The Empire Strikes Back: Trajectories of Imperial Institutions in the Assyrian Empire

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Abstract

This study, which focuses on the Assyrian Empire in southwestern Asia (ca. 1350–609 BC), provides an overview of the political institutions enabled by the Assyrian authorities across space and time. It reviews established models of imperialism in the light of the available textual and archaeological evidence to assess to what degree the institutions of governance of the Assyrians varied significantly by region and depended, in part, on the long-term socio-ecological dynamics prevailing in different cultural enclaves. A comparison between the Middle Assyrian (ca. 1350–935 BC) and the Neo-Assyrian (ca. 883–609 BC) periods reveals that the institutions enabled in both periods were similar and are to be interpreted along a temporal continuum. The overall picture is that the Assyrian Empire is not to be considered a homogenous and monolithic political unit exerting a standardized system of control over the dominated territories. In contrast, the Assyrians used a variety of flexible and adaptative institutions to avoid centrifugal tendencies of the subject communities and to consolidate their power over a multi-ethnical polity stretching over one million square kilometres at its maximum extent during the Neo-Assyrian period.

1. Introduction

A large part of the human population in world history lived under imperial institutions and control (Goldstone and Haldon 2009). Imperial institutions had a remarkable impact on the landscapes and communities over which they ruled, and some scholars argue that the legacy of ancient empires persists in the modern world (Bernbeck 2010; Hardt and Negri 2000). How did empires shape political landscapes? What was the impact

of changes in human population on rural land-use intensity? How did this pressure drive the transformation in the existing local political institutions, and how did this vary regionally? Today, the grand project of European integration is frequently described as the expression of a "New Empire" in media and other kinds of public discourse, and the topic is hotly debated with positions ranging from "localist" to "globalist" (Behr and Stivachtis 2015; Bonacchi, Altaweel, and Krzyanska 2018; Patel 2020). It is therefore timely and important to investigate to what degree imperial institutions affected heterogeneous local communities, contributed to building a long-lasting homogenous culture and identity, and countered particularistic and centrifugal tendencies in the different provinces and peripheries of empires.

In the past two decades, a resurgence of academic studies focusing on empires and their implemented institutions is evidenced by an increasing number of publications and research projects. These studies have primarily focused on colonial modern British, French, and American imperialism (Cain and Hopkins 2016; Immerman 2010; Thomas 2017) and on the ancient Assyrian, Persian, Roman, and Byzantine empires (Düring 2020b; Kaldellis 2015; Radner 2015; Revell 2009; Waters 2014). In specific regions such as Europe and Asia, where textual sources are relatively abundant, the study of ancient empires has been dominated by institutionalist and historical perspectives mainly focusing on elites, royal courts, and imperial institutions. Such a textual data-driven approach has emphasized interpreting ancient empires as homogenous and monolithic political units exerting a standardized system of control over the dominated territories as a result of the relationships between the imperial bureaucracies and the local elites (Fales 2001; Goldstone and Haldon 2009; Morris and Scheidel 2009; Postgate 1992; Tilly 1994; Woolf 1998). As a consequence, most archaeologists have studied ancient empires by investigating elite assemblages, fortifications, palaces, monumental buildings, and other marks of imperial establishments. We cannot blame a sort of "tyranny of texts," as written sources represent a particularly privileged tool for several reasons: the texts provide fine-grained information about political geography, the logistics of empires, political institutions, the network of alliances and diplomatic relationships with vassal states, and the relationships between the royal court and the provincial governors. However, recent studies in archaeology have emphasized the importance of bottom-up approaches and agent-centered studies focusing on how imperial institutions of governance impacted the daily life of ordinary people (D'Altroy 1992; Düring, Boozer, and Parker 2020; Rosenzweig 2016; Terrenato 2014). Another strand of studies has highlighted how imperial strategies were nuanced, varied from region to region, and depended on specific socio-ecological dynamics (Düring 2020b; Düring and Stek 2018; Glatz 2009; Matney 2016; Parker 2001; Sinopoli 1994; Tyson and Herrmann 2018).

In this chapter, I will not point to the biases occurring in the archaeological and historical record when dealing with ancient empires. Rather, I would like to stress that a holistic approach integrating archaeological, textual, and environmental data (e.g., climate, land use) into a spatial framework can contribute to providing a better understanding of imperial institutions occurring in a given region across space and time. Therefore, I will firstly attempt to provide an overview of the development of state societies in ancient Mesopotamia. Secondly, I will delineate in more detail how the Assyrian polity (ca. 1350–609 BC) was organized and interacted with the pre-existing local polities over which it exerted its dominion.

2. Paths to Imperial Polity: The Southwestern Asian Context

2.1 From Early States to Empires

Many studies have paid significant attention to explaining what is a "state," and the prevailing working definitions describe the "state" as a political unit characterized by four primary features: (1) radical social stratification (Fried 1967); (2) a set of institutions and personnel embodying centralized government administration (Haldon

2007; Hinsley 1986; Offe and Ronge 1997); (3) legal, military, and economic authority over a designated group of people (Smith 2003; Wright 1978); and (4) the consistent threat of legitimate force as a compelling instrument to adhere to the existing political order (Goldstone and Haldon 2009; Jessop 1990; Sanderson 1995). However, those features do not necessarily distinguish chiefdoms or more complex chiefdoms from bureaucratic states. In fact, according to the view proposed by Wright (1977) and then further developed by Spencer (2010), the state is a centralized territorial polity characterized by a specialized administrative organization of full-time bureaucrats.

The state formation process has often been interpreted via an evolutionary sequence from small and simple to larger and more complex forms of social organization. Different labels have been used to define different examples of social organization where small-scale human polities (bands and tribes), chiefdoms, and states were respectively egalitarian, ranked, and stratified societies (Chase-Dunn and Khutkyy 2021; Fried 1967; Hinsley 1986; Smith 2003). However, a monolinear and/or unidirectional social development from smaller and simpler groups to larger and more complex ones is not always the case (Johnson and Earle 2000). For instance, Crone (1986) and Yoffe and Clark (1993) argue for a multilinear perspective, where tribes and/ or chiefdoms are to be regarded as an alternative to rather than a direct precursor of state societies. However, chiefdoms are more related to the emergence of the state, and the archaeological record seems to suggest a cumulative overall increase of social complexity in the very long run since the beginning of the Holocene, while acknowledging periods of sequential decrease in complexity (Currie and Mace 2011; Richerson and Boyd 2001; Tainter 2006).

Several and varied theories of state origin and development have been advanced in anthropology. Functionalist theories propose that the state developed as a solution to manage societal challenges such as the division of labor and the provision of public goods (Johnson and Earle 2000; Service 1975), the storage of food surplus and the extraction of resources (Peregrine, Ember, and Ember 2007; Tilly 1992), the maintenance of irrigation channels (Wittfogel 1957), and long-distance trade (Liverani 2014). In this context, sedentary farming, the emblematic result of a steady settled lifestyle, may have served as a precondition for the rise of early states, and it is not by coincidence that early states appeared in those parts of the world that first adopted agriculture, despite their different environmental conditions: the Fertile Crescent, the Indus Valley, the Central plain of China, and later Central Mesoamerica (Diamond 1999; Puttermann 2008; Spencer 2010). According to a model developed by Spencer (2010), the earliest state institutions originated in concomitance with the long-distance territorial expansion of those polities needing the bureaucratization of a central authority to control territories located more than one day's trip from the capital. In addition, as the polities became larger and more complex, social institutions were invented to legitimate coercion even in the absence of consensus (e.g., the army, the law, the courts, the prisons) (Chase-Dunn and Khutkyy 2021).

Conflict theories conceive the state as an instrument reinforcing the internal conflict between social classes and guaranteeing the privileges of the elites (Engels 1884; Fried 1967). Within this framework, another set of theories highlights the external conflict between polities as a catalyst for state formation. For instance, Carneiro's (1970) circumscription theory conceives that resource concentration and limitations of movement make people concentrate on certain areas, thereby intensifying conflict and competition. Therefore, warfare is seen as a mechanism of social evolution resulting in larger centralized political units.

Finally, cultural multilevel selection theory proposes that the selection of cultural traits occurs at different levels (individuals, groups, whole societies) and that well-organized, hierarchical, and centralized-structured state societies outcompete those uncooperative and dysfunctional societies (Richerson and Heinrich 2012; Turchin 2009).

