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EF
Introduction

Eckart Frahm

Aims and Scope of this Book

Assyria was one of the great civilizations of the ancient world. It had a long and variegated history, with beginnings in the third millennium and various phases of growth and decline. During the eighth and seventh century BCE, Assyria became what many consider the first empire in world history, its borders stretching from the Persian Gulf to central Anatolia and from the Zagros mountains in Iran to the Egyptian Nile. The main beneficiaries of this unprecedented accumulation of power and wealth were the Assyrian military and administrative elites and, most notably, the Assyrian kings, who used a mixture of political cunning, military force, and administrative malleability to forward the Assyrian cause. Between 616 and 609 BCE, after a dramatic showdown with the Babylonians and Medes, the Assyrian state collapsed, and only vestiges of Assyrian culture survived. But the imperial structures built by the Assyrian kings provided a blueprint for the later empires of ancient Western Asia, beginning with the Babylonians and Persians. And Israelites and Greeks, while oblivious of earlier Mesopotamian rulers, immortalized in their historical writings their encounters with the great Assyrian kings (and a few queens) of the first millennium BCE. Thus, Assyria lived on, both in the political and administrative institutions of later states and, thanks to the Bible and classical authors, in the cultural memory of the Western (and Middle Eastern) world.

For a long time, this afterlife remained a rather shadowy one. Over a period of more than two millennia, the imperial cities of ancient Assyria lay buried under heaps of rubble, and no one was familiar any more with the languages the Assyrians had spoken and the literatures they had studied. It was only in the middle of the nineteenth century, when British and French adventurers, diplomats, and scholars embarked on excavations in Nineveh, Kallāju (Calah), and Dur-Šarrukin, that Assyria’s ancient civilization began to reemerge. In palaces, temples, and private houses, impressive examples of Assyrian artwork and tens of thousands
of Assyrian texts came to light, the latter ranging from literary and scholarly works to royal inscriptions, state correspondence, and economic documents. Many of the finds uncovered by the European explorers were transferred to the British Museum in London and the Louvre in Paris.

Once the Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform writing system was deciphered, an achievement of the late 1840s and early 1850s, scholars were able to embark on the long and arduous task of reconstructing Assyrian history and culture based on original sources. Their work has now proceeded for more than 150 years, with new discoveries requiring repeated revisions of earlier views and giving rise to new directions in research. The twentieth-century excavations in Assyria’s long-time capital Ashur, for example, and in Kültepe (Kaniš), a city in central Anatolia with a settlement of Assyrian traders, have given us a much better view of the earlier periods of Assyrian history, up to then largely shrouded in darkness.

Future discoveries and new scholarly agendas will undoubtedly advance our understanding of Assyrian history and culture even further. But the materials at our disposal are now so rich and so well studied that the time seems ripe for a volume to summarize our current knowledge and provide an overview of Assyrian history and culture throughout the ages. Except for a few excellent but very short overviews (e.g., Cancik-Kirschbaum 2008; Radner 2015), there is, somewhat surprisingly, no such volume yet. The present book, with its thirty-two chapters on Assyrian geography, history, and culture, aims to fill the gap. While obviously not comprehensive, the book seeks to provide enough information to help readers gain a more in-depth idea of the rich world of ancient Assyria. As for those who wish to go beyond what the volume has to offer, they will find ample material in the “guides to further reading” and the substantial bibliographies that accompany individual chapters.

**Assyrian Civilization and its Study: Some Fundamentals**

**Geography**

Assyria can be subdivided into three geographical zones (see Chapter 1). Its heartland, situated east of the Tigris in what is now the northeastern portion of the Republic of Iraq, was demarcated by the cities of Ashur in the south, Nineveh in the north, and Arbela in the east. These three important cities formed what has been dubbed the “Assyrian triangle” (Radner 2011), with a fourth one, Kalhu, situated in the center. Assyria’s closer periphery reached to the Cizre plain in the north, the foothills of the Iranian Zagros mountains in the east, the border with Babylonia, in central Iraq, in the south, and the Khabur valley in the west, in modern Syria. From the 13th century BCE onwards, and especially during Assyria’s imperial phase in the first millennium BCE, Assyria also comprised a further periphery, which stretched in some periods as far as Babylonia in the south, Elam in the east, and the eastern Mediterranean and even Egypt in the west (see Figure 0.1).

