

Neo-Assyrian capital cities: from imperial headquarters to cosmopolitan cities

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The discovery of monumental sculptures of human-headed winged lions and bulls in the area of Mosul (today northern Iraq) around 1843 CE marks the beginning of the investigations of ancient Mesopotamia. The names of the Assyrian cities were known from a few Greek and Roman travelers and from references in the Old Testament. Nimrod, Aššur, and Nineveh stood for condemnable life, hubris, megalomania, and cruelty – features that seemed to be corroborated by the colossal beasts and the endless scenes of warfare on the stone panels, the vast palaces, which they decorated, and the incredibly large cities.¹ Today, although systematic archaeological research and the decipherment of tens of thousands of cuneiform texts provides more and more detailed information about the Assyrian Empire, it is still a challenge to define the characteristics of Assyrian cities and how people lived in them.

Historical and environmental background

The cities investigated here are all situated in the “Assyrian Heartland” in northern Mesopotamia, a fertile area within the rain-fed dry farming zone (see Table 23.1). Until 1500 BCE Assyrian cities did not exceed 100 hectares, because the hinterlands could not support larger cities. The Assyrians depended always on further income derived from trade, taxes, or tribute.

Assyria began as a modest city-state around the capital city Aššur (note that Aššur designates the highest god of the city and the empire, the city and the land). During the Old Assyrian period (c. 2000–1700 BCE) Aššur was a

¹ The “sh” sound in Akkadian names and places is sometimes rendered š or Š in the chapter and figures and maps. The “h” sound in Akkadian is unmarked; the sound is an “Achlaut,” like Scottish “loch” or Yiddish “chutzpah.” The sound appears occasionally as “kh.” The emphatic consonants (s and t, usually transliterated with dots under them) are not marked in the text.

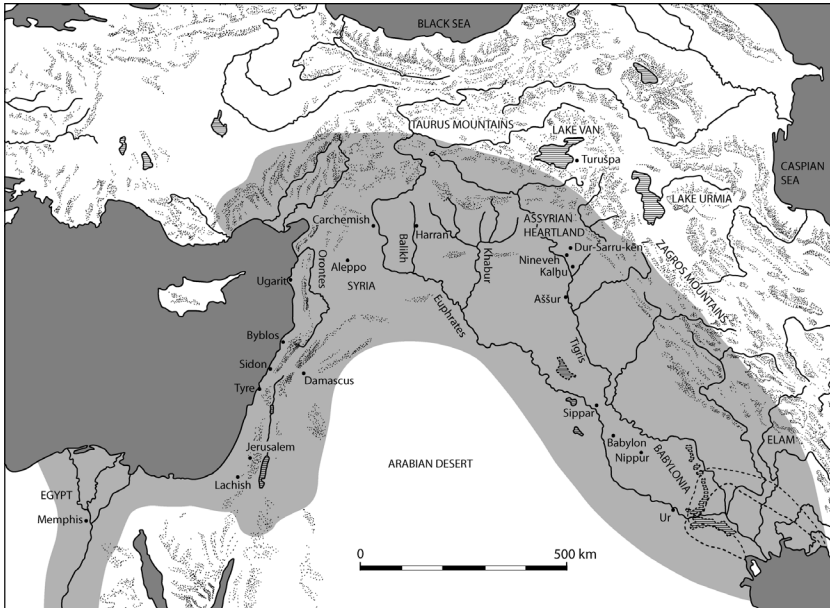
Table 23.1 Chronological table of the Assyrian capital cities and the mentioned kings

	Assyrian kings mentioned	Capital city (Ancient/ modern name)
Old Assyrian period (c. 2000–1700 BCE)		<i>Aššur</i> /Qalat Šerqat
Middle Assyrian period (c. 1700–1100 BCE)	Šamši-Adad I (1815–1776)	<i>Aššur</i> /Qalat Šerqat <i>Aššur</i> /Qalat Šerqat
	Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233–1197)	<i>Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta</i> / Tulul al-'Aqr
Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 1100–612 BCE)		<i>Aššur</i> /Qalat Šerqat (until 864)
	Aššurnasirpal II (883–859)	<i>Kalhu</i> /Nimrud
	Šalmaneser III (858–824)	<i>Kalhu</i> /Nimrud
	Šalmaneser V (726–722)	<i>Kalhu</i> /Nimrud
	Sargon II (721–705)	<i>Dūr-Šarru-kēn</i> /Khorsabad
	Sennacherib (704–681)	<i>Nineveh</i> /Kuyunjik+Nebi Yunus
	Esarhaddon (680–669)	<i>Nineveh</i> /Kuyunjik+Nebi Yunus
	Aššurbanipal (668–631)	<i>Nineveh</i> /Kuyunjik+Nebi Yunus
	Sinšariškun (626–612)	<i>Nineveh</i> /Kuyunjik+Nebi Yunus
	Aššuruballit II (611–609)	<i>Harranu</i> /Harran

major trading center that flourished mainly due to its elaborate network of trading colonies in Anatolia. The expansionist efforts started during the fourteenth century, and in the following century Assyria was already an important military power, which subordinated Upper Mesopotamia and parts of Syria. After a period of weakness in the late second and early first millennium, the Assyrian Empire evolved into a “great power,” dominating most of the Near East (ninth–seventh century): at the time of Sargon II and Sennacherib it extended from the Persian Gulf to the Taurus Mountains, and from Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Gaza until beyond the Zagros Mountains in Iran; even Egypt was occupied for some years during the reign of Esarhaddon and Aššurbanipal (Map 23.1).

Between 614 and 612 BCE the Assyrian capital cities of the heartland were besieged and sacked by an alliance of Medes and Babylonians. The destruction of Nineveh and of the Temple of Aššur marked the end of the Assyrian

Neo-Assyrian capital cities



Map 23.1 Map of the Neo-Assyrian Empire at the height of its power (seventh century BCE) (drawn by M. Lerchl).