Variation among states has been classified according to a wide range of different criteria. Some scholars have focused on the administrative and bureaucratic apparatus (Weber 1978) or have provided a more complex taxonomy based on the development of social and hierarchical ties among different political agents (Claessen

and Skalník 1978; Crumley 1995). Other scholars have pointed out that the administrative and centralized structure of the state is an extension of the bureaucratic city, due to its capability to extract sources and labor from the surrounding rural hinterland (Fox 1977). Trigger (2003) is even more categorical, recognizing only two kinds of states: city-states and territorial states. The former indicates an urban center and its hinterland, while the latter was a larger entity with multiple administrative centers ruled by residents linked to the state. Nevertheless, Hansen (2000) objects to this dichotomy and says that a city-state is merely a territorial state with a small territory and well-defined borders. In addition, he suggests that it is more appropriate to replace the misleading term "territorial state" with "macro-state" to denote those "states in possession of a large territory dotted with urban centres, of which one is a capital" (Hansen 2000, 16). Hence, the city-state is one of the most common forms of micro-state. Slightly different is the position of Marcus (1998, 92), who argues that territorial states and city-states "were often different stages in the dynamic cycles of the same states, rather than two contrasting socio-political types," and that the clusters of city-states in a specific area were the result of the political collapse of earlier unitary states. Along slightly different lines, Finer (1997, 6–3) proposes four different types of state: city-states, "generic" states (roughly equivalent to territorial states), national states, and empires. He classifies the states according to the degree of centralization and standardization of administration and cultural homogeneity.

Empires can be thought of as a particular type of macro-state, although it must be recognized that there is no single definition of what constitutes an empire, and the topic is hotly debated among scholars. Here I will provide six fuzzy criteria appliable to empires. First, empires are characterized by a dominating political entity exerting political control or sovereignty over one or more polities (Altaweel and Squitieri 2018; Cline and Graham 2011; Doyle 1986). Second, empires impose their power through a centralized military organisation (Morris 2021). Third, imperial governments dominate geographically vast areas (Scheidel 2021). Fourth, empires are large, composite, and multi-ethnical political entities (Howe 2002). Fifth, empires encompass regions having different landscapes and ecologies (Beattie and Anderson 2021). Sixth, empires are the result of a military conquest by a dominating organizational center characterized by a proper ideology, culture, and language imposed over subordinate peripheries (Finer 1997; Goldstone and Haldon 2009; Motyl 2001). Even though empires are identifiable by a small number of key elements as illustrated by the six criteria above, they are complex because there is no unique version of empires. Empires developed, instead, as a bundle of successful social practices and repertoires regulating the relationships between imperial ideologies and local elites, between the core elites and the dominated peripheral elites, and between the different bureaucratic levels of the imperial administration and military organization (Haldon 2021). To summarise, Morris (2021, 157) has recently provided an effective definition of an ideal-type empire as "a political organisation exercising significant coercive powers across a geographically extensive territory within which is perceived by its subjects as an alien, foreign force."

2.2 The Empires of Southwestern Asia

In this section, I provide a historical overview of the political landscapes in southwestern Asia from the beginning of the third millennium BC until the end of the first millennium BC. I also offer a first and general account of the diachronic development and spatial distribution of the earliest large-scale southwestern Asian empires.

The study of the available archaeological and textual evidence has revealed that the political landscapes of southwestern Asia probably witnessed a series of repeated cycles from small political entities to large territorial states throughout the period spanning from the fourth to the first millennium BC (Marcus 1998; Thuesen 2000; Ur 2010). During this period, city-states remained the more stable and longest-lasting political unit, while the larger regional kingdoms were often politically fragile and could last only one generation or a single dynasty (Palmisano 2018). The history of southwestern Asia was characterized by alternating periods

of political fragmentation, where the region was divided into hundreds of city-states and tribal communities, and periods of stronger political unification where large centralized states imposed their authority upon numerous and weaker existing polities (Barjamovic 2013). For the sake of simplicity, the political history of early southwestern Asia can be divided into five blocks (for a historical overview and a visual inspection of the extent of early large-scale states in southwestern Asia, see Altaweel and Squitieri 2018; Barjamovic 2021; Radner 2020a).

1. Age of city-states (ca. 3000–2350 BC). The political landscapes of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Levant, and Iran were littered with hundreds of city-states.

2. Early large-scale states (ca. 2350–2000 BC). The dynasty of Akkad and the Third Dynasty of Ur are conventionally recognized as the earliest examples of empires in human history (Steinkeller 2021). The former exerted its sovereignty on southern Mesopotamia, part of Syria, and western Iran between ca. 2350 and 2215 BC, while the latter unified southern Mesopotamia under a highly centralized and bureaucratic imperial administration between ca. 2100 and 2000 BC.

3. Intermezzo (ca. 2000–1600 BC). For most of this period, southwestern Asia was divided into hundreds of city-states (Palmisano 2017). In this context, two exceptions are represented by the ephemeral short-lived large kingdoms of Shamshi-Adad I and Zimri-Lim, who unified Upper Mesopotamia during ca. 1809–1776 BC and ca. 1780–1758 BC respectively (Van De Mieroop 2020). Southern Mesopotamia became a fully integrated and unified imperial-type state under Hammurabi of Babylon and his dynasty (ca. 1792–1595 BC).

4. Regional empires (ca. 1600–1100 BC). Several empires were established between Egypt and Iran. The Mitannian Empire (ca. 1550–1340 BC) stretched over Upper Mesopotamia and northern Syria, the Cassite state (ca. 1600–1155 BC) unified southern Mesopotamia, Elam and Anshan consolidated the power in western Iran between 1500 and 1100 BC, and the Hittite Empire imposed its power on Anatolia and the northern Levant (ca. 1650–1100 BC).

5. Universal empires (ca. 900–330 BC). After a period of political fragmentation, southwestern Asia was unified by several succeeding vast empires. The Neo-Assyrian Empire (ca. 883–609 BC) stretched at its maximum over western Iran, Mesopotamia, the Levant, southeastern Anatolia, and northern Egypt. The empire of Urartu (ca. 830–600 BC) extended over southeastern Turkey, Armenia, and northwestern Iran. After the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Neo-Babylonian Empire (ca. 626 BC–539 BC) occupied most of the areas once held by the Assyrians, while the Median state (ca. 625–550 BC) extended over eastern Anatolia and Iran. In the end, the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 559–330 BC) imposed its sovereignty over a huge area of 5.5 million square km stretching from central Asia in the east to Thracia and southeast Europe in the west.

