

# TRADE, MERCHANTS, AND THE LOST CITIES OF THE BRONZE AGE\*

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## Abstract

We analyze a large dataset of commercial records produced by Assyrian merchants in the 19th Century BCE. Using the information collected from these records, we estimate a structural gravity model of long-distance trade in the Bronze Age. We use our structural gravity model to locate lost ancient cities. In many instances, our structural estimates confirm the conjectures of historians who follow different methodologies. In some instances, our estimates confirm one conjecture against others. Confronting our structural estimates for ancient city sizes to measures of modern populations and income, we document persistent patterns in the distribution of city sizes across four millennia, even after controlling for time-invariant geographic attributes. Finally, we offer evidence in support of the hypothesis that large cities tend to emerge at the intersections of natural transport routes, as dictated by topography.

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This paper analyzes a large collection of commercial records from the earliest well-documented long-distance trade in world history: the Old Assyrian trade network connecting northern Iraq, Northern Syria and central Turkey during the Middle Bronze Age period (c. 2000-1650 BCE). The clay tablets on which the merchants recorded their shipment consignments, expenses, and contracts—excavated, translated and published by researchers for more than a century—paint a rich picture of an intra-regional exchange economy (Larsen, 2015).

Originating from the city of *Aššur* on the West bank of the River Tigris, some 100 km south of the modern-day Iraqi city of Mosul, several hundred Assyrian merchants settled on a permanent or temporary basis in *Kaneš* (Kanesh) near modern-day Kayseri in Turkey. They maintained smaller expatriate trading settlements in a few dozen urban centers on the central Anatolian Plateau and in the Trans-Taurus. *Kaneš* was the regional hub of the overland commodity trade involving the import of luxury fabrics and tin from *Aššur* to Anatolia (tin originally sourced from Central Asia) in exchange for silver and gold bullion (Barjamovic, 2018). Assyrian merchants were also involved in a voluminous trade of copper and wool within Anatolia itself (Dercksen, 1996; Lassen, 2010).

The Assyrian texts depict a flourishing market economy, based on free enterprise and private initiative, profit-seeking and risk-taking merchants, backed by elaborate financial contracts and a well-functioning judicial system (Hertel, 2013). *Aššur* offered reliable legal procedures, a transparent system of taxation, and foreign policy that protected the Assyrian caravans and local investors involved in financing the risky long-distance trade. Assyrian merchants established trading colonies or “ports” among the small city-states of Anatolia. They negotiated with local Anatolian rulers, kings or ruling couples, the right to establish permanent trading settlements and maintain their own legal and financial institutions independent from the local community. Local rulers guaranteed the protection of passing merchant caravans against robbers and brigandage, and maintained roads and bridges, in exchange for tolls and taxes on transit trade.

Our first contribution is to extract systematic information on commercial linkages between cities from ancient texts. To do so, we leverage the fact that the ancient records we study can be transcribed into the Latin alphabet, and digitized. We parse all texts and automatically isolate all tablets which jointly mention at least two cities. We then systematically read those texts, which requires an intimate knowledge of the cuneiform script and Old Assyrian dialect of the ancient Akkadian language that the records are written in. Taking individual source context into account, this analysis identifies exclusively a subset of records that explicitly refer to trades between cities.

Our second contribution is to estimate a structural gravity model of ancient trade. We build a simple Ricardian model of trade. Further imposing that bilateral trade frictions can be summarized

by a power function of geographic distance, our model makes predictions on the number of transactions between city pairs, which is observed in our data. The model can be estimated solely on bilateral trade flows and on the geographic location of at least some known cities. We estimate a distance elasticity of trade in the Bronze Age equal to 1.9, surprisingly close to modern estimates.

Our third contribution is to use the structural gravity model to estimate the geographic location of lost cities. While some cities in which the Assyrian merchants traded have been located and excavated by historians and archaeologists, other cities mentioned in the records can not be definitively associated with a place on the map and are now lost to us. Analyzing the descriptions of trade routes connecting the cities and the landscapes surrounding them, historians have developed qualitative conjectures about potential locations of these lost cities. We propose an alternative, quantitative method based on maximizing the fit of the gravity equation. As long as we have data on trade between known and lost cities, with sufficiently many known compared to lost cities, a structural gravity model is able to estimate the likely geographic coordinates of lost cities. Our framework not only provides point estimates for the location of lost cities, but also confidence regions around those point estimates. For a majority of the lost cities, our quantitative estimates come remarkably close to the qualitative conjectures produced by historians, corroborating both such historical models and our purely quantitative method. In some cases where historians disagree on the location of a lost city, our quantitative method supports the conjecture of some historians against others.

Our fourth contribution is to test for the persistence of economic forces over a long horizon. Aside from allowing us to recover the location of lost cities, our gravity model yields a structural estimate for the fundamental economic size of ancient cities, when no reliable data on production and consumption, or even population size or density in the 19th century BCE survives. Instead, we structurally estimate fundamental city sizes in a general equilibrium trade model. Estimated ancient city sizes are strongly correlated with the economic size of those cities in the current era. We argue that natural transportation networks shaped by the topography of the wider region—a factor usually overlooked by economists, but recognized by historians (Ramsay, 1890)—is critical in explaining the hierarchy of ancient cities and their modern counterparts. We also find suggestive evidence that the distribution of population of ancient urban settlements is closely approximated by Zipf’s law, much like the distribution of modern city sizes.

**Related literature.** Our paper contributes to several literatures. First, we provide the earliest estimate of the gravity equation in trade, dating back to the 19th Century BCE, about four millennia earlier than existing estimates from the mid-19th century CE, and with a distance elasticity of trade

close to modern estimates (Disdier and Head, 2008; Cosar and Demir, 2016).

Second, we invert a structural gravity equation in order to locate lost cities, complementing qualitative approaches in history and archeology with a quantitative method rooted in economic theory. Our approach is loosely related to multidimensional scaling problems in other fields, where one searches for (unknown) coordinates of points such that the distances between those points are close to known distances. Multi-dimensional scaling has been applied for instance to locate eight parishes in Oxfordshire using data on marriages circa 1600-1850 CE (Kendall, 1971), and to match known archaeological sites to place names in Norway using night watchmen itineraries in the 13th century CE (Galloway, 1978). An earlier contribution (Tobler and Wineburg, 1971) uses a similar dataset as ours to locate Assyrian cities in Bronze Age Anatolia. Our method differs from and improves upon multidimensional scaling in that we use an explicit structural economic model. This allows us to infer not only the location of lost cities, but also the distance elasticity of trade, the size of cities (a theory-guided counterfactual measure), formal estimates of standard errors, and confidence regions. Furthermore, compared to Tobler and Wineburg (1971), we use a much larger dataset that has become available for study in the meantime, systematically clean our data to identify meaningful economic exchanges, formally account for trade zeros, and confront our estimates to historical and contemporaneous evidence. We also show that our structural estimates yield more plausible estimates than a naive multi-dimensional scaling approach.

Finally, we provide novel evidence on the (very) long run determinants of the city size distribution. An important line of theoretical and empirical inquiry in economic geography involves attempts at explaining the distribution of economic and demographic size of cities over time. Locational fundamentals as dictated by geography is potentially an important factor (Davis and Weinstein, 2002). Agglomeration of economic activity for non-geographic reasons may magnify size differentials even across seemingly homogenous locations (Krugman, 1991). Path-dependence through lock-in effects could lead to the persistence of past factors—related to the fundamentals that may have been important once (Bleakley and Lin, 2012; Michaels and Rauch, 2016). Our results and historical setting suggest that centrality in transport routes dictated by topography may be an important geographic factor explaining the persistence of cities’ long-run economic fortunes.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 1 describes our data. Section 2 derives our model and our estimation strategy. Section 3 discusses our estimates for the distance elasticity of trade, and the location of lost cities. Section 4 presents our estimates for city sizes, and explores the long-run determinants of the distribution of city sizes. Section 5 compares our structural gravity model to estimates from a naive gravity model.

# 1 Ancient Trade Data

Our data comes from a collection of around 12,000 texts that constitute the hitherto deciphered and edited part of around 23,500 texts excavated primarily at the archaeological site of Kültepe, ancient *Kaneš*, located in Turkey's central Anatolian province of Kayseri. These texts were inscribed on clay tablets in the Old Assyrian dialect of the Akkadian language in cuneiform script by ancient Assyrian merchants, their families and business partners.<sup>1</sup> The texts date back to a period between 1930 and 1775 BCE, with around 90% of the sample belonging to just one generation of traders, ca. 1895 - 1865 BCE (Barjamovic et al., 2012).

Since *Kaneš* was home to the main expatriate court adjudicating on disputes within the Assyrian commercial activities in Anatolia during that time, main Assyrian merchants all maintained houses and commercial storage in the city. The merchants settled at *Kaneš* typically acted both as agents of larger trading houses in the mother city of *Aššur*, as well as partners in local trade ventures. This required them to keep records on trade endeavors throughout their commercial circuit, regardless of whether it involved *Kaneš* or not. Such records were to a large extent archived at *Kaneš* alongside dossiers of legal and commercial records coming from elsewhere within the network, and archival copies of texts going out to other cities in Anatolia. This to some degree alleviates any geographical bias of the sources and the commercial geography that they reflect.

The city of *Kaneš* experienced a major conflagration that destroyed all Assyrian merchant houses and sealed off and preserved many of the commercial archives *in situ* ca. 1840 BCE (Manning et al., 2017). This is the main reason why the material, which represents the world's oldest consistent archive of trade data, survives to this day. Unlike papyrus, paper or parchment, clay is ubiquitous, inexpensive and preserves well in the ground, so the *Kaneš* archives survived where most other materials would have perished. The closest comparable corpora of ancient trade data are almost 3000 years later, coming e.g., from the medieval Italian merchant archives and the Cairo Genizah.

Most texts under consideration, found in merchants' houses, are commercial: business letters, shipment documents, accounting records, seals and contracts. In a typical shipment document or expense account, a merchant would inform partners about the cargo and related expenses:

*(I paid) 6.5 shekels (of tin) from the Town of the Kanishites to Timelkiya. I paid 2 shekels of silver and 2 shekels of tin for the hire of a donkey from Timelkiya to Hurama. From Hurama to Kaneš I paid 4.5 shekels of silver and 4.5 shekels of tin for the hire of a donkey and a packer. [Tablet AKT 8/151, lines 5-17]*

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<sup>1</sup>Figure 1 shows a picture of a well preserved clay tablet.

*In accordance with your message about the 300 kg of copper, we hired some Kaneshites here and they will bring it to you in a wagon...Pay in all 21 shekels of silver to the Kaneshite transporters. 3 bags of copper are under your seal...Here, Puzur-Aššur spent 5 minas of copper for their food. We paid 5 2/3 minas of copper for the wagon. [Tablet Kt 92/k 313, lines 4-8, 14-22]*

Occasional business letters contain information about market and transport conditions:

*Since there is a transporter and the roads are dangerous, I have not led the shipment to Hutka. When the road is free and the first caravan arrived safely here, I will send Hutka with silver. [Tablet POAT 28, lines 3-7]*

*Concerning the purchase of Akkadian textiles which you have written about, since you left the Akkadians have not entered the City; their land is in revolt, but should they arrive before winter, and if it is possible to make purchases profitable for you, we shall buy some for you. [Tablet VS 26/17, lines 4-11]*

While the actual cuneiform tablets are scattered all around the world in collections and museums, many of the texts have been transliterated into Latin alphabet, translated into modern language, published in various volumes, and recently digitized by assyriologists. We use qualitative and quantitative information about cities and merchants mentioned in a sample of 9,728 digitized texts available to us and approximately 2,000 additional non-digitized texts.<sup>2</sup>

The version of the data we use, tabulated by Barjamovic (2011), mentions 79 unique settlements, ‘cities’ for short. Out of these 79 cities scattered around in modern-day Iraq, Syria and Turkey, we restrict our analysis to 25 Anatolian cities in Turkey. Appendix B.1 explains in detail the sample selection criteria. Our directed measure of bilateral commercial interactions between cities is a count of all mentions of cargo shipments or individual merchants traveling from  $i$  to  $j$ ,

$$N_{ij}^{data} \equiv \text{number of mentions of travels from } i \text{ to } j.$$

Since we rarely have a description of the content of the shipments, we are unable to identify the intensive margin of trade, i.e., the value of the wares being transported.  $N_{ij}^{data}$  measures instead the extensive margin of trade, a count of the number of shipments.

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<sup>2</sup>We rely on data amassed through twenty years of collaborative effort of the Old Assyrian Text Project. The project’s website gives public access to a large part of the data (sadly, due to insufficient funding the site <http://oatp.net/> is no longer active, but the digital archive can be accessed via [www.web.archive.org](http://www.web.archive.org)). We are grateful to Thomas Hertel, Ed Stratford and all the members of the Old Assyrian Text Project for providing us with the underlying data files.

To construct this measure, we proceed in several steps. First, we automatically parse through all our 12,000 texts to identify any tablet which mentions at least two cities. To do so, we systematically isolate strings of characters corresponding to all possible spellings of city names.<sup>3</sup> We find 2,806 unique tablets containing at least two city names from this step.

Second, we systematically read all those 2,806 tablets, and identify all mentions of cargo shipments or individual merchants' travels. While not necessarily about actual shipments of goods, we infer from a large number of merchants travelling from  $i$  to  $j$  that trade flows in this direction are large. 198 unique tablets contain such mentions of cargo and merchants' itineraries. A typical business document will describe one or several itineraries of cargo shipments. The following example is an excerpt from a memorandum on travel expenses describing cargo trips:

*From Durhumit until Kaneš I incurred expenses of 5 minas of refined (copper), I spent 3 minas of copper until Wahšušana, I acquired and spent small wares for a value of 4 shekels of silver.* [Tablet AKT 8/145, lines 24-29]

From this sentence, we identify three shipments: from *Durhumit* to *Kaneš*, from *Kaneš* to *Wahšušana* and from *Durhumit* to *Wahšušana*. Note that for itineraries of this type,  $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$ , we count three trips,  $A \rightarrow B$ ,  $B \rightarrow C$  and  $A \rightarrow C$ , implicitly assuming some trade is going on along the way. In the rare cases where an itinerary loops back, we do not count the return trip. This procedure isolates 227 explicit cargo or merchants' itineraries, from which we identify 391 directed travels between city pairs (itineraries with more than two cities generate multiple travels).

Of the 25 cities in our sample, 15 are 'known' and 10 are 'lost'. 'Known' cities are either cities for which a place name has been unambiguously associated with an archaeological site, or cities for which a strong consensus among historians exists, such that different historians agree on a likely set of locations that are very close to one another. 'Lost' cities on the other hand are identified in the corpus of texts, but their location remains uncertain, with no definitive answer from archaeological evidence. From the analysis of textual evidence, archaeology and the topography of the region, historians have developed competing hypotheses for the potential location of some of those. We

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<sup>3</sup>We exclude *Aššur*, the home city of the Assyrians, from our automated search for three reasons. First, the word *Aššur*, which occurs ca. 40,000 times, is also the name of the main Assyrian deity, and occurs very often as an element of personal names (cf., for instance the name Puzur-Aššur meaning "Refuge of *Aššur*" in Kt 92/k 313 cited above). Second, the city of *Aššur* is often referred to as simply *ālum*—"the City" (comparable in use to references to the financial district of London), which appears ca. 10,000 times. Our automated search is not able to use a letter's context to distinguish between *Aššur* as a god, as part of a personal name or as a city; or the word for "city" as being *Aššur* or another city. Third, in order to analyze the long-run determinants of city sizes in a consistent manner, we limit our attention to cities within the boundaries of modern-day Turkey so as to eliminate confounding institutional factors. Being situated in northern Iraq, *Aššur* does not satisfy this criterion.

propose to use data on bilateral trades between known and lost cities and a structural gravity model to inform the search for those lost cities.