**Sources**

Our reconstruction of Assyrian history and culture is based on a plethora of sources. Of particular significance are tens of thousands of cuneiform texts from various Assyrian and non-Assyrian sites, written by Assyrian scribes on clay tablets in Assyrian, Babylonian,
and Sumerian language. Important to keep in mind is that their distribution, both in time and space, is highly uneven.

For the third millennium (see Chapter 2), the textual evidence is meager, and most of our knowledge about developments in the Middle Tigris region and Upper Mesopotamia in general comes from uninscribed archaeological sources. Much richer for the study of Assyrian history and culture is the textual record from the first centuries of the second millennium, the so-called Old Assyrian period (see Chapters 3 and 4). Some 23,000 tablets inscribed in Assyrian are known from this time. Practically all of them originate from a site outside Assyria proper, Kültepe (Kaniš) in central Anatolia. The tablets deal almost exclusively with the activities of the Assyrian merchant colony located there and their interactions with their families in Ashur. We therefore know a lot about the socio-economic conditions of the Old Assyrian period, the long-distance trade in which the Assyrian merchants were engaged, and the individual biographies of some of them, but comparatively little about Assyria’s political history, even though there are a few short inscriptions of the Old Assyrian rulers of Ashur.

One source type first attested in the Old Assyrian period is the “eponym list,” which records in sequential order the officials after whom individual years were named. The Assyrians used this dating system throughout their history. Lengthy eponym lists, which together with king lists serve as the chronological backbone of our reconstruction of Assyrian history, are available for substantial portions of the Old Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian periods, but not for Middle Assyrian times.2

The Middle Assyrian period (see Chapters 6 and 7), which followed the Old Assyrian era after a “Dark Age” that lasted from the 17th to the 15th century BCE (see Chapter 5), has left us fewer but more diverse texts, discovered in Ashur and a few other cities in central Assyria and eastern Syria. They include detailed royal inscriptions, political letters, administrative documents, epics, and scholarly texts from Assyria’s main urban centers, all of them important for our understanding of the history, culture, and socio-economic conditions of the Middle Assyrian state.

By far the richest textual evidence is available for the so-called Neo-Assyrian period, which lasted from the tenth to the seventh century BCE (see Chapters 8 and 9). Particularly well documented are the roughly one hundred years from 745 to 631 BCE during which Assyria ruled over most of Western Asia. Thousands of often long and detailed royal inscriptions, and thousands of political letters, the “state correspondence” of the empire, found in Kalhu and Nineveh, cast light on the political history of the period, while the roughly 20,000 scholarly and literary tablets and fragments from Assurbanipal’s famous library at Nineveh, created in the mid-seventh century BCE, provide a detailed panorama of the intellectual pursuits in which members of the Late Assyrian elite were engaged. Numerous scholarly and literary texts were also discovered in Neo-Assyrian Ashur, Kalhu, and Sultantepe (Chapters 20 and 21). Thousands of legal texts, especially debt notes and sale documents, inform us about the social and economic history of the Neo-Assyrian period and provide us with glimpses into the lives of non-elite Assyrians, such as small traders, farmers, and slaves.

Texts written by other people in the ancient Near East also cast light on Assyrian history and culture. Examples include Sumerian economic documents from southern Mesopotamia from the 21st century BCE, diplomatic letters from 18th-century Mari in eastern Syria, royal inscriptions and letters from the Hittite capital Hattusa from the second half of the second millennium, inscriptions in Luwian hieroglyphs from early Iron Age Syria and Anatolia, and Babylonian Chronicles from the late first millennium BCE. The reports on Assyrian history found in the Bible and the writings of Greek and Roman authors provide some interesting
information as well. Though often historically inaccurate, they illuminate how the Assyrian state was perceived by less powerful neighbors and later tradition.