Empire. The last king, Aššurballit II, briefly retained control over some western provinces and many provincial centers continued to exist, but Assyria as a state no longer existed.

Long-lasting internal problems made the empire collapse so quickly. They were rooted in the concentration of power in the hands of the king, struggles for the succession to the throne, the dependence of the enormous cities with a massive bureaucracy and a huge army that needed to be regularly supplied from the provinces and tributary states, the loyalty of which was seldom by choice. The huge capital cities in the Assyrian heartland were situated so close together that the agricultural output in their hinterlands was inadequate. Their provisions from distant regions required a sophisticated system of overland transport, shipping, and storage of large amounts of food.

The evolution to *the* superpower of the ancient Near East was accompanied by considerable population growth mainly due to mass deportations – it is supposed that up to 4 million people were deported between c. 850 and 614 BCE – and a certain voluntary influx of people. A large proportion of the

conquered territory was steppe, which the Assyrians made arable with the help of deportees. This led to a restructuring of the provinces with a reformed administration and to a complete remodeling of the cities in the Assyrian heartland. The old capital city, Aššur, which had developed since the late third millennium, no longer met the social, economic, and political needs for the capital of a large empire, and several Assyrian kings felt the need to found new residence cities with distinctly differing structures (Kartukulti-Ninurta, Kalhu, Dūr-Šarru-kēn, Nineveh). Even so Aššur always remained the religious and ideological center of the empire, because it was the seat of the city-god and national god Aššur, whose representative was the king.

Aššur, the eternal capital

The city of Aššur is situated at a strategically convenient position on a mountain spur high above the Tigris Valley. Best known is the city of the seventh century, from the end of the Assyrian Empire (Figure 23.1). At that time the overall area of the walled inner city measured c. 65 hectares, with the new city (southern extension) c. 73 hectares; the population is estimated between 30,000 and 50,000.

Mainly remains of sanctuaries are known from the late third millennium, and even at the Old Assyrian period the city is poorly known. The first flourish under the interloper king Šamši-Adad I didn't last long, but he gave the already existing main sanctuary, the temple of the god Aššur, its shape, which remained nearly unchanged for 1,200 years until the end of Assyria. He also erected the ziggurat, presumably after a Babylonian model. When

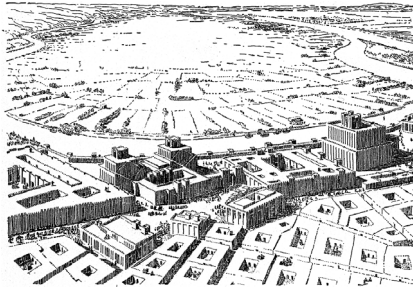


Figure 23.1 The city center of Aššur with the most important temples and palaces (from W. Andrae, *Das wiedererstandene Assur* [Leipzig, 1938], p. 44, Abb. 24).

Assyria came into power again in the thirteenth century, the city was enlarged by the southern extension. King Tukulti-Ninurta I, well aware that he had himself created enemies all over with his expansionist policy, fortified the strategic weak point of Aššur, the western flank. He was also the first king to leave the old, cramped city and founded Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta as his new capital (see below). With Aššurnasirpal II the Assyrian kings displaced the seat of the government definitively away from Aššur. However, the city's structure remained the same until 614 BCE. The official buildings were arranged, one beside the other, along the elevated northern edge. These are (from east to west) the Temple of Aššur and the ziggurat at the tip, the "Old Palace," and the Anu-Adad Temple. Opposite the main and processional road, which widens here to a plaza, were the temples of Ištar and Nabu, the Western Palace, the temple of Sin and Šamaš, and the Eastern Palace.

The temple of the god Aššur (Ešara) was a mighty complex, consisting of a main building and a large court surrounded by rooms. At special occasions such as ritual festivals the public had access to the large court. The holy abode was described by Esarhaddon: "I backed the cella of Aššur, my lord, with gold. Figures of *lahmu* und cherubs from shiny gold I put side by side. I plastered the walls with gold. . ." The temple held its own workshops (for example, of goldsmiths), a brewery, bakery, a butchery, and kitchens that prepared the daily meals for the god and his household. The coherence of the empire was performed there daily as the rations of meat were provided every day by a different province. In this way, the whole empire literally fed the god.

The existence of this temple contributed significantly to the enduring importance of the city, even when the governmental headquarters were displaced. The whole priesthood and temple personnel remained in Aššur with the god, and the Assyrian kings had to come there regularly for ritual purposes. But the temple also played a decisive role in the Assyrian royal and state ideology. The god Aššur was deemed the true king, who retained the cosmic order; his representative on earth was the king, who preserved the political order. Thus the legitimation of the Assyrian kings was immediately bound to the Temple of Aššur, which constituted the ideological center of the empire throughout its history.²

² Stefan Maul, "Der assyrische König – Hüter der Weltordnung," in Kazuko Watanabe (ed.), *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999), p. 214.

Close to it stood the “Old Palace,” the main palace of the Assyrian kings at least since the nineteenth century, when the complex of 110 meters by 98 meters with at least ten courtyards and 172 rooms had been erected. But even after Aššurnasirpal II had deplaced the capital to Kalhu and inaugurated his new palace there, almost every king seems to have altered this prestigious abode, as building inscriptions of at least twenty-one kings testify. One reason for its continuous use were the royal tombs below the palace. At least seven Assyrian kings of the eleventh–seventh centuries were buried here. This indicates that many kings returned after death to this so-called “Palace of the Fathers.” Regular offerings and libations for the dead at the ancestors’ graves belonged to the fundamental duties of every mortal, the king included.³

At least four other palaces are attested: one on the terrace of the “New Palace” from the ninth century; the “Eastern Palace” of Šalmaneser III 100 meters southeast of the “Old Palace”; a palace or administrative building between the Nabû-Temple and the Sin-Šamaš Temple; and the palace of a crown prince of the early seventh century, which was the only official building inside the housing quarters. In sum, the palaces did not occupy a large proportion of the city area. Strikingly, and in sharp contrast to the following Assyrian capitals, the area of the official buildings merged smoothly into the residential zones. Although these have been investigated only partially, their overall structure can be discerned due to a systematic exploration with trenches. In the late seventh century, tightly packed housing quarters extended that were accessible through a regular street network. The houses of downtown (*libbi āli*) are sizeable (surface area between 150 and 450 square meters) and display quadrangular ground plans, while small houses with irregular ground plans predominate in the places where new construction areas were set out here in the seventh century. Apparently space had become rare then.

