

## CHAPTER XVIII

### LATE ASSYRIAN PLANT ORNAMENT<sup>1</sup>

It is in a greatly altered world that we must seek for the heirs of the traditions of plant ornament current in the Second Millennium. In north Syria and along the Mediterranean littoral a great hiatus exists between the decorative arts of the First and Second Millennia. In Assyria, however, the art of Middle Assyrian times provides direct antecedents for the motives of the late period. This is in accordance with Assyrian history. The land was untouched by the Aegean invasions and its kings were successful in protecting their country's borders from encroaching Aramaic tribes.

As in Middle Assyria, the most prominent Late Assyrian vegetal designs are the hybrid trees, among which descendants of the three main Middle Assyrian classes are found. The ancestry of a number of examples can be traced to the hybrids with twigs of the preceding period.<sup>2</sup> Now the hybrid elements have often disappeared; it is only occasionally that traces of them remain. The Late Assyrian designs are more stiff and give a far less graceful, naturalistic impression than their Middle Assyrian ancestors. The same holds true for the other groups of Late Assyrian hybrid trees. Examples of compounds with canopies surrounding palmette crowns occur.<sup>3</sup> One of these is particularly interesting for it preserves a large number of Middle Assyrian characters, including scrolls arranged in a definite lozenge pattern (Figs. XVI.1, XVI.81-82).

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter had not been completed when the summary of the thesis, entitled "A Conspectus," was presented to the faculty. This section of the text is taken from the Conspectus and serves as an introduction.

<sup>2</sup> De Clercq, *Catalogue méthodique et raisonné de la Collection De Clercq* (Paris, 1890), I, Pl. XXXII, 342, 346. W. H. Ward, *Cylinders and other ancient Oriental Seals in the Library of J. Pierpont Morgan* (New York, 1909), Pl. XXIII, 160. A. Delaporte, *Catalogue des cylindres orientaux*, Musée du Louvre (Paris, 1923), Vol II, Pl. XL, 723.

<sup>3</sup> L. Delaporte, *Catalogue des cylindres Orientaux de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, 1910), Pl. LXXXIX, 9. De Clercq, *op. cit.*, Pl. XXXIX. 342 bis.

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The commonest Late Assyrian hybrids, prominent on stone reliefs,<sup>4</sup> glazed tiles,<sup>5</sup> as well as seals,<sup>6</sup> are those combining the features of several Middle Assyrian types. The trunks interrupted at intervals by hybrid units, now completely stylized (Fig. XVI.71), and palmette-tipped canopies (Figs. XVI.71, XVI.73) had occurred on Middle Assyrian seals. The most remarkable feature of these Late Assyrian trees are the sinuous ribbons (Fig. XVI.105) arranged in a variety of ways in the space between the outer canopy and the central trunk. One unusual Middle Assyrian seal provides the earliest example of such ribbons. The details of their development are not certain, but they may well be closely related with the Middle Assyrian hybrids characterized by the presence of “lozenges.”

In addition to the “sacred tree” motives, palmettes were frequent. The commoner Late Assyrian form has fan-shaped foliage greatly enlarged at the expense of the South-flower perianth and volute, which may even be absent. Such forms occur as isolated motives in embroidery and small objects, or may tip arc friezes.<sup>7</sup> The spiky palmette of Middle Assyria reappears, being found on faience work and seals.<sup>8</sup>

The Middle Assyrians had already made widespread use of hypotactic arc friezes, which were probably Egyptian in origin and had presumably reached Assyria by means of Mitanni and Syria. In Late Assyrian times the motive was very common. It was used in mural borders and textile patterns, on faience vessels, and in carved paving slabs of stone.<sup>9</sup>

No Late Assyrian design yet cited has been anything more than a modification of Middle Assyrian prototypes. There is, however, one group of patterns new in this period.

