



Publikationen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts

---

Beate Pongratz-Leisten

## Between Nature and Landscape: Mapping Conquered Territory in the Tree and Plant List in Ashurnasirpal II's Banquet Stele

in: Marzoli et al. - Kontaktmodi: Ergebnisse der gemeinsamen Treffen der Arbeitsgruppen »Mobilität und Migration« und »Zonen der Interaktion« (2013–2018) 249–261

<https://doi.org/10.34780/366c-6609>

Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:  
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

Copyright (Digital Edition) © 2024 Deutsches Archäologisches Institut  
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Zentrale, Podbielskiallee 69–71, 14195 Berlin, Tel: +49 30 187711-0  
Email: [info@dainst.de](mailto:info@dainst.de) | Web: <https://www.dainst.org>

### Nutzungsbedingungen :

Mit dem Herunterladen erkennen Sie die [Nutzungsbedingungen](#) von iDAI.publications an. Sofern in dem Dokument nichts anderes ausdrücklich vermerkt ist, gelten folgende Nutzungsbedingungen: Die Nutzung der Inhalte ist ausschließlich privaten Nutzerinnen / Nutzern für den eigenen wissenschaftlichen und sonstigen privaten Gebrauch gestattet. Sämtliche Texte, Bilder und sonstige Inhalte in diesem Dokument unterliegen dem Schutz des Urheberrechts gemäß dem Urheberrechtsgesetz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Die Inhalte können von Ihnen nur dann genutzt und vervielfältigt werden, wenn Ihnen dies im Einzelfall durch den Rechteinhaber oder die Schrankenregelungen des Urheberrechts gestattet ist. Jede Art der Nutzung zu gewerblichen Zwecken ist untersagt. Zu den Möglichkeiten einer Lizenzierung von Nutzungsrechten wenden Sie sich bitte direkt an die verantwortlichen Herausgeber\*innen der jeweiligen Publikationsorgane oder an die Online-Redaktion des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts ([info@dainst.de](mailto:info@dainst.de)). Etwaige davon abweichende Lizenzbedingungen sind im Abbildungsnachweis vermerkt.

### Terms of use :

By downloading you accept the [terms of use](#) of iDAI.publications. Unless otherwise stated in the document, the following terms of use are applicable: All materials including texts, articles, images and other content contained in this document are subject to the German copyright. The contents are for personal use only and may only be reproduced or made accessible to third parties if you have gained permission from the copyright owner. Any form of commercial use is expressly prohibited. When seeking the granting of licenses of use or permission to reproduce any kind of material please contact the responsible editors of the publications or contact the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut ([info@dainst.de](mailto:info@dainst.de)). Any deviating terms of use are indicated in the credits.

# Between Nature and Landscape: Mapping Conquered Territory in the Tree and Plant List in Ashurnasirpal II's Banquet Stele

von Beate Pongratz-Leisten

In her recent book *Before Nature*, 2016, Francesca Rochberg<sup>1</sup> posits that »the simile-filled descriptions of landscape and terrain traversed by the Assyrian army as well as the flora and fauna encountered and described in the highly literary accounts of Neo-Assyrian annals did not aim at understanding nature or geography but« – and here she refers to Niek Veldhuis – »to understand Sumerian and Sumerian writing.«<sup>2</sup> Niek Veldhuis has greatly advanced our knowledge of the composition of the lexical corpus, i. e. lexical lists of words for inanimate and animate objects, including all things of wood, metal, stone, etc. and made this argument in his edition of the literary text *Nanše and the Birds*, a text that displays great affinities with the lexical corpus<sup>3</sup>. Francesca Rochberg, by contrast, investigates the theoretical underpinnings of the scientific practices of divination, astronomy, mathematics, and medical astrology. She observes that celestial omen series such as *Enūma Anu Enlil* did not presuppose universal laws of nature, and neither did they view the relationship of antecedents and consequents in omens as a relationship of cause and effect<sup>4</sup>. Rather, explanation was bound to philological techniques and »in lieu of ontological-causal or logical-formal explanation, which would not have answered the needs of cuneiform scribal scholarship, a hermeneutic orientation to explanation developed to elucidate and explicate the meanings of texts. ... An intertextual dimension was thus at the core of explanatory method in the context of prediction.«<sup>5</sup>

Here we have two scholars, one coming from the perspective of the lexical corpus and the oth-

er a historian of science steeped in the divinatory compendia, who both claim that a concept of nature was non-existent in ancient Mesopotamia and that whatever kind of lists of natural phenomena are attested in the texts – ornithological in one case and terrestrial and celestial signs in the other – are to be contextualized in the realm of scribal production.

A close reading of another genre of the cuneiform corpus, namely the historical inscriptions and their accompanying pictorial representations in the Neo-Assyrian palaces, suggests a different conclusion. At the beginning of Mesopotamian history natural features are only rarely depicted in Mesopotamian art. They can be found in Proto-Elamite seals of the early third millennium B.C. from Susa and Tepe Yahya, normally flanked by animals, a motif that is then also attested in Mesopotamia during the Early Dynastic period<sup>6</sup>. The Proto-Elamite evidence as well as the representation of landscape in Naram-Sin's *Victory Stele* and in Akkadian art as represented in glyptic have been considered being among the few exceptions<sup>7</sup> to be equated with political and cultural expansion, i. e. more precisely with »eastern expansion, conquest and trade.«<sup>8</sup> The extensive representation of landscape, as it then occurs in the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, is highly unusual in ancient Near Eastern art, and must be seen in the context of the massive expansion during the Neo-Assyrian period. Rather than driven by defensive strategies against outer threats, this expansion was primarily economically motivated and resulted in the exploitation of the resources of the conquered territories by

1 Rochberg 2016.

2 Veldhuis 2004, 92.

3 Veldhuis 2004, 108.

4 Rochberg 2016, 265.

5 Rochberg 2016, 266 f.

6 Collon 2000.

7 It has been argued that this might have been due to scale, as the Assyrian reliefs displayed in registers allow for much more detailed depiction: Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, 176; Reade 1980, 73; Kantor 1966; Winter 1999.

