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Creating capitals: The rationale, construction, and function of the imperial capitals of Assyria

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Chapter 2: Assyria and Aššur

2.1 CHOOSING ASSYRIA

The aim of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of capital creation, and more specifically *imperial capital creation*. In order to contextualize Assyrian capital creation, it is necessary to present some earlier examples of the phenomenon from other empires of the Near East. The first empires in global history, such as Akkad, Babylon and the Hittites, are attested in the broader region of the Near East, predating the Assyrian empire (Barjamovic 2013). Sargon of Akkad is connected with the foundation of the first imperial state in Mesopotamia ca. 2350 BCE (Liverani 1993). During that period the city of Akkad developed into what could be described as the first imperial capital. Unfortunately, Akkad has not yet been located and textual sources do not provide much detail about its physical characteristics. Therefore, an investigation of its creation is not possible.

The case of Egypt and the city of Amarna has already been mentioned in the previous sections, in reference to the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who changed his name to Akhenaten to signify his devotion to god Aten. During his reign, Egypt experienced a number of significant changes in its cultural sphere: most temples devoted to regional deities were closed, the artistic canon was changed, and the capital of Egypt was moved to Amarna (Kemp 2006). The city has been extensively excavated (Kemp 2012) and has shown that, together with the creation of a large new religious center, Amarna was also a city with workshops, a diverse population, outlying villages, cemeteries, and more. However, the city ceased to function as a capital and was abandoned after the death of Akhenaten.

In itself, Amarna presents a very interesting case of capital creation. It seems to be linked to a singular religious undertaking. It is very likely that it did not

have a significant cultural impact on the population of Egypt. Dabbs and Zabecki (2014), for example, who studied the South Tomb Cemetery of Amarna to demonstrate the exploitation of population, demonstrated that traditional burial practices of the New Kingdom did not change even in the new capital, despite the enforced religious change. The uniqueness of the phenomenon within its historical context, in conjunction with its brevity, make it a good case study to examine individually, but difficult to fit within a wider comparative framework of Egyptian capitals.

The Hittite empire had two imperial capitals, Hattuša, the traditional capital of the empire, and Tarhuntašša. The former has been thoroughly investigated both historically and archaeologically, and although it was not a new foundation, its massive redevelopment and expansion during the imperial period makes it an important site to study. The latter has been described either as ceremonial capital (Singer 2006), or as the result of political conflict (Bryce 2007, 122). Yet, like Akkad, archaeological investigations have not identified Tarhuntašša, making a comparison between the two Hittite cities impossible (d'Alfonso 2014).

The Kassite dynasty (ca. 1595-1155 BCE) of the Babylonian empire also created a new capital. The royal palace was relocated from Babylon to the newly founded Dūr-Kurigalzu (Potts 2006). The city was founded during the reign of king Kurigalzu and it functioned as the primary administrative center of the state throughout the history of the dynasty (Clayden 1996; Bartelmus 2010). The limited archaeological and textual data regarding the city, especially pertaining to its residential space, does not offer any conclusions as to why and how it was constructed. It has been suggested that the Kassites created Dūr-Kurigalzu in order to exercise more effective control over other city-states (Carlson 2017, 93); however, evidence for this is lacking.

