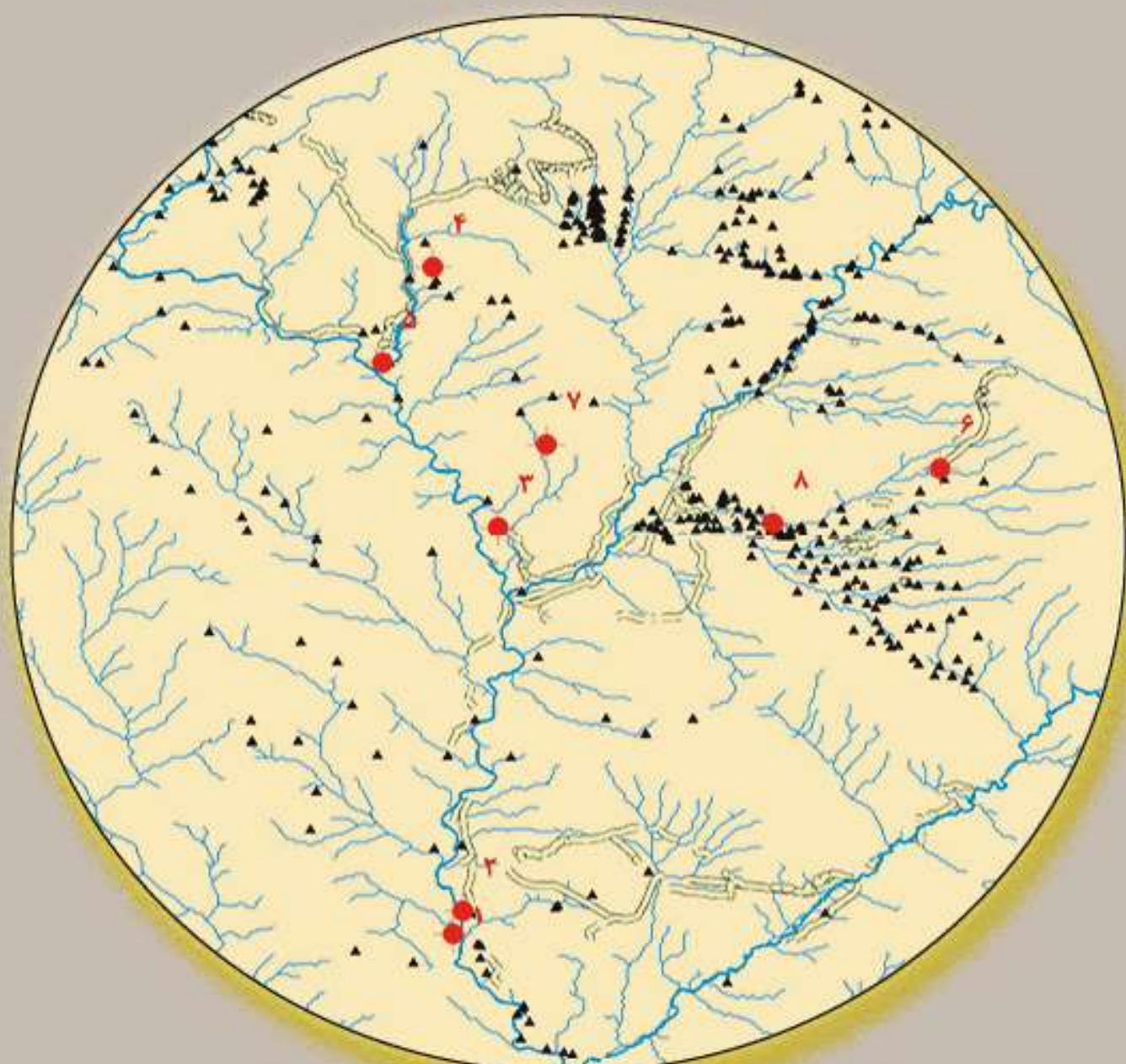


# The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom

## *The Historical-Political Geography of Central Assyria*



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## Abstract

In the early years of the first millennium BC, an unprecedented and significant phenomenon occurred in northern Mesopotamia that affected the entire Ancient East politically, socially, and militarily. This phenomenon was the creation of a single political structure called the Neo-Assyrian Kingdom and its core. The institution of kingship is an important part of ancient societies. The term “monarchy” means that sovereignty or supreme authority is symbolically vested in an individual. The three principles on which the foundation of this kingdom was based can be described as ideology, legitimacy, and implementation.

Royal ideology was a fundamental component of the Neo-Assyrian monarchy, as it formed the foundation and principle of a belief system and allowed the elite group to justify their dominance over others. Legitimacy is also crucial because it adds to monopoly, thus allowing power to be concentrated in the hands of one individual. However, no system for justifying and concentrating power can be effective without the means of dissemination and enforcement.

The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom was a large and expansive state that achieved a unified political structure. This government expanded its control based on policies such as conquest, coercion, or diplomacy. In doing so, it formed a codified political organization that encompassed a vast and culturally diverse region. Assyria was a hybrid state. To integrate the people and territories acquired through imperial expansion, the Assyrians created complex administrative systems that transcended political, social, ethnic, and local boundaries; but at the same time, Neo-Assyrian state was considered to have been exploitative. Most of the Assyrian state's efforts were aimed at controlling local populations, extracting resources from subjects and subordinate territories, and directing these resources to its main core (Central Assyria) for the economic benefits and political continuity of a very small segment of the population. The geography of Mesopotamia also profoundly shaped the way the region's inhabitants viewed the world around them, and the duality of the sense of “center” and “periphery” was formed in the early stages of their intellectual development.

Although our initial understanding of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom often emphasizes its exploitative nature, there is abundant evidence for the integration of subject peoples into the Assyrian state. A number of scholars have also noted that many of the soldiers, scribes, administrators, and high officials in Neo-Assyria were not actually Assyrian.

