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

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Summary

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of capital creation in antiquity, focusing on the imperial capitals of Assyria from the 14th century BCE until the fall of this empire in 612 BCE. Capital creation is defined as the construction of a monumental capital either in a new location or through a profound transformation of a pre-existing settlement. As a historical phenomenon, capital creation can be linked with empire and nation building processes. One of the first states to repeatedly engage with capital creation was the Assyrian empire. As such, it offers unique potential for the study of capital creation.

The Assyrian Empire relocated its capital four times and created new urban centers at: Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, Kalḫu, Dur-Šarrukēn, and Nineveh. While these capitals have been investigated in some detail, they have not yet been studied from a comparative perspective concerned with the rationale behind capital creation in Assyria. This thesis presents a systematic re-evaluation of the archaeological evidence of these capitals.

The comparative framework that forms the backbone of this study consists of three questions: *why* was a capital created; *how* was a capital constructed; and *what* was the function of the capital (Chapter 1). These questions are contextualized in a triangular model that maps out: the historical conditions under which a new capital was created; who the key agents were; and what resources were required for their construction. The combination of the three key questions and the triangular model is applied to the four Assyrian capitals.

Chapter 2 discusses the broader historical context of Assyria and provides an overview of the traditional capital of the empire, Aššur. Aššur can be regarded as the benchmark for Assyrian capitals, and serves to clarify the differences between a historical city versus a planned capital.

Chapters 3-6 are dedicated to the study of the four capitals. These chapters place each urban center

within their historical frameworks, exploring key events and agents that initiated or influenced the creation of each city. The construction processes are analyzed on the basis of available textual, geographical, and archaeological evidence. Finally, the functions of these cities are investigated, including the rarely explored lower cities.

The results of the analysis are then combined in chapter 7. This chapter demonstrates that capital creation is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that affects, and is affected by numerous parameters. It deconstructs the dominant narrative that imperial capitals are mainly the projects of exceptional leaders and produces a synthetic and contextual answer to the rationale, construction, and functioning of these Assyrian capitals. Finally, Chapter 8 presents the conclusions of the dissertation and draws out the broader relevance of the model used in this study for both ancient and more recent instances of capital creation.