The scheme of the larger houses consisted of a public sector near the entrance (*bābānu*) and a private one (*bītānu*) in the rear sector – a pattern similar to that of palaces. This was appropriate since the houses served not only as dwelling places, but also as handicraft workshops or trade offices with plenty of public audience spaces. The education of the intellectual elite took place in the houses of “scribes” (not in schools). Underneath the

³ Friedhelm Pedde and Steven Lundström, *Der Alte Palast in Assur: Architektur und Baugeschichte* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2008).

innermost chamber the deceased household members were buried in vaulted burial chambers and venerated regularly. Many houses contained private archives (real estate documents, marriage contracts, testaments, and business records) that give insight into daily life. The different urban districts seem to have accommodated a socially differentiated population. Many houses in the marginal zones of the city may be attributed to immigrants. Indeed, Aššur was a flourishing city with ethnically and socially highly differentiated inhabitants from all regions of the empire until the end in 614 BCE. Egyptians, Medes, Luwians, Arameans, and others are attested as house owners. Suburbs outside the city wall are attested by relevant sherd scatters.

Real estate affairs were under the responsibility of the urban administration. At least one civil servant had to be present during purchase and sale of houses and plots. The transactions were controlled by the “principal of the city” (*ša muhhi āli*), who was higher in rank than the mayor (*hazannu*), who had been appointed by the king. This hierarchy changed after the middle of the seventh century, when the mayor headed the urban administration. From 684 BCE onwards a council of three mayors is attested, who were responsible for three urban districts, from which the one for downtown (*ša libbi āli*) is the highest in rank.⁴ The mayor and the principal acted also as judges, but their main duty consisted in linking the king and the city. No buildings devoted to the urban administration have been discovered so far. Perhaps there were none, or the administration acted in the office rooms of the temples, since at least one mayor of downtown is known to have been a goldsmith of the Aššur Temple.

The most remarkable features of the old capital city are the dominance of the temples compared to the palaces, and the fact that even the palaces and temples of prime importance for the state were not separated from the residential quarters. This contradicts the frequent assertion that Neo-Assyrian cities were characterized by a distinct segregation of royal and urban domains. But it may have been the main reason why numerous Assyrian kings made enormous efforts to transfer the administrative headquarters of the growing empire elsewhere.

⁴ Karen Radner and Evelyn Klengel-Brandt, “Die Stadtbeamten von Assur und ihre Siegel,” in Simo Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, Sept. 7–11, 1995* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), pp. 137–59.

Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta, the futile attempt to replace the capital at Aššur

Tukulti-Ninurta I, at the end of the Middle Assyrian period, was the first king to leave the venerable, but ramped city of Aššur and to found a new city 3 kilometers upstream on the other riverbank. The king claims to have created Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (literally: the harbor of Tukulti-Ninurta) on virgin soil as “a city for cult and residence.” This creation was an enormous undertaking: the new capital with an area of c. 240 hectares extended over at least 2.8 kilometers along the Tigris and was 900 meters wide.⁵ A city wall with protruding towers fortified the rectangular urban area. A narrower inner wall enclosed the official area of the city (at least 35 hectares), which was situated at the edge toward the valley. In the middle of this area the “Temple of the Universe” was erected, which was dedicated mainly for the god Aššur. This was deemed pretentiousness, because Aššur resided in his age-old abode, and the temple was shut down after the assassination of Tukulti-Ninurta by his nobles. No later king ever tried to replace the seat of Aššur.

The only building that was erected on an elevated position, was the royal palace (The House of the Universe). An artificial mudbrick terrace, 15–18 meters high, supported the vast palace, which must have measured possibly 400 meters in length. With a total surface of c. 40,000 square meters this palace was at least four times larger than the “Palace of the Fathers” at Aššur. The lower city exhibits numerous settlement traces, including a small temple in the north. However, it is not clear how extensively the lower city was covered with buildings. A canal (Canal of Justice) supplied the urban area with water, and granaries for the storage of the grain tax are mentioned in texts. The building of a new capital city remained an episode, and the following kings continued to reign from the city of Aššur, until Aššurnasirpal II moved the capital to Kalhu.

Kalhu (or Calah) and the emergence of the military headquarters of the empire

Aššurnasirpal II built his new capital city at Kalhu, an already existing, fair-sized town, which he enlarged considerably to an area of 360 hectares (Figure 23.2). The citadel has the natural oval form of a tell site. Where it is included in the large mudbrick city wall, the city’s contour is irregular; where the newly

⁵ Reinhard Dittmann, “Ausgrabungen der Freien Universität Berlin in Assur und Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta in den Jahren 1986–89,” *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 122 (1990), 157–71.

