



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Politopoulos, A.

Citation

Politopoulos, A. (2020, November 26). *Creating capitals: The rationale, construction, and function of the imperial capitals of Assyria*. *Archaeological Studies Leiden University*. Leiden University Press (LUP), Leiden. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138401>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138401>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/138401> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Politopoulos, A.

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

Issue Date: 2020-11-26

Chapter 7: Creating Capitals – Comparative Analysis and Conclusions

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters I analyzed the creation of Assyrian capitals using historical, textual, and archaeological datasets. Each case study presented its own difficulties and particularities, which require a contextual investigation. A comparative study is needed, however, in order to understand and explain the wider phenomenon of capital creation. The comparison will correspond to the three main questions put forward at the beginning of this study: the why, how, and what of capital creation.

These three questions allow me to explore: the past of each capital, the historical conditions that led to capital creation, the actual construction of a capital, and the function and use of each capital. Some aspects are related to more than one of these questions and repetition might, therefore, occur. For example, the geographical location of a city, can be related to the why, e.g. using a more favorable location as an imperial center, to the construction process, e.g. access to key building resources, but might also influence the function of the city.

7.2 WHY – THE REASONS BEHIND CAPITAL CREATION IN ASSYRIA

7.2.1 EXPLORING ASPECTS OF CAPITAL CREATION

Assyrian capital creation always happens in periods of protracted transformation and expansion. This can be observed if we put the relative size of the Assyrian empire in a graph (Figure 45). Through investigating royal inscriptions (Grayson 1987; 1991; 1992) it is possible to identify and estimate periods of expansion and recession. This graph is informed by the comparative study of maps, textual evidence, and historical studies on Assyria

(Taagepera 1978; Liverani 1988; 2017; Roaf 1990). Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta was constructed after roughly a century of major expansions that occurred during the reigns of three kings: Adad-nirari I (ca. 1295-1264 BCE), Shalmaneser I (ca. 1263-1234 BCE), and Tukultī-Ninurta I (ca. 1233-1197 BCE). This was followed by the decline of the Middle Assyrian empire during the so-called dark ages, with a brief territorial expansion during the rule of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BCE) acting as a brief exception. Kalḫu, similarly, was constructed after roughly 50 years of *reconquista* with four consecutive kings carrying out the major territorial expansion of Assyria (Aššur-dan II, 934-912 BCE; Adad-nirari II, 911-891 BCE; Tukultī-Ninurta II, 890-884 BCE; and Aššurnasirpal II, 883-859 BCE). The reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE) saw even more building projects in the city, which can be considered a continuation of the original plan. The creation of Kalḫu was followed by another period of decline in the size of the empire and internal conflicts.

Finally, Dur-Šarrukēn and Nineveh were both constructed after the Assyrian empire entered another phase of territorial expansion (Tiglath-Pileser III, 744-727 BCE; Shalmaneser V, 782-773 BCE; and Sargon II, 721-705 BCE). During the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, extensive transformations in the administrative system took place, with a special focus on the structure of the provinces (see section 5.2 and 5.3). The period following the elevation of Nineveh to a capital was one of large growth (due to the incorporation of Egypt), but soon after the Assyrian empire witnessed a final phase of decline until its fall in 612 BCE. As can be seen from the long history of imperial expansions and contractions in Assyria, capitals were always constructed after periods of sustained growth that spanned several kings. I suggest that this trend of constructing capitals after periods of continuous and, more importantly, steady and consolidated, growth is not

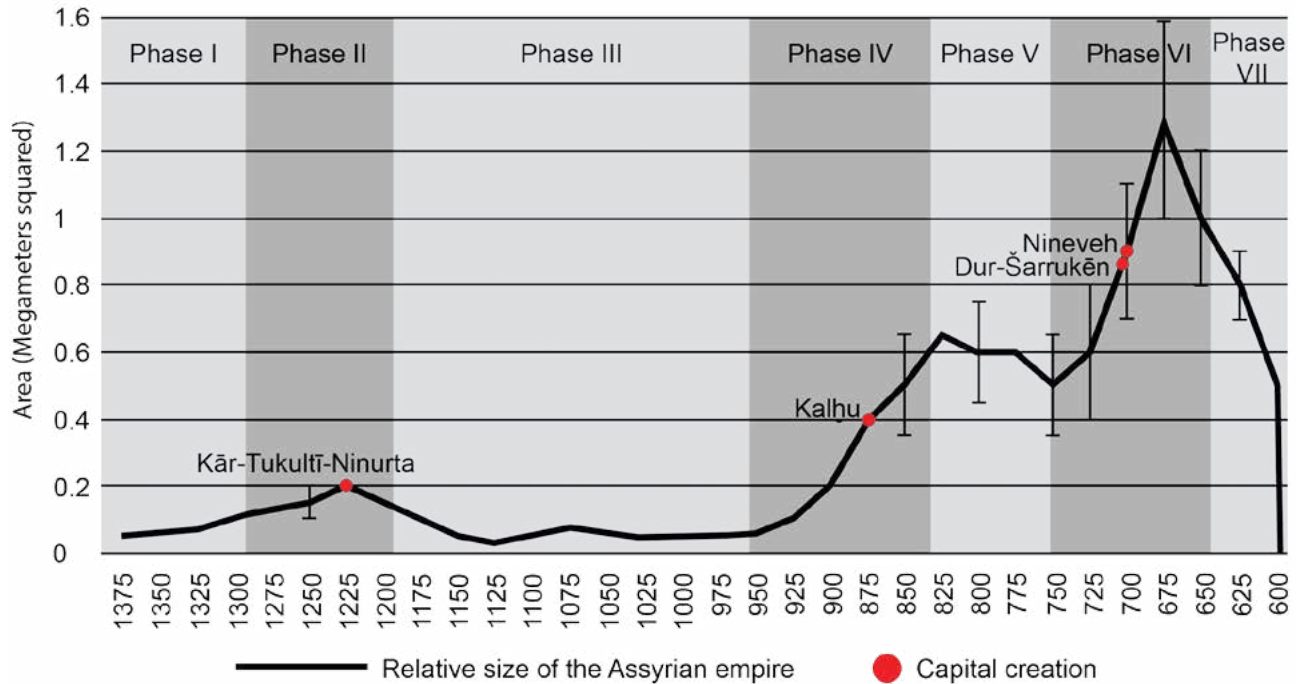


Figure 45: Estimated size of the Assyrian Empire from 1375 to 615 BCE with indications of every instance of capital creation (vertical axis in Mm²). Data are based on Taagepera 1978; Liverani 1988; 2001; 2017; Roaf 1990; Frahm 2017a; 2017b; 2017c with adjustments and added error margins, produced by the author. For the phases see Table 2 section 2.1.1.

coincidental. From investigating each individual case separately, but also by comparing them, there is a clear correlation between significant changes in the nature of the empire (i.e. from state to empire, or a new level of territorial growth) and capital creation. The question that follows then is: why facilitate such changes with a new capital? What does a new capital have to offer to be considered necessary?

7.2.2 GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

One of the first things that comes to mind when relocating a capital is whether the new location is more beneficial in terms of its geographical location than the previous one. In addition, is the location of the new capital related to the shift of the territorial center of the empire?

It is interesting to note here that no Assyrian king ever stated a reason for abandoning the previous capital. The narrative presented in royal inscriptions

for the building of new capitals always focused on the potential, of the new location for the capital. It is often mentioned that the new location was laying in ruins, had gone to waste, or had unrealized potential. There is no clear statement of any inadequacies of the previous location or positive advantages of the new location. Therefore, any discussion regarding the advantages of one location over another should be done with caution in order to avoid reasons based on our current, *post hoc*, knowledge.

In terms of the distance between them, the Assyrian capitals never ‘travelled’ very far (Table 5). The most significant change happened in the Neo Assyrian period and consisted of the move from Aššur to Kalhu. In fact, all of the capitals were located within the general region of the so-called Land of Aššur (Figure 4; Postgate 1992), the region perceived by the Assyrians as their core area. The southern capitals (Aššur and Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta) are located outside the zone of rainfed agricultural, while the northern

Capital city	Approximate size	Approximate distance from the previous capital
Aššur	62 ha	-
Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta	240-500 ha	3-4 km N of Aššur
Kalḫu	360 ha	70 km N of Aššur
Dur-Šarrukēn	300 ha	45 km N of Kalḫu
Nineveh	750 ha	18 km S of Dur-Šarrukēn

Table 5: Size of Assyrian capitals and distance between them.

capitals (Kalḫu, Dur-Šarrukēn and Nineveh) are located within. Regardless, extensive irrigation programs were executed for every capital. Most of the newly created capitals were located on the east bank of Tigris; only Aššur was located on the west bank of the Tigris. Dur-Šarrukēn was located close, if not next to, the east bank of river Khosr, a tributary of the Tigris.

Even if the capitals moved, especially in the Neo Assyrian period, it is not possible to consider the relocation of the capital as a change away from imperial heartland. Looking closer, it is possible to argue for a shifting focus within, however, the confines of the Assyrian core from the Middle to the Neo Assyrian period.

In the case of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, there is no real distancing from the previous capital. The new city was constructed so close to Aššur that it has been argued that it could simply be seen as an extension (Gilibert 2008). In chapter 3 I argued that despite this proximity, Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta was an instance of capital creation. The large number of new administrative buildings in Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta clearly indicate the creation of a new administrative center of Assyria.

Moving from Aššur to Kalḫu it is possible to argue that a shift of territorial focus from the south to the north was one of the driving factors for the choice of the new capital. At this time, the northern part of the land of Aššur had developed into the most important

region of the empire. Most military expeditions already started from the north, and more specifically, from Nineveh. Kalḫu was also closer to areas important for the acquisition of resources, as well as in a more strategic location for military expeditions to the west (Parker 2001).

