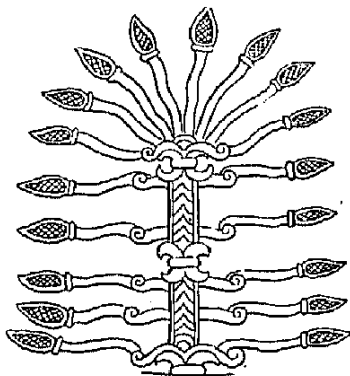


Fig. 19.

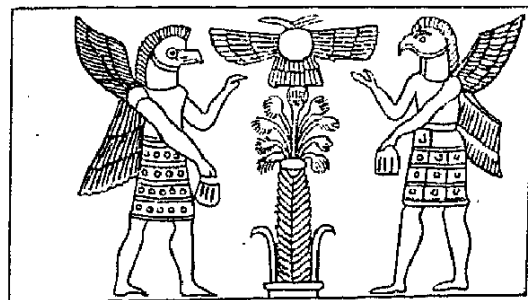


Fig. 20.

date-palm as being its fruit-clusters, recurring also in more conventional forms in ornamental designs.* I am glad to be able to cite this dissertation, one of the most important contributions to the theory of art-development, to show that its writer, approaching the subject from quite a different point of view, so long ago arrived at this opinion as to the representation of the female inflorescences or young date-clusters in Assyrian art.

Having now considered these points of evidence separately, it remains to apply them to those pictorial groups fortunately preserved in the figured decoration of royal robes, where the whole argument is, so to speak, summed up (Plate III, fig. 15). There the winged deities with cone and bucket not only approach the sacred palm-tree, but are bringing into contact the male and female inflorescences, and the scene of fertilization is complete.

On the question with what motive this scene was so continually represented, some remarks may now be made. The winged sun, adopted from Egypt into Assyria, continues to hold on the Assyrian monuments the same dominance over scenes of religious significance which belongs to it in Egyptian sculptures and paintings. That it was not transferred as a mere ornament, but with meaning and purpose, may be clearly seen in a sculptured group of which the copy published by Layard is here reproduced (Plate III, fig. 14). Here the winged sun is held by ropes in the hands of two kneeling figures. These are obviously the two deities who are seen from a different point of view on the inscribed stone belonging to the shrine of Samas, the Sun-god of Sippara, now in the British Museum. It has been described by Mr. Theo. G. Pinches,† whose argument is hardly open to doubt, that the beings holding the sun with their ropes (which I may incidentally remark end in conventional palm-heads) are the guides or directors of the sun, who keep him in his straight path. In the group we are now examining they hold the sun over the palm-tree, doubtless to ripen it, while behind them stand the two winged figures with cone and bucket ready to fertilize it. The whole scene, which with more or less variation is repeated on cylinders in the British Museum and elsewhere, had obviously a well-understood significance in Assyrian nature-worship, of which at least the practical theme seems apparent, doubtful as its full religious

* Sir George Birdwood, "Industrial Arts of India," p. 325.

† *Trans. Soc. of Bibl. Arch.*, Vol. VIII, p. 164.

significance may be. The importance of the palm-tree in the Mesopotamian region is measured by the fact that even in modern ages a failure of the date-crop amounts to a famine. Kaempfer mentions the Turks being turned back from an expedition against Bassora by the threat of cutting down the male palms in the invaded district, so as to leave the soldiers without supplies; but this step, calamitous to the population, being delayed in execution, the invasion was accomplished.* Thus it is no wonder that the Assyrian winged beings who carry in their hands the fertilizing cones, should occupy so conspicuous a place before the eyes of the nation on the palace-walls of Nineveh. Their high divine rank is shown by their prominence and their association with the sun. But any confident suggestion as to their names, or even the decision whether they represent the fertilizing winds, or national deities whose fertilizing influence comprised or was typified by the process of fecundating the date-palm, must be left to be settled by other evidence than that which I can deal with here.

It has to be remembered, however, that there appears on the Assyrian monuments another quasi-human figure carrying the palm-cone (Plate I, fig. 3). This is the deity clothed in the skin of the fish, or with a fish-tail, whom Prof. Sayce identifies with Ea or Oannes.† At first sight the marine nature of this being seems incongruous with the cultivation of the date-palm, but the record of the Chaldean historian Berossos offers a solution of the difficulty. The description of Oannes, who appeared on the Erythræan sea-coast of Babylonia, and of whom a representation was preserved in the historian's time, amounts to identification with the figure on the monuments. His body was that of a fish, with another head under the fish's head, and human feet joined to the fish's tail. Now to this Oannes were attributed the origins of Babylonian civilization, and among other arts he made them distinguish the seeds, and showed them how to collect the fruits. In his hands, therefore, the cone and bucket may be the symbols of a god of agriculture.

Passing from the significance of the winged beings in the religion and art of Assyria itself, we come to their world-wide influence among other nations who adopted them, probably with little exact preservation of their original meaning. Thus since the

* Kaempfer, p. 706.