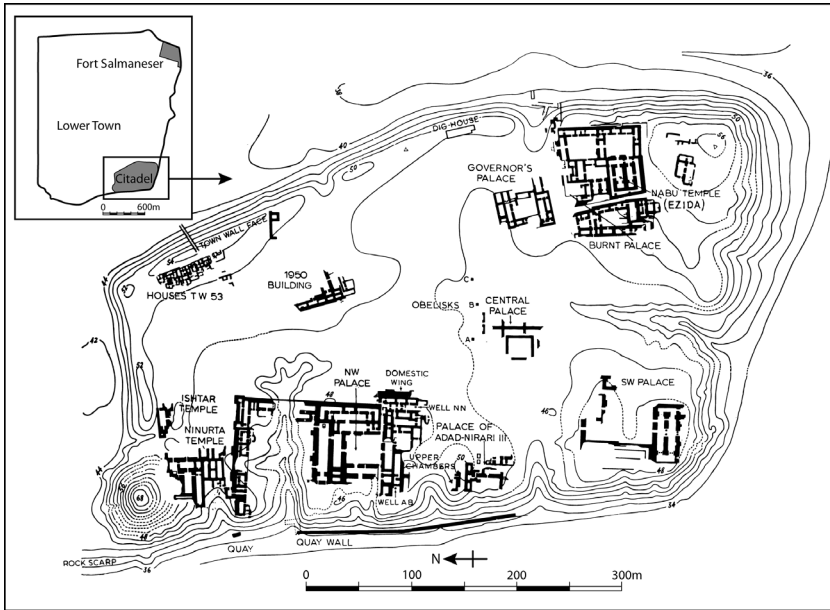


Figure 23.2 Plan of Kalhu with a multitude of palaces on the main mound (drawn by M. Lerchl after M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains* [New York: Dodd, Mead 1966], p. 32, fig. 1).

created Lower Town is enclosed, the contour is linear and forms a right angle. Extensive excavations have been carried out at the citadel and at “Fort Šalmaneser,” while 90 percent of the city, the Lower Town, remains unexplored.

Aššurnasirpal II created a vast ensemble of official buildings high up the citadel mound. He claimed to have built nine temples for twelve gods at Kalhu. Further large buildings, usually called “palaces,” served for administrative and residential purposes and were led by high-ranking officials. At least seven palaces were erected by Neo-Assyrian kings, but they were not all simultaneously in use. The Governor’s Palace was probably not the seat of the governor of Kalhu, but rather of several high-ranking people in the administration of Kalhu. Some of the courtiers were allowed to reside on the citadel, such as an “entrance supervisor” and a eunuch and court official, who was also a merchant, land-owner, and money lender: they lived in a group of densely packed houses, which were built against the inner face of the citadel’s wall at the northeast side.⁶

⁶ David Oates and Joan Oates, *Nimrud: An Assyrian Imperial City Revealed* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2001).

The earliest and largest palace, the North-West Palace, was built by Aššurnasirpal as his main residence. On an area of at least 200 by 120 meters a large official part around the outer court was laid out, bordered by offices and storerooms, and several residential and provisioning arrays around smaller inner courtyards. Below the residential area the undisturbed tombs of the queens were found in 1989 (CE), the treasures of which display the enormous wealth of the royals. The extensive decoration with carved panels from Mosul alabaster, which was clearly influenced by similarly decorated buildings in the conquered Syro-Aramean kingdoms, was a novelty, which was to become the most typical decoration of Neo-Assyrian official buildings. The particular subjects of the narrative reliefs were chosen according to the function of the rooms: more private areas showed sporting scenes (for example, of hunts) of the king, while processions of people bringing tribute to the king decorated exterior facades. The throne room, as the virtual center of the empire, where major state ceremonies took place, was given the utmost care in decoration. The huge palace and its opulent decoration were “designed to impress, astonish, intimidate, to present an image of the Assyrian capital city as capital of the civilised world, of the royal palace as the centre of the universe, and of the Assyrian king as the most powerful man alive, deputy of Aššur, the most powerful god.”⁷

At a safe distance from the citadel Šalmaneser III, the successor of Aššurnasirpal II, constructed the arsenal (*ekal mašarti*), nicknamed by the excavators “Fort Šalmaneser.” The building, roughly 300 by 200 meters, is a novelty in Near Eastern architecture. It consisted in its southern part of rooms of state, which were used by the king and his courtiers. The northern part, where narrow rooms surround overly huge courtyards, was mainly used as barracks and workshops, housed troops, the military equipment from the soldiers and from the horses, chariots, and war machines. Later, the booty was stored here. This huge building, where the army was assembled and reviewed before the annual campaigns, reflects the growing importance of the Assyrian army in the ninth century.

We can only guess at the use of the Lower Town. The extensive building program was accomplished by deportees. Aššurnasirpal II reports: “When I consecrated the palace of Kalhu, 47,074 men and women, summoned from all the districts of my land, 5,000 dignitaries and envoys of the people of the lands Suhu, Hindanu . . . 16,000 people from Kalhu, and 1,500 palace officials,

⁷ John E. Curtis and Julian E. Reade, *Art and Empire* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), p. 40.

all of them . . . for ten days I gave them food, I gave them drink . . .”⁸ The 47,000 deportees, who worked for years to build his new palace in Kalhu, were brought to the job in addition to the 16,000 former inhabitants of Kalhu. It may be supposed that the deportees were the first to live in the Lower Town, and that the continuous supply of manpower, the population growth, and the military headquarters further contributed to the growing demands for housing space.

Dūr-Šarru-kēn: the politically motivated founding of a new capital

This city (modern Khorsabad) was created due to political reasons. King Šarru-kēn (Sargon) II (721–705 BCE) was not the legitimate heir to the throne. Due to internal struggles he felt the need to deplace the seat of the government. He chose a site in the hilly country along the Khosr River 16 kilometers northeast of Nineveh, which was unoccupied except for a small village, and created his capital named “Fort Sargon.”

From the laying of the foundations in 717 BCE it took only ten years to raise a city, which was nearly square with sides measuring 1,760 x 1,830 x 1,620 x 1,850 meters, and was enclosed by a wall, 14 meters wide and allegedly 12 meters high. Seven gates, each protected by a pair of colossal human-headed winged bulls supporting an arch, controlled the access (Figure 23.3).

The temples must have been finished, when in 707 BCE the entrance of the gods was celebrated. A year later the city was inaugurated with pompous festivities to which all dignitaries of the empire and vassal rulers were invited. But Sargon enjoyed the splendors of this outrageous city for only one year; he died on a campaign in the Taurus Mountains in 705 BCE. The fact that his corpse was not found and could not be buried was a clear sign for his son Sennacherib, the heir to the throne, to transfer the seat of the government hastily, this time to Nineveh (see below). Dūr-Šarru-kēn continued to exist as the capital of a province.