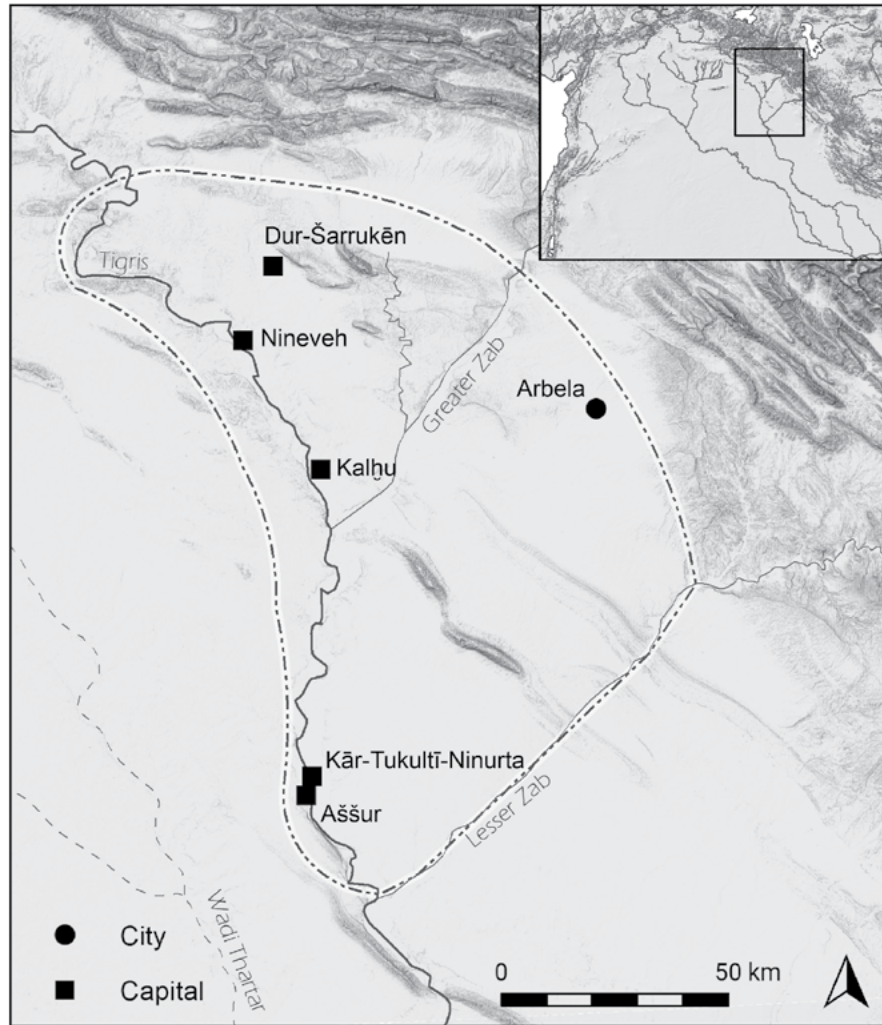


Figure 4: The location of Assyrian capitals (in dotted line the presumed extent of Assyria ca. 1500 BCE – courtesy of Tijmen Lanjouw).

Elam was another large territorial state of the Late Bronze Age that relocated its capital (Mofidi-Nasrabadi 2007). During the reign of Untaš-Napiriša,³ the large urban center of Dur-Untaš, modern Chogha Zanbil, was constructed 40 kilometers from Susa (Potts 2016). In the Ancient Near East, the city contains the best-preserved ziggurat, which was surrounded by an enclosure with several religious buildings. However, Dur-Untaš was not completed, and major construction stopped after the death of Untaš-Napiriša. After

³ The dating of Untaš-Napiriša is uncertain and could be dated to the second half of the 14th century or the middle of the 13th century BCE.

the abandonment of the project, and until it was destroyed by the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (640 BCE), the city was still partially inhabited. Archeological excavations have only revealed small residential areas (Carlson 2017, 249-251). All these examples of capital creation predate the first newly founded capital of Assyria (Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta). However, all of them are either poorly documented, making them unsuitable for detailed investigation, or are unique within their respective empires, making comparative studies trickier. In that regard, Assyria presents a more suitable subject for the study of imperial capital creation. Among the other early empires of the Ancient Near East, Assyria was the most durable, and lasted

some 740 years, from 1353 to 609 BCE. In those centuries, the Assyrian empire changed its capital city no less than four times. The repetition of the phenomenon allows for a comparison within the same cultural context, a crucial factor that does not exist in preceding cases of capital creation. In addition, it makes Assyria an exceptional subject in the study of capital creation as it is rare that a state will relocate its capital more than once (another unique case in this respect is China).

The Assyrian sequence makes it possible to compare urban design, architectural features, evolving patterns in planning within the same broader cultural framework. In addition, it makes it possible to identify and compare the historical conditions under which each move took place. It also provides examples of both short-lived capitals and cities which lasted for more than a century. There are several additional advantages that makes a comparative study of Assyrian capitals an ideal case study for examining capital creation in the Ancient Near East.

Firstly, all the Assyrian capitals are located within the same broader region of the Assyrian heartland (Postgate 1992; Barbanes 1999; here Figure 4).⁴ While there are small-scale local differences, this broad similarity allows for a comparison between the location of those cities in relation to contemporary access to resources, agricultural land availability, trade routes, and waterways. Secondly, Assyrian capitals present some of the most complete datasets available for the study of ancient capital creation. Archaeological excavation has been carried out at all of the cities, at least on their citadels, and there are textual data from royal inscriptions and other sources. Furthermore, we have relatively secure dates for when each capital was created, how long the construction process took, as well as the historical conditions during the creation of those capitals.