Table 1 provides summary statistics. The mean number of travels across all city pairs is 0.63. As with modern international trade data, many city pairs do not trade: of all the 600 potential export-import relationships (directed  $ij$  and  $ji$  pairs out of 25 cities), only 114 have a positive flow. The average  $N_{ij}^{data}$  for these trading pairs is 3.33, with a large dispersion (s.d. 4.31).

The top panel of figure 2 plots the map of cities, including a preview of the estimated locations of lost cities.<sup>4</sup> The city of *Kaneš* is geographically central to the system of cities under study. As discussed above, it was also the operational center of Assyrian merchants in central Anatolia. Trade flows, however, do not just display a hub and spoke structure around *Kaneš*, as seen by the rich pattern of bilateral ties between cities in the bottom panel of figure 2. This further reassures us that we are not over sampling *Kaneš*-related trade.

## 2 Model and Estimation

We build a simple model of trade in which merchants arbitrage price differentials between cities. While stylized, this model captures key features of trade in the Middle Bronze Age. For instance, the model can accommodate a commodity produced outside of our network of trading cities, such as tin sourced from Central Asia, transported and traded between the Assyrian ports in Anatolia, and possibly exported by other commercial networks to distant places such as the Aegean and Egypt.

**Model.** We adapt Eaton, Kortum, and Sotelo (2012)’s finite sample version of the Eaton and Kortum (2002) gravity model of trade to our setting. The Eaton and Kortum model is particularly well suited for two reasons. First, it is a model of arbitrage pricing which plausibly describes Assyrian merchants’ trading strategy. Second, this model makes an explicit prediction about the count of shipments, which we observe, rather than the value of shipments, about which we have almost no information. When bringing the model to the data, we depart from Eaton, Kortum, and Sotelo (2012) and other modern gravity estimates such as Silva and Tenreyro (2006): unlike with modern trade data, we do not know the location of some cities. We use instead our model to estimate those locations. In other words, we treat some distances as unknowns instead of data.

There are  $K + L$  cities,  $K$  of them known, and  $L$  of them lost. A finite number of tradable commodities (tin, copper, wool...) are indexed by  $\omega$ . Merchants arbitrage price differentials be-

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<sup>4</sup>We include *Aššur*, the home city of the Assyrians, on those maps in order to give a full picture of the related geography, even though it is not included in our sample (see footnote 3).



tween cities, subject to bilateral transaction costs. For simplicity, we assume iceberg ad valorem transaction costs, such that delivering one unit of a good from city  $i$  to city  $j$  requires shipping  $\tau_{ij} \geq 1$  units of the good. We also explicitly assume a transaction cost for within city transactions,  $\tau_{jj} \geq 1$ , to capture the trade of cities with their hinterlands. If a merchant observes costs  $c_i(\omega)$  and  $c_j(\omega)$  for good  $\omega$  in cities  $i$  and  $j$  such that  $\tau_{ij}c_i(\omega) < \tau_{jj}c_j(\omega)$ , she can exploit an arbitrage opportunity:<sup>5</sup> buy  $\tau_{ij}$  units of the good at a cheap cost  $\tau_{ij}c_i(\omega)$  in  $i$ , ship those  $\tau_{ij}$  units to deliver one unit in  $j$ , sell at a high price  $\tau_{jj}c_j(\omega)$  for a profit, without the threat of being undercut by local sellers who could at best buy  $\tau_{jj}$  units locally at cost  $c_j(\omega)$  to sell at cost  $\tau_{jj}c_j(\omega)$  per unit.

We assume for tractability that the local cost of one unit of any commodity  $\omega$  in city  $i$ , at any time, is drawn from a Weibull distribution,

$$\Pr [c_i(\omega) \leq c] = 1 - \exp\left(-T_i w_i^{-\theta} c^\theta\right). \quad (1)$$

The cost  $c_i(\omega)$  includes the marginal cost of production, any markup or distribution cost, but also  $w_i$ , a shifter to the cost of sourcing goods from city  $i$  reflecting the cost of local immobile factors, determined in equilibrium below. The distribution of costs is i.i.d across commodities and over time, and costs are independent across cities.  $\theta > 0$  is an inverse measure of the dispersion of costs and  $T_i > 0$  controls the efficiency of sourcing goods from  $i$ .<sup>6</sup>

Denote by  $c_{ij}(\omega) = \tau_{ij}c_i(\omega)$  the marginal cost of delivering good  $\omega$  from origin city  $i$  to destination city  $j$ . Under the assumption that merchants can freely exploit any arbitrage opportunity,<sup>7</sup> the probability that a shipment sourced by destination  $j$  originates from  $i$  is equal to

$$\Pr \left[ c_{ij}(\omega) \leq \min_k \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \right] = \frac{T_i (\tau_{ij} w_i)^{-\theta}}{\sum_k T_k (\tau_{kj} w_k)^{-\theta}}. \quad (2)$$

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<sup>5</sup>We use the conventional ‘she’. Although there is no documented instances of female Assyrian traders, women did occasionally participate in the trade as partners.

<sup>6</sup>This model can also accommodate cases where good  $\omega$  is not produced locally, but instead is sourced from outside our network of  $K + L$  trading cities and enters our system only through the gateway city  $i$  (e.g. tin mined in Central Asia, and shipped via *Aššur*). In that case,  $T_i w_i^{-\theta}$  depends both on the fundamental efficiency and cost of local producers in  $i$ ,  $T_i^{local}$  and  $w_i^{local}$ , on the efficiency and cost of outside producers sending goods to  $i$ ,  $T_i^{outside}$  and  $w_i^{outside}$ , and on the cost of sourcing goods from outside,  $\tau_{outside,i}$ ,

$$T_i w_i^{-\theta} = \tau_{ii}^{-\theta} T_i^{local} \left(w_i^{local}\right)^{-\theta} + \tau_{outside,i}^{-\theta} T_i^{outside} \left(w_i^{outside}\right)^{-\theta}.$$

<sup>7</sup>As the merchants we consider are mobile, constantly traveling between cities, we do not consider the problem of repatriating the proceeds from this sale explicitly. We implicitly assume repatriation is costless. If repatriating profits entails a cost, the  $\tau_{ij}$  term would contain both the cost of shipping goods *and* of repatriating profits. Historical evidence suggests that some of the merchants’ profits were invested into new shipments and real estate in Aššur, where house prices seemingly experienced a surge during the period (Barjamovic et al., 2012, p.72). In the absence of any systematic information on how profits are accrued and spent, we do not model profits explicitly. Eaton et al. (2012) show that if profits are redistributed using an outside good, their model’s predictions remain as in ours.

We define two additional conditional probabilities (see mathematical Appendix A for formal derivations): the probability that, conditional on not sourcing locally, destination  $j$  sources good  $\omega$  from origin  $i$ ; and the probability that conditional on not sourcing a good either locally or from a lost city, destination  $j$  sources good  $\omega$  from known origin  $i$ ,

$$\Pr \left[ c_{ij}(\omega) \leq \min_{k \neq j} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \mid c_{jj}(\omega) > \min_{k \neq j} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \right] = \frac{T_i(\tau_{ij}w_i)^{-\theta}}{\sum_{k \neq j} T_k(\tau_{kj}w_k)^{-\theta}}, \quad (3)$$

$$\Pr \left[ c_{ij}(\omega) \leq \min_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \mid \min_{l \in \mathcal{L} \cup \{j\}} c_{lj}(\omega) > \min_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \right] = \frac{T_i(\tau_{ij}w_i)^{-\theta}}{\sum_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} T_k(\tau_{kj}w_k)^{-\theta}}, \quad (4)$$

where we denote the set of  $K$  known cities by  $\mathcal{K}$ , and the set of  $L$  lost cities by  $\mathcal{L}$ . We form conditional probability (3) because, in our dataset, unlike in modern trade data, we do not observe internal transactions, a purchase in city  $j$  of a good sourced locally in  $j$ . We also form conditional probability (4) to estimate the distance elasticity of trade using known distances only.

Equations (2), (3), and (4) will form the basis of our estimation. It is important to note that the Eaton and Kortum (2002) model makes explicit predictions about the probability of a shipment occurring, equation (2). The empirical counterpart to this probability can be formed using only data on the count of shipments, and does not require knowledge of the value of shipments. This property is crucial to us, as our dataset contains information on the count of shipments, but not on the value of shipments. Among modern trade models, this feature is unique to the Eaton and Kortum (2002) model, and one of our main motivations for using it. Note that this model also predicts that trade shares in value are equal to trade shares in counts.<sup>8</sup> We will use this property to close our model in general equilibrium in order to derive counterfactual measures of city sizes.

**Estimation.** Our estimation proceeds in three steps. First, we parametrize trade costs as a function of distance only. Using data on shipments among known cities only, we can estimate the distance elasticity of trade. Second, imposing the estimated trade cost function, we jointly estimate city sizes for all cities and the geographic location of lost cities. Estimating unknown locations for lost cities, and therefore distances involving lost cities, is novel compared to conventional estimates of the gravity equation in trade. Third, we combine our estimates to compute a measure of the

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<sup>8</sup>In the Eaton and Kortum (2002) model, the fraction of shipments imported by  $j$  originating from  $i$  in count,  $N_{ij}/\sum_k N_{kj}$ , is equal to the fraction of  $j$ 's spending on imports from  $i$ ,  $X_{ij}/\sum_k X_{kj}$ , in expectation,

$$\mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{N_{ij}}{\sum_k N_{kj}} \right] = \mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{X_{ij}}{\sum_k X_{kj}} \right] = \frac{T_i(\tau_{ij}w_i)^{-\theta}}{\sum_k T_k(\tau_{kj}w_k)^{-\theta}}.$$

This holds because the distribution of prices of goods delivered in destination  $j$  is independent of the goods' origin. See property (b) on page 1748 and equations (8) and (10) in Eaton and Kortum (2002).

fundamental size of cities, solving a full general equilibrium version of our model. Heuristically, the distance elasticity ‘translates’ our data on bilateral trade flows into geographic distances. A simple triangulation-type technique can then recover the location of lost cities. Our three-steps procedure formally estimates parameters such that the gravity model fits the data as closely as possible, and further provides estimates of standard errors and confidence regions around our point estimates.

For cities  $i$  and  $j$  with latitude-longitude  $(\varphi_i, \lambda_i)$  and  $(\varphi_j, \lambda_j)$ , we parametrize the symmetric trade cost function as

$$\tau_{ij}^{-\theta} = \delta \cdot (\text{Distance}_{ij}(\varphi_i, \lambda_i; \varphi_j, \lambda_j))^{-\zeta}. \quad (5)$$

A scaling factor,  $\delta$ , controls for measurement units, and  $\zeta$  is the distance elasticity of trade. The function  $\text{Distance}_{ij}(\varphi_i, \lambda_i; \varphi_j, \lambda_j)$  maps geo-coordinates into geographic distances, in kms.<sup>9</sup>

We use Euclidean distances, i.e. as the crow flies distances, instead of least effort distances that would account for the topography of the local terrain. There are two reasons motivating this choice. First, when estimating our gravity model, we need to solve a complex non linear minimization program—see problem (8) below. With an explicit Euclidean formula for distance, we can take the first order conditions of this program with respect to the latitudes and longitudes of lost cities. Had we used least effort distances instead, we would have had to compute all possible least effort distances for pairs of points on a discrete grid, and solved our minimization program by brute force. This is computationally infeasible.<sup>10</sup> Second, we use information on the topography of the local terrain as an external validity check on our estimates (see sections 3.2 and 4.3 below). Not bringing topographical data into our estimation gives credence to those validity checks.

Our model being based upon Eaton, Kortum, and Sotelo (2012)’s finite sample version of the Eaton and Kortum model, predicted trade shares between city pairs are random. In particular they can be zero, as often happens in the data, if the lowest realized cost to deliver a good from  $i$  to  $j$  is higher than the lowest realized cost from all other origins. Beyond this finite sample randomness, we can easily add a multiplicative disturbance term to the trade cost function (5), without altering

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<sup>9</sup>For latitudes ( $\varphi$ ) and longitude ( $\lambda$ ) measured in degrees, we use the Euclidean distance formula,

$$\text{Distance}_{ij}(\varphi_i, \lambda_i; \varphi_j, \lambda_j) = \frac{10,000}{90} \left( \sqrt{(\varphi_j - \varphi_i)^2 + \left( \cos\left(\frac{37.9}{180}\pi\right) (\lambda_j - \lambda_i) \right)^2} \right),$$

where 37.9 degrees North is the median latitude among known Assyrian cities. For locations in these latitudes, the difference between this Euclidean formula and the more precise Haversine formula is negligible. This approximation considerably speeds up the estimation. We will also need to know internal trade frictions. Since we do not observe internal trades, we cannot estimate within city transactions costs. We instead normalize internal distances,  $\text{Distance}_{ii} = 30\text{km}$ , capturing the economic hinterland of a city within the reach of a day’s travel by foot or donkey.

<sup>10</sup>Such an analysis would require us to consider all possible locations for our lost cities—all combinations of 10 sites chosen from millions of grid points—compute least effort paths for each guess, calculate our objective function, and iterate many times over. This requires computational power beyond current capabilities.

our estimation strategy.<sup>11</sup>

Step 1 of our estimation estimates the distance elasticity of trade  $\zeta$  using trade among known cities. Under the parametrization (5) for the trade cost function, the following moment condition equates the expected fraction of goods from  $i$  to  $j$  among shipments from known cities, with the probability (4) of a good being sourced from  $i$  to  $j$  conditional on being sourced from a known city,

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{N_{ij}}{\sum_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} N_{kj}} \right] &= \Pr \left[ c_{ij}(\omega) \leq \min_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \mid \min_{l \in \mathcal{L} \cup \{j\}} c_{lj}(\omega) > \min_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \right] \\ &= \alpha_i \beta_j \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\zeta}, \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

with  $\alpha_i = w_i^{-\theta} T_i$  and  $\beta_j = \delta / \sum_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} w_k^{-\theta} T_k (\tau_{kj})^{-\theta}$ . Under this moment condition (6), we estimate the distance elasticity  $\hat{\zeta}$  by Poisson Pseudo Maximum Likelihood. This estimation uses only trade shares among known cities,  $N_{ij} / \sum_{k \in \mathcal{K} \setminus \{j\}} N_{kj}$ , bilateral distances between known cities,  $\text{Distance}_{ij}$ , and origin and destination fixed effects to control for  $\alpha_i$  and  $\beta_j$ . This follows closely the procedure in Eaton, Kortum, and Sotelo (2012), with the only difference that we derive conditional probabilities (non-internal trade among the subset of known cities only) and not unconditional ones.

