Ashur - Assyria

Assyria. Atheta (Aramaic for Assyria), or Aššur (Akkadian for Assyria) was a Semitic Akkadian kingdom, extant as a nation state from the late 25th or early–24th century BC to 605 BC. 

Assyria was centered on the Upper Tigris river, in northern Mesopotamia (present day northern Iraq). The Assyrians came to rule powerful empires a number of times throughout history. It was named for its original capital, the ancient city of Assur/Ashur (Akkadian: אַשׁוּר; Hebrew: אשור; Arabic: آشور). 

As part of the greater Mesopotamian civilization, Assyria was at its height a highly advanced nation for its time in terms of architecture, engineering, agriculture, economics, civil service, mathematics, medicine, literature, military technology, law, astronomy and libraries/record keeping. A number of Assyrian kings showed an early interest in botany and zoology also. 

Assyria was also sometimes known as Subartu, and after its fall, from 605 BC through to the late 7th century AD variously as Atheta, Syria (Greek), Assyria (Latin) and Assuristan. The term Assyria can also refer to the geographic region or heartland where Assyria, its empires and the Assyrian people were and still are centred. The modern Assyrian Christian minority in northern Iraq, north east Syria, south east Turkey and north west Iran are the descendants of the ancient Assyrians (see Assyrian continuity). 

Assyria originally was one of a number of Akkadian city states in Mesopotamia. In the late 24th century BC, Assyrian kings were regional leaders only, and subject to Sargon of Akkad who united all the Akkadian Semites and Sumerian speaking peoples of Mesopotamia under the Akkadian Empire which lasted from c. 2334 BC to 2154 BC. Following the fall of the Akkadian Empire c. 2154 BC, and the succeeding Sumerian Third Dynasty of Ur, there were a number of other competing Amorite states such as Isin and Larsa, but Mesopotamia eventually coalesced into two distinct nations: Assyria in the north, and Babylonia in the south. 

In the Old Assyrian period of the Early Bronze Age, Assyria had been a kingdom of northern Mesopotamia, initially competing with their fellow Sumero-Akkadian states in southern Mesopotamia for dominance of the region, and also with the Hattians and Hurrians to the north in Asia Minor, the Gutians to the east in the Zagros Mountains and the Eblaites and later Amorites in the Levant to the west. During the 20th century BC, it established colonies in Asia Minor, and under king Ilushuma it asserted itself over southern Mesopotamia. From the late 19th century BC Assyria came into conflict with the newly created state of Babylonia which eventually eclipsed the older Sumero-Akkadian states in the south. Assyria experienced fluctuating fortunes in the Middle Assyrian period. Assyria had a period of empire under Shamshi-Adad I and Ishme-Dagan in the 19th and 18th centuries BC. Following this it found itself under short periods of Babylonian and Mitanni-Hurrian domination in the 18th and 15th centuries BC respectively, and another period of great power with the rise of the Middle Assyrian Empire (from 1365 BC to 1075 BC) that included the reigns of great kings such as Ashur-uballit I, Arik-den-ili, Tukulti-Ninurta I and Tiglath-Pileser I. During this period Assyria overthrew the Mitanni and eclipsed both the Hittite Empire and Egyptian Empire in the Near East. 

Beginning with the campaigns of Adad-nirari II from 911 BC, it again became a great power over the next three centuries, overthrowing the Twenty-fifth dynasty of Egypt and conquering Egypt, Babylonia, Elam, Urartu/Armenia, Media, Persia, Mannea, Gutium, Phoenicia/Canaan, A ramea (Syria), Arabia, Israel, Judah, Edom, Moab, Samarra, Cilicia, Cyprus, Chaldea, Nabatea, Commagen e, Dilmun and the Hurrians, Sutu and Neo-Hittites, driving the Ethiopians and Nubians from
Egypt, defeating the Cimmerians and Scythians and exacting tribute from Phrygia, Magan and Punt among others. After its fall, (between 612 BC and 605 BC), Assyria remained a province and Geo-political entity under the Babylonian, Median, Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, Roman and Sassanid empires until the Arab Islamic invasion and conquest of Mesopotamia in the mid-7th century, when it was finally dissolved.

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Early history

In prehistoric times the region was home to a Neanderthal culture such as has been found at the Shanidar Cave. The earliest Neolithic sites in Assyria were the Jarmo culture c. 7100 BC and Tell Hassuna, the centre of the Hassuna culture, c. 6000 BC. During the 3rd millennium BC, there developed a very intimate cultural symbiosis between the Sumerians and the Semitic Akkadians throughout Mesopotamia, which included widespread bilingualism. The influence of Sumerian (which was an unclassified language) on Akkadian (and vice versa) is evident in all areas, from lexical borrowing on a massive...
This has prompted scholars to refer to Sumerian and Akkadian in the 3rd millennium BC as a sprachbund.\[6\]

Letter sent by the high-priest Lu’enna to the king of Lagash (maybe Urukagina), informing him of his son’s death in combat, c. 2400 BC, found in Girsu.

