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Neo-Assyrian Empire Hegemony: Structure and Function

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Abstract

In contemporary research, various terms are used to describe periods of relative transregional stability within specific temporal and spatial settings; however, these terms carry different meanings, and a single definition cannot be applied uniformly across all contexts. In the Late Bronze Age, sudden climatic and social developments led to heightened tensions and widespread political–social conflicts, and the powers active in that period were unable to establish durable transregional stability. With the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age, the emergence and expansion of the political, economic, military, and ideological system of Neo-Assyria became evident—an order that succeeded in establishing a new transregional framework in the Iron Age, bringing the ancient Near East under its control, and shaping an early form of global order. The central concern of this study is to understand and analyze how Neo-Assyrian hegemony formed and persisted during the Iron Age. Accordingly, by drawing on written Neo-Assyrian sources, relief inscriptions, field-based archaeological studies, and research data produced from investigations conducted between 1967 and 2023 CE, the hegemonic system of the Neo-Assyrian Empire has been reconstructed through a systemic analytical model. The primary objective is to clarify the functional mechanisms of Neo-Assyrian hegemony and to explain how a transregional order in the ancient Near East was realized. The findings indicate that the political and economic structure of Neo-Assyria possessed coherent systemic characteristics that enabled the expansion and consolidation of its hegemony throughout the ancient Near East. Although the sudden collapse of Assyria occurred following the formation of anti-hegemonic alliances, the underlying transregional order persisted, and Assyrian hegemonic patterns were reflected in subsequent empires. Therefore, Neo-Assyria can be regarded as the first global power to generate a transregional hegemonic system.

Keywords: Hegemony, Pax, Peace, Iron Age, Neo-Assyrian Empire.

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Introduction

At the end of the Late Bronze Age[1], the political system of the Middle East collapsed due to sudden climatic and social upheavals, and from the remnants of this period, a new order emerged in the Iron Age, with a structure fundamentally distinct from the preceding political system (Iravani Ghadim & Amiri Nejad, 2023: 97–123). This new order in the ancient Near East was embodied by the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Empires exhibit distinctive structural characteristics, and by situating these structures within a systemic framework, their various dimensions can be analyzed and conceptualized as an integrated system. Given the transregional order established by the Neo-Assyrian state in the Iron Age Middle East, a central question arises: what constitutes a hegemonic system, and how can such a system be understood in the context of the Neo-Assyrian Empire?

The structure of the Assyrian hegemonic system can be modeled during the peak of Neo-Assyrian power, from 746 to 631 BCE. By constructing a standardized model of Assyrian hegemony, it becomes possible to examine how this system functioned. Accordingly, the study investigates the historical background of Neo-Assyrian hegemony, the operation of its hegemonic system, and the causes of its eventual decline. The results indicate that the Neo-Assyrian Empire possessed a distinct hegemonic system that produced a new order in the ancient Middle East. Moreover, the characteristics of this hegemonic order and its core structural elements can be observed in subsequent empires, including the Achaemenid and Roman Empires.

Literature Review

Extensive research has been conducted on hegemonic systems in general (Adamson, 1980; Watson, 2006; Parchami, 2009; Worth, 2015); however, relatively few studies have focused specifically on the Neo-Assyrian hegemonic system. The earliest research in this field relied primarily on the Hebrew Bible, with scholars such as Cogan analyzing the Neo-Assyrian hegemonic order in terms of its imperial character and its relationship to religious ideology (Cogan, 1993). Subsequently, scholars such as Paul-Alain Beaulieu sought to conceptualize a broader, transregional hegemonic system. In his article “World Hegemony, 900–300 BCE”, he examines this structure within the Neo-Assyrian, Babylonian, and Achaemenid Empires (Beaulieu, 2007).

The most substantial contributions to the study of Neo-Assyrian hegemony, however, have been made by Bradley J. Parker. His seminal work, “Power, Hegemony, and the Use of Force in the Neo-Assyrian

Empire" (Parker, 2015), appears in the volume Understanding Hegemonic Practices of the Assyrian Empire. In the same volume, Düring's chapter, "Middle Assyrian Hegemony", addresses the foundational principles underlying the formation of the Assyrian hegemonic system (Düring, 2015). More recent studies have examined the effects of Assyrian hegemony by analyzing socio-political structures in the Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages. These investigations often focus on specific instruments of hegemony within a transregional order, such as deportation, as discussed in Valk's research (Valk, 2022), and cultural mechanisms, as explored in Thompson's work (Thompson, 2023).

Structure and Function of the Hegemonic System

Hegemony derives from the Greek term hêgemonía, meaning leadership or rule. Conceptually, it refers to the dominance of one group or its representatives over other groups through a combination of coercion and consent, whereby the dominant group, or hegemon, secures a degree of acquiescence from those under its control (Meiggs, 1972; Williams, 1977; Cox, 1981; Lebow, 2003; Griffiths, 2005: 63; Clark, 2011; Worth, 2015; Schmidt, 2018: 3; Roger, 2019: 29). Although the hegemon constitutes the dominant power, hegemony does not imply absolute control, total exploitation, or omnipotence over others (Layne, 2006).

In this framework, a hegemon can be understood as a power that possesses superior military, political, cultural, and economic capabilities relative to other powers, enabling it to establish a hierarchical system and assert itself as the central authority over other regions and political entities (Nexon & Wright, 2007: 253). Hegemony is thus both relational and structural: it is expressed in the capacity of the dominant power to influence, regulate, and shape the behavior of subordinate entities while maintaining systemic stability across a transregional order.

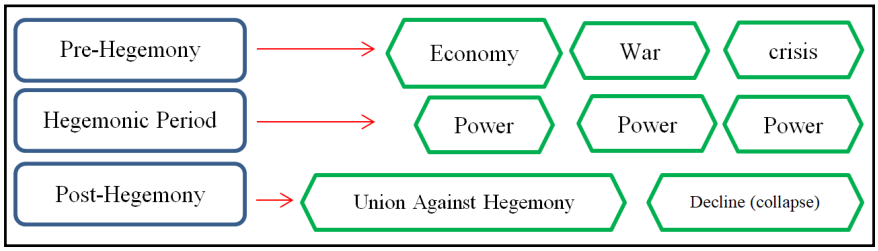
Historically, two conceptualizations of hegemony, classical and modern, can be distinguished. In the classical conception, hegemony encompasses power, leadership, command, dominance, sovereignty, and empire. It represents a hierarchical military-political structure achieved and maintained primarily through successful warfare, with mechanisms of control reinforced through economic, cultural, and religious resources. In this context, ancient hegemonic systems often relied on the competence and charisma of individual rulers, kings or emperors, and, due to the fear they instilled in medium and independent powers, depended heavily on military strength. From the perspective of the hegemon, threats were typically internal, in the form of rebellion or resistance, rather than external rivals.