2.3   The Assyrian Empire as the First World Empire

From 1350 BC, the city-state of Aššur rose to power, starting an expansion process that culminated in the establishment of the Assyrian Empire, the first long-lived empire in world history, which lasted in some form or another for three-quarters of a millennium until its demise in 609 BC (Barjamovic 2021; Düring 2018, 2020a; Kühne 2011; Tenu 2009). Some scholars do not agree with this depiction and prefer distinguishing the Neo-Assyrian Empire (ca. 883–609 BC) from the Middle Assyrian kingdom (ca. 1350–935 BC) because the latter was medium-sized (ca. 140,000 square km) and extended only over Upper Mesopotamia (figure 1; Bedford 2009; Cline and Graham 2011; Roaf 1990). Even though the beginning of the Assyrian Empire is
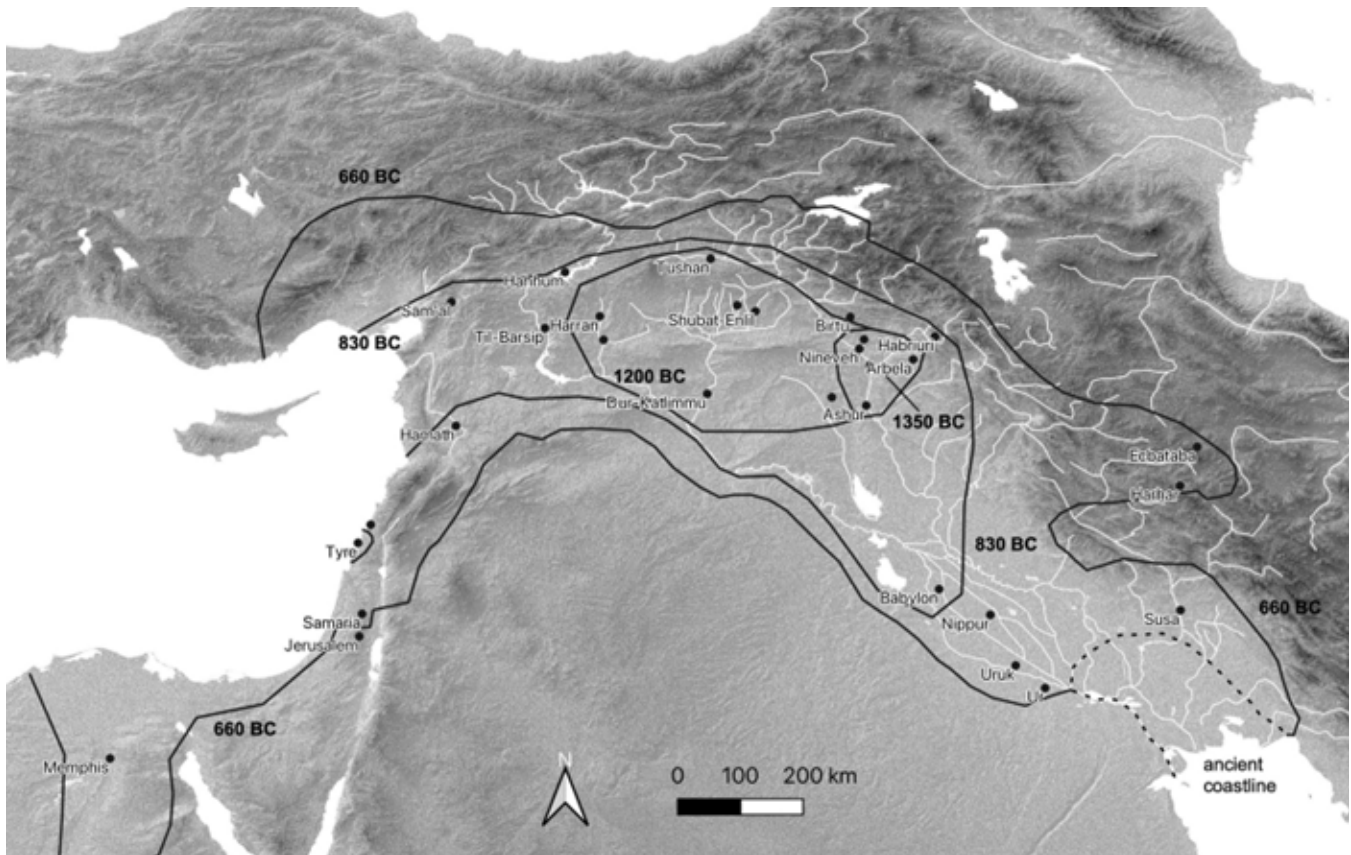
Figure 1. Map showing the expansion of the Assyrian Empire from the fourteenth to the seventh century BC

disputed, it is widely accepted that the empire existed at least between ca. 883 and 609 BC and reached its apex during Assurbanipal's kingdom (ca. 668–631 BC), when it extended approximately 1.4 million square km (Frahm 2017; Liverani 1988; Radner 2006). Therefore, for the sake of clarity, in this chapter, I will use the terms Middle Assyrian kingdom and Neo-Assyrian Empire to distinguish these two time periods.

More recently, Düring (2020b) stated that the Assyrian Empire marked a watershed in human history as it is the earliest example of a world empire. It started an era sometimes known as the "Age of Empires" (Altaweel and Squitieri 2018), a sequence of succeeding vast empires dominating Western Asia until the twentieth century AD. According to the political scientist Herfried Münkler (2005), world empires are characterized by three crucial parameters: (1) temporal duration, (2) spatial extension, and (3) a civilizing mission that consists of integrating the newly culturally different conquered territories into an imperial administration by generating a unifying sense of belonging and identity through the routine exercise of ideological practices and social engineering. In addition, world empires should have experienced a cycle of rise, decline, and a new beginning. The Assyrian Empire fits perfectly with this definition of world empire as it experienced the following periods (Radner 2014; figure 1):

1. Rise (ca. 1350–1050 BC). The small city-state of Aššur (Ashur) extended its domination over most of Upper Mesopotamia (now northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Iraq).

2. Decline (ca. 1050–935 BC). During this period the Middle Assyrian kingdom lost control over most of Upper Mesopotamia and shrank to the old heartland between Aššur in the south, Nineveh (modern Mosul) in the north, and Arbilu in the east (modern Erbil) (Radner 2020a).

3.   A new beginning (ca. 934–609 BC). The Assyrians retook control of the area; dominated in the last quarter of the second millennium BC (ca. 934–884 BC); extended further west, north, south, and east (ca. 883–745 BC); and consolidated the empire (ca. 744–630 BC) (Bedford 2009).

Another peculiarity of world empires is to cross the so-called "Augustan threshold," referring to a critical point in the empire's history where after an expansion phase follows a consolidation phase bringing into balance military, economic, political, and religious powers (Doyle 1986). The Assyrian Empire can be considered the first example of a world empire successfully crossing the "Augustan threshold" (Bagg 2013; Düring 2020a). In this perspective, the Assyrian Empire differs from earlier southwestern Asian empires such as those of Akkad, Ur III, Mitanni, Hittites, and Cassites. Most of those large-scale states did not last for more than two centuries, and some of them, such as those of Shamshi-Adad I, Hammurabi of Babylon, and Zimri-Lim of Mari, existed for only one or two generations and relied exclusively on the charismatic and military qualities of their founders (Rollinger, Degen, and Gehler 2020; Van de Mieroop 2020). Further, a recent comparative study by Düring (2015a) clearly shows how the Assyrian Empire, unlike the other Late Bronze Age empires such as Mitanni, Hittites, and Cassites, relied on more intrusive and developed practices of governance for the consolidation of power, such as continuity in state institutions, social and landscape engineering, agricultural intensification, improvement of military and logistical infrastructures, and co-optation of local elites.

