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

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## Chapter 6: Nineveh – The Largest Capital of Assyria

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Nineveh is an exceptional city in many ways. From its long history to its biblical implications, and from its importance in ancient Assyria to its modern relevance of heritage and the destructions by ISIS, Nineveh is a key place for understanding the history of the Near East (Petit and Morandi Bonacossi 2017; Figure 35). In addition, it is the first time that the new capital of Assyria was located in an already existing, established, and thriving city. It should be clarified that the key difference between Nineveh and Aššur is that the latter was not a created capital, but rather evolved gradually into the capital of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh, on the other hand, was the only city which had a contemporary importance and was elevated into a capital. Such an alteration to the ‘standard’ paradigm of capital creation requires a shift in the perception of the phenomenon.

#### 6.1.1 HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Nineveh covers an area of ca. 750 ha and is surrounded by a monumental wall. Its two most prominent features are the two citadel mounds: Kuyunjik, the main citadel mound, and Nebi Yunus, the secondary citadel mound. Both mounds are located along the inner side of the long wall of the city that has a northwest to southeast orientation (see Figure 36). The river Khosr runs through the city, separating it in a northern and a southern part.

The site was first discovered and investigated by Paul-Émile Botta in 1840, before he moved to excavate Dur-Šarrukēn. Botta’s success there inspired further research in the broader area, and Austen Henry Layard, after a few seasons at Kalḫu, began excavating at the mound of Kuyunjik in 1849. Following his death, the British Museum continued research on the site, directed by George Smith (for one season) and Hormuzd Rassam. The

site yielded impressive finds, including the palace of Sennacherib, the palace and library of Assurbanipal, several bas reliefs, bull colossi.

Excavations here continued in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, again organized by the British Museum, under the direction of Campbell Thompson. The latter also excavated a building to the north of Kuyunjik at an unspecified location. Campbell Thompson also conducted some work at the secondary citadel of the city, Nebi Yunus. After World War II, several Iraqi archaeologists from the Iraqi Department of Antiquities continued work at the site on several occasions. Most notably, work was conducted under the direction of Mohammed Ali Mustafa (1951-1958), Tariq Madhloom (1967-1971), Manhal Jabur (1980), and Abd as-Sattar (1987) (Scott and MacGinnes 1990, 63). Their work significantly expanded our understanding of the city, especially with their excavations at the gates of the city. Excavations were conducted in several parts of the city, including the two citadels, several gates, bridges, the city wall, the river walls, and a small number of buildings in the lower parts of the city. Several gates were also restored, like the Nergal Gate and the Adad Gate. Significant research was done by Mohammed Ali Mustafa at the mound of Nebi Yunus and the surrounding area; in addition to the Assyrian phase of the city, he identified several later layers that dated until the Hellenistic period (Mustafa 1954).

The last large-scale project that took place at the site was conducted under the supervision of David Stronach and the University of California, Berkeley. Stronach conducted a survey of the northern part of the lower city, and also excavated the Halzi Gate, where he found the remains of several skeletons (Lumsden 1991; 2000; Stronach and Lumsden 1992, 228). The signs of battle at this gate point towards the last siege of the city and the fall of Nineveh (Stronach 1997).





**Figure 35:** Nineveh today, surrounded by the city of Mosul (image from Google Earth).

The Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project, directed by Daniele Morandi Bonacossi (2016; 2018), carried out the most recent archaeological project in the surrounding hinterland of Nineveh. A comprehensive review of archaeological research at the site can be found in Scott and MacGinnes (1990), Russel (1991, 34-44), Reade (2002, 392-394), and recently an edited volume by Petit and Morandi Bonacossi (Curtis 2017; MacGinnis 2017a; Mario Fales 2017; Petit and Morandi Bonacossi 2017; Stronach 2017). The following sections treat the archaeological remains at the city from the Middle Assyrian period onwards, until its elevation to the capital of Assyria.

In recent years the city of Mosul, in which the archaeological site of Nineveh is located, was occupied by the Islamic State, which caused significant damage, destroying the reconstructed gates and causing significant damage to city's citadel. After the recent liberation of Mosul, tunnels constructed by ISIS through the mound of Nebi Yunus revealed the existence of several wall reliefs that could date to Esarhaddon's reign (680-669 BCE) and thus signify new additions to the palace. Although news outlets heavily discussed the importance of the archaeological finds at Nineveh after the liberation of Mosul as of yet there has been no opportunity for archaeological study on this material.<sup>27</sup>

## 6.2 MIDDLE ASSYRIAN NINEVEH

While Nineveh has a very long history of habitation, starting from the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE (Stronach 1994; Reade 2000, 395-396; Iamoni 2017), I will focus exclusively on the Assyrian phases, especially the Middle Assyrian phase, when Assyria first became independent from the Mitanni. Nineveh initially was part of the Mitanni empire. On at least two occasions there are textual attestations that Mitannian kings, Šuttarna II (c. 1400-1385 BCE) and Tušrata (c. 1380-1350 BCE), sent the effigies of Ištar in Nineveh to the Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis III (c. 1386-1353), for healing purposes (MacGinnis 2017b).

Almost immediately after Assyria became independent, Nineveh came under the rule of king

Aššur-uballit I (c. 1353-1318 BCE), who conducted renovation works at the temple of Ištar. This is recorded in royal inscriptions, although these renovations have not been identified archaeologically (Grayson 1987, A.0.73.1001; Tenu 2017). The temple seems to have been a primary focus of the Assyrian kings, as numerous texts proclaim the renovations done to the Ištar temple, especially those from Shalmaneser I and Aššur-rēsa-isi I (ca. 1133-115 BCE). Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BCE) worked on the terrace connected to the temple, and erected the obelisk found outside the North-West Gate (Reade 2005, 373). Two more obelisks, the so-called 'Broken Obelisk' and the 'White Obelisk', as well as a statue of a woman, possibly Ištar, belong to kings of the second millennium. It appears that the importance of the cult of Ištar for Assyria was great. This was an important trade center (Tenu 2004, 29). Temples were not the only building projects that took place in the city. Nineveh occupied a unique position among Assyrian cities, particularly in the Middle Assyrian period, as it became an official royal residence in addition to Aššur. While the Assyrian king would visit other cities, Nineveh was unique in having a royal palace where the king would spend some time of the year. This is illustrated by the construction of three palaces, gardens, and administrative buildings (Russell 2017, 430-4; Tenu 2017, 121). Once again, the evidence is mainly textual, with scarce archaeological data due to the heavy building activities of the late Neo Assyrian period.

A palace was constructed by Shalmaneser I and is recorded on a cone fragment dating to his reign (Grayson 1987, A.0.77.30). The same palace was restored by Mutakkil-Nusku (1133 BCE) and Tiglath-Pileser I. Inscriptions mention that Aššur-rēsa-isi I also constructed a palace in the city which was finished by Tiglath-Pileser I (Grayson 1991a, A.0.87.10). In the latter's description of the palace, we read that the palace was decorated with bricks glazed the color of obsidian, lapis lazuli, *pappadilū*-stone, and *parūtu*-alabaster. A garden was planted in connection with this palace, which was watered by a canal diverted from river Khosr (Grayson 1991a, A.0.87.24-7). A third palace in the city may have been a summer house (Reade 2002b, 411). Despite these textual descriptions, the actual position of these palaces remains unknown.

It is interesting that the texts of Aššur-rēsa-isi I mention the construction of a *bīt-kutalli*, which can

<sup>27</sup> Information can be found in news outlets, e.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/mosul-iraqi-troops-find-assyrian-treasures-in-network-of-isis-tunnels> [accessed 07-05-2018].

be interpreted as an arsenal or storage house. They also state that the construction of the building had already started but was damaged by an earthquake (Grayson 1987, A.0.86.4). Its location is unknown and could have been located in the lower town rather than on the citadel mound of Kuyunjik or Nebi Yunus. For several centuries Nineveh remained the only city with a possible arsenal, until Shalmaneser III constructed Fort-Shalmaneser at Kalḫu. It has, therefore, been suggested that Nineveh was actually the main military establishment of the Assyrian empire starting in the Middle Assyrian period (Russell 1999, 222).

In terms of the urban layout of Middle Assyrian Nineveh, our knowledge is even more limited. It is most likely that a lower town, probably even a city wall existed located in the northern part of the Neo Assyrian city. That can also be supported by the University of California, Berkeley's excavations in 1990 (Lumsden 1991; Stronach and Lumsden 1992, 228-230). Despite the limited Middle Assyrian data produced, the size of the mound of the northern part of the lower city implies a long occupation sequence. It is impossible to estimate the size of the city, its population, or its layout. It is also unclear whether or not the mound of Nebi Yunus was even part of Middle Assyrian Nineveh.

During the Middle Assyrian period: i) Nineveh assumed the role of an important provincial capital of the Assyrian state, and ii) Nineveh became a city where the king resided, especially towards the end of the Middle Assyrian period. The need of the king to reside temporarily in other places of the empire might be a result of the continuously expanding empire.

### 6.3 NEO ASSYRIAN NINEVEH

Nineveh remained part of the Assyrian state even during its decline during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. The reformation of the Assyrian empire during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries has already been addressed above. Those events culminated in the re-centering of the empire further to the north with the creation of Kalḫu. Nineveh's importance increased during the Neo Assyrian period, even before Sennacherib's transfer of the capital (Frahm 2017, 164-170). Architectural work always occurred at Nineveh contemporary with the construction of other capital cities. Kings resided in its palace and its temples were restored or reconstructed (Stronach 1994, 97).