Step 2 of our estimation uses the distance elasticity  $\hat{\zeta}$  from step 1, and our dataset on all trade flows between known and lost cities. We estimate exporter fixed effects  $\alpha_i = w_i^{-\theta} T_i$  for all cities, and the latitudes  $\varphi_l$  and longitudes  $\lambda_l$  of lost cities, collected in the vector of parameters  $\beta$

$$\beta = (\alpha_1, \dots, \alpha_{Kane\bar{s}-1}, \alpha_{Kane\bar{s}+1}, \dots, \alpha_{K+L}, \varphi_{K+1}, \lambda_{K+1}, \dots, \varphi_{K+L}, \lambda_{K+L})',$$

where we arbitrarily normalize  $\alpha_{Kane\bar{s}} \equiv 100$ . We use (3) to form the moment condition,

$$\mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{N_{ij}}{\sum_{k \neq j} N_{kj}} \right] = \Pr \left[ c_{ij}(\omega) \leq \min_{k \neq j} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \mid c_{jj}(\omega) > \min_{k \neq j} \{c_{kj}(\omega)\} \right] = \frac{\alpha_i \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\hat{\zeta}}}{\sum_{k \neq j} \alpha_k \text{Distance}_{kj}^{-\hat{\zeta}}}. \quad (7)$$

<sup>11</sup>To account for departures from the simplest gravity model where only distance matters, we can add a multiplicative disturbance term drawn from a joint Gamma distribution as in Eaton, Kortum, and Sotelo (2012),

$$\tau_{ij}^{-\theta} = \delta \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\zeta} \nu_{ij}, \text{ with } \nu_{ij} \sim \text{Gamma} \left( \frac{1}{\eta^2} \frac{\alpha_i \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\zeta}}{\sum_{k \neq j} \alpha_k \text{Distance}_{kj}^{-\zeta}}, \frac{\eta^2}{\alpha_i \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\zeta}} \right).$$

Under this distributional assumption, treating the  $\nu$ 's as realizations from a random variable, the moment condition (7) below remains the same (see mathematical appendix A for a formal derivation),

$$\mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{N_{ij}^{data}}{\sum_{k \neq j} N_{kj}^{data}} \right] = \mathbb{E} \left[ \frac{\alpha_i \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\zeta} \nu_{ij}}{\sum_{k \neq j} \alpha_k \text{Distance}_{kj}^{-\zeta} \nu_{kj}} \right] = \frac{\alpha_i \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\zeta}}{\sum_{k \neq j} \alpha_k \text{Distance}_{kj}^{-\zeta}}.$$

Reassuringly, both realized (random) and expected trade shares are all in  $(0, 1)$  and add up to one.

It simply states that the expected share of shipments from  $i$  to  $j$  equals the probability of a shipment being sourced from  $i$  to  $j$ . Under this condition (7), we estimate the parameters  $\beta$  by a method of moments, solving the following non linear least squares minimization problem,

$$\beta = \arg \min_{\beta} \sum_j \sum_{i \neq j} \left( \frac{N_{ij}}{\sum_{k \neq j} N_{kj}} - \frac{\alpha_i \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\hat{\zeta}}}{\sum_{k \neq j} \alpha_k \text{Distance}_{kj}^{-\hat{\zeta}}} \right)^2. \quad (8)$$

Note that our NLLS estimator (8) uses data contained in trade zeros explicitly. For instance, consider a case where the observed trade share from  $i$  to  $j_1$  is zero, but the trade share from  $i$  to  $j_2$  is positive. Our estimator trades off a low origin  $i$  fixed effect  $\alpha_i$  to match the observed zero share from  $i$  to  $j_1$ , and a higher  $\alpha_i$  to match the positive share from  $i$  to  $j_2$ . Furthermore, if  $i$ 's location is lost, so that both  $\text{Distance}_{ij_1}$  and  $\text{Distance}_{ij_2}$  are unknowns to be estimated, our estimator also trades off a large  $\text{Distance}_{ij_1}$  to match the observed zero share from  $i$  to  $j_1$  and a lower  $\text{Distance}_{ij_2}$  to match the positive share from  $i$  to  $j_2$ , where the Euclidean geometry of our space imposes a mechanical link between  $\text{Distance}_{ij_1}$  and  $\text{Distance}_{ij_2}$ .

Step 3 of our estimation collects all estimated parameters to compute a measure of fundamental city sizes. To derive this measure, we need to fully solve our model in general equilibrium. This requires a number of additional assumptions. First, we solve this model under the continuous limit of Eaton and Kortum (2002), i.e., we assume away the randomness due to finitely many shipments. Second, we assume perfect competition for simplicity, so that prices equal marginal costs.<sup>12</sup> With no arbitrage, the equilibrium price for commodity  $\omega$  in city  $j$  is the lowest cost among all possible sources,  $p_j(\omega) = \min_k \left\{ \delta^{-1/\theta} \text{Distance}_{kj}^{\zeta/\theta} c_k(\omega) \right\}$ . Third, we assume trade balance at the city level, so that total spending equals the amount paid to local factors,

$$X_i = \sum_k X_{ki} = w_i \text{Pop}_i, \quad (9)$$

where  $\text{Pop}_i$  is the size of city  $i$ 's population. The volume of trade from  $i$  to  $j$  is

$$X_{ij} = \frac{T_i w_i^{-\theta} \text{Distance}_{ij}^{-\theta} X_j}{\sum_k T_k w_k^{-\theta} \text{Distance}_{kj}^{-\theta}}. \quad (10)$$

It is simply equal to total expenditure in  $j$  multiplied by the probability of sourcing a good from origin  $i$ . This implies that the fraction of  $j$ 's imports originating from  $i$  in value,  $X_{ij} / \sum_{k \neq j} X_{kj}$ , is exactly equal to the fraction of shipments from  $i$ ,  $N_{ij} / \sum_{k \neq j} N_{kj}$ . This unique property of the Eaton and Kortum model allows us to estimate our trade model using data on counts of shipments

<sup>12</sup>Imperfect (Bertrand) competition as in Bernard et al. (2003) would give identical results, with all aggregate simply shifted by a multiplicative constant.

only. We use as our measure for the fundamental size of city  $i$  the counterfactual real value of its aggregate output if it were to move to complete autarky,<sup>13</sup>

$$Size_i \equiv \frac{w_i^{autarky} Pop_i}{P_i^{autarky}} \propto Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}, \quad (11)$$

with  $P_i^{autarky}$  the ideal price index in city  $i$  under autarky. This measure for city size is convenient because it only depends on exogenous parameters,  $Pop_i$  and  $T_i^{1/\theta}$ . If, for instance, trade frictions or the size of other cities were to change, this measure would remain invariant. This measure can be computed using our parameter estimates and an assumption for the trade elasticity  $\theta$  only,<sup>14</sup>

$$Size_i \propto Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta} \propto \hat{\alpha}_i^{1+1/\theta} \sum_k \widehat{Distance}_{ki}^{-\hat{\zeta}} \hat{\alpha}_k, \quad (12)$$

where we use  $\theta = 4$  from [Simonovska and Waugh \(2014\)](#). As the absolute level of sizes cannot be identified, we arbitrarily normalize  $Size_{Kaneš} \equiv 100$ , so city sizes are all relative to that of *Kaneš*. Equation (12) shows how to recover the fundamental size of a city, in a counterfactual autarky state, using only observable trade data. In this simple gravity setting, the term  $\hat{\alpha}_i^{1+1/\theta}$  corresponds to an exporter fixed effect, the propensity of a city to trade after controlling for distance. The extra term  $\sum_k \widehat{Distance}_{ki}^{-\hat{\zeta}} \hat{\alpha}_k$  adjusts for the endogenous response of factor prices in general equilibrium: if city  $i$  is either centrally located and/or located near large trading partners ( $\widehat{Distance}_{ki}$  small and/or  $\hat{\alpha}_k$  large for some  $k$ 's), it faces an upward pressure on the price of local fixed factors. This depresses its exports by eroding its competitiveness. In autarky, this depressing effect of trade on factor prices disappears. Equation (12) formally adjusts for this endogenous factor price response.

**Standard errors.** Robust (White) standard errors are computed analytically and account for heteroskedasticity and for the two-step nature of our estimation (PPML then NLLS). To gauge visually the precision of estimates for the location of lost cities, we draw maps with confidence regions around our point estimates. For each lost city  $l$ , we draw four contours such that the true location lies inside with respectively 50%, 75%, 90% and 99% probability. These elliptical contours are computed using analytical solutions for the iso-density curves of the estimated distribution of the geo-coordinates of lost city  $l$ ,  $\mathcal{N}(\hat{\beta}_l, \hat{\Sigma}_l)$  with mean  $\hat{\beta}'_l = (\hat{\varphi}_l, \hat{\lambda}_l)$  and covariance matrix  $\hat{\Sigma}_l$ . They

<sup>13</sup>For a derivation of (11), see [Eaton and Kortum \(2002\)](#), equation (15) on page 1756.

<sup>14</sup>See mathematical Appendix A for a formal derivation. To recover  $Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$  we need to know the trade elasticity parameter  $\theta$ . In the absence of consistent information on differences in commodity prices between Anatolian market places, our data does not allow us to directly estimate  $\theta$ . We therefore choose  $\theta = 4$  from the literature. Since the parameter  $\theta$  mostly affects the absolute scale of our estimates of city sizes, but not relative city sizes (in logs), this choice is of little consequence.

account not only for the precision of the latitude and longitude of city  $l$ , but also for the co-variance of those geo-coordinates.

We also compute a measure of the precision of our location estimates akin to a standard error,

$$precision(l) = \sqrt{\mathbb{E}_{(\varphi, \lambda) \sim \mathcal{N}(\hat{\beta}_l, \hat{\Sigma}_l)} \left[ \left( Distance(\hat{\varphi}_l, \hat{\lambda}_l; \varphi, \lambda) \right)^2 \right]}, \quad (13)$$

where  $Distance(\hat{\varphi}_l, \hat{\lambda}_l; \varphi, \lambda)$  is the distance between the estimated location for  $l$  and a location drawn from our estimated  $\mathcal{N}(\hat{\beta}_l, \hat{\Sigma}_l)$ . Heuristically, it means that our point estimates are within this distance,  $precision(l)$ , expressed in km, from the true location with probability 75%.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 The Lost Cities of the Bronze Age

We present our results for the distance elasticity of trade and the estimated location of lost cities, and we confront our results to historical evidence in section 3.1. To further gauge the plausibility of our estimates, we suggest a quantitative method to systematically use the qualitative information contained in our ancient texts to construct admissible regions for the lost cities in section 3.2. As a proof of concept, we fictitiously “lose” the location of some known cities, and compare their known locations to our recovered gravity estimates in section 3.3. Finally, we propose to use our gravity model to evaluate the validity of potential unnamed archaeological sites in section 3.4.

#### 3.1 Using Gravity to Recover the Location of Lost Cities

Table 2 presents the estimated geo-coordinates of lost cities, along with robust standard errors. Panel A of table 3 presents our estimates for the distance elasticity of trade,  $\zeta = 1.912$  with a standard error of 0.189. This suggests that the impact of distance on trade around 1880 BCE was surprisingly similar to what it is today, with modern elasticity estimates typically near unity (Disdier and Head, 2008; Chaney, 2018), and estimates for shipments transported by road above unity —see Cosar and Demir (2016) for a distance elasticity around 2 based on overland transit of exports from Turkish cities, almost equal to our ancient estimate.

Figures 3 and 4 show maps with our point estimates and confidence regions for each lost city separately. A “•” sign depicts the estimated location from our structural estimation (8), surrounded by contours representing the confidence area for that city. For most cities, our estimates are tight, in the sense that the confidence area is at most 100 km wide, and often much smaller. This visual message is confirmed by the measure of the precision of our estimated locations in panel B of table 3:

<sup>15</sup>See mathematical Appendix A for analytical formulas of standard errors, confidence regions,  $precision(l)$  and their derivations.

all but three of our measures of precision are smaller than 100 km (60 miles), and less than 50 km in four cases. This to be compared to the average distance of 223 km between known cities.

We add to those maps two other locations. The “▲ F” sign corresponds to the site suggested by historian Massimo Forlanini (Forlanini, 2008); the “▲ B” sign corresponds to the site suggested by historian Gojko Barjamovic (Barjamovic, 2011). Those historians base they proposals on a careful analysis of ancient texts, ancient itineraries, topographical studies, surviving toponyms, etc.<sup>16</sup> This comparison allows us to confront our estimates, obtained by a purely quantitative method—a structural gravity estimation, to those obtained by historians from a purely qualitative method. We consider this comparison to be an informal external validity test.

In five cases, *Durhumit*, *Kuburnat*, *Ninašša*, *Šinahuttum*, and *Wašhaniya*, our gravity estimates for the location of lost cities are close to the conjecture of at least one of the two historians (less than 70 km - 45 miles). In one case, *Ninašša*, our estimate favors the proposal made by Forlanini over that from Barjamovic. In two cases, *Durhumit* and *Wašhaniya*, our gravity estimates are remarkably close to the proposals made by Barjamovic (48 km and 13 km respectively), and favor Barjamovic over Forlanini. For *Šinahuttum*, both historians agree on the same location, and our estimate is extremely close (24 km). For *Kuburnat*, Forlanini and Barjamovic disagree by about 70 km, and our gravity estimate is about 70 km from both proposals. We view these cases where our structural gravity estimates are close to at least one historian’s proposal as an endorsement that the true locations of those cities are indeed at or very near those sites. As we do not use the historians conjectures as input in our estimation, those converging views are unlikely to be coincidental.

In the case of *Hahhum*, our estimate is not nearly as close to the historians’ proposals, but the distance between their proposal and our estimate is of the same order of magnitude as the precision of our point estimate (100 km distance versus 60 km precision). Our gravity estimate is shifted towards the North and West of their proposal. It lies in the Taurus mountain range, a rugged high altitude and snow covered area. As we do not impose our gravity estimates to be in hospitable locations, nothing prevents this from happening. Forlanini and Barjamovic on the other hand impose the realistic constraint that cities are in accessible and suitable places and draw in historical information about its location on the Euphrates River, which the gravity estimate ignores.

In the case of *Tuhpiya*, Forlanini’ and Barjamovic’s proposals are near each other, but our gravity estimate is far from theirs (130 and 110 km respectively). However, our estimate near the modern town of Sorgun-Yozgat (22 km) corresponds to an earlier proposal by Cornelius (1963).

Finally, in three cases, *Purušaddum*, *Šuppiluliyi* and *Zalpa*, our estimates are statistically too

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<sup>16</sup>We describe in Appendix B.2 a few of the steps those historians use to infer the likely location of lost cities.



imprecise to draw any definitive conclusion. For *Purušhaddum* and *Zalpa*, our estimates are also far from both historians' proposals. For *Šuppiluliyā*, our estimate is not very far from the historians' proposals (about 90 km from both), but it is so imprecise that we cannot draw any inference: the precision for *Šuppiluliyā* (90,000 km) is more than twice the circumference of the earth.

To conclude, we often find a remarkable agreement between our quantitative method for locating the lost cities of the Bronze Age and the qualitative method of historians using soft information. We view our results as plausible, with the exceptions of *Purušhaddum*, *Šuppiluliyā*, and *Zalpa*, which are imprecisely estimated. Furthermore, in the case of *Ninašša*, our gravity estimates favor the location proposed by Forlanini over this given by Barjamovic, while in the cases of *Durhumit* and *Wašhaniya*, they favor Barjamovic over Forlanini.

### 3.2 Gravity Estimates of Lost Cities versus Merchants' Itineraries

To further assess the validity of our gravity based estimates for the location of lost cities, we use the qualitative information in the tablets on detailed itineraries of merchants to define admissible regions for the location of lost cities. This methodology is a mathematical counterpart to the contextual analysis of merchant itineraries by historians (Barjamovic, 2011).