2.1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ASSYRIA

This section briefly introduces the historical context and dates for Assyria used in this study. The Assyrian empire has been divided into three broad periods:

⁴ It should be noted that even though the region can be described as the Land of Aššur (Postgate 1992), there is significant climatic difference between the location of Aššur/Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta and Kalḫu/Dur-Šarrukēn/Nineveh. The first two are located below the rainfed agricultural zone.

i) the Middle Assyrian period in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1353-1197 BCE; Jakob 2017, 119-132), ii) the years of decline in the so-called Dark Ages (ca. 1196-934 BCE; Frahm 2017b, 165-167; Jakob 2017, 132-140), and iii) the Neo Assyrian period in the Early Iron Age (ca. 934-612 BCE; Frahm 2017b 167-196). The Middle and the Neo Assyrian periods correspond to the two imperial phases of Assyria, when it became one of the largest, and in the case of the Neo Assyrian empire, the largest and most dominant imperial power in the Ancient Near East. The center of Assyria is the city of Aššur, the traditional capital of the Assyrian empire. Throughout the Middle and Neo Assyrian periods there was always a core region of the empire, which was perceived as the land rightfully belonging to Assyria, the so-called *Land of Aššur* (Postgate 1992; Harmanşah 2012, 54-57). The size of this core region varied and extended as the empire grew. All Assyrian capitals are located in what was perceived of as the Land of Aššur.

In this study, the Assyrian empire is understood as one continuous political entity which went through different phases during its history (Frahm 2017a; Kühne 2011; 2015; Tenu 2009, 18). As such, the terms Middle and Neo Assyrian are used simply as chronological terms and not as characterizations of two different imperial states. It is important, however, to underline the factors that show the continuity in the Assyrian state in order to conceptualize the Assyrian empire as a whole.

Düring (2015, 299-301) listed three arguments for the continuity between the Middle and Neo Assyrian periods. The first argument concerns military and political practices. There is a continuous sequence of Assyrian kings and their power in the Assyrian heartland. Additionally, some of the military achievements of the Middle Assyrian kings are comparable to those of the Neo Assyrian kings. Tukultī-Ninurta I (1233-1197 BCE),⁵ for example, managed to conquer Babylon (if only briefly).

The second argument is concerned with archaeological sequences, which suggest a large degree of similarity in the material culture from the Middle to the Neo Assyrian periods, especially in the Assyrian heartland and Central and Southern Ḫabūr region. Furthermore, regions which were lost to Assyria for centuries (e.g. the Upper Tigris

⁵ The spelling of the kings follows the most recent king list presented in Frahm 2017c. The list can also be found in Appendix 1.

	Phase	Dates	Capital Creation
Neo Assyrian Period	VII Fall of Assyria	630-609 BCE	-
	VI Imperial expansion and consolidation	744-630 BCE	Dur-Šarrukēn, Nineveh
	V Internal problems and brief territorial recession	823-745 BCE	-
	IV From territorial state to empire	934-824 BCE	Kalḫu
Middle Assyrian Period	III Recession and brief expansion	1197-935 BCE	-
	II From state to empire	1295-1197 BCE	Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta
	I Independence	1353-1296 BCE	-

Table 2: The division of Assyrian chronology and used in this study is based on Liverani 1988; Bedford 2009; Frahm 2017b, 162-165; 2017c; Jakob 2017; phases described by the author.

and Upper Ḫabūr) and were dominated by regional states (Szuchmann 2007), seem to have been an important *topos* for Assyria in the Neo Assyrian period. During this period, conquests of these regions were framed as a *Reconquista* that liberated Assyrian lands (Liverani 1988; 2017, 119; Postgate 1992).

Finally, the degree of continuity between the Middle and Neo Assyrian empire is substantial in the capital cities of the Assyrian empire. Aššur functioned as a capital in both periods; whenever the location of the capital changed, Aššur remained central to the Assyrian identity, and was the location for the coronation and burial of Assyrian kings (Lundström 2012). At the same time, as discussed below, Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta shares many similarities with the Neo Assyrian capitals both in terms of size as well as in terms of urban design. As such, it is safe to assume that there is a certain continuity in the process of imperial capital creation in the Assyrian empire. The complete chronology used in this study can be found in Appendix 1. The different chronological periods of Assyria, as I would interpret them, are presented in Table 2:

In the Neo Assyrian period, the empire eventually became the largest empire known at that point (Figure 5). Beyond the military campaigns, land reconfigurations, and population deportations, the empire also engaged continuously in large scale building projects. In the following section I will discuss the notion of kings as builders, how this notion was incorporated in Assyria, and how, and whether, capital creation can be understood as part of a standardized building activity.

2.1.2 KINGS AS BUILDERS IN ASSYRIA

Contemporary texts often recounted the achievements of kings from the ancient Near East, mostly in royal inscriptions and epics. Two of the most common themes in these inscriptions are war and building (Liverani 1995, 2360). The building activity of kings and the motif of a king as builder, is of central interest to this study.