If a hegemonic system failed to manage vulnerabilities posed by internal and external pressures, or could not adapt to changing circumstances, it risked rapid collapse. Ancient hegemonic systems frequently fell abruptly, often due to the intervention of anti-hegemonic alliances during warfare, demonstrating the fragile balance inherent in classical power structures (Wilkinson, 2008).

The modern concept of hegemony was revived in the 19th century by Marxist theorists, such as Plekhanov, as a critique of the Tsarist system, and was subsequently developed through the work of Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist theorist (Gramsci, 1971). In contrast to the classical model, Gramsci proposed that a dominant group, or its representatives, could achieve leadership prior to asserting military dominance. Through political, ideological, and economic struggle, consent could be secured from subordinate groups. Accordingly, modern hegemony relies less on military force or individual charisma and more on the pervasive influence of culture, which disseminates authority and shapes civil society (Roger, 2019).

The classical concept of the hegemonic system provides the most appropriate framework to analyze the 8th and 7th centuries BCE in the ancient Near East, under the dominance of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Hence, the cultural-political developments of this period are conceptualized and examined using the terms 'hegemony' and 'ancient hegemonic system'.

Emerging from a pre-hegemonic era characterized by chaos, protracted warfare, and weak economies, the Neo-Assyrian hegemonic period witnessed the concentration of superior military, political, economic, and religious power in the hands of the hegemon. Despite the establishment of a transregional order, this period was historically brief. The system experienced a rapid decline and ultimately collapsed due to external anti-hegemonic pressures. The Neo-Assyrian hegemonic system, despite its structural and cultural sophistication, was unable to sustain stability indefinitely, and its collapse underscores the inherent vulnerability of even the most dominant ancient empires (Fig. 1).



◄ **Fig. 1: Cyclical of the Hegemonic System in Ancient (Authors, 2024).**

The formation of ancient hegemonic systems occurs in regions undergoing severe socio-political and economic crises, as exemplified by the Assyrian, Persian, and Roman hegemonies. Such a system combines a dominant political-religious ideology with territorial expansion centred on the core authority. It establishes direct control through coercive force and indirect control via economic-political treaties and oaths, all underpinned by military power. Through these mechanisms, the hegemon exerts influence over surrounding regions and creates a stable transregional order (Amiri Nejad, 2024; Fig. 2).

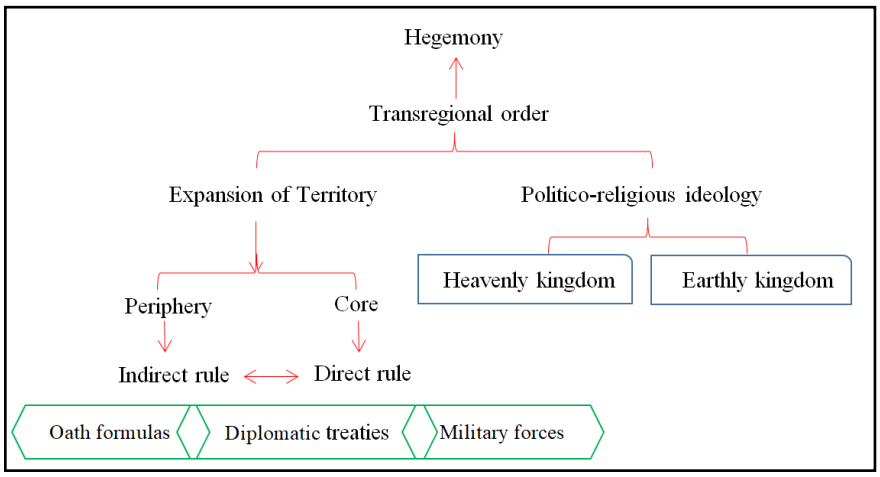
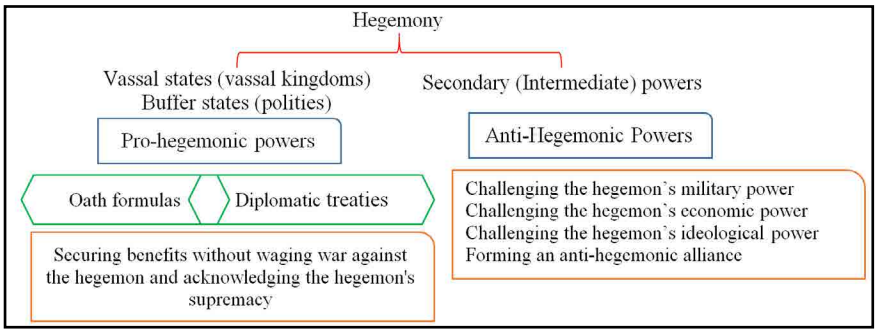


Fig. 2: Development and Structure of the Ancient Near Eastern Hegemonic System (Authors, 2024). ▶

As previously conceptualized in the theory of hegemony, the hegemon possesses superior regional power, although this does not imply absolute control. This framework recognizes the continued presence of medium powers, vassal states, and buffer states. Buffer states, due to their limited economic, political, and geographical capacities, are not directly targeted by the hegemon and are maintained largely by their lack of direct interaction with medium powers. In contrast, vassal states within the hegemonic system are generally loyal to the hegemon, securing their interests through political and economic treaties. These treaties typically involve provisions for military and political support from the hegemon to the vassal state. Medium powers, positioned just below the hegemon, actively seek to diminish its authority by challenging its military, economic, and political-religious dominance. Such powers inevitably attract the attention of the hegemon, which aims to curb their influence or, where feasible, eliminate them entirely. Nevertheless, in instances where the hegemon's power weakens, the formation of an anti-hegemonic alliance may precipitate the collapse of the entire hegemonic system (Fig. 3).