Two citadels, distant from each other as far as possible, protrude from the rectilinear outline of the city. The smaller one, the *bīt kutalli* (“Review Palace,” or Palace F), lay raised on a terrace above the lower city. It served as the royal arsenal comparable to Fort Šalmaneser at Kalhu. The larger one, measuring c. 20 hectares, was separated from the lower city by an interior

⁸ A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the First Millennium B.C.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 293.

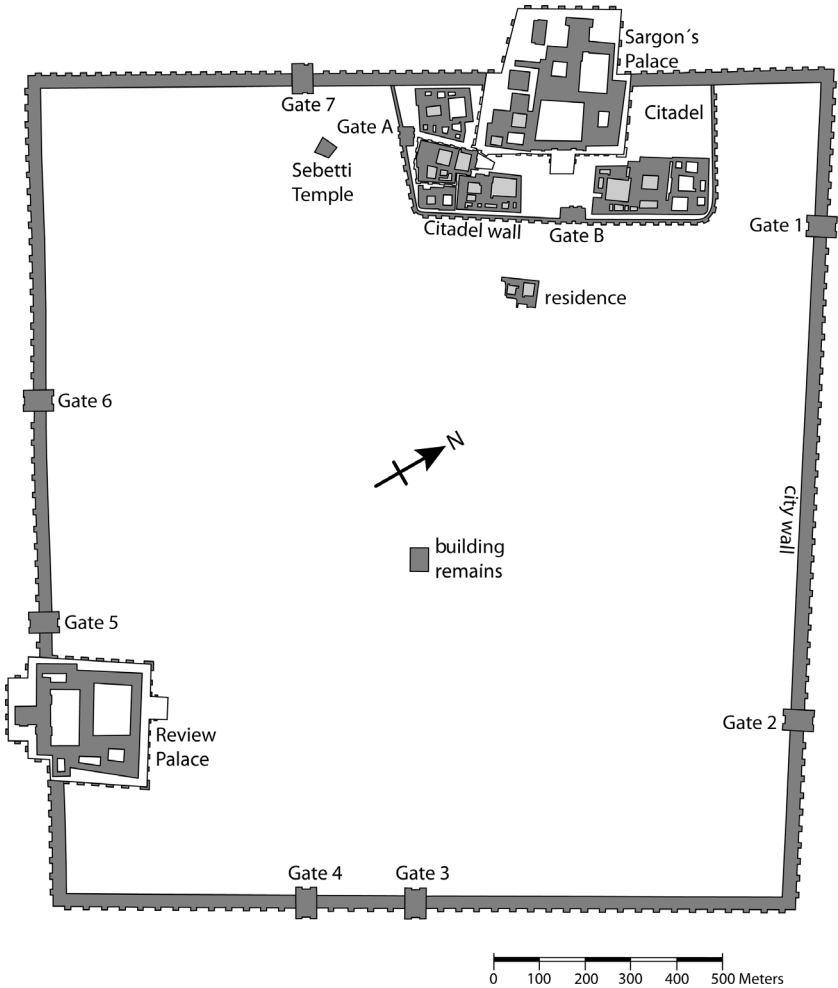


Figure 23.3 Plan of Dūr-Šarru-kēn, the newly founded capital city (drawn by M. Lerchl).

wall with protruding towers. Two chamber gates controlled the entrance to the citadel, inside of which were exclusively royal buildings, residences, and sacred buildings. Sargon's royal palace and the Nabū-Temple were further secluded by being laid on raised platforms. The palace was in every respect fabulous: it measured c. 250 by 190 meters and was lavishly decorated with colossal figures and hundreds of sculptured stone slabs. Immediately adjacent to the palace were built a ziggurat and a temple complex, where six different

gods were venerated. In this way, the shrines were under complete control of the royal apparatus, and the king could fulfil his religious duties without leaving his profoundly protected abode. The temples appear like small duplicates of the gods' main temples in the venerable city of Aššur. The remaining area of the citadel was densely covered with spacious subsidiary residences, where high state officials lived and administered.

The palace terrace projected into an artificial park and orchard area, which was created with great effort. Sargon claims that the park was "like the Amanus mountain, in which grows every tree of the Hatti-land and the fruit trees of every mountain." These royal gardens, where exotic plants from all the countries of the empire grew, underscored visibly the king's claim to universal power.

The most striking feature is the way in which the citadels were strongly fortified and carefully separated from the lower city. This has been ascribed to the fact that a motley collection of deportees from the whole empire were settled here under supervision of Assyrian officials. For lack of excavations it is difficult to figure out how much of the lower city was covered with buildings. However, earlier notions that this was no city, but a camping area of prisoners on a walled, empty space are no longer acceptable. The gates point to a regular road network, minor excavations in the center of the lower city brought to light a spacious elite house, and another residence and a temple were situated near the citadel.

Nineveh: the creation of the largest city in Mesopotamia by Sennacherib

From at least the mid-third millennium onwards Nineveh was known for its temple of the goddess Ištar – one of Mesopotamia's main sanctuaries. In the fourteenth century Nineveh served as a royal residence; at least three Middle Assyrian palaces are mentioned in texts. By the end of the second millennium BCE the city consisted of the citadel and a substantial lower town, extending from the Khosr River to the north, and probably already protected by a city wall. From that time it was the "second city" of Assyria, where the kings temporarily resided and received annual tributes. A multitude of palaces with adjacent gardens and several temples are mentioned as having existed at Kujunjik (the modern name for the main citadel of ancient Nineveh).⁹

⁹ The most conclusive summary about Nineveh is given by J. E. Reade, "Ninive," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 9 (2001), 388–433. For the renewed excavations, which shed

It was king Sennacherib who first made Nineveh into the Assyrian administrative capital. He refurbished the city and enlarged it considerably (Figure 23.4). He states in his building accounts that the earlier city had a circumference of 9,300 great cubits (=5,115 meters; c. 150–200 hectares) and that he enlarged it to 21,815 great cubits (=12,000 meters), which fits well with the measured area of 750 hectares. An estimate of 15,000–20,000 inhabitants (100 per hectare) comes close to the number of people at Kalhu, before it was made the capital. New Nineveh was quadrangular, approximately 4 kilometers long and up to 2 kilometers wide and measured 750 hectares. It was by then ten times larger than Aššur. The population has been estimated (at an approximation of 100 persons per hectare) as 75,000, but this seems much too low. The number of “more than 120,000 persons and much cattle” mentioned in Jonah 4:11 is usually judged as exaggerated although it seems more in line with the 63,000 inhabitants of Kalhu, which had an area of 360 hectares.

