

The Mesopotamian Soul of Western Culture

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The worn-out phrase, “Already the ancient Greeks...,” involves attitudes and views that make an Assyriologist stir uneasily. Its basic message is that Western culture was born in ancient Greece. The little word “already” betrays, on the one hand, admiration of the achievements of the Greeks, and on the other hand disparagement of previous cultures, as if nothing worth mentioning had been accomplished before the Greeks. Such attitudes are rooted in remote antiquity and derive from Greek antagonism towards “the barbarians” after the Persian Wars, as well as from notions of Greek superiority over “the barbarians” after the conquests of Alexander.

Today we know that Greece already in the third millennium BC was an inseparable part of the ancient Near Eastern cultural sphere. The local culture, which the Greeks adopted when they invaded the country in the early second millennium BC, had long had close ties with Anatolia, Mesopotamia and the Levant. This oriental connection continued and gained in strength in the early part of the first millennium BC, when the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid empires extended their spheres of influence farther and farther towards the West. Irrespective of political boundaries, the Greeks and Ionians at this time accepted influences from the East in all areas of culture: religion, science, arts, fashion, and even political and administrative systems. The general east-to-west direction of the influences is easy to document, and their quantity and variety is impressive.

Nonetheless, the notion of the uniqueness and superiority of Greek culture lives on tenaciously. Even when the reality of Near Eastern influence is admitted, its significance is generally marginalized, and the Greeks' own contribution to the birth of Western culture is considered essentially more significant. The shift from classical Greek culture to Hellenistic world culture seems natural and self-evident, while the culture of the ancient Near East seems to belong to a totally different world. It is as if the entire Old World, winged by the “Greek genius,” had suddenly changed after the fourth century BC and taken a dramatic leap forward towards a modern kind of society, philosophy, science and arts.

The progress of ancient Near Eastern studies is, however, slowly challenging this view. It is becoming increasingly clear that the predominantly Greek stamp of Hellenistic culture largely is an “optical illusion” caused by the dominant position gained by the Greek language in the East as a result of Alexander the Great's conquests. In reality, Hellenistic culture with its philosophies, religions, sciences, arts and institutions was essentially based on ancient Near Eastern cultural traditions, whose origins can, with the help of Mesopotamian sources, be traced back to the beginning of the third millennium BC, and even earlier.

This fact is not at all evident: in comparison with Greek and Hellenistic cultures, Mesopotamian culture at first sight, undeniably, seems alien and strange. The better one has learned to understand it, however, the more it has come to resemble our own culture. Its strange and exotic features conceal within themselves an invisible world of ideas more familiar to us, which resurfaces in new garments but largely identical in content in classical antiquity. In Mesopotamia, the visible and invisible worlds were connected with each other through a complex system of symbols, images, metaphors, allegories and

mental associations. Unraveling this symbolic code opens the way to the very core of Mesopotamian culture, the world of ideas hidden its conventional and alien surface.

The study of Mesopotamian intellectual culture has progressed rapidly in recent years. In particular, charting and decoding its verbal and visual imagery has opened vistas that can with good reason be called revolutionary. I take a telling example from my own field of expertise.

The relief shown in **(Fig. 1)** takes us to the heart of the Assyrian empire, the governmental palace of King Ashurnasirpal II in Calah at the beginning of the ninth century BC. Having walked through endless corridors paneled with colorful bas reliefs, we finally enter the throneroom of the palace. To the left of the entrance, at the far end of the hall, surges the royal throne; the walls of the room are lined with reliefs recalling the temple of Jerusalem decorated with cherubs and palm trees, as described in the prophecy of Ezekiel. Winged genies and a stylized palm tree also dominate the relief shown in the picture, which covered the wall space behind the royal throne. While reliefs with trees and genies occur in great numbers also elsewhere in the palace, this particular relief and its duplicate facing the entrance to the throneroom are unique in that they are the only ones in which the tree is topped by a *winged disk* and surrounded by two mirror-imaged royal figures.