◄ **Fig. 3: Hegemonic Power and Peripheral Relations (Authors, 2024).**

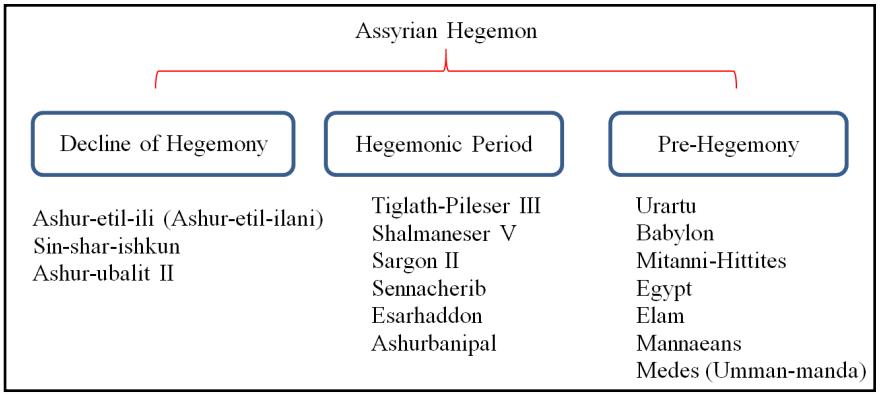
Assyrian Hegemony: Structure and Function

The end of the Late Bronze Age was marked by sudden climatic and social upheavals that led to the collapse or weakening of Middle Eastern powers. Consequently, the Sea Peoples ravaged the Eastern Mediterranean, the Hittites in Anatolia were destroyed, the Kassites in southern Mesopotamia were weakened, and Egypt lost its influence in the Levant (Amiri Nejad & Iravani Ghadim, 2024: 159–191). Archaeologically, this period is recognized as the transitional phase from Assyro-Mesopotamia to the Neo-Assyrian Kingdom. The Neo-Assyrian Kingdom began with the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (934 BCE) and continued until the ascension of Tiglath-Pileser III (745 BCE) (Frahm, 2017: 162–208). At the outset of this period, the empire expanded intermittently, extending westward to the Mediterranean coast and eastward to the Iranian Plateau. However, between 823 BCE and 745 BCE, internal conflicts intensified, including the rebellions of Arappa and Calah, the weakening of central Assyrian authority, and the growing strength of Urartu. These conditions enabled Tiglath-Pileser III to seize power in 746 BCE, initially supported by select military and civil elites, whom he swiftly curtailed in influence (Fuchs, 2008: 95). It was during this period that Assyrian hegemony began to take shape (Fig. 4), with the empire's territory doubling and approaching Egypt (Radner, 2006–08: 56–63). Tiglath-Pileser III was succeeded by Shalmaneser V, who further expanded the western territories during his reign (Becking, 1992: 21–60; Fuchs, 1998: 84–85; Bagg, 2011: 227–32). In 722 BCE, following a coup and the transfer of power, Sargon II deposed Shalmaneser V and initiated a period of expansion and consolidation of Assyrian hegemony. During this transition, several Assyrian urban centers rebelled, and in 720 BCE, Sargon II destroyed the city of Hamath and exiled 3,600 rebellious Assyrians there (Radner, 2011). In the same year, he suppressed uprisings in the western part of the empire, deporting insurgents to Syria and the east (Becking, 1992: 61–104). Between 713 and 716 BCE, Sargon II focused his military campaigns on the eastern empire, and in

710 BCE, he defeated the Babylonian–Elamite alliance, seizing control of the Babylonian throne (Foster, 2005: 790–813; Mayer, 2012). Following Sargon II's death in battle in 705 BCE, Sennacherib became emperor of Assyria (Frahm, 1999: 74–76). Between 701 and 700 BCE, he defeated a coalition of Babylon, Elam, Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs (SAA 15: XXXII–XXXIII). In 701 BCE, he moved westward to quell rebellions in the empire's western regions (Bagg, 2011: 244–252), and his campaigns in the west are documented in classical sources, including 2 Kings (18: 13–19: 36), Isaiah (36: 1–37: 37), 2 Chronicles (32: 1–23), Herodotus (2.141), as well as modern studies (Gallagher, 1999; Grabbe, 2003).

From 699 to 695 BCE, Sennacherib undertook extensive construction and urban development projects in Nineveh (Matthiae, 1999). In 689 BCE, he successfully captured Babylon, where the Babylonian king was taken prisoner and executed, and numerous statues of gods, along with large portions of the city, were destroyed or desecrated (Richardson, 2012). Although Sennacherib was able to consolidate Assyria's power in both the western and eastern regions, he was assassinated in 681 BCE as a result of an internal coup (Parpola, 1980). Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) avenged the emperor's death by punishing the conspirators. He expanded Assyrian influence further east than his predecessors, but his most significant achievement was the conquest of Egypt (Onasch, 1994: 16–59). In 672 BCE, Esarhaddon required all his officials and commanders, both domestic and foreign, to swear an oath of loyalty to the king and the crown prince, which was then sent to the central court (SAA 2: 115–16). Copies of this oath have been discovered in Ashur and Calah (SAA 2: 135–136; Lauinger, 2012). As the empire's territory, power, and wealth expanded, so too did the plots against the emperor and his authority. In 670 BCE, Esarhaddon, with the assistance of his intelligence network and spies, carried out a purge of numerous high-ranking Assyrian officials (Parpola, 1993; Grayson, 1975: 86). The last powerful Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, reigned from 668 to 631 BCE. During his rule, the Assyrian military remained highly mobile, and between 667 and 664 BCE, anti-Assyrian alliances in Egypt were defeated, resulting in the capture of the capital of Upper Egypt (the 25th Dynasty). Significant spoils, including electrum obelisks, were transported back to Assyria (Onasch, 1994: 61–158). Ashurbanipal's primary military objective was the conquest of Elam (Waters, 2000: 42–80). In 652 BCE, an anti-Assyrian coalition of Babylon and Elam sparked a four-year war (Frame, 1992: 131–190). Ultimately, in 648 BCE, Ashurbanipal captured and destroyed Babylon, and in 647 BCE, he devastated Susa and its royal

cemetery, returning the statue of the goddess Nanaya to Uruk (Iravani Ghadim, et al., 2026: 49–55).