Attestations of the importance of building activity comes from a multitude of sources from different periods and states, from the epic of Gilgamesh (Dickson 2009) to ancient Israel and Ugarit (Ricks and Carter 1994). The most commonly mentioned building activity in textual evidence is the construction or renovation of temples (Kapelrud 1963). Temples have been seen as the places in which gods dwell, the “house of a god”, and as places related to the organization of ancient societies (van Leeuwen 2007, 68). Following the earlier Sumerian tradition (Averbeck 2002), Assyrian kings also sponsored building activities of temples and other buildings, usually described as an act dictated by gods (van Leeuwen 2007, 74-76).

In addition, the kings of Assyria sponsored the construction and restoration of palaces, city walls, canals, and entire cities. In a recent paper, Russell discussed the building activities of Assyrian kings in major Assyrian cities (Russell 2017). He based his analysis on three main type of datasets: excavated buildings; inscriptions found on architectural material and/or excavated in secondary contexts; and texts mentioning the activities of a king, or those of his forebears (Russell 2017, 423-424). Based on this

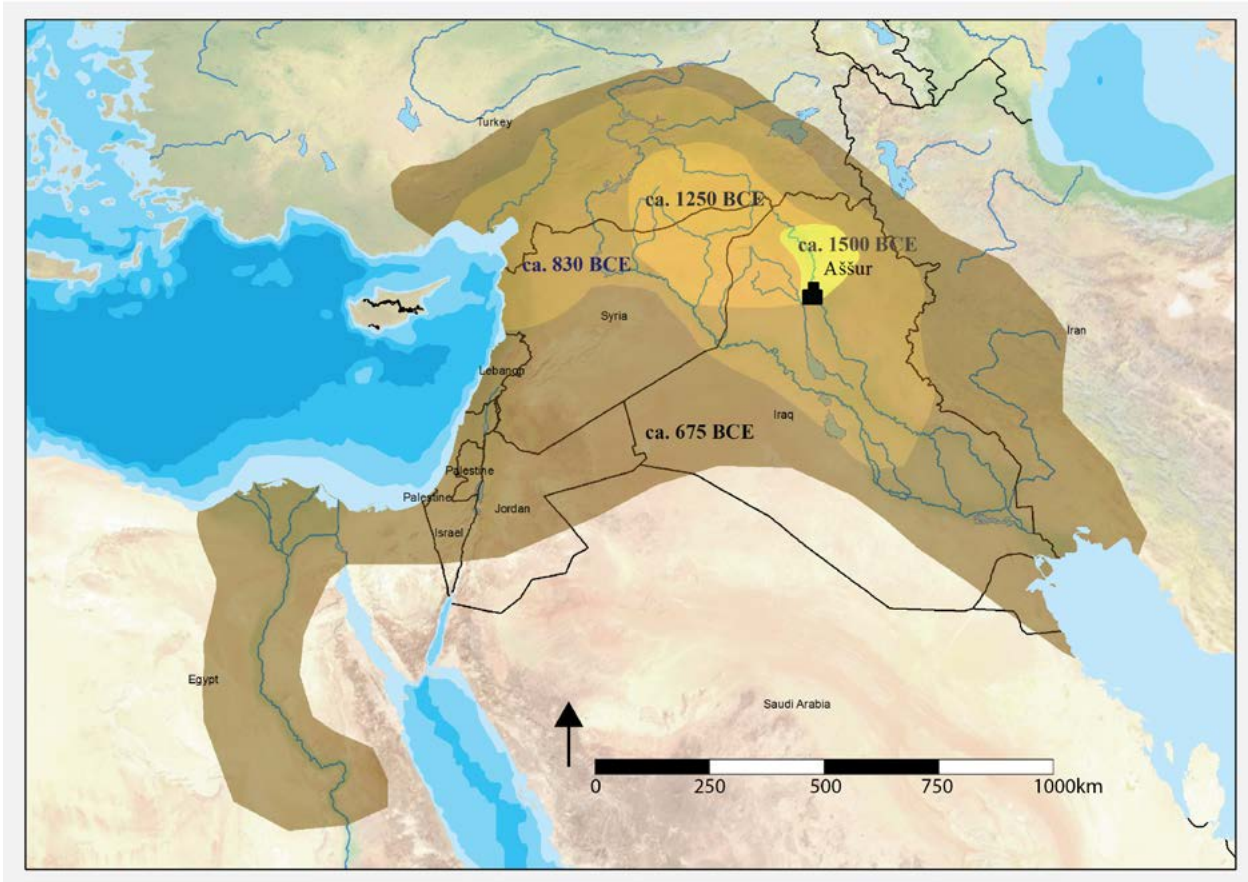


Figure 5: Map with the extent of the Assyrian Empire (courtesy of Tijmen Lanjouw).