Kalḫu is located on the Tigris, and as such it was well connected with other cities and it could easily be embedded in existing trade networks (Radner 2011). It is also possible to create extensive irrigation systems to exploit and intensify the production of the surrounding landscape (Ur and Reade 2015). These features are, to some degree, shared with every other Assyrian capital. Each capital is located on a river (specifically on the Tigris or Khosr), with extensive surrounding hinterland, at a central location of the empire, and with natural defenses (Table 6). It is not possible to point out any particular location-related advantages of one place over another. Only in the case of Dur-Šarrukēn can it be argued that its location was somewhat *less* favorable (chapter 5). Nevertheless, it still had access to the Tigris through the Khosr river, it could exploit part of the agricultural production of the Nineveh province, and the mountains to the north and east created a natural defense.

Comparing all of the capitals, none of them seem to have had a decisive geographical advantage. This is in contrast to what was discussed in the introduction (1.3), for post-colonial capitals, where the shift of location often signified a shift in the focus of these states: from capitals located close to colonial trade routes to inland locations, more favorable for the administration of the new nation states.

In Assyria the geographical advantages of a new location, or the disadvantages of the old one, did not provide a sufficient reason for moving the capital. The only capital with some clear benefits in terms of its location was Nineveh, because it was already centrally located and connected to major trade routes. Therefore, in exploring why Assyria moved its capital to different locations, the physical location of the new or previous capital was not a main driving factor but only a supplementary one.

7.2.3 HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF LOCATION

Another aspect related to the new location of the capital is whether there was any previous historical or ideological significance at the site. In terms of Assyrian cities, Aššur was, and remained for

Capital city	On the Tigris	Extensive available surrounding hinterland	Natural defenses	Possible citadel mounds
Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta	Yes	Yes	Limited	1
Kalḫu	Yes	Yes	Yes	2
Dur-Šarrukēn	No	Limited	Yes	2
Nineveh	Yes	Yes	Limited	2

Table 6: Geographical characteristics of Assyrian capitals.

the entire life of the empire, the most important historical, cultural and ideological center (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011, 74; Pedde 2012, 853-855; Maul 2017, 337). The identity and ideology of Assyria was tied to its historic capital and no king or capital city ever challenged that fact. Reconstructions and repairs continued to take place for its most important buildings, the coronation of kings took place in the city, and several Neo Assyrian kings were buried there (Miglus 1989; Pedde and Lundström 2008, 28-30; Parker 2011).

In discussing the historical importance and the past of a city/location, it is necessary to clarify and define what can be defined as a ‘new location’ for Assyria. In the introduction I defined capital creation as the process of constructing capital cities at a new location (*ex novo*) or through transforming a pre-existing settlement. As a new location, I define a location where there was no settlement before, or that the settlement was not significant enough to influence the construction and urban design of the new capital.

Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta was constructed at a location where little prior occupation is attested. It is unlikely that there were absolutely no settlements or villages in the area (see also Mühl 2015), based on its proximity to the river and its agricultural potential. The extent of landscape reconfiguration and urban construction was such that it probably erased any traces of previous occupation.

In the case of Kalḫu, both archaeological and textual evidence exist that there was a Middle Assyrian settlement located in the area. However, the existence of this settlement (or settlements) again did not significantly impact on the general plan of the new

capital. The construction of this capital redeveloped the entire landscape to accommodate its needs.

Dur-Šarrukēn is the clearest example of a completely new location, with only a small village mentioned as a pre-existing settlement in the area. The lack of archaeological surveys and test trenches inside the city does not allow for any further assessment on the history of the site.

Nineveh was the only capital whose plan was largely defined by the pre-existing city and the surrounding landscape. The notion, however, that Nineveh was ‘destined’ to become the capital of Assyria is very deterministic and without any real basis (see section 6.1).

Returning to the issue of the historical importance of the location of the new capital, it seems like, with the exception of Nineveh, this was not a concern. On the contrary, the creation of a new capital was always associated with the extensive development or re-development of an area. The narrative of the royal inscriptions always highlights the ‘new’. Even the narrative for Nineveh revolves around Sennacherib’s foresight to understand the unrealized future potential of the city and make it the capital of the empire.

Regarding Nineveh, there is another fact that highlights that historical importance was not of utmost significance. The Temple of Iṣtar at Nineveh was always of central importance for the kings of Assyria, yet its reconstructions were not particularly extensive (Reade 2005, 280). When compared with other restoration works done in previous centuries to the temple (see Russell 2017, 435-446), there is no significant difference between previous works and work during the reign of Sennacherib.

Capital city	Pre-existing settlement	First settlement at the area	Previous use of the area	Extent of transformation of the area
Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta	No	Middle Assyrian	Possibly agriculture	New foundation
Kalḫu	Yes	Early Bronze Age	City or provincial capital	Complete transformation
Dur-Šarrukēn	No	Neo Assyrian	-	New foundation
Nineveh	Yes	Early Bronze Age	Regional center	Extensive transformation

Table 7: Historical aspects of the locations of Assyrian capitals.

The common denominator here is the aspect of the new but, still with an acknowledgement of the past (Table 7). In the absence of other evidence regarding the choice of location for the construction of a new capital, the royal inscriptions are the only written evidence that give us details on the historical significance of the new location. Considering that such texts look for any opportunity to praise a king and his actions, if historical importance was a determining factor, one would expect it to be mentioned. Therefore, the potential of the new capitals to be configured anew seems to have been central.

7.2.4 “DISEMBEDDEDNESS”, THE UNDERMINING OF ELITES, AND CAPITALS AS MONUMENTS

The most common argument for the creation of new capitals is that a king is trying to distance himself from existing elites and power centers of the established capitals and, thus, to create a new center where only the loyal elites can follow. A version of this concept is that of “disembedded capitals”, in which urban sites are founded *de novo*, in order to supplant existing patterns of authority and administration (Joffe 1998, 549; chapter 1.3.1).

Radner, likewise, argued that the creation of Kalḫu was a way for the Assyrian king to undermine the power of the northern cities such as Nineveh and Arbela and create a new mega-center loyal and controlled by the king (Radner 2011, 324). She describes the creation of Kalḫu as an intentional strategy to strengthen the position of the king at the expense of the old urban elites (2016, 44).

However, none of the surrounding centers lost its status or significance. If anything, both Arbela and Nineveh continued to grow during the centuries that followed (see for example Stronach 1994, 97-8; Frahm 2017, 164-70). Radner also suggested that the construction of Kalḫu allowed the king to create new structures of authority and effectively change the power structures of Assyria to develop a more favorable condition for himself. While it is true that the creation of Kalḫu was accompanied with changes in the administration, there are no indications that Aššurnāṣirpal’s claim to the throne was ever contested, especially not to the extent that would force him to create a new center.

On the contrary, there is clear continuity from the rule of the previous kings (Adad-nirari II and Tukultī-Ninurta II) to the reign of Aššurnāṣirpal (see for example Oates and Oates 2001, 15-16; Bagg 2011, 192-194; Fales 2011; Frahm 2017b, 169-170). The creation of Kalḫu seems to consolidate, rather than break away from the changes that were happening in Assyria throughout the first expansion phase of the Neo Assyrian period (934-824 BCE).

One of the major aspects of disembedded capitals as proposed by Joffe is the idea that the created capitals are part of material innovations which aim to undercut competing factions. These include “*sudden shifts in the evidence for political legitimation, such as new iconographic techniques, a new symbolic vocabulary, or the distinctive combination of new and old elements*” (Joffe, 551). This proposed discontinuity is not attested in any of the new capitals of Assyria. Every new capital does see new elements in its palatial architecture (e.g. developments at Dur-Šarrukēn in Kertai 2015, 83-120), the iconography of palatial

buildings (e.g. the iconography of Sennacherib's palace in Russell 1991, 152-187), and the vocabulary of royal inscriptions (e.g. Liverani 2017, 165-178 on the developments of royal inscriptions related to capital creation). Yet, these never go so far as to explicitly focus on undermining previously ruling factions. On the contrary, if one looks at the way these capitals are structured there seems to be a distinct continuity. The changes that occur in the palatial aspects of each capital or on royal inscriptions can mostly be seen as developments within the already existing Assyrian traditions, rather than breaks in the cultural continuity (Nóvak 2004, 184; Liverani 2017, 175-177).

Along the same lines, the creation of new capitals in Assyria is never clearly connected to usurpations or revolts against a king, although these did occur in Assyria (see in particular Radner 2016). Kings or potential kings dealt with such issues in various manners. Examples of such cases are Tiglath-Pileser III and his usurpation (Zawadzki 1994) or Sargon's actions when he ascended to the throne (Grayson 1992a). Competition for the throne or between elites is, in general, not uncommon in regal systems and the Assyrian empire was no exception to this. In relation to capital creation however, it begs the question: was capital creation used as a strategy to gain an edge over the competition between elites in Assyria? If so, what were the benefits of such an act?

As demonstrated in this study, the construction of a new capital requires the mobilization of the entire imperial apparatus and the cooperation of several elites. This also would take place when the Assyrian army was campaigning all over the empire. The realization of such a large-scale project requires a degree of state stability and security, as is clear from the construction texts from Dur-Šarrukēn.

In Assyria, however, there was no instance of capital creation occurring directly after a usurpation. The only case that can be made for such an example is the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn. However, just because the conditions under which Sargon ascended to the throne are unclear, this does not necessarily have to be described as a usurpation (unlike the case of Tiglath-Pileser III). In addition, the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn began after Sargon had established himself securely on the throne.

Therefore, the massive investment in resources and labor required to construct a new capital is in contrast with a scenario of intense competition between elites.

As has been already stated, most of the structural changes in the empire seem to be consolidated by the new capitals rather than enforced by them.

7.2.5 OVERARCHING THEMES IN ASSYRIAN CAPITAL CREATION

I will now discuss an idea that has been expressed several times when dealing with the capitals of Assyria (section 2.1.2): the idea that Assyrian capitals are just another example of architectural activities that took place during a king's reign. An example of this comes from Russell (2017) who, in his evaluation of Assyrian architecture, places capital creation alongside every other standard building activity of Assyrian kings.