◀ **Fig. 4: Assyrian Hegemony (Authors, 2024).**

The ideology of kingship was a deeply entrenched concept among the Assyrians, rooted in their religion, in which the god Ashur symbolized the power of Assyria. The Assyrian king was regarded as the representative of divine authority, the embodiment of celestial sovereignty, and the nominal son of the god Ashur (iššak Aššur). However, Assyrian kings never claimed divine status themselves throughout their political history (Karlsson, 2016: 84). Assyrian rulers portrayed themselves as embodiments of wisdom, mercy, justice, and the power of Ashur, frequently adopting titles such as "the kind man," "the good shepherd," "the wise ruler," "servant of the gods," and "the just judge" (Toro, 2014: 140–145; Karlsson, 2016: 113). The king also held the role of commander of the army, although ultimate military leadership was attributed to the god Ashur. Assyrian military campaigns were thus considered a form of ritual worship, conducted in accordance with the divine will of Ashur (Weippert, 1972: 476–484). Just as Ashur was regarded as the king of the gods in the heavens (šar gimrat ilāni rabûti), this celestial hierarchy was mirrored on earth, where the Assyrian king was understood as the ruler of the four corners of the world. Consequently, it was this integration of political and religious ideology that enforced the dominion of Ashur over the world and placed the earthly realm under the supervision of his representative, the king of Assyria[5] (Karlsson, 2016: 59).

The political-religious ideology of Assyria granted the king the authority to punish earthly rulers for betrayal and rebellion, as well as to transfer the divine representations of their gods (i.e., cult statues) to Assyria (Figs. 5–6). This practice was justified on the grounds that the defeated peoples had failed to show proper reverence toward their own deities, who were understood to remain faithful to the god Ashur in the heavens. Accordingly, the gods themselves were not considered responsible for the disloyalty of

their worshippers. As a result, this ideological framework legitimized both the transfer and the subsequent veneration of the gods and sacred objects of conquered peoples within Assyrian temples[6] (Toro, 2014: 149).

The religious tolerance exhibited by Assyrian kings, together with their demonstrative respect for both Mesopotamian and foreign deities, functioned as a form of imperial propaganda designed to secure the allegiance of vassal states and regions under indirect control. In this context, the kings actively sponsored the construction and restoration of temples and presented offerings to various gods[7] (Holloway, 2001: 338–425; Radner, 2009: 184–85).

▲ Fig. 5: The transport of the gods to Calah (Layard, 1853).

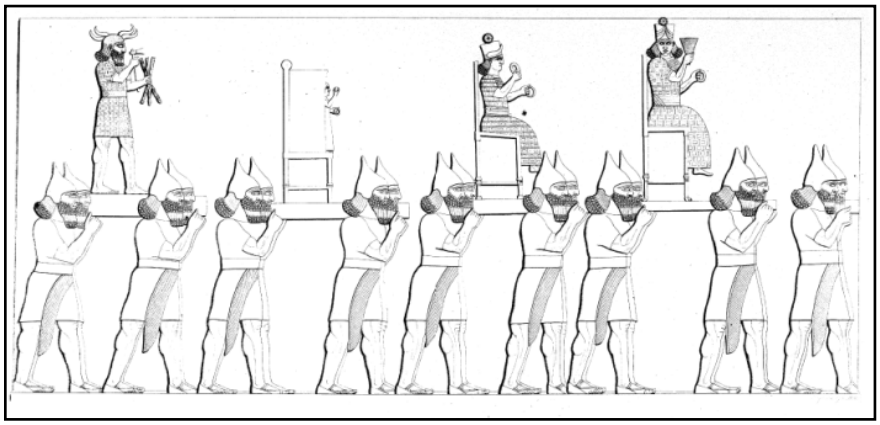
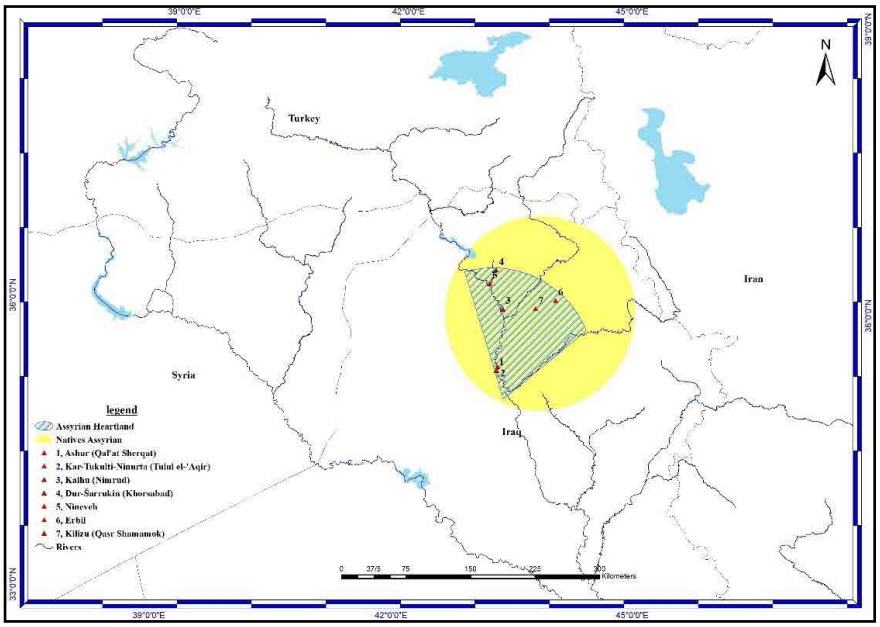


Fig. 6: The transport of the gods by the soldiers of Tiglath-Pileser III (Layard, 1853).▶

The Neo-Assyrian Empire, in its pursuit of establishing a global order, depended upon the sustained provision of resources to its imperial core. To achieve this, the economic-political structure of Neo-Assyria, unlike that of other Mesopotamian powers, was structured into two principal regions: Central Assyria and Greater Assyria. The central region encompassed the Assyrian capital and other major urban centers, such as Arbela, Nineveh, Ashur, Nimrud, and others (Fig. 7). These areas, characterised by arable and fertile land, were administered directly by the Assyrian king and members of the royal court (Iravani Ghadim & Amiri Nejad, 2023: 97–122). Greater Assyria comprised territories beyond the central region, administered both directly and indirectly through provincial institutions, vassal states, and buffer zones under the authority of the Neo-Assyrian palace. The Greater

Assyrian territories functioned primarily to provision the central region, with provincial centers annually delivering fixed quotas of tribute, taxation, and labour, while vassal states and buffer zones were tasked with securing the empire's frontiers against military and political pressures. Greater Assyria remained continuously connected to the imperial core through a complex network of bureaucratic administration and communication routes (Parker, 2001: 251–2).