Akkadian gradually replaced Sumerian as the spoken language of Mesopotamia somewhere after the turn of the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BC (the exact dating being a matter of debate),\[2\] but Sumerian continued to be used as a sacred, ceremonial, literary and scientific language in Mesopotamia until the 1st century AD.

The city of Assur (Aseur) existed since at least before the middle of the 3rd millennium BC (c. 2600 - 2500 BC), although it appears to have been a Sumerian ruled administrative centre at this time rather than an independent state. Assyrian kings are attested as far back as the late 25th to early 24th Century BC, beginning with Tudiya. During the Akkadian Empire (2334-2154 BC) the Assyrians, like all the Akkadian peoples, were subject to the dynasty of Akkad. The Akkadian Empire of Sargon the Great, which united all the Akkadian speaking Semites, including the Assyrians, claimed to encompass the surrounding “four quarters”; the regions north of the seat of the empire in central Mesopotamia had been known as Subartu. The name Azuhinum in Akkadian records also seems to refer to Assyria proper. During the Akkadian Empire, the city of Ashur was a regional administrative center of the Empire, implicated by Nuzi tablets,\[8\] subject to their fellow Akkadian Sargon and his successors. However, towards the end of the reign of Sargon the Great, the Assyrian faction rebelled against him; “the tribes of Assyria of the upper country—in their turn attacked, but they submitted to his arms, and Sargon settled their habitations, and he smote them grievously”.

The Akkadian Empire was destroyed by economic decline, internal strife and barbarian Gutian people in 2154 BC. The rulers of Assyria during the period between 2154 BC and 2112 BC may have once again been fully independent as the Gutians are only known to have administered southern Mesopotamia, however there is no information from Assyria bar the king list for this period. Assyria became part of the Empire of the Sumerian 3rd dynasty of Ur founded in 2112 BC, and appears to have remained largely under Sumerian domination until the mid-21st century BC.

According to some Judaean-Christian theological traditions, the city of Ashur (also spelled Assur or Aššur) was founded by Ashur the son of Shem, who was deified by later generations as the city’s patron god. However, there is absolutely no historical basis whatsoever for this tradition in the far older Mesopotamian annals; Assyrian tradition itself lists an early Assyrian king named Ushpia as having dedicated the first temple to the god Ashur in the city in the 21st century BC. It is highly likely that the city was named in honour of the Assyrian god of the same name.

**Classical Dating**
George Syncellus in his *Chronographia* quotes a fragment from Julius Africanus which dates the founding of Assyria to 2284 BC,[10] The Roman historian Velleius Paterculus citing Aemilius Sura states that Assyria was founded 1995 years before Philip V was defeated in 197 BC (at the *Battle of Cynoscephalae*) by the Romans.[10] The sum therefore 197 + 1995 = 2192 BC for the foundation of Assyria. Diodorus Siculus recorded another tradition from Ctesias, that dates Assyria 1306 years before 883 BC (the starting date of the reign of Ashurnasirpal II) and so the sum 883 + 1306 = 2189 BC.[10] The *Chronicle* of Eusebius yet provides another date for the founding of Assyria, with the accession of Ninus, dating to 2057 BC, but the Armenian translation of the *Chronicle* puts back this figure slightly back to 2116 BC. Another classical dating tradition found in the *Excerpta Latina Barbari* dates the foundation of Assyria, under Belus, to 2206 BC.

Old Assyrian period

Of the early history of the kingdom of Assyria, little is positively known. In the Assyrian King List, the earliest king recorded was Tudiya. He was a contemporary of Ibrium of Ebla who appears to have lived in the late 25th or early 24th century BC, according to the king list. Tudiya concluded a treaty with Ibrium for the use of a trading post in The Levant officially controlled by Ebla. Apart from this reference to trading activity, nothing further has yet been discovered about Tudiya. He was succeeded by Adamu and then a further thirteen rulers (Yangi, Suhlamu, Harharu, Mandaru, Imshu, Harshu, Didanu, Hanu, Zuabu, Nuabu, Abazu, Belu and Azarah) about all of whom nothing is yet known.

The earliest kings such as Tudiya, who are recorded as *kings who lived in tents* were likely to have been independent Akkadian semi nomadic pastoralist rulers. However, these Assyrian kings became subject to the Akkadian Empire from the late 24th century BC.[1] These kings who dominated the region, at some point during this period became fully urbanised and founded the *city state* of Ashur.[12]

The first written inscriptions by 'urbanised' Assyrian kings appear in the mid-21st century BC. Assyria then consisted of a number of city states and small Semitic Akkadian kingdoms. The foundation of the first true urbanised Assyrian monarchy was traditionally ascribed to Ushpira a contemporary of Ishbi-Erra of Isin and Naplum of Larsa.[13] c. 2030 BC. He was succeeded by kings named Apiashal, Sulli, Kikkiya and Akiya of whom nothing is yet known.