Assyria's expansion was remarkably rapid and highly successful, but it was also met with long, stubborn, and in some cases successful resistance. At certain points in time, the anti-Assyrian alliances arose as a response to Assyrian expansionism and military dominance. They are called “Kitro” in Assyrian sources meaning “a conspiracy between evil criminals with the aim of threatening”, which is a specialized ideological term in Neo-Assyrian literature. Ultimately, Assyria was eliminated from the scene of history by one of these alliances.

The results obtained in this book, in addition to adding new components to Neo-Assyrian archaeology, are also expected to help identify the cultural and political presence of Neo-Assyrians in the western regions of Iran for more than three centuries.

**Keywords:** Iron Age, Pottery, Neo-Assyrian Kingdom

### Extended Abstract

In the early years of the first millennium BCE, an unprecedented and significant development took place in northern Mesopotamia, which profoundly impacted the political, social, and military structures of the entire ancient Near Eastern region. This phenomenon entailed the formation of a centralized political entity known as the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which constituted its core nucleus. The institution of kingship represents a fundamental component of ancient societies. The concept of kingship denotes that sovereignty or supreme authority is symbolically vested in a singular individual. The three foundational principles underpinning this kingdom were ideology, legitimacy, and governance.

Royal ideology was one of the fundamental components of the Neo-Assyrian monarchy, as it constituted the foundation and core of a belief system that enabled the elite class to legitimize their dominance over others. Legitimacy is equally vital, as it confers exclusivity and thus permits the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual. However, no system for justifying and centralizing authority can be effective without mechanisms for dissemination and enforcement.

The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom was a vast and expansionist state that achieved a centralized political structure. This state extended its control through policies such as conquest, coercion, and diplomacy. Through these means, it constructed a coherent political organization that integrated an extensive and culturally heterogeneous territory. Assyria was a composite polity. The Assyrians developed complex administrative systems to integrate the diverse populations and territories acquired through imperial expansion, transcending political, social, ethnic, and local boundaries; nevertheless, the Neo-Assyrian state functioned as an exploitative regime. The majority of the Neo-Assyrian state's efforts were directed toward controlling local populations, extracting resources from subjects and subordinate territories, and channeling these resources to its core (central Assyria) for the economic benefit and political sustainability of relatively small ruling elite. The topography of Mesopotamia profoundly shaped the inhabitants' worldview, and the dichotomy between the notions of "center" and "periphery" had emerged during the early stages of their intellectual development.

Although initial interpretations of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom often emphasize its exploitative nature, abundant evidence indicates the integration of subject peoples within the Assyrian administration. Several scholars have also noted that a significant number of soldiers, scribes, administrators, and high-ranking officials in Neo-Assyria were, in fact, not ethnically Assyrian.

Assyrian expansion was remarkably rapid and highly successful; however, it also encountered prolonged, determined, and in some cases, effective resistance. At certain periods, anti-Assyrian coalitions emerged, referred to in Assyrian sources as "kitru"—meaning "a conspiracy of wicked criminals aimed at threat"—a specialized ideological term in Neo-Assyrian literature. Ultimately, Assyria was eradicated from the historical stage by one such coalition.

The findings presented in this book will not only contribute new elements to the archaeology of Neo-Assyria but are also expected to aid in identifying the cultural and political presence of Neo-Assyria in the western regions of Iran over a period exceeding three centuries.

#### 4 The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom

The book “*The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom: The Historical-Political Geography of Central Assyria*” is organized into three chapters. In the first chapter, based on the Socio-Natural System theory, the subsystems of topography, hydrology, climate, agriculture, road networks, trade, migration, political history, Assyrian hegemony, as well as internal and external rebellions were examined and analyzed. In this chapter, the geographical component was evaluated through an interdisciplinary framework grounded in contemporary Middle Eastern studies. Utilizing historical textual sources, the environmental and geographical parameters of Central Assyria were reconstructed. By systematically correlating present-day geographical data with that of the Neo-Assyrian period, a nuanced model has been developed elucidating the Assyrians’ adaptive strategies and interactions with their spatial environment. The topographical subsystem demonstrates that the study area comprises three distinct zones: highland, midland, and lowland regions, with average elevations ranging from approximately 97 meters above sea level in the lowlands to over 2,000 meters above sea level in the highlands (Figure 1). During the Neo-Assyrian period, these topographical variations were well documented; direct references to the terrain can be extracted from Assyrian texts and reliefs. Shalmaneser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib mentioned these rugged landscapes in their military campaigns and provided detailed accounts of them.

The hydrological subsystem indicates that the study area has historically possessed abundant water resources. The Tigris River, along with its perennial tributaries, has been capable of meeting the water needs of the region's inhabitants throughout history. This fluvial network comprises five principal tributaries: Khabur, Great Zab, Little Zab, Adhaim, and Diyala, with the Great Zab and Little Zab flowing into the Tigris within the study area (Figure 2). Historical texts frequently reference this river; during the Neo-Assyrian period, kings such as Shalmaneser I, Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal mentioned the Tigris River and its tributaries, providing detailed depictions of its landscape.