8 Collon 2000, 16.

means of tribute and booty<sup>9</sup>. Such exploitation requires geographical knowledge to be acquired by the imperial administration, military strategists, and authors of royal inscriptions, and geographical lists and itineraries attest to such knowledge. Although no Neo-Assyrian geographical maps have been discovered, the existence of a fragment of a Middle Assyrian map showing the Euphrates River together with a tributary and the location of a military camp<sup>10</sup>, suggests that such maps must have been drawn up on other material such as parchment or the like<sup>11</sup>.

The depiction of landscape features rises in stages and culminates in the reliefs of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace in Nineveh at the beginning of the seventh century B.C.<sup>12</sup>. Natural features are regularly depicted on a monumental scale, and mountains and trees stand »for territorial claims or aspirations.«<sup>13</sup> Moreover, since the end of the second millennium B.C. with Tiglath-pileser I, the chopping down of fruit trees and other trees and the destruction of entire gardens become part of military strategy and will be regularly reported in the Assyrian annals<sup>14</sup>.

And while landscape – i. e. landscape as a cultivated place produced through local practice and human intervention<sup>15</sup> – never turns into a topic *per se*, as in sixteenth century Italian painting and seventeenth century Dutch painting<sup>16</sup>, landscape elements including trees, mountains, and rivers were combined in the reliefs to provide the geographical setting of the historical narrative<sup>17</sup>; to denote the crossing of difficult mountain passes or, by depicting endless ranks of date palms, to evoke the notion of profusion and abundance of the Babylonian river plain. During the Neo-Assyrian period, interest with the Northern Syrian landscape intensified, particularly the region of Mount Amanus »owing to its majestic height, diverse wild animals, and thickly forested slopes.«<sup>18</sup> Considering the lengthy accounts of Sennacherib describing his creation of landscaped gardens replicating the exotic regions of the Amanus and parks for leisure, the ceremonial and ritual use of temple gardens as well as

the creation of huge parks outside the city wall for the pleasure of royal hunting suggest that nature and constructed landscape had turned into a topic in their own right. The setting of Ashurbanipal's *Banquet Scene* in a large landscape that transitions into a hunting garden<sup>19</sup> reflects landscape as a constructed place that contained such diverse floral and faunal abundance as fictive imagining of a politically controlled territory<sup>20</sup> and as a way of mediating that controlled territory as a place of affect, contemplative looking, or connoisseurship to the audience<sup>21</sup>. Viewing nature, in this time, had turned into an active looking that was historically determined<sup>22</sup> and, as a mental image, transformed it into an invented landscape.

Irene Winter's pioneering study of the decorative program of Assurnasirpal II's palace in Nimrud drew our attention to the royal rhetoric and historical narrative in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs<sup>23</sup>, and Michelle Marcus has made the case that the visual designs of the Neo-Assyrian palaces showed a deliberate and preconceived program with regard to the spatial representation of geographical places, aiming at the clustering of campaigns in geographically related areas. Such geographical organization, she claims, was intended to promote and reinforce the king's power by demonstrating his »geographical knowledge of the hinterland and his mastery of physical space.«<sup>24</sup> Her inquiry into the arrangement of the decorative programs of the Neo-Assyrian palaces demonstrated that beginning with Assurnasirpal II one can observe a deliberate organization representing the conquest of the West and the South through visual opposition of these campaigns on the opposite walls of Assurnasirpal II's throne room<sup>25</sup>. Such a demonstration of territorial control was perfected in the arrangement of the bronze bands of Shalmaneser III's *Balawat Gates*, where the display, like in the summary or display inscriptions, shows a geographical rather than a chronological arrangement of events, proceeding »from Hatti in North Syria (1), to Urartu and Gilzanu (2), to the source of the Tigris (3), to

9 Bagg 2011, 129.

10 KAV 25 (VAT 9423), see Pedersén 1985, 38 (M2: 10) and Weidner 1952/1953, 208, no. 39.

11 Bagg 2011, 58.

12 Seymour 2016, 67.

13 Collins 2004, 1.

14 Cole 1997.

15 Hirsch 1995.

16 Büttner 2000; Michalsky 2011.

17 Marcus 1995, 194.

18 Thomason 2001, 65.

19 See the reconstruction by Albenda 1976, pl. 1.

20 Amrhein 2014.

21 Cosgrove 1984, 46; Jaworski – Thurlow 2010, 4.

22 Michalsky 2011, 30–33.

23 Winter 1981.

24 Marcus 1995, 194.

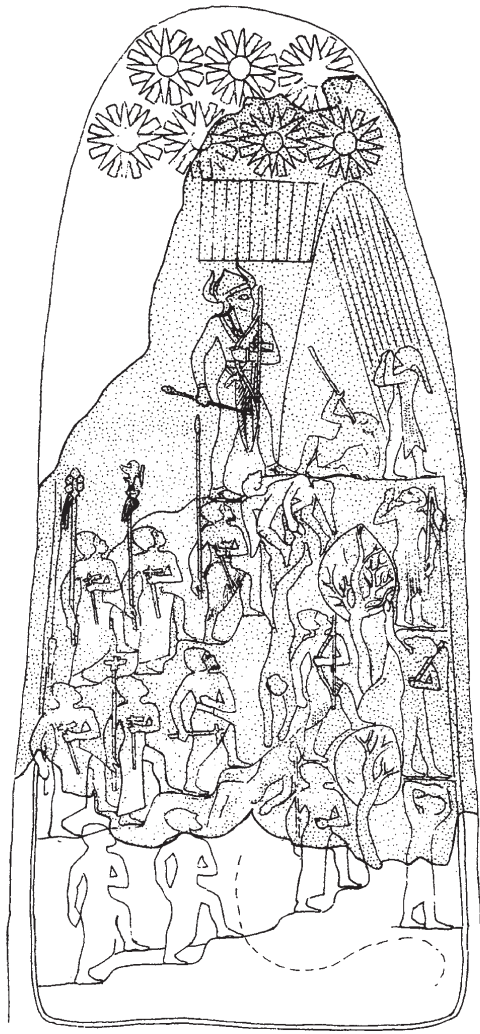
25 Marcus 1995, 198.