Once again, our knowledge of the actual urban environment of Nineveh is limited. The Lower Town probably grew significantly, as did the pressure for space on the mound of Kuyunjik. Reade (1970, 65-66), attempted to identify the area occupied by the city based on textual account of building activities.<sup>28</sup> The perimeter of the area mentioned in the text was calculated at 5,115 m and could refer either to an area exclusively around Kuyunjik or an area including Nebi Yunus. Inscriptions do describe a palace located on top of Nebi Yunus, but it is uncertain whether the mound was incorporated into the city at this time (Stronach 1994, 98).

Some information can be derived from the royal inscriptions of Sennacherib regarding the city's canal system. An example is the "Tebilti River", which is possibly a water canal that came from the northern part of the city (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 002, 44-53). The river, according to the inscription, ran within the city walls and had caused damage to residences, tombs, and possibly the Kuyunjik mound as well as one of the palaces. During the reconstruction works at Nineveh, the inscription informs us that the river was diverted, possibly outside of the city and its original location was filled in, creating a large terrace close to the Tigris.

The considerable work done on the expansion and building activity of Kuyunjik must have had dramatic implications for urban life of Nineveh, which must have had a high population density.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the parts added to the city would have created a new urban reality. The biggest addition to Nineveh was the area south of the Khosr river, where there is no evidence of previous occupation. It is possible that this part of the city comprised of agricultural fields that were transformed into a more urbanized area. The elevation of Nineveh to imperial capital raises many questions about the functioning of this new part of the city, as well as how it was connected to the old Lower Town.

28 For the most recent reading of this text, see RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 8, 9'-11'.

29 At this point, it is not possible to give an estimation of the pre-Sennacherib population of Nineveh due to the lack of available data on the Lower City.





Figure 36: Plan of Nineveh (Petit and Morandi Bonacossi 2017, Figure 23.1, published with permission).

## 6.4 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During Nineveh's lifespan as an Assyrian capital (704-612 BCE) three subsequent kings carried out significant building projects in the city and expanded or changed its urban fabric: Sennacherib (705/4-681 BCE), Esarhaddon (681-669 BCE), and Assurbanipal (668-627 BCE).

Sennacherib's reign was a very dynamic period for Assyria (Frahm 2017, 183-186; Lippolis 2017). Alongside the construction of Nineveh, the Assyrian army conducted several campaigns on all fronts. One of the most notable aspects of Sennacherib's kingship is the so-called "*Babylonian problem*", connected to the continuous revolts by Babylon (Parker 2017). The status of and relation with Babylon always played a central role in Assyrian foreign politics. A number of conquests of Babylon have already been mentioned in this study and, without delving too deep into the problem, almost all Assyrian kings had to deal with Babylon in one way or another.

Sennacherib took this situation to the extreme by waging multiple campaigns to control the area, but the initial results were relatively poor.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, in 689 BCE, the Assyrians decided that brute force was the only solution to the problem (Frahm 2017, 186). Babylon was conquered after a long siege, and Sennacherib's inscriptions record that the city was plundered and completely destroyed.

Sennacherib's reign followed in the footsteps of the previous kings with continuous campaigns. While the results of these campaigns seem mixed, Assyria managed to sustain its growth. His invasions of Palestine, for example, resulted in the withdrawal of the Assyrian force from the area (Parker 2017). Nevertheless, Judah remained an ally to Assyria until the end of the empire.

Esarhaddon ascended to the throne in 680 BCE after his father was murdered, possibly by his other sons, but under mostly unknown circumstances (Parpola 1980; Frahm 2017, 186). Military campaigns under his reign were equally, if not more successful than Sennacherib's on territorial terms, and his reign was characterized by more cohesive strategies (Parpola 1983, 231-236; Frahm 2017, 187). Conquest of kingdoms on the Phoenician coast, Palestine, and Anatolia solidified the Assyrian presence in the area but, more importantly, paved the way for his reign's grand achievement. After multiple invasions, Egypt was conquered by the

Assyrian empire in 671 BCE (Grayson 1992b, 123-126). In addition, a peace treaty with Elam was completed in 674 BCE and Assyria aided in the reconstruction of Babylon (Porter 1993).

The consistent administrative policies during that period, and a continuous suspicion of conspiracies (Frahm 2010; 2017, 187-188), had its effect on the building projects undertaken during Esarhaddon's reign. Nebi Yunus was favored, with the construction of another palace here. At the same time, the military palace of Kalhu, Fort-Shalmaneser, saw extensive restorations and expansions (see chapter 4).

Esarhaddon divided the rulership of the empire by appointing his son Assurbanipal as heir to the throne of Assyria, while his other son, Šamaš-šuma-ukin, was appointed to the throne of Babylon (Parker 2017). The king died in 669 BCE on the road to Egypt, where an anti-Assyrian rebellion was taking place.

Assurbanipal's kingship (668-631 BCE) is marked by a series of events that brought significant losses to Assyria. He initially suppressed the Egyptian rebellion already underway since the end of his father's reign, but Egypt eventually managed to regain its independence. On the Babylonian front, the relationship between the two states became tense. With the support of Elam, Šamaš-šuma-ukin renounced his brother's claim to the Assyrian throne. After a long campaign (652-648 BCE), Elam was destroyed, and Assyria regained control of Babylon (Grayson 1992c).

Assurbanipal was also the last king to undertake major architectural projects in Nineveh, with the construction of the North Palace (Grayson 1992c). In addition, another important building was created as part of the Southwest Palace, probably with the personal supervision of the king: the Library of Assurbanipal (Fincke 2017).

Several of Assyria's 'misfortunes' have been attributed to the king's short-tempered personality which "*allowed personal rivalries to influence his decision-making*" (Parker 2017, 146). Scholars have tried to identify aspects of his character and unique features in his kingship, such as the fact that he rarely accompanied military campaigns (Radner 2017c). While indeed Assurbanipal can be described as an atypical king in some ways, the historical events which led to the loss of control of several Assyrian territories had already been set in motion before his ascension to power. More generally, this was a period influenced by the continuous turmoil in the succession of kings, as well as the territorial over-extension of the empire. Some of these developments are also visible in the changing landscape of Nineveh, to which we now turn.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed account, see Grayson 1992b, 105-109.



## 6.5 WHY – A CAPITAL WAITING TO HAPPEN?

In recent scholarship, the relocation of the capital to Nineveh is treated as an event ‘waiting to happen’. Oates and Oates (2001, 16) question why Kalḫu was chosen to be the capital instead of Nineveh in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. They suggest that the abandoned site of Kalḫu provided a wider variety of construction possibilities. Russell proposed that the question we should ask is not “*why did Sennacherib move the capital to Nineveh?*” but rather, “*why hadn’t it been done long before?*” (Russell 1999, 243). The question suggests viewing the motivations of Sennacherib as “*refreshingly transparent*” from our modern point of view. Such a statement, however, requires a large number of assumptions and *post hoc* knowledge of the importance of the city.

I suggest that the question “why not Nineveh?” is a misguided one, given our modern knowledge and perception of Nineveh. As for the previous Assyrian capitals, research has traditionally framed the creation of Nineveh as a choice presented to the king: create a new capital or move the capital to Nineveh. There is, however, no evidence of such binary considerations. At no point does any textual or archaeological evidence suggest Nineveh was a candidate for becoming the capital of Assyria before Sennacherib. Several kings did construct buildings in Nineveh, but never moved the court and the central administration of the empire to this city.

As a matter of fact, Sennacherib’s inscriptions (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 003) state that he pays tribute to several Assyrian kings who “exercised domination” from the palaces of Nineveh. For example, one of the inscriptions reads (with my emphasis added):

*At that time, Nineveh, the exalted cult center; the city loved by the goddess Ištar in which all of the rituals for gods and goddesses are present; [...] in which since time immemorial earlier kings, **my ancestors, before me exercised dominion over Assyria and ruled the subjects of the god Enlil, and wherein annually, without interruption, they received an income unsurpassed in amount, the tribute of the rulers of the four quarters (of the world);***

***(but) not one among them had paid heed to (or) shown interest in the palace inside it, the seat of lordly dwelling whose site had become too small; nor had anyone (of them) conceived of and put his mind towards the straightening of the city’s street(s)***