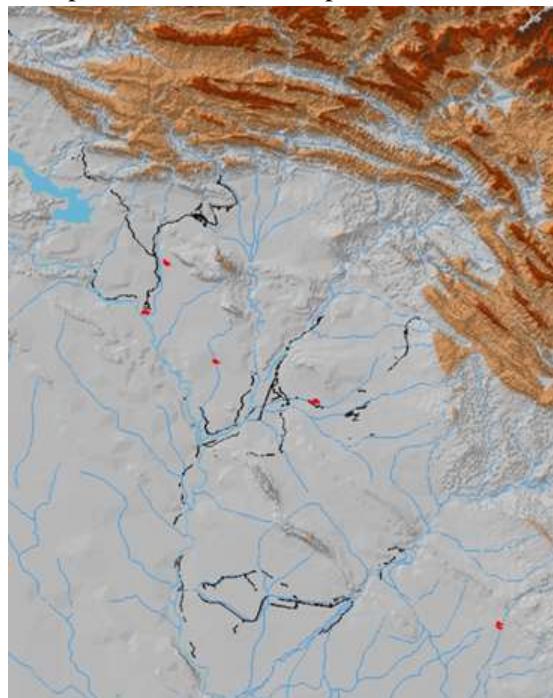


Fig 1; Topography of Central Assyria

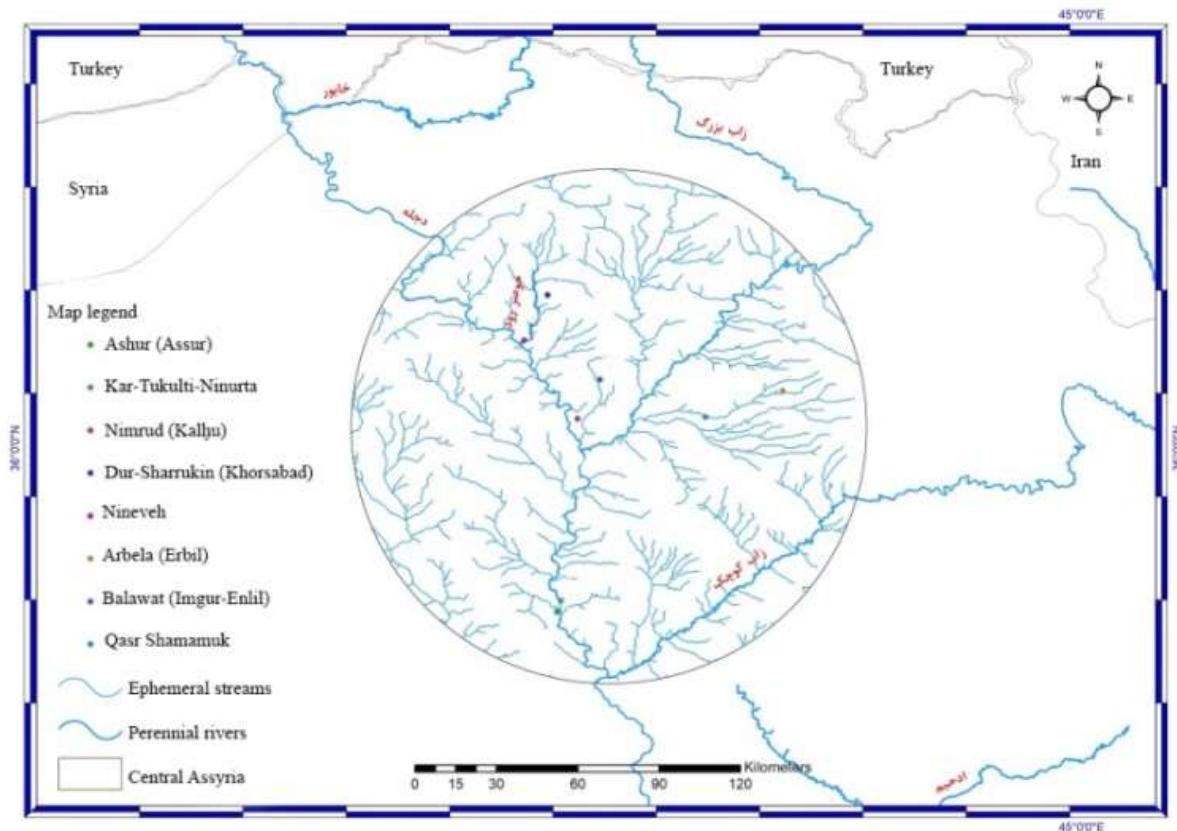


Fig 2; Central Assyria's Water Basin

Although the study area is endowed with abundant water resources, its capacity significantly diminishes during periods of drought. To mitigate this natural challenge, the Assyrians employed canal irrigation technology, a practice rooted in the Chalcolithic period of the region. The earliest canal irrigation project in Assyria dates back to the early second millennium BCE. Although no physical traces of this canal remain today, it is well documented in Assyrian texts, notably in the inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II. Ashurnasirpal II frequently mentions the construction of canals in his inscriptions. The remains of one such canal were identified and mapped in 1849 by Austen Henry Layard and Felix Jones. Assyrian texts indicate that most Assyrian kings showed a strong interest in constructing canals and undertook the building or restoration of irrigation channels. However, the largest Assyrian canal was constructed between 680 and 669 BCE by Esarhaddon in Kalhu. Sargon II constructed a unique irrigation system to supply water to his royal gardens, which featured fragrant trees of Hittite and mountainous origin. Following Sargon II's death and the relocation of the capital by Sennacherib, the Assyrian water management system underwent significant transformation. Sennacherib initiated the construction of a 150-kilometer canal to provide water for Nineveh and the surrounding agricultural lands, a project that took approximately fifteen years to complete. An examination of Assyrian texts related to the irrigation system indicates that canal construction was carried out by Assyrian kings, and reports of these construction activities are recorded in Assyrian inscriptions and written sources. The second source comprises

## 6 The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom

reliefs, which provide visual information regarding Assyrian architectural and infrastructural constructions, including the building of public edifices, gardens, canals, and more. The third source referenced in the study of the Assyrian irrigation system comprises archaeological data and satellite imagery. Classified data derived from high-resolution CORONA satellite imagery, dating from 1959 to 1972, have been made available to researchers, proving highly significant for the archaeological landscapes of Assyria (Figure 3).