Kaldu, or Babylon (4), to Hamath in South Syria (5), and last to the Mediterranean Coast (6).« And she continues »These structural parallels between text and image suggest that the decoration of the bronze gates was specifically designed as a summary, or map, of the extent of Assyrian control in all four directions – an agenda that coincides with Shalmaneser's own military policy of territorial expansion on all fronts.«<sup>26</sup>

Marcus observed a similar strategy for expressing the same ideological agenda in the spatial arrangement of the imagery of Shalmaneser III's *Black Obelisk*, which has five registers of tribute scenes. Each image on the four sides is framed and labeled with a caption identifying the tribute and its source<sup>27</sup>. The direction is from top to bottom, and each tribute scene fills the four sides of the shaft. The geographical pattern noted by Marcus becomes most obvious in the superpositioning of the top two of the five registers, which show tribute from Gilzanu in Northwestern Iran to the far East and from Jehu of Israel from the far West. It has already been suggested by Edith Porada that this particular choice in the display and arrangement of the scenes serves to delimit the border of the empire from east to west<sup>28</sup>. This geographical aspect of the depiction of tribute in the *Balawat Gates* and in the *Black Obelisk* is relevant for my discussion of the interest in nature, as it reveals a focus on the economic and material gains<sup>29</sup>. These are rendered with great precision and detail with regard to the origin of the resources.

While the content of what designated booty (*šallatu*) and what was represented by tribute (*maddattu*) changed over time, the precision with which the origin of economic resources is depicted on the *Black Obelisk* compares with the Neo-Assyrian description of the ethnicity of the enemy. It is in the Neo-Assyrian period that particular attention is given to the physiognomy, dress, and headdress of foreign dignitaries, for instance, as in the case of Sennacherib, who describes Elamite dignitaries wearing »a golden girdle-dagger, whose wrists are encircled with rings (for attaching the?) slings of reddish gold, like fat steers to which nose-ropes are attached.«<sup>30</sup> Carlo Zaccagnini classified this kind of description as ethnographic<sup>31</sup>; other qualifications including

references to their style of housing or their degree of intelligence must rather be conceived as an attempt to juxtapose them to Assyrian values, and should thus be regarded more as ideological than ethnographic<sup>32</sup>. That such ethnographic descriptions were not arbitrary but grounded in reality is supported by the fact that the palace reliefs may also show reliability with regard to certain topographic or architectural features. This has been observed by Markus Wäfler, *Nicht-Assyrer neuassyrischer Darstellungen*, 1975<sup>33</sup>, for the depiction of the city of Lachish, which had a free-standing tower in front it, which is rendered in Sennacherib's Northwest Palace at Nineveh.



1 Reconstruction drawing of the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin

26 Marcus 1995, 196.

27 Marcus 1987.

28 Porada 1983.

29 Tadmor 1975, 37.

30 Grayson – Novotny 2012, 183, Sennacherib 22 v 85–88.

31 Zaccagnini 1982; Feldman 2011.

32 Pongratz-Leisten 2001.

33 Wäfler 1975.





2 Plaster Cast from the Uruk Vase, Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin

The attention given by the Assyrians to the items of booty and tribute, to geographical detail, and to ethnographic features provides the framework for my argument that the lists of exotic plants and animals attested in first millennium Neo-Assyrian annals go beyond a scribal interest in the writing system. Marian Feldman and Jürgen Bär categorized the Assyrian display of the reception of foreign luxury goods and of carved stone palace reliefs as Assyrianization and imperial display of conquest respectively<sup>34</sup>. It seems to me that not all objects fall into one category, and that the representation of trees and plants in the

Assyrian reliefs may have more than one meaning. Thus already for Naram-Sîn's *Victory Stele* (fig. 1) Irene Winter claims that the tree »represents a »setting« element in a broader, historical narrative,« referring to the oak species *quercus aegilops* which represented the dominant vegetation in Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>35</sup>, while trees in seals »have emblematic status as part of a formulaic and generic motif: the mountain landscape.«<sup>36</sup> Winter, in a very preliminary sorting, isolated several subsets for the representation of plants. For each of these, she distinguished a »referential« use like the one represented by the flora in the Uruk Vase, which clearly refers to fertility and abundance achieved through the yield of the domesticated internal landscape (fig. 2)<sup>37</sup>, from a »symbolic« use as represented by the »sacred tree« in the relief behind the throne pedestal of Assurnasirpal II in his Northwest Palace in Nimrud (fig. 3)<sup>38</sup>, and/or »narrative« uses, as shown in another relief in that same throne room, which depicts Assyrian soldiers cutting down fruit trees as they also decapitate the enemy (fig. 4)<sup>39</sup>. The very important point reached in her conclusion is that »what the Akkadians, as well as the Assyrians ... were marking was their awareness of the distinction us/not us, projected onto the land. Thus, unlike Dutch or English landscape painting, the trees on the mountain do not signal an identification with a place, but rather an identification of a place: an event that occurred in THAT landscape and no other; in THAT territory, on THAT frontier. In such perspective, the »Tree(s) on the Mountain« of the *Victory Stele* of Naram-Sîn take on significant meaning: not only as indicators of an early interest in rendering »true landscape«, but as markers in the developing tradition of historical narrative. The trees, no less than the mountain, serve as topoi – special topographical features. Through their verisimilitude, they mark a shift from cognitive mapping – that mental image projected onto an unknown territory – to a kind of physical mapping achieved by specific indicators associated with a known, if foreign, geography.«<sup>40</sup>

Inspired by these discussions, I would like to explore the meaning of a passage from Assurnasirpal II's famous *Banquet Stele*, which records the construction of his newly built palace at