3. Modes of Institutions of Governance

3.1 Models of Assyrian Imperialism

In the past decades, different theoretical models have been formulated to explain how imperial authorities imposed, consolidated, and managed their power over landscapes and people put under their sovereignty. In this section, I will review those models of imperialism that have been applied to explain how the Assyrians successfully dominated a large portion of southwestern Asia. The theoretical framework distinguishing territorial and hegemonic modes of imperial domination has been one of the most influential approaches to infer imperial strategies of domination (Luttwak 1976). In this model, a territorial strategy consists of direct rule over subdued regions that are converted into provinces with an imperial administration. Territorial control involved not only high levels of investment in terms of deployment of armies and bureaucrats but also the building of those physical infrastructures (e.g., roads, administrative centers, storage facilities, irrigation channels) easing the local management of labor and resources (Alconini 2008; D'Altroy 1992). Therefore, this imperial strategy is characterized by significant economic extraction to obtain high revenues for imperial purposes (Hassig 1985; Luttwak 1976). By contrast, the hegemonic strategy consists of indirect rule over the subdued polities, whose existing administrative, economic, and social structures are left almost intact. This form of control is characterized by minimal infrastructural investment and low extraction revenues, and, in the absence of a permanent standing army, the defense of the territory is delegated to the local elites (D'Altroy 1992; Hassig 1985). It often has been assumed that hegemonic forms of power are typical of expanding empires that subsequently switch to more direct control of domination once they consolidate their power (Luttwak 1976). In this model, a spatial distinction has been made between the core regions of the empire subject to direct rule (territorial strategy) and the distant peripheral zones dominated through hegemonic strategies of imperial control (D'Altroy 1992; Luttwak 1976). This hegemonic/territorial theoretical framework originally developed by Luttwak (1976) was further elaborated by Postgate (1992), who proposed a concentric model where the core regions of the Assyrian Empire were directly controlled and surrounded by vassal states subject to a hegemonic form of control (figure 2a).
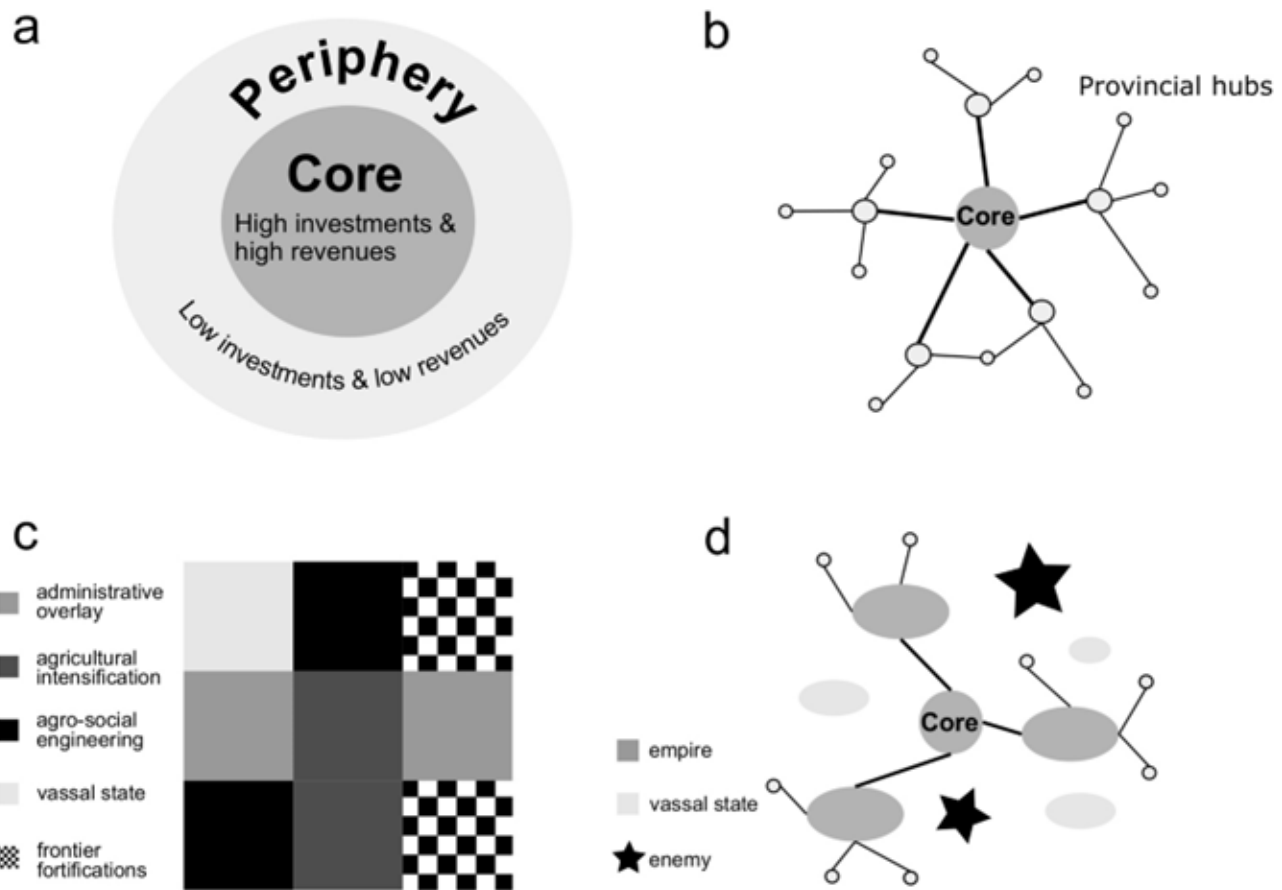
Figure 2. Schematic representation of modes of imperialism: (a) hegemonic and territorial model (Luttwak 1976; Postgate 1992); (b) network model (Bernbeck 2010; Liverani 1984, 1988); (c) mosaic model (Düring 2020a; Schreiber 1992); (d) hegemonic/territorial + network model (Parker 2001).

Liverani (1984, 1988) reacted against this territorial/hegemonic model of imperial domination and argued that there was not necessarily a spatial continuity between the regions of the Assyrian Empire under direct and indirect control. Rather, he postulated that the Assyrian Empire was not a spread of land but a network of communication and transportation corridors along which the empire established provincial capitals, towns, and administrative hubs to impose rule over small pockets of territory directly controlled (figure 2b). More recently, Bernbeck (2010) pointed out the similarities between the Assyrian Empire and the United States and argued that both polities relied on a network of military bases and fortresses to guarantee imperial control in alien territories.

Düring (2018, 2020a), building on the "imperial mosaic" model suggested by Schreiber (1992), has recently proposed that the Assyrian Empire was not homogenously administered and instead was a patchwork of different imperial strategies that were opportunistically applied according to the socio-ecological pre-existing conditions of the new polities and territories incorporated (figure 2c). According to this model, the Assyrian Empire has to be conceived as a mosaic in which each tessera (individual tile) was characterized by different imperial institutions and policies (figure 2c). In his model, Düring (2020a) defines five distinct imperial repertoires of governance: (1) administrative overlay/accommodation, (2) agricultural intensification, (3) agricultural and social engineering, (4) vassal states, and (5) frontier fortifications. The first repertoire indicates a political regime where the Assyrian impact in the newly conquered territories was elusive and

mostly in continuity with the pre-existing independent polity in terms of institutions, agricultural production, settlement patterns, and material culture; the second one is applied to those areas that were already part of the Assyrian Empire and that met a further intensification in agricultural output; the third one is characterized by a deep and remarkable reconfiguration of the conquered regions in terms of political institutions, agricultural landscapes, and settlement systems; the fourth one refers to those independent polities that kept their own institutions but had a subordinated position formalized in official treaties and were obliged to pay annual tribute and supply manpower to military campaigns and construction activities; the fifth one indicates the establishment of buffer zones by the deployment of fortresses and garrisons along the frontiers of the empire as a defense from external enemies.

Parker (2001, 2013) proposed a synthesis of the hegemonic/territorial model and the network model by suggesting that areas under the direct control of the Assyrian rule were interspersed with regions indirectly controlled (vassal/client states), without control (buffer and autonomous states), and hostile (enemy states) (figure 2d). More recently, Parker (2020) has completed this model by identifying four parameters called "pathways" to measure the degree of control that empires exert over subject territories: political, ideological, social, and economic. Empires establish political control through military action and the annexation and administration of conquered territories; promote ideological control by disseminating the ideology of the core and engaging with the local beliefs; impose social control via forms of social engineering such as mass deportation, resettlement of formerly uninhabited areas, agricultural intensification, and co-optation of local elites; and exert economic control by taxes, tributes, extraction of local resources, and trade. By applying D'Altroy's (1992) territorial/hegemonic continuum (figure 3a) to those four parameters ("pathways"), Parker (2020) postulated that in the provinces the Assyrian authorities could have exerted strong direct political and economic control (figure 3b), while in the vassal states they could have made use of indirect political, ideological, and social control (figure 3c).
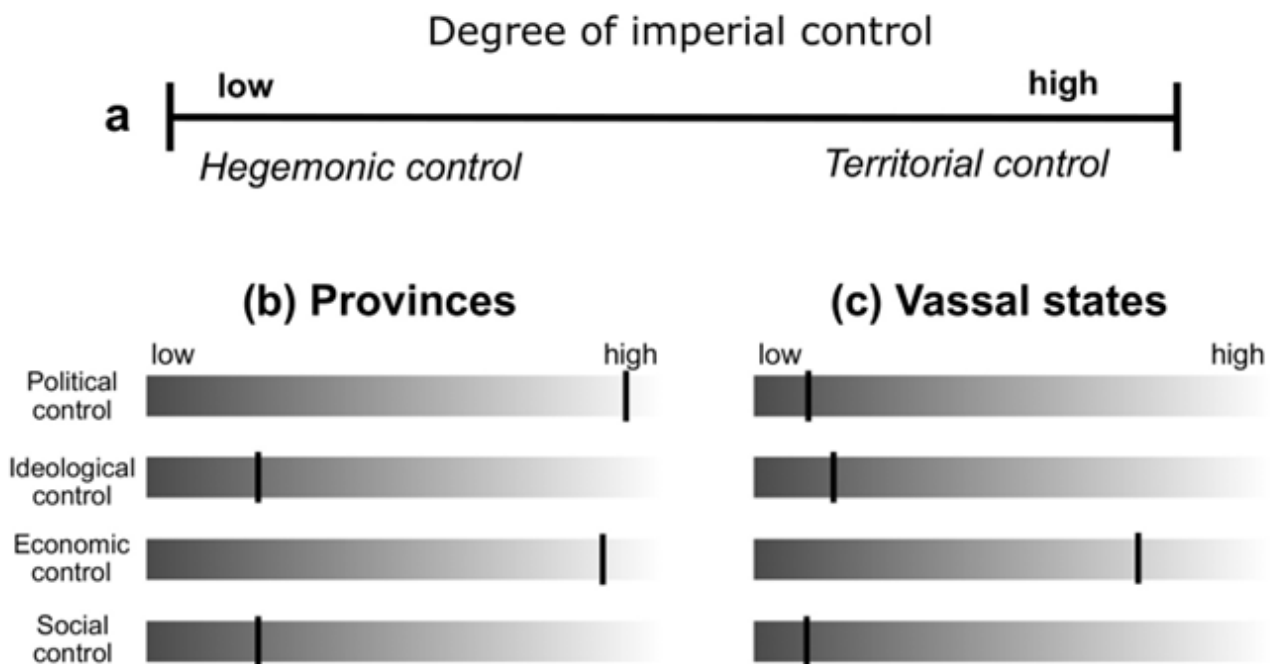
Figure 3. Schematic representation of (a) the territorial-hegemonic continuum (D'Altroy 1992) and pathways of power for (b) provinces and (c) vassal states (Parker 2020).