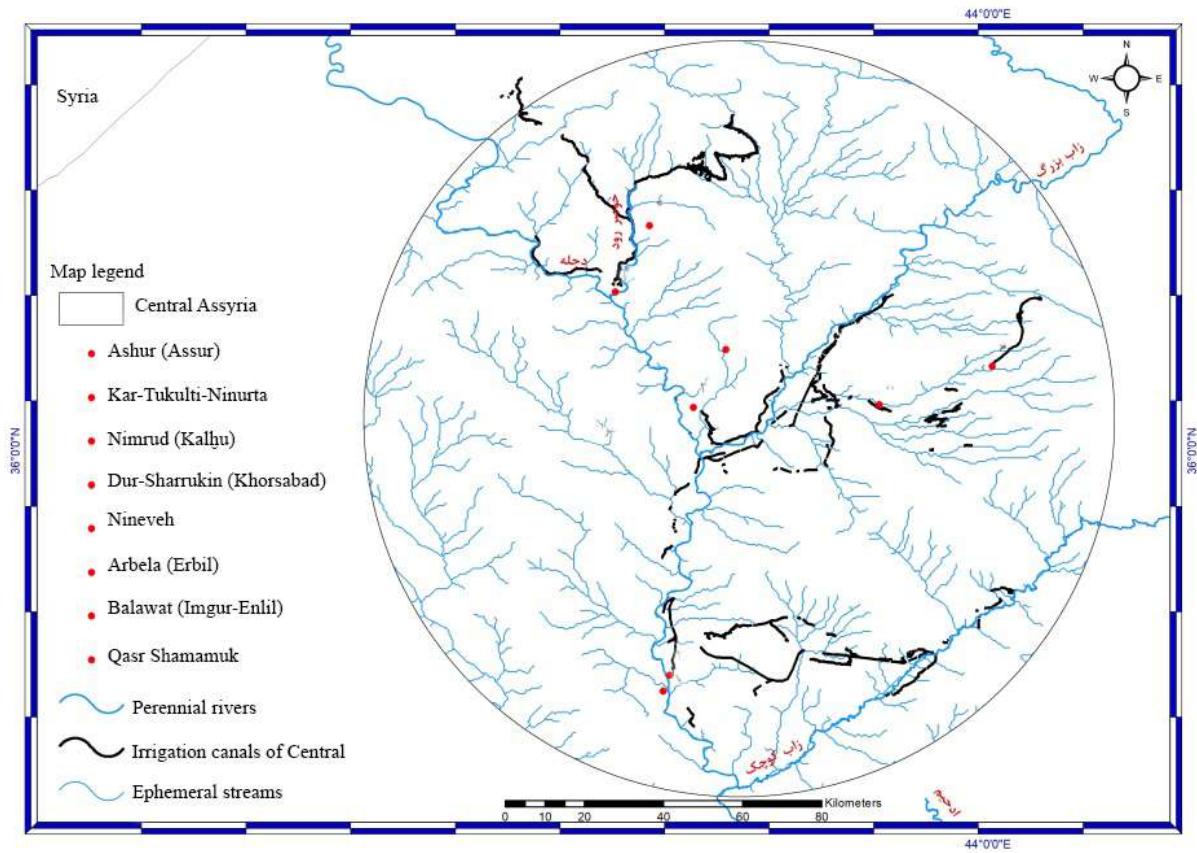


Fig 3; Irrigation canals of Central Assyria

The climatic subsystem indicates that the study area possesses a semi-arid continental climate influenced by Mediterranean air masses; characterized by hot, dry summers and cold, wet winters, with abrupt and rapid temperature fluctuations, whereby within a few weeks, conditions can shift from severe cold to intense heatwaves; The average annual precipitation in the study area ranges between 350 and 1,034 millimeters, with average summer temperatures varying from 26 to 36 degrees Celsius, and winter temperatures ranging between 9 and 10 degrees Celsius. To reconstruct the climate of Neo-Assyria in the first millennium BCE, two primary sources are utilized: Paleoclimatic data and Assyrian textual records. Paleoclimatic data from regions such as kuna-ba Cave near Sulaymaniyah, as well as data from Anatolia, Iran, Syria, Cyprus, the Land of Jordan, indicate that during the seventh century BCE, northern Iraq experienced a prolonged period of severe drought lasting several decades. Between 920 and 800 BCE, there was an increase in precipitation during the cold seasons by approximately 15 to 30 percent. From a historical perspective,

this period coincides with the emergence and expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. However, between 800 and 700 BCE, a trend of increasing drought began, reaching its peak around 700 BCE. Following a temporal hiatus, another phase of drought occurred between 660 and 600 BCE in the study region. Notably, these severe droughts coincided with widespread global climatic shifts during the 2.8 and 2.7 kiloyear events. Regions of the Near East, northern Levant, eastern Mediterranean, and Anatolia also experienced this drought. Assyrian texts, spanning from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I to Ashurbanipal, describe climatic trends. Among these texts, one from Ashurbanipal's period documents widespread drought in the region, during which the Assyrian king sent grain to the Elamite king. Additionally, a text dated to 657 BCE mentions an Assyrian astronomer named Akulanu who refers to an extensive drought year with no harvest. Although the Assyrians utilized canal irrigation to mitigate agricultural risks, archaeological evidence indicates that major Assyrian cities maintained granaries and food storage facilities. These reserves were systematically monitored and assessed annually by the Assyrian administrative apparatus and were utilized during periods of drought.

In the social subsystem, based on Assyrian texts and related documents from the first millennium BCE, the subcomponents of political history, Assyrian hegemony, trade and migration, road networks, and agriculture were examined. By correlating ancient texts with recent archaeological research related to the social subsystem, a visual model of the social conditions was developed, and the relationship between Neo-Assyrian macro-policies and this subsystem was introduced and analyzed.

The agricultural subsystem indicates that the study area comprises pastures, forests, irrigated and rain-fed farmland, as well as regions with sparse vegetation cover. Forested areas are primarily located at elevations between 850 and 2,000 meters above sea level and are dominated by sparse oak trees. Agriculture and animal husbandry within the core territory of Assyria are directly correlated with regional precipitation and topography. Areas receiving over 550 millimeters of annual rainfall are suitable for rain-fed cultivation (including wheat, barley, lentils, and chickpeas), while regions with 350 to 550 millimeters of precipitation engage in high-risk agriculture. In zones where annual rainfall is below 350 millimeters, cultivation is not feasible without artificial irrigation. The study area lies between the oak forests of the Taurus and Zagros Mountains and the deserts of Iraq and Syria. The northern regions, due to higher rainfall, are suitable for rain-fed agriculture, whereas in the southern parts, economically viable farming is impossible without artificial irrigation. Assyria's strategic location made it a vital nexus between Assyrian agriculturalists and pastoralists; the main suppliers of sheep and goats were the highland mountainous areas of the Zagros and the foothills of the Taurus extending to the Zamua region, which fulfilled the livestock and textile needs of central Assyria. The Arab tribes, who were the principal camel herders, were permitted to inhabit the zone between the agricultural belt and the desert along the southern borders, stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the Persian Gulf. Another significant source of livestock resources for the Neo-Assyrian Empire came from tribute payments and war booty. At the conclusion of their military campaigns, particularly in the eastern regions, the Assyrians received substantial quantities of livestock as war booty from the conquered territories. The numbers and types of these animals are documented in Neo-Assyrian texts.