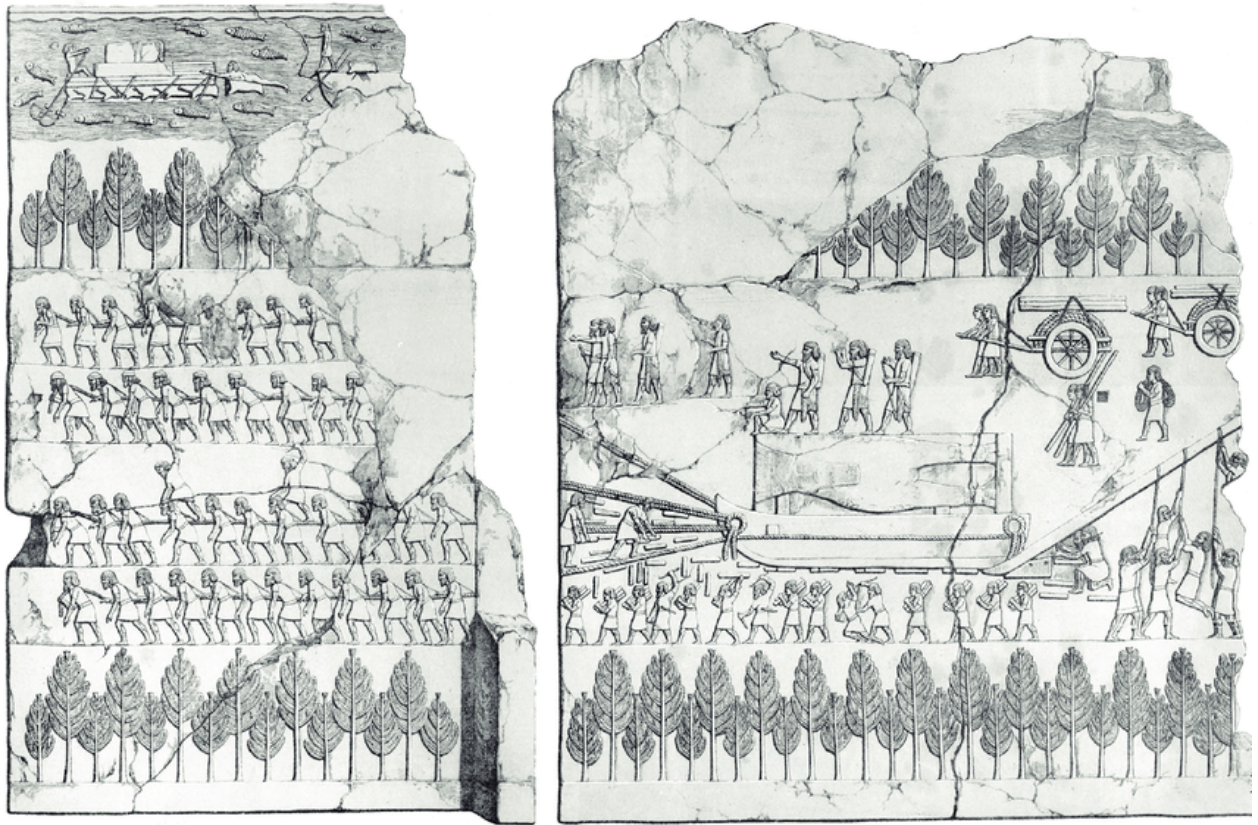
*and the widening of (its) squares, the dredging of the river, (and) the planting of orchards:*

*(But) as for me, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, the performing of this work came to my attention by the will of the gods and I put my mind to it. (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 003, 34-41)*

This passage is of interest for a number of reasons. It informs us about the status of the palaces of Nineveh before Sennacherib, as well as the religious and administrative importance of Nineveh. I would like to highlight two other important sections in this passage: i) the palace was considered too small, and ii) changing the city’s design was significant. These points are interesting because they highlight the fact that both elite spaces as well as urban development were part of the urban planning, something not attested in previous royal inscriptions. This point is also elaborated by Liverani (2017, 171-173) who discusses the evolution of the royal inscriptions of Sennacherib in relation to the progress of various constructions in the city, from the palaces and temples initially, to urban planning and surrounding landscape later on<sup>31</sup>. Despite the extensive mention of constructions in royal inscriptions, however, at no point there is any reasoning as to why did the relocation happened in the first place.

It might be, indeed, “refreshing” to finally have an Assyrian capital which makes sense from our perspective due our knowledge of its eventual development as a capital. This seeming “transparency” in motivation, however, does not answer the question of why make Nineveh the capital at all. What are the reasons and motivations to create a new capital immediately after Dur-Šarrukēn had been constructed? One of the dominant narratives revolves around the circumstances of Sargon’s death (see most recently Lippolis 2017). Sargon’s death on the battlefield, and the failure to retrieve his body for a proper burial was interpreted as a horrible omen, a divine punishment. Scholars have associated the lack of Sargon’s name mentioned in Sennacherib’s inscriptions and the relocation of the capital to Nineveh with the ill fortune of Sargon. This might indeed have been part of the religious narrative, although it is not mentioned as a reason in any royal inscription. It seems, however, too reductive to attribute such a massive and expensive project solely on Sargon’s unfortunate death, especially in the absence of relevant evidence.

<sup>31</sup> See for example: RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 001, 63-67; 015, 31-32; 016, 54-55; 022, 36-38; 044, 33-37.



**Figure 37:** Stone panel from the S.W. palace of Sennacherib (court 6) showing the transportation of a lamassu to Nineveh (The British Museum).

An argument can be made that the location of Nineveh was significantly more advantageous. As shown in the previous chapter, the location of Dur-Šarrukēn caused logistical difficulties, both for its construction, as well as its connectivity to other important Assyrian centers like Nineveh and Arbela. At the same time, the coordination for the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn took place mostly at Nineveh, which might add to the argumentation of why the latter would be preferred over Dur-Šarrukēn. While the fact that Nineveh was located at a more central and advantageous position cannot be disputed, one has to wonder as to whether this was the main reason for the relocation of the capital.

It is possible to speculate that the reasons for moving away from Dur-Šarrukēn would have been political. I discussed earlier that the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn could be linked to a distancing from existing elites. It might be that these elites that felt threatened by the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn could seize the opportunity of Sargon's death to pressure the new king Sennacherib in abandoning his father's city. Such a hypothesis

could be supported by the fact that Nineveh was a commonly accepted Assyrian center because of its economic importance and central location within the empire. As Liverani puts it, "*Sennacherib's choice of Nineveh as capital is repeatedly justified with reference to its prior glorious history, which is a complete inversion of the motif of an untouched site*" (Liverani 2017, 170).

None of these hypotheses can, however, be fully supported with the currently available data. It seems, in fact, that rather than the relocation of Nineveh being "*refreshingly transparent*", as mentioned above, it is probably the most puzzling choice. It is puzzling to such extent that we cannot really answer why Nineveh was created as a capital. We can assess the advantages and the new city itself, but not the reasons for its creation.

I would argue that, moving forward, the best way to understand the reasons for the elevation of Nineveh to a capital should be seen in the context of the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn. I suggest that these two capitals are

the product of the same historical processes related to the territorial and economic growth of Assyria. The short time span between the construction of the two capitals means that: i) Assyria used the same pool of resources for both creations, and ii) to a large extent, many of the same, competing or cooperating, elites were probably involved in both projects. It is currently impossible, however, to determine with any certainty the reasons behind the creation of Nineveh.

## 6.6 HOW

In contrast to the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn, little evidence exists for the construction process of Nineveh (Figure 37). However, there is no reason to imagine that the construction process of Nineveh was dramatically different than its predecessor. The project was likely executed in part by the same people, such as Sennacherib, who already was involved intimately with the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn.

The evidence from the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn clearly states that Nineveh was a hub through which most of the construction materials had to pass. As such, it follows that the building of Nineveh must have been significantly smoother. The central administration had already moved to Nineveh and was overseeing the creation of the city from within, without the need for a distant “middleman”.

Given the lack of evidence and the similarity in the construction process between Dur-Šarrukēn and Nineveh, I will not investigate the building aspects of Nineveh in greater detail. Several specific aspects related to construction will be explored in the following section, as well as in the discussion chapter (see section 7.3.2), where there will be a focus on the city wall of Nineveh.

## 6.7 WHAT – URBAN LAYOUT

Nineveh, as a capital, covered about 750 ha and was surrounded by a ca. 12 km long city-wall, which gave the city a trapezoidal shape. Unlike Dur-Šarrukēn, the design of the city was heavily influenced by existing landscape features, namely the edge of the flood-plain of the Tigris on the west and the conglomerate extrusion which defines the city-wall on the east (Stronach 1994, 100).

The long sides of the city are on the east (ca. 5 km long) and west (ca. 4.1 km), with the northern part of the wall extending some 2 km and the south being the narrowest side of the city at ca. 900 m long. From space, the wall is still visible today, though less clearly than in the 1960s (Figure 38). Besides the wall, the other distinct features of the city that can be seen from the air are the two citadel mounds, and the Khosr river that divides the city in two.

### 6.6.1 CITY-WALL – FUNCTION AND CONSTRUCTION

The city-wall comprised two distinct elements, an inner mudbrick wall and an outer stonewall (also known as a curtain wall) and was constructed within twelve years (702-690 BCE) (Figure 39). Sennacherib’s royal inscriptions give a vivid description of the construction of the wall:

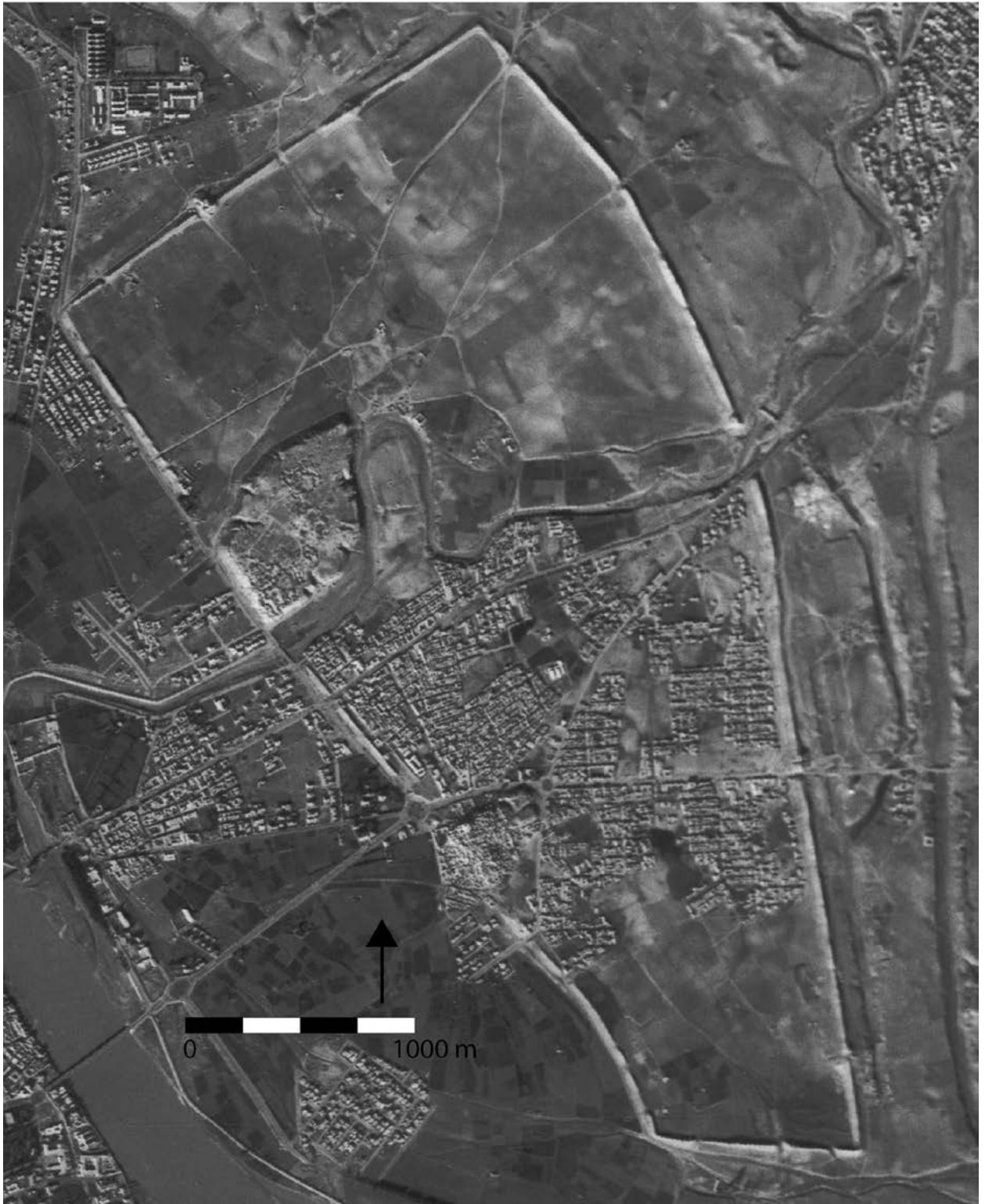
*(11') [I laid the foundation of its great wall, Badnigalbilukurašusu, (which means) “Wall Whose Brilliance Overwhelms Enemies,” upon limestone and made (it) 40 bricks thick]. I raised its superstructure [180 courses of brick high.*

*(12') [I opened up a foundation pit for the outer wall, Badnigerimhuluḥa, (which means) “Terrorizer of Enemies,” then I dug down forty-five nindanu and made (it) reach] the water table. [I bound together strong mountain stone in the water below and above] I expertly carried out its construction [with large limestone (blocks) up to its copings] (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 8, 11'-13'),*

Archaeological work has shown that the numbers presented in the text are very close to reality (Scott and Macginnis 1990, 67-69; Stronach 1997, 311-312; Reade 2002b, 399-401). The standard size of the mudbrick used for the wall was 37 x 37x 12 cm, which would give a height of about 22 m without mortar (180 courses x 12 cm), and somewhere between 24 and 25 m including mortar. Stronach’s early suggestion of a possible height of 30 m is probably exaggerated (Stronach 1994, 100). The 40 bricks would give a thickness of roughly 15 m, which corresponds with the available data (see for example Madhloum 1967; Madhloum and Mahdi, 1976, 55).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the size and the labor required for the construction of the wall see the corresponding section in the discussion chapter 7.3.2.





**Figure 38:** CORONA satellite image of Nineveh (11/12/1967 <http://corona.cast.uark.edu/atlas#zoom=14&center=4805080,4350270> accessed 19/02/2018).



**Figure 39:** Part of relief depicting the multiple walls of the city of Nineveh. Nineveh, Iraq (after Nadali 2017, Figure 32.2).

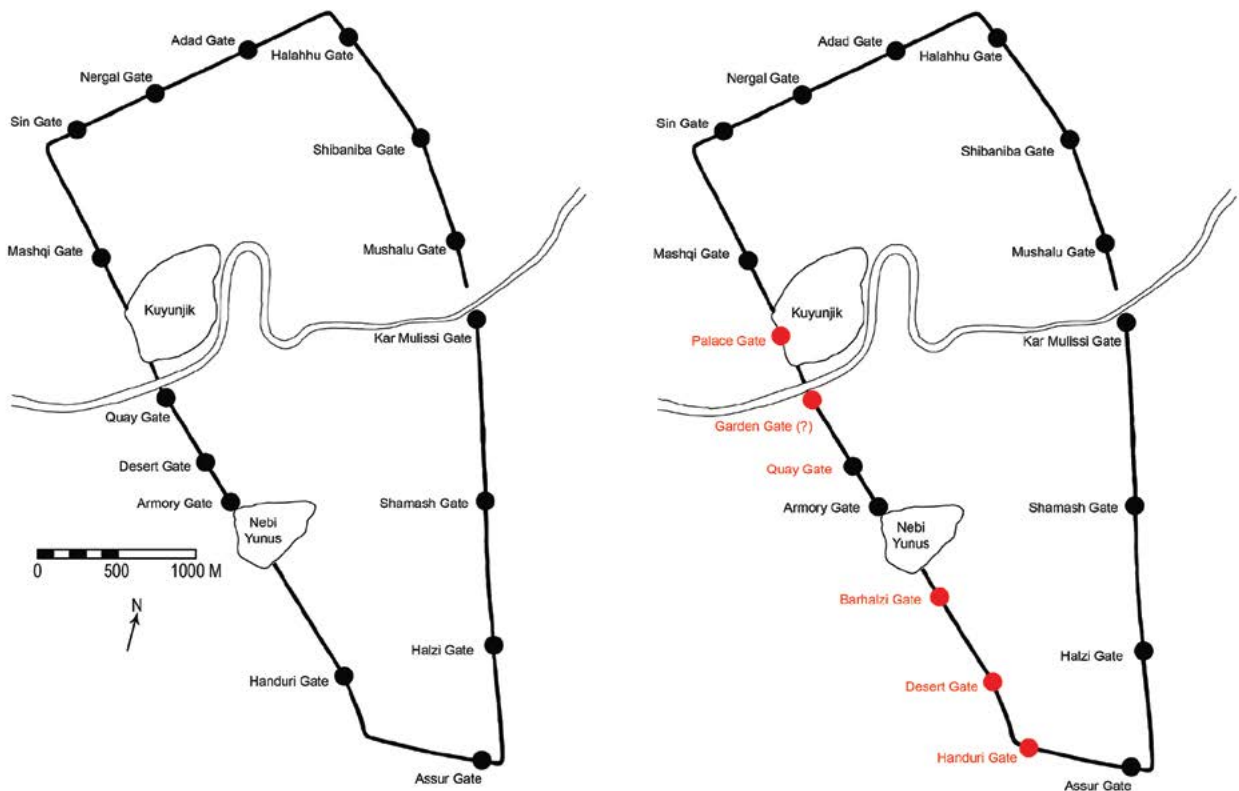
The total volume of the mudbrick walls with these measurements can be calculated at ca. 4,320,000 m<sup>3</sup>. The outer, or curtain, wall was much lower, 4 to 6 m, and projected from the mudbrick wall at varying distances between 4 and 11 m (Reade 2000, 400). It had a stone core and a façade of carefully carved limestone block. Rectangular turrets or towers projected from the wall at roughly 15 m intervals, while crenellations topped the wall, allowing for quick movement and deployment of the army along its entire length. Parts of the curtain wall have been excavated at different places (Madhloum 1969, 54; Pickworth 2005, 302-305). While the features described seem to be consistent throughout the wall, the quality of stone carving and construction indicates variations in workmanship (Reade 2002b, 400).

A surrounding moat lay about 80 m away from the curtain wall. Several suggestions have been made regarding whether the moat was dry or filled, or

which parts of the wall actually had a moat in front of them. Jones (1853, 318-323 in Reade 2002b, 400) suggests the existence of a canal system that would feed the northeastern part of the moat. However, this section is regarded as dry by Stronach (1994, 101), especially in the north because of the steep slope of the ground.

Moving to the southeastern part of the moat, the satellite image is not clear exactly below the Khosr river, and I hesitate to conclude on the existence of a moat there. The moat feature seems to continue, but the coloring of the soil is different, possibly suggesting that the southern part of the eastern moat would have been dry. The reasoning for leaving part of a moat dry is unclear, especially if there was consideration for an even further line of defense (Stronach 1997, 312, fig. 2). It might be the case that certain parts of the defenses were left unfinished, much like certain parts of the wall were qualitatively poorer.





**Figure 40:** Plan of Nineveh with 15 and 18 gates (drawing by the author).

It is clear that the city wall was designed to impress, which contrasts with the vulnerabilities introduced by the construction of the gates. Yet, the visual effect of a roughly 25 m high wall must have been stunning. This also was probably the intention of the design, suggested by its name: “Wall Whose Brilliance Overwhelms Enemies”.

#### 6.6.2 CITY GATES – FUNCTION AND VULNERABILITIES

The number of gates of Nineveh present an extraordinary case of Assyrian urban design. When discussing Dur-Šarrukēn, the presence of numerous gates in a city was seen as problematic for defensive purposes. Major roads already existed in Nineveh, because of the central role of the city for centuries. The challenge for Sennacherib’s designers was: i) how to embed the new parts of the city in the

existing road system, ii) how to create gates that were functional but also secure, and iii) how to deal with the issue of the river Khosr.