At the same time, the creation of capitals has been associated with the exceptional personality of aspiring kings and elite competition. This argument claims that it was standard practice for every king to engage in architectural building activities (through reconstructions, or new palaces/temples), and the most formidable kings did not settle for constructing new buildings but constructed complete cities. This argument diminishes the phenomenon of capital creation by treating capitals as projects of individual agents, rather than a manifestation of imperial-wide phenomena.

By contrast, I argue that creating capitals was an *exceptional* and not a regular event in Assyria. That is not to say that there were no models or standardized factors in the construction of those cities. However, the creation of a new city requires the development of a new urban space, or the complete reworking of an existing urban space, in a way that is meaningful both for the elite buildings of the citadels, and to the urbanism of the lower cities for the broader population. Furthermore, the creation of a capital also requires the development of the surrounding countryside.

As such, the uniqueness of capital creation, in comparison to other building projects, is based on incorporation of a very wide set of elements related to imperial activity: administration (administrative buildings, layout of palaces); ideology (palaces, temples, decoration); religion (choice of temples, location and layout of temples); social organization (development of urban space); military organization (palaces and secondary citadels); and agricultural development (redevelopment of surrounding hinterland).

These developments can be seen in different aspects of capitals. Kertai (2015), for example, assessed the palatial buildings of the Neo Assyrian empire, studying their development both architecturally, but also ideologically. By investigating the transformation of palatial spaces, it was possible for him to identify changes in the administrative system of the empire. The inclusion of temples of various deities in each new capital also allows us to observe the evolution of religious ideology in Assyria. These are some examples of how capitals incorporate and manifest wide developments and changes in Assyria. Assessing the time intervals between capitals, as well as their respective longevity, makes it clear that this act does not occur with any sort of regularity. However, as mentioned earlier, it is possible to identify similarities in the historical conditions during which capitals were created.

7.2.6 WHY THEN? WHY THERE?

Why were capitals created, why at a particular time, and why at a particular location? A framework that allows for such a comparative explanation should incorporate: i) the historical conditions under which a capital was created, ii) the type of resources exploited, and iii) the agents who acted for the creation of a capital. Such a framework was suggested in the introduction of this thesis, and it is through these parameters that I will comparatively investigate the capitals of Assyria below as well.

I specified above that capital creation is often directly linked to historical conditions related to transformative processes of states and empires (section 1.3). When dealing specifically with ancient states, capital creation occurs almost exclusively in imperial states, and is, therefore, connected with transformations in empires. Focusing on Assyria, I have created a model that analyzes each individual case study and then compares the results to identify overarching patterns behind Assyrian capital creation.

7.2.7 HISTORICAL CONDITIONS – FROM STATE TO EMPIRE

During its long history, Assyria became an empire at two distinct points in time: in the Middle Assyrian period, after its independence from the Mitanni Empire; and after the Late Bronze collapse, with the emergence of the Neo Assyrian empire. Both of

these events of imperial transformation include the creation of new capitals: Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta for the Middle Assyrian period; and Kalḫu for the Neo Assyrian period. I argue here that the comparative study of these two events reveals even more about the rationale behind capital creation, especially in relation to Assyria's transformation.

Starting with the investigation of the historical conditions, both capitals were constructed during periods of continuous expansions for Assyria. Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta was built at the peak of the Assyrian expansion during the Middle Assyrian period. It was during the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta I, however, where Assyria reached its maximum extent, from the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad at the Baliḫ river on the west (Akkermans 2006), to Babylon on the southeast (Jakob 2017, 205).

Similarly, Kalḫu is constructed after a period of resurgence in Assyria's power. Following a period of recession starting with the reign of Aššur-dan II (934-912 BCE), Assyria enters another phase of massive territorial growth (Parker 2001, 44). However, it is precisely during the reign of Aššurnāširpal II (883-859 BCE) that this growth spikes significantly and allows for the establishment of the Neo Assyrian empire (as seen in Figure 45; Frahm 2017b, 169).

Both of these processes of territorial growth, which are amplified immediately before and during the instances of capital creation, are accompanied by administrative changes (see e.g. Kühne 2015; Pongratz-Leisten 2015) and the development of an imperial ideology (Postgate 1992; Pongratz-Leisten 2011; Caramelo 2012). For the case of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, administrative changes are signified by broader regional transformations in conquered territories, such as the creation of new peripheral centers (Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2009; 2015), changes in regional systems and intensification of agricultural production (Wiggerman 2000; Parker 2001; 2003; Kühne 2013; 2015), and the creation of a number of fortified settlements (e.g. Tenu 2015, 80-82). Accompanying these changes is the development of a "culture of empire" (Düring 2015, 302).

Similar developments take place in the period before and during the creation of Kalḫu. Aššurnāširpal's reign signifies both the spike in territorial growth, but also a series of administrative changes (Oates and Oates 2001, 15-16; Bagg 2011, 192-194; Fales 2011; Frahm 2017b, 169-170) as well as in architectural projects (see Russell 2017). In regard to imperial ideology, the concept of the Assyrian *Reconquista*

(Postgate 1992, 250) takes its full shape during the reign of Aššurnāṣirpal. This has been described as “*the second phase of the Reconquista period*” during which Assyria becomes the most powerful state in Western Asia (Frahm 2017b, 169).

Based on the comparative investigation of these two cases, it becomes clear that both Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta and Kalḫu occurred at very specific historical moments of Assyrian history. While this process, however, creates the preconditions for the creation of a capital, it does not in itself explain capital creation. The reigns of Tukultī-Ninurta and Aššurnāṣirpal present peaks in the transformational process of Assyria. These are the tipping points, a kind of imperial leap that Assyria takes which allows it to create a new capital.

This argument is further corroborated by a number of other shared similarities between the two cases, which are related to the broader scope of Assyrian capital creation. Firstly, both projects are concerned with the redevelopment of the Assyrian core area and its increased agricultural production. Both projects were accompanied by massive restructuring of the land surrounding the new capitals and large irrigation projects (see for Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta Bagg 2000a; Miglus 2011; Reculaeau 2013; Mühl 2013, 157-175; 2015a, 48-51; and for Kalḫu Morandi Bonacossi 2014; Reade and Anderson 2013, 47; Ur and Reade 2015). Furthermore, the resources that fueled the building of the new capitals were a result of the extensive military campaigns discussed above. Forced population deportation and prisoners of war provided the large labor force required for such building projects (Harrak 1987, 219-229; Freydank 1974; 1975; 1976; 1980; 2001; Harmanşah 2013, 115-119), and conquest and taxation through tribute provided the abundance of resources for the construction of the new capitals (see for example Szuchman 2007; Tenu 2009; 2015; Radner 2017a). Finally, rulers capable of initiating and undertaking such projects, given these favorable historical contexts, are also important for the realization each new capital. While it is impossible to show who was the main figure, if there was a single person, behind the decision of making a new capital, these specific Assyrian kings must have played a crucial role.

A key difference, however, between the two capitals needs to be noted: their longevity. While Kalḫu lasted for some 175 years, Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta acted as a capital only during the reign of its eponymous king and may not have even been completed (see section

3.4). This difference is not directly related to the functions of these capitals as such but is determined by the different trajectories the empire took after their creation. Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta was created right before the recession of the empire in the Late Bronze Age, and it is possible that Assyria could no longer economically maintain its construction process. After the creation of Kalḫu, Assyria managed to maintain its imperial status and, despite entering a brief period of decline, it retained most of its territorial growth and economic power, which allowed for the further development of the city (Oates and Oates 2001, 69-70, 144-198; Kertai 2011, 71-72; 2015, 47, 77-79). By comparing Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta and Kalḫu, I argue for a direct relation between the process of Assyria’s imperial transformation and the creation of new capitals. This interpretation acknowledges the role of the king in mobilizing resources and ideological support but sees the contemporary political landscape as a determining factor in creating opportunities for capital creation. This did not happen at random points of the imperial development, but rather at the tipping points of Assyria’s territorial, economic, and imperial growth.

7.2.8 HISTORICAL CONDITIONS – IMPERIAL TRANSFORMATION

The comparative study of the last two capital relocations, Dur-Šarrukēn and Nineveh, is trickier, the main reason being the fact that there was little time between the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn and the capital’s relocation to Nineveh. Dur-Šarrukēn acted as a capital only for 1-2 years and was immediately replaced. As such, I argue that the creation of these two cities should be seen as part of the same episode of capital creation. With this in mind, the exploration of the *causa movens* should be directed in identifying both the similar historical conditions that allowed for the creation of two consecutive capitals, as well as the key differences that dictated the immediate replacement of Dur-Šarrukēn.

Looking at the broader historical process, the creation of these two capitals follow a similar trajectory as the one of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta and Kalḫu. During the so-called “interval” (823-745 BCE), the Assyrian empire had entered a period of territorial decline and continuous internal turbulences and succession conflicts (Appendix 1; Grayson 1992a, 76; Frahm 2017b, 173-176). This period ended with the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BCE), who pursued

a policy of continuous military activity (Grayson 1992a, 75-77), and sets the track for the last imperial phase of Assyria. A number of administrative changes took place during his reign which paved the way for the so-called Sargonid empire (Garelli 1991). These include: the transformation of the military into a professional army (Dubovský 2004-5); the incorporation of foreign soldiers into the new army (Radner 2010); the reconfiguration of provinces; and the appointment of anonymous eunuchs in key positions (Garelli 1991, 46; Lumsden 2001, 34; May 2015, 107).