Sennacherib described his buildings program: “I increased the site of Nineveh, my royal city, I widened its squares, made bright the avenues and streets and caused them to shine like the day . . . The wall and outer-wall I caused to be skillfully constructed and raised mountain-high. I widened its moat to 100 great cubits.” Royal Assyrian building inscriptions are not objective sources, but describe an ideal city, not the real topography. Still, due to the fragmentary state of the archaeological remains, we have to take them into account.

The headquarters of the empire

The city enclosed several elevations. The two most prominent mounds both lay at the outer edge of the city and bordered the Tigris Valley, thus contributing to its protection. The smaller mound in the southern part (named Nebi Yunus after the prophet Jonah) was c. 15 hectares in area and 15 meters high. At least from the ninth century onwards the Neo-Assyrian Arsenal (*ekal mašarti/kutalli*) was located here. It served as a camp and provided ample space for stables and weapons. There is archaeological evidence that tribute and booty were stored there, for example, several

light on the development of the city and the diversity of its quarters, see David Stronach, “Village to Metropolis: Nineveh and the Beginnings of Urbanism in Northern Mesopotamia,” in Stefania Mazzoni, (ed.), *Nuove fondazioni nel vicino oriente antico: realtà e ideologia* (Pisa: Giardini, 1994), pp. 85–114. The ancient texts are rendered after the timeless translation of Daniel David Luckenbill, *Sennacherib, King of Assyria, Annals* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1924).

Neo-Assyrian capital cities

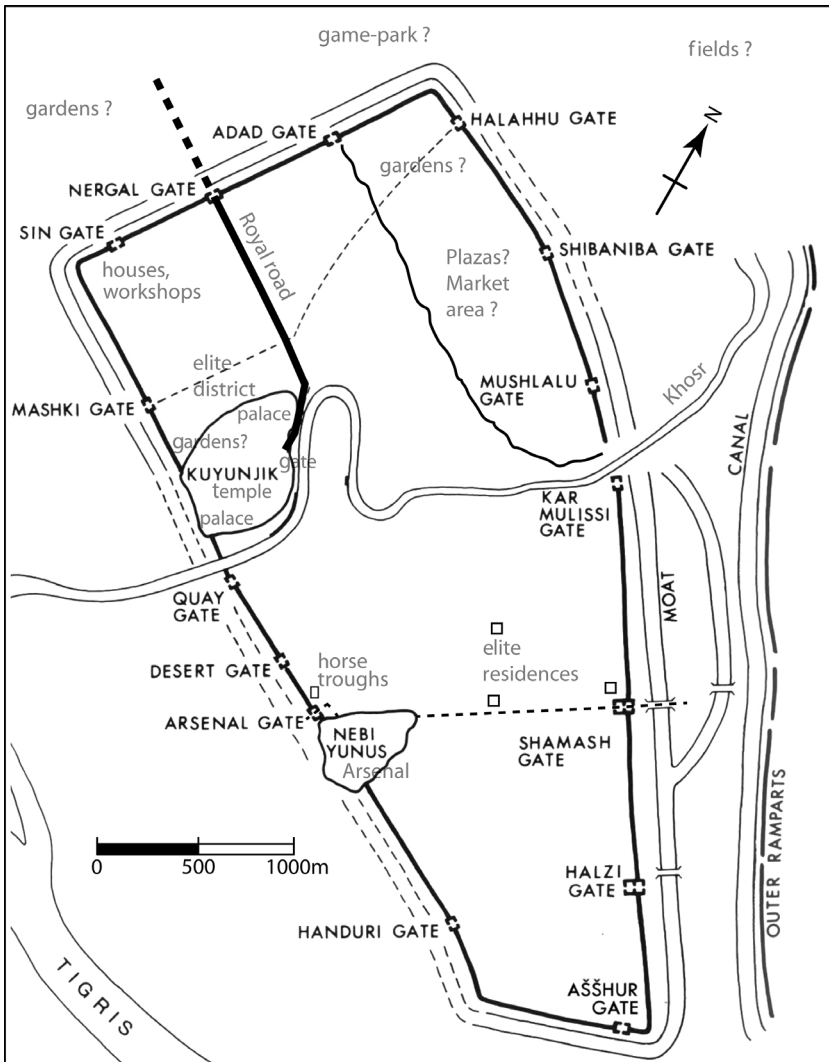


Figure 23.4 Nineveh, the largest city of its time; map showing the functions of the urban area and its outskirts (drawn by A. Otto; adapted from David Stronach, "Notes on the Fall of Nineveh," in Simo Parpola and R. M. Whiting [eds.], *Assyria 1995* [Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997], p. 312, fig. 2).