3.2 The Evolution of the Assyrian Institutions

3.2.1 The Middle Assyrian Period

In the Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1350–935 BC), the most substantial institutional change concerns the role of the king, whose power increased considerably if compared with the role played by his predecessors during the Old Assyrian period (ca. 1950–1720 BC) (Faist 2010). The available textual sources tell us that the political order of the city-state of Aššur during the Old Assyrian period was characterized by a self-governing communal policy in which the ruler shared the power with other institutions (Dercksen 2004; Veenhof 2017): the City Assembly (alum) and the City Hall (bit alim). The first was the highest judicial authority (e.g., issued edicts, solved legal disputes, introduced laws) and comprised the heads of the main merchant families (Veenhof 2017). The ruler acted as the chairman of the City Assembly and played an important religious role (Faist 2010). The City Hall was the main economic and administrative system and was involved in the regulation of trade, the collection of taxes, and the management of the public granary, stocks and city treasure (Faist 2010). The City Hall was headed by the limum, a magistrate annually elected who did not belong to the royal family. The institution of limum counterbalanced the power of the king, and the exclusion of the royal family from this magistracy shows the will of the Aššur polity to limit the power of the ruler (Faist 2010; Nemirovsky 2020).

However, the Middle Assyrian kingdom was characterized by a regime of royal autocracy where power was concentrated in the hands of the king (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2014; Jakob 2017). The City Assembly disappeared, the City Hall was turned into a place for keeping the standard weighing stones, and the limum lost any functions of power (Faist 2010). The Middle Assyrian kings retained the title iššiakku (vice-regent, steward) of the god Aššur given that they symbolically acted as the administrators of the god who exerted his rule over the whole Assyria. The increase of the king's power was reflected in the introduction of the title šarru rabû (great king). The adoption of this title clearly shows the intention of the Middle Assyrian kings to act as major players in the international scene and to represent themselves equal to the other "Great Kings" of Egypt, the Hittite and Cassite empires that dominated over most of western Asia (Bedford 2009; Liverani 2014). The first ruler to use this title was Aššur-uballiṭ I (ca. 1353–1318 BC) who also titled himself "king of the land of Aššur" (Grayson 1987). The Middle Assyrian kingdom was characterized by a highly hierarchized bureaucratic structure, where the king entrusted the high-office posts either to members of his own royal house or to the representatives of some of Aššur's influential families (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1999; Faist 2001; Jakob 2003; Postgate 2013). This system strengthened the position of the royal house, and the high officials were completely subordinate to the ruler (Nemirovsky 2020).

Unlike the Old Assyrian period, the high officials could pass their positions from father to son (Faist 2010). The territory of Assyria was divided into smaller provinces: administrative units managed by district governors that were responsible for the agricultural production of the crown land, the management and distribution of the agricultural surplus, the imposition of taxes, the organization and maintenance of the labor force, and the organization of the military (Jakob 2003; Roth 1997). One of the highest officials of the Middle Assyrian central administration was the vizier (sukkallu), who perhaps was a dignitary of the royal court (Faist 2010; Roth 1997). This office, as a consequence of the military expansion during Shalmaneser I's kingdom (1263–1234 BC), seems to have been divided in two: the vizier was responsible for the Assyrian heartland between Aššur, Nineveh, and Arbilu, while the great vizier (sukkallu rabi'u) was entrusted with the management of the newly conquered territories in West Upper Mesopotamia (Faist 2010; Jakob 2003). The great vizier was the most powerful authority after the king and its office was inherited from father to son (Jakob 2017). The duties of the vizier consisted of the consolidation of Assyrian authority in the annexed territory, the leadership of military operations, and the enabling of fortification measures (Faist 2010). High officials were entrusted with rural estates (dunnu), which were often fortified, of considerable size, and equipped with a reasonable

labor workforce to produce agricultural surplus (Wiggermann 2000). These estates were given to the Assyrian governors as compensation for their service and to fund the maintenance of the facilities of the Assyrian state (Düring 2015b). The dunnu was a typical Middle Assyrian institution enabling the development of previously abandoned uncultivated landscapes as part of the process of the Assyrian expansion and consolidation of power in the newly conquered territories (Düring 2015b; Radner 2004). Dunnu acted partly as agricultural colonies producing agricultural surplus benefitting local elite owners (Wiggermann 2000) and partly as strongholds feeding travelling army personnel (Koliński 2001).

3.2.2 The Neo-Assyrian Period

From the ninth century BC, innovations were introduced into the administrative system of the Assyrian Empire. The first step in achieving a stable and long-lasting cohesion was the replacement of the local dynasties in the newly integrated provinces of the empire with high officials without hereditary claims chosen, in part, by merit and not because they were tied to the royal family (Radner 2014). Most of them were eunuchs, whose sterility prevented the opportunity to pass their positions from father to son, thus avoiding competition within the royal clan (Radner 2011). The creation of this new class of administrator eunuchs loyal to the king was a crucial step in strengthening the role of the sovereign at the expense of the traditional old urban elites of Aššur (Radner 2014). In 879 BC, the relocation of the political and administrative center from Aššur to Kalḫu during the kingdom of Aššurnasirpal II (ca. 883–859 BC) was a further move to weaken those aristocratic and democratic powers whose influence was prominent in Aššur in favor of those officials owing their appointment to the king (Radner 2017). In this scenario, the fortified rural estate dunnu entrusted to provincial governors was abolished (Düring 2015b). This was likely due to the diminished power of the traditional Assyrian elites during the Neo-Assyrian period and to a landownership that was no longer hereditary but linked to temporary positions held by the Assyrian officers (Radner 2004).

The innovation in the Neo-Assyrian royal ideology was that the sovereign, in the international scenario, was no longer a Great King among a group of "brothers" heading rivalling large territorial states, but rather the Great King exerting his domination over most of southwestern Asia (Bedford 2009). Neo-Assyrian sources reveal that the organization of the Assyrian administration was fundamentally militaristic, and while the authority of the king was unlimited, he relied on a restricted group of high officials (Grayson 1999). Below the king were three senior officials (Grayson 1995): the vice-chancellor (ummānu), the majordomo (rab ša muḫḫi ekalli), and the field marshal (turtānu). The first two were royal advisers, while the third headed the army. The next ranked officials were the palace herald (nāgir ekalli), the chief cupbearer (rab šaqê), and the (chief) steward (abarakku), who respectively acted as a chief administrative officer of the empire, as the king's plenipotentiary, and as a responsible of royal commissions (Bedford 2009).

The second half of the eighth century BC was characterized by the consolidation of the Assyrian Empire and saw the incorporation of several former vassal states as provinces (Radner 2014). The development of provincialization marked the transition from a hegemonic to a territorial mode of governance (Bedford 2009). Each province was headed by a governor (bēl pāḫiti) appointed by the king who was not part of local dynasties but either a eunuch or a member of an Aššur elite family (Grayson 1992; Parker 2012). Provincial lower-ranking officials included a deputy governor (šaniu), a major-domo (rab bēti), a city overseer (ša muḫḫi āli), a village inspector (rab ālāni), and a village mayor (ḫazannu). The provinces in the Assyrian heartland were smaller in size as they were long-lasting institutions established at a much earlier time that had survived from the Middle Assyrian period (Radner 2006). All Assyrian governors were expected to provide the central administration with the same amount of taxes and labor regardless of the size of the province (Parpola 1995). Therefore, it seems that the provinces of the empire were expected to have the same economic potential (Radner 2014). The only exception was represented by the border marches, which were provinces heavily militarized and strategically located along the frontiers of the empire in order to defend the boundaries of the

empire from foreign enemies (Radner 2017).