34 Bär 1996.

35 Winter 1999, 70.

36 Winter 1999, 67.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

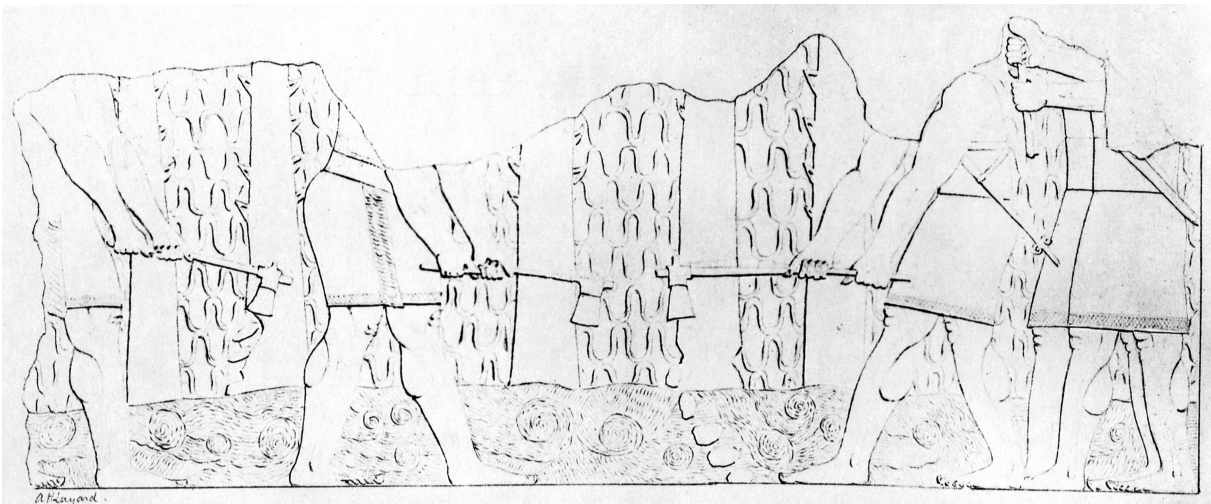
39 Winter 1999, 68.

40 Winter 1999, 72.





3 Wall relief from the Throne Room in Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Nimrud, British Museum, London



4 Soldiers cutting down trees, Throne Room in Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Nimrud

Nimrud (fig. 5). It was set in a recess adjacent to the throne room of Assurnasirpal II's palace. On that stele, similar to the *Broken Obelisk* of Assur-bel-kala, the image is set into a square recess, while the rest of the surface is filled with the inscription. The relevant section for the present purposes contains a long list of trees and plants and runs as follows:

RIMA II A.O.101.30: 36b-52<sup>36b</sup> I dug out a canal from the Upper Zab, cutting through a mountain at its peak, (and) called it Patti-hegalli. I irrigated the meadows of the Tigris (and) planted

orchards with all kinds of fruit trees in its environs. I pressed wine (and) offered first-fruit offerings to Aššur, my lord.<sup>(40)</sup> In the lands through which I marched and the highlands which I traversed, the trees (and) plants (lit. seeds) which I saw were: cedar, cypress, *šimiššalû*, *burāšu*-juniper, ..., *daprānu*-juniper, almond, date, ebony, *meskanu*, olive, *šušūnu*, oak, tamarisk, *dukdu*, terebinth, and *murrānu*, *mehru*, ..., *tījatu*, Kanish-oak, *haluppu*-oak,<sup>(45)</sup> *šadānu*, pomegranate, *šallūru*, fir, *ingirašu*, pear, quince, fig, grapevines, *angašu*-pear, *šumlalû*, *titipu*, *šipputu*, *zanzaliqqu*,



5 Assurnasirpal II's Banquet Stele

»swamp-apple«, *hambuququ*, *nuhurtu*-plant, *urzīnu*, and *kanaktu*.

Translation Wilson: (As) the canal gathers strength between the (northern) heights and the gardens, the water channels rejoice, the gullies cry out with joy. (As) the waters (plentiful) as (50) the stars of heaven seep slowly into the pleasure garden, (so) its pomegranate trees, as the vines, become laden with massing(?) fruit; (yea) the pomegranate trees in the pleasure garden it makes to abound with plenteous fruits. [This song(?) I], Assurnasirpal, [myself sung(?)] in the delightful garden that its fru[it], by my command, might become fruitful exceedingly.<sup>41</sup>

Assurnasirpal II's account of the digging of the canal that ultimately serves to water his pleasure garden in his newly built residence in the city of Nimrud is set between the building ac-

count of his new palace, which is characterized by a detailed description of all the woods used for its construction, and the building of the various temples in the city of Nimrud. These sections are then followed by a hunting report, which lists all the animals he hunted and which he either killed or which he brought back for breeding herds. The last section of the text on the stele is dedicated to the food he served to nearly 80,000 people when celebrating the inauguration of his palace. The list of trees, plants, and aromatics is incorporated into the account of the construction of the canal. The interesting fact is that the king neither claims to have brought back these plants from his military campaigns nor to have had them planted in the orchards alongside the canal or in his pleasure garden next to the palace. Rather, the text states: »<sup>(40)</sup>In the lands through which I marched and the highlands which I traversed, the trees (and) plants (lit. seeds) which I saw were: cedar, cypress ... etc.«

My following considerations are dedicated to the question of what to make of this particular list in the inscription of the *Banquet Stele*. A close look at the trees and plants mentioned in the text reveals that most of them are listed in the lexical list HAR.ra=*hubullu* III (Table 1). Some of the entries listed in the *Banquet Stele* even match the pairing or sequence of the entries in the HAR.ra=*hubullu* list, such as cedar (*erēnu* Hh III 217) and cypress (*šurmēnu* Hh III 225); boxwood (*šimiššalû* Hh III 95) and juniper (*burāšu* Hh III 97f); pear (*kamiššeru* Hh III 33f), quince (*supurgillû* Hh III 35), and fig (*tittu* Hh III 29). One could, consequently, assume that the list in the *Banquet Stele* represents some reminiscence of the scribal training of which the GIŠ-list, i. e. the list of trees and wooden objects, formed an essential part. However, there are other entries, which, in addition to the thematically oriented list of HAR.ra=*hubullu* are attested equally in the *Practical Vocabulary* from Assur, the purpose of which appears to have been more practice oriented<sup>42</sup>.