In order to construct those admissible regions, we extract from our corpus of texts systematic information describing the routes followed by merchants as they travel between multiple cities. A typical multi-stop itinerary, which documents travels between both known and lost cities is found in the following excerpt from tablet Kt 83/k 117:

*To the Port Authorities of Kaneš from your envoys and the Port Authorities of Wahšušana. We have heard the tablets that the Station(s) in Ulama and Šalatuwar have brought us, and we have sealed them and (hereby) convey them on to you. On the day we heard the tablets, we sent two messengers by way of Ulama and two messengers by way of Šalatuwar to Purušhaddum to clear the order. We will send you the earlier message that they brought us so as to keep you informed. The Secretary *Ikūn-pīya* is our messenger.*

[Tablet Kt 83/k 117 (Günbatti, 1998), lines 1-24]

That letter, sent to the Assyrian port authorities at *Kaneš* from its emissaries at the Assyrian port in *Wahšušana* describes how missives sent from *Wahšušana* to *Purušhaddum* will travel by two different routes, presumably during a conflict, so as to ensure safe arrival. The letter contains two itineraries: *Wahšušana* → *Ulama* → *Purušhaddum*, and *Wahšušana* → *Šalatuwar* → *Purušhaddum*. For both of these itineraries, two cities are known (*Wahšušana* and *Ulama* for the first, *Wahšušana*

and *Šalatuwār* for the second), and one is lost (*Purušhaddum*). These are two examples of the type  $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow X$  where city  $X$  is lost.

Using all such mentions of multi-stop itineraries, we impose two sets of constraints on the admissible location of lost cities: a set of “short detour” constraints, and a set of “pit stop” constraints.

The “short detour” constraint assumes that when deciding which itinerary to follow, merchants do not deviate too much from a direct route. For any segment of an itinerary with three stops  $A$ ,  $B$ , and  $C$ , involving at least one lost city, we assume that the intermediate stop does not represent too much of a detour compared to a direct trip without the intermediate stop. Formally we impose

$$\|AB\| + \|BC\| \leq (1 + \sigma) \|AC\|, \quad (\text{“short detour”})$$

where  $\|AB\|$  represents the duration, in hours, of the fastest route going from  $A$  to  $B$ .<sup>17</sup> This constraint means that going from  $A$  to  $C$  via  $B$  does not represent more than a  $\sigma\%$  detour compared to going straight from  $A$  to  $C$ .

The “pit stop” constraint assumes that caravans are required to make frequent stops, in order to rest, replenish supplies, feed their pack animals (donkeys were subjected to harsh treatments by their caravan leaders), and possibly do side trades. For any lost city  $X$ , we formally impose

$$\|AX\| \leq \|\text{average segment}\| + \pi \|\text{s.d. segment}\|, \quad (\text{“pit stop”})$$

where  $\|\text{average segment}\|$  is the duration, in hours, of the average segment between two known cities, and  $\|\text{s.d. segment}\|$  its standard deviation. This constraint means that any segment involving at least one lost city is no more than  $\pi$  standard deviations longer than the average known segment.

Figure 5 depicts a graphical example of how to construct such an admissible region by combining constraints from different itineraries. In this fictitious example, we consider one lost city  $X$ , which appears in two different itineraries,  $A \rightarrow X \rightarrow B$ , and  $C \rightarrow D \rightarrow X$ . The figure also shows how raising the parameters  $\sigma$  and  $\pi$  widens the size of the admissible region.

Those two sets of constraints, “short detour” and “pit stop”, seem reasonable. Historical evidence suggests that Assyrian merchants were indeed following close to optimal routes (Palmisano, 2013; Palmisano and Altaweel, 2015; Palmisano, 2017).

We systematically collect all mentions of multi-stop itineraries from our 12,000 texts. Jointly imposing the “Short detour” and “Pit stop” constraints corresponding to any mention of a lost city, we construct admissible regions for all lost cities. Appendix D provides further details.

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<sup>17</sup>To compute this measure of distance, we collect systematic information on elevation on a fine grid. We use Langmuir (1984) formula for calculating the time for a normal human being to travel between any two contiguous grid-points. We prevent crossing large impassable rivers except in a few locations (fording). We then use Dijkstra (1959) algorithm to compute the optimal travel route between any two grid-points. See Appendix C for details.

We present our results in a series of maps in figures 6 and 7. Each map depicts the admissible region for a given city, using the above procedure to code information from merchants’ itineraries, with parameters  $\sigma = 2.6$  for the “short detour” constraint and  $\pi = 1.3$  for the “pit stop” constraint. For comparison, we also show on the same map our point estimate and 90th percentile confidence region from estimating our gravity model (8), as well as the locations proposed by historians Forlanini (2008) and Barjamovic (2011).

Our gravity estimates for the location of lost cities all lie within their admissible regions,<sup>18</sup> and are therefore compatible with the qualitative information from merchants’ itineraries, with the exception of *Purušhaddum*. *Purušhaddum* was the main Assyrian market in Anatolia after *Kaneš*. It was located where the Assyrian zone of trade intersected with a regional network further to the west (Barjamovic, 2008; Erol, 2013), but its location remains debated (Forlanini, 2017, p.242f). Unfortunately, its peripheral position in the Assyrian network makes it difficult for the gravity model to suggest a location (see section 3.3 below), with large and imprecise confidence regions (figure 4A). The addition of the constraints imposed merchants’ itineraries suggests that the actual position is more likely to be sought in the overlap between the confidence region and the admissible region (the intersection of the solid line ellipse and the dashed line region on figure 7A). At the Southwest corner of the region of overlap is a possible candidate that has not yet been surveyed by archaeologists, Akşehir Karahöyük (Barjamovic, 2017, p.314).

As we never use the information contained in merchants’ itineraries to estimate our structural gravity model, we see this compatibility as an encouraging sign that our estimates are consistent with historians’ qualitative methodology. Our procedure for extracting information from ancient text in an automated and systematic manner is also complementary to that qualitative methodology.

### 3.3 Proof of Concept: What If We Fictitiously “Lose” Some Known Cities?

To evaluate our inverse-gravity method for estimating the coordinates of lost cities, we propose a proof of concept exercise: we fictitiously “lose” known cities, use our structural gravity model to recover their locations, and compare those to their true location.

We pick one known city at a time, and estimate its coordinates, as if it had been lost. We perform this exercise separately for each of the 15 known cities. Each time, we set the distance elasticity to our estimated  $\hat{\zeta} = 1.9$ , we fix the other known cities to their true location, and the

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<sup>18</sup>A few admissible sets are wide, and do not impose a strict constraint on the location of lost cities, e.g. *Tuhpiya*. The reason we cannot impose a stricter set of parameters is that in order to satisfy all constraints jointly, we are bound to have a relatively loose interpretation of our constraints. In practice, with stricter parameters, the admissible region for some lost cities would be empty sets, e.g. *Kuburnat*.

lost cities to their estimated location from table 2, but re-estimate all other parameters solving the same non-linear least squares problem as (8).

Figure 8 presents a subset of the results of our within-sample predictions.<sup>19</sup> Overall, our estimates are close to the true locations. More interestingly, while our estimates are imprecise for peripheral cities (for instance *Hurama*, *Šalatuwar*, *Ulama*, and *Wahšušana*, bottom panel of figure 8), they are very precise for centrally located cities (for instance *Hattuš*, *Hanaknak*, *Kaneš*, and *Šamuha*, top panel of figure figure 8). One exception is *Karahna*, a poorly estimated central city; the likely reason is that trade with *Karahna* was extremely limited and therefore its size (the second smallest of our 25 cities) and location are imprecisely estimated. Among the nine centrally located cities, the average distance between the true and estimated locations is 40 km (median 33 km), and often substantially lower (*Zimišhuna*=1 km, *Hattuš*=3 km, *Tapaggaš*=17 km, *Hanaknak*=19 km, *Kaneš*=33 km). We conclude from this exercise that our proposed inverse gravity estimation of the location of lost cities is reliable for central cities, but less precise for peripheral cities.

### 3.4 Using Gravity to Evaluate the Validity of Potential Archaeological Sites

Having estimated the parameters of a structural gravity model, we can in theory evaluate whether a given potential site is a good candidate for a given lost city. Our estimation delivers a probability distribution, over the two-dimensional geographic space, for the likely location of each lost city. For any potential site for lost city  $l$  with latitude  $\varphi$  and longitude  $\lambda$ ,  $\hat{f}_l(\varphi, \lambda)$  assigns a probability (density) that this is the true site for  $l$ ,

$$\hat{f}_l(\varphi, \lambda) = \frac{\exp\left(-\frac{1}{2(1-\hat{\rho}_{\varphi_l, \lambda_l}^2)} \left[ \frac{(\varphi-\hat{\varphi}_l)^2}{\hat{\sigma}_{\varphi_l}^2} + \frac{(\lambda-\hat{\lambda}_l)^2}{\hat{\sigma}_{\lambda_l}^2} - \frac{2\hat{\rho}_{\varphi_l, \lambda_l}(\varphi-\hat{\varphi}_l)(\lambda-\hat{\lambda}_l)}{\hat{\sigma}_{\varphi_l}\hat{\sigma}_{\lambda_l}} \right]\right)}{2\pi\hat{\sigma}_{\varphi_l}\hat{\sigma}_{\lambda_l}\sqrt{1-\hat{\rho}_{\varphi_l, \lambda_l}^2}}, \quad (14)$$

where the estimated geo-coordinates for city  $l$  ( $\hat{\varphi}_l, \hat{\lambda}_l$ ), and their estimated variances ( $\hat{\sigma}_{\varphi_l}^2, \hat{\sigma}_{\lambda_l}^2$ ) and correlation ( $\hat{\rho}_{\varphi_l, \lambda_l}$ ), are given in table 2. Of course, this formula only summarizes the best possible estimate for a given location according to our structural gravity model, and it should be complemented with additional historical and archaeological evidence.

We propose to apply formula (14) on a list of 87 unnamed archaeological sites in Anatolia, known to have been occupied during the Middle Bronze Age period when Assyrian merchants were active in Anatolia (those sites are tabulated in Barjamovic (2011), Appendix 2.1 and 2.2. on pp. 72-74).

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<sup>19</sup>Appendix table F.1 lists the geo-coordinates for all known city, both true and estimated, as well as the distances, in km, between the true and estimated locations. Appendix figures G.1 and G.2 present maps for all known cities, with their true and estimated locations.

This allows us to point to some of the strengths and limits of our quantitative method. For brevity, we focus our discussion here on two lost cities, *Durhumit* and *Wašhaniya*.<sup>20</sup>

The location of the city of *Durhumit* is controversial and has been the topic of intense debate among historians in recent years. The city was a central market of copper during the period of Assyrian trade and occurs >200 times in the trade records from *Kaneš*. It reappears in documentation of the Hittite state in the 14th-13th century BCE as a fortified imperial border province. Assyrian and Hittite sources seem to favor a location in different directions (Forlanini, 2008; M. and C., 2009; Barjamovic, 2011, p.261-265; Cammarosano and Marizza, 2015, p.180f; Kryszewski, 2016, p.343ff; Corti, 2017, p.232). Scholarly disagreement follows the same east-west axis as our structural gravity estimate, with its east-west confidence region (figure 3A). The analysis constrained by itineraries in turn seems to favor a central northern position of the city (figure 6A). Our gravity estimates ranks the unexcavated archaeological site of Ayvalpınar as the most likely candidate for *Durhumit*. An Assyrian seal carved in a workshop at *Kaneš* (Lassen, 2014, p.118) was found on the surface of the site in strong suggestion that it formed part of the Assyrian trade network, and it has previously been thought to belong to the region of *Durhumit* based on qualitative analyses of the data (Barjamovic, 2011, p.386; Dönmez, 2017, p.88). However, it is probably located too far south and inside the core area of the Hittite state to be the city itself. The second most likely candidate, near Oluz, has been under archaeological excavation since 2007 revealing an occupational hiatus between the Early Bronze Age and the period of the Hittite Empire (Dönmez, 2017). This effectively eliminates it as candidate site for *Durhumit*. The third candidate (Ferzant) is not an urban site but a cemetery. The fourth candidate (Doğantepe) is a large site that has not been subject to systematic excavation. It is a viable candidate for *Durhumit*, although there may be other, possibly better proposals (Dönmez, 2017; Corti, 2017, p.222).

The city of *Wašhaniya* is known to have been located as the first major stop on a route leading west from *Kaneš* to *Wahšušana*. The gravity estimate corresponds fairly well to the conjecture proposed by historians (Forlanini, 2008; Barjamovic, 2011). The most likely candidate is Yassihöyük, which has come under excavation within the last decade and revealed findings dated to the period of Assyrian trade (Omura, 2016). Excavations at a number of sites located along the historically important route leading southeast from Yassihöyük to Kayseri have revealed remains from the period (Weeden and Matsumura, 2017, p.108), including Suluca, Zank and Topaklı on the list of likely candidates. The site of Kırşehir Kalehöyük is also located close to the predicted location of

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<sup>20</sup>The full set of results are presented on Appendix Table F.2. For each lost city  $l$ , the table lists the five most likely unnamed archaeological sites, along with their distance from our gravity estimate for the location of  $l$ , and the (logged) probability density that this is the correct site according to (14).

our gravity model, but does not figure on the list of candidates because it lacks clear remains dated to the Bronze Age. The main mound now has the Alaaddin Mosque (built 1230 CE) and a high school built on it (Adibelli, 2013). Dense later occupation of its surroundings makes it difficult to ascertain whether the city was occupied during the period of Assyrian trade.

We draw two lessons from this analysis. First, our structural gravity model should prove useful in selecting the most likely among a list of candidate archaeological sites to locate lost cities, but this selection ought to always be complemented by historical evidence. Second, it is likely that any list of candidate archaeological sites will be incomplete, as important ancient cities may lay buried under modern settlements, inaccessible to archaeologists, and may never be found.

## 4 Persistence and Determinants of City Sizes

We now turn to a systematic discussion of our estimates of ancient city sizes, and of the long-run determinants of the city size distribution. With no reliable historical or archaeological evidence on the size of those ancient cities to use as external validity, we confront instead our estimates of ancient city sizes to measures from the modern data,<sup>21</sup> explore the geographic and topographic determinants of city sizes, and characterize the structure of the city size distribution.

### 4.1 City Size Estimates

Our estimates of the fundamental size of ancient cities ( $Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$ ) are presented in panels B and C of table 3. Our estimates do not achieve the level of statistical significance typical of modern econometric estimations. This is to be expected given the sparsity of our four millennia old data.

We should also note that there does not seem to be any systematic bias for larger cities to be more or less likely to have been unambiguously located by historians.<sup>22</sup> We offer a potential rationale for this finding below. We provide evidence that city sizes are persistent, so that large ancient cities tend to be located at or near large modern cities. As archaeologists are rarely able to survey and excavate densely populated urban areas, this suggests that at least some large ancient cities may never be discovered, as they lay buried underneath modern cities.

### 4.2 The Distribution of City Sizes over Four Millenia

In order to confront our ancient size estimates to modern size measures, we match the locations of ancient sites with corresponding modern urban settlements. We then project two alternative

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<sup>21</sup>See appendix B.3 for details on modern data sources.

<sup>22</sup>A Welch's t-test of equality between the sizes of known and lost cities gives a  $p$ -value of 0.29.

measures of modern city sizes on our ancient size estimates and a control for geographic amenities.

