Virtually every Mesopotamian ruler who left royal inscriptions has at some point declared himself to be the provider of “abundance” for the land—Sumerian ṣe₂-gal₂, ṣe₂-nun; Akkadian ḫegallu, ṣu₂ḫšu, ṣu₂ḥdu—thanks to the privileged relationship he enjoys with a god or the gods. Among the kings of the Neo-Assyrian period, such references abound. Assurbanipal II, for example, implies the ideal when he offers a positive prognosis for a future prince: “may he establish plenty, prosperity and abundance in his land” [mukammir ṣu₂ḥdi ḫegalli]; Tiglath-pileser III refers to the god Adad, among the gods who have blessed his reign, as the one “who heaps up abundance and plenty” [mukammir ṣu₂ḥdi ḫegalli]; Sargon II calls himself: “he who amasses plenty, prosperity and abundance” [mukammir ṣu₂ḥdi ṣu₂ḫši u ḫegalli]; Sennacherib “provides abundance and prosperity in the fields of Assyria” [ṣakin ṣu₂ḫši u ṣu₂ḥdi ina ụḡâri mātššu Aššur]; Esarhaddon petitions the gods for “plenty and abundance in my land” [tu₂ḥdu ḫegallu ina mātšja]; and Assurbanipal claims: “In my reign (there was) abundance and prosperity” [ina pa₂ṭšja ḫegallu tu₂ḥdu].

That these references are associated specifically with abundance of water for agricultural production and/or of agricultural production


itself, rather than wealth in material goods, is clear from the contexts. Assurnasirpal II calls a watercourse he constructed Bâbelat-ḫegallû (“The Bearer of Abundance”); Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-pilesar III, Sargon II and Sennacherib all speak directly of the “waters of abundance,” mē nuḫšî, which will ultimately provide good harvests; Esarhaddon’s phrase quoted above is preceded by his request that the gods may “bring about successful harvests, plenty of grain”; and Assurbanipal records the abundance not only of grain, but also that of fruit trees and herds that coincided with his reign.2 In addition, some Assyrian rulers occasionally take on the epithet ıkkaru/LU₂.EN.GAR, literally “cultivator,”3 suggesting direct agency in this most important of investments.

Among the many roles and identities associated with the Assyrian king in textual sources,4 some verbal epithets can be paired quite literally with images in the visual repertoire of respective rulers, such as narrative scenes representing the king fiercely triumphant in the hunt or victorious in battle;5 however, no overtly agricultural or pastoral themes are featured among the royal reliefs that would correspond directly with the activities involved in either cultivation or animal husbandry.

The one obvious candidate for a reference to the role played by the Assyrian ruler in relation to productivity of the land is the representation in the throne room of Assurnasirpal II of the king flanking the tree that otherwise proliferates throughout his Northwest Palace at Nimrud (fig. 1). The tree is surely based upon the date palm; literally neither “Tree of Life” nor “Sacred Tree” from any known Assyrian text, although

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2 Grayson, RIMA 2 (above, n. 1), ANP II 101.17, 1. 6; CAD N/2, p. 320. See also CAD H, s.n. šegallû: 167, as “abundant yield of fauna and flora.”
5 It has been argued, for example, that the four types of representation of the ruler in the throne room of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud correspond directly to the first four attributes epithets of the king mentioned after the titulary at the beginning and end of the Ninurta Temple inscription (Grayson, RIMA 2 [above, n. 1], p. 195, ANP II 101.1, i 18b–19a, repeated p. 222, iii 126b. See I. Winter, “Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology,” in S. Parpola and R. M. Whitby (eds.), Assyria 1995, Helsinki, 1997, pp. 359–381, for a recapitulation of these paired images and titles.