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<sup>4</sup> A. H. Layard, *Monuments of Nineveh* (London, 1853), II, Pls. VII; VII, A; XXV; LI, 7. P. E. Botta and E. Flandin, *Monuments de Ninive* (Paris, 1849-50), II, Pl. CXIX. Victor Place, *Ninive et l'Assyrie* (Paris, 1867), III, Pl. XLIX, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Layard, *op. cit.*, Pl. LXXXIV, 13. Botta and Flandin, *op. cit.*, Pl. CLVI, 13, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Delaporte, BN, Pls. XXII, 328; XXVI, 384. Delaporte, A, II, Pl. XL, 721, 722. De Clercq, *op. cit.* Pl. XXXII, 343.

<sup>7</sup> Layard, *op. cit.*, Pls. VI, XLVIII, XLIX, XCVI, 6. Walter Andrae, *Farbige Keramik aus Assur* (Berlin, 1923), Pls. XX, XXV, XXVI, XXIX.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Pls. XXXI, XXXII. Anton Moortgat, *Vorderasiatische Roll-Siegel* (Berlin, 1940), Pl. LXXIV, 616, 739.

<sup>9</sup> Layard, *op. cit.*, I, Pl. LXXXVI and *passim*. Andrae, *op. cit.*, p. 18, Fig. 9; Pls. XI, B; XII; XIV, B; XIX. Place, *op. cit.*, III, Pl. XLIX, 1.

Certain simple Egyptianizing designs appear, probably borrowed from contemporary Phoenician work rather than directly imported from Egypt. Faience vessels are decorated with waterlily petals at the base. Groups formed by a *Nymphaea* flanked by two buds occur in the same context. Waterlily flowers and buds tip hypotactic arc friezes.<sup>10</sup> A fly whisk appears in a relief with a waterlily handle.<sup>11</sup> According to the sculptures the Assyrians began to carry small bouquets; the Egyptianizing groups of waterlily buds and flowers betray the ultimate source of this new custom.<sup>12</sup>

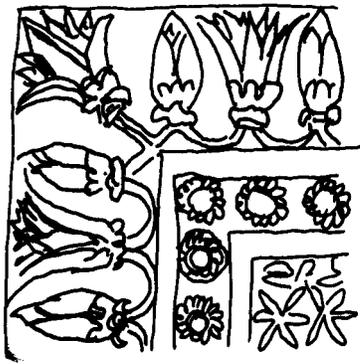


Fig. XVIII.1



Fig. XVIII.2

The contribution of Late Assyrian artists to plant ornament was a relatively minor one. They gave the last formalizing touches to motives which had been created by Middle Assyrians. Riegl credited the Late Assyrians with being the first to distinguish between the borders and the interior surfaces of the space to be decorated,<sup>13</sup> but in view of recent evidence, it seems probable that the Mitannians, with their tradition of metope design, actually deserve this credit.

<sup>10</sup> Kantor left two sketches illustrating the waterlily and bud motive: Fig. XVIII.1 is from Nineveh, Fig. XVIII.2 is from Assur.

<sup>11</sup> Andrae, *op. cit.*, Pls. XI, B; XII, XIII. Botta and Flandin, *op. cit.* II, Pl. CV.

<sup>12</sup> Layard, *op. cit.*, Pls. XXXIV-XXXVIII. Botta and Flandin, *op. cit.*, I, Pls. XLIII, LXXIV, CI, CXIII.

<sup>13</sup> Riegl, *Stilfragen* (Berlin, 1893), pp. 86ff.