The transportation subsystem indicates that three types of routes were utilized during the Assyrian period: royal or main roads, secondary roads, and Hollow Ways. The main roads

## 8 The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom

were managed and guarded by the empire, with military garrisons stationed along these routes. Secondary roads connected smaller towns to provincial centers and were primarily used to meet the daily needs of provincial hubs and facilitate communication. The third type of roads, as proposed by Wilkinson, was agricultural paths (Hollow Ways). These can be considered informal routes formed around settlements by farmers and pastoralists. Their lengths ranged from one to six kilometers and gradually faded away as they extended further from the ancient habitation sites. These routes are directly linked to the agro-pastoral economic system and extend linearly and radially from settlements toward agricultural fields and pastures. They were stabilized through the continuous movement of humans and domesticated animals (Figure 4).

The trade subsystem indicates that the existence of Assur during the Old Assyrian period was primarily founded on commerce, due to the absence of significant agricultural lands capable of sustaining the subsistence needs of the Old Assyrian population (Figure 5). As the Kanesh Karum tablets (Kültepe) clearly reflect, the commercial economic structure of Old Assyria was well established; the Middle Assyrian taxation system, however, was complex and opaque. What is known is that taxes were levied on goods imported into the Assyrian realm, and these taxes were paid by the final purchaser. Additionally, taxes were imposed on lands owned by the royal court that were allocated to military officials and bureaucrats, which had to be paid annually to the palace. At the beginning of the eighth century BCE, commercial centers called Karum were established with the purpose of collecting taxes on trade within cities and provinces. These trade hubs functioned as royal warehouses, from which the revenues generated through commerce and taxation were dispatched to the Assyrian capital. Provincial governors during the Neo-Assyrian period were obligated to send a fixed amount of taxes and labor annually to the capital. At the same time, they were permitted to engage in trade with their neighboring regions. For example, the governor of Sidon maintained commercial relations with the Mediterranean territories; likewise, the governor of Ashdod traded with Egypt and Arabia, while the eastern governors conducted trade with Mana and Median tribes.