We drop one outlier from our sample, *Purušhaddum*, which is matched with the modern city of Ankara. A minor provincial town at the turn of the 20th century, Ankara was chosen as the capital of Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. As a result, it rapidly grew to be the second largest city of the country. It is therefore now much larger than any other city in our sample, primarily due to the idiosyncratic positive effect of assuming a political role in recent history.<sup>23</sup>

Our first measure of modern size,  $Population_i$ , measures the total urban population living within 20 km of ancient city  $i$ .<sup>24</sup> We use the 2012 urban population of districts (LAU-1 level, which are subdivisions of NUTS-3 level Turkish provinces). Our second measure,  $NightLight_i$ , is the total nighttime luminosity of the area within 20 km of ancient city  $i$ . In the absence of modern city-level income data, nighttime luminosity is a strong correlate of local incomes (Hodler and Raschky, 2014).

Table 4 presents the results from the estimation of various specifications of

$$\ln(Size_i|_{modern}) = a + b \cdot \ln\left(Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}|_{ancient}\right) + c \cdot \ln(CropYield_i) + u_i, \quad (15)$$

where  $Size_i|_{modern}$  is either population or night lights depending on specification.  $CropYield_i$ , a measure of agricultural suitability around  $i$ , controls for local amenities.<sup>25</sup>

Columns 1 and 4 of table 4 show the results of simple specifications without any geographic controls for each measure of modern size, population and night lights. These results are also plotted in the two panels of figure 9. The correlation between ancient and modern sizes is high, 0.38 for both measures of modern size. This surprising level of persistence in city sizes from the the 20th century BCE to the 21st century CE is robust to controlling for modern local crop yields (columns 3 and 6), while crop yields are not statistically significant on their own (columns 2 and 5).

The strong and robust correlation of city sizes over four millennia is unlikely to be a mere coincidence. While this gives us confidence that our estimates for ancient city sizes are plausible, it also begets the question of how one can explain this surprising persistence of the city size distribution?

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<sup>23</sup>We note the role of Ancyra as a Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman provincial center of varying importance, but nothing in history warrants its extreme current size based on political events in the 20th century CE.

<sup>24</sup>For lost cities, we use our own estimates from section 3.1. For two ancient cities, Tuhpiya and Samuha, there are no modern-day urban population centers within 20 kms of their coordinates. We winsorize their populations to the smallest population within the sample. The results are robust to dropping them and estimating with a sample of 22 cities. The results are also robust to using Barjamovic (2011) instead of our gravity estimates for the location of lost cities, to restricting the sample to known cities only, or to using alternative procedures for matching ancient and modern towns. See appendix table F.3 for those robustness checks.

<sup>25</sup>To construct  $CropYield_i$ , we use the low-input level rain-fed cereal suitability index of IIASA/FAO (2012). We average this measure within an area of 20 km radius around the coordinates of ancient city  $i$ . In unreported regressions, we also experimented with other geographic controls: elevation, distance to the nearest river, and distance to modern mineral deposits of gold, silver and copper. None of those controls were significant, nor were their estimated impact on modern sizes robust. We therefore exclude those controls from our regression.

Over the course of history, sufficiently many large shocks would have reset any initial advantage of a particular site, with a series of states rising and collapsing, radical changes in institutions and political boundaries, migrations and shifts in population for the region, climate change, large earthquakes, the rise and fall of religions, etc. In the remainder of this section, we test in detail two alternative hypotheses to explain this persistence: time-invariant local amenities, versus the advantageous location as a natural trading hub conferred by the topography of the land.

### 4.3 Determinants of City Sizes: the Road-knot Hypothesis

To probe the determinants of the persistence of city sizes, we project our ancient size estimate ( $Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$ ) on two geographic observables: terrain ruggedness, a local measure of the defensive advantage of a site,<sup>26</sup> and a measure of ‘global’ advantage.

Our concept of ‘global’ advantage is novel: we define, for each site, a measure of its proximity to intersections of roadways. In developing this measure, we build upon the early work of Ramsay (1890), who proposed a topographical approach to the study of the historical geography of the region. Based on his reading of early Greek and Roman authors and his own exploratory travels in Asia Minor, Ramsay suggested that key to understanding urban geography in the classical antiquity is the realization that only a limited number of routes cross the area as dictated by the topography. He observed that the zones where such routes intersect formed what he called “road-knots,” which tend to predict the location of major urban centers throughout history, in spite of a number of major political and social upsets. The exact position of the settlement within the zone of intersection could vary from period to period, but would remain in its immediate vicinity. Ramsay’s basic hypothesis, that the existence of road-knots may be causally related to the presence of major administrative and trading centers, was further elaborated and advanced by French (1993).<sup>27</sup>

The location of ancient *Kaneš* is a case in point: it is located at the northwestern end of Taurus crossings connecting the central Anatolian plateau to the upper Mesopotamian plain. The main settlement in the Bronze and parts of the Iron Age was at *Kaneš* itself, but in late Hellenistic times it moved to its current location, the regional capital of Kayseri 20 km to the west. Several other

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<sup>26</sup>In unreported regressions, we experimented with alternative measures of local amenities: crop yield, elevation, distance to the nearest river, and distance to the nearest known copper deposit documented in the Early Bronze Age, using for this measure the list of Anatolian mines known at the time, compiled in Massa (2016). As none of those measures were either significant or robust, we exclude them from our regressions.

<sup>27</sup>A similar analysis by Cronon (2009) emphasizes Chicago’s location at the intersection point of overland and water transportation routes as a key factor in its growth. For topographical and historical determinants of city sizes, see also Bleakley and Lin (2012) for mid-Atlantic and southern U.S. cities that were once portage sites, and Michaels and Rauch (2016) for modern French cities originating from ancient Roman towns. Dalgaard et al. (2018) find that the density of two-millennia old Roman roads is correlated with the current road network and contemporary economic activity in Europe.



large ancient and corresponding modern cities, such as *Hurama*-Karahöyük/Elbistan, *Mamma-Kale*/Maraş, and *Samuha*-Kayalıpınar/Sivas, are also placed on road-knots (Barjamovic, 2011).

For our first measure,  $RomanRoads_i$ , we locate the intersections of roads from detailed maps of the Roman transportation network in Anatolia (French, 2016), and record the number of roads radiating from each intersection (3 for a T-crossing, 4 for an X-crossing etc). The variable  $RomanRoads_i$  assigns the number of Roman roads intersecting at points within 20 km of city  $i$ , which varies between 2 and 5.<sup>28</sup> While capturing the location of cities vis-a-vis the actual historical road network, this measure has two shortcomings. First, there is about a two thousand years gap between the Middle Bronze Age and the Roman period. This concern is partially alleviated by the fact that Roman roads themselves follow older trails (Ramsay, 1890; French, 1993). The other shortcoming concerns the potential endogeneity of the road network itself: it is plausible that roads endogenously connect large cities, so that large cities “cause” roads, rather than the reverse.

Our second measure,  $NaturalRoads_i$ , is immune to this reverse causality concern. We use detailed data on the topography of the entire region surrounding Anatolia and implement Langmuir (1984)’s formula to compute travel times for a normal human being walking on a rugged terrain. We complement this formula by collecting information on impassable rivers and river crossings (fords), and allow for maritime travel near the coast. We use Dijkstra (1959)’s algorithm to compute the optimal route between any two points (see appendices C and E for details). Our approach in defining natural routes finds support in Palmisano (2013), Palmisano and Altaweel (2015) and Palmisano (2017), who argue that ancient routes followed least-effort paths closely. Armed with this measure of optimal travel routes, we consider a very large number of routes between origin-destination pairs. We weight each route of duration  $d$  by a weight proportional to  $d^{-\zeta}$  using our estimated ancient distance elasticity of trade  $\zeta = 1.9$ , and record all intersections or overlaps of those routes. This measure corresponds to the notion of betweenness centrality in the network of optimal routes. Implicitly, we are assuming in the background that a gravity model with distance elasticity  $\zeta = 1.9$  governs the movement of a population uniformly distributed over space. We define a road-knot score equal to the number of intersections or overlaps for each location. Our variable  $NaturalRoads_i$  is the simple average of this road-knot score within 20 km of city  $i$ . In essence, it measures the propensity of a given site to be connected to a natural routes network. This measure

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<sup>28</sup>We use 20 km as a benchmark for the natural drift of city locations over time. As explained above, 20 km is the distance between the modern city of Kayseri and ancient *Kaneš*. French (1993) describes another instance in which a modern city, Aksaray, is 18 km away from the ancient site of Acemhöyük due to local relocations of towns throughout history. If there is no intersection within 20 km, a city assumes a score of 2 since each city is necessarily on a road itself. 16 out of 25 cities have a road score of 2. Two cities, *Kaneš* and *Ulama*, have road scores of 5.

is arguably time invariant as it uses topographical data as input only.

Figure 11 shows a heat map of our road-knot scores for Turkey and the surrounding region. Major modern urban settlements and transportation arteries, not included on this map, overlap with our road measure, although neither were used as input.

Table 5 presents the results from the estimation of various specifications of

$$\ln\left(\text{Pop}_i T_i^{1/\theta} \Big|_{\text{ancient}}\right) = d + e \cdot \ln(\text{Ruggedness}_i) + f \cdot \ln(\text{Roads}_i) + v_i. \quad (16)$$

In columns 3, 4, and 5, we control for  $\text{Ruggedness}_i$ , a measure of how rugged the terrain is around  $i$  (Riley et al., 1999).  $\text{Roads}_i$  corresponds either to the number of roman roads intersecting near city  $i$ ,  $\text{RomanRoads}_i$ , in columns 2 and 5, or to the number of natural paths intersecting or overlapping near city  $i$ ,  $\text{NaturalRoads}_i$ , in columns 1 and 4.

Table 5 presents robust and significant evidence in support of the road-knot hypothesis. Cities located near the intersection of many routes, tend to be systematically larger. While the  $\text{RomanRoad}$  variable has a positive but non significant effect (columns 2 and 5), our a priori measure of the connectedness of a city to the natural road network,  $\text{NaturalRoad}$ , is strongly significant, with a  $p$ -value below 0.015 both on it own in column 1, and when controlling for  $\text{Ruggedness}$  in column 4. Our natural road score accounts for more than a fifth (22%) of the variation of ancient city sizes.<sup>29</sup> Figure 10 presents visual evidence of this strong correlation, and shows it is not driven by outliers.

Two observations are in order. First, our method explains which among the existing ancient cities are large, which are small. We do not attempt to explain *where* cities are located, only how large they are given their location. Second, our measure of connectedness to the natural road network,  $\text{NaturalRoads}$ , is particularly relevant in this central part of modern Turkey, a high plateau with many smaller mountains. Had we applied our method on a flat plain, such as lower Mesopotamia, Eastern China, Northwestern Europe, or the U.S. Midwest, the topography would presumably have offered less guidance on natural road access of a particular location, and access to waterways might play a larger role. Anatolia, with its clearly defined mountain ranges and valleys, is a particularly well suited laboratory to test the road-knot hypothesis.

$\text{Ruggedness}$ , is also correlated with our estimates of ancient city sizes, accounting for 17% of the variation in column 3 of table 5, and it remains significant when we control for road-knots (columns 4 and 5). It suggests that the defensive value of a site contributed to the emergence of larger cities. Among all measures of local amenities,  $\text{Ruggedness}$  is the only variable that is significantly

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<sup>29</sup>The results are robust to using the locations proposed by Barjamovic (2011) instead of using our estimated locations for lost cities, and to restricting the sample to known cities only. See appendix table F.4.

correlated with city size. Crop yield, elevation, distance to the nearest river, and distance to mineral deposits exploited in the Early Bronze Age are all either insignificant, or driven by outliers.

To recap, along with ruggedness, the proximity of a city to natural roads is a time-invariant attribute that can account for the persistence of city sizes. Topography dictates the path followed by optimal roads, today and in the past. Access to this natural road network confers an economic advantage which can explain the emergence and sustainability of large urban centers.

#### 4.4 Did Zipf’s Law for Cities hold Four Millenia Ago?

In the absence of any reliable historical evidence on the population sizes of ancient cities, can we use our structural gravity model to evaluate whether the distribution of ancient cities was governed by Zipf’s law? Formally, our structural estimates of city sizes do not inform us directly about population sizes, as they confound population and efficiency,  $Size_i \propto Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$ . We can however use our findings in the previous section 4.2 to get suggestive evidence on the distribution of population sizes. Our regression of modern population sizes,  $\ln(Population_i|_{modern})$ , on our structural measure of ancient city sizes,  $\ln(Size_i|_{ancient})$ , suggests a correspondence between structural size and population:  $\ln(Population) \approx constant + 0.23 \ln(Size)$  (see column 1 in table 4). Using this correspondence naively, we can then test whether the distribution of ancient population sizes follows Zipf’s law, applying the methodology suggested by [Gabaix and Ibragimov \(2011\)](#), by estimating

$$\ln(Rank_i - 1/2) = g - h \cdot \ln(Population_i) + w_i, \tag{17}$$

where  $Rank_i$  is city  $i$ ’s population rank, starting from the largest city, and  $h$  is the Zipf exponent.

Figure 12 presents the results of estimating (17). The data suggests that the distribution of city population sizes in the Bronze Age is very well approximated by Zipf’s law, with a Zipf exponent of  $h = 1.08$  (robust *s.e.* = 0.211 and  $R^2 = 0.719$ ), very close to modern estimates—[Rosen and Resnick \(1980\)](#) find an average Zipf exponent of 1.13 for 44 countries in 1970. This finding would suggest that Zipf’s law is a stable empirical regularity over four millenia. It should of course be interpreted with due caution, as we have no direct evidence on actual population sizes, and rely instead on trade data and a structural gravity model to infer city sizes in the Bronze Age. It is however an intriguing finding, worthy of further investigations.

## 5 Structural versus Naive Gravity

We conclude with a brief comparison between our structural gravity approach and a ‘naive’ gravity similar to [Tobler and Wineburg \(1971\)](#). In order to provide a meaningful comparison, we use the

most up to date data from the corpus of ancient texts from Assyrian merchants available today, but perform a similar estimation to theirs. First, we define an undirected measure of interactions between cities  $i$  and  $j$  by counting the number of tablets where cities  $i$  and  $j$  are jointly mentioned,  $I_{ij}$  in their notation. Second, we impose that city sizes,  $P_i$  in their notation, are simply proportional to the total number of mentions of city  $i$  in our ancient texts,  $P_i = \sum_{j \neq i} I_{ij}$ . Finally, we postulate a ‘naive’ gravity structure linking sizes and distances to interactions,

$$I_{ij} = k \cdot \frac{P_i P_j}{Distance_{ij}^2} \Leftrightarrow \frac{P_i P_j}{I_{ij}} = \beta \left( (\varphi_i - \varphi_j)^2 + \cos^2 \left( \frac{37.9}{180} \pi \right) (\lambda_i - \lambda_j)^2 \right),$$

where  $\beta$  is a simple multiplicative constant, and the  $\varphi$ ’s are the latitudes and the  $\lambda$ ’s the longitudes of cities  $i$  and  $j$ . Collecting  $\beta$  and all the geo-coordinates of lost cities in the vector  $\theta = (\beta, (\varphi_{K+1}, \lambda_{K+1}), \dots, (\varphi_{K+L}, \lambda_{K+L}))$ , we estimate this model by non linear least squares,

$$\theta = \arg \min_{\theta} \sum_j \sum_{i \neq j} \left( \frac{P_i P_j}{I_{ij}} - \beta \left( (\varphi_i - \varphi_j)^2 + \cos^2 \left( \frac{37.9}{180} \pi \right) (\lambda_i - \lambda_j)^2 \right) \right)^2. \quad (18)$$

We then compare our results using structural versus naive estimates.<sup>30</sup>

First, the estimated locations of lost cities from both models are far apart—123.3 km on average. So the modeling choices, structural versus naive gravity, have a substantial impact on our estimates. Our structural estimates are also substantially closer to the proposals from historian [Barjamovic \(2011\)](#)—87.1 km on average, than the naive estimates—154.4 km on average. Our structural gravity model seems better at identifying the location of lost cities than a simpler naive gravity model.