The textual evidence informs us that another institutional innovation in the Neo-Assyrian Empire was the shift from a seasonally active conscript army to a permanent army composed of professional soldiers (Liverani 2004; Radner 2014). The main duty of the provincial governors was to collect and pay taxes to the Assyrian king (Perčírková 1987). However, agricultural taxes (e.g., grain, fodder) were supposed to feed the local garrison and horses, as well as large cities, and never left the provinces given the expensive long-distance transportation costs (Kerekes 2011; Perčírková 1987). In addition, the governors had to provide recruits for the Assyrian army and labor for large construction projects (e.g., aqueducts, roads, temples) (Fales 2012a; Perčírková 1987); maintain military fortresses and road stations (Grayson 1995; Radner 2015); supply intelligence (Fuchs 2011); and establish new trade relationships with neighboring regions (Radner 2004). The economy of the empire favored the flow of the surplus to the core to guarantee the maintenance of the bureaucratic structure (Bedford 2009). The members of the Assyrian elite occupying roles as high officials and provincial governors benefitted from this system where there was no distinction between public and private sector (Grayson 1995; Perčírková 1987). The provincial governors were paid by what they were able to extract from the provinces they managed (Perčírková 1987). Therefore, Postgate (1979) identified three sectors of the Neo-Assyrian economy: palace sector, government sector, and private sector. The government sector seems to have overlapped the other two sectors rather than being distinct. Fales (2017) accepted this model and added that a "patrimonial" mode of governance formed a prominent sector in the imperial administration, underpinning several crosslines of control over people and goods by Assyrian elites (e.g., queen, crown prince, magnates, governors).

4. Dealing with Diversity: The Geography of Imperial Policies

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the institutions implemented by the Assyrians in the subject territories during the maximum extent of the polity reached in the Middle Assyrian (ca. 1250–1200 BC) and Neo-Assyrian (ca. 660 BC) periods. I will then comparatively assess the continuity and discontinuity of imperial institutions of governance in those two periods.

4.1 Institutions of Governance

The Assyrian Empire made use of a varied repertoire of hard and soft power institutions in order to maintain control over the conquered territories. With the term hard power, I mean not only the ability to persuade others through coercive inducements and measures such as military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions (cf. Nye 2009; Wilson 2008) but also through the establishment of tangible resources of economic (e.g., agricultural development), military (e.g., fortifications, communication systems), and administrative power (new provincial capitals and urban centers) (see Gallarotti 2011). This governance strategy requires a substantial infrastructural change and strongly impacts the landscape and the societies under the control of the empire. The most common outputs of hard power institutions are the following:

1.   The establishment and expansion of a communication system (through roads and canals), which eases trade, military campaigns, and transportation (Kessler 1997);

2.   The construction of fortresses and fortifications both to control and defend the subjected territories (Morello 2016);

3. Agricultural development of formerly underpopulated areas through the establishment of new small rural settlements (a phenomenon also known as "landscape infilling"), agricultural colonization, and the building of irrigation channels (Rosenzweig 2016; Ur 2017);

4. Evidence of changing social organization from the form of an excessive concentration of population in a few larger sites (urban primacy or nucleation) to an even distribution of population across settlements of equal size (dispersion), the extreme patterns among a wide range of possible site size structures (Davies et al. 2014; Palmisano 2017). This distinctive pattern of dispersed, newly founded small rural sites in previously underutilized zones is typical of imperial-sponsored landscapes and is in marked contrast with the nucleated settlement patterns preceding the Assyrian domination (Wilkinson et al. 2005). In other words, city-states may have created underused buffer zones between themselves that, instead, were fully exploited under unifying imperial institutions.

5. The creation of new imperial provinces and the building of new administrative provincial capitals;

6. Deliberate coordinated schemes of resettlement and forced mass deportations of people from the peripheral provinces and annexed territories in order to quell particularly rebellious regions and to frustrate the capability of local communities to develop a culture alternative to the one of the Assyrian Empire (Oded 1979; Radner 2017).

The term *soft* power indicates the ability to affect others by intangible power means such as diplomacy, culture, ideology, and institutions (Nye 1990, 2009). The common forms of this governance strategy are here listed:

1. Religious and ideological ideas legitimizing the imperial domination;

2. Co-optation of local elites of annexed territories or diplomatic relations with independent client/vassal states (Parker 2015);

3. The development of homogenous institutions easing the management of both the core and the peripheral provinces of the empire (Bedford 2009);

4. The creation of a uniform culture and Assyrian identity (Parpola 2004).
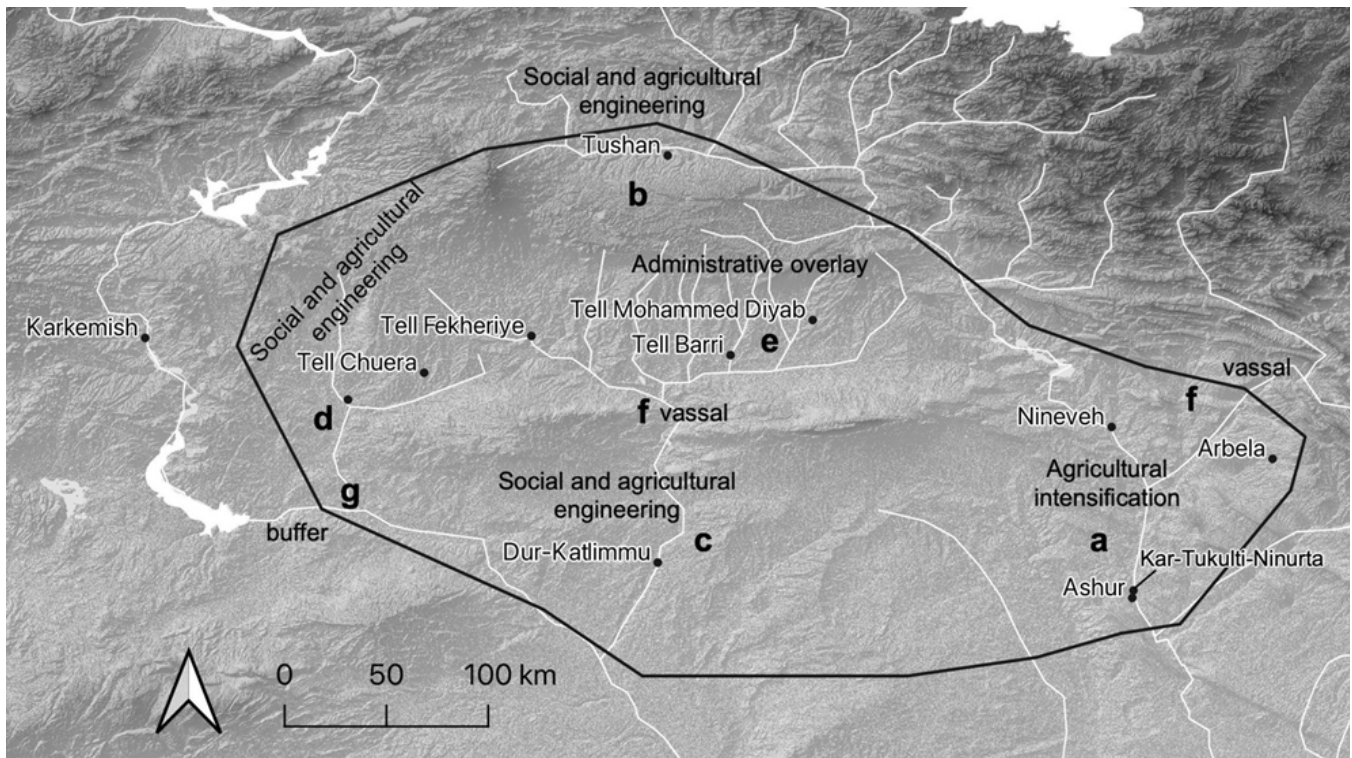
4.2 The Middle Assyrian Period

As I said above, the Middle Assyrian polity has not been unanimously considered by scholars to be an empire because of its modest size when compared with the Neo-Assyrian Empire (140,000 sq. km versus 1.4 million sq. km) and the lack of a multi-ethnic society. However, when the Middle Assyrian kingdom reached its apex under the realm of Tukulti-Ninurta I (ca. 1233–1197 BC), the Assyrians implemented a series of institutions that were then adopted and further developed in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. These included a varied repertoire of imperial policies deployed according to the pre-existing socio-ecological conditions of the newly conquered territories. The core area of the empire, the Assyrian heartland between Aššur, Nineveh, and Arbilu (figure 4a), was characterized by a substantial increase in the population, likely due to deportees coming from the conquered regions who were employed as a labor force for the construction of irrigation canals, the agricultural intensification, and the foundation of the new large capital Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta measuring about 480 hectares (Dittmann 2011; Düring 2018; Mühl 2015). The newly conquered territories annexed into the Assyrian provincial system experienced radical changes in their administrative institutions and settlement systems. In

such areas, the local indigenous sites were destroyed and replaced by a few strategically fortified administrative imperial centers (Wilkinson et al. 2005). Those imperial centers became the focus of substantial imperial investments such as the establishment of new military fortifications, communication systems, administrative buildings, and rural agricultural sites (Parker 2003).