41 Wilson 1988, 80.

42 Landsberger – Gurney 1957/58; Veldhuis 2014, 357 f.



Banquet Stele	HAR.ra=hubullu	Practical Vocabulary	
<i>erēnu</i>	cedar	Hh III 217	
<i>šurmēnu</i>	cypress	Hh III 225	
<i>šimiššalû</i>	boxwood(?)	Hh III 95f.	
<i>burāšu</i>	b.-juniper	Hh III 97f.	
<i>duprānu</i>	d.-juniper	Hh III 102	
<i>lammu</i>	almond tree	Hh III 74ff + 148ff	
<i>gišimmarû</i>	date palm	Hh III 283	
<i>esu/usû</i>	ebony		
<i>musukkannu</i>	m.-tree (East)	Hh III 204	
<i>sirdu</i>	olive	Hh III 231	677a
<i>šušûnu</i>	tamarind?		680
<i>allānu</i>	oak	Hh III 133f	512
<i>tarpa'u</i>	tamarisk variety	Hh III 5a	
<i>dukdu</i>			
<i>buṭnu</i>	terebinth	Uruanna II 510	
<i>murrānu</i>	m.-plant	Hh III 167f	.
<i>mehru</i>	fir	Uruanna II 500	
<i>tījatu</i>	t.-herb/shrub	Hh XVII 285ff.	74f.
<i>allankaniš</i>	Kanish-oak		512f.
<i>haluppu</i>	h.-oak	Hh III 4	
<i>šadānu</i>	tree or bush	<b>SB and NA</b> ; not in Hh-list	
<i>nurmû</i>	pomegranate	Hh III 186 + 94	
<i>šalluru</i>	fruit tree	Hh III 126	
<i>ašuhu</i>	fir	Hh III 74-78 = 181	
<i>ingirāšu/ingarāšu</i>	foreign tree (MA/NA)	Hh III 241	
<i>kamiššeru/</i>			
<i>kamiššaru</i>	pear	Hh III 33f. + 46	
<i>supurgillû</i>	quince	Hh III 35 +130a	
<i>tittu</i>	fig	Hh III 29f.	
<i>ishunnatu</i>	grapevine	Hh III 20f.	
<i>angašu</i>	pear tree		
<i>šumlalû</i>	aromatic	Hh III 113	
<i>tiṭipû</i>	fruit tree	<b>only Asn. II</b>	
<i>šippūtu</i>	š.-tree		<b>only Asn. II</b>
<i>zanzaliqqu</i>	z.-tree		Hh III 418
<i>hašhuru</i>	apple tree	Hh III 32-48	
<i>hambuququ</i>	fruit tree	<b>SB and NA</b>	
<i>nuhurtu</i>	medicinal plant	Hh XVII 285	74f
<i>urzīnu</i>	medicinal plant	Hh III 255	679
<i>kanaktu</i>	aromatic from tree	Hh III 92	

Tab. 1 List of trees and plants in the Banquet Stele of Assurnāṣirpal II

Two entries are not attested in lexical lists at all and appear only in literary texts, while two other entries are attested in the Uruanna list, a list of pharmaceutical plants of which exemplars are known from the cities of Assur and Nineveh in the first millennium. Together with the statement that the king brought back animals for breeding herds, one possibility could be that the evidence of the tree and plant list in his inscription suggests a genuine interest in the flora of conquered territories. Moreover, as this tree and plant list forms part of the building account of

the canal, which was supposed to supply water not only along the way but also for the pleasure garden of the king, one could assume that these plants were mentioned because they might have been collected to be planted in the royal gardens. Such an undertaking would require a strategy similar to that of Napoleon, who took selected *savants* with him on his military campaign to Egypt, including chemists, physicians, mathematicians, engineers, artists, zoologists. Napoleon did this to take economic as well as cultural control of Egypt, and his experts published their dis-



coveries and insights into Egyptian civilization in the seventeen volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte*<sup>43</sup>. The Assyrians, while not necessarily taking cultural control, had a genuine interest in the knowledge of the territory they conquered, or at least an ideological interest in the public display of such knowledge. That the list of trees and plants was drawn up to reflect the practical purpose of planting in the royal gardens is one possible interpretation. The list would thus reflect economic interests with regard to the extraction of resources from a foreign and distant natural landscape to be transformed into the allegorical landscape of a royal garden reflecting the social and political identity of the Assyrian elites in the homeland. To some degree one could even categorize such interest as an interest in nature. Such an intention is obvious in *Ashurbanipal's Banquet Scene* (fig. 6), which shows an assemblage of plants that did not co-exist in reality and to which, similar to Dutch seventeenth century Still life paintings with their imaginary flower bouquets<sup>44</sup>, an allegorical reading could be applied. Its assemblage of plants – conifers, palm trees, and grapevines – originated from Assyria (pine) and from mountainous regions and Babylonia and, consequently, celebrated the king's power to procure exotic commodities and control their place of origin. The *Banquet Scene* itself shows Ashurbanipal reclining on a couch holding a flower in one hand and a bowl in the other. His queen, Libbali-sharrat, facing her husband sits upright on a throne and holds a bowl to her lips. »Four female attendants fan the royal couple, while three more approach from the left with trays of food. On the far left of the relief, continuing onto the adjoining slab, is a female orchestra led by a harpist. Behind her, hanging from a branch of a pine tree, is the severed head of Teumman, the vanquished king of Elam.«<sup>45</sup> A sword, bow, and quiver rest on a table set beyond the royal couple. A luxuriant trellised grapevine arches over king and queen. As in Elamite iconography the grape vine is associated with deities or royalty, Paul Collins suggested that it was in-

tended to introduce a religious overtone into the scenery<sup>46</sup>. The relief program surrounding the banquet scene offers a »constructionist view«<sup>47</sup> of its larger surroundings: while the setting of the banquet itself in the upper register exhibits »a high level of planning and design: date palms alternate with pine trees and grape vines frame the banqueting royal couple,«<sup>48</sup> the two registers below – the middle one including conifer trees, lotus plants, deciduous trees, and small grapevine – seem to offer a view into the parks surrounding the city and with the lowest register into swampy nature further away<sup>49</sup>. So, in addition to its iconic subject of the royal banquet, the relief program is hierarchizing the landscape into various degrees of artificiality. Paul Collins, indeed, suggested that the palm tree served to identify Elam or Babylonia, and, in this case – in addition to Teumman's head hanging from a pine tree as trophy – could well be understood as a signifier for the conquest of Elam<sup>50</sup>. In this kind of topographical view the enviroing landscape serves as the setting for the main subject, i. e. the banquet, and so it is understood as being part of the territorial domain of the king<sup>51</sup>. A similar mix of plants originating from different geographical regions can be observed in Room E of Ashurbanipal's North Palace which shows a lion and a lioness resting in a landscape of grapevines, conifers, and palm trees, i. e. elements combining western and southern landscapes<sup>52</sup>.

