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24. Neo-Assyrian Town Planning

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Although Assyrian cities were amongst the first Ancient Near Eastern sites to be excavated by European scholars in the nineteenth century, our knowledge of Neo-Assyrian town planning is still surprisingly limited. The reason for this is the focus on palaces and temples during the early excavations and the long interruption of scientific research in Northern Iraq in recent decades, when modern techniques such as geophysical prospection would have provided new tools for advanced urbanistic research. Nevertheless, some provincial Assyrian towns have been thoroughly investigated, which has helped us to gain additional knowledge.

The heartland of the Neo-Assyrian Empire contained three types of cities, based on their genesis: first, old towns with a long and uninterrupted settlement history, which gave them an appearance of successive growth; second, newly founded towns with a properly planned outline reflecting the idea of a 'perfect' settlement; and third, a combination of the two: significantly transformed old towns. The first type is represented by Assur; the second by Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Šarrukin); and the third by Nineveh, a city with a long history, which was significantly restructured and reshaped when it became the new capital.

The city of Assur was the eponymous core of Assyria, its ancient capital and seat of the national god Aššur; god, city, and country bore the same name and were of crucial importance for Assyrian identity (figs. 24.1-2). Already flourishing in the late third mil-

Figure 24.1 The ziggurat of Assur. Courtesy of UNESCO.

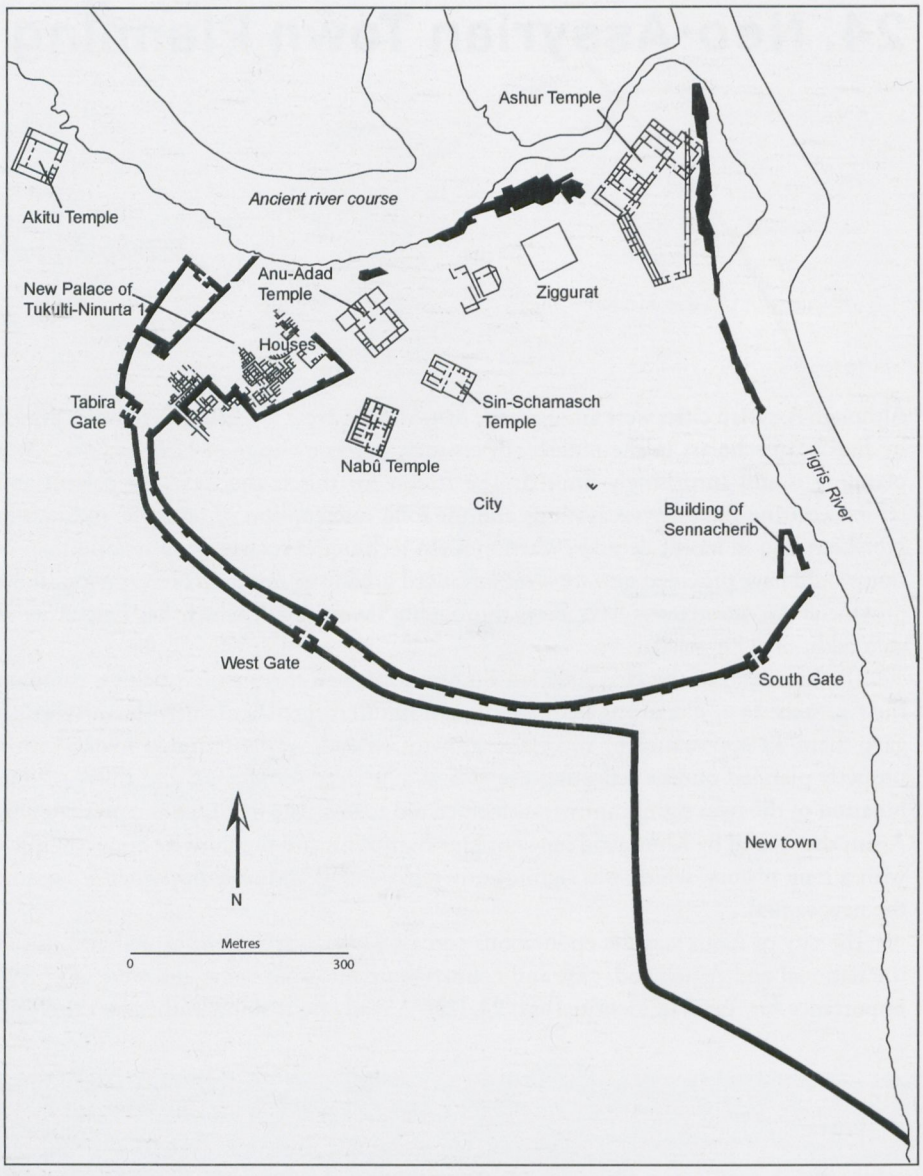

Figure 24.2 Plan of Assur.