Second, our structural city-size estimates are only weakly correlated with the naive size measure, the total mentions of a city: the correlation between  $\ln(Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta})$  and  $\ln(P_i)$  is 0.4, significant at the 5% level. Identifying actual shipments from ancient texts, controlling for distance, and correcting for general equilibrium forces does have a sizable impact on city size estimates. Moreover, our structural estimates for city sizes are significantly related to modern city sizes, while naive estimates are not. For instance, using size estimates from naive gravity in the estimating equation (15) to test for the persistence of economic activity over 4000 years gives an insignificant coefficient of logged modern population on logged ancient size (0.313 with a  $p$ -value of 0.376 to be compared to 0.230 with a  $p$ -value of 0.035 for our structural estimate), and a poor fit ( $R^2 = 0.035$  to be compared to  $R^2 = 0.145$  for our structural estimate). Our structural estimates for size are also significantly related to measures of access to natural roads, both for all cities together, and for the subset of lost cities only. Naive size estimates are related to access to natural roads only when considering all

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<sup>30</sup>Further details of this comparison are presented in Appendix F, table F.5 for comparing location of lost cities estimates, and table F.6 for comparing city size estimates.

cities, but not when looking at the subset of lost cities only. Our structural estimates for city sizes seem more plausible than naive estimates.

To recap, identifying meaningful trade relationships between ancient cities rather than using a simpler automated search for joint attestations of city names, and estimating a structural gravity model rather than a naive one, delivers not only different, but also more reliable estimates for the location of lost cities and the sizes of all ancient cities.

## Conclusion

Business documents dating back to the Bronze Age—inscribed on clay tablets and unearthed from ancient sites in Anatolia—give us a window to analyze economic interactions between Assyrian merchants and Anatolian cities 4000 years ago. The data allows us to construct a measure for trade between ancient cities and estimate a structural gravity model. Two main results emerge.

First, more cities are named in ancient texts than can be located unambiguously by archaeological and historical evidence. Assyriologists develop proposals on potential sites based on qualitative evidence (Forlanini, 2008; Barjamovic, 2011). In a rare example of collaboration across disciplines, we use a theory-based quantitative method from economics to inform this quest in the field of history. The structural gravity model delivers estimates for the coordinates of the lost cities. For a majority of cases, our quantitative estimates are remarkably close to qualitative proposals made by historians. In some cases where historians disagree on the likely site of lost cities, our quantitative method supports the suggestions of some historians and rejects that of others.

Second, we analyze the correlation between the estimated economic size of ancient cities and their time-invariant geographic attributes, as well as their future economic outcomes. Despite a gap of 4000 years, we find that ancient economic size predicts the income and population of corresponding regions in present-day Turkey. We argue that the persistence of cities' fortunes in the very long run can best be explained by their position in the network of natural trade routes, as proposed by Ramsay (1890). While access to mineral deposits may have played a role in the early emergence of some cities, such as the mines in the Early Bronze Age near *Kaneš* and *Durhumit* (Massa, 2016), it seems that key to the emergence and persistence of the urban network in Anatolia is the ability of cities to access natural routes, and integrate into the broader trading network. We hope to further explore this hypothesis in other historical settings and regions in future research.

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## Tables

Table 1: **Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max	Observations
Known cities					15
Lost cities					10
Number of unique tablets					198
Number of itineraries					227
Number of travels					391
$N_{ij}^{data}$ (all $i \rightarrow j$ pairs for $i \neq j$ )	0.63	2.29	0	23	600
$N_{ij}^{data} > 0$ only	3.33	4.31	1	23	114
$Distance_{ij}$ in km ( $i$ and $j$ known)	223	113	17	576	105

*Notes:* The ancient data comes from a textual analysis of clay tablets inscribed in the cuneiform script, written by Assyrian merchants in the 2nd millennium BCE. Most texts are digitized and will be available as tagged and searchable files through the OARE-project, currently being built as part of the Neubauer Project.

Table 2: **Lost Cities' Geo-coordinates**

	Latitude	(s.e.)	Longitude	(s.e.)	Correlation
Durhumit	40.47	(0.025)	35.65	(0.445)	-0.952
Hahhum	38.429	(0.274)	38.04	(0.517)	0.68
Kuburnat	40.712	(0.582)	36.52	(0.512)	-0.06
Ninassa	38.977	(0.778)	34.614	(0.482)	0.86
Purushaddum	39.71	(1.54)	32.872	(0.669)	0.774
Sinahuttum	39.956	(0.333)	34.866	(0.165)	0.863
Suppiluliyia	40.021	(1022.82)	34.618	(58.796)	1.0
Tuhpiya	39.611	(0.18)	35.199	(0.307)	0.528
Washaniya	39.157	(0.219)	34.311	(0.265)	-0.01
Zalpa	38.805	(0.648)	37.862	(1.199)	0.878

*Notes:* This table presents the estimated geo-coordinates, latitudes and longitudes, from solving our structural gravity model (8). All latitudes are North, and all longitudes are East. Robust (White) standard errors are in parentheses, as well as the estimated correlation between latitude and longitude.

Table 3: Gravity Estimation Results

<i>Panel A: Distance elasticity and statistics</i>							
$\zeta$ (dist. elast.)	1.912						
	(0.189)						
Observations	600						
<i>Panel B: Sizes and locations of lost cities</i>							
	$Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$	(s.e.)	Precision	Distance to historians' proposals, in km			
				Forlanini	(s.e.)	Barjamovic	(s.e.)
Durhumit	0.174	(0.409)	49	220	(46)	48	(26)
Hahhum	64.556	(85.929)	62	102	(27)	102	(27)
Kuburnat	11.22	(24.316)	76	72	(46)	70	(41)
Ninassa	0.21	(0.45)	87	71	(47)	93	(49)
Purushaddum	0.076	(0.1)	154	168	(75)	193	(112)
Sinahuttum	1.515	(2.021)	34	24	(20)	24	(20)
Suppiluliyā	0.012	(5.246)	89914	89	(54307)	85	(54240)
Tuhpiya	0.579	(0.912)	38	128	(35)	112	(33)
Washaniya	5.413	(6.462)	35	68	(25)	13	(19)
Zalpa	28.695	(60.689)	145	103	(75)	131	(70)
<i>Panel C: Sizes of known cities</i>							
	$Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$	(s.e.)					
Hanaknak	2.062	(3.679)					
Hattus	2.967	(4.183)					
Hurama	5.091	(9.564)					
Kanes	100.0	(70.902)					
Karahna	0.008	(0.084)					
Malitta	0.057	(0.096)					
Mamma	114.683	(189.19)					
Salatuwar	1.513	(4.836)					
Samuha	3.508	(4.847)					
Tapaggas	0.091	(0.218)					
Timelkiya	101.922	(129.238)					
Ulama	0.099	(0.498)					
Unipsum	44.294	(64.469)					
Wahsusana	1.416	(3.53)					
Zimishuna	0.0	(0.001)					

*Notes:* This table presents the results from estimating our structural gravity model from equations (6), (8) and (12) using directional data,  $N_{ij}^{data}$ . Our measure of fundamental city size,  $Pop_i T_i^{1/\theta}$ , defined in (11), is the counterfactual real output of city  $i$  if it were to move to complete autarky. Precision, measured in km, is defined in (13). Distance to historians' proposals measures the distance, in km between our point estimate and the conjecture by historians Forlanini (2008) and Barjamovic (2011). Robust (White) standard errors in parentheses.

Table 4: Persistence of Economic Activity across 4000 Years

	log( <i>Population</i> )			log( <i>NightLights</i> )		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
log( $PopT^{1/\theta} _{ancient}$ )	0.230** (0.035)		0.297** (0.015)	0.124** (0.036)		0.178*** (0.008)
log( <i>CropYield</i> )		0.727 (0.507)	1.781* (0.079)		0.777 (0.143)	1.407*** (0.003)
<i>N</i>	24	24	24	24	24	24
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.145	0.015	0.226	0.143	0.059	0.312

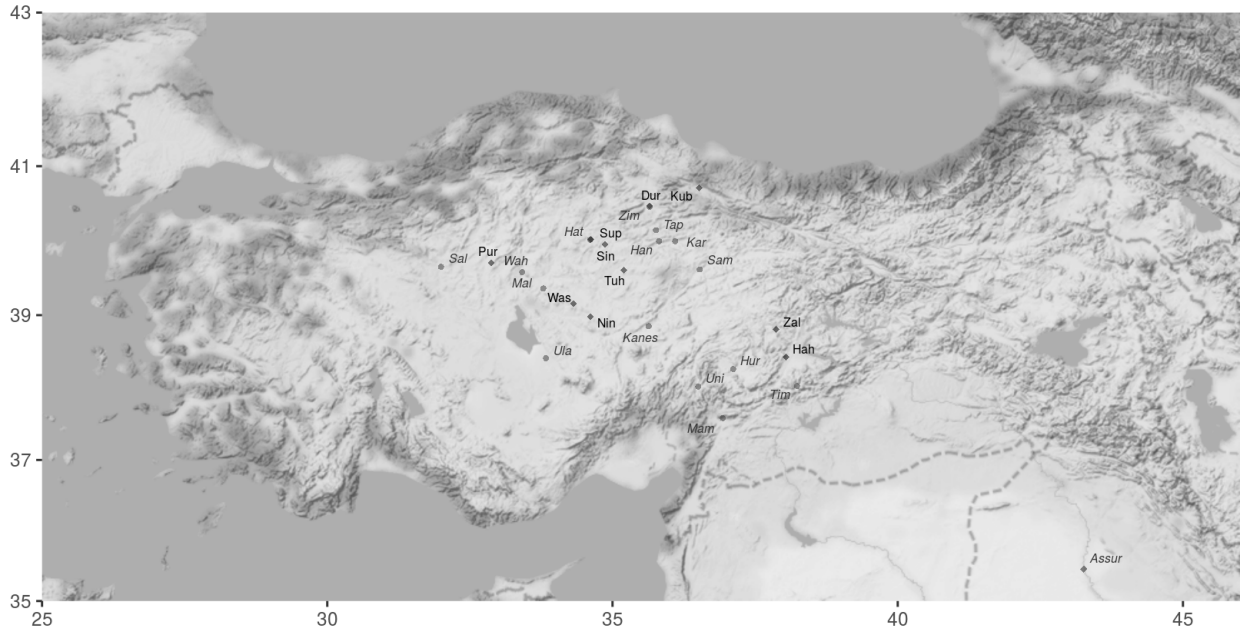
*Notes:* This table presents the estimation from various specifications of (15). Each observation is an ancient city after dropping *Purušhaddum-Ankara* from the sample. Dependent variables are modern-day size measures: *Population* and *NightLights* are total urban population and night luminosity within 20 km of the ancient city, respectively. Explanatory variables are  $PopT^{1/\theta}|_{ancient}$ , the ancient city size estimate and *CropYield*, the average rain-fed low-input cereal suitability index of the area within 20 km of the ancient city. In unreported regressions, we also experimented with other geographic controls (elevation, distance to the nearest river, and distance to modern mineral deposits of gold, silver and copper), but none of those measures were either significant or robust. Robust *p*-values are in parentheses.

Table 5: Determinants of Ancient City Sizes

	log( $PopT^{1/\theta} _{ancient}$ )				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
log( <i>NaturalRoads</i> )	1.404** (0.013)			1.783*** (0.002)	
log( <i>RomanRoads</i> )		1.990 (0.378)			2.387 (0.220)
log( <i>Ruggedness</i> )			2.371** (0.012)	3.189*** (0.000)	2.495*** (0.003)
<i>N</i>	25	25	25	25	25
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.224	0.038	0.166	0.508	0.220

*Notes:* This table presents the estimation from various specifications of (16). Each observation is an ancient city. The dependent variable  $PopT^{1/\theta}|_{ancient}$  is the ancient city size estimate. Explanatory variables start with *Ruggedness*, the Terrain Ruggedness Index (Riley et al., 1999). *RomanRoads* is the number of Roman roads radiating from an intersection within 20 km of the ancient city (French, 2016). *NaturalRoads* is the natural road score of the area within 20 km of the ancient city as defined in subsection 4.3. In unreported regressions, we experimented with alternative measures of local amenities (elevation, crop yield, distance to the nearest river, and distance to the nearest known copper, gold or silver deposit documented in the Early Bronze Age), but none of those measures were either significant or robust. Robust *p*-values are in parentheses.

Panel A: Known and Lost Cities



Panel B: Ancient Trade Network

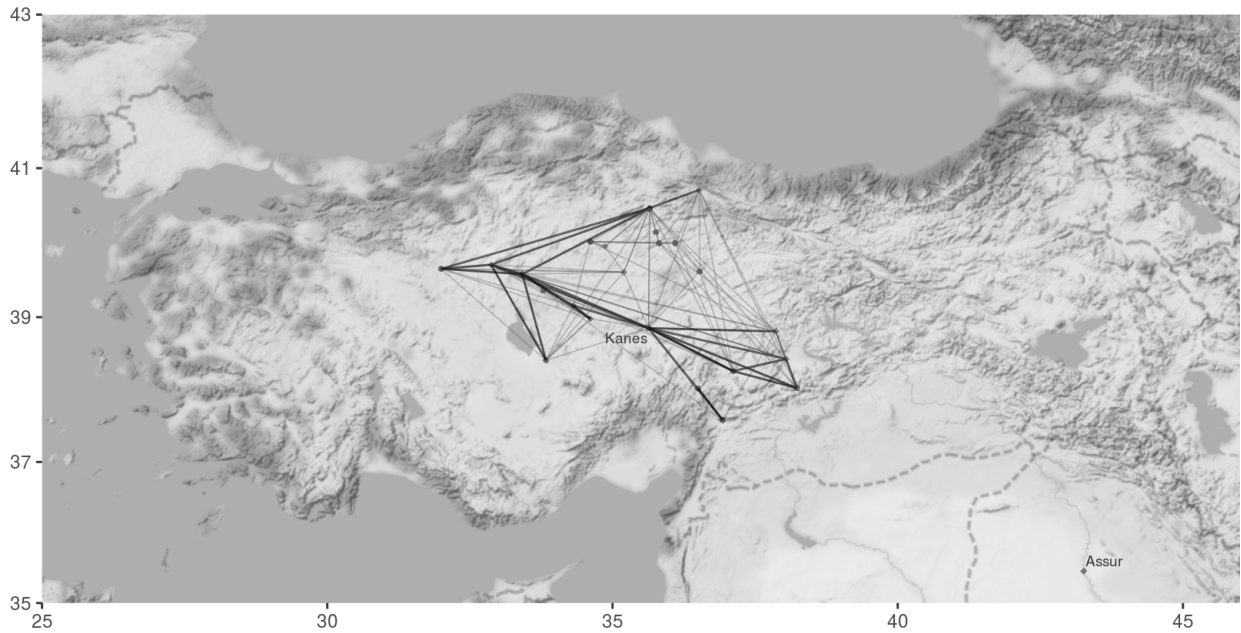
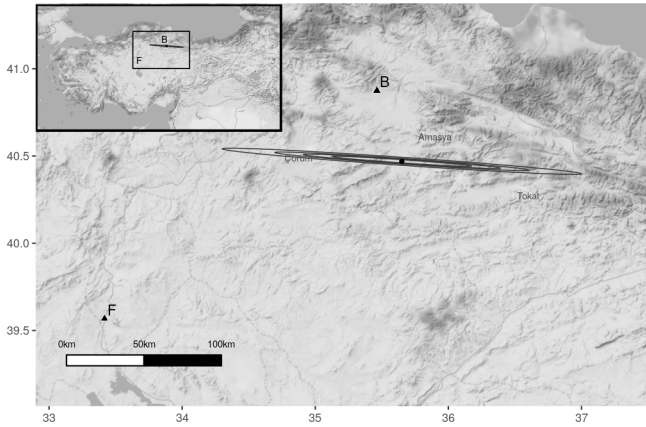


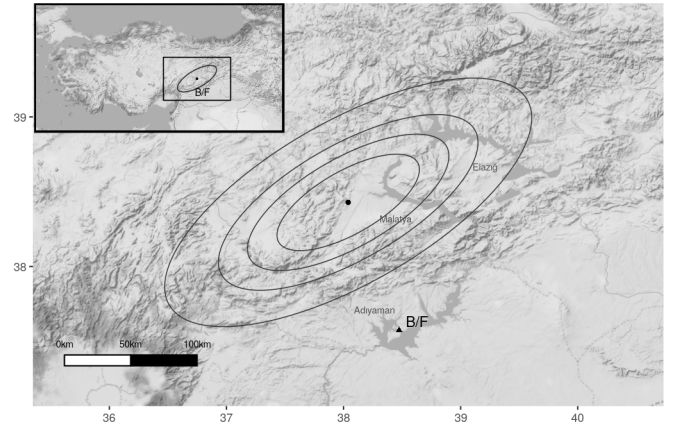
Figure 2: Cities and Trade in Anatolia in the Bronze Age.