◀ **Fig. 7: The central heart of Assyria (Authors, 2024).**

The imperial policy at the centre of the Assyrian realm included the expansion of settlements, the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects (such as hydrological systems, temple construction, and public architecture), the enhancement of agricultural production, and the storage of surplus crops. Archaeological fieldwork conducted between 2000 and 2022 in the Greater and Lesser Zab River basins indicates that, of the 461 Neo-Assyrian settlements identified in the study area, 245 were either newly founded or reoccupied (Altaweel, 2004, 2008; Mühl, 2013; Kopanias et al., 2013, 2016; Pappi, 2018; Dezső, 2021; Simi, 2019; Pfälzner et al., 2015, 2016, 2017; Ur et al., 2013, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021; Radner et al., 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019; Herr, 2018; Giraud, 2016; Koliński, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020a–b, 2022; Schurtz, 2022). The empire employed exile as a deliberate policy to promote settlement expansion (Fig. 8), resulting in the displacement of more than 4.5 million individuals within the Assyrian deportation system (Oded, 1979: 21). Tiglath-Pileser III conducted 37 deportations, Shalmaneser V one, Sargon II 38, Sennacherib 20, Esarhaddon 12, and Ashurbanipal 16 (Ibid: 20). The largest number

of mass deportations originated from Babylonia and southern Assyria, totalling 36 recorded instances, most of which were carried out under Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib. The Zagros populations, primarily dispersed Median tribes, accounted for 18 deportations, followed by Elam (13), the Mannaeans (12), and Urartu (number unspecified in the sources). By the late 8th century BCE, most deportations were directed toward the Assyrian heartland, with the highest frequency occurring during the reign of Sennacherib (Oded, 1979: 26). The empire pursued specific objectives through these deportations, including the suppression of rebellion from a political standpoint, the intensification of production and enrichment of the imperial core from an economic perspective, the reinforcement of military capacity through the incorporation of deported populations, and the expansion of major infrastructural projects through compulsory labour (corvée) for civil purposes[8].

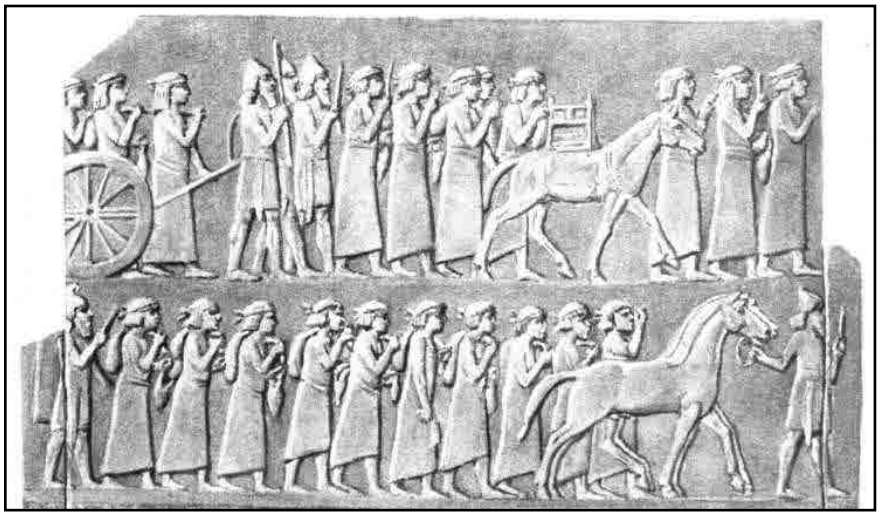


Fig. 8: Mass Deportations, Room F, Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, 668-627 BCE (Barnett, 1967, SLAB 14, PLATE XX). ▶

The stabilization and continuity of the imperial core necessitated the expansion of its territorial periphery. To achieve this objective, the empire adopted three principal policies: war, treaties (pacts), and economic integration[9]. Within its military strategy, the empire sought to increase wealth through tribute, taxation, and the mobilisation of military-economic labour. As discussed in the framework of ancient hegemonic systems, Assyria undertook decisive measures against medium powers that threatened its hegemony (Table 1). For instance, Urartu, in the years prior to 746 BCE, encroached upon Assyrian territory and posed a serious challenge to its hegemonic authority (Iravani Ghadim, 2007: 148–154; Iravani Ghadim, 2017: 129–136). During the expansion of Assyrian hegemony (from Sargon II to Ashurbanipal), Urartu was progressively weakened, and by the first half of the 7th century BCE, it ceased to

undertake significant military activity. In the 640s BCE, Sarduri III (or IV), the last king of Urartu, acknowledged the supremacy of Ashurbanipal and rendered tribute (Hellwag, 2012). Therefore, the Assyrian hegemon successfully neutralised one of the surrounding medium powers to such an extent that it played no role in the eventual collapse of the empire. Elam, another medium power during the hegemonic period, experienced a comparable trajectory (Iravani Ghadim, 2007: 148–154; Iravani Ghadim, 2017: 129–136). Throughout its political history in this era, Elam sought to curb Assyrian dominance by forming anti-hegemonic alliances (Waters, 2000: 42–80). This policy led Assyrian kings to adopt a severe stance toward this rival power, as evidenced by the destruction of Susa and the Elamite royal cemetery in 647 BCE, as well as the return of the statue of the goddess Nanaya to Uruk (van Koppen, 2013: 380). The confederation formed by the Medians, Babylonians, and Scythians ultimately brought about the fall of Assyria and the conquest of Nineveh. The Scythians are referred to as Asguzai and Iskuzai in Assyrian sources, Skythai in ancient Greek sources, Isguzulu in Urartian texts, Askenaz in the Torah, and Saka in Achaemenid inscriptions. In the inscription of Darius the Great, these groups are described under three different designations, “Saka tigraxauda,” “Saka tayaiy paradraya,” and “Saka haumavarga”, across distinct geographical contexts (Iravani Ghadim, 2018: 23–24; Iravani Ghadim & Beikzadeh, 2018: 120).

Assyrian Hegemon	The Rise of Hegemony	Expansion of Hegemony	Decline of Hegemony
Urartu	1	2	3
Elam	4	2	3
Mannaeans	5	6	3
Babylon	7	7	8
Medes (Umman-manda)	9	5	8
Egypt	9	7	10

◄ **Table 1: The function of the Assyrian hegemonic system against secondary (intermediate) powers (Authors, 2024).**

1. Military campaigns and the establishment of buffer states; 2. Indirect control and the dismantling of rival powers; 3. The absence of effective regional authority; 4. Economic and political treaties; 5. Military campaigns combined with economic and political treaties; 6. Military campaigns and indirect administration; 7. Military campaigns and direct administration; 8. Anti-Assyrian coalitions; 9. The establishment of buffer states; 10. Withdrawal from Assyrian hegemony.