lennium BC, the city was of some importance due to its role as trade centre in the early second millennium. Unlike Babylonian cities, which were centred on the temples and ziggurats of their tutelary gods, Assur's main sanctuary, dedicated to the god Aššur, was situated at the city's northernmost periphery, on a peak of a steep mountain ridge overlooking the river valley. In its immediate vicinity was the palace of the ruler, who was at the same time high priest and representative of the god. The spatial vicinity of temple and palace, perceivable from inside and outside the city, represented the ideological connection between the city god and the king. This provided the pattern for all later Assyrian capitals.

The limited extension of available urban space and the location at the southernmost periphery of the dry-farming Assyrian heartland meant that Assur was neither big nor economically powerful enough for the ambitious building programmes of the Neo-Assyrian kings: the enormous administration and the wish for gigantic palaces as symbols of royal power required more space. Hence, large residential cities became political capitals beside Assur, which continued to be the religious centre. The separation of political and religious capital was a characteristic feature of the Assyrian Empire (Novák 2014). This process had already started in the late Middle Assyrian Period with the foundation

Figure 24.3 The site of Nimrud, October 2009. Photograph by Mary Prophit.

of Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta, situated opposite Assur on the eastern bank of the Tigris.

The first Assyrian residential city built in the first millennium was Nimrud (ancient Kalhu; fig. 24.3). In the ninth century BC, the ruins of this once occupied but now abandoned city were chosen by Ashurnasirpal II (reigned 883-859 BC) as his new residence. Nimrud was situated close to the confluence of the Tigris and Greater Zab rivers, in between the two major cities of Assur and Nineveh. The city was surrounded by extra-urban royal gardens and a 'zoo', to which plants and animals from conquered countries were brought. In the city itself were settled deportees from all the countries that were under the yoke of the Assyrian king, making the city an illustration and symbol of the whole world. All of the public buildings were situated on top of a fortified and elevated citadel on the edge of the city, with the temple of the tutelary god Ninurta standing at the north-western corner. The element of the citadel was previously unknown to Babylonian and Assyrian urban architecture, being inspired by Northern Levantine patterns and at the same time the result of the elites' growing wish for security against their subjects. Again, the temple and the palace formed a close spatial connection, higher in elevation than the dwelling quarters. Since the citadel was physically connected with the lower city walls, the public buildings were visible from the outside and could be perceived as towering over the fortification walls. During the reign of Shalmaneser III (reigned 859/858-824 BC), a second citadel was added on top of an artificial terrace towards the south-eastern corner of the city. This secondary citadel, 'Fort Shalmaneser', was the seat of the military palace of the city.

This newly established pattern of a 'typical' Assyrian urban layout was copied 150 years later by King Sargon II (reigned 721-705 BC) when he founded the next residential city, Khorsabad, on virgin ground (fig. 24.4). Here, an almost square layout was chosen for the city. Its main elements were again the citadel with the royal palace and the temples of the gods of the city, and a secondary citadel with the military institutions.

The last Assyrian residential city was Nineveh (fig. 23.1), an existing city that was rebuilt and significantly enlarged by Sennacherib (reigned 705/704-681 BC). Again, the environment was transformed into an artificial landscape consisting of parks and gardens. Two citadels dominated the skyline of the city: the larger one (Kuyunjik) was the main citadel, whilst the smaller one (Nebi Yunus) was the secondary one. On top of the main