Attempts to reconstruct the history and culture of ancient Assyria cannot be based on written documents only. In fact, the material remains of Assyrian city walls, palaces, temples, and domestic quarters tell us a lot about the way ancient Assyrian city-dwellers, whether rich or poor, lived their lives (see Chapter 23); and images on large artifacts such as bas-reliefs or stelae or on small ones such as cylinder or stamp seals provide us with pictorial evidence of Assyrian deities and demons, the ways the Assyrians practiced warfare, and the urban and non-urban landscapes they inhabited (see Chapter 24).

Because the political situation in Iraq has significantly limited archaeological work in the Assyrian core area during the past decades, newly developed scientific methods such as paleobotanical and archaeometrical analysis have been applied only sparingly at the main Assyrian sites in the Tigris region. However, thanks to surveys in eastern Syria that were conducted before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and successful attempts in recent years to use satellite imagery, we now have a much improved understanding of settlement patterns, agricultural structures, and the distribution of roads and canals in the Assyrian heartland and its periphery (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Continuity and change in Assyrian history and culture

The aforementioned subdivision of Assyrian history into three periods, Old Assyrian, Middle Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian (followed by a long “post-imperial” era, see Chapter 10), was devised by modern scholars and is primarily based on changes affecting the Assyrian language (see Chapter 17). Historically, it is somewhat problematic – the transitions between the periods were gradual and not marked by clearly identifiable historical events. Nonetheless, there are a number of characteristic political and cultural features that distinguish the three eras. They go hand in hand with some remarkable continuities that imbue the span of Assyrian history with a considerable degree of coherence.

With regard to Assyria’s territorial extent, we can trace, despite occasional setbacks, a steady development towards ever greater size. For most of the Old Assyrian period, Ashur was the center of a small city state. Even though the merchants of Ashur travelled wide and far, cities such as Nineveh were not under Ashur’s control yet. In the 18th century, the Amorite king Šamši-Adad I brought Ashur for a short time into his large Upper Mesopotamian kingdom, but without making it his main residence. The situation changed in Middle Assyrian times, when Ashur grew into the political and religious capital of an influential territorial state reaching from the Khabur region in the west to the foothills of the Zagros in the east. Only now do we find references to the “land of Ashur” (māt Aššur) in the textual record and can speak of an “Assyria” in the strict sense of the word. Finally, in the Neo-Assyrian period, Assyria expanded even further, morphing into an empire that dominated much of Western Asia.

Throughout all this territorial change, there was, however, also some continuity, especially with regard to the role played by the city of Ashur. It served as Assyria’s political capital until 879 BCE, when Aššurbanipal II moved the royal court to Kalḫu. But Ashur remained a highly important cultural and religious center much longer. Up to the last decades of the Assyrian state, Assyrian kings would spend the winter months in Ashur to participate in various religious festivities. They also continued to be buried there, in vaults located under the floors of Ashur’s “Old Palace.”
Ashur’s status was closely linked to the god who shared his name with the city and had his temple there. Throughout the history of Ashur and Assyria, the god Assur served as the state’s foremost deity (see Chapter 18). As a consequence of the political transformations Assyria experienced over the course of this long period, Assur’s “character” changed as well – from numen loci into powerful divine king, with a family of his own. Yet he never ceased to define the religious identity of the Assyrian people and particularly their rulers. Even after the downfall of the Assyrian empire, Assur continued to be worshipped in his city, and some of the festivals held in honor of Assur and his wife Šerua were still celebrated in the second century AD (see Chapter 10).