It is during the reign of Sargon (722-705 BCE) that Assyria re-establishes itself as the sole imperial power of the Near East, what Frahm describes as the “*genesis of an empire*” (Frahm 2017b, 176). This happens both through the continuously successful territorial growth (Grayson 1992a, 85-102; Fuchs 1994; 2009; Melville 2016), as well as through the consolidation of the administrative changes that had started with the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (Lanfranchi 1997; May 2015). Once again in Assyrian history, when a transformational process reaches a critical point it coincides with the creation of a new capital city. While in this case Assyria is already at the level of an empire, we can observe the same broader trajectory that leads to the creation of a new capital: after a period of decline comes one of continuous expansion, which is marked by the creation a new capital.

It has been argued by scholars that the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn was an attempt by Sargon to secure his claim to the throne (see for example Radner 2011, 325-327). While it is possible to argue that during the first years of Sargon’s reign there was resistance to his claim by other elites (Frahm 2017b, 180), this changed quite soon. By 717 BCE, when the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn began, Sargon had a series of successful military campaigns both in the western (Frahm 2013) and the eastern front (Frahm 2017b, 181), with relative internal stability. Examining the historical overview, however, also revealed that the broader policies implemented during Sargon’s reign were in line with the imperial transformation that had begun with Tiglath-Pileser III. Sargon might have wanted to consolidate himself in power, but there was also no real political divergence from the previous reigns. On the contrary, during the reign of Sargon, the previous administrative changes and expansionist policies seem to be consolidated even further (see Grayson 1992, 101).

This begs the question as to why then Dur-Šarrukēn was abandoned in favor of Nineveh, especially in such a short time. For that, only hypotheses can be made, as there are no real historical or archaeological evidence to prove any of them. It is plausible to think that the geographic location of Nineveh could have played a role. Dur-Šarrukēn’s connection to the road network depended on its proximity to Nineveh, since it provided the easiest way to get to other centers like Erbil and Kalḫu. It also provided the fastest access to the Tigris. Much of Dur-Šarrukēn’s construction was in fact managed from both Kalḫu and Nineveh, and most of the materials used for the construction of the city had to go through Nineveh first.

It can also be hypothesized that the reasons could have been political. Elites competing with Sargon could have seized the opportunity of his sudden death to pressure the new king Sennacherib into relocating the capital. None of the above reasons, however, justify the immense transformation of Nineveh, nor why wouldn’t the capital simply return to Kalḫu.

While it is not possible to pinpoint the exact reasons for the abandonment of Dur-Šarrukēn and the creation of Nineveh, it needs to be noted here that the broader historical conditions had not changed since the creation of Dur-Šarrukēn. Assyria kept riding the wave of military success, expanding its borders all the way to Egypt, and continuing with similar administrative policies as seen in the years of Sargon. Consequently, I suggested that these two instances of capital creation should be treated as one episode.

In these two cases then, it is apparent that the latter capitals of Assyria were constructed in an attempt to create stability after a period of internal political conflicts, and to consolidate the large territorial and economic growth of the empire. In short, the creation of these capitals is related to another phase of imperial transformation for Assyria.

7.2.9 CONCLUSIONS

Imperial capitals in Assyria should not be described, or discussed, as only the cities of their kings. They were, rather, the cities of the empire, reflecting and representing the acquired status of Assyria at a given time, encapsulating the continuous growth and changes in the nature of Assyria.

Capital creation in Assyria then, was a strategy and a process of imperial creation and consolidation, similar to how it acted as a strategy for nation

building later on in time. The fact that capital construction happened only four times in the 710 years of the Assyrian empire makes it clear that it was not a standard practice, nor an activity considered by every court. The overview of the history of Assyria in this chapter (Figure 45) showed that capital creation happened only at points of economic and territorial growth of Assyria. To answer why Assyria moved its capitals, the reasons should not be reduced only to great kings who attempted to elevate themselves above others.

Rather, capital creation in Assyria is a phenomenon directly connected to the interplay between imperial transformation and the multiple actors taking part in the process of creating a capital. From becoming an empire, to taking a decisive turn in its imperial history, all capitals are created after periods of continuous expansions that span across several kings. Taking a comparative approach also explains the similarities in several elements of Assyrian capitals like the choice of location and features. The location for an Assyrian capital required a number of characteristics to exist, but the exact location of a city was an important factor but was never the primary *causa movens* for Assyrian capitals.

Finally, there seems to be a degree of continuity and regularity in the process of capital creation both in terms of the constructed elements, as well as the regal narrative promoted in the royal inscriptions (see for example Novák 2004; Liverani 2017, 176-178). This standardized process can be described as a blueprint for capital creation in Assyria and is constituted by a mixture of geographical elements, the standardized regal narrative of innovation, the organization of large work projects, and the standardized layouts of the new cities.

7.3 HOW – THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS OF ASSYRIAN CAPITALS

The second part of this chapter compares the construction process of the imperial capitals of Assyria. In terms of datasets, this element of capital creation is difficult to explore. Assyrian reliefs were rarely concerned with building or construction processes. In addition, the royal inscription, besides some (possibly) arbitrary numbers of people who were brought in to work at the capitals, pay no attention to how the city was constructed. The only textual dataset, remarkable nonetheless, which

deals extensively with the construction of a capital is the one discussed in the chapter on Dur-Šarrukēn (Parpola 1995). As such, the only reliable, albeit incomplete, dataset which can tell us something about the construction of each capital are the archaeological remains of the capitals as finished products.

A point of complication for the comparative study of the construction process is the definition of what exactly comprises a construction process. In Assyria, the “official” opening of a capital is its ceremonious opening festival, when a new city starts to function as a capital (see above section 4.4.1). The construction of a capital city, however, doesn’t end at the moment of its opening. On the contrary, the cities continued to grow and transform, both from the top, with new additions to the citadels and palaces, as well as from the bottom, with the social interactions and urban populations giving shape to the urban structure. The best example of such a capital in Assyria is Kalḫu, which changed significantly during the reign of Shalmaneser III, and kept evolving even after it was abandoned as the administrative center of the empire. On the other hand, Dur-Šarrukēn, and to a certain extent Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta had no time to evolve significantly as urban centers. They functioned as capitals only for a very brief period of time and they were abandoned either partially (Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta) or completely (Dur-Šarrukēn) after the death of their eponymous king. As a result, for the study of construction, I suggest that the point where the initial construction of each capital was completed differs for each city and is based on the type of data being compared. I define the initial phase of construction, as the creation of the outline and major living spaces of a city, which comprises the planning and construction of city walls and the creation of the main citadels. However, there are variations on that definition, as demonstrated in the more detailed comparison below.

The key topic that will be discussed here is labor investment and management, which pertains to the labor force and materials required to construct various aspects of the city. Further, I will discuss the differences or similarities in the construction process of the various capitals. Issues that will be assessed include the size of the city, the speed of construction, and the size of the walls. The textual evidence available for the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn is particularly important, as its figures are applied to different case studies.

Capital city	Approximate size	Approximate size of Citadels
Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta	240(-500) ha	(32-)65 ha (very unclear)
Kalḫu	360 ha	Main Citadel 20 ha Secondary Citadel 5 ha
Dur-Šarrukēn	300 ha	Main Citadel 25 ha Secondary Citadel 6 ha
Nineveh	750 ha	Main Citadel 32 ha Secondary Citadel 12 ha

Table 8: Size of Assyrian capitals.

7.3.1 A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF LABOR INVESTMENT IN ASSYRIAN CAPITALS

The newly constructed capitals of Assyria were the largest cities of the empire (Table 8). The size of each capital was probably predetermined as part of the planning. This can be observed by the angular shape of each city with long linear walls. In addition, the textual evidence discussed above for Dur-Šarrukēn (Parpola 1995) revealed that each official or contractor had a specific, predetermined, plan to manage number of workers and specialists under his supervision.

There are no textual data referring to the exact number of the people involved in the construction of each city. Royal inscriptions mention the number of deportees brought to work in the construction of the capitals (e.g. Harak 1987, 220-221 for the Kassites working at Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta). However, these figures cannot be trusted as a valid source, as they are part of state propagandaj (Grayson 1987, 183-184). Deportees would have worked as a labor force in the construction of the city, in the newly created fields surrounding the city, on the irrigation channels, and any other task related to the construction process.

The overall assessment of labor investment for the creation of Assyrian capitals requires a detailed discussion, which we currently lack the data for. Based purely on the size of each city, one could argue that a city would require more or less labor

Section	Constructed elements
City Wall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wall • Gates • Towers
Lower City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houses • Administrative buildings • Production facilities
Citadel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrace • Buildings • Walls and gates
Surrounding hinterland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrigation works

Table 9: Main constructed elements of Assyrian capitals for the assessment of labor investment.

investment than another. For example, Nineveh, being ca. 750 ha would require a larger work force and more primary materials than Kalḫu, which is ca. 360 ha. However, this abstract assessment disregards the complex nature of constructing capitals. The construction of each capital required the restructuring of the surrounding hinterland, with extensive irrigation projects, and labor investment based on the specific geographical and agricultural situation of each site.

As such, to assess the labor required for the construction process of an Assyrian capital city, I propose using a multilayered analysis that addresses different datasets and brings them together. These datasets comprise the different sections of an Assyrian capital. I propose four different sections (Table 9):

As many of these datasets are incomplete or completely absent for the purpose of this study I will limit myself to the comparative exploration only of the constructed elements for which we have a significant amount of archaeological data. However, the aforementioned framework is a useful start for a technical study on each individual case.

The table below (Table 10) allows us to compare the differences or similarities between the constructed elements of Assyrian capitals. Before assessing some of these more in depth, there is another parameter that needs to be explored comparatively: time. The speed and intensity of construction dramatically influences the amount of labor required to realize each project. I define the construction time frame from when a city's construction begun and to the end of the initial phase of construction (Table 11).