Notes: Panel A shows a map with the locations cities of under analysis plus *Aššur*. Known cities are in grey (*Hanknak*, *Hattuš*, *Hurama*, *Kaneš*, *Karahna*, *Malitta*, *Mamma*, *Šalatuwar*, *Šamuha*, *Tapaggaš*, *Timelkiya*, *Ulama*, *Unipsum*, *Wahšušana*, *Zimišhuna*), and lost cities are in black (*Durhumit*, *Hahhum*, *Kuburnat*, *Ninašša*, *Purušhaddum*, *Šinahuttum*, *Šuppiluliyi*, *Tuhpiya*, *Wašhaniya*, *Zalpa*), where their locations are estimating from solving (8). Panel B represents graphically the trade network among Anatolian cities. Thin lines indicate  $0 < N_{ij}^{data} \leq 3$ , and thick lines  $N_{ij}^{data} > 3$ .

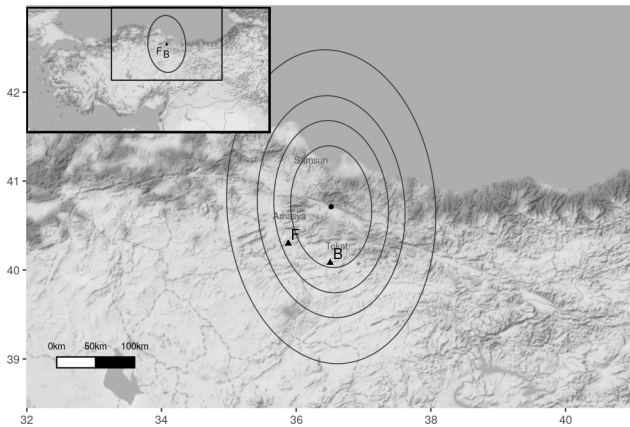
Panel A: *Durhumit*



Panel B: *Hahhum*



Panel C: *Kuburnat*



Panel D: *Ninašša*

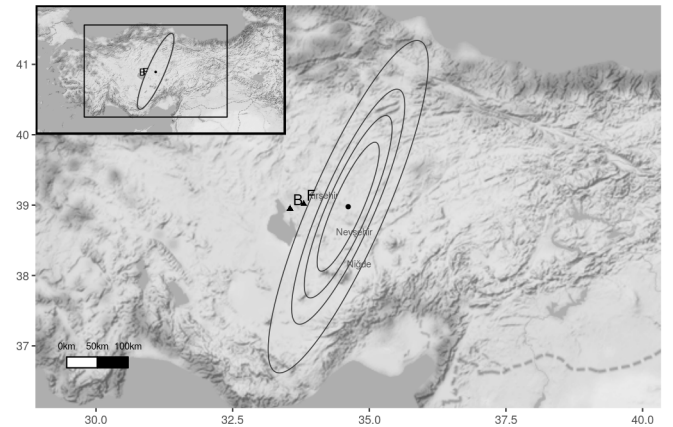
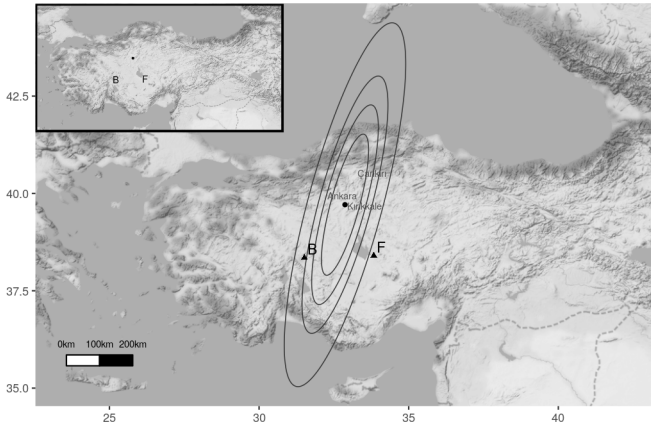


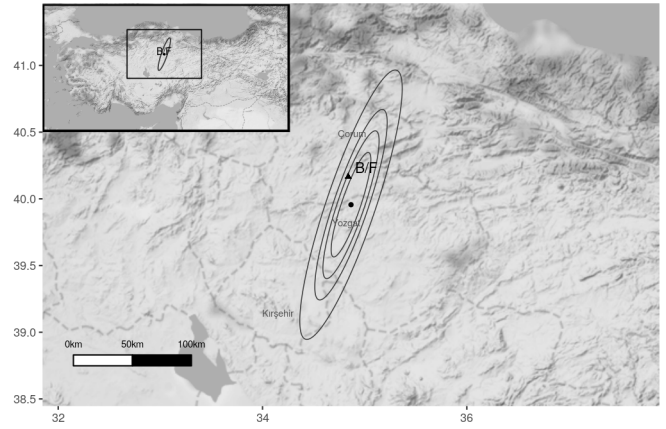
Figure 3: **Locating Lost Cities (I).**

*Notes:* The maps show the estimated locations for the ancient lost cities of *Durhumit* (panel A), *Hahhum* (panel B), *Kuburnat* (panel C), and *Ninašša* (panel D). The “•” sign corresponds to the point estimate for the location of lost cities, from solving (8). The ellipses around the point estimate are a 2-dimensional contour plot of the 50th, 75th, 90th and 99th percentile confidence regions for the location of lost cities, taking into account their (White-robust) variance-covariance matrix. For comparison, the location denoted by “▲F” corresponds to the site suggested by historian Massimo Forlanini (Forlanini, 2008), and the location denoted by “▲B” to the site suggested by historian Gojko Barjamovic (Barjamovic, 2011). Both base their suggestion on qualitative information collected from historical records.

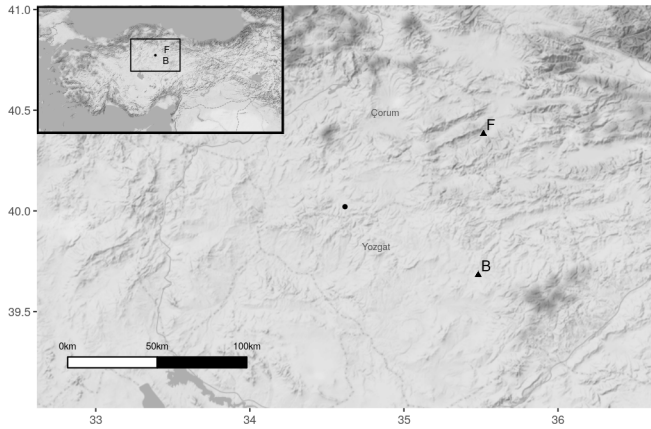
Panel A: *Purušhaddum*



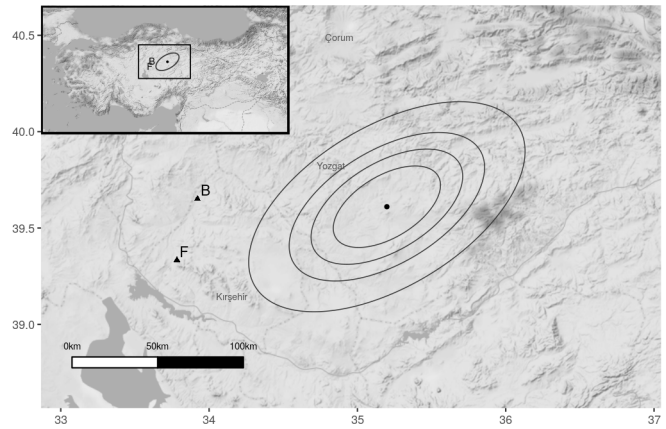
Panel B: *Šinahuttum*



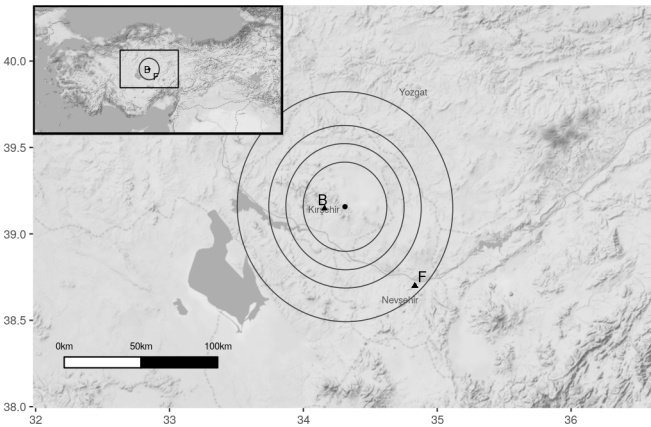
Panel C: *Šuppiluliyā*



Panel D: *Tuḫpiya*



Panel D: *Wašhaniya*



Panel E: *Zalpa*

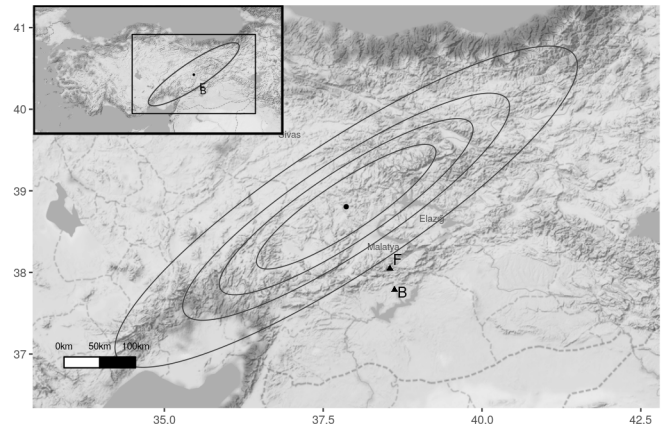


Figure 4: Locating Lost Cities (II).

Notes: See figure 3. The confidence regions for *Šuppiluliyā* are not shown as they are too wide.

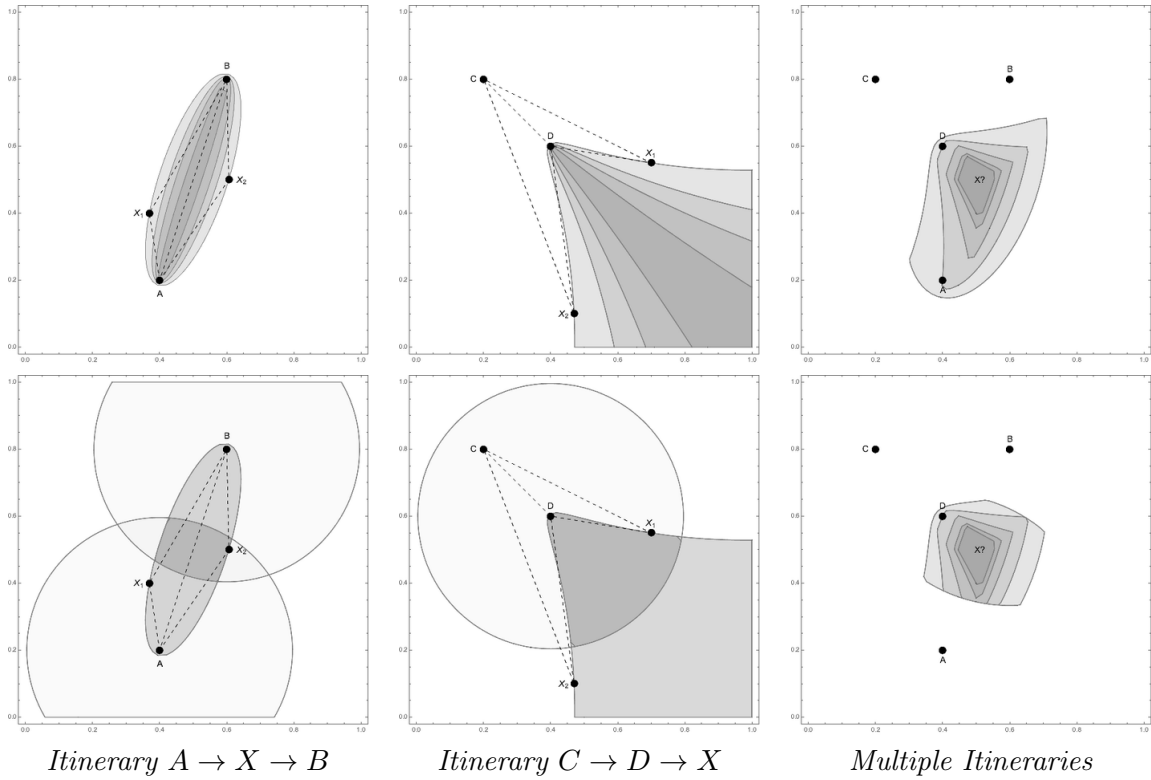
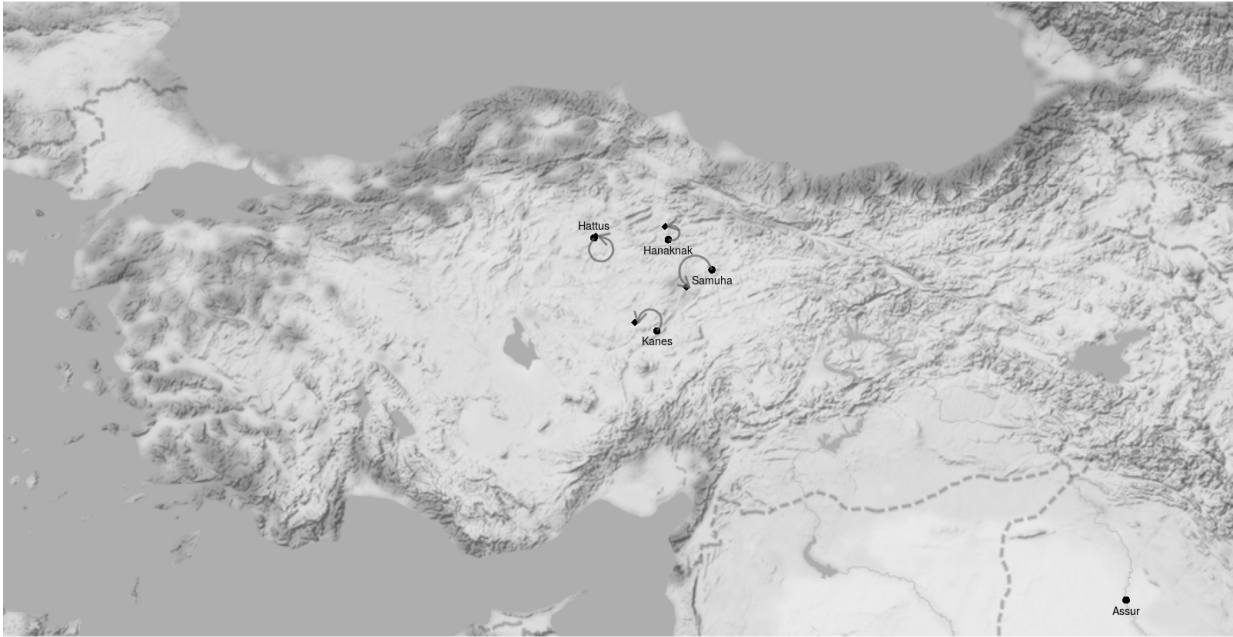


Figure 5: Constraints on Lost Cities from Merchants' Itineraries, Example.