While Assur served as Assyria’s divine protector, the Assyrian king embodied the earthly dimensions of the Assyrian state. But contrary to what one might expect, the autocratic type of rule that characterized Assyria’s political system during the imperial period came into being relatively late. During the Old Assyrian period, the Assyrian city state had a far more complex political structure, one that some have characterized, in reference to Aristotle, Polybius, and other classical political theorists, as a “mixed constitution” (Liverani 2011). There was a “democratic” component, provided by the city assembly, an aristocratic one, provided by the eponyms (limum), who were probably chosen from among the landholding and mercantile elites, and a monarchical one, represented by a hereditary ruler. This ruler did not yet bear the traditional Mesopotamian title “king” (šarrum), which was instead associated with the god Assur. Rather, he was known as the “prince” (rubâ’um), the “representative of the god Assur” (iššiak Aššur), and the “overseer” (waklum), a title referring to his legal functions.

It was not until the 14th century BCE, under Aššur-uballit I, that Assyrian rulers began to call themselves šarru(m). From this time onwards, the Assyrian kings accumulated more and more power. But even during Assyria’s imperial period in the eighth and seventh century BCE, they still used on occasion some of the traditional titles held by their Old Assyrian forebears, and tablets with loyalty oaths sworn by Assyrian vassals were sealed with the Old Assyrian seal of the “city hall.” The old idea that the true king of Assyria was the god Assur remained alive well into the seventh century BCE.

Assyrian dynastic continuity was nonetheless remarkably strong. With the probable exception of the short-lived reign of the eunuch Sin-šumu-lišir in 627, the rulers who governed Assyria from the 17th century onwards were apparently all members of one and the same family – they belonged to the so-called Adasi dynasty. Even though there were phases when the power of the king was overshadowed by that of certain high officials, and despite the fact that on various occasions the royal family was plagued by infighting that led, in at least one case, to the killing of the monarch, the prerogative of the ruling house to provide the Assyrian king, enshrined in the Assyrian King List, remained unchallenged for a full millennium.

A long-term analysis of the Assyrian economy reveals a strange mix of continuity and change as well. At first glance, the mercantile system of the Old Assyrian period seems to have little in common with the exploitative “tributary mode of production” that characterized the economy of Assyria’s imperial phase. And yet, the transition may have had its own historical logic: it brings to mind what Marxist economists have written about imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. In fact, the Assyrian economy never entirely lost its commercial dimensions. Assyrian merchants continued to play an important economic role until the last decades of Assyrian history (see Chapter 9), and the detailed accounts Neo-Assyrian scribes kept during military campaigns, not only to register plundered goods but also to document
the numbers of killed, maimed, or deported enemies, appear like gory late manifestations of the mercantile spirit of Assyria’s early age.

Assyria’s material culture, amidst centuries of artistic and technical innovation, was characterized by certain continuities as well, continuities that helped create a specifically Assyrian identity. To mention a small but telling example, there were certain types of bread that were peculiar to Assyria from Middle Assyrian to Neo-Assyrian times (Postgate 2015).

Assyrian civilization did not unfold in isolation. Throughout its history, it absorbed influences from other regions, which in turn adopted elements of Assyrian culture (see Chapters 11–16). The sculptures found in mid-third millennium layers in Ashur, for example, were clearly inspired by southern Mesopotamian models.

From early on, Hurrian culture exerted a strong influence on Assyria. The main deity worshipped in Nineveh in the late third millennium was the Hurrian goddess Šauška, who was later identified by the Assyrians as Ištar of Nineveh. The bedchamber of that goddess was known well into the first millennium BCE under the semi-Hurrian name bit nathši. Some Assyrian terms for (military) professions, for example turtānu (“Commander-in-Chief”), are Hurrian loanwords. Over time, however, the Assyrians replaced many Hurrian features, especially in the areas of religion, literature, and scholarship, with elements from the more prestigious culture of ancient Babylonia, where a language closely related to Assyrian was spoken. The importation of numerous Babylonian deities and the reshaping of the theology of Assur after the model of the god Enlil of Nippur are among the most prominent examples of this shift. Even Assyrian royal inscriptions were often written in Babylonian language, and Babylonian scholars and exorcists became key advisors to the Assyrian kings. Assyrian hostility towards the Hurrian state of Mittani in the mid-second millennium probably accelerated this process.