The royal inscriptions of Sennacherib inform us about the existence of first 14, then 15, and eventually 18 gates (697-690 BCE) (Russel 2017, 448). Most of the gates have been located and identified with specific names mentioned in the inscriptions. These are the names I will be working with, although it must be stated that the location and attribution of each gate is not entirely secure. The 1990 review of archaeological works in Iraq mentions 15 city-wall gates: 7 of these are excavated or partially excavated, 4 are of uncertain location, and 4 are completely unknown (Scott and MacGinnis 1990, 63-67; 73, fig. 4; 1997, 312, fig. 2) (Figure 40).

Reade subsequently presented 18 gates and discussed the certainty of their identification and location and offered new propositions for their location/

identification (Figure 40) (2002, 401-403; also 390, fig. 1). That study first discusses the location of the Handuri Gate, which is mentioned in the texts as facing both south and west. The gate has not been identified archaeologically. In the plans presented by Stronach and Scott and MacGinnis mentioned above, the Handuri Gate is located on the western section of the corner. In Reade's figure, this location is occupied by the Desert Gate and the Handuri Gate is located on the southern part of the corner.

The gate identified as the Palace gate (the *Mušlālum* of the Palace, included in Reade's plan as gate 13), could be identified as a passage leading downwards from the South-West Palace and outside of the city. This passage would probably end at a gate, but no remains of one have been identified. Finally, there might have been another gate exactly south of Nebi Yunus, which appears very late in the textual evidence. This gate is associated with a governor named Barhalzi and it was possibly left incomplete (Reade 2002b, 403). These propositions are also suggested in the recent publication by Petit and Morandi Bonacossi (2017, 126, figure 23.1).

Regardless of the exact position and identification of the gates, their number is simply unprecedented. The names associated with the gates sometimes reveal part of their function (for example the Quay gate) or importance (for example the Nergal gate). Unfortunately, the lack of archaeological data does not allow for a direct connection between the size, location, and role/importance of each gate. From the few gates that have been excavated it is evident that there is no single design, and that gates could include: a projection from the city wall, lateral chambers, multiple courtyards, defensive towers, multiple arched entrances, and different degrees of sculptural decoration.

The excavations and restorations conducted at the Nergal Gate (Layard 1853; Madhloum 1967), and Adad Gate (Madhloum 1967; 1968), as well as the excavations at the Shamash (Madhloum 1967; 1968; 1969) and Halzi Gates (Stronach 1992; Pickworth 2005) demonstrate that they could be monumental in size, reaching perhaps higher than over 25 m (i.e. higher than the mudbrick wall), and with width of more than 7 m. Unfortunately, the abrupt ending of the excavations at the Halzi Gate and the destruction of the reconstructed gates (Nergal, Adad, Mashqi) by ISIS have left us with no available plans for the gates and an immediate need for conservation works.

Embedding the new parts of the city into the existing road networks seems to have been an easily solvable problem. The gates were equally spread between the northern and southern parts of the city (7/8 in the north, 9/10 in the south) and were connected to major roads. The most prominent gates were probably located in the northern and eastern "open" parts of the city, while the gates on the bank of the Tigris were probably less monumental in size. In addition to the western Mashqi Gate, the northern gates were closer to the main citadel and were associated in textual sources with rituals and processions, and thus probably were the more elaborate gates.

In the south, the Halzi Gate and the Shamash gate lie more than a kilometer apart from each other but can be considered as main entrances to the city. Both looked towards the east, had broad facades (70 and 66 m wide respectively) protruding from the wall, and incorporated 8 and 6 turrets respectively (Pickworth 2005, 302). Access to Nebi Yunus was through the "Armory" Gate, just to the north. However, the citadel had another main gate from within the city (Scott and MacGinnis 1990, 64-66). Given that gates are usually the most vulnerable parts of a wall, in the case of Nineveh, it seems like there was no serious concern with defense: it is certainly a challenge to defend gate openings that are up to 7 m wide. This is clear from the archaeological evidence of the Halzi Gate (Pickworth 2005), which show that the gate was narrowed from its original width down to 2 m when the city was under siege. However impressive and functional the wall must have been, the large number of gates and the indifference of the kings after Sennacherib to enhance the defenses of the city, reinforce weathered gates, or simply finish the incomplete ones shows that Assyrian elites did not expect to be besieged. I suggest that the wall of the Nineveh acted primarily as a symbol for the invulnerability of the empire, and that its defensive function was secondary.<sup>33</sup>

### 6.6.3 THE LOWER CITY

Little is known about the lower city of Nineveh. In previous sections I discussed the Lower Town Mound in the northwestern part of the city, since it probably comprised the core part of Nineveh.

<sup>33</sup> For the multiple roles of walls, including walls as symbols of sovereignty and dominance, see Tracy 2000a; 2000b, 4.

One survey and deep trenches in the north of the city have revealed limited yet crucial information (Lumsden 1991; 2004; Stronach and Lumsden 1992, 227-229). The southern part of the city has seen only limited excavations and only a few buildings and monuments are known. Modern urbanization has resulted in a significant loss of information. Considering the long history of the city, however, there is no question that at least some parts of the city were dedicated residential areas.

An area which can be described as having ‘elite residences’ has been found around the inner part of the Mashqi Gate, directly to the north of Kuyunjik. This part of the city was probably quite spacious, consisting mostly of large courtyard buildings surrounded by broad roads (Stronach and Lumsden 1992, 228; Stronach 1997, 314, fig. 3a). A densely populated “artisan’s quarter” was identified in the northwest of the city, near the Sin Gate (Lumsden 1991, 3). It is the only area so far that has produced a significant amount of kiln slags for pottery production (Stronach 1994, 102). The type of production carried out in that space is not clear, but it was probably a more “industrialized” part of the city (Figure 36).

From the Nergal Gate runs a wide and straight road, which has been connected to the Royal Road mentioned in the texts; it leads directly to the citadel (Stronach 1994, 101). Several worn and flat stone paving blocks were found *in situ* or ploughed out of the ground during the survey of the area (Lumsden 1991, 3).

One of the most interesting aspects of the northern part of the city is the northern part of the eastern mound (Figure 36). This area probably contained only a limited degree of residential buildings, and for the most part it seems like it was an empty space. This eastern mound approaches Kuyunjik in height, and because of its open space it would have provided a view of the entire northern part of the city, including the main gates, the main citadel and the river Khosr. On the basis of the very limited residential spaces known elsewhere at Nineveh Lumsden suggested that the area mostly contained gardens and other open spaces (Lumsden 2000). This elevated location created a very different perspective for the broader population, since in other Assyrian capitals, the elevated corner spaces were citadels. It has been argued that it was a deliberate choice to include this mound within the city wall, since it made the

perception of the city “*legible, understandable and clear*” (Lumsden 2004, 192).

While this is indeed a possibility, there are some other factors that might have affected this viewing experience, namely the limited knowledge of the buildings located on the terrace. Lumsden, however, recognized the weak points of his arguments and the fact that his proposal is heavily based on phenomenology (2004, 187). If the situation in the north of the city is mirrored in the south, this suggests Nineveh had several open or empty spaces in between some tightly packed neighborhoods. This is very similar to what Ur has suggested for Kalḫu (see section 4.5.2).

## 6.8 WHAT – CITADELS

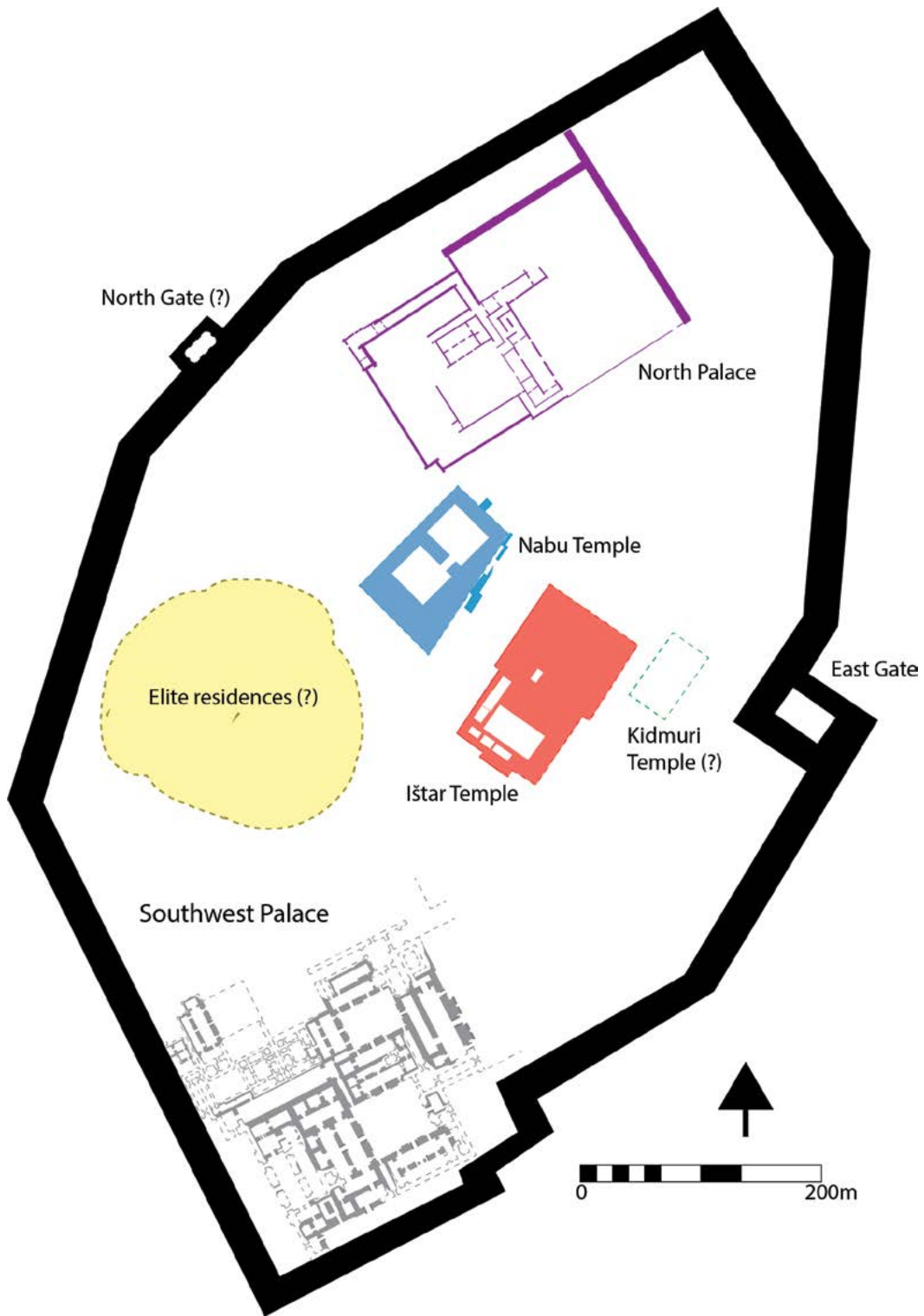
Nineveh included two citadel mounds, Kuyunjik, with the main palace, and Nebi Yunus, interpreted as the military palace. Those mounds both were located on the western side of the city, overlooking both the city to the east and the Tigris to the west. Kuyunjik occupied part of the northern section and was used as the main citadel for centuries, and Nebi Yunus was on the southern side of the city.