Section	Constructed elements	Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta	Kalḫu	Dur-Šarrukēn	Nineveh
City Wall	Wall	Unknown	ca. 8 km	7 km	12 km
	Gates	Unknown	ca. 4	7	14(-18 by 690 BCE)
	Towers	Unknown	Possibly at standard intervals	At standard intervals	At standard intervals
Lower City	Area	ca. 210(-440) ha	ca. 343 ha	ca. 269 ha	ca. 706 ha
	% of built area	Unknown	ca. 54% (Ur 2013)	Unknown but probably less than 50%	Unknown
Citadel	Main Citadel Area	(32-)65 ha	21 ha	25 ha	32 ha
	Secondary Citadel Area	-	7 ha	6 ha	12 ha
	Main Citadel – Gates	Possibly 2	1 (potentially 2)	2	Possibly 2 or 3
	Main Citadel – No. of buildings	5 identified	At least 7 (excavated and dated to the reign of Aššurnāṣirpal)	7 excavated, possibly 8	4 identified, definitely more
	Secondary citadel – No. of buildings	-	1	1	Possibly 2 or 3

Table 10: Details of constructed elements in Assyrian capitals.

Capital city	Construction time
Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta	Unknown – Possibly 10-15 years
Kalḫu	Unclear – 5 years (883-879 BCE opening festival) ¹ – 40 years (844/3 BCE the completion of Fort Shalmaneser)
Dur-Šarrukēn	10-11 years (717-707/6 BCE)
Nineveh	12 years (702-690 BCE)

(Footnotes)

¹ Aššurnāṣirpal claims to have built the entire circuit of the wall during those 4 years.

Table 11: Duration of construction of Assyrian capitals.

Nineveh is the only exception to this, as it was already a functioning city, and Sennacherib and his court could move into the city already from the beginning. Therefore, as a time frame for this first phase of construction of Nineveh, I will use the time the city wall took to complete, 702-690 BCE (Reade 2002b, 399).

7.3.2 BUILDING CITY WALLS

Using city walls as an investigative case study for labor investment in Assyrian capitals brings a number of advantages not found in other datasets. Firstly, it is one of the most complete available datasets from all capitals (with the exception of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta). Secondly, there is no question in terms of different functions between each capital, the city wall always has the same purpose, to enclose the city and, at least in theory, provide a line of defense. Finally, the materials (mudbricks and stone) are consistently used in the same way at all capital cities, and the methods of construction were consistent during that period.

While the city walls had stone foundations, their largest and core part was made of mudbrick. This comparison begins by assessing the volume

City	Wall Length	Volume	Mudbricks	Volume (including mortar)
Kalḫu	8 km	1,904,000 m ³	116,672,312	2,240,000 m ³
Dur-Šarrukēn	7 km	1,176,000 m ³	71,892,200	1,470,000 m ³
Nineveh	12 km	3,888,000 m ³	233,510,400	4,320,000 m ³

Table 12: Volume and estimated number of mudbricks for the mudbrick city wall of each Assyrian capital.

of the city walls in terms of mudbricks to. For comparison's sake, I will be assuming the same mudbrick dimensions for each capital, 37 x 37 x 12 cm (0.016428 m³; ca. 61 bricks/m³), as this was the most common size of mudbrick for the Neo Assyrian period. I will exclude Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta from the actual quantification of the walls, since we lack both excavation data as well the complete perimeter of the wall.

For these calculations, I will treat the walls as if they had a set width and height. Of course, both the width and the height of the wall might have varied based on the topography. Since the available height is an estimate, and since an exact width is known only in certain parts of the walls, working with conservative and consistent numbers serves to decrease the assumptions made for this comparison rather than increase them. The results of this analysis can be seen in the following table (Table 12; see also Appendix 2 for the calculations).

This model assesses the volume of the walls only in terms of the number of mudbricks used, without taking into account the gates and protruding turrets or towers which existed in every Assyrian city wall. Including those, the numbers should be significantly higher. However, the purpose of this exercise is to highlight the magnitude of the undertaking of the construction of a capital and to add some data to the yet unexplored field of constructing imperial capitals. Using the stated module of mudbrick, Mallowan proposed that a man could lay about 100 bricks per day, which would create 1.6428 m³ per day (Mallowan 1966, 82; Oates 1990).

Of course, such an assessment is incomplete, since it takes into account only the actual brick laying per day, without calculating the operational chain that go into such a project. These factors include the digging for and preparation of the clay, the transportation of water, mixing of the clay with straw, as well as

the molding, drying, storing, and transportation of bricks. Some studies have assessed the production of and construction with mudbrick (e.g. Burke 2008, 146-148). In a recently published paper, Richardson (2015) assessed the labor invested in the construction of the wall of Larsa. With Mallowan's building ratio, he calculated that the wall would take 465,672 labor days for the construction of the mudbrick wall. He then conducted a taskwork analysis, based on Heimpel's (2009) textual analysis of the GARšana documents. The GARšana texts is a rare volume of texts that record the administration of a series of constructions at the site of GARšana. Among other things, the construction of the city wall is elaborated and Heimpel analyzed the processes and steps inherent in mudbrick preparation and wall construction. Richardson, using a similar method, ended up with 1,312,295 labor days for the fortification wall of Larsa and 1,957,095 with the inclusion of the rampart (Richardson 2015, 278).

This estimation is significantly higher than the calculations of Mallowan (1966) and Oates (1990), but are probably much closer to the actual number, since it incorporates the multilayered process of mudbrick construction. I will conduct a modified taskwork analysis for Assyrian capital city walls based on the information provided by Richardson (2015, Table 1 and Appendix 2; here Table 13).³⁵ It needs to be clarified that for the purposes of this study, which is to highlight the magnitude of the labor investment in Assyrian capital city construction, I am using absolute numbers. However, a future study dedicated exclusively on mudbrick construction, should additionally calculate minimum and maximum number of labor days.

The above analysis of course is only indicative of the work required to construct an Assyrian capital

³⁵ All numbers of labor days are rounded up to the decimal.

Mudbrick wall - Task	Known and analog day -rates	Kalḫu – Labor days	Dur-Šarrukēn – Labor days	Nineveh – Labor days
Site clearing ¹	1050 m ²	107	94	172
Straw carried ²	18 m ³	12,694	7,840	25,920
Dirt work (excavation) ³	3 m ³	558,507	344,960	1,140,480
Carrying earth	3 m ³	558,507	344,960	1,140,480
Mixing earth	1.725 m ³	1,103,768	681,740	2,253,913
Molding bricks ⁴	240	486,134	299,550	972,960
Carrying bricks ⁵	1.7 m ³	1,120,000	691,764	2,287,059
Building (including mortar laying) ⁶	1.6428 m ³	1,363,526	894,813	2,629,657
Delivering reeds	26 m ²	38770	22,615	83,077
Laying reeds ⁷	6 m ²	168,000	98,000	360,000
Trimming reed ⁸	400 m ²	800	525	1440
Total		5,410,813	3,386,861	10,895,158

(Footnotes)

1 Richardson calculated 350 m²/day for site clearing. Heimpel calculated about 1575 m²/day for agricultural work. Richardson's estimation includes the clearing of more difficult terrain and other mudbrick constructions. Still, the estimation seems very conservative and the terrain was probably not as difficult. I will assume 1050 m²/day.

2 I am not including straw harvesting, as the production rates of the Assyrian empire must have been much higher than Richardson's estimation for Larsa. I assume that straw production would not affect the time spent on the construction of the wall since the material already existed in abundance. It is also assumed that 12% of the volume of each mudbrick was straw.

3 This calculates the volume of the earth required for the mudbricks. Pouring water is excluded from my calculations because of the proximity of the construction sites to water.

4 Richardson calculates that 10% of the total wall consisted of baked mudbrick. Since we do not have any indications for the amount of baked bricks in the Assyrian capital city walls, I will assume 0 baked bricks.

5 We do not have an exact knowledge of where and when the mudbricks were made, but it is safe to assume that a large percentage of the bricks were not made on-site but rather brought there (see for example Parpola 1995, 65). The estimation of 1.125 m³ in Richardson's example is too low. The aforementioned text mentions a delivery of 40,000 bricks, which was probably not made by only 6-8 people. As such, I will assume at least 1.7 m³, which still might be conservative.

6 I use Mallowan's estimation for brick laying. However, this estimation is probably on the low side.

7 Richardson estimates the very labor-intensive process of 1 reed-mat for every 5 courses of bricks. Loud and Altman (1938, 18) suggest 1 reed-mat per 9 courses of brick, based on Place's observation of the citadel wall. However, while possible, it is not certain that the citadel wall would exactly mirror the fortification wall. Heimpel (2009) suggest 1 reed-mat for every 16-18 courses of bricks. For the sake of comparison here, I will use a similar estimate of 1 reed every 15 courses, since there are differences in the height of each wall.

8 Richardson assumes 288 m²/labor day/person, admitting that it is the a very slow rate (Richardson 2014, 311). Considering that the infrastructure for the construction of the wall was already in place, I will assume a much higher rate of 400 m²/labor day.

Table 13: Tasks and analysis for the construction of mudbrick city walls in Assyrian capitals.

city wall. My estimations for the required labor are, in general, relatively conservative, and do not calculate the travel time required for bricks commissioned from other locations. The reason for these conservative estimations is because I do not account for all of the other elements embedded in each construction process.³⁶ The table indicates the construction of the mudbrick parts of each wall, both inner and outer facades, without accounting for other parts such as: the stone foundations, towers and crenellations, plastering of the wall (inside and outside), and the gates.

This analysis makes the workload going into the construction of capitals more tangible. The kings are often the only topic of discussion in terms of constructing magnificent cities, but little previous research has addressed how these cities were built, or how much work, effort, and resources had to be put into them.

Factoring in the amount of time each project took offers a better picture of the magnitude of the project. If we assume, for example, that the city wall of Nineveh took roughly 12 years to be completed (702-690 BCE), then the 10,895,158 works days would require 2488 people working every day, with no days off, exclusively on the mudbrick section of the city wall. If we account for the people supervising the construction, the work groups, or those transporting the actual materials, then the number could easily reach 3000.