In the first millennium BCE, Aramaean culture made a strong impact on Assyria. Aramaeans had begun to move into the Assyrian core area in the wake of the collapse of several major Late Bronze age civilizations around 1200 BCE and continued to arrive there in large numbers as a result of the mass deportations undertaken by various Neo-Assyrian kings. Many Assyrians adopted the Aramaic language and alphabetic script. After the downfall of the Assyrian state in the late seventh century BCE, cuneiform writing in Assyria came to an end, but key elements of Assyrian culture and religion survived among the Aramaeans. Even today, there are groups of Aramaeans who call themselves Assyrians and consider themselves heirs of the Assyrians of the imperial age (see Chapter 32).

The Assyrians interacted also with other people, among them Hittites, Luwians, Urartians, and Elamites, and adopted elements of their cultures. All in all, they were remarkably open to foreign influences. Neo-Assyrian kings built monumental palace complexes incorporating zoos and gardens as formal showcases for collections of foreign animals, trees, and plants, kept princes from foreign states as hostages in their residences, and embraced with great enthusiasm the artwork and architecture of their neighbors, from delicately carved ivories to monumental art forms and palatial architectural elements such as porticos known among the Neo-Hittite and Aramaean inhabitants of northern Syria as bit ḫlānī. At the same time, Assyrian culture had an impact on other civilizations, especially during the first millennium BCE. The Urartians, for example, adopted Assyrian cuneiform writing and remodeled their national god Ḥaldi after the Assyrian god Assur. The olive oil industry in Ekron was, in all likelihood, boosted by the new markets that emerged as a result of the Assyrian domination of the Levant. And some of the new religious ideas articulated in the Biblical book of Deuteronomy can be seen as a response to the political theology underlying the loyalty oaths
that Assyrians kings imposed on their subjects and vassals. Unlike other empires, however, Assyria made no attempt to actively promote its language, religion, and literature outside its core area. The cultural changes effected by Assyrian rule in conquered regions were, as a rule, incidental rather than symptoms of deliberate cultural domination.

Trends in Research on Ancient Assyria and their Ideological Background

As mentioned above, the foundations for the modern study of ancient Assyria were laid in the 1840s and 1850s, when French and British explorers rediscovered the great Assyrian cities Kalḫu, Dur-Šarrukin, and Nineveh, and the Irish clergyman Edward Hincks and other scholars deciphered the cuneiform writing system (see Chapter 31). Since then, the scholarly analysis of ancient Assyria has gone through various phases. Initially, texts and images found at Assyrian sites were first and foremost scrutinized with the goal to assess their bearing on the “sacred history” outlined in the Hebrew Bible, whose reliability as a historical source was partly corroborated and partly invalidated by the new finds. Assyrian references to a number of Israelite and Judean kings known from the Bible confirmed the historical existence of these rulers, but other information retrieved from the Assyrian inscriptions undermined established patterns of Biblical history and chronology (see Chapter 29).

When, from the 1870s onwards, tablets from Assurbanipal’s Ninevite library were successively translated, additional connections with the Biblical record came to light, including those between the Assyro-Babylonian and Biblical flood stories. In early twentieth-century Germany, these and other discoveries led to the politically charged “Babel–Bibel” dispute, in which the German emperor Wilhelm II intervened in person to condemn claims by some Assyriologists that the apparently derivative character of the Bible challenged the holy book’s status as a source of unquestionable truths.

While nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholars often read Assyrian texts with an eye to their relevance to the Bible, the yardstick for judging Neo-Assyrian art was the sculpture from ancient Greece and Rome. By displaying Neo-Assyrian monuments along with Greek masterpieces like the Parthenon friezes in the British Museum in London and the Louvre in Paris, the cultural elites of the nineteenth-century European imperial powers implicitly endorsed Assyrian civilization – not the least, perhaps, because their own political mission was to some extent comparable to Assyria’s imperial politics (Bohrer 2003). But there were also some critical voices. The famous nineteenth-century cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt, in his Reflections on History, derided “the utterly uncouth royal fortresses of Nineveh, [t]he meanness of their ground-plan and the slavishness of their sculptures.” The tension between an attitude that admired the political and cultural achievements associated with Assyria’s empire-building and one that detested the brutality and oppression associated with this endeavor has never entirely ceased to inform the debate about the Neo-Assyrian period (Fales 2010: 27–55).

In the wake of the trauma of World War I, the “critics” of ancient Assyria gained for quite some time the upper hand. A 1918 article by Albert T. Olmstead, an influential American historian of the ancient Near East, compared the atrocities described in Assyrian royal inscriptions to the horrors of the recent war. But Olmstead was also a representative of a more “historicist” approach to Assyria. Tellingly, his History of Assyria from 1923 begins with the statement: “Assyrians deserve to be studied by and for themselves.” Olmstead’s book is,
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incidentally, both the first and, somewhat astoundingly, the last serious attempt by a modern scholar to produce a comprehensive history of ancient Assyria.⁶

In the half-century that followed World War II, scholars focused on preparing new editions of Assyrian texts and other forms of “positivist” research. Where we find value judgments regarding Assyria in their works, these are largely negative. The Danish-American Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen, for example, claimed, in his 1976 book The Treasures of Darkness, that the first millennium BCE, the period of Assyria’s greatest expansion, “contributed no major new insights, rather, it brought in many ways decline and brutalization.”

The past two or three decades have seen Assyriologists continue their traditional editorial work, but also, in the wake of the “cultural turn” of the 1970s, become more interested in Assyria’s religious, intellectual, and socio-economic history. Inspired by the new insights thus gained, several scholars, among them Martin West (1997), Stephanie Dalley (1998), and especially Simo Parpola (e.g., 1993), have sought to reestablish a more positive image of ancient Assyria. Possibly influenced by the experience of the vastly amplified global flow of ideas and goods brought about by new technologies and the downfall of communism in the late 1980s, they have stressed that later civilizations were in many ways indebted to Assyrian models, not only politically, but also in religion, literature, and the arts. Even though this “neo-diffusionist” approach has led to a number of contestable claims (for a critique, see, e.g., Cooper 2000), it has served as an important corrective to the largely negative appreciation of Neo-Assyrian civilization that dominated the preceding decades, and it has opened up Assyrian studies to the “global history” approach that has gained traction in recent years (see, for example, Liverani 2011).

The Assyrian Cultural Heritage Crisis

This Introduction cannot end without a word on the current political situation in the region in which Assyrian civilization once thrived. For quite some time now, conditions there have been deplorable, especially in Iraq, where war, unrest, and humanitarian crisis have been steady phenomena since 1980. But at no point in recent history has the state of affairs been worse than at this very juncture. At the time of writing this Introduction, much of the ancient Assyrian heartland is under control of the so-called “Islamic State,” a group that, after taking the city of Mosul in June 2014, began to accompany its atrocities against civilians with a well-publicized campaign of cultural cleansing targeting museums and archaeological sites such as Nineveh and Kalhu and threatening to destroy significant parts of Assyria’s cultural heritage. Important archaeological complexes such as the throne room suite of Aššurnaṣîrpal’s palace in Nimrud and the Nabû temple at the same site, as well as central parts of Sennacherib’s famous Southwest Palace at Nineveh, have been entirely demolished between March 2015 and June 2016.⁷ For everyone interested in ancient Assyria, this is a deeply depressing moment. But it is perhaps also a moment in which the appearance of a Companion to Assyria is particularly timely. May the book help to counter the powerful forces that seek, at this very moment, to obliterate Assyria’s rich history and culture.