During the hegemonic period, political-military stability and economic-commercial treaties[11] were promulgated in the form of loyalty oaths by

the Assyrian hegemon. These oaths were formalised in the name of the god Ashur, and any violation of their terms incurred severe punishment imposed by the Assyrian king in accordance with the divine mandate of Ashur (Holloway, 2001: 160–77). A prominent example of such oaths is attested during the reign of Esarhaddon[12], when vassal rulers and provincial governors swore allegiance by recognising Ashurbanipal as the designated successor to the Assyrian throne (SAA 2: 6). The oath contained multiple clauses, including a stipulation that anyone who heard hostile or subversive statements against the king or the land of Assyria and failed to report them would be subject to punishment (SAA X: 199).

In the Assyrian hegemonic model, one observes a phase during which Assyria attained considerable power and wealth while expanding its territorial domain. Meanwhile, the lands incorporated within Greater Assyria benefited from relative security, judicial order, and political stability. However, this raises a fundamental question: Why did the most powerful and complex political structure of the first half of the first millennium BCE in the ancient Near East collapse so abruptly? In fact, the internal dynamics of the Assyrian hegemonic system itself constituted a primary factor in its eventual collapse. Four major crises caused the hegemonic structure to operate against the hegemon (Table 2). These crises include: Political-Religious Crisis[13]: The political history of Neo-Assyria reveals that between 824 and 745 BCE, Assyria experienced significant internal instability, with effective authority concentrated in the hands of regional civil and military elites. Nevertheless, during this period, the legitimacy of the monarchy was not directly contested. This situation changed in 626 BCE, when a chamberlain named Sîn-šumu-līšir declared himself king of Assyria[14]. This unprecedented act undermined the sacral legitimacy of the monarchy, which was ideologically conceived as the earthly representative of the god Ashur, thereby generating a structural crisis within the political-religious order. Crisis of Central Authority: The provinces and vassal states, as peripheral regions, were expected to channel their economic surplus, -taxation, tribute, labour, and other resources- to the imperial centre.

Over time, the imperial centre evolved from a predominantly Assyrian polity into a multi-ethnic society in which loyalty to Assyrian state ideology progressively eroded. The widespread deportations and massacres of traditional Assyrian families during the reigns of Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal weakened the indigenous aristocracy and contributed to the gradual dissolution of ideological cohesion within the empire. The army became increasingly composed

of non-Assyrian soldiers, and the royal court was guarded by foreign forces, including Median contingents (Lanfranchi, 2003: 107; Toro, 2014: 179–285). During the period of hegemonic decline, Neo-Assyrian kings, as reflected in their correspondence and administrative reports, appear to have been more preoccupied with the security of the royal court and the person of the king than with the welfare of the broader imperial population (Toro, 2014: 179–283). Socio-Economic Crisis: Deportees, who had been among the principal drivers of Assyrian hegemonic expansion, were increasingly subjected to exploitation by the palace, temples, and high-ranking officials in the final phase of the empire. This exploitation generated structural imbalances between producers and consumers within the imperial economy (Liverani, 2001: 387). The distant territories governed indirectly became progressively more difficult to control due to the escalating costs of military deployment, and as the empire expanded, its capacity to sustain effective administrative and military oversight diminished. External Crisis: The external crisis took the form of an anti-hegemonic coalition which, capitalising on the political-religious, central, and socio-economic crises, delivered the decisive blow to the empire. Following a period of profound internal systemic instability, Assyria was unable to withstand external assault, resulting in its abrupt collapse.

Pre-hegemony	The new hegemon	Decline of hegemony	The new hegemon
Regional instability	Hegemony of Assyria	Crisis of political-religious legitimacy	Hegemony of Achaemenids (Persian hegemony)
Prolonged warfare		Crisis of central authority	
Fragile economy		Absence of support from lower social classes	
		Foreign coalition attack against the hegemon	

◀ **Table 2: The hegemonic cycle of the ancient Near East (Authors, 2024).**

Conclusion

By applying the concept of hegemony to describe the period of transregional stability in the first half of the first millennium BCE in the Near East, the most appropriate term is “hegemony” in its classical sense. Classical hegemony denotes a transregional order sustained through a religious-political ideology, -specifically, the ideology of kingship- and the hierarchical structuring of relations between the imperial core and its peripheries, underpinned by military power. The Assyrian hegemonic system, in its systematic organisation, closely reflects this model, with the emperor positioned at the apex of the imperial hierarchy. The hegemon, drawing legitimacy from the king’s role as the earthly representative of the god Ashur and as the “King of Kings” on Earth, administers and

orders the four corners of the world. To this end, the hegemon expands the Assyrian hegemonic framework, imposing order upon a wider sphere of political and social disorder. In this process, the Assyrian emperor establishes a unified imperial order in the ancient Near East through the coordinated exercise of military, economic, and religious authority, ensuring social, economic, and political stability for both the central core and the peripheral territories.

The research findings indicate that the functioning of Assyrian hegemony operated as a unified system, with Assyria and its ruler at its apex, establishing a transregional order grounded in a single religious-political ideology and the hierarchical structuring of relations between the core and periphery. This system was sustained through the continuous interaction of military, political-religious, and economic subsystems. Such a dynamic enabled the hegemonic framework to adapt to internal disturbances and mitigate the risk of systemic collapse. The Assyrian hegemonic system demonstrates that when internal stability could not be maintained, the system rapidly lost equilibrium, leaving it vulnerable to anti-hegemonic external alliances and eventual collapse. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the functioning of the Assyrian hegemonic system relied on the integration of theoretical principles and practical governance structures, which, when supported by military power, facilitated both imperial expansion and systemic stability.

Based on the modeling and analysis of the Assyrian hegemonic structure, it can be argued that the Assyrian Empire was the first power in the ancient Near East to establish a fully articulated hegemonic system, a concept later adapted and redefined by the Persian and Roman empires. It is anticipated that future research on systems of domination in historical empires will increasingly employ the concept of "hegemony" to describe the systematic organisation of transregional order across different periods and to evaluate the operational dynamics of imperial power.

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Author Contribution

All authors have had equal participation.

Conflict of Interest

In adherence to ethical publication standards, the authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest, either personal or financial, that could have influenced the content or conclusions presented in this research.