evidence, Russell tabulated the buildings constructed throughout Assyrian history in major urban centers. He concluded that Aššur, and to a lesser extent Nineveh, seemed to be the focus of royal inscriptions during the Middle Assyrian and the intermediate period of recession. The creation of a new capital presented a unique case among the otherwise standardized construction activities featuring in the texts. The focus of royal inscriptions on building projects in Aššur and Nineveh continues during the Neo Assyrian period. In the early stages of the Neo Assyrian period, and until the construction of Kalḫu, inscriptions describe renovations of the wall of Aššur and reconstructions of its palaces and temples. After the construction of Kalḫu, construction projects occur at the new capital, but continue in both the city of Aššur and at Nineveh. The same remains true after the construction of the two subsequent capitals, Dur-Šarrukēn and eventually Nineveh as a capital. Thus, Aššur and Nineveh are the two cities that seem to never be neglected.

Russell's research demonstrated that restorations and constructions are a standard practice, although there is variability in the type of constructions. The major buildings are always mentioned in royal inscriptions and are part of the royal propaganda yet focus always remains on the most important centers: always the capital, Nineveh, and Aššur, even after the latter stopped functioning as an administrative capital. In the royal inscriptions the king of Assyria was presented as a builder, besides conqueror and ruler of the world.

Russell (2017) presents the creation of capital cities as part of the standard spectrum of building activities of Assyrian kings. However, while other types of building activities occur almost continuously, capital cities are constructed only during specific episodes in Assyrian history. I argue therefore, that capital creation is an exceptional practice of the Assyrian empire.

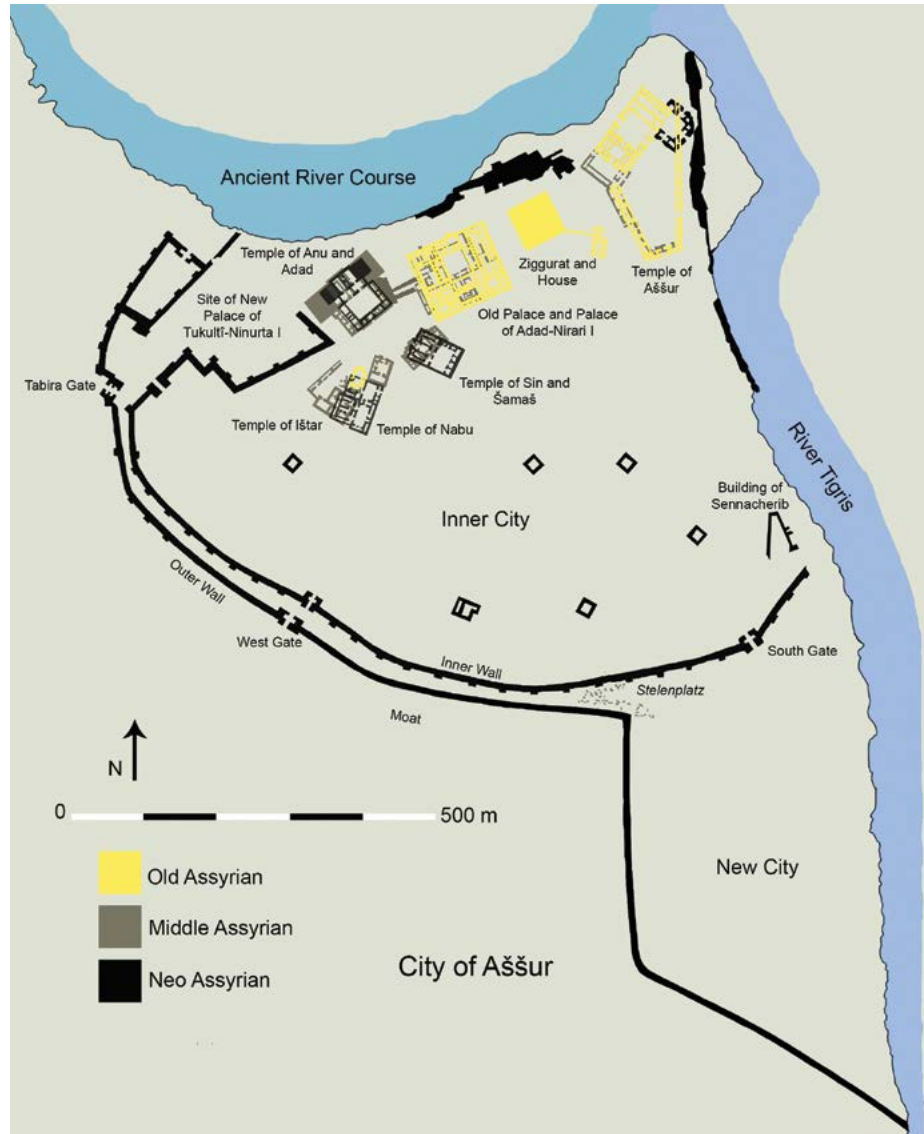


Figure 6: The city of Aššur, drawing by the author (Andrae 1977; Roaf 1990; Miglus 1996; Miglus 2000; 2001, produced by the author).