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<sup>14</sup>In turning to the study of the plant ornaments used in the First Millennium B. C. we are in the same situation as one who seeks familiar landmarks in a landscape devastated by a tremendous storm. Between the Asia of the Second Millennium B. C. and that of the First, there intervened an epochal upheaval - the migrations during the Twelfth and Eleventh Centuries B. C. The Sea Peoples, rushing across Anatolia, swept away the powerful Hittite kingdom like a “house of cards.” The tide poured over Syria, bringing barbarism to such as Alalakh and ending the career of such great emporia as Ugarit. The land-traveling hordes stormed through Palestine and, in conjunction with their sea-faring brethren, attempted to force the gates of Egypt. There, finally, they were thrown back by Merneptah - to scatter and settle in Western Asia or to wander to the East. The focus of the storm did not pass through Assyria and Babylonia. The former country was able to maintain its integrity after a hard struggle. To the south the feeble rulers of Babylon were but little more than figure heads. Chaldean and Aramaean tribes infiltrating into both southern Mesopotamia and Syria had already done much to change the situation in those areas, and a group of people who had not hitherto played a distinct separate role in history, the “Hieroglyphic” Hittites, now emerged as heirs of Hittite power in north Syrian states. The effect of the storm was not limited to the Levant, but also brought to an end the *koine* culture of LH III B. The close connections between Asia and the Greek mainland were severed, not to be resumed with intensity until the orientalizing period. Greece was pushed back into insular isolation, and to an extent unaffected by outside influences, pursued its own course in the final phases of the Mycenaean period (LH III C). There was a gradual transition to the geometric phase and the “Middle Ages” of the Aegean world.

Despite altered political and cultural conditions it is possible to trace the continuations of the old traditions of the Second Millennium B. C., though they are sometimes hard to find in the countries most affected by the migrations. In Palestine the Hebrews adopted Canaanite crafts while in the coastal cities the Phoenicians possessed a

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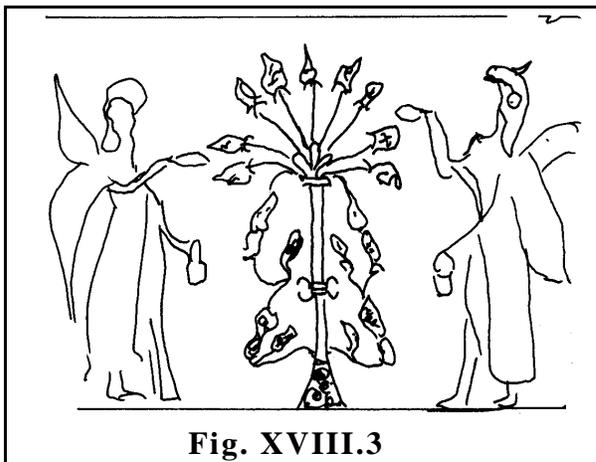
<sup>14</sup> The following section is from an unfinished first-draft of this chapter.  
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repertory directly descended from that used by the seal cutters of the Second and Third Syrian groups. However, in north Syria, which bore the full brunt of the turmoil, there is great difficulty in discovering definite links with the past.

In strong contrast is the situation in Assyria where there is no break between Middle Assyrian culture and that of the Late Assyrian empire. In fact the whole of Late Assyrian plant ornament was closely conditioned by that of the preceding period and no strikingly new motives were evolved.

### BETWIGGED HYBRIDS

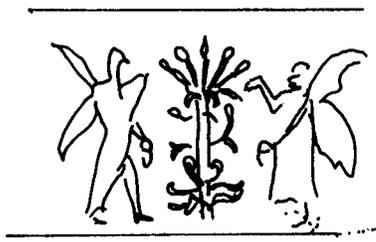
In view of the continuity of Middle and Late Assyrian art, it is not surprising that the three main types of South-flower hybrids known in the earlier period recur, sometimes but little changed in form. For example seal 342 in the De Clercq collection (Fig. XVIII.3 can be considered as a descendant of the betwigged Middle Assyrian hybrid



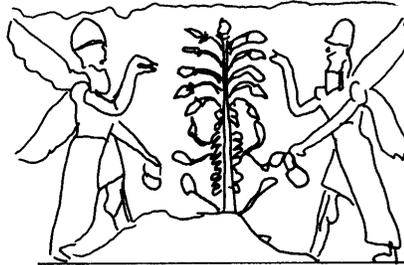
**Fig. XVIII.3**

of Fig. XVI.51 even though the later pattern is stiffer and more artificial. In it the mountain peaks have become a triangular base, c-clamps appear, and the trunk has become a cylindrical pole ending in a formal palmette. The latter feature, however, had already occurred in Middle Assyrian times in a mural from