Endnotes

1. This cultural period in Mesopotamia spans from 1200 to 1100 BCE.

2. During this period, the political systems of the Hittites in Anatolia, Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Kassites in Babylonia, and Assyria in northern Mesopotamia were all established.

3. Other terms used in the archaeological literature as alternatives to "hegemony" include "peace" and "pax," which warrant brief discussion. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2021), "peace" is defined as freedom from war and violence, particularly when people live and work together harmoniously and without conflict. The Larousse Dictionary defines peace as the absence of war between nations. The concept of peace has its roots in the Greek eirene, the Roman pax, and the Hebrew shalom (Oswald et al., 2014). Galtung defines peace as the absence of violence, which in the context of international relations entails respect for sovereignty, equality of rights, immunity, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Galtung, 1996). Pax (Latin): Linguistically, pax signifies peace and refers to stability achieved through agreements, settlements by consensus, or the act of making peace. Functionally, pax can be understood in terms of treaties and pacts between two social groups (Cornwell, 2017: 17). The Encyclopædia Britannica (2024) notes that pax also refers to the Roman goddess and symbol of peace, introduced during the reign of Augustus. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines pax as an inscribed tablet associated with a sacred figure, kissed by participants during religious or ceremonial rites. Additionally, when combined with a specific Latin designation, pax conveys the notion of stability enforced under the influence of military dominance (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Historically and culturally, pax was venerated as the Roman goddess and symbol of Roman peace. The concept of pax as a political term dates back to the Roman Republic and is closely related to the religious concept of pax deorum (the peace of the gods), which constituted a fundamental element of Roman intellectual and religious culture (Linderski, 2000; Santangelo, 2011). During the Republic and the civil wars, the term pax evolved into a political concept used to express political authority, security, and internal stability. In the late Republic and early Principate, pax became a central political concept symbolizing the resolution of internal Roman conflicts, and it played a key role in Augustus' discourse of legitimacy (Cornwell, 2017: 14–42). During the Empire, the idea of Roman peace transitioned from pax republica to Pax Augusta, through which Rome asserted dominance over the known world by means of military power and conquest, while internally signifying the cessation of civil strife. Over time, the concept of pax became increasingly intertwined with the name of the emperor, such that it ultimately came to symbolize the imperial order itself (Cornwell, 2017: 194–195). As previously noted, the concept of pax in the Roman period is fluid, since during the republic and the civil wars it denoted negotiation, conflict, and internal political victories within Roman discourse. However, during the Empire, it evolved into an ideological construct signifying internal stability and territorial expansion under the authority of the emperor, thereby shaping contemporary understandings of Roman imperial power (Barton, 2007: 251–253).

4. Mušezib-Marduk.

5. I am Esarhaddon, king of the world, king of Assyria, valiant warrior, foremost of all rulers, son of Sennacherib, king of the world (and) king of Assyria, (ii 15) descendant of Sargon (II), king of the world (and) king of Assyria, creation of the god Aššur (and) the goddess Mullissu, beloved of the gods Sîn and Šamaš, chosen by the gods Nabû (and) Marduk, favorite of the goddess Ištar, the queen, desired by the great gods, capable, able, intelligent, learned, the one whom the great gods (ii 20) raised to be king in order to restore the great gods and to complete the shrines of all of the cult centers of the great gods; the one who (re)constructed the temple of the god Aššur, (re)built Esagil and Babylon, (and) restored the gods and goddess(es) who (live) in it; the one who returned the plundered gods of the lands from the city Aššur to their (proper) place and let (them) dwell in security (ii 25) As soon as I had completed the temples (and) had installed (them) on their daises as (their) eternal dwelling(s), with their great help I marched triumphantly from the rising sun to the setting sun and I had no rival (therein). I made the rulers of the four quarters bow down at my feet (and) they (the gods) entrusted to

me (any) land that had sinned against the god Aššur. (ii 30) The god Aššur, the father of the gods, gave me (the power) to let (cities) fall into ruins and to (re)populate (them, and) to enlarge Assyrian territory (Esarhaddon 001: ii 12-40).

6. The Assyrian kings venerated both Mesopotamian and foreign deities and invoked them in their oaths and treaties as divine guarantors of loyalty and the preservation of treaty obligations (Collon, 1987).

7. During the period of Assyrian hegemony, only three major temples are recorded as having been destroyed by Assyrian kings, those located in Musasir, Babylon, and Susa. Their destruction appears to have been politically and economically motivated, as these cult centers posed a significant challenge to Assyrian hegemonic authority. Musasir, for example, was sacked in 714 BCE by Sargon II, primarily for economic reasons, and the statue of the god Haldi was carried off to Aššur. However, according to the sources, the statue was returned to the temple at Muṣaṣir the following year, reflecting a policy of religious pragmatism within Assyrian imperial practice (Frame, 2021: 53–83; SAA 01: 9).

8. I deported the people of the cities Sukkia, Bāla, Abitikna, Pappa, (and) Lalluknu from their (own) places and (re)settled them in the city Damascus and the land Ḫatti (Syria). (58) I conquered six cities of the land Niksamma (and) captured Šēp-šarri, the city ruler of Šurgadia. I added those cities to the province of the land Parsuaš.(59) (As for) Bēl-šarru-uṣur of the city Kišesim, I brought him, together with (his) property (and) possessions, the treasure of his palace, to Assyria. I set a eunuch of mine as provincial governor over his city (and) (re)named it Kār-Nergal. [I m] ade a royal image of myself and erected it inside (that city). I conquered six settlements in its neighborhood and added (them) to its province. (61) I surrounded Kibaba, the city ruler of Ḫarḫar, (and) conquered (that city). I counted him as booty together with the people of his land. I reorganized (the administration of) that city. I settled there people from the lands that I had conquered (and) set a eunuch of mine as provincial governor over them. I (re)named (that city) Kār-Šarrukīn, set up the weapon of the god Aššur, my lord, there, (and) erected a royal image of myself inside (that city). I conquered six districts neighboring it and added (them) to his (or: its) province.(64b) I surrounded (and) conquered the cities of Kišešlu, Qindāu, Bīt-Bagāya, (and) Anzaria. I restored (them) and reorganized (their administration). I (re)named them the cities of Kār-Nabû, Kār-Sîn, Kār-Adad, (and) Kār-Ištar (respectively).(65b) In order to subjugate the land Media in the environs of the city Kār-Šarrukīn, I strengthened (its) garrison. I conquered thirty-four districts of the land Media and made (them part of) the territory of Assyria. I imposed upon them the annual payment of horses as tribute (Sargon II 7, 57-65b).