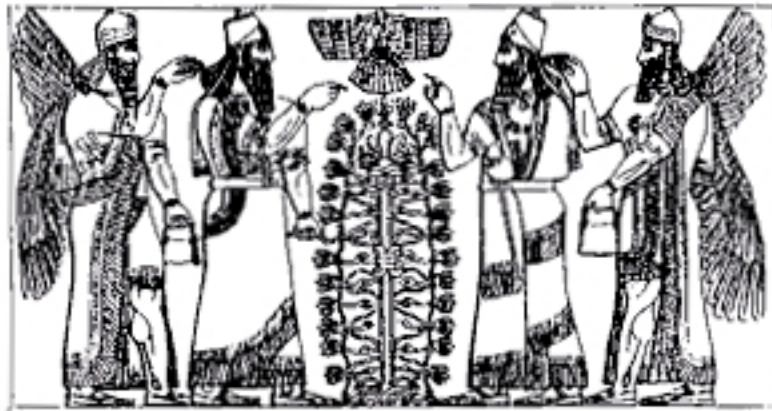


Figure 1

Slab B-23 of the throneroom of Ashurnasirpal II's Palace at Calah
(After A. H. Layard, *Monuments of Nineveh* I [London, 1849], Pl. 25)

The visual effect of this magnificently carved relief (to which the line drawing reproduced here does little justice) is indisputable, and for over a hundred years it has been one of the prized attractions of the Assyrian Galleries of the British Museum. Its location behind the royal throne emphasizes its ideological significance, and even an outsider can instinctively feel the sense of majesty, holiness and supernatural power emanating from it. Its exact meaning has, however, until recently, remained an enigma. The noncommittal caption attached to it in the exhibition hall is revealing: "Kings and winged figures offerings beside a sacred tree." As we shall see shortly, the winged figures do not carry offerings: there is, in fact, only one king, not two, on the relief, and nobody actually stands beside the tree.

In order to understand the relief correctly it is essential to realize that it does not depict physical but *metaphysical* reality. Each of its four main elements – the winged disk, the tree, the winged figure, the

king – represents a figuratively expressed abstract idea or metaphysical concept. Each main element again consists of several symbolic sub-elements, which with invisible bonds associate the ideological message of the relief with other structures of thought built upon the same symbolism,: philosophy, mythology, cult, magic, rituals, and religious doctrines. In this sense the relief is a sort of figurative hypertext studied with links to the entire Mesopotamian intellectual culture.

The winged figure standing behind the king represents the culmination of man's spiritual development, a mythical sage who thanks to his wisdom and piety has won for himself a place in heaven. The wisdom of the figure is of a mystical kind, an ability to understand and master supernatural powers operative in the world. In this capacity it functions as the king's guardian against sin, cultic impurity and evil spirits. The crown on its head is the crown of *heaven*; the garments it is dressed in are the *white* garments of a saint; the bucket in its left hand is filled with water of *life*, and the cone in its right hand has *purificatory* power. The figure has the wings of a guardian angel; from its belt protrude weapons against forces of darkness; its muscular feet symbolize victorious striving towards heaven. Apart from the bucket and the cone – the distinctive marks of an antediluvian sage – the figure in all its details resembles Ninurta, the slayer of Anzu (a monster symbolizing darkness and sin) exalted in heavenly glory after his victory, as depicted in a contemporary relief (**Fig. 2**).



Figure 2

Ninurta slays Anzû. Relief from the temple of Ninurta at Calah
(After A. H. Layard, *Monuments of Nineveh* II [London, 1853], Pl. 5)

The figurative language of the relief is not limited to the symbolic meaning of its constituent elements; it also has a syntax of its own. Its composition is dominated by centripetal balance, harmony and symmetry. The figures turned towards the center support the balance of the whole and underline the significance of the mysterious tree in the middle. The tree's location on the middle axis of the relief, in the center of power, *exactly behind* the king seated on the throne, is not accidental.