*Notes:* The figures show examples of how to use data on multiple merchants itineraries to construct admissible regions for lost cities. The top row of figures only imposes the “short detour” constraint, while the bottom row of figures further imposes the “pit stop” constraint. The left figures show the example of an itinerary of the type  $A \rightarrow X \rightarrow B$ , where  $A$  and  $B$  are known, and  $X$  is lost. For example, points  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  are two possible candidates such that going from  $A$  to  $B$  via  $X_1$  (or  $X_2$ ) represents only a 5% detour compared to going straight from  $A$  to  $B$  (“short detour” constraint). But only point  $X_1$  also satisfies the constraint that each leg of the trip ( $A$  to  $X$  and  $X$  to  $B$ ) are no more than 0.4 standard deviations longer than the average trip (“pit stop” constraint). The middle figures show similar exercises for an itinerary of the type  $C \rightarrow D \rightarrow X$ , with  $C$  and  $D$  known and  $X$  lost. The right figures jointly impose constraints from both itineraries. Darker shades of grey correspond to shorter detours. For this example, we use a Euclidean metric for distance. The next two figures on actual data use instead optimal travel routes, taking into account the ruggedness of the terrain.



Panel A: Central cities



Panel B: Peripheral cities

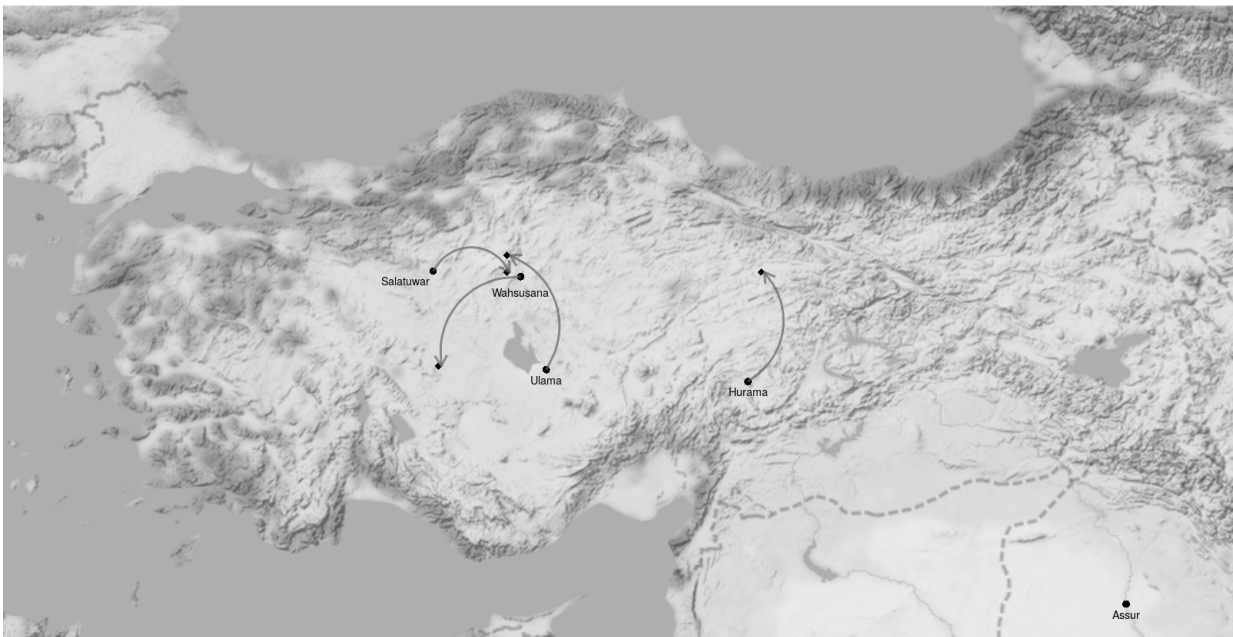


Figure 8: **Proof of Concept: Recovering Fictitiously Lost Cities.**

*Notes:* The maps present the results of our proof-of-concept exercise. For each known city, we set the distance elasticity to  $\hat{\zeta} = 1.9$ , fix the other known cities to their true location, the lost cities to their estimated location from table 2, and re-estimate all other parameters solving (8). The top panel presents the results for four centrally located cities (*Hattuš*, *Hanaknak*, *Kaneš*, and *Šamuha*). The bottom panel presents the results for four peripheral cities (*Hurama*, *Šalatuwar*, *Ulama*, and *Wahšusana*). For each city, the “•” sign represents the true location of that city; the “◆” represents the estimated location of that city; and an arrow links both. See appendix table F.1 for the true and estimated locations of all known cities, and appendix figures G.1 and G.2 for the corresponding maps.

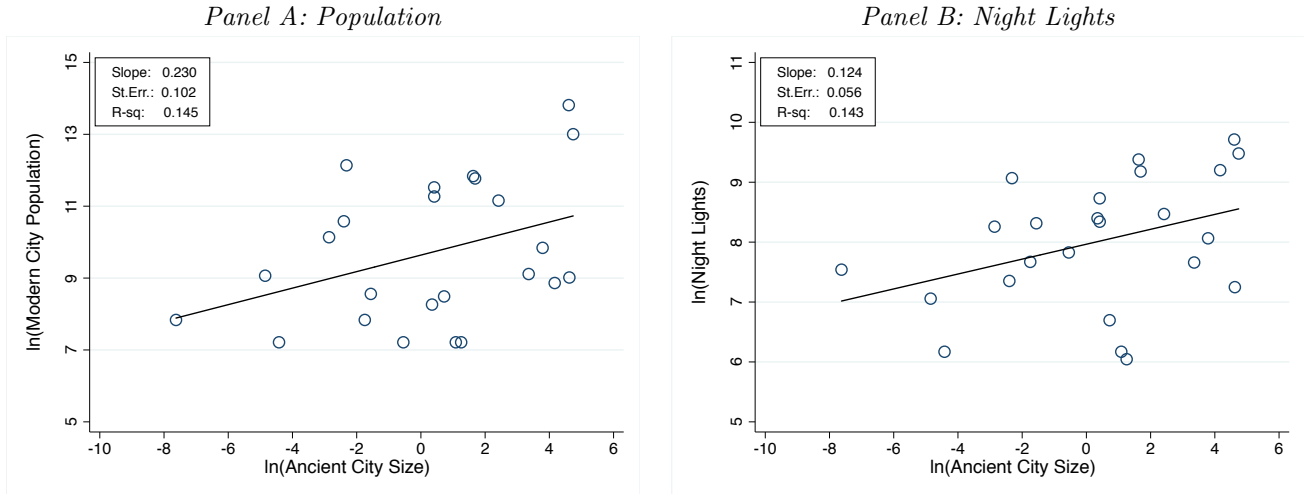


Figure 9: **Ancient and Modern City Sizes**

*Notes:* The figures show the relationship between ancient city size and modern population (Panel A), and modern night lights (Panel B). The horizontal axis in both panels is the logged estimate of  $PopT^{1/\theta}$  for ancient cities. The vertical axis is the logged 2012 urban population (Panel A) and night luminosity (Panel B) within 20 km of the ancient city's location. The regression line corresponds to the result in column 1 of table 4 in Panel A, and column 4 in Panel B.

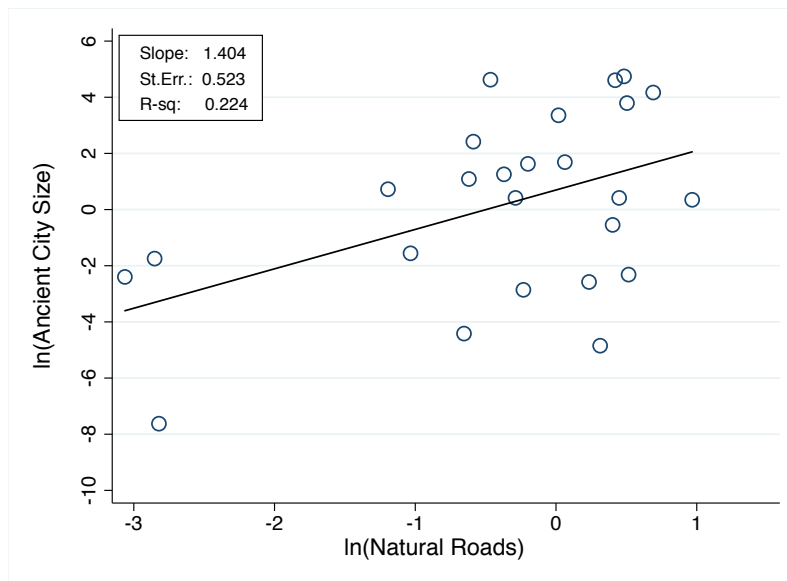


Figure 10: **The Topographical Determinants of Ancient City Sizes**

*Notes:* The horizontal axis is the logged index for road-knots, *NaturalRoads* for ancient cities. The vertical axis is the logged estimate of  $PopT^{1/\theta}$  for ancient cities. The regression line corresponds to the result in column 1 of table 5.

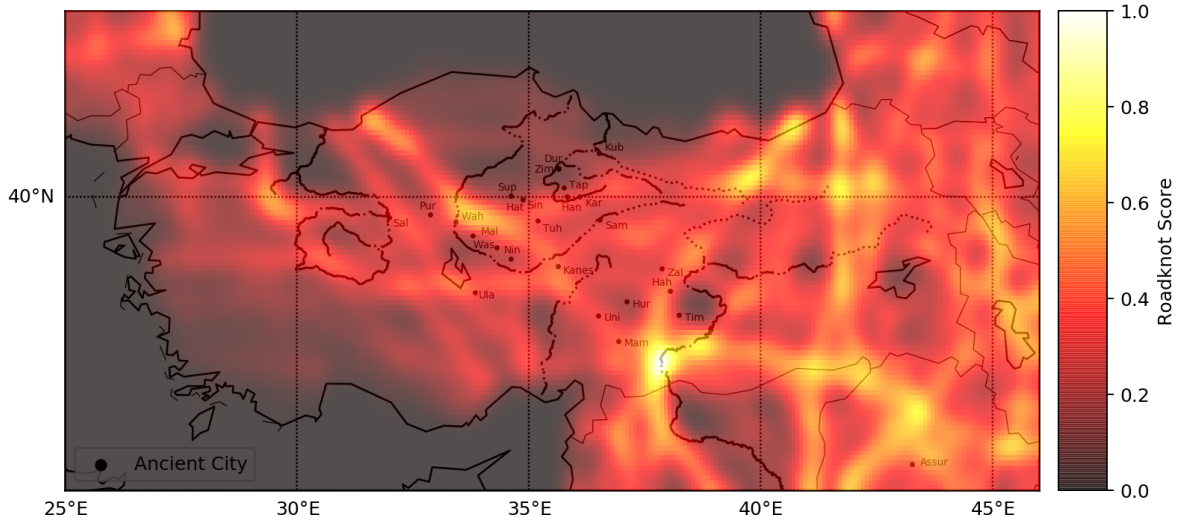


Figure 11: Natural Roads Scores.

*Notes:* This figure shows a heat map of our road-knot scores used to define the variable  $NaturalRoads_i$  in section 4.3. We draw a very large number of origin/destination pairs. Using topographical data only (see figure C.1 below), we then compute the least-effort travel path from origin to destination (see appendix C). For each grid-point on the map, we record the number of intersections, where we weight a path of duration  $d$  by  $d^{-\hat{\zeta}}$  using our estimated distance elasticity of trade  $\hat{\zeta} = 1.9$  (see appendix E). Brighter colors correspond to a higher number of intersections. The variable  $NaturalRoads_i$  averages this score for grid-points within 20km of city  $i$ .

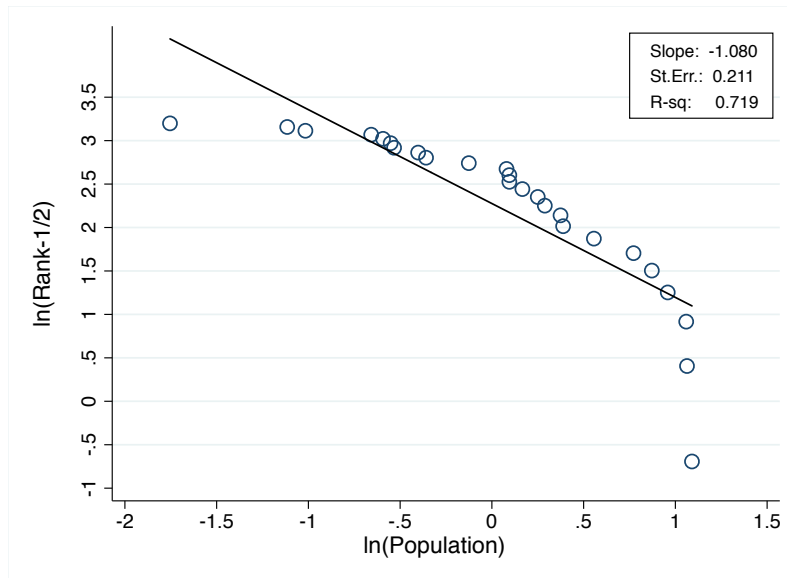


Figure 12: Zipf's Law for Cities in the Bronze Age.

*Notes:* The horizontal axis is the log of the population of ancient cities, where we apply the transformation  $\ln(Population_i) = 0.23 \cdot \ln(Size_i)$  to our structural estimate of ancient city sizes using column 1 of table 4. The vertical axis is the log of rank minus one half. The regression line corresponds to the estimate of equation (17).