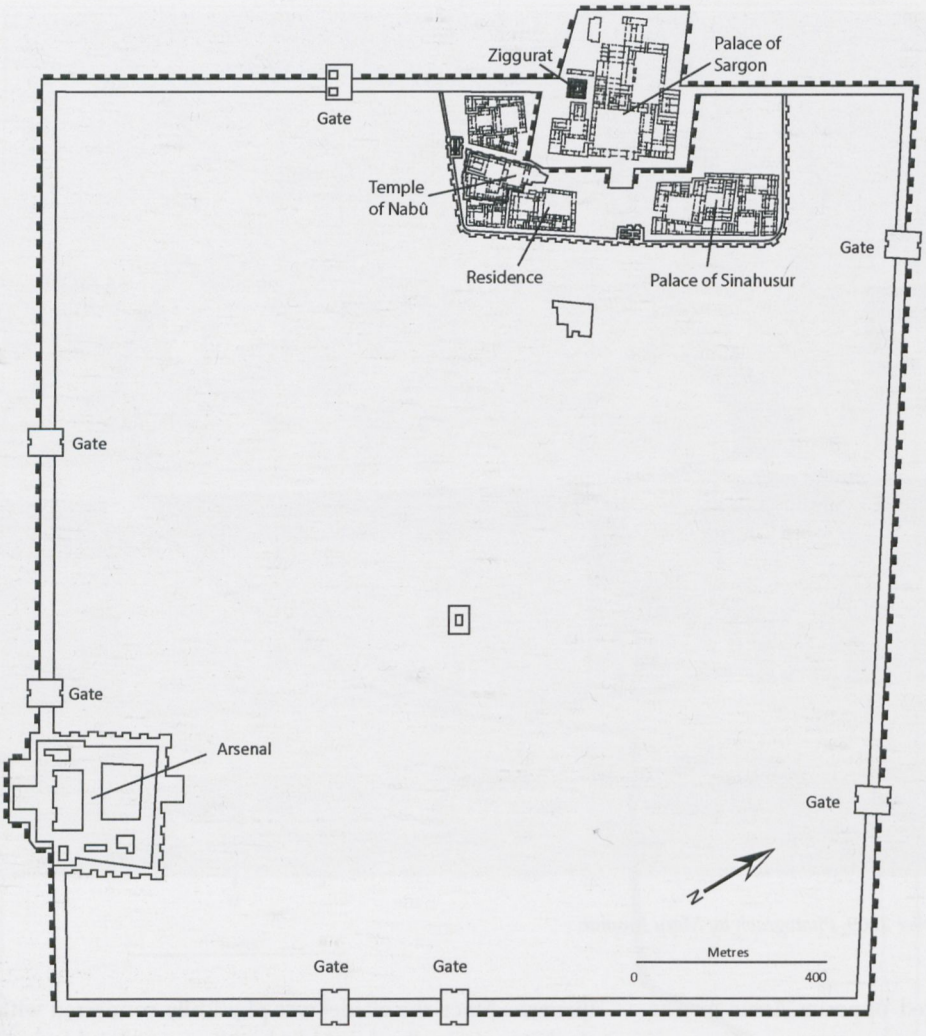

Figure 24.4 Plan of Khorsabad.

citadel and close to its edges, the palaces of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal were erected, whilst temples occupied the area in between them. Since the palace of Sennacherib lay close to the western slope of the citadel, it overlooked the riverside and the gardens, just as the palaces of his predecessors had done.

As far as we know, smaller sites tended to follow the pattern of these capitals. Of course, we should make a distinction between newly founded towns and those towns with a long occupation history, as we should likewise differentiate between notable seats of provincial administration and modest villages of only local importance.

Tell Halaf (ancient Guzana) (fig. 24.5; Novák 2013), Til-Barsip (fig. 24.6) and Tell Sheikh Hamad (ancient Dūr-Katlimmu) (Kühne 2013) are all provincial centres, but they have very different histories. Irrespective of this, they share some common features, such as fortified citadels on the periphery, situated close to a river passing by the city. The governors' palaces were all situated on the citadel's edge, in several cases on top of artificial mud brick terraces, thus imitating the situation in the capitals. The outer shape of the cities often followed geometric outlines.

The alignment of the streets differed according to the occupation history of the cities: the dwelling quarter in Assur shows irregular alignments of streets, most of them relatively narrow; in Nineveh, Sennacherib mentioned in his building inscription broad and straight streets, and private constructions were forbidden, under the threat of punishment, from encroaching on the street. Thus, a rather regular street system seems to have existed here, which is confirmed by the situation at Tell Sheikh Hamad, where the geophysical prospection indicates a geometric grid system.

