Chapter 2

Power and Prestige: The Neo-Assyrian Imperial Landscape

Assyria first became a geographical and cultural entity in the 23rd century BCE, and continued to continuously occupy that territory, or some piece of it, until 605 BCE. Understandably, the borders and boundaries of Assyria expanded and contracted during those 1600 years. We concentrate here on the Neo-Assyrian empire or Late Assyrian period (911–605 BCE), particularly the 8th and 7th centuries, touching on the Middle Assyrian period (1400–1050 BCE) only where necessary for conceptual continuity. Although the terms ‘Neo-Assyrian’ and ‘Late Assyrian’ are often used interchangeably, we use ‘Neo-Assyrian’ to refer to the political-cultural complex of the Neo-Assyrian empire and ‘Late Assyrian’ to refer to the period of time.

From its inception, Assyrian power and identity was concentrated in the ‘Assyrian triangle’, cornered by the cities Aššur, Nineveh, and Arba-ilu, along and to the east of the Tigris river (map 2.1a). This area was the religious, political, and cultural centre of the empire. Scholars generally recognise the triangle to sit within a roughly heart-shaped area which extends beyond the banks of the Tigris to the west (map 2.1b). This larger region was never out of Assyrian control and cultural continuity can be demonstrated archaeologically across the ‘1200 BCE event’ which caused the collapse of neighbouring empires (Kuhrt 1995; Caubet 1992). Radner (2006) refers to the 11 administrative provinces which comprise this heartshaped region as ‘central Assyria’ and in this study we refer to it as the Neo-Assyrian Central Polity.

The physical entity of Assyria is described in the literature as the ‘heartland’, ‘Assyria proper’, and māt Aššur (land of Assur). Each of these terms incorporates complex political, ideological, and territorial relationships and it is illustrative of the complexity of Assyrian geography to tease apart the connotations of each term. Assyrian heartland can refer to the territory defined above as the Central Polity, but is often used to describe a larger region of Upper Mesopotamia which extends from the Ġazīra or Syrian steppe in the west to the Zagros mountains in the east (e.g. Kühne 1995) (map 2.1c). This second usage reflects that during times of strength during both Middle and Late Assyrian periods, this territory was not only under Assyrian control but demonstrated continuity in material culture and ideology with the Central Polity.
MAP 2.1 Map of the Assyria. (a) the Assyrian triangle; (b) Central Polity; (c) Assyria Proper. (Modified from Google Earth Landsat Image.)