Such allegorical reading also applies to Assurnasirpal II's plant list in the *Banquet Stele* and so anticipates in the textual medium what later will be represented in the image. And while Assurnasirpal II is by no means the only Assyrian king whose annals mention certain woods, like cedar, cypress, ebony, and boxwood, among the items of tribute or booty that were used as timber for the construction of royal palaces in the Assyrian homeland<sup>53</sup>, Assurnasirpal II's list is unique in its extensive attention to innumerable plants, and this particular section is not concerned with the construction of his palace, which he described in detail in a preceding section.

43 Beaucour – Laissus – Orgogozo 1990; Burleigh 2007.

44 Berger 2011.

45 Collins 2004, 1.

46 Collins 2004, 4.

47 A term used by Andrews 1999, 3 under the impact of E. H. Gombrich's groundbreaking study *Art and Illusion* (1960) 254 who stated that »the innocent eye is a myth. ... All thinking is sorting, classifying.«

48 Amrhein 2014.

49 Albenda 1976.

50 Collins 2004, 2. As an additional or alternative role played by the palm tree he further suggested its association with Ishtar and aspects of fertility.

51 For such an interplay of iconic subject, often the city, and the surrounding landscape in Renaissance painting see Andrews 1999, Chapter 2.

52 Thomason 2001, 88.

53 Postgate 1992.



6 Ashurbanipal's Banquet Scene, North Palace, Room S, Nineveh

Although the text's intertextual relationship with the lexical lists demonstrates that it was drawn up by a scholar, it was not generated to display erudition or scholarly knowledge and it was not motivated by an interest in writing and historical orthography, as Niek Veldhuis claims for the list of birds in the literary composition *Nanše and the Birds*<sup>54</sup>. Rather, the other possible interpretation I would like to suggest is that the plant list makes an ideological claim to the botanical knowledge of foreign territories to support the territorial ambitions of the king<sup>55</sup>. The trees and plants serve as a vehicle for the ideological claim of possessing the geographical knowledge of territories in which the Assyrian government had economic and political interests. I cannot identify the origin of every plant or tree,

but it seems that the sequence of the plants reflects at first a geographical move from the region of the Amanus through Anatolia in the North towards Kurdistan in the Northeast, and the Zagros in the East; it then returns to the Amanus and this time moves South towards Babylonia and then towards the East as far as the Indus region. It returns to the Mediterranean and then North and East of Assyria; lastly, the region of the Gebel Sinjar and East of the Upper Zab and again Anatolia reflect first the opposite directions West and East and then include the North again. Several plants and trees in the last section possibly originate from Anatolia, if one assumes an intertextual relationship between the Sargon legend *King of Battle* (*šar tamhari*) and Iran (Table 2).

Banquet Stele		Country of Origin
<i>erēnu</i>	cedar	Amanus/Lebanon
<i>šurmēnu</i>	cypress	Amanus/Lebanon and Urartu
<i>šimiššalû</i>	boxwood(?)	Anatolia
<i>burāšu</i>	b.-juniper	Kurdistan/Urartu, Zagros
<i>duprānu</i>	d.-juniper	Amanus
<i>lammu</i>	almond tree	Mediterranean Coast
<i>gišimmarû</i>	date palm	Babylonia
<i>esu/usû</i>	ebony	India
<i>musukkannu</i>	m.-tree (East)	Indus and 1 <sup>st</sup> . mill. Babylonia

54 Veldhuis 2004, 113.

55 Marcus 1995, 195.

Banquet Stele		Country of Origin
<i>sirdu</i>	olive	Mediterranean Coast/Arabia
<i>šušūnu</i>	tamarind?	
<i>allānu</i>	oak	North and East of Assyria
<i>tarpa'u</i>	tamarisk variety	native to Iraq
<i>dukdu</i>		
<i>buṭnu</i>	terebinth	Gebel Sinjar
<i>murrānu</i>	m.-plant	
<i>mihru</i>	conifer	East of Upper Zab
<i>tījatu</i>	t.-herb/shrub	
<i>allankaniš</i>	Kanish-oak	Anatolia
<i>haluppu</i>	h.-oak	Anatolia?
<i>šadānu</i>	tree or bush	
<i>nurmū</i>	pomegranate	Iran
<i>šalluru</i>	fruit tree	
<i>ašuhu</i>	pine <sup>56</sup>	Anatolia/Kurdistan
<i>ingirāšu/ingarāšu</i>	foreign tree (MA/NA)	
<i>kamiššeru/kamiššaru</i>	pear	
<i>supurgillū</i>	quince	
<i>tittu</i>	fig	Anatolia (šar tamhari)
<i>ishunnatu</i>	grapevine	
<i>angašu</i>	pear tree	
<i>šumlalū</i>	aromatic	
<i>titipu</i>	fruit tree	Iran
<i>šippūtu</i>	š.-tree	
<i>zanzaliqqu</i>	z.-tree	
<i>hašhuru</i>	apple tree	Anatolia (šar tamhari)
<i>hambuququ</i>	fruit tree	
<i>nuhurtu</i>	medicinal plant	
<i>urzīnu</i>	medicinal plant	Anatolia (šar tamhari)
<i>kanaktu</i>	aromatic from tree	

Tab. 2 List of trees and plants in the Banquet Stele of Assurnāširpal II

Assuming that there is a geographical pattern underlying the sequence of the trees and plants and that these trees and plants would function as an index to a specific topographic or geographic locale would explain why the scholar who composed the list did not just follow the sequence of trees in the lexical list HAR.ra=*hubullu*. Moreover, the capability of drawing a geographical map of conquered territories through the listing of their respective plants requires a genuine interest in their botany to enable such identification.