### 6.8.1 MAIN CITADEL

Kuyunjik underwent significant changes during the elevation of Nineveh to a capital city. The royal inscriptions of Sennacherib provide a vivid description of parts of the spatial organization of the mound before its restructuring:

*The former palace, which was 360 cubits long opposite the zamû-wall of the ziggurat, 80 cubits wide opposite the tower of the temple of the goddess Ištar, 134 cubits wide opposite the tower of the Bīt-Kidmuri, (and) 95 cubits wide (on the other side); (45) which earlier kings, my ancestors, had had constructed for their lordly dwelling, but whose construction they had carried out inexpertly (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 003, 44-46)*

*Afterwards, I decided to increase the height of the terrace, then I added 20 courses of brick to the former (terrace) and (thus) I raised (it) to a (total) height of 180 courses of brick. (55) I made the area larger than before, added (it) to the former dimensions of the palace, and (thus) enlarged its structure. (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 003, 54-55)*



**Figure 41:** Sketch of Kuyunjik (after Petit and Morandi Bonacossi 2017, produced by the author).

The Kuyunjik terrace was greatly expanded during the reconstruction of Nineveh, as is apparent from the textual evidence. The rationale for this was to accommodate the much larger palace designed by the planners of the city. Sennacherib's palace (S.W. Palace) was located on the southern corner of the mound, and it overlooked the river Khosr. However, the mound itself was much more spacious, a ramp led to it from the city, and there was no need to internally level this area. This is in contrast to Dur-Šarrukēn, where the confined space did not allow for any further constructions or open spaces around the residential buildings; this positioned the palace raised above every other building within the citadel. The citadel incorporated older and newly built temple structures, but there is archaeological evidence only for a few of these (Figure 41). The most prominent temple, and the one which has been known for the longest time, is the Ištar Temple.<sup>34</sup> The historical importance of the cult of Ištar has already been briefly discussed, and it is clear that the plans of Sennacherib for restructuring the mound included works on this temple.

The Ištar Temple is located at a very central place in the mound and is directly associated with the ziggurat, which was probably located southwest of temple. The archaeological levels associated with the reigns of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, show only minor restoration works. Textual and archaeological evidence do not reveal significant changes compared to the previous periods (Reade 2005, 380). The level associated with the reign of Assurbanipal, shows the most significant amount of restoration, on the basis of textual evidence and finds bearing the name of the king (Thompson and Hutchinson 1929a; Thompson and Hamilton 1932; Strommenger 1970; Reade 2005, 381). Those works include the decoration of the temple with gold and silver, work on the outer doors of the Ziggurat, and the addition of glazed bricks decorated with military achievements at the *bit akitu*. This is an unidentified building associated with the Ištar Temple, possibly located between the Nabu and Ištar temples.

The Nabu Temple is the only other archaeologically attested temple on the citadel, as the existence of the Kidmuri Temple is conjectural (Thompson and Hutchinson 1929b). The available data for the Nabu Temple shows a roughly oblong courtyard (ca. 26 x

35 m) with a paved doorway on the northeastern side. The excavated area is too small, and the remains too poorly preserved to reconstruct this temple in greater detail. The textual evidence provides a similar pattern as with the Ištar Temple, where some small restoration projects took place under Sennacherib's reign, but the most significant restoration happened under Assurbanipal (Reade 2002b, 410).

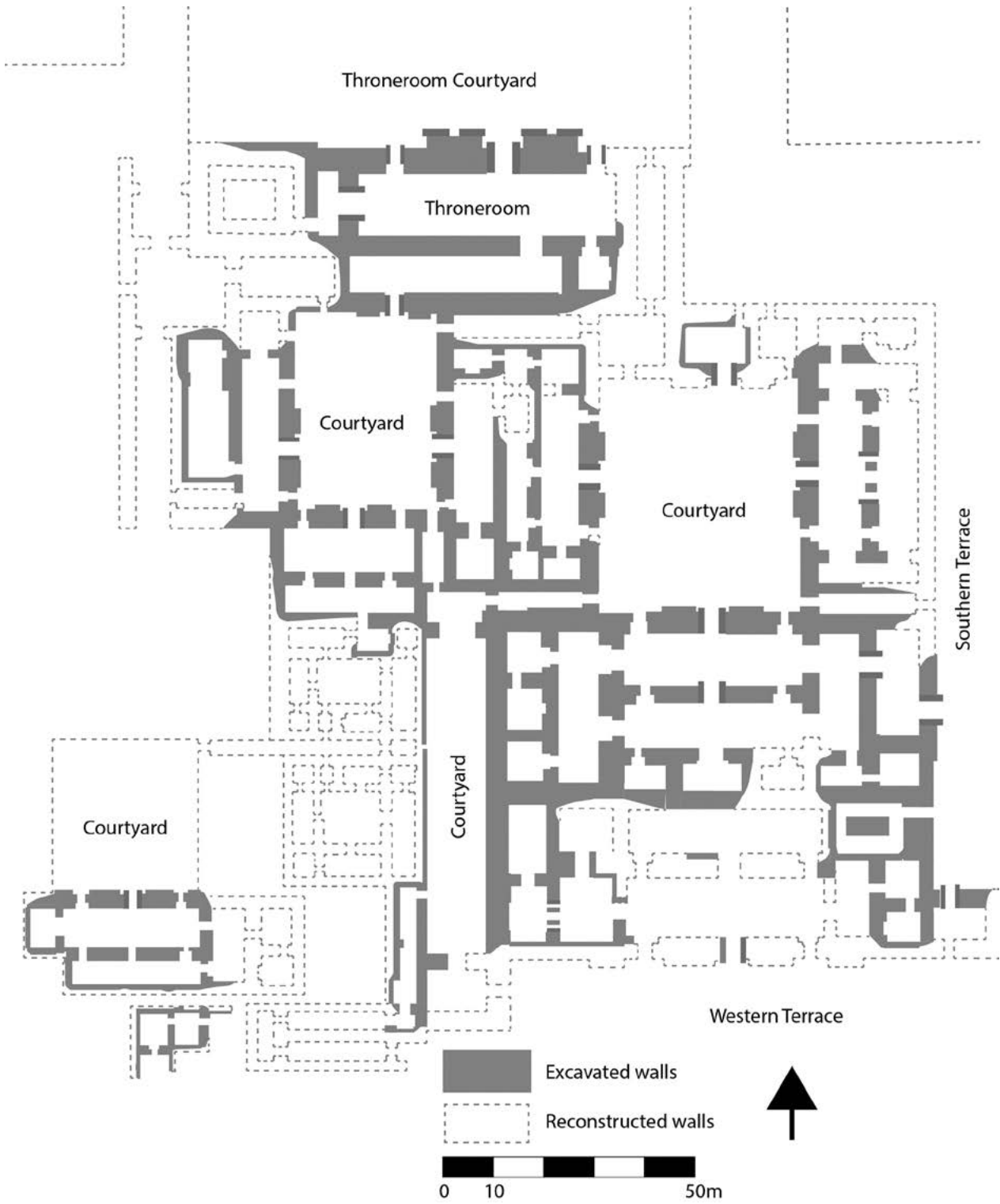
The small-scale of the restoration works to temples during Nineveh's initial creation as a capital city shows that they were not the primary concern. More focus was paid to the city wall, urban planning, and the construction of the main palaces on the two mounds. Reade has even suggested that Sennacherib had a "*disdainful attitude to religion as a mere political tool*" (2005, 380), because foundation documents of the temples were generally unfocused, i.e. referring more to general renovation projects rather than the temples themselves. I believe there is not enough data to support this idea. The temples at Nineveh were continuously maintained throughout the history of the Assyrian empire (see section 2.1.2). It is possible that much more work was needed for the walls and palaces of the city, and that there was no need to spend resources on buildings that were in a relatively good architectural state.