Dur-Šarrukēn is the only city for which we have certain dates for its construction (717-706 BCE). As such, I will take this 11-year span as the timeframe in which the walls were built. My estimation for the mudbrick wall is 3,386,861 labor days. This would mean an estimated 844 people working every day, with no days off, exclusively on the city wall. This number is probably very low in comparison to the actual labor force. If we give each person one day off per week, then the total number of people working

on the wall would increase to 984, for the sake of simplicity, 1000.

Kalḫu presents the most difficult case to quantify. According to the king's royal inscriptions, the city wall was finished when the opening festival took place, meaning that the wall should have been completed within five years. Many scholars find this implausible, arguing that the city wall was finished by the king's son, after the construction of Fort Shalmaneser, given its size (Oates and Oates 2001, 28; Russell 2017).

Calculating the labor force required for the first estimation, 5,410,813 labor days in 5 years would translate to almost 3000 people (2965). As we have seen in the case of Nineveh this is not an unrealistic labor force to assume in Assyria. Of course, everything would need to happen much faster, and the building process would have been much more intense than in the other two capitals. At the same time, however, there was less construction taking place, as there was no secondary citadel during the time of the construction of the wall, meaning that there was a larger labor force available for the wall itself. As such, in terms of feasibility, Assyria could certainly muster the required workforce for the completion of the wall within the first years of the construction of Kalḫu.

Finally, the only city that was not considered in this analysis is Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta. The lack of knowledge for the city's outline, as well as for the specifics of its wall does not allow for such an assessment. Furthermore, as I argued earlier, the currently available evidence suggest that the perimeter wall of the city was never completed.

This analysis shows the industrial-scale production required for the construction of Assyrian capitals. If we consider that, at any given time, about 3000 people were working to construct the city wall of Nineveh, who all need to be fed and housed somewhere, the numbers increase exponentially. Adding to this, at the same time there are constructions at the gates, palaces, temples, citadels, bridges and of course the residential buildings in the city. In the hinterland, there are several monumental canals being constructed (Morandi Bonacossi 2016). As such, we are probably looking at tens of thousands of people working at the same time to create all the different parts of a new capital.

This scale reveals that constructing a capital is a project that can only be realized within a context of imperial growth. As demonstrated in the previous

³⁶ I treat the labor force as unified and consistent. The reality is that these numbers would fluctuate. Not every group of workers has the same composition or production output. The table does not account for shortages of material (e.g. failed delivery of straw, Parpola 1995, 65) or laborers. Furthermore, the analysis does not take into account the agricultural production required to feed and support the people working on the construction of the walls. It also does not consider any days off, or longer periods of time where work would not take place (e.g. religious festivals).

section, Assyrian capitals were only constructed at peaks of expansion, and this is substantiated by the assessment of the construction process. New capitals could only be constructed when Assyria crossed a threshold in its territorial and economic growth and had access to sufficient resources and work force.

The textual dataset from Dur-Šarrukēn (section 5.5) also supports this argument in terms of material that do not leave traces in the archaeological record. The royal correspondence for the construction of Dur-Šarrukēn underlines the vast quantities of materials needed and the organization surrounding their management. Combining all the different tasks necessary to create a new capital, it becomes apparent that there needs to be a strong administrative system in place to realize such a project.

7.3.3 CONCLUSIONS - WHO BUILDS THESE CITIES?

A recurring theme in capital creation is the degree to which a king influences the creation of a city. I have argued that, while the agency of a king is important, the reasons behind capital creations are much more related to the wider process a state or empire underwent. Kings constitute only part of the phenomenon of capital creation.

Exploring the construction process of a city reveals even more about who is actually building the Assyrian capitals. We often forget that constructing a city is much more than individual commands and decisions made by a king. The king and his court did make executive decisions, but the provincial governors collected and sent local materials, and planners, architects, and artists envisioned and directed the creation of the most impressive features. Continuing down the chain of command were the taskmasters, and the thousands of workers at the bottom working under harsh conditions. This analysis of the city wall complicates and contextualizes the process of capital creation beyond the persona of a specific king.

7.4 WHAT - A CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE

The last part of the discussion revolves around the function of the capitals. I believe that one of the fundamental issues of research in Assyrian capitals is the fact that they are seen exclusively as administrative centers and not as residential urban spaces. Each capital was the residence of the king,

housed the largest part of the court, and was the place where the most important decisions about the empire were taken. However, I suggest that we should study the Assyrian capitals also as residential spaces for a larger population of elites and commoners, which reconfigured its space.

There have been some research projects investigating daily life in an Assyrian capital, from a visual perspective (Lumsden 1991; 2004). They remain, however, very generic or are based exclusively on textual sources (e.g. biblical sources, royal inscriptions) or phenomenological approaches. The absence of archaeological material produced by surveys and excavations on the lower cities produces a very incomplete picture of life in those cities. This fragmentary picture has led to some partial assessments on the function and lived experience of Assyrian capitals, such as viewing the cities exclusively as arenas for the competition of elites. The following section addresses this elite-driven view of the cities by examining: the dichotomy between public and private/royal space; the social spaces of Assyrian capitals; the city walls as symbols; and finally Assyrian capitals as empty cities.

7.4.1 WHAT IS PUBLIC AND WHAT IS PRIVATE?

I will start by bringing up an issue of perception that stems, in my opinion, from our distorted view of Assyrian capitals: the juxtaposition between public and private spaces. In discussing the citadel of Kalḫu, I briefly mentioned two terms: *babānu* and *bītānu* (Oates and Oates 2001, 36-38). Although a clear definition for these terms is still lacking, the general consensus in research is that they refer to two distinct features of late Assyrian palaces: open spaces/courtyards (*babānu*),³⁷ and internal/private rooms, usually the quarters of the king (*bītānu*) (Postgate 2005, 222). While the latter is quite well understood (Margueron 2005), the purpose of *babānu* is much more unclear.

The place defined as *babānu* is, possibly the intermediate open space between the *bītānu* and the entrance of the palace. It has been suggested that it refers to the entrance courtyards of palaces (Oates and Oates 2001, 36). While it is generally agreed that *babānu* and *bītānu* are strictly palatial spaces, some researchers have described *babānu* as a public

³⁷ Also translated as "outside", deriving from *bābu*-gate (Kertai 2013c, 195)

space (Harmanşah 2013, 123). This, I suggest, is one of the problems associated with our strict view of elite spaces. Kertai also argued that the duality of these terms is a modern construct, since there is no textual evidence in support of such clear distinctions between private and public in Assyrian palaces (Kertai 2013c, 199).

Describing the *babānu* space as public is rather misguided. Access to the main palace was limited, and palaces could be described as places of increasingly more restricted zones. A person had to enter the city, go through a citadel gate, go through the entrance of the palace and eventually end up at the entrance courtyard of a palace (if we accept that this is what *babānu* is). Who would have been allowed within the citadel, even more so, within the palace? Very likely, these were spaces which only a limited portion of the population of the city got to experience. Thus, they were not public spaces in the modern sense of the word.

Defining private and public in contemporary cities, while seemingly simple, comes with its own challenges. Residential houses, for instance, are private space, while a city park or a square are public spaces. However, even contemporary cities have spaces where this distinction is rather vague. For example, a parliament is a public building, but it is not always publicly accessible. As such, defining private and public in the capitals of Assyria, where we have a limited knowledge of its urban space is, conceptually, much more difficult.

In reality, as it will be discussed later on (section 7.4.4), we know close to nothing about public spaces in Assyrian capitals. We do not have the data about a square in Nineveh, or an open garden in Kalḫu. It is unclear what large market streets would look or where an open festival would take place. It is, therefore, important to define this lack of knowledge, and not attempt to compensate for it by defining something else as public (i.e. *babānu*). Understanding the function of cities is not possible without understanding the function of the spaces within them.

7.4.2 THE SOCIAL WEB OF ASSYRIAN CAPITALS AND THEIR URBAN EVOLUTION

Following up on a similar topic, another aspect of Assyrian capitals we lack knowledge of is their social web and their urban evolution. For example, the survey at Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta showed that

perhaps people resided in neighborhoods based on their ethnicity (Dittmann 2011, 168-169). This could be possible in other capital cities as well, since in every case deportees were settled and used as a work force. The population of urban spaces re-appropriates its living body, re-imagining or re-purposing it in ways city planners did not intend or predict (Lefebvre 1991). Over longer periods, the populations of large cities tend to also develop a metropolitan identity connected to the city they reside in. Such an example in ancient empires is the population of Babylon, where the population of Babylon had a very well-defined view of what it meant to be a Babylonian (Kuhrt 2014). This could possibly be the case in some Assyrian capitals as well.

The development of such metropolitan identities is unlikely to happen in a very short period of time; they are processes which require living in and experiencing the space people occupy. Assyrian capitals varied considerably in their duration as functional capitals. Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta lasted only for the reign of Tukultī-Ninurta, and was subsequently abandoned as an urban center. On the contrary, Kalḫu was the capital for roughly 170 years, and the city remained functional as an urban space until the fall of the Assyrian empire, giving it a lifespan of more than 250 years.

Dur-Šarrukēn presents an interesting case of studying an urban environment, since it did not have time to develop. It was used for only two years and was mostly abandoned afterwards, not giving it time to evolve an urban identity. In that sense, Dur-Šarrukēn is a snapshot of how Assyrian planners thought a city should be, but not how Assyrian cities developed over time. Finally, Nineveh is the only city with a history, long before Assyria, as integral part of the Assyrian core and finally as a capital. As such, it probably had a strong urban identity and its urban space was redeveloped several times, either as a provincial center or as a capital.

7.4.3 DEFENSIVE ASPECTS OF ASSYRIAN CAPITALS AND WALLS AS SYMBOLS

An issue discussed in the previous chapters is the defensive capabilities of Assyrian capitals. The assessment was made on the basis of the city walls, moats and the number and construction of city gates. In any walled city, the gates are probably the most vulnerable sections of the wall. I concluded that in most cases, and especially in the cases of Dur-Šarrukēn and Nineveh, despite the impressive defensive

installations and the large amount of labor required for their construction, the defensive capabilities of the cities were quite minimal.