Three conspicuous features catch the eye in its complicated structure: the garland surrounding the tree, the balance and harmony of the whole, and the three nodes of the trunk, from which fruit-bearing branches emerge. The nodes and the fruits on the right and left side of the tree, linked to one another by

means of volutes, from a series of superimposed triads. Some variants of the tree resemble the menorah, the Jewish seven-branches lampstand; an anthropomorphic tree from Assur (**Fig. 3**) in its stark frontality resembles a Byzantine icon. The triadic structure of the tree reminds one of the Neoplatonic doctrine according to which the entire universe was triadically organized.



Figure 3

Anthropomorphic tree from Assur

(Drawing by Hildi Keel-Leu. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin; courtesy Othmar Keel)

In 1983 the American art historian Irene Winter made a significant breakthrough in the interpretation of the relief. She was able to show that the sculptures adorning the palace formed a uniform, carefully planned decorative program whose thematic inventory and internal order correlated with the Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal carved upon all the reliefs. This discovery made it possible to approach the relief from the viewpoint of their makers. The relief placed behind the royal throne corresponds to the initial words of the inscription: “Ashurnasirpal, representative of Ashur.” Taking into consideration the tree's central place in the relief, Winter concluded that it symbolized the “balance of the state in relationship to divine principles,” in other words, the divine world order upheld by the king as the god's representative. The winged disk hovering over the tree, in its turn, symbolized Ashur, the supreme god of the empire.

These conclusions opened fascinating perspectives which I have followed up in a series of articles and monographs published in recent years.

Attention had been drawn already in the 1940s to the fact that in other reliefs of the palace the winged sages purify *either* the king *or* the tree, but not both of them at the same time. This variation implies an equivalence between the king and the tree on the symbolic level, corresponding to the equation of the king with the date palm in contemporary texts, and suggests that the king was considered an *embodiment* of the tree, as in the Book of Daniel, where the king of Babylon sees himself as huge tree growing in the center of the world. Indeed, when seated on his throne, the king, from the viewpoint of the people present in the throneroom, literally merged with the tree. The throneroom relief expresses this merger graphically by depicting the king in mirror-image posture on both sides of the tree, thus, as it were, *enclosing* the tree within himself. If the tree basically symbolized the divine world order then the king embodying the tree must have represented the realization of this divine order in man, the “perfect man.” The same idea occurs in Jewish mysticism, where the Tree of Life depicted as man represents Adam Qadmon, the perfect, sinless man.

This point of contact with the Jewish mystical tradition open important gates. In Mesopotamian sources, the symbolism of the tree is not explained with a word, despite the ubiquity and obvious importance of the motif. This indicates that the associated doctrines were guarded as “secrets of heaven and earth” that were passed on to a limited number of initiates only. The situation is thus exactly the same as with the Tree of Life of Christianity and Judaism. While since antiquity extremely common in sacral and secular art, it is, excepting the second chapter of Genesis and the last chapter of Revelations, only rarely referred to in the Bible and later Christian and Jewish texts, and then always in the most general terms only. The complex doctrines relating to it are known only from medieval Jewish mystical philosophy, Kabbalah, whose entire doctrinal structure is built around an esoteric tree diagram, which in its three-graded triadic structure bears a striking resemblance to the Assyrian sacred tree.

The Tree of Life of Kabbalah depicts the cosmic world order as an equilibrium of powers emanating from the transcendent God. It consists of ten divine powers arranged, as in the Assyrian tree, in three superimposed triads on a vertical axis. The powers of the tree are interconnected by invisible ties; each of them has a name corresponding to its nature or function, and each of them reveals one aspect of the essence of God. At the top is the intellectual triad of Crown, Wisdom and Understanding; in the middle the moral triad of Love, Mercy and Justice; and at the bottom the physical triad of Glory, Victory and Foundation. The realization of the equilibrium of the tree in man restores the perfection of the soul lost in the Fall and thus opens the path to heaven and eternal life.