While no residential houses have been excavated on the citadel of Kuyunjik, their existence is known through textual evidence. A text dating to 614 BCE mentions four houses near the Kura Temple (Reade 2002b, 418). It can be assumed that during the transformation of the city into a capital, the space of the citadel was expropriated in order to construct the new palatial buildings. However, there was plenty of space in the western part of the mound to accommodate several private residences. The same goes for the empty space on the east side, above the east gate. In that regard, the citadel again resembles the dedicated space for several private residences at Kalḫu, than the minimal number of residential buildings at Dur-Šarrukēn

The construction of the main palace was a much more thorough and monumental project, because of the complete reconstruction of the main palace (Figure 42). A recent study has thoroughly re-evaluated the archaeological evidence of the S.W. Palace, or "Palace Without Rival", of Sennacherib (Russell 1991; 1999, 124-143; Reade 2002b, 411-416; Kertai 2015, 120-147). It is located in the southwestern part of Kuyunjik, possibly on top of the previous palace, and it was one of the first buildings constructed at the

<sup>34</sup> For a comprehensive history of the excavations and the various phases of the temple, see Reade 2005.





**Figure 42:** The "Palace Without Rival" (after Kertai 2015, produced by the author).

new capital. For the construction of Sennacherib's palace, the previous building was completely demolished. Perhaps Sennacherib's palace followed a similar orientation to its ancestor. On the basis of textual evidence, the palace's construction can be separated into four phases from 703 to 691 BCE, when the palace was most likely completed (Reade 2002, 411-412).

The palace itself was the largest the empire had seen, measuring some 503 by 242 m, and containing more than 80 rooms. Moving away from the more rigid construction of Sargon's palace, organized in a system of quadrants, the S.W. palace was more linear, organized in interlocking zones radiating from the throneroom courtyard (Kertai 2015, 122). Furthermore, in contrast to its predecessor, the S.W. palace incorporated more internal courtyards, and allowed for the creation of more closely connected by clearly separated zones. Another significant difference is the absence of the characteristic Double-Sided Reception Suite at the far end of the palace, which was present in both main and secondary citadel palaces of Dur-Šarrukēn. To accommodate for a large open space, it is possible that the protruding terrace of Sargon's palace was replaced by the open southern terrace at the S.W. palace (Kertai 2015, 141).

Besides the architectural and organizational differences between Sargon's and Sennacherib's palaces, significant differentiation is also observed in their decorative themes. While Sargon's decorative program focused on military themes in specific rooms together with a wider range of themes, military images almost exclusively decorate the "Palace Without Rival" (Russell 1991, 152-174). In addition, Sennacherib's palace reliefs have several innovative elements both in terms of subject matter (e.g. new apotropaic motifs and figures) as well as composition (e.g., the omission of hunting scenes) (Russell 1991, 179-187). The military reliefs, though innovative in terms of composition (Russell 1991, 191-222), must have been quite hard to decipher due to their complexity and the lack of textual references. The palace remained largely unchanged until the fall of Nineveh, when it was burned down. Even though some of the wall reliefs were changed, most of the following kings left Sennacherib's decorations intact (Kertai 2015, 146). Most of the later changes happened during the reign of Assurbanipal, who also added his famous library that was located partly in the S.W. Palace and partly in the new North Palace (Fincke 2017). It also seems that despite the

construction of a new residential palace for the king, the S.W. Palace did not lose its administrative status. Assurbanipal's reign was one of increased building projects. Besides the additions and repairs to the S.W. Palace, he initiated the construction of a new residential palace on the main citadel, the North Palace. The reasons for the building of a new palace remain unclear. According to textual evidence, the king claims to have reconstructed an older building located there, namely the *bit ridūti* (Reade 2002b, 416-417). The North Palace is only partially excavated, and although its complete dimensions are unknown, it was definitely smaller than the S.W. Palace. The most well documented area of the palace is its throneroom suite, which still follows the Late Assyrian plan of a long rectangular room with gates (Kertai 2015, 174).

The role and purpose of this new palace is unclear. Hunting scenes dominate the sculpted reliefs in the corridors, however, the iconographic evidence does not allow for much interpretation of their purpose. The fact that the palace begun late in the king's reign (646 BCE) and was completed within a short time period (643 BCE possibly) has led some scholars to interpret its construction as a triumphant project for the victories over Babylon and Susa (Reade 2002b, 417). In addition, during Assurbanipal's reign, considerable work took place on the wall reliefs and inscriptions of the S.W. Palace indicating that there was interest in preserving its role as a main palace (Russell 1999, 154-209).

The main citadel mound significantly differed from the one in Dur-Šarrukēn. The citadel included more temples, had open spaces allowing for future reconfigurations, and it could accommodate a much larger palace. While Sennacherib and his court respected the religious and historical importance of Nineveh, the project nonetheless involved heavily remodeling of the city.

#### 6.8.2 NEBI YUNUS

The mound of Nebi Yunus is located in the south of the city, 1 km from Kuyunjik (Figure 36). Archaeological work on the tell has been very limited (Scott and MacGinnis 1990, 64-67, fig. 1; 71), and the palace located here is only known from textual evidence. According to Sennacherib's inscriptions a palace (*É.GAL ku-tal-li*) already existed at that location for "the proper running of the military camp, the care of horses, (and) the overseeing of everything" (RINAP

3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 022, vi 31-34). The description of this palace is very short and does not designate any specific king as its creator.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed whether Nebi Yunus was part of the city in earlier times. It seems that Nebi Yunus was outside of Nineveh before its transformation into a capital. However, that does not mean that an earlier palace could not have existed there. As mentioned, there was probably a building dedicated to the administration of the military in Nineveh. It is possible that Sennacherib's inscriptions do not give an adequate description of the role of the previous building. This older building could have acted as the central building around which the Assyrian military gathered in order to start a new campaign.

It is worth noting that the in Nebi Yunus inscription (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 034), which gives a longer description of the previous *bit/ekal kutali*, the scribe mentions that a terrace did not exist for the older building and that its outer courtyard was too small to fit the large number of horses. It also mentions that the site of the previous palace was abandoned. It is possible therefore, that the previous *bit kutali* of Nineveh existed at another location altogether.

Whatever the case, Sennacherib's planners decided to expand the mound significantly to accommodate a palace of a similar size to the other secondary citadels in Kalḫu and Dur-Šarrukēn. Construction at Nebi Yunus started after the main palace was completed and decorated (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 22, vi 30). The main building/palace of the secondary citadel is described as having two distinct sections, one that was a replica of a Hittite palace and built of stone and timber, and another one that was characteristically Assyrian (Reade 2002b, 419). The king says his royal residence was in the latter. According to Turner, a close reading of the text actually indicates two different suites of one building rather than two different palaces (Turner 1970, 73). The description of the decoration in the residential quarters gives the impression of a palace that was equally monumental to the S.W. Palace.

We also read about at least two courtyards: an outer courtyard with similar functions to the one in the old palace, and another courtyard below the Hittite-style wing. Finally, the text mentions the large quantities of treasures stored in the military palace/*ekal māšarti*, although it is unclear if this refers the entire building or a specific section/wing. It should

be noted that among all the available Sennacherib inscriptions (RINAP 3 Online Corpus), the Nebi Yunus inscription is the only one that refers to the palatial complex as *ekal māšarti*, which indeed might beg the question on whether it describes the entire complex. The only other mentions of the *ekal māšarti* refer to the accompanying gate mentioned above.

## 6.9 WHAT – WATERS OF NINEVEH

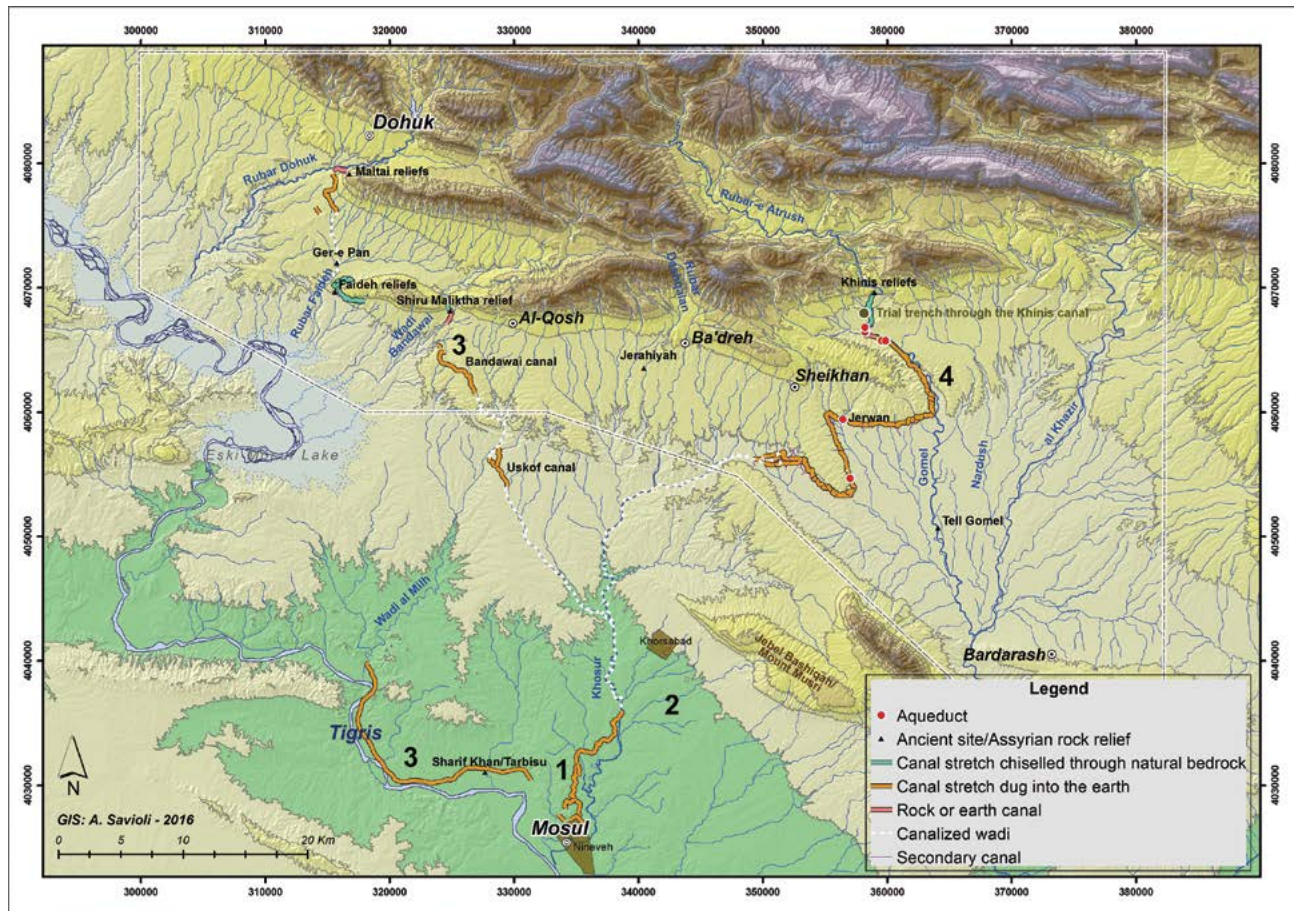
The last, but certainly not least, aspect of Nineveh's creation I would like to discuss is its water systems. In contrast to Dur-Šarrukēn, the elevation of Nineveh into a capital included heavy remodeling of the surrounding hinterland and heavy intensification of its agricultural production. This resulted in a long and complex system of irrigation canals of unprecedented size, as well as many and impressive gardens within the new capital (Morandi Bonacossi 2018).