My argument is that the function of the city walls and gates as visual monuments was more important than their defensive value. It seems that, as the capitals of Assyria evolved, the number of gates increased. We saw that the gates of Neo Assyrian capitals went from ca. 4 at Kalḫu, to 7 at Dur-Šarrukēn (for a wall with smaller circuit), and finally to 18 at Nineveh. While the latter had a wall that was 12 km long, the number of gates was proportionally bigger than in the previous two capitals. In addition, the river Khosr going through Nineveh created a very vulnerable location along the wall.

As such, the vulnerability of the city walls gradually increased in Assyrian capitals. To add to this, the gates of Nineveh, as observed in the corresponding chapter, had very large entrances. The difficulty in defending those gates became visible in the consequent sieges of the city (614 and 612 BCE).

To compensate for this vulnerability, the wall at Nineveh increased in size and height, to create an imposing visual effect. The last capital of Assyria was the only one with a double wall, with the mudbrick wall rising up to 24 m. The view of the wall must have been breathtaking, and the visual factor was probably a priority for the Assyrians. The royal inscriptions inform us that the wall was named “*Wall Whose Brilliance Overwhelms Enemies*” (RINAP 3 Online Corpus, Sennacherib 8, 11’). From the name it can be assumed that, indeed, the visual aspect was the one that would “*overwhelm*” the enemies and discourage them from ever attacking such a massive structure.

This approach to walls as symbols has already been explored in a broader research regarding city walls (Tracy 2000a; 2000b). Walls can have multiple functions, defensive, symbolic or even ritualistic. In some cases, for example, walls can be used as defense not against siege, but rather to control internal conflicts. In those cases, walls create a more easily controlled space for the suppression of revolts. Walls also have the ability to create clearly configured spaces for social investment (Smith 2003b). Finally, walls can be a symbol of strength, signaling the power and status of a city or an elite.

The city walls of Nineveh had the largest investment in terms of work days and had with the largest, most impressive wall of any other capital. At the same time, the wall of Nineveh was probably the most

inefficient and hardest to defend of all capitals. A large number of gates spread so far away from each other, with large openings would probably spread the Assyrian army too thin, as was the case eventually with the fall of the city (Stronach 1997). The model of increasingly impressive but costly defenses also fits well with my suggestion as to why the Assyrian empire founded new capitals at specific points in its history. As the empire grew and changed, its power needed to be visually conveyed in an ever more impressive fashion. Walls played an important role in this, since they were the first thing one would see upon approaching or entering a city and could inspire a sense of invincibility of the Assyrian empire. As such, it can be argued that, when it comes to the walls of Assyrian capitals, and more prominently in the case of Nineveh, symbolism is as important as functionalism.

7.4.4 ASSYRIAN CAPITAL CITIES AS EMPTY SPACES

Finally, I would like to address what I view as one of the most serious issues in the study of Assyrian capitals, the fact that they are often seen in scholarship as empty spaces. This, in essence, is a theoretical and methodological issue. Our knowledge of the urban spaces of Assyrian capitals is almost non-existent, and most studies have focused on the palaces (e.g. Russell 1999; Kertai 2015), temples (e.g. Reade 2002a; 2005), hinterland (e.g. Gilibert 2008; Ur and Reade 2015; Morandi Bonacossi 2018), the role and importance of capitals, and the association of the king with the capital (e.g. Radner 2011). The lower city was rarely, if ever, mentioned as a living space (Ur 2013; Osborne 2015, 15).

This has become apparent throughout this study, since in most cases archaeological evidence from the lower cities is virtually non-existent. This is the traditional perspective of Assyrian capitals: cities with (one or two) citadels and a large empty space, the lower city. Previous studies on Assyrian capitals have perpetuated this concept mostly by ignoring the existence of lower cities, or focusing heavily on the citadel areas, and the function of the elite spaces (see for example Novák 1999; 2004; Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011; Radner 2011; Reade 2011; Carlson 2017; Liverani 2017, 172).

Even more recent studies, which claim to take more bottom-up approaches to life in Assyrian capital cities, often fall into the same pattern of focusing

exclusively on palatial spaces. An example of such an approach comes from Harmanşah (2013, 119-130), where, although he proposed to discuss the relation between official narratives and the citizens of the city at Kalḫu, he focuses almost exclusively on the elite citadel spaces. Similarly, Thomason (2016) discussed the sense-scape and bodily experience in Assyrian capitals, and the way Assyrian royal authority attempted to control its citizens through sensorial means. However, again, he focuses exclusively on the imagery found in palatial buildings or spaces of recreation (e.g. gardens, game parks) that were accessible mostly to the higher classes. He concludes with some general ideas about the experience of individuals in Assyrian capitals, without discussing the day-to-day aspects of life, or the living conditions outside of the citadels. Such interpretations have fostered an elite-centered approach to capitals, in which Assyrian cities are just a collection of elite spaces and experiences.

However, to understand the function of any urban settlement, it is necessary to investigate its full extent, and not just specific locations. This is even more necessary if the selected locations are not representative of the whole. Earlier in this chapter I showed the space occupied by citadels in each city in comparison to the rest of their space. We have a relatively good picture of 6-13% of each Assyrian capital (Table 8), and have essentially ignored the remaining 87-94%. Additionally, those elite spaces are by no means representative of what the rest of each city would look like. As such, our sampling is both limited and skewed towards the elite.

In today's cities terms such as "good neighborhoods" or "bad neighborhoods" are common in our everyday life. If one lives in a capital, the person would know where the most expensive streets are, or which places would be cheaper to rent a house. The multiplicity of modern metropolitan areas is a topic thoroughly studied by several other disciplines (e.g. Lefebvre 1991; Florida 2008; Farias and Bender 2012; Tonkiss 2013; Gleeson 2014).

Why then do we accept the assessment of Assyrian capitals solely on their elite spaces? One answer is that these are the only data that we have. The available data come largely from the excavations of the 19th and early 20th century in those cities. These were times when impressive finds, palaces, statues and libraries were the main focus of European researchers and museums. A city was considered well-investigated once its palaces and temples were

excavated (e.g. Khorsabad, Loud and Altman 1938). It is recalled that the concept of city taxonomy was discussed in the introduction of this thesis. The concept of diversity of cities in Mesopotamia was explored based on the arguments by Stone (2008), who suggested that cities can be classified along a series of axes: cities that house all elements within society or elite enclaves; institutional centers that are clustered or scattered; and residential neighborhoods where rich and poor lived apart (Stone 2008, 163).

Furthermore, I introduced the concepts of urban taxonomy on the basis of urban anthropology, and specifically the propositions of Fox (1977). By combining the two approaches, I suggested the use of three primary types to identify the urban nature of ancient Assyrian cities. These primary types are: elite enclaves, administrative centers, and production centers. On the basis of these three primary types, I will consider how Assyrian capitals should be classified.

There are, of course, objective difficulties in the classifying the urban area of Assyrian capitals. Every city is located in areas heavily exploited by modern agriculture or urbanization. In recent times research in those areas has been halted due to conflicts. Some researchers have been finding methods to work around those difficulties. An example is the research by Jason Ur (2013) who assessed the percentage of built space in Kalḫu on the basis of satellite imagery or survey studies (Dittmann 1989; Fiorina 2011).

At the same time, other Assyrian cities can provide valuable comparative data to understand the built space of an Assyrian capital. The work in the lower town of Aššur, for instance, can provide blueprints for some smaller, yet wealthy houses (Miglus 2000; 2002). The case of Dūr-Katlimmu (Kühne 2011; 2015; here section 4.5.2) can be used to illustrate elite neighborhoods, with larger residence for Assyrian officials. Ziyaret Tepe, a provincial imperial center of Assyria, located in the area of Upper Tigris, has yielded significant results of urban architecture and city planning (Matney *et al.*, 2015).

The city of Aššur has a very long history of urban development, comparable to that of Nineveh. Its general structure is different than any other capital of Assyria, as it does not follow a regular plan, nor is its citadel separated from the city by a wall. Due to its long history as a city, it is expected that a large variety of activities took place in its lower town over the centuries, like woolen textile production, and private storage of trade goods (Veenhof 2010,

48-53). Aššur was definitely not an “empty” city, and this has been demonstrated archaeologically for both the Middle as well as the Neo Assyrian period (Andrae 1977; Miglus 1996; 2000; 2002; Hausleiter 2011).

To give an example of the several Neo Assyrian buildings located in the lower city, one of the characteristic Neo Assyrian residential buildings measured a residential space of about 300 m² (Miglus 2002, 18). The house had a 95 m² brick paved courtyard surrounded by several residential rooms, bathrooms etc. In terms of size, while it can definitely be described as a large building, it doesn't even remotely compare to the large residential building of the citadel of Dur-Šarrukēn, the smallest of which measures 4,000 m², or the large residential buildings of the lower city of Dūr-Katlimmu, which average about 4,600 m². Regardless, based on the finds (Miglus 2002, 19-20), it seems like the Aššur house was the residence of a wealthy family. Similar buildings probably exist in the northern part of the lower city of Nineveh (Lumsden 1991; 2004; Stronach and Lumsden 1992, 227-229). While moderately sized wealthy houses have been documented here, they have not been identified yet in the lower towns of the other Assyrian capital cities. However, it is plausible to assume their existence, especially in the case of Kalḫu, which also had a long occupation; it seems likely that this type of houses, for lower ranking officials or wealthy individuals, remains to be discovered.

In Dūr-Katlimmu the lower city is very different from that at Aššur and can be described as both an administrative center and an elite enclave. Its residential buildings are very large and can be compared with those on the citadel at Dur-Šarrukēn. At the same time, the lower city of Dūr-Katlimmu measures 60 ha, which is the same size as the full extent of Aššur. Therefore, there are two rather different models of urban settlement: one that mostly comprises an elite space (Dūr-Katlimmu), and one that has both an elite and a diverse urban residential space (Aššur).