A closer analysis of the Kabbalistic tree surprisingly reveals that it is based on an Assyrian model. Each of its divine powers is associated with a mystical number reflecting the rank order of the relevant power in the hierarchical structure of the tree. A similar connection between divine powers and mystical numbers also existed in Assyrian religion. When the divine powers of the Kabbalistic tree (*Sefirot*) are replaced by corresponding Assyrian ones, one obtains a structure exactly corresponding to the three-graded generation hierarchy of the Mesopotamian divine world. The crown of the tree is the god of heaven, Anu; its foundation is the god of the netherworld, Nergal; in between heaven and earth, connecting them, is the goddess of love, Ishtar. The mystic numbers of the tree in the order of the Mesopotamian sexagesimal number system (**Fig. 4**), with the help of which the Mesopotamian origin of the tree can be mathematically proven.

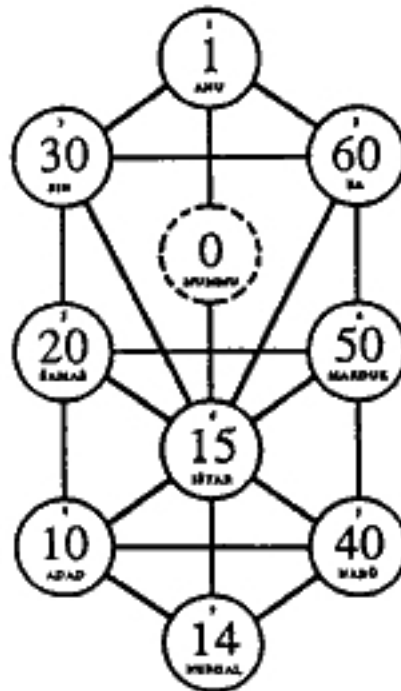


Figure 4

The reconstruction numerical structure of the Assyrian sacred tree
 (from S. Parpola, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52 [1993]: p. 183. fig. 9)

The discovery of this link between Assyrian and Jewish mysticism puts Assyrian religion in an entirely new light. Hidden under its polytheistic surface lies a pattern of thought which reduced all the gods worshiped in the world into mere aspects and attributes of a single almighty god, Ashur, who transcended human comprehension. Ashur was the “sum total” of all the gods; the equilibrium of divine powers crystallized in the sacred tree was his manifest “body.” The garland and filaments surrounding the tree symbolized the unity of its multiple divine powers. None of the manifest gods (all of them created by, or emanated from, Ashur) were perfect or omnipotent in themselves but carried out their specific functions and tasks as Ashur's “limbs” and “powers.” From this point of view Assyrian religion was as monotheistic as Christianity and Judaism with their multitudes of angels and archangels, the Trinity, and the system of the ten *Sefirot*. Broken into their components, the Neo-Assyrian spellings of the name Ashur signify “the only, universal God.”

The winged disk hovering over the tree depicts Ashur as a transcendent, almighty God in whom all the manifest divine powers converge. The winged disk, a symbol of the sun, symbolizes the essence of his nature, the eternal, infinite ocean of light and goodness surrounding the physical universe and radiating its brightness into it. The figure in the middle of the disk, raising its hand in blessing, represents Marduk/Enlil, the creator and ruler of the visible world and the god of mercy. The volute on the top of the disk, whose two ends are sometimes replaced by two divine figures (**Fig. 5**), implies a “Trinitarian” understanding of God. The figure of the right represents the divine prince, Ninurta, sent to the rescue of the world in the person of the king; the figure to the left is Ninurta's mother, Mullissu, the *spirit of God* residing in the king.



Figure 5

A triad of gods on the winged disk- Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal

(After A. H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* [London and New York, 1853], 160)

We see how penetrating through the symbolism of the relief startlingly brings it closer to our own time. The God of the relief emerges as essentially the same as our own but at the same time also the same as Allah, “the merciful and compassionate,” whose principal attribute is depicted in the middle of the winged disk. The king with his ribboned high tiara, sacerdotal garments and hand raised in blessing is essentially the same as the Pope, God's representative upon earth. The winged sage is a saint raised to the glory of heaven. The sacred tree, which contained the key to human perfection and salvation, corresponds as a religious and ideological symbol to the Christian cross.