In the same way that Assurnāširpal II chose to represent the conquest of the West and the South through the visual opposition of these campaigns on the opposite walls of his throne

room, I would like to posit that geographical considerations equally determined the sequence of the entries in the list of trees and plants in the *Banquet Stele*, which to some degree is matched by the regions from which the king invited people to participate in his banquet, including »the semi dependent and vassal states of Suhi and Laqe on the Middle Euphrates, Bit Zamani and Shupria on the Upper Tigris, Zamua in the East and Bit-Adini and Patina/Unqi in the West.«<sup>57</sup> In the words of William J. T. Mitchell, we must »ask not just what landscape ›is‹ or ›means‹ but what it does, how it works as cultural practice.«<sup>58</sup> In this particular case, the plant and tree list drawn up in the *Banquet Stele*, whether reflecting an imag-

56 Postgate 1992, 180 assumes pine rather than fir in contrast to CAD.

57 Tadmor 1975, 41.

58 Mitchell 1994, 1.



inary landscape or an artificial landscape created in the royal gardens of Nimrud, ultimately was created to signify or symbolize power relations. And while it does not function as an agent of power independent of human intention<sup>59</sup>, it certainly represents a deliberately constructed mental image that like its pictorial counterpart served as an instrument of cultural power demonstrating the king's geographical and botanical knowledge of his conquered territories. To return to the earlier claim that an interest in the writing system underpinned the composition of lists in particular genres, as suggested by Francesca Rochberg and Niek Veldhuis on the basis of divinatory and literary texts respectively, the list of trees and plants in the *Banquet Stele* shows that lists in historiographic texts might have operated differently, and that scholarly erudition entered or was submitted to the service of royal ideological representation.

### Summary

Did the ancients in Mesopotamia have a notion of nature? Assyriologists have denied such a concept on the basis of divinatory compendia dealing with phenomena of nature in form of terrestrial and celestial signs on the one hand and lexicographic texts on the other. Instead they have localized listings of natural phenomena in the realm of scribal education. This article adduces a third category of texts, i. e. historiography, as well as pictorial material, and comes to a different conclusion. While the early pictorial repertoire features only few landscape elements, during the first millennium the depiction of landscape features rises in stages culminating in the reliefs of Sennacherib's *Palace Without Rival* to stand for territorial claims and aspirations. Landscape elements including trees, mountains, and rivers were combined in the reliefs to provide the geographical setting of the historical narrative; to denote the crossing of difficult mountain passes or, by depicting endless ranks of date palms, to evoke the notion of profusion and abundance of the Babylonian river plain. Moreover, royal inscriptions report on the creation of landscaped gardens replicating the exotic regions of the Amanus and parks for leisure, the ceremonial and ritual use of temple gardens

as well as the creation of huge parks outside the city wall for the pleasure of royal hunting; they suggest that nature and constructed landscape had turned into a topic in their own right. Against this backdrop, the following contribution investigates the meaning of the plant list in Assurnasipal II's Banquet Stele arguing for a deliberate display of geographical and botanical knowledge.

### Zusammenfassung

Existierte im alten Mesopotamien ein Konzept von Natur? Auf der Basis von divinatorischen Kompendia, die himmlische wie irdische Naturphänomene beinhalten und von lexikographischen Texten wurde dies von Assyriologen verneint. Stattdessen siedelte man Listen von Naturphänomenen im Bereich der Schreiberausbildung an. Der vorliegende Artikel betrachtet eine weitere Textkategorie, die der Historiographie, wie auch das Bildmaterial, und kommt zu einer anderen Schlussfolgerung. Während das frühe Bildmaterial nur wenige Landschaftselemente aufweist, nimmt die Darstellung von Landschaftselementen während des ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. stetig zu bis sie in den Reliefs in Sanherib's *Palace Without Rival* als Symbol für territoriale Expansion und Aspiration kulminiert. Landschaftselemente wie Bäume, Gebirge, und Flüsse werden in den Reliefs als geographischer Kontext für die historische Erzählung kombiniert, um die Überquerung schwieriger Gebirgspässe zu indizieren, oder um durch endlose Reihen von Dattelpalmen reichlichen Überfluss in der babylonischen Flussebene zu evozieren. Zusätzlich berichten Königsinschriften von der Anlage von Landschaftsgärten als Abbild der exotischen Regionen des Amanus Gebirges und von Vergnügungsparks, den zeremoniellen und rituellen Gebrauch von Tempelgärten wie auch der Schaffung von ausgedehnten Jagdgründen ausserhalb der Stadt; all dies weist daraufhin, dass Natur und Landschaft zu einem eigenen Thema geworden sind. Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht vor diesem Hintergrund die Bedeutung der Pflanzenliste in der Bankettstele Assurnasirpals II und interpretiert diese als bewusste Darstellung geographischen und botanischen Wissens.

59 Mitchell 1994, 2.



## ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

- Fig. 1** Börker-Klähn 1982, II, fig. 26k  
**Fig. 2** Crüsemann et. al. 2013, fig. 9.1  
**Fig. 3** ©Trustees of the British Museum  
**Fig. 4** Barnett – Falkner 1962, pl. CXIV  
**Fig. 5** ©Trustees of the British Museum  
**Fig. 6** ©Trustees of the British Museum