Kar Tukulti Ninurta (Fig. XVI.73-76), and on a stone vessel from Assur (Fig. XVI.106). There are two Late Assyrian betwigged trees that stand relatively alone. One in the Louvre (A 723)(Fig. XVIII.4) has unusual lateral foliage, a prominent volute and a South-flower perianth on the stem below the twiggy head. The other, a seal in the

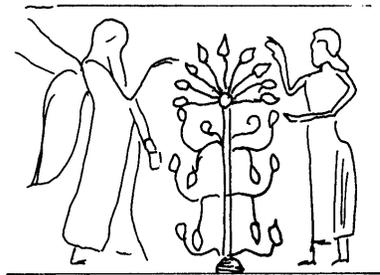


**Fig. XVIII.4**

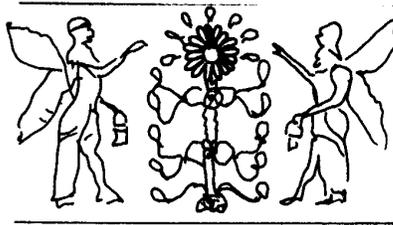


**Fig. XVIII.5**

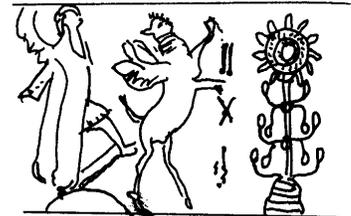
seals that they are evidently representatives of one well-defined pattern. Closely related are the “trees” on a Late Assyrian seal (Fig. XVIII.7) and on a Neo-Babylonian seal (Fig. XVIII.8) which possesses the same triangular base and branching foliage.



**Fig. XVIII.6**



**Fig. XVIII.7**

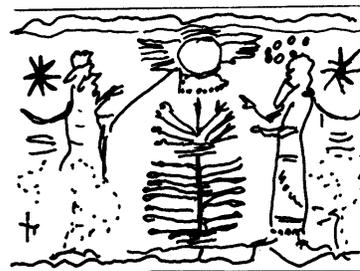
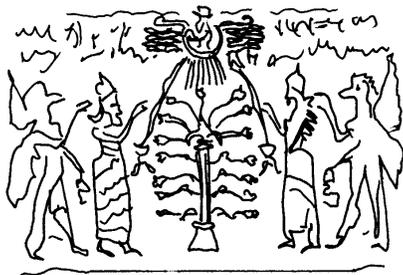


**Fig. XVIII.8**

In almost all the examples of twigged trees quoted, the plant motive appeared as the central element of the composition, usually flanked by winged genii with basket and cone, or by animals, or by human figures who grasp the streamers dependent from the winged sun disc placed above the tree. Thus the tree seems to possess more meaning, to be a more definite symbol, than it had on many Middle Assyrian seals, where it frequently occurred as a decorative or landscape element, rather than as a cardinal part of the scenes rendered.

The evolution of the graceful Middle Assyrian twigged hybrids which, despite all their formality, give a charming naturalistic impression into the stiff, petrified forms typical for Late Assyrian art can be regarded as a natural sequence. One feature is remarkable and requires explanation. This is the appearance of the c-clamp. This feature does not seem to have any basis among earlier patterns. Midway in the trunks of some “trees” and sometimes at the top is to be found an element composed of two vertical c-curves bound by