It should be noted that these similarities are by no means accidental. The ideological message of the relief is connected to our time by an unbroken cultural tradition whose continuity can be seamlessly documented. After the collapse of the Assyrian empire, its culture and ideological structure were successively inherited and taken over by the Median, Achaemenid and Hellenistic empires, Rome, Byzantium, the Sasanids and the caliphs. As late as in the eleventh century AD the caliphs of Baghdad still bore the Assyrian titles “representative of God” (*Khalifat Allah*) and “perfect man” (*insan kamil*), while in the West the office of God's earthly representative passed from the emperor to the Pope. In the Achaemenid empire, the winged disk as the symbol of the almighty God was transferred to the Persian god Ahura Mazda (equated with Yahweh in the book of Ezra), while the divine hand raised in blessing came to symbolize God the Father in early Christian art. In gnostic and early Syriac texts Jesus is crucified on the *Tree of Life*, while in early Christian art the cross is frequently depicted in the form of the Tree of Life and vice versa. The doctrine of the “perfect man” as an image of the macrocosm, implicit in the tree, is clearly spelled out in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians (verses 15-19). The example could be multiplied.

The roots of Christianity have been sought in Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Greek philosophy. Yet many of its central doctrines are already found in Assyrian religion, which influenced the ancient Near East for centuries and was still very much alive in Syria-Palestine long after the birth of Christ. The same

applies to Neoplatonic philosophy, whose ultimate source of inspiration was not the writing of Plato or Aristotle but the *Chaldean Oracles* of Julian the Theurgist (a “Chaldean” advisor of Marcus Aurelius), and to the doctrines of Pythagoras and Orpheus, whose oriental background was known already in antiquity. As we have seen, Plato's teachings of the metaphysical world of ideas, of matter as the prison of the soul, and of the soul's divine origin, immortality and gradual ascent towards perfection were also fundamental to the path of salvation in the Assyrian sacred tree.

Mesopotamian mathematics knew the concept of zero and pi, reciprocals, powers, square and cubic roots, logarithms, numerical series, plane geometry, polynomial equations and the triangle of “Pythagoras” already a thousand years before they were transmitted to the Greeks by Pythagoras and Euclides. By the thirteenth century BC at the very latest there existed in Mesopotamia a sophisticated musical theory that made use of a musical notation and knew the “Pythagorean” tone scale. Prototypes of “Aesopian” fables and “Hippocratean” medical recipes have been found in second millennium Assyria. The Sumerian king Shulgi threw the javelin and the discus, wrestled, and raced during religious festivals already a thousand years before the Olympic games, and Plato's allegory of the ship of state is already attested in the third millennium BC. Many sayings well-established in our culture, such as “the princess and half the kingdom” and “worth its weight in gold,” have their origin not in classical Greece but in ancient Mesopotamia.

Without noticing it, the Greeks had become significantly “mesopotamianized” already long before the conquests of Alexander. Precisely this made the subsequent transition to the Hellenistic world culture so natural and smooth.

In stating this I do not wish in any way to belittle or disparage the part played by the ancient Greeks in the emergence of Western culture. *Of course* they made significant and outstanding contributions to it, for example in the fields of logic and visual arts; and undeniably, without them our civilization would not be what it is today. But in the final analysis, their contribution is no more remarkable than that of the nations who also contributed significantly to our common heritage – for example, the Romans, who in their ignorance considered themselves as mere imitations of Greeks in the field of culture. It is accordingly best to finally bury the myth of the “Greek origin” of our culture. Its roots lie in ancient Mesopotamia, and the innumerable ideas, patterns of thought and institutions born there, which imperceptibly live on in our thoughts, attitudes and environment, are its immortal soul.