Another important, but also different, type of urban center in Assyria was Ziyaret Tepe, the ancient city of Tušhan, located in Upper Tigris (Matney *et al.* 2017). Although the city was occupied and abandoned in previous periods, the city was reconstructed during the Neo Assyrian period and became a major urban center of the northern frontier of Assyria. Extensive survey, excavations and magnetometry

survey (Matney 1998; Matney and Bauer 2000) have revealed the complexity of Tušhan. The city contained a large palatial building, the so-called “Bronze Palace” (Wicke *et al.* 2013), temples, fortifications and several residential buildings which housed soldiers, officials and bureaucrats of Assyria, as well the general population of the city.

The “Bronze Palace”, located on the citadel of Tušhan, has been identified as an elite residence which also acted as the main administrative building. Centered around a 330 m² courtyard (Matney *et al.* 2009, 41-44), to date more than 1,000 m² of the building has been uncovered, but its full extent remains unknown due to erosion and the existence of a modern cemetery (Greenfield, Wicke and Matney 2013, 52). This puts it at least on par with the elite residences at the citadel of Kalḫu (Mallowan 1966, 137; see section 4.5.2). Inside the palace areas for public hearing (e.g. a throneroom) and areas for private life (e.g. residential or kitchen areas) have been identified (Greenfield, Wicke and Matney 2013, 53-56).

A series of other buildings have been excavated in the lower city, including a city gate (Operation Q) and a smaller residential building (Operation K) (Matney *et al.* 2009, 61-62; Greenfield 2015). The residential building has been excavated to an extent of about 86 m² and it seems that it was a house of a lower status family (Greenfield 2015, 5-8). Based on Greenfield's research of zooarchaeological remains, combined with the variety of buildings found at the site, it appears that Tušhan, as a provincial capital, housed a very wide range of social classes in its walls. Also, there is evidence for a wide variety of activities taking place here, ranging from administrative activities, to the primary and secondary processing of animal products (Greenfield 2015, 3), and from accounting and storage (MacGinnis *et al.* 2014) to crop processing.

Tušhan then presents yet another different type of central city in Assyria, a city that was developed to become a provincial center, with elite spaces that could even house the king during his visits. At the same time, it had a broader urban space that housed soldiers and the residents of the city. The population of Tušhan consisted of bureaucratic officials, military and administrative officers, soldiers, craftsmen, soldiers, and local people working in farming and/or pastoral activities (Matney 2010)

Assyrian urban spaces, it appears, were not one-dimensional or straightforward. On the contrary,

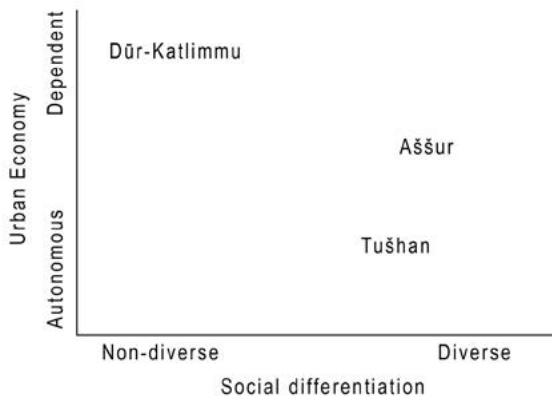


Figure 46: Assyrian cities placed in the urban spectrum developed by this study, produced by the author.

we have diverse urban spaces and even diversity in the function of cities: administrative and storages activities; different kind of productions; military related activities and/or housing of soldiers; and agricultural production. Aššur can be described initially as a residential center in the Old Assyrian period (Veenhof 2010), then it became a residential imperial capital in the Middle Assyrian period (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011), and eventually became a more religious center in the Neo Assyrian period, which at the same time housed an urban population, probably of wealthier families. Dūr-Katlimmu's lower city can be described as a space dedicated to elite families, with provincial administrative functions. Finally, Tušhan can be described as a provincial center which contained all elements within society, administrative functions, and production facilities. These three examples create a taxonomy of central cities in Assyria, of which each city has a different urban profile in relation to the typology (Figure 46).

In regard to Assyrian capitals, Nineveh is currently the best-known case of a capital city with a very diverse urban space. Its northwestern section we see both an artisan's quarter, with tightly packed houses, workshops, kilns, and other industrial infrastructure (Lumsden 1991, 3).

At the same time, there is a neighborhood with larger residential buildings and large open spaces. Nineveh also contained extensive regal and elite spaces,

as well as several temples in its massive citadel mounds. Therefore, in Nineveh, we have aspects of an elite enclave as well as an administrative center. Nineveh's sheer size allowed for the creation of a true metropolitan city, with great diversity of urban spaces.

Is Nineveh unique in this respect among the Assyrian capitals? It most definitely has unique aspects that were not reproduced in any other cases. Nineveh's long history meant that its urban development happened over the course of several centuries. Dur-Šarrukēn and Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta had no time to develop a fully-fledged urban space. For Dur-Šarrukēn, the only known building of the lower city is a very large official residence. There are no indications for workshops or different type of neighborhoods. While we should not necessarily be taking the absence of evidence as evidence of absence, the brief existence of Dur-Šarrukēn would not have allowed for the development of an urban space in the lower city.

Kalḫu, on the other hand, was the most long-lived new capital and had significant time for the development of its urban space, as well as the inclusion of several different functions. Even though data for the type of activities that took place in its lower city are lacking, it is possible to assert some of them based on the comparative data of the aforementioned examples. Fort Shalmaneser already included some production and maintenance facilities related to the Assyrian army (Oates 1962; Oates and Oates 2001, 162; Kertai 2011, 71-72). In addition, based on Ur's satellite imagery analysis, there were some parts of the city that were tightly built up (Ur 2013, Fig. 5), possibly resembling the so-called artisan's quarter of Nineveh. At the same time, we are informed about possible administrative activities related to the lower city itself from the so-called "town-wall palace" (Mallowan 1957, pl. 11). It is, therefore, perhaps possible to assume that the type of activities taking place at Kalḫu would resemble these of Nineveh or Tušhan, such as: industrial type production (densely built areas); military maintenance (Fort-Shalmaneser); administration and storage (administrative builds both in the lower city and in the citadels); and crop processing (based on the extensive surrounding agricultural hinterland). At the same time, it is possible to suggest that the city included an elite population, and commoners, workers, bureaucratic officials, and soldiers.

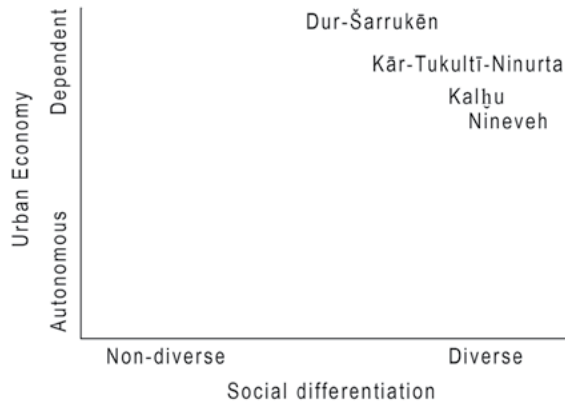


Figure 47: Assyrian capital cities classification based on this study, produced by the author.

On the basis of the evidence presented in this study in relation to the lower cities of Assyrian capitals, I would argue that Assyrian capitals contained very diverse urban spaces, creating cities that incorporated all aspects of Assyrian central cities. Due to their size and the different activities that took place in the cities, I would argue that Assyrian capitals should be placed on the top right of the suggested taxonomy of central cities discussed above (Figure 47). They all had very diverse populations, while being economically dependent on their hinterland and external food and economic resources. At the same time, just like every other city, Assyrian capitals were not identical to each other. Some might have been more elite focused (e.g. Dur-Šarrukēn), others might have had more urban features (e.g. Nineveh and Kalḥu), while others might have had a larger focus on agricultural production and they housed large numbers of deportee workers (e.g. Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta).

Concluding, Assyrian capitals were not empty cities and should not be reconstructed as such. The archaeological focus on elite spaces has distorted our view of these capitals and our perception has focused on the large palaces and temples. However, these cities were occupied by people. What kind of people it is hard to say, they might have been priests, soldiers, rich individuals, poor deportees, workmen, traders etc. Some of them might existed in one capital and not in another. Whatever was the case, Assyrian capitals were probably full of life.

7.4.5 CONCLUSIONS – FUNCTION OF ASSYRIAN CAPITALS

There is no question about the function of Assyrian capitals as the headquarters of the empire. Even though the Assyrians themselves did not have a word for capital cities (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2011, 73), their capitals fit all the criteria of a capital city: the seat of the government (king), and the location from which the administration and supervision of the empire was conducted.

It is important to stress, however, that Assyrian capitals should not be confined to the strict definition of “the residence of the king”. They were fully fledged urban spaces, with complex social interactions. In the conceptual examples I investigated above, I suggested a more bottom-up approach for the study of the capitals of Assyria. Concluding, we still lack significant knowledge on the functions of Assyrian capitals.

Moving forward, an investigation of the lower cities will be a crucial factor that is bound to change the view we have of Assyrian capitals. The extent of the lower cities is such that it makes it almost impossible to excavate them in their entirety.

However, geophysical surveys (e.g. ground penetrating radar, magnetics, or resistivity) combined with archaeological surveys, such as the one conducted by Fiorina (2011) can help us map the lower cities and give a more cohesive picture of their urban spaces. Targeted excavations will then be able to provide glimpses of how these cities would have looked and the types of activities that took place in them. Such studies will allow us to rethink and redefine the basic premises of the current top-down approaches to Assyrian capitals. This will also allow for a wider, multifaceted re-interpretation of Assyria as an empire.