2.2 AŠŠUR, THE TRADITIONAL CAPITAL OF ASSYRIA

This section briefly discusses the city of Aššur (Figure 6) which was central to Assyrian history. Aššur was the traditional capital of Assyria and the place of origin of the Assyrian state (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011, 74; Pedde 2012, 853-855; Maul 2017, 337). At the same time, while the Assyrian empire relocated its capital several times, Aššur was never really supplanted, since it remained the burial place for several Neo

Assyrian kings (Pedde 2010), and was a place of continuous religious importance (Maul 2017, 349-353) and architectural development (Russell 2017).

Aššur has seen a considerable amount of archaeological research during the early 20th century. The site was first identified in 1821 by Claudius J. Rich and first excavated by William F. Ainsworth in 1840. The first systematic excavations took place from 1903 to 1914, carried out by the German Oriental Society (Andrae 1913; 1977; Pedde 2008). Later expeditions by German teams were conducted by R. Dittmann (in

1988-89), B. Hrouda (in 1990), and P.A. Miglus (in 2000-1), alongside excavations by the Department of Antiquities of Iraq since 1979 (Hausleiter 2011, 59-60; Pedde 2012). The thorough investigation of the city has yielded a good understanding of the chronological sequence of important architectural features, as well as its urban development over time.

2.2.1 AŠŠUR THE GOD

The name Aššur corresponds to three different things in Assyria: i) the god Aššur, ii) the city of Aššur, and iii) the land that rightfully belongs to Assyria or the *mat Aššur* (Postgate; 1992; Liverani 2017, 12). It has often been difficult for scholars to understand what exactly Assyrians texts refer to when using the word Aššur; only recently has research taken steps towards being able to understand the potentially subtle textual differences between these meanings, at least when the term is related to the kings of Assyria (Liverani 2011; Postgate 2011; Valk 2018, 193-282). In many ways, the name of the god and the name of the city were inextricably interwoven (Galter 1996; Maul 2017). Therefore, it is important to have an understanding of the significance of the concept of Aššur as god-city, since it permeates the development of Assyrian identity and ideology, both of which are important for the study of Assyrian capitals.

The god Aššur presents a rather mysterious case of a deity (van Driel 1969; Lambert 1983, 82) and has some interesting differences when juxtaposed with other important deities of the Ancient Near East: he seems to be solitary, without family ties or involvement in divine hierarchies (Maul 2017, 339). Furthermore, it is unclear whether he had any specific qualities or characteristics, or whether he was associated with any specific natural element. In fact, he lacks any stock epithets present for other Mesopotamian gods (Lambert 1983, 83). It rather seems that Aššur actually had no attributes, he was simply a god (Livingstone 1989, 4-6). At the same time, at least for the Assyrians, he was omnipotent and can be described as the central deity around which the world revolved (Foster 2005, 817-819). While the Assyrians worshiped other deities,⁶ Aššur

was the defining deity for the Assyrian identity (Maul 2017, 345-346; Valk 2018, 282-284).

Aššur was also central for the legitimization of the rule of the Assyrian king, both internally and externally (Liverani 2017, 10-24). The Assyrian ruler was primarily considered the representative of the god (Kryszat 2008), and during the imperial phase of Assyria was elevated to the status of a king (Liverani 2011; Machinist 2011). This status as a proxy for the divine mandate, however, was what justified the Assyrian king's expansionist policies. A quote from a Middle Assyrian coronation ritual reads, "*By your just scepter extend your land! And Aššur will grant you authority and obedience, justice and peace!*" (Müller 1937, 12-13: ii34-36; Liverani 2017, 12). This mandate of expanding the Assyrian rule remained part of the coronation rituals of Assyrian kings until late into the Neo Assyrian period (Oded 1992, 10-27; Fales 2010, 77-78; Machinist 2011, 408-409). The extension of the rule of Aššur is what Liverani described as the basic "mission" of the Assyrian king: to "*constantly advance the frontiers of his realm and to establish order, justice, and peace*" (Liverani 2017, 13; see also Maul 2017, 351).