Notes

1 Pongratz-Leisten 2015 is a recent attempt to analyze in detail Assyrian religion and political ideology in various historical periods. The book appeared too late to be considered by the contributors of this volume.
For a few remarks on the problems of establishing an exact chronology for Assyrian history, see the “List of Assyrian Kings” at the end of this volume.

In this volume, we use different orthographies to distinguish between the city, Ashur, and the god, Assur. It should be noted that this distinction is purely conventional and artificial. Both the city and the god had the same name, rendered Aššur in scholarly transliterations.

The following paragraphs excerpt Frahm 2006, where bibliographical references can be found.

The article appeared in The American Historical Review (for exact references, see Fales 2010, 45–6).

Mayer 1995 is largely limited to an analysis of the history of Assyrian warfare, and almost exclusively based on the study of Assyrian royal inscription, with other sources receiving only sporadic attention. Saggs 1984 is a popular “cultural history” of Assyria.

For detailed information on the destruction inflicted by ISIS, see the weekly reports posted online by ASOR’s Syrian Heritage Initiative at http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/weekly-reports/(last accessed 11/15/2016). For some of the author’s thoughts on the crisis and its roots, see Frahm 2015.

References


PART I

Geography and History
CHAPTER 1

Physical and Cultural Landscapes of Assyria

Jason Ur

Introduction

The history of the land of Assyria is, to a considerable extent, the story of a continuous attempt by individuals, communities, states, and empires to define their places in their landscapes. In basic economic terms, people had to feed their families, which meant adapting to the possibilities and limitations of climate and environment for agriculture and animal husbandry, and sometimes extending them. For the elite elements of society, the environment was a critical variable in how palace walls were decorated, how gardens and parks were created, and how tribute was collected. Climate and environment played important roles in determining the scheduling of royal campaigns and in which directions they went. The limitations and fluctuations of climate were a major concern in religious contexts as well, as priests and kings attempted to intercede with the gods for the favorable growing conditions that sustained cities, enabled trade, and revealed to the people the good relationship between the king and the gods.

The physical landscape of Assyria was far from immutable. Fluctuations in temperature, rainfall, and seasonality took place on yearly, decadal, and even millennial scales. Human communities were responsible for modifications that turned the physical environment into the cultural landscape. The nature of these cultural changes have much to tell us about past societies. At one end of the continuum, landscapes were modified by the aggregate actions of their inhabitants, whether they were farmers, shepherds, craftspeople, or traders. Individuals might have only limited effects on their surroundings within their lifetimes, but their collective actions can leave a tremendous, often unintended, footprint. The best example of such cumulative action is the tell, the classic form of archaeological site in the Near East, the largest of which grew to 40 m or higher. Tells formed over centuries or millennia as individual households built, repaired, tore down, and rebuilt stone and mudbrick structures on the
same spot (Rosen 1986). The intention of the builders was simply to provide a physical space for their households, not to create a looming aggregate of decayed mud brick on the landscape; the cumulative result of many generations engaging in this simple domestic behavior, however, had just such an effect.

On the other end of the continuum, landscapes could be modified according to royal will; kings and their planners imposed their particular political, economic, demographic, and cosmological visions upon the surrounding land. The resulting landscape elements were often monumental due to the royal household’s ability to mobilize vast amounts of labor toward its ends. These structures are more difficult to remove, and therefore disproportionately likely to survive to the present than lesser changes.

This chapter reviews the physical environment and cultural landscapes, both emergent and imposed, in the regions of modern northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey and eastern Syria that encompass the central part of the ancient “Land of Assyria” (Figure 1.1). Although this geographic designation was only meaningful in the late second and early first millennia BCE, in the time of the Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian empires, it provides a convenient geographical framework within which to consider earlier landscapes, especially the Early

Figure 1.1  Topography, hydrology, and major sites of Assyria (northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, and southeastern Turkey).