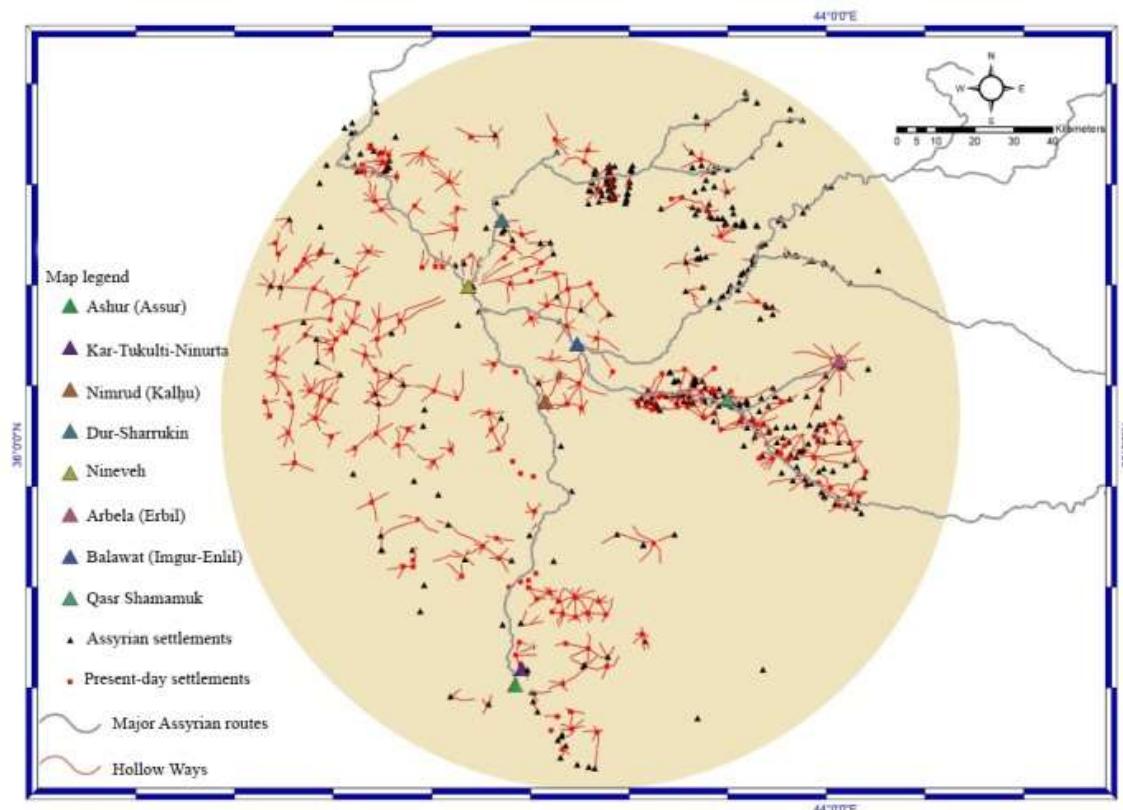


Fig 4; Assyrian road network

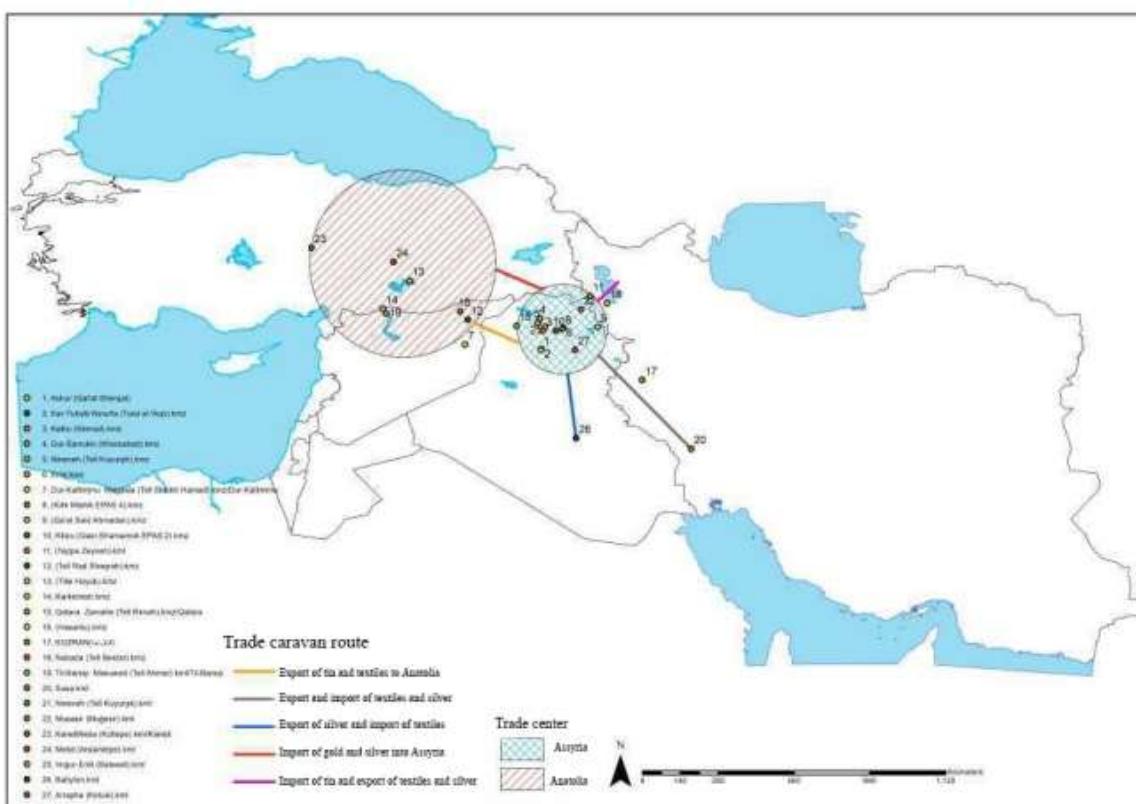


Fig 5; Main Assyrian trade routes

The migration subsystem indicates the existence of two types of migration: forced and voluntary. Throughout the political history of Assyria, over 4.5 million instances of population displacement have been recorded. Voluntary migration involved Assyrians who, during the Late Bronze Age, were compelled to migrate due to climatic events, but returned to the Assyrian heartland from the early Iron Age onward. Forced migration included mass deportations, the exile of royal family members as hostages, and the relocation of war captives for labor purposes. During the reigns from Ashur-Dan II to Tukulti-Ninurta II, a total of five deportations occurred; Ashurnasirpal II conducted thirteen deportations; Shalmaneser III eight; Shamshi-Adad V six; Tiglath-Pileser III thirty-seven; Shalmaneser V one; Sargon II thirty-eight; Sennacherib twenty; Esarhaddon twelve; and Ashurbanipal sixteen deportations were carried out.

The political history subsystem indicates that Assyrian political history can be divided into the Old, Middle, and Neo-Assyrian periods. The Neo-Assyrian period begins with the reign of Ashur-Dan II in 934 BCE and consolidates Assyrian power in the ancient Near East during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III in 744 BCE. From Tiglath-Pileser III onward, subsequent kings prioritized territorial expansion as a core principle of their foreign policy. The last powerful king of the Neo-Assyrian period was Ashurbanipal, and with his death, the decline of Assyria rapidly began. Between 631 and 612 BCE, the power of Neo-Assyria disappeared from the political history. The most important sources for reconstructing the political history of late Neo-Assyria are the Babylonian records from the early reign of Nebuchadnezzar, which approximately cover the events from 616 to 609 BCE.

The Assyrian hegemony subsystem can be described as follows: At the end of the Late Bronze Age, the political system of the Near East collapsed due to sudden climatic and social events. From the ashes of this period, a new order emerged in the Iron Age, which had a structure fundamentally different from the preceding political system. This new order in the ancient Near East was the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Empires represent a specific structure, which, when placed within a system, allows for analysis of its various aspects and the formulation of an integrated system. Given this supra-regional order established by the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the Iron Age Near East, the question arises: what is a hegemonic system, and how can it be understood in the context of the Neo-Assyrian Empire? The structural framework of the Assyrian hegemonic system can be modeled during the Neo-Assyrian Empire's peak power period from 746 to 631 BCE. By constructing a standard model of Assyrian hegemony, we can address how the Assyrian hegemonic system functioned. In this context, the historical background of Neo-Assyrian hegemony, the operational mechanisms of the hegemonic system, and the reasons for its decline were evaluated. The results indicate that the Neo-Assyrian Empire possessed a unique hegemonic system that established a new order in the ancient Near East. The manifestations of this hegemonic order and its core structure can also be observed in subsequent empires, including the Achaemenid and Roman Empires.

The subsystem of internal and external rebellions indicates that the Neo-Assyrian Empire, throughout its political existence, continually faced various uprisings of differing scales. Internal rebellions primarily manifested as power struggles among political factions at the royal center aiming to seize control, while external rebellions took the form of independence movements and local rulers' efforts to reclaim their traditional authority.