9. To the god Aššur, the king of all the gods, lord of (all) the lands, begetter of everything, king of all the great gods, one who controls (all) regions (of the world); almighty lord of (the city) Baltil (Aššur), (the god) who in his great raging anger crushes the rulers of the world and has put the proud to confusion; the honored one, the hero from whose net the evildoer cannot escape and (with whose net) the one who does not respect an oath (sworn) by him (the god Aššur) is eradicated (lit.: “his root is torn out”); with respect to the one who does not revere his (the god Aššur’s) name (and) (instead) trusts in his own strength, disregards the greatness of his (the god Aššur’s) divine nature, and talks boastfully, (120) he (the god Aššur) rushes angrily against him in the heat of battle, shatters his weapons, and scatters his well-organized forces to the wind. Moreover, with respect to the one who observes the judgment(s) of the gods, trusts in the fair decision of the god Šamaš, and reveres the divine nature of the god Aššur, the divine Enlil of the gods, he (the god Aššur) has fierce axes go at his side (and) causes him to stand in triumph over (his) enemies and foes (Sargon II 7, 116).

10. ...harbor district of Egypt, mingled together [the people of Assyria and Egypt], and allowed (them) to engage in trade (Sargon II 1, 17b).

11. “In the 730s BCE, Tiglath-Pileser III received an annual tribute from the Kingdom of Tabal in western Taurus, consisting of 10 talents of gold, 1,000 talents of silver (equivalent to 32 tons), and 2,000 horses. After the Battle of Carchemish, Sargon II acquired significant spoils, and he converted the Assyrian currency from copper to silver”.

12. I am the youngest of my older brothers (and) by the command of the gods Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Bēl, and Nabû, Ištar of Nineveh, (and) Ištar of Arbela, (my) father, who engendered me, elevated me firmly in the assembly of my brothers, saying: ‘This is the son who will succeed me.’ He questioned the gods Šamaš and Adad by divination, and they answered him with a firm ‘yes,’ saying: ‘He is your replacement.’ (i 15) He heeded their important word(s) and gathered together the people of Assyria, young (and) old, (and) my brothers, the seed of the house of my father. (i 17) Before the gods Aššur, Sîn, Šamaš, Nabû, (and) Marduk, the gods of Assyria, the gods who live in heaven and netherworld, he made them swear their solemn oath(s) concerning the safe-guarding of my succession. (i 20) In a

favorable month, on a propitious day, in accordance with their sublime command, I joyfully entered the House of Succession, an awe-inspiring place within which the appointing to kingship takes place (Esarhaddon 001, i8-20).

13. Sources studied for the political-religious crisis: Grayson, 1975; Parpola, 1993; Grayson, 1996; Mattila 2000; Fuchs 2008; Radner, 2011; Siddall 2013; Radner, 2016; Elayi, 2021.

14. Aššur-etel-ilani: After my father and begetter (i.e., Assurbanipal) had departed, no father raised me or taught me to spread my wings; no mother cared for me or oversaw my education. The Chief Eunuch Sîn-šumu-lēšir, who had faithfully served my father and begetter and who guided me constantly like a father, safely installed me upon the throne of my father and begetter. He caused the people of Assyria, great and small alike, to safeguard my kingship during my minority and to honor my royal authority (Kataja and Whiting 1995: nos. 35 and 36).

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هژمونی امپراتوری آشورنو: ساختار و عملکرد

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چکیده

در پژوهش‌های معاصر، واژگان متنوعی برای توصیف دوره‌های ثبات نسبی فرامنطقه‌ای در بازه‌های زمانی و مکانی مشخص به‌کار گرفته می‌شود؛ با این‌حال، این اصطلاحات واجد معانی گوناگونی‌اند و نمی‌توان در تمامی زمینه‌ها از تعریفی یکسان برای آن‌ها استفاده کرد. در اواخر عصر مفرغ، تحولات ناگهانی اقلیمی و اجتماعی موجب بروز تنش‌ها و درگیری‌های گستردهٔ سیاسی-اجتماعی شد و قدرت‌های سیاسی در این دوره قادر به ایجاد ثبات فرامنطقه‌ای پایدار نگردیدند. با گذار از عصر مفرغ متأخر به عصر آهن، شاهد ظهور و گسترش نظام سیاسی، اقتصادی، نظامی و ایدئولوژیک آشور نو هستیم؛ نظامی که موفق شد نظم فرامنطقه‌ای جدیدی را در عصر آهن بنیان نهد، خاورمیانهٔ باستان را تحت کنترل درآورد و نوعی نظم جهانی اولیه را شکل دهد. مسئلهٔ محوری این پژوهش، درک و تحلیل چگونگی شکل‌گیری و تداوم هژمونی آشور نو در عصر آهن است. بر این‌اساس، با بهره‌گیری از منابع مکتوب آشوری، نقش‌برجسته‌ها، مطالعات باستان‌شناسی میدانی و داده‌های پژوهشی حاصل از تحقیقات انجام‌شده بین سال‌های ۱۹۶۷ تا ۲۰۲۳م.، تلاش شده است نظام هژمونیک امپراتوری آشور در قالب یک مدل تحلیلی سیستمی بازسازی شود. هدف اصلی، تبیین سازوکارهای عملکردی هژمونی آشور و چگونگی تحقق نظم فرامنطقه‌ای در خاورمیانهٔ باستان است. یافته‌های پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که ساختار سیاسی و اقتصادی آشور نو واجد ویژگی‌های سیستمی منسجمی بوده است که زمینه‌ساز گسترش و تثبیت هژمونی این امپراتوری در پهنهٔ خاورمیانهٔ باستان گردید؛ هرچند فروپاشی ناگهانی آشور درپی شکل‌گیری ائتلاف‌های ضدهژمونیک رخداد، اما ساختار نظم فرامنطقه‌ای آن تداوم یافت و الگوهای هژمونیک آشوری در امپراتوری‌های پسین نیز بازتاب یافت؛ از این‌رو، می‌توان امپراتوری آشور نو را نخستین قدرت جهانی دانست که الگوی یک نظام هژمونیک فرامنطقه‌ای را پدید آورد.

کلیدواژگان: هژمونی، آشورنو، عصر آهن، بین النهرین، امپراتوری.

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