In approximately 1975 BC, Puzur-Ashur I (a contemporary of Shu-Ilishu of Larsa and Samium of Isin) founded a new dynasty, and his successors such as Shalim-ahum (died 1946 BC), Ilushman (1945-1906 BC), Erishum I (1905-1867 BC), Ikunum (1867-1860 BC), Sargon I, Naram-Sin and Puzur-Ashur II left inscriptions regarding the building of temples to gods such as Ashur, Adad and Ishtar in Assyria.

Ilushman in particular appears to have been a powerful king, and the dominant ruler in the region, who made many raids into southern Mesopotamia between 1945 BC and 1906 BC, attacking the independent Sumero-Akkadian city states of the region such as Isin, and founding colonies at the expense of the Hattians and Hurrians in Asia Minor. The conflict between Assyria and the states of the south was to become a pattern throughout the history of ancient Mesopotamia, with the future rivalry between Assyria and Babylonia. However, Babylonia did not exist at this time, but was founded in 1894 BC by an Amorite prince named Sumuabum during the reign of Erishum I.

The Amorites, a Semitic people hailing from the north eastern Levant had overrun southern Mesopotamia from the mid-20th century BC, deposing native Sumero-Akkadian dynasties and setting up their own kingdoms. However, they were successfully repelled by the Assyrian kings of the 20th and 19th centuries BC.
The main rivals to early Assyrian kings during the 22nd, 21st and 20th centuries BC would have been the Hattians and Hurrians to the north in Asia Minor, the Gutians to the east in the Zagros Mountains of north west Iran, the Elamites to the south east in what is now south central Iran, the Amorites to the west in what is today Syria and their fellow Sumero-Akkadian City-States of southern Mesopotamia such as Isin, Kish, Ur and Larsa.[1]

Assyria had extensive contact with Hattian, Hittite and Hurrian cities on the Anatolian plateau in Asia Minor. The Assyrians established colonies in Cappadocia, (e.g., at Kanesh (modern Kültepe) from 1495 BC to 1740 BC. These colonies, called karum, the Akkadian word for ‘port’, were attached to Hattian and Hurrian cities in Anatolia, but physically separate, and had special tax status. They must have arisen from a long tradition of trade between Assyria and the Anatolian cities, but no archaeological or written records show this. The trade consisted of metal (perhaps lead or tin; the terminology here is not entirely clear) and textiles from Assyria, that were traded for precious metals in Anatolia.

Like many city-states in Mesopotamian history, Ashur was, to a great extent, an oligarchy rather than a monarchy. Authority was considered to lie with "the City", and the polity had three main centres of power — an assembly of elders, a hereditary ruler, and an eponym. The ruler presided over the assembly and carried out its decisions. He was not referred to with the usual Akkadian term for "king", šarrum; that was instead reserved for the city's patron deity Assur, of whom the ruler was the high priest. The ruler himself was only designated as "the steward of Assur" (iššiak Assur), where the term for steward is a borrowing from Sumerian ensi/k. The third centre of power was the eponym (limmum), who gave the year his name, similarly to the archons and consuls of Classical Antiquity. He was annually elected by iot and was responsible for the economic administration of the city, which included the power to detain people and confiscate property. The institution of the eponym as well as the formula iššiak Assur lingered on as ceremonial vestiges of this early system throughout the history of the Assyrian monarchy.[14]

**Assyrian Empire of Shamshi-Adad I**

In 1813 BC the native Akkadian king of Assyria Erishum II (1819- 1813 BC) was deposed, and the throne of Assyria was usurped by Shamshi-Adad I (1813 BC – 1791 BC) in the expansion of Semitic Amorite tribes from the Khabur River delta. Although regarded as an Amorite by later Assyrian tradition, Shamshi-Adad is also credited with descent from the native ruler Ushpia in the Assyrian King List. He put his son Ishme-Dagan on the throne of a nearby Assyrian city, Ekallatum, and maintained Assyria's Anatolian colonies. Shamshi-Adad I then went on to conquer the kingdom of Mari (in modern Syria) on the Euphrates putting another of his sons, Yasmah-Adad on the throne there. Shamshi-Adad's Assyria now encompassed the whole of northern Mesopotamia and included territory in Asia Minor and northern Syria. He himself resided in a new capital city founded in the Khabur valley, called Shubat-Enil.

Ishme-Dagan inherited Assyria, but Yasmah-Adad was overthrown by a new king called Zimrilim in Mari. The new king of Mari allied himself with the Amorite king Hammurabi of Babylon, who had made the recently created, and originally minor state of Babylon a major power. Assyria now faced the rising power of Babylon in the south. Ishme-Dagan responded by making an alliance with the enemies of Babylon, and the power struggle continued without resolution for decades. Ishme-Dagan, like his father was a great warrior, and in addition to repelling Babylonian attacks, campaigned successfully against the Turukku and Lullubi who had attacked the Assyrian city of Ekallatum, and against Dadusha, king of Eshnunna and Jamhad (modern Aleppo)

**Assyria under Babylonian domination**
Hammurabi, after