In addition to the god's connection to the Assyrian identity and to the Assyrian imperial mission and rule, it had a physical manifestation in its namesake city: the rock overlooking the Tigris, on which the temple of Aššur was erected. The cliff, bearing the Assyrian name Abiḥ, was directly linked with the god and his cult site (Maul 2017, 340). Despite several relocations of the capital of the Assyrian empire, the cult center of Aššur was never moved. The temple in Aššur remained his sole place of worship, with the short-lived exception being the creation of a temple for Aššur at Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

The importance of the god for Assyria, combined with its strict connection to his namesake city, meant that Aššur retained its status as a defining place for Assyrian identity until the fall of Assyria. Even in the Neo Assyrian period, when the city became less central, kings continued to undertake building projects there, and have themselves buried under its earlier palaces (Pedde 2010; Lundström 2012). As such, while Aššur was abandoned as capital, its significance as a place for worship remained. Even when new capitals were constructed, they were always constructed by the command and in the name of Aššur, as is exemplified in the Banquet Stele for

⁶ The goddess Ištar, for example, one of the most important deities in the Mesopotamian pantheon, had dedicated temples in the city of Aššur (Schmitt 2012), as well as the famous Ištar of Nineveh (Reade 2005).

the construction of Kalḫu: “*Assur, the great lord, cast his eyes upon me and my authority (and) my power came forth by his holy command. Ashurnasirpal, the king whose strength is praiseworthy, [...] gave to me, the city Calah I took in hand for renovation.*” (Grayson 1991, A.O.101.30, 20b-23)

2.2.2 AŠŠUR THE CITY

For the purposes of this study, I am focusing only on the Middle and Neo Assyrian phases of Aššur. However, it must be noted that there is archaeological evidence of occupation dating to the early 3rd millennium BCE (Hockmann 2010; Pedde 2012, 853). These include: the Early Bronze Age sequence of the temple of Ištar (Schmitt 2012), the plan of a probably unfinished palace dating to the Old Assyrian period under the Old Palace (Pedde and Lundström 2008, 28-30; Lundström 2013), and remains associated with the Aššur temple (Miglus 1989).

Walter Andrae was the first to conduct archaeological work in the lower town of an Assyrian capital, through a series of test trenches made at regular intervals, revealing multiple residential buildings (see Matthews 2003, 13 Figure 1.5; Pedde 2008, 773). Work on the lower town of Aššur, and particularly in the northern and northwestern sections, continued by German teams of the Free University of Berlin and the University of Munich in 1988-90, and in 2001 by the University of Halle (Miglus 1996; 2000; 2002).

The outline of the city is defined by a city wall on the south and southwest, and by the course of the Tigris on the north and east. At the turn of the Middle Assyrian period, in the 16th century BCE, we see the first systematic construction of the circular fortification wall surrounding Aššur’s Old Town, encompassing some 47 ha (Miglus 2010). A few decades later, most likely under the reign of Puzur-Aššur III (first quarter of the 15th century BCE),⁷ the wall was expanded to surround the so-called New Town, giving Aššur its maximum extent of 62 ha (Andrae 1977, 140-141; Grayson 1987, A.O.69.1). The combination of natural defenses offered by the river in conjunction with the circular wall made Aššur a very well defended city.

During the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta I (ca. 1233-

1197 BCE) the city wall was enhanced with the construction of a moat (Grayson 1987, A.O.78.19). Most of the current remains of the wall date to the Neo Assyrian period, as several kings conducted restoration works or reconstructed parts of the wall completely. An example of this comes from the reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE), who performed extensive restoration work on the outer wall of the city, at the point where it turns sharply southwards (Reade 2004, 456).

Another interesting feature at that location is the *stelenplatz*. Located between the outer and the inner walls, and running east to west for ca. 100 m, Andrae (1977) uncovered about 140 stelae. They date from the 14th to the 7th centuries BCE, mostly rectangular and averaging 2 m in height. Most of them bear small inscribed panels, and only the latest 7th century stela includes an image (Miglus 1984). While the stelae are similar in composition and shape, those of kings were of considerably better quality and placed in more prominent positions than those of officials (Reade 2004, 457). Various explanations have been given, including Andrae’s plausible argument that they served as some kind of monumental calendar, acting as an eponym and king list (Reade 2004, 470). Despite the uncertainty of its role, however, the *stelenplatz* is crucial in showing both the continuity, as well as the development of the administration in Assyria.

Excavations in the northern part of the lower city have uncovered several residential buildings, dating from the Old Assyrian to the Neo Assyrian, and also to the Parthian periods (Miglus 2000; Hausleiter 2011). An interesting example comes from the westernmost trenches, ‘ ‘Abschnitt 2’ (Miglus 2002, 9, Abb. 2), which contained a sequence of nine buildings. This particular sequence reveals stratigraphic architectural remains ranging from the mid-2nd millennium to the Neo Assyrian period constructed along narrow lanes (Hrouda 1991, 104). In addition, the excavators unearthed a variety of graves (e.g. double urn graves, chambers graves, a vaulted tomb) located under the floors of these buildings. Based on this sequence, it was possible to determine a strong continuity from the Mitannian to the early 1st millennium BCE urban layout, as well as changes in the building organization during the 8th and 7th century BCE (Hausleiter 2011, 8). Findings of the residential buildings of the lower city of Aššur will be explored later in the thesis (section 7.4.4).