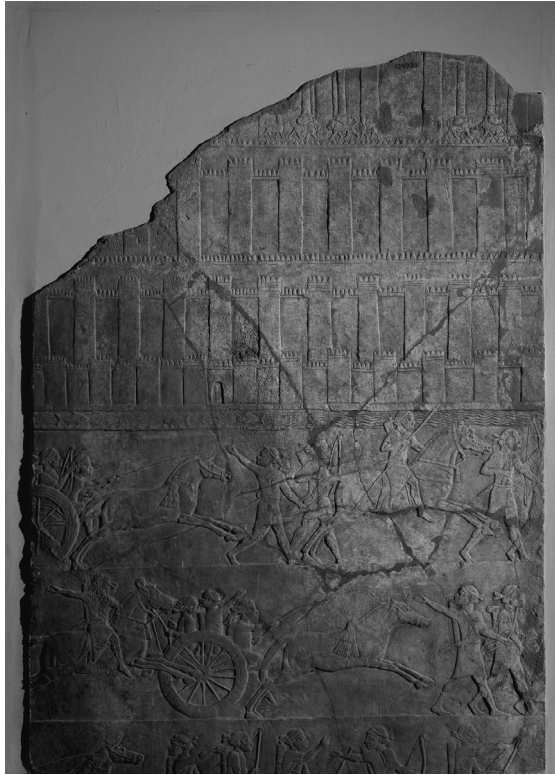


Figure 23.5 Depiction of the citadel mound of Nineveh “Kuyunjik” with its multiple fortification walls and Sennacherib’s “Palace Without Rival” at the top; stone slab from Nineveh, North Palace, Room H (© Trustees of the British Museum).

statues of a defeated Egyptian king were prominently displayed in the entrance gates of the arsenal. Nebi Yunus was directly accessible from the west by a separate city gate named Marshalling everything: the Gate of the Arsenal, close to which stood horse troughs.

Kuyunjik is a steep-sided mound, c. 45 hectares in area and 25–30 meters high (Figure 23.5). It is a tell site, made up of continuous settlement layers since the seventh millennium. In Neo-Assyrian times it was fortified. A stone-paved ramp led up to the only entrance, the East Gate, flanked by colossal bulls. At least five temples must have occupied the center of the citadel. Private houses are mentioned in a text from 614 BCE but it is difficult to judge who inhabited the houses (high officials or royal servants?) and if Kuyunjik was a restricted area.

By far the largest buildings are the two palaces in the extreme southwest and northeast. Whereas little is known about the heavily eroded North Palace, where several crown princes and kings resided, much more is known about the SW Palace, the “Palace Without Rival.” Sennacherib described extensively in his annals how he tore down the former palace and enlarged it. The palace must have measured approximately 12 hectares, but barely half of it has been excavated. It was the administrative center of the whole Assyrian Empire at its peak. It consisted of an outer court, probably surrounded by services and offices, giving access to the throne room. Beyond this lay the royal residential suite and the residence of the queen. Smaller units between them may have been the court eunuchs’ apartments. A large part of the southern sector served various administrative purposes and probably replaced the free-standing palaces of high officials that are attested in earlier capitals. The walls of most of the rooms and courtyards were decorated with stone panels, which depict scenes of conquest during the military campaigns abroad and building projects in Assyria, often explained by captions.

At the southwestern edge, heading for the Tigris Valley, a terrace spread in front of a large facade. This may be depicted on a panel, which shows a two-tiered main city wall with protruding towers and a postern gate and a wall beyond a river; an inner wall with turrets and an outer wall, all topped by crenellations, probably depict the citadel wall of Kujunjik. The building above matches Sennacherib’s descriptions of the palace fairly well with colossal winged bulls and bronze lion bases that supported cedar columns.

The city wall, streets, parks, and open spaces

Sennacherib’s city wall (12 kilometers long) consisted of an inner mudbrick wall (The Wall whose Splendor Overwhelms the Enemy) c. 15 meters thick and 25 meters high, and an outer stone wall (The Wall that Terrifies Evil), 11 meters thick and 4.5 meters high. At a distance of c. 80 meters there was a moat (dry or water-filled?), c. 55 meters wide, in places spanned by stone bridges. The city wall is reported as having fourteen to eighteen gates, which bear elaborate names such as “Adad who Gives Abundance to the Land: the Gate of Adad of the Game-park” (variant: “of the gardens”), describing what lay beyond the gate.

The Nergal Gate, approached by a stone paved ramp and flanked by colossal bulls, protected the entrance to the main or “royal road” that led straight to the empire’s center on top of Kujunjik. Sennacherib claims: “62 great cubits I measured the width of the royal road, up to

the park gate.”¹⁰ This 34-meter-wide boulevard was laid out straight between the Nergal Gate and the northeastern edge of Kujunjik, that is, on a 1,000-meter stretch. The road broke through the extant house quarters, and its construction works seem to have caused considerable trouble. Sennacherib feels obliged to add: “If ever (anyone of) the people who dwell in that city tears down his old house and builds a new one, and the foundations of his house encroach upon the royal road, they shall impale him upon a stake on his (own) house.” This refers to the fact that not the king, but the urban administration was responsible for the real estate affairs in the lower town, and that the residents used to alter the dwelling zones and their lanes at convenience. Nineveh, besides being the administrative center of the whole empire, was also the capital of a province with a separate urban administration, the head of which was the governor.

The alleged “shining” of the road may refer to the paving of the streets with stone slabs, while the overland roads, even the famous royal road, *harrān šarri*, which was used on the annual military campaigns, and by traders and the post, were only earth tracks.

At least three extramural parks and game-parks, and several garden areas inside the city are attested. It has been argued that “Hanging Gardens,” that is, artificially laid out parks, marvels of exotic fauna and flora, existed not only in Babylon, but also in Nineveh. It is unlikely that these were open to the public. However, private gardens, orchards, and fields existed outside and inside the city and were irrigated with the help of Sennacherib’s sophisticated system of canals, dams, and aqueducts, which brought supplementary water from Jerwan, 40 kilometers north in the Zagros foothills.

The lower town

The city was divided by the Khosr River into a northern and a southern part. In the northern half, the raised mound extending about 400 meters north of Kuyunjik was occupied by a densely built elite district of the seventh century BCE with spacious, well-drained courtyard houses and two broad roads, one running eastwards on the axis of the Maški Gate. Adjacent to this area, in the northwestern corner of the city there is evidence for a densely populated urban district, where potters and other artisans worked and lived in small, tightly packed houses.

¹⁰ See Luckenbill, *Sennacherib*.