## References

- Albenda 1976** P. Albenda, Landscape Bas-Reliefs in the Bit-Hilani of Ashurbanipal, BASOR 224, 1976, 49–72
- Amrhein 2014** A. Amrhein, Neo-Assyrian Gardens: A Spectrum of Artificiality, Sacrality and Accessibility. Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes: An International Quarterly, DOI: 10.1080/14601176.2014.945832
- Andrews 1999** M. Andrews, Landscape and Western Art (Oxford 1999)
- Bär 1996** J. Bär, Der assyrische Tribut und seine Darstellung: Eine Untersuchung zur imperialen Ideologie im neuassyrischen Reich (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1996)
- Bagg 2011** A. M. Bagg, Die Assyrer und das Westland (Leuven 2011)
- Barnett – Falkner 1962** R. D. Barnett – M. Falkner, The Sculptures of Aššur-Našir-Alpi II (883–859 B.C.). Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.). Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.) from the Central and South-West Palaces at Nimrud (London 1962)
- Beaucour – Laissus – Orgogozo 1990** F. Beaucour – Y. Laissus – Ch. Orgogozo, The Discovery of Egypt (Paris 1990)
- Berger 2011** H. Berger Jr., Caterpillars. Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting (New York 2011)
- Börker-Klähn 1982** J. Börker-Klähn, Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs (Mainz 1982)
- Büttner 2000** N. Büttner, Die Erfindung der Landschaft: Kosmographie und Landschaftskunst im Zeitalter Breughels (Göttingen 2000)
- Burleigh 2007** N. Burleigh, Mirage. Napoleon's Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt (New York 2007)
- Cole 1997** S. W. Cole, The Destruction of Orchards in Assyrian Warfare, in: S. Parpola – R. M. Whiting (eds.), Assyria 1995. Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995 (Helsinki 1997) 29–40
- Collins 2004** P. Collins, The Symbolic Landscape of Ashurbanipal, Source, Notes in the History of Art 23/3, 2004, 1–6
- Collon 2000** D. Collon, Early Landscapes, in: L. Milano – S. de Martino – F. M. Fales – G. B. Lanfranchi (eds.), Landscapes. Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East 3. Landscape in Ideology, Religion, Literature and Art, Papers presented to the XLIV Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Venezia, 7–11 July 1997 (Padova 2000) 15–17
- Cosgrove 1984** D. Cosgrove, Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 10, 1984, 45–62
- Crüsemann et. al. 2013** N. Crüsemann – M. van Ess – M. Hilgert – B. Salje (eds.), Uruk – 5000 Jahre Megacity, Begleitband zur Ausstellung »Uruk – 5000 Jahre Megacity« im Pergamonmuseum – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin und in den Reiss-Engelhorn Museen Mannheim (Petersberg 2013)
- Feldman 2011** M. H. Feldman, Assyrian Representation of Booty and Tribute as a Self-Portrayal of Empire, in: B. E. Kelle – F. Ritzel Ames – J. L. Wright (eds.), Interpreting Exile. Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts (Atlanta 2011) 135–150
- Grayson – Novotny 2012** A. K. Grayson – J. Novotny, The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC) I (Winona Lake 2012)
- Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951** H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, Arrest and Movement: An Essay on Space and Time in the Representational Art of the Ancient Near East (London 1951)
- Hirsch 1995** E. Hirsch, Introduction: Landscape: Between Place and Space, in: E. Hirsch – M. O'Hanlon (eds.), The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space (Oxford 1995) 1–23
- Jaworski – Thurlow 2010** A. Jaworski – C. Thurlow, Semiotic Landscapes. Language, Image, Space (London 2010)
- Kantor 1966** H. J. Kantor, Landscape in Akkadian Art, JNES 25, 1966, 145–152
- Landsberger – Gurney 1957/1958** B. Landsberger – O. R. Gurney, Practical Vocabulary of Assyria, AfO 18, 1957/1958, 328–341
- Marcus 1987** M. I. Marcus, Geography as Organizing Principle in the Imperial Art of Shalmaneser III, Iraq 49, 1987, 77–90
- Marcus 1995** M. I. Marcus, Geography as Visual Ideology: Landscape, Knowledge, and Power in Neo-Assyrian Art, in: M. Liverani (ed.), Neo-Assyrian Geography (Rome 1995) 193–202
- Michalsky 2011** T. Michalsky, Projektion und Imagination. Die niederländische Landschaft der Frühen

- Neuzeit im Diskurs von Geographie und Malerei (München 2011)
- Mitchell 1994** W. J. T. Mitchell, Introduction, in: W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power* (Chicago 1994) 1–4
- Pedersén 1985** O. Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the City of Assur. Part I* (Uppsala 1985)
- Pongratz-Leisten 2001** B. Pongratz-Leisten, The Other and the Enemy in the Mesopotamian Conception of the World, in: R. M. Whiting (ed.), *Mythology and Mythologies, Melammu Symposia 2* (Helsinki 2001) 195–231
- Porada 1983** E. Porada, Remarks About Some Assyrian Reliefs, *AnSt* 33, 1983, 15–18
- Postgate 1992** J. N. Postgate, Trees and Timber in the Assyrian Texts, in: J. N. Postgate – M. A. Powell (eds.), *Trees and Timber in Mesopotamia, Bulletin on Sumerian Agriculture 4* (Cambridge 1992) 177–192
- Reade 1980** J. Reade, Space, Scale and Significance in Assyrian Art, *BaM* 11, 1980, 71–74
- Rochberg 2016** F. Rochberg, *Before Nature. Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science* (Chicago 2016)
- Seymour 2016** M. Seymour, The Empire in the Palace: Campaign Reliefs in the Southwest Palace at Nineveh. Pp. 65–80 in *Assyria to Iberia. Art and Culture in the Iron Age* (New York 2016).
- Tadmor 1975** H. Tadmor, Assyria and the West: The Ninth Century and its Aftermath, in: H. Goedicke – J. J. M. Roberts (eds.), *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (Baltimore 1975) 36–48
- Thomason 2001** A. K. Thomason, Representations of the North Syrian Landscape in Neo-Assyrian Art, *BASOR* 323, 2001, 63–96
- Veldhuis 2004** N. Veldhuis, Religion, Literature, and Scholarship. The Sumerian Composition »Nanše and the Birds.« (Leiden 2004)
- Veldhuis 2014** N. Veldhuis, *History of the Cuneiform Lexical Tradition* (Münster 2014)
- Wäfler 1975** M. Wäfler, *Nicht-Assyrer neuassyrischer Darstellungen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1975)
- Weidner 1952/1953** E. Weidner, Die Bibliothek Tiglath-pileser I, *AfO* 16, 1952/1953, 197–215
- Wilson 1988** J. V. Wilson, Kinnier. Lines 40–52 of the Banquet Stele of Aššurnasirpal II, *Iraq* 50, 1988, 79–82
- Winter 1981** I. J. Winter, Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in the Neo-Assyrian Reliefs, *Studies in Visual Communication* 7, 1981, 2–38
- Winter 1999** I. J. Winter, Tree(s) on the Mountain. Landscape and Territory on the Victory Stele of Naram-Sîn of Agade, in: L. Milano – S. de Martino – F. M. Fales – G. B. Lanfranchi (eds.), *Landscapes. Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East 1. Invited Lectures, Papers Presented to the XLIV Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Venezia, 7–11 July 1997* (Padova 1999) 63–72
- Zaccagnini 1982** C. Zaccagnini, The Enemy in the Neo-Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: the Ethnographic Description, in: H. J. Nissen – J. Renger (eds.), *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn. Politische und kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im Alten Vorderasien vom 4. bis 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr., Teil 2, 25<sup>th</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Berlin, 03–07 July 1978* (Berlin 1982) 409–424

#### ADDRESS OF THE AUTHOR

Prof. Dr. Beate Pongratz-Leisten  
 New York University  
 Institute for the Studies of the Ancient World  
 15 East 84th Street  
 New York, NY 10028, USA  
 bpl2@nyu.edu