⁷ This dating for Puzur-Aššur III follows Frahm 2017c, which is the king-list followed in this study. However, Tenu (2009, 323) dates this king to 1521-1498 BCE.

2.2.3 THE “CITADEL” OF AŠŠUR

The northern part of the city is a raised area that contains all the palaces and the main temples and is often referred to as a citadel. Aššur is the only one of the Assyrian capitals that does not have a walled citadel. Five buildings in this “monumental core” (Micale 2006, 156) existed since the Old Assyrian period: The Old Palace, the temple of Sin and Šamaš (Werner 2009), the temple of Ištār (Bär 2003), the Anu and Adad temple with two ziggurats (Grayson 1987, A.O.59.1001), and the aforementioned Aššur temple.

I argue that from the Middle Assyrian period onwards, the architectural development of the city is directly related to the expansion and growth of the Middle Assyrian empire: for every major expansion phase of Assyria, there is also a surge of architectural activities in the capital (see also Düring 2020). A similar argument is presented by Russell (2017, 430), who identifies three main surges of building activity in Aššur in the Middle Assyrian period: i) during the period when Assyria regains its independence from the Mitanni (ca. 1407-1318 BCE), ii) during the period of imperial growth (ca. 1297-1197 BCE), and iii) during the brief re-expansion period in the so-called Dark Ages (ca. 1332-1056 BCE).

The creation of most of the new buildings and the extensive restorations of old buildings is especially clear during the period of imperial growth (Micale 2006, 156; Pedde 2012, 854; Russell 2017, 431). Under the reign of Adad-nirari I (ca. 1295-1264 BCE), extensive renovations took place in the Old Palace, the city wall, the Aššur temple, and the temple of Ištār (see the royal inscriptions of Adad-nirari I in Grayson 1987, A076.1-49). Shalmaneser I (ca. 1263-1234 BCE) completely reconstructed the Aššur temple, which had been destroyed by fire, adding a large courtyard, and followed this by reconstructing the accompanying ziggurat (Russell 2017, 431). In addition, restoration works were carried out on the Old Palace and the temple of Ištār (see Grayson 1987, A077.1-37; Miglus 1985). Finally, Tukultī-Ninurta I in addition to the creation of his namesake capital, also conducted extensive architectural projects in Aššur, including the attempt to construct a new palace (see section 3.2 for a discussion of the project), and the complete reconstruction of the temple of Ištār (Schmitt 2012). During the Neo Assyrian period, once again we see

a similar pattern, where the biggest architectural projects coincide with periods of growth. Most striking is the fact that extensive architectural works at Aššur also coincide with the creation of a new capital elsewhere, as exemplified during the reign of Aššurnāširpal II (883-859 BCE). Alongside the creation of Kalḫu, and despite the relocation of the capital, Aššur was not neglected, but rather witnessed the reconstruction of several important buildings. This included the levelling and rebuilding of the Old Palace (Miglus 1989, 124; Pedde and Lundström 2008, 37-58; Lundström 2013), and the temple of Sin and Šamaš (Werner 2009, 18). Aššurnāširpal was also buried at the south end of the Old Palace (Lundström 2009). Much later, Sennacherib (704-681 BCE), the king under whom Nineveh became capital, also undertook extensive renovation works at Aššur; he took special care of the fortifications, and created a new building for the New Year’s festival, as well as a Prince’s Palace for his son (Russell 2017, 854).

2.2.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON AŠŠUR

From this brief overview of the traditional capital of Assyria it is apparent that Aššur was central for the Assyrian empire in terms of tradition, religion, identity, and the legitimization of rule. As such, and despite the fact that Assyria changed its capital multiple times, Aššur was never really supplanted as the core location for Assyrian religion.

At the same time, Aššur is unique in many ways among Assyrian capitals. It is the only capital that was not created, but rather grew naturally. Even Nineveh, with its long history, was massively expanded and redeveloped. Aššur is the only capital that does not feature a rectangular shape, which is a result of its organic growth and its location. Finally, it is the only capital that did not have an elevated platform as a citadel, or a wall that divided its monumental core from the rest of the city. It seems like kings were mostly concerned with conserving the historical core of the city rather than redesigning Aššur.

Aššur’s unique position among capitals also meant that there was never an attempt to copy it or replace it as a religious center. Each new capital came with its new set of innovations, but Aššur retained its status. Comparatively, therefore, it is more fruitful to compare the new capitals to each other, rather than to Aššur.