† Sayce, "Religion of Ancient Babylonians," p. 131.

Assyrian sculptures became familiar to European eyes, their suggestive effect on the ancient Hebrew mind has been often thought of. One striking point of comparison with the mystic visions of Ezekiel was noticed many years ago by Layard. It is that the four forms of the living creatures of Ezekiel, man, lion, bull, eagle, are precisely those of the Assyrian monuments. The winged bull and lion are made up of these and no other, and if we add to them the winged walking figures, they fall into the same scheme. As Layard argues, "These coincidences are too marked not to deserve notice; and do certainly lead to the inference, that the symbols chosen by the prophet were derived from the Assyrian sculptures."* Through long ages of religious art, this quaternion of mystic creatures is to be traced henceforth. Within Christendom the four beasts of the Apocalypse reproduce those of Ezekiel; and at last the series passes into the attributes of the four Evangelists.

I have now to point out that the argument for the derivation of the Cherubim of Ezekiel from the Assyrian monuments may be carried further. In the prophet's description of the living creatures who he knew were cherubim, he says that "they had every one four wings, and the likeness of the hands of a man was under their wings." Now these are two special characteristics belonging to such an Assyrian deity as is here shown (Plate I, fig. 2) majestically striding with the fertilizing cone in his hand. They form a combination which can hardly have repeated itself by accident. Modern observers are not indeed struck at first sight by the express mention of the hands under the wings, which to them seem almost a matter of course. But this is because the genii and angels to whose forms we are accustomed are themselves derived from the winged figures belonging to Assyria. It is improbable that at the time of Ezekiel there were any other types in the world answering the description of the four wings and the hands below them, except such Babylonian-Assyrian winged deities, and the adaptations of them by neighbouring nations. Through the Phoenicians the Assyrian figures had long before become familiar to the Hebrew mind, as appears when the Tyrian workmen are related to have adorned the temple of Solomon "with carved figures of cherubim and palm-trees and open flowers." This shows that among the Phoenician art-figures of Assyrian origin, familiar to us by many specimens, the cherub was a definite figure known by

* Layard, "Nineveh," Vol. II, p. 465.

name, and not only was the conventional sacred tree of Assyria depicted beside it, but this was understood to be the date-palm. The types from which the visionary living creatures modelled themselves in the prophet's mind in his vision on the banks of the river Chebar, stand thus almost completely open to the modern student.*

As an example of the transplanting of Assyrian types, Plate IV, fig. 17, represents a group from Persepolis illustrating those combinations of winged animals with trees and other sacred objects which are commonly engraved on cylinders, etc. It is hard to guess whether they continue to embody some religious conception, or have passed into the merely decorative stage, but there is still evident in them a consciousness of meaning which makes their details instructive. In the present figure, the drawing of the palm-tree is important, for above its almost naturalistic shaft the head of the palm stands up as a half-rosette. The comparison of these with the complete rosettes in the figure, makes it probable that the latter were intended as representing the head of the palm seen from above or below. Such rosettes are known in Assyrian ornament accompanying cones, leaves, and fan-heads of the palm (see Layard, "Monuments," 1st series, pl. 34-38), and it seems a reasonable explanation that the wheel-like objects to which winged deities are presenting the cone in the enamelled archivolt at Khorsabad may be the palm-trees. In Plate III, fig. 16, I give a sketch of a group from this remarkable series, which strikingly recalls the alternate cherubim and wheels of Ezekiel's vision. In Plate IV, fig. 18, is part of the decoration of the François Vase at Florence, which shows groups of the nature of that of Persepolis travelling into Greek art, the tree before which the griffins stand being the well-marked conventional palm-group of the Assyrian monuments. In more degenerate forms the art-student may trace the influence of such groups in the ornamentation of the Renaissance, as in the Loggie of the Vatican.

It is needless for me to bring forward evidence here on a topic now becoming acknowledged in classical archæology, that the Assyrian winged deities whose nature and functions have been here remarked upon are the predecessors of the winged genii whose graceful forms pervade Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art. In later times, when Christianity became an imperial religion, the Victories and Cupids and guardian genii of pagan Rome with slight change

* Ezek. x, xl; 1 Kings, vi, vii; 2 Chron. iii.

gave rise to the Christian angels, and as such have ever since retained their artistic place; so obvious is this, that mere comparison is the only proof it needs. It is a remarkable instance of the permanence of art-forms once established in the world, that the Assyrian palm-tree, though separated from the winged deities whose office was to make it fruitful, has none the less made its way also over the world. From the time of the early Assyrian discoveries, it became evident that its conventional form had given rise to the Greek ornament often called the "honeysuckle," but the real nature of which is now acknowledged in the term "palmette." Reduced to mere decoration, this pattern pervades modern buildings and furniture, repeated with wearisome iteration by craftsmen from whose minds the sense of original meaning in ornament has long since died out. It is curious to see sometimes on a church wall the honeysuckle pattern bordering a space round sculptured angels, and to remember how far off and how long ago it was that the ancestor of the angel tended the ancestor of the plant.