Questions concerning segregation patterns – social, ethnic, religious, and so forth – remain unanswered, due to the scarcity of data. However, the proximity of big, complex elite houses to small houses, as attested in Assur and in Tell Sheikh Hamad, may be taken as an indication of patron-client relationships, rather than social segregation.

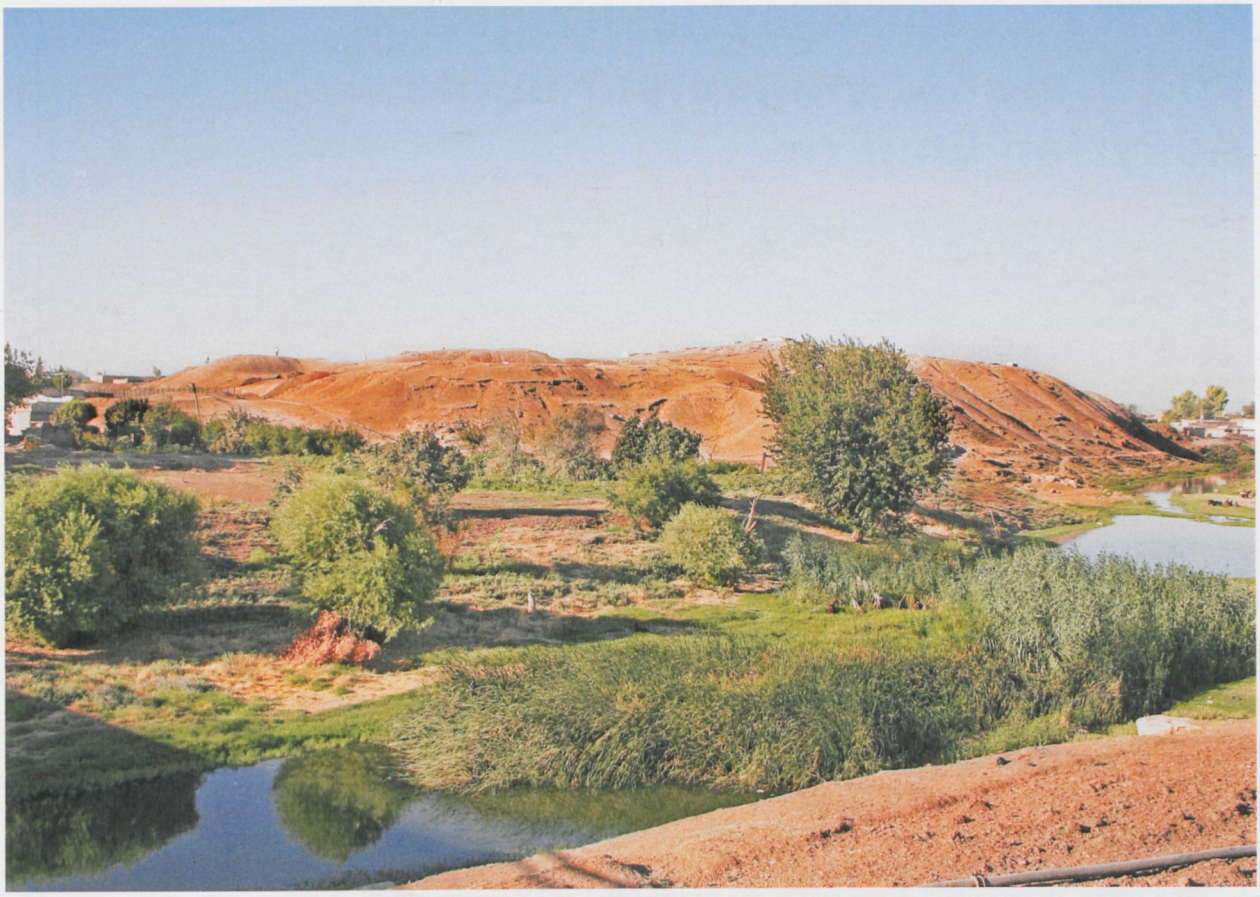

Figure 24.5 (top) Tell Halaf. Photograph made by Günther Mirsch. Courtesy of the Tell Halaf Project.

Figure 24.6 (right) One of the lion statues found at Til-Barsip. Reproduced from Thureau-Dangin 1930, 13.