Chapter Two focuses on the archaeological data pertinent to the Neo-Assyrian period. Among these, ceramics represent one of the most significant categories of material culture.

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of Assyrian pottery traditions spanning the Old Assyrian, Middle Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian periods. Emphasis is placed on the Neo-Assyrian ceramic assemblage, including a detailed typological analysis and systematic classification of ceramic type's characteristic of this era. Regarding Neo-Assyrian ceramics, studies conducted between 1954 and 2023, encompassing field surveys and archaeological excavations, have been examined across several regions. These include Central Assyria, Western Assyria and the Mediterranean coastal areas, Northern Assyria covering southern, western, and eastern Anatolia, Southern Assyria including the southern banks of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, as well as Eastern Assyria encompassing western and northwestern parts of Iran. The results of the ceramic studies, presented through a new typological and classification system, include standard Assyrian ware and palace Ware, as detailed below, Standard ware of the Neo-Assyrian Period: The characteristic rims of Neo-Assyrian pottery encompass eight distinct types that have been recovered across the entire Neo-Assyrian realm through field surveys and excavations. The bases of diagnostic vessels comprise twelve distinct forms, distributed throughout all regions under Neo-Assyrian cultural influence. Moreover, the characteristic vessel shapes number over thirty distinct types, identified across most areas of the Neo-Assyrian imperial domain, reflecting prevalent production techniques and functional uses of ceramics during this period. Palace ware, as a Diagnostic Ware of the Neo-Assyrian Period: Palace ware emerges concurrently with the onset of the Neo-Assyrian period, and disappears from the archaeological record following the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Therefore, it serves as a principal ceramic marker for the Neo-Assyrian cultural horizon. Typological and classificatory analyses of palace pottery indicate that, to date, this ceramic category has been recovered exclusively from the central and western regions of the Neo-Assyrian realm and comprises nine distinct types.

The second part of Chapter Two focuses on the architecture of Central Assyria (Figures 6). The capitals and major cities of Assyria were examined, and based on archaeological studies, urban plans as well as key structures such as temples, palaces, and public buildings were documented. This section includes the study of the cities of Ashur, Tukulti-Ninurta, Kalhu (Nimrud), Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad), Nineveh, and Balawat.

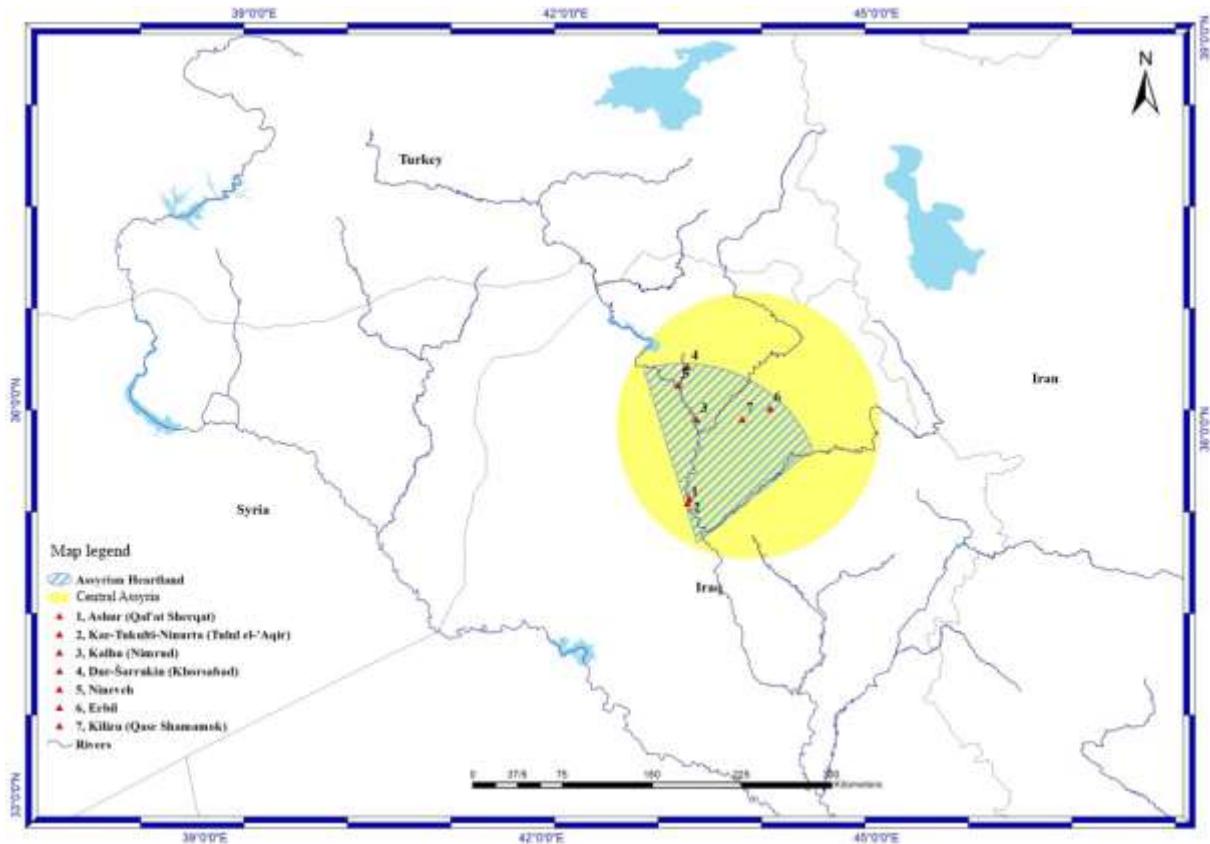


Fig 6; Central Assyria

The third section of Chapter Two focused on the central settlements of Neo-Assyria. A total of 419 identified settlements within the core Assyrian territory were examined, based on studies conducted from 1967 to 2023. These settlements were documented and analyzed through visual models, charts, and tables, with comprehensive information about each settlement presented across 12 columns in the settlement database table (Figures 7-8).