In the Middle Assyrian kingdom, the governance strategies of hard power were implemented in the Upper Tigris (figure 4b), the Lower Khabur (figure 4c), and the Northern Balikh (figure 4d). The physical and cultural landscapes of these three regions were deeply transformed: first, a landscape poorly cultivated became extremely productive given conspicuous investments and the introduction of new technologies such as irrigation (Kühne 2009; Reculeau 2010, 2015); second, the socio-demographic structure of the area changed because of the arrival of free people from the Assyrian heartland and deportees from the newly conquered territories (Düring 2015a); and third, the new rural settlements and large-scale farming estates mentioned above, known as dunnu (e.g., Tell Sabi Abiyad in the Northern Balikh), augmented the agricultural output (Düring 2015b; Koliński 2015; Tenu 2015). The Upper Khabur (figure 4e) was the agricultural heartland of the Mitanni state (ca. 1550–1340 BC), and the archaeological evidence seems to suggest that the Assyrians had a limited impact on the area. Rather, they accommodated their administrative institutions to the pre-existing settlement and agricultural systems as witnessed by the continuous use of the former Mitannnial royal centers of Waššukanni (Tell Fekheriye) and Taidu (Tell Hamidiya) as provincial capitals (D'Agostino 2008; Düring 2020b; Jakob 2015; Tenu 2015). The institution of dunnu seems to appear rarely in this area, which was not subject to a systematic program of social and agricultural engineering as was the case in the other regions of the kingdom. According to Jakob (2015), the uncommon use of this institution can be explained by the fact that the Assyrians were originally reluctant to annex the Upper Khabur into the provincial system and did so only after their attempt to control the region as a vassal state failed. However, the Assyrians adopted hegemonic practices of power by co-opting the local elites of small independent kingdoms turned into vassal states such

Figure 4. Map of the governance strategies in the Middle Assyrian kingdom (based on Düring 2018, Fig. 2.3). The letters indicate the regions mentioned in the text.

as Katmuhu, the "Land of Mari," and Idu (figure 4f; Frahm 2017; Koliński 2015). The Assyrians were also involved in the creation of buffer zones to insulate important provinces from external enemies (Parker 2003). In those areas, the investment was limited to the establishment of fortified isolated centers hosting military garrisons for the defensive control of the zone, as perhaps occurred in the southern Balikh (figure 4g; Düring 2020b; Lyon 2000).
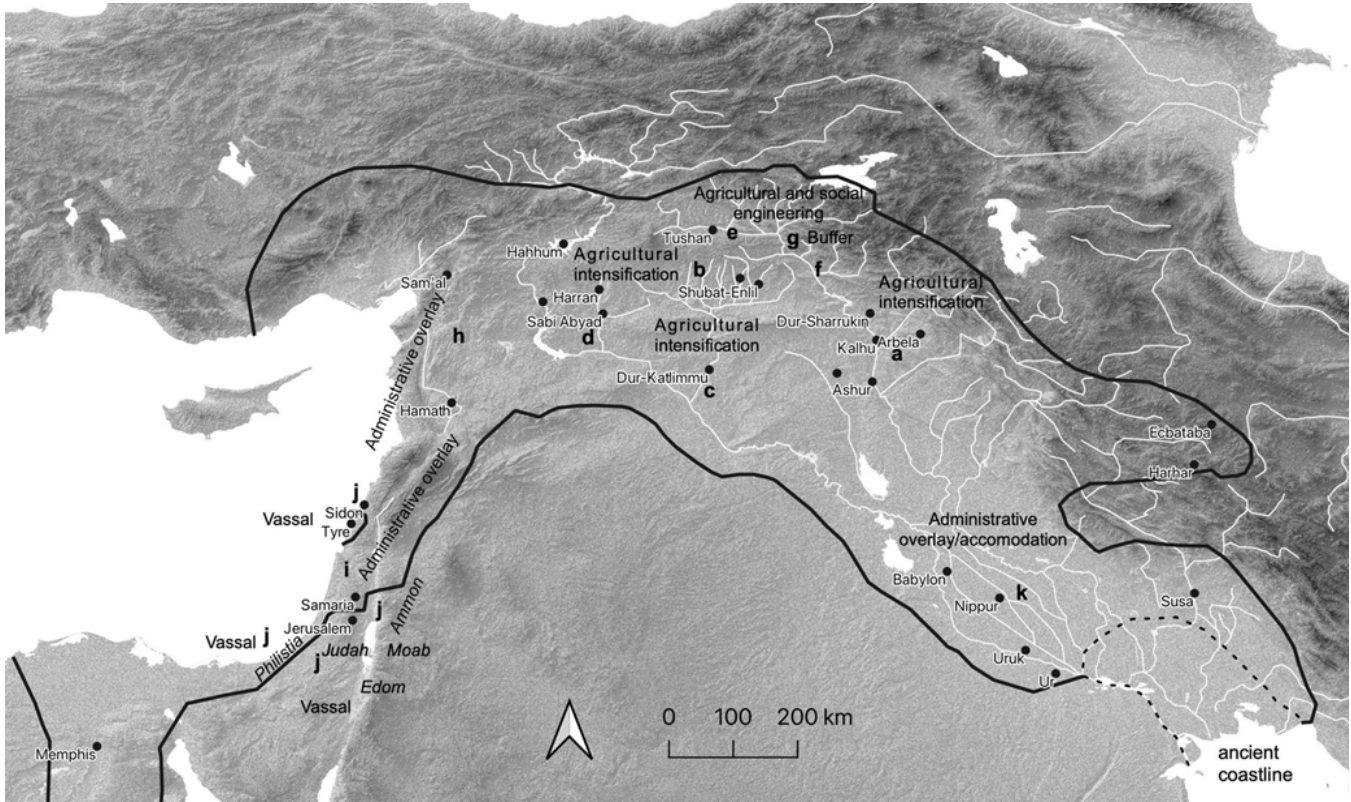
4.3 The Neo-Assyrian Period

During the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 883–609 BC), the Assyrians were the first to unify most of the Near East into a single political unit. At its apex, during the kingdom of Assurbanipal (ca. 668–627 BC), the Neo-Assyrian Empire stretched from the Zagros Mountains in the east to Egypt in the west, and from the Persian Gulf in the south to the Taurus Mountains in the north. As in the case of the Middle Assyrian kingdom, the Assyrians implemented a variety of institutions across the subject territories (Düring 2020b; Herrmann and Tyson 2018; Parker 2003). The complete repertoire of hard power institutions, including the establishment of new provinces and administrative centers, agricultural colonization, and a renewed system of fortification and communication, was implemented in the Assyrian heartland (figure 5a) and across the enlarged core areas encompassing the Upper Khabur valley (figure 5b), the Lower Khabur (figure 5c), and the Balikh valley (figure 5d) until the Euphrates (Wilkinson et al. 2005). The archaeological surveys carried out in these areas demonstrate that the landscape was subject to a substantial transformation and a dramatic surge in the number of newly established small rural settlements (Morandi Bonacossi 2018; Ur 2017; Ur and Osborne 2016; Wilkinson et al. 2005). The reorganization of the subject territories is particularly evident in the resulting settlement patterns characterized by newly established administrative imperial centers, the lack of medium-sized settlements, the increase in small-sized dispersed rural sites, the colonization of former unproductive areas by the introduction of irrigation, and the massive forced relocation of deportees from the subject territories toward the core of the empire (Morandi Bonacossi 2000; Oded 1979; Ur 2017; Wilkinson 1994; Wilkinson et al. 2005). Outside the core area of the empire, along the northern frontier, the Upper Tigris valley (figure 5e) and the Cizre plain (figure 5f) were annexed during the reigns of Aššurnasirpal II (ca. 883–859 BC) and Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC) respectively. These areas were well integrated into the Assyrian provincial system as witnessed in the archaeological record by a dramatic increase in small rural settlements, the landscape infilling of areas formerly uncultivated, the lack of intermediate-sized settlements, and the establishment of large imperial administrative centers such as Tušhan (32 ha, the modern Ziyaret Tepe) in the Upper Tigris valley (Guarducci 2018; Matney 2016; Parker 2003). However, the archaeological and textual data seem to suggest little involvement of the Assyrians in the Middle-Upper Tigris valley (figure 5g), which likely was turned into a buffer zone characterized by the establishment of newly founded, evenly spaced military fortresses to protect the downstream river traffic from the Assyrian provinces in the Upper Tigris (Parker 2003, 2013).