Strangely, in the northeastern part of the city Sennacherib's wall included a high conglomerate river terrace, which – according to a survey – was only lightly settled. A part of this area may have been covered by gardens and orchards; another part may have had market functions. A city of that size must have had extended areas of daily barter and trade near the gates or within the city. Since Sennacherib boasted of his widening of the plazas, and since the two northeastern gates are named: “Always Possessing the Goodness of Grain and Cattle: Gate of the Town Šibaniba” and “Bringing the Produce of the Mountain(s): Gate of the Land of Halahhu,” this area seems a likely candidate for daily economic activities.

Whereas the northern half of Nineveh clearly shows differentiated functions of neighborhoods, this is more difficult to discern in the southern half. Several remains of palatial buildings, belonging to military officials or members of the royal family, further indicate that throughout Nineveh the elite quarters seem to have been located along the main boulevards, which lead to the two citadels. There remains ample space inside the city, where the tens of thousands of inhabitants could have lived. We know from texts only that Nineveh was a cosmopolitan metropolis in the late seventh century, where deportees and other people from all over the empire worked and lived.

Conclusion

The development from a city-state (Aššur) to the vast Assyrian Empire led to a marked change in people's living conditions and to the concept of a city as a royal capital. The old, traditional capital Aššur lost its role as the seat of government, and several kings created new capital cities in the Assyrian heartland. These changes arose from population pressure, economic growth, security issues, and the increased desire for the visible representation of royal power. Equally desirable was the Assyrian kings' desire to outrank Babylon, the eternal rival, in size, splendor, and religious prominence. Since the Aššur Temple remained the religious and ideological center of the empire, the seat of the government could be transferred according to the requirements of the particular king.

The creation of the great cities, their thorough refurbishment or new planning belong to the most important programs of Assyrian kings. In the Assyrian self-concept a king's duty was to establish and maintain the order of the world. The regularity of the planned or remodeled cities, a dominant feature of all the cities, was therefore not only due to technical but also, to a

considerable extent, to ideological reasons. The most visible expression of this are the king's building programs: he rebuilt ruined cities, regularize fortifications and streets, civilized nature by establishing botanical and zoological gardens, and even mastered the elements by means of a sophisticated water supply system. The previous assertion that the street network inside the cities was irregular has certainly to be abandoned. The king even breached already existing towns in order to create huge boulevards. Beyond this, the founding of "new" cities and the erection of "eternal" buildings were means to make their own names unforgettable and thus to achieve immortality – a fundamental aim of Near Eastern people.

Another prominent feature of the newly designed cities was the size. The dimensions of the cities, then among the largest in the world, the grandeur of the palaces, the massiveness of the fortifications, the width of the streets, the size of the statues and guardian-figures: everything was colossal. Also the effort and the expenses were enormous: tens of thousands of people worked for years in gigantic construction sites. The know-how and technical skills of countless inhabitants of the whole empire were needed for their completion. The center of government included a multitude of palaces; the palaces exhibit a confusingly large number of rooms; and the houses of the countless inhabitants must have sprung up like mushrooms.

The quality of the constructions was exceptional and illustrates visibly the infinite possibilities of the empire: exotic plants and animals from all the conquered territories, foreign stones, timber, and other imported materials such as ivory were employed lavishly. The desire to occupy the highest place is just another example of the royal quest for superlatives. The royal palace was always established on a citadel high above the lower city. Perhaps it is not by chance that the highest elevation of Kalhu and Dūr-Šarru-kēn, the ziggurat, was built as close as possible to the palace. In the last capital Nineveh/Kuyunjik the highest building must have been the royal palace itself. Size, number, quality, and height: every initiative of the king was colossal and excessive. The building projects were the elaborately staged signs of royal power and the king's privileged relation to the gods, and this was displayed to everyone.

The artfully designed imperial cities display a sharp division between elites and commoners. The supreme political and religious power in the administrative capitals was walled off from the rest of the city. This is understandable, since the huge royal palace served as the economic and administrative headquarters of a "worldwide" empire, where an immense

amount of taxes, booty, and treasures were stored. This headquarters had to be segregated from the rest of the city, which disposed of its own administration, supplies, and complex network of public and private urban institutions and buildings. Enormous attention was paid to the military headquarters. Each capital of the ninth–seventh century includes a separate second citadel with arsenals that were carefully segregated from the lower city. The well-organized and equipped army was the major pillar on which rested the vast Assyrian Empire.

Millions of deportees and the additional voluntary influx of people caused tremendous demographic changes in the countryside and in the cities. For example, in Aššur the crowded housing quarters grew over the deteriorating city walls, and Egyptians, Medes, Babylonians, Luwians, and other ethnic groups from all over the empire lived there together. In order to avoid comparable shortages of living space, the lower cities of Nineveh and Kalhu were carefully designed. In Nineveh spacious elite residences lay in a preferred location close to the major citadel and along the main roads. But the entire area of the very large cities was not covered with buildings. We know of gardens, parks, and pasture land within the surrounding wall, and the existence of plazas for various economic and social purposes can be assumed. Extramural fields, gardens, and orchards belonging to the king and individuals were used for pleasure and contributed to the provisioning of the cities. Suburbs are so far only attested at Aššur, but may have existed elsewhere.

Even if royal construction work seems to have dominated the appearance of cities, in actual fact this is not entirely true. If we knew more about the lower cities with their neighborhoods, the image would probably be different. Urban affairs, real estate management, legal practice, and many other elements of daily life were in the hands of the urban administration.

The enormous cities with an estimated population of 30,000–120,000 were ethnically mixed and socially heterogeneous. Their welfare depended on an elaborate system of provisioning, communication, and transport. The water supply system at the highest technical level permitted the settling of tens of thousands of people. However, the cities of the heartland were too large to be maintained only by local resources and they depended on the exploitation of the provinces – a highly vulnerable system. The attack of the Medes and Babylonians was just the welcome opportunity for the people all over the empire to throw off the heavy burden of the Assyrian yoke.

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