Chapter Three, titled “Concluding Remarks,” analyzes the natural and political geography of Central Assyria based on the collected data. This chapter examines the elevation of settlement formation, their area, distribution patterns, and the relationship of settlements to networks, with a particular focus on agricultural roads extracted and modeled from Corona satellite imagery. Additionally, the correlation between settlements and water sources, as well as the Neo-Assyrian trade road network, has been documented and modeled.

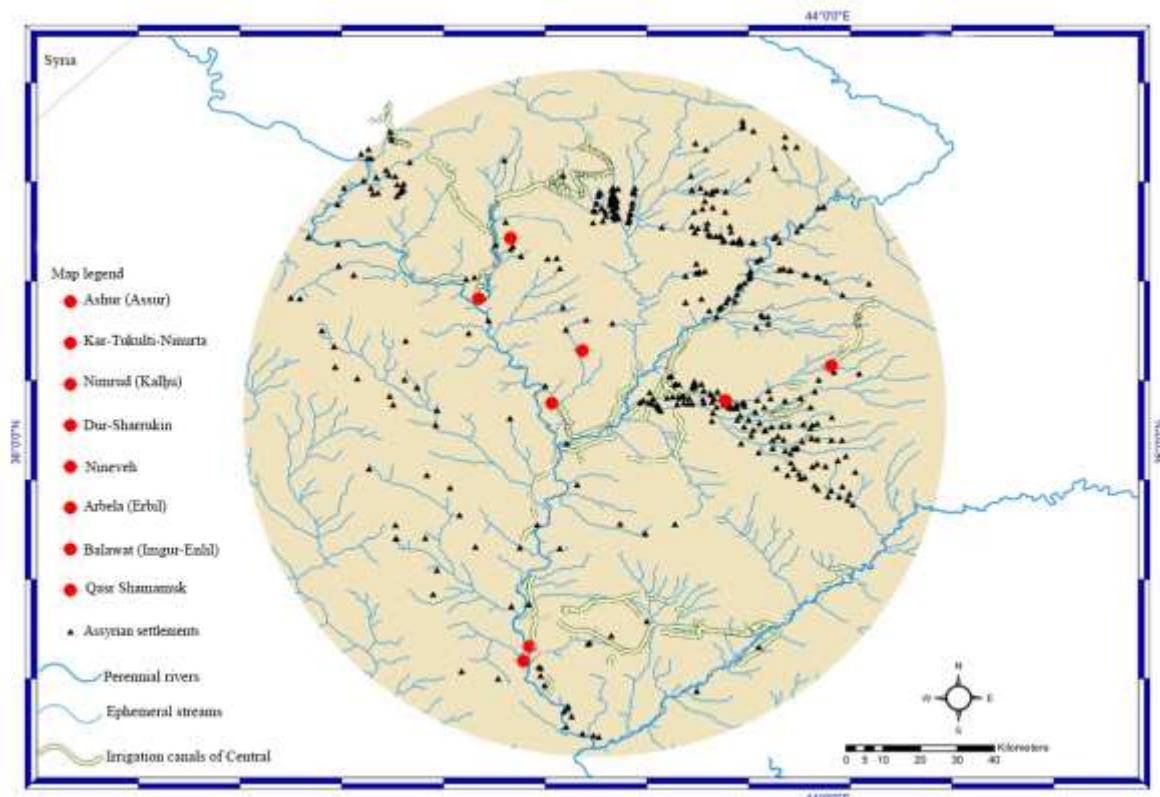


Fig 7; Central Assyrian Settlements

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	X	Y
1	Tell Farha	1	1	1	0	153	1	1	Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	358426/2744	3903952/162
2	Tell al-Zab		1		0	140	1	1	Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	357169/501	3904332/502
3	Tall al-Nail	1		1	0	139	1	1	Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	354796/5145	3904924/508
4	Tell Agamiya I	1		1	4	150	1	1	Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	351274/2418	3906821/244
5	Tall al-Ḏahab	1	1	1	0	152	1	1	Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	352464/8692	3909748/203
6	Tell Nimal	1	1	1	0/6	138	1		Altaweeel, 2004: 192-207; Altaweeel, 2008: 127-134	350815	3911143
7	Tell al-Namil	1		1	0	141	1		Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	351571/8987	3912079/848
8	Tell al-Sadr		1		0	149	1		Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	351687/6541	3912559/406
9	Tell Ali	1	1	1	7/5	177	1		Mühl, 2013: 221-231	380232	3916235
10	Tell al Hukna	1		1	0	153	1	1	Mühl, 2011: 371-390; Mühl, 2013: 221-231	346636/0867	3918389/842

## 14 The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom

Fig8; Table of Central Assyrian Settlements (Column 1: Settlement Number — A unique identifier assigned to each settlement site; Column 2: Settlement Name — The archaeological or historical name of the settlement; Column 3: Middle Assyrian Settlements — Indicates presence or occupation during the Middle Assyrian period; Column 4: Neo-Assyrian Settlements — Indicates presence or occupation during the Neo-Assyrian period; Column 5: Multi-layered Settlements — Settlements with occupational strata from multiple historical or cultural phases; Column 6: Total Settlement Area — The overall surface area of the site measured in hectares; Column 7: Elevation Above Sea Level — The geophysical altitude of the site in meters above sea level; Column 8: Surveyed Settlements — Sites that have been subjected to surface surveys or archaeological reconnaissance; Column 9: Excavated Settlements — Sites where archaeological excavations have been conducted; Column 10: Source Reference for Settlement Data — Primary sources such as excavation reports, ancient texts, or prior studies validating the data; Column 11: Geographic Coordinate X — Longitude, expressed in decimal degrees or UTM coordinates; Column 12: Geographic Coordinate Y — Latitude, expressed in decimal degrees or UTM coordinates)



اتشارات دانشگاه تهران  
۴۸۰۵

# پادشاهی آشور نو

جغرافیای تاریخی- سیاسی آشور مرکزی

تألیف

دکتر فرشید ایروانی قدیم  
دکتر امیر امیری نژاد  
دکتر احمد علی یاری