Beyond the Euphrates, in the northern Levant (figure 5h), the Assyrian imperial institutions differed from the ones employed in the core area. This area was formerly composed of vassal states that were annexed into the administrative provincial system only during the expansionist phase of the empire during the eighth and seventh centuries BC. As a consequence, the cultural and physical landscapes did not experience a radical change, and the settlement patterns inferred from the archaeological record seem to suggest that local rulers could have retained some degree of autonomy as witnessed by the presence of high mounded fortified citadels (Herrmann and Schloen 2016; Postgate 1992; Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2016; Wilkinson et al. 2005). In the southern Levant (figure 5i), the kingdoms of Israel and Aram Damascus were completely conquered and turned into Assyrian provinces by late 720 BC, while the other kingdoms (Phoenician city-states, Philistia, Judah, Ammon, Moab, and Edom; figure 5j) became client states (Becking 2019; Novotny 2019). So, the impact of the Assyrian Empire in the southern Levant was limited when compared with the core area, and the Assyrians made use of both hegemonic and territorial governance strategies there (Bagg 2013; Faust 2018,

2021; Tyson 2018). Southern Mesopotamia (figure 5k) was annexed into the Assyrian provincial system in the last quarter of the eighth century BC, and the governance strategies enabled by the Assyrians were flexible and attuned to the reality of the occurring fragmented political landscape (Radner 2020b).

Figure 5. Map of the governance strategies in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The letters indicate the regions mentioned in the text.

4.4 Comparing Imperial Institutions

I here provided a snapshot of the imperial institutions during the maximum extent of the Middle Assyrian kingdom and the Neo-Assyrian Empire. However, this is just an extreme schematization of these institutions given that hegemonic and territorial practices of power are to be interpreted along a temporal continuum in order to have a more complete understanding of their evolution. This geographical assessment of Assyrian imperial institutions suggests that during the Neo-Assyrian Empire (figure 5) those territories that were part of the Middle-Assyrian polity (figure 4) experienced strong direct rule and landscape and social engineering. This is perhaps due to the fact that the former lost Middle Assyrian territories represented a vivid memory for the Assyrians in the Iron Age, and the initial wars of the expanding Neo-Assyrian Empire were presented as a sort of "Reconquista" (Düring 2015a; Fales 2012b; Postgate 1992). Hence, at the time of the Neo-Assyrian conquests, North Mesopotamia had already established a long tradition of cultural connections with the Assyrians, which was not the case for the peripheral areas of the empire such as the Levant and southern Mesopotamia. All in all, the dearth of Assyrian influence on the peripheral areas of the empire can be explained by using arguments based on the duration of rule as well as tradition, rather than Assyrian neglect. While the Assyrian provinces of North Mesopotamia and North Syria were included in the empire's orbit quite early at the start of Assyrian expansion, other areas such as the southern Levant in general became part of the imperial provincial and client state systems much later. The relatively shorter period that the southern Levant was under Assyrian direct or indirect rule, compared with other areas of the empire, gave the local culture notably

less time to transform and reflect the new socioeconomic and political situation. However, the Neo-Assyrian Empire, even during the apex of its expansion phase, could have opted for more hegemonic and nuanced governance strategies for keeping control of those regions far from the core of the empire. A direct annexation of those regions requiring a big effort in terms of structural investments (e.g., full-time bureaucrats and armies, administrative centers, roads, agricultural facilities) in exchange for low revenues could have made Assyrian rulers opt-out of the direct control of those territories. In addition, the Assyrian policies were not always based on dominance or despotism, and they adapted to local conditions or granted concessions to the peripheral regions of the empire in order to have a stabler rule, avoid rebellions, and be more cohesive.

In both the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods, similar institutions of hard power were implemented (Düring 2015a, 2020b): the destruction or abandonment of existing settlements and the establishment of new administrative urban centers, the forced mass deportation of people from the subject territories, the creation of a fortification system along the frontiers, the development of a road system complete with relay stations, the construction of irrigation channels for the agricultural colonization of formerly unproductive lands, and the creation of a provincial system. However, apart from the diplomatic relations with vassal states and the co-optation of local elites, there were several differences among the strategies of institutions of soft power implemented in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods (Düring 2015a, 306). In particular, the Assyrian ideology and religion were intensely propagated across all segments of the population through a variety of means such as rock art, monuments, victory stelae, royal inscriptions, statues, orthostats in the palaces, emperor cult, and religious festivals (Parker 2015; Parpola 2004). This process of acculturation (known also as "Assyrianization") of those non-Assyrian elites opting into Assyrian identity was more pronounced during the Neo-Assyrian period and further promoted by intermarriages, common military expeditions, and joint business projects (Matney 2010; Parpola 2004). The long-term strategic goal of Assyrian policy was to replace the ethnic identities of the conquered people with a unifying Assyrian identity (Parpola 2004). In addition, during the Neo-Assyrian period, the king assumed a much more central role at the expense of aristocratic and democratic powers (Radner 2014). To summarize, there was a series of institutional transformations and innovations in the repertoire of the imperial strategies enabled during the Neo-Assyrian period. Moreover, the evolution of Assyrian institutions is to be interpreted along a temporal continuum given that most governance strategies were originally developed in the Middle Assyrian period and then adopted in the later Neo-Assyrian period (Düring 2020b).

5. Conclusions: Final Thoughts and Future Perspectives

In this chapter, I have provided a broad overview of the hegemonic and territorial institutions of domination adopted by the Assyrians during the Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian periods. The available archaeological and textual evidence seems to suggest that the repertoire of governance strategies enabled in both periods was similar and is to be interpreted within a frame of a temporal continuum.

A more remarkable difference during the later Neo-Assyrian period was a greater effort in building a so-called "culture of empire" that aimed to overcome the multiple ethnic identities of the population annexed to the empire in order to build a unifying cultural Assyrian identity. This also could be explained by the fact that the Neo-Assyrian Empire, unlike the Middle Assyrian kingdom, was a multi-ethnic polity stretching over an extent of 1.4 million squared kilometers that needed to build a long-lasting homogenous culture and identity to avoid any particularistic and centrifugal tendencies. However, the overall picture is that in both the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods the Assyrians made use of various flexible ruling institutions across space and time and did not administer the subject territories homogenously. A higher degree of homogenous administrative practices seems to have been implemented in the enlarged core of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, in those territories that were part of the earlier Middle Assyrian kingdom.

What is clear is that the Assyrian Empire did not necessarily pursue a static and dogmatic grand project and, in some cases, adapted to the pre-existing socio-ecological conditions of the newly conquered territories in order to avoid particularistic and centrifugal tendencies. The development of the imperial institutions enabled by the Assyrians also can be seen under the lens of a sequential and evolutionary continuum. At a first stage of expansion, both in the Middle and the Neo-Assyrian periods, the Assyrian Empire could have made use of institutions found in a hegemonic mode of governance in order to exert a certain degree of control over those peripheral areas farther from the core. In a second stage, the Assyrians could have consolidated their power by developing institutions such as imperial provinces that allowed a more direct control over subject populations (Llop-Raduà 2012). However, another aspect to consider is the length of the Assyrian rule in a specific region. For instance, regions experiencing a long period of domination adhered more properly to all aspects of an "Assyrian culture of empire" (e.g., material culture, institutional administration, physical landscape transformation) than those regions subject for short periods.

Finally, I would like to conclude by pointing out that future research efforts should systematically integrate archaeological, textual, and geographical data into a landscape-based approach to empirically investigate the evolution of Assyrian institutions across space and time. In this perspective, the Assyrian Empire represents a privileged case study, given that it has one of the largest archaeological datasets in the world (thousands of archaeological excavations and detailed surveys) augmented by a relatively large amount of textual evidence found both in the region and Mesopotamia (e.g., Assyrian royal inscriptions, administrative documents, correspondence relating to the region). The LMU-Munich-based Munich Open-access Cuneiform Corpus Initiative (MOCCI) co-directed by Karen Radner and Jamie Novotny represents an excellent tool providing free and easy access to around 10,000 geo-located Assyrian texts (Novotny and Radner 2019). This holistic approach could bridge together archaeology and history and bring new perspectives and theoretical frameworks for understanding imperial practices of imposition, consolidation, and maintenance of power in general.

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