The creation of these canal systems is documented in several sources, including royal inscriptions and commemorative reliefs located along these canals (Oates 1968, 49-52; Reade 1978, 61-72 and 157-170; Bagg 2000b, 169-224). The combined distance covered by those canals has been estimated between 150 to 240 km; they were constructed over the span of fifteen years, from 702 to 688 BCE (Bagg 2000a, 316; Morandi Bonacossi 2018a).

Recent archaeological research has revealed significant information about this canal system. Ur's investigation using satellite imagery has provided significant data for the identification of canals around the city, revealing the existence of extensive canal systems and the effective and intensive agricultural planning implemented for the new capital (Ur 2005).

More recently, the Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project (LONAP), conducted by Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, yielded significant results through their identification of settlements and major and minor canal systems in Nineveh's surrounding landscape (Morandi Bonacossi 2016; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b; Morandi Bonacossi and Iamoni 2015).

The results of the LONAP survey demonstrated a widespread occupation of small sites in the region to the north of Nineveh, similar to that observed in the Jazira region (Wilkinson *et al.* 2005). The Neo Assyrian period shows a large spike in regional



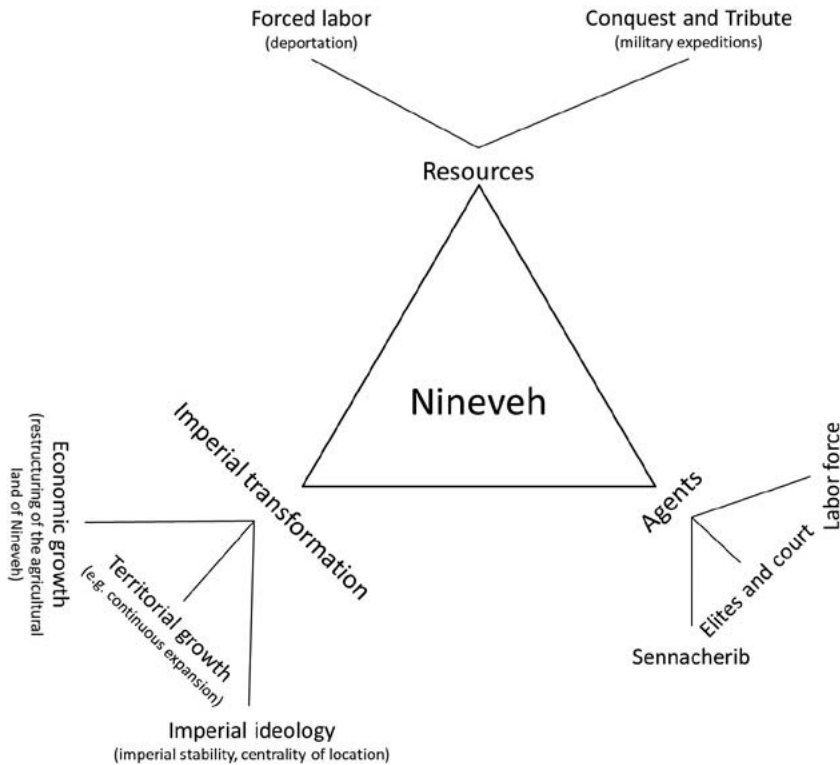
**Figure 43:** The large canals leading to Nineveh (Land of Nineveh Archaeological Project, University of Udine, published with permission).

occupation with roughly 271 Neo-Assyrian sites and a total settled area of 610 ha (Morandi Bonacossi 2018b, Fig. 8). The most significant aspect of this peak is that, instead of replacing an existing settlement system, it represents an intensification of existing agriculture and a large expansion of irrigation systems during the first millennium. The occupation of the area shows a scattered distribution of small agricultural sites averaging at about 2.25 ha (Wilkinson *et al.* 2005; Morandi Bonacossi 2016, 145; Morandi Bonacossi 2018b, 88).

Sennacherib's irrigation program involved the large-scale restructuring of the landscape and was executed in four stages, together with the construction of the new capital. The first stage saw work at the Kisiri canal, which diverted water from the Khosr river ca. 15-16 km north of Nineveh

(phases 1 and 2 in Reade 2002b, 404-405; stage 1 in Morandi Bonacossi 2017a). During the second stage, streams from Mount Musri were directed to the Khosr river. It is possible that this project already started during the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn but remained unfinished (Reade 2002b, 407).

The Bavian inscription (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 223) informs us about the third stage of the program, also known as the Northern System (Figure 43). Originally it was thought that five different canals stage (Maltai, Faideh, Bandawai, Tarbisu, and Uskof) comprised this (Oates 1968; Reade 1978). Morandi Bonacossi however, showed that it is possible to reconstruct this phase differently, or even that such stage never existed (2017b; 2018b, 94-98). Based on the findings of the LONAP survey and reinterpretation of the



**Figure 44:** Model for the creation of Nineveh, produced by the author.

Maltai, Faideh and Shiru Maliktha reliefs, these three canals of the assumed Northern System could have been constructed earlier, during the reign of Sargon. This is particularly interesting as Sargon's royal inscriptions do not mention anything about irrigation works. While evidence remains inconclusive, it could be suggested that a plan to restructure the landscape was in place already for Dur-Šarrukēn, and that it was modified to redirect the waters towards Nineveh. The Bandawai and Uskof canals can be securely dated to the reign of Sennacherib.

Finally, the Khinis System, also known as "Sennacherib's Canal", brought water from the Gomel river into a tributary of the Khosr river. This massive restructuring of the land was also followed by its systematic imperial appropriation through the construction of a series of commemorative monuments (Ornan 2007; Winter 2010; Harmanşah 2013, 93-99). While commemorative or construction monuments can be found in other canal systems,

the case of the Khinis System is unprecedented. As Morandi Bonacossi puts it, we have a "*grandiose, extremely sophisticated and self-congratulatory programme*" (2018a, 68).

The imperial narrative presented in these commemorative monuments and the royal inscriptions in relation to the large-scale irrigation programs is indeed heavily focused on the king, even more so than the construction of the city. Its effects, however, were empire-wide. The realization of such a project required the work and investment of several imperial and local officials, the management of deportees, and the exploitation of resources (Morandi Bonacossi, 2018a). The new, massive irrigation system did not only provide sustainable amounts of food sources for the new capital (Morandi Bonacossi 2018b, 107), but also shaped the imperial landscape as a whole, consolidating the impact of the relocation of the capital.



## 6.10 WHAT – CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that assessing Nineveh as an “expected outcome” of capital creation in Assyria is misleading. There is no evidence to suggest that Nineveh was ever considered as a previous candidate for the capital. In addition, the significant changes in Nineveh show that the city itself required extensive transformation to become capital of Assyria. Furthermore, the argument that Sennacherib took the decision to relocate the capital because of Sargon’s unfortunate death seems to be inadequate. The *damnatio memoriae* of Sargon was a response only to his death in battle, and not to his capital (Liverani 2017, 176). Assyria had already invested heavily in the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn and repeating such a project required sound political objectives which the Assyrian officials would be ready to accept.

This reasoning, however, is not reflected in the royal or building inscriptions, which proclaim the same regal-centric narrative expected from any large-scale Assyrian project which involved the king and his court. In addition, the same inscriptions contain no convincing argument for the rationale behind choosing Nineveh as the new capital.

Giving an answer as to why Nineveh was turned into a capital is not possible based on current evidence. It is possible to speculate political motives, and assess the advantages of Nineveh over Dur-Šarrukēn, but we cannot have a conclusive argument as to why Nineveh was chosen.

Nevertheless, I argue that we should assess Nineveh within the historical context of growth and expansion that also led to the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn. In that regard, we should consider the two capitals as product of the same historical processes. While Nineveh was not a new foundation, the unclear reasons behind its elevation to a capital as well as its extensive transformation demonstrate that this was not simply an inevitable outcome. Rather, this was a well-consolidated and well-executed plan, which aimed to affect the entire imperial system and not only to bolster the image of Sennacherib. As such, Nineveh also fits the model used in this study, which combines resources, agents, and imperial transformation (Figure 44).