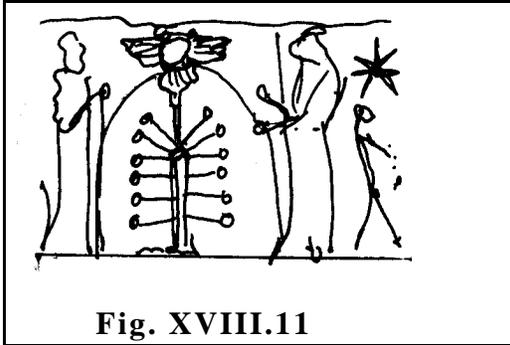
one or three horizontal bands.(i. e. Fig. XVIII.3). This “c-clamp” motive, as we may call it, is quite distinct from the older volute elements, although when the clamp appears at the top of a trunk, its upper curves do displace down-curving volutes. In looking for an explanation for the c-clamp we at once notice that a similar motive appears in series as an ordinary decoration on the stretchers of Assyrian furniture. These furniture clamps differ from those of the trees in having more spirally coiled tips and wedges. The representations of the clamps on furniture suggest that we may have to do with a structure of true functional origin in which the ties fastening together two strips are held in place by curved elements and tightened by a wedge driven in from each side. However, in the furniture on which the motive appears in Late Assyrian reliefs there seems to be no structural need for such elements. There is another aspect to the problem. It seems evident as Sidney Smith and Frankfort have pointed out,<sup>15</sup> that in Late Assyrian times hybrid plants of these types were really “sacred trees” and closely associated with the god Assur, even perhaps being a symbol of him. Moreover, they equate the “sacred tree” of the seal designs with a cult object described by Sidney Smith as follows: “...at the New Year Festival in Assyria use was made of a bare tree-trunk, around which metal bands, called ‘yokes’ were fastened and fillets were attached.” Frankfort refers to the evidence that tall cedar poles ornamented with copper bands were set up at the portals of Assyrian temples and goes on to say that certain of our Late Assyrian hybrid designs “..are unintelligible as the rendering of natural trees, but not so if they represent the ritual object consisting of a pole ornamented with copper bands, cloth and ribbon.”



<sup>15</sup> CS, p. 205. Sidney Smith, *Early History of Assyria*, p. 123.  
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**Fig. XVIII.9**

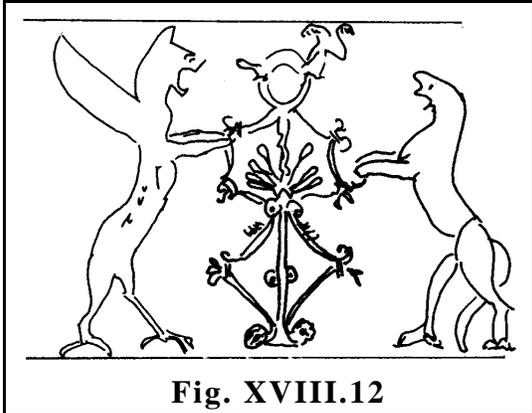
**Fig. XVIII.10**



(Other examples of betwiggled hybrids not discussed in this draft are Figs. XVIII.9, XVIII.10 and XVIII.11.)

### BELOZENGED HYBRIDS

A second type of Middle Assyrian tree to reappear on Late Assyrian seals is that in which ribbons are arranged so as to enclose lozenge-shaped areas. The most detailed example is a seal in the deClercq collection, which also has webbing encompassing its



palmette crown (Fig. XVIII.12); its ancestry may be traced back to Middle Assyrian seals such as one in the Morgan collection (Fig. XVI.1) and an Assur sealing (Fig. XVI.81). Such trees were, as far as we know, rare in Middle Assyrian times, but became somewhat commoner in the later period. Thus, there are

several drill hole style seals with cursorily, but clearly represented lozenge trees, which form a characteristic and prominent class of Late Assyrian hybrid trees. In addition to trees with one lozenge, there are examples with two (Fig. XVIII.13),<sup>16</sup> which

<sup>16</sup> Another example is in Lajard, *Mithra*, XXXIV, 4.  
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correspond in structure to the magnificent tree of the Graz seal (Fig. XVI.83).

Occasionally a Late Assyrian tree may possess a series of lozenges as in embroidery represented on the chest of a winged figure from Nineveh (Fig. XVIII.14).

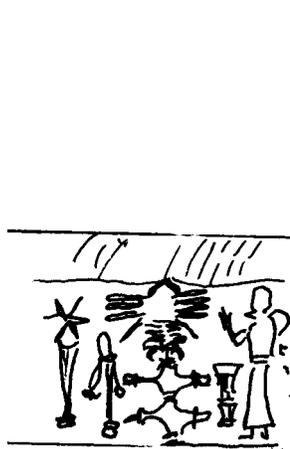


Fig. XVIII.13

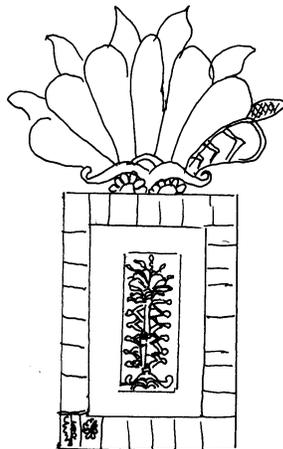


Fig. XVIII.14



Fig. XVIII.15

#### BEWEBBED HYBRIDS

The Middle Assyrian and Kassite trees with webbing around their crowns have a number of descendants in the late period. The tree of Fig. XVIII.15 in the straightness of its trunks is reminiscent of the webbed tree on a Thirteenth Century B. C. sealing from Assur (Fig. XVI.57), while trees on seals in the Louvre and British Museum (Figs. XVIII.16, XVIII.17) possess not only a leafy nimbus, but twisting lateral branches which relate them directly to a Kassite pattern (Fig. XVI.63).



Fig. XVIII.16

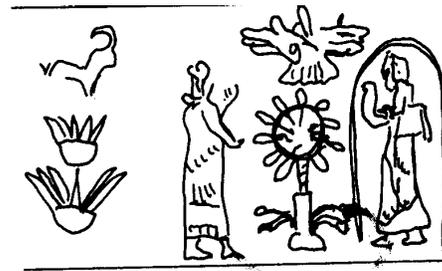


Fig. XVIII.17

In middle Assyrian times we have only two clear examples of trees completely enclosed by webbing (Figs. XVI.71, XVI.104), although some Kassite patterns approximate to this type (Figs. XVI.68-70). On seals it occurs in elaborate (Fig.

XVIII.18) or simplified (Fig. XVIII.19) forms whose affinities to the tree on Middle Assyrian light-on-dark ware are clear. However, the Late Assyrian trees in which webbing extends all the way to the base are usually more complicated than their predecessors,



Fig. XVIII.18

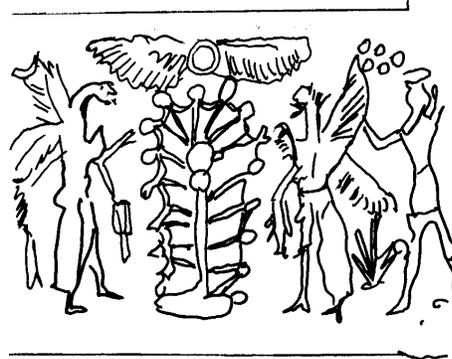


Fig. XVIII.19

having a series of criss-cross lacings connecting the outer arc frieze with the central trunk (as in the trees of Figs. XVIII.20, XVIII.21, XVIII.22). The arrangement of the ribbons

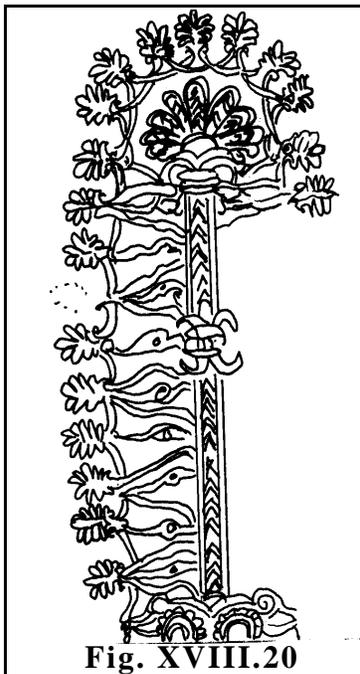


Fig. XVIII.20

is of two types. In Fig. XVIII.20 short ribbons projecting from the trunk join others in round curls in a fashion analogous to what we have already seen in the elaborate twigged hybrids. This is a feature which we can explain on purely ornamental grounds by referring back to the upper part of the Middle Assyrian tree on the Boston seal of Fig. XVI.46, and to one of the ivory trees from Assur (Fig. XVI.49) where we have two palmette stems springing from coiled ends of upturned or downturned volutes. This feature, which appears meaningless on many Late Assyrian hybrids is nothing but the habit common to Second

Millenium B. C. designers of adding pendant stems to volute elements, developed into a senseless pattern by later artists who no longer understood the meaning of the traditional pattern which they had inherited.

A different and more difficult problem is presented us by the second type of ribboning used in the elaborate hybrids - that in which the sinuous bands connect trunk and outer webbing (Fig. XVIII.20) and in the most elaborate cases are interwoven so as to give the appearance of a realistic mesh of ribbons (Fig. XVIII.22). The elaborate webbing



Fig. XVIII.21



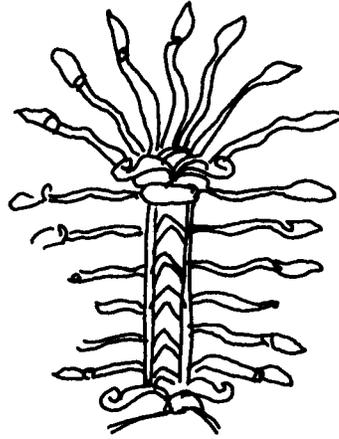
Fig. XVIII.22

around the crown of Fig. XVIII.20 is clearly an ornamental feature derived from superimposed arc frieze patterns such as had already occurred in Middle Assyrian times, but the other sinuous bands do not fall into place as developments of features known to us. Actually we have already had this problem arise in rare cases of Middle Assyrian designs with suddenly appearing and unexplainable webbing (Chapter XVI, pp.213ff.).

(Other examples of bewebbed hybrids not discussed in this draft are Figs. XVIII.23 and XVIII.24.)



**Fig. XVIII.23**



**Fig. XVIII.24**

### SOURCES FOR THE FIGURES

- XVIII.1 Place, *Ninive et l'Assyrie* (Paris, 1867), Pl. XLIV, 1
- XVIII.2 Andrae, *Farbige Keramik* (Berlin, 1923), p. 18, Fig. 10
- XVIII.3 De Clercq, 342
- XVIII.4 A 723
- XVIII.5 Morgan 770
- XVIII.6 De Clercq 346
- XVIII.7 Ward 693
- XVIII.8 Brett 129
- XVIII.9 CS XXXIIIa
- XVIII.10 Morgan 726
- XVIII.11 Brett 120
- XVIII.12 De Clercq 342 bis
- XVIII.13 Orinst A 25469
- XVIII.14 Layard, *Mon. Nin.* I, Pl. 51, 7 Embroidery on chest of winged figure
- XVIII.15 Southesk Qc 14
- XVIII.16 A 701
- XVIII.17 BM 89502
- XVIII.18 VAR 608
- XVIII.19 VAR 606
- XVIII.20 BM: reign of Ashurnasirpal, Pl. XI (Nimrud gallery, no. 2, Calah).
- XVIII.21 Lajard, *Mithra*, XXXII, 3
- XVIII.22 Layard, *Mon. Nin.*, Pl. 9 (Khorsabad, Sargon)
- XVIII.23 Layard, *Mon. Nin.* I, Pl. XXXIX, A
- XVIII.24 Layard, *Mon. Nin.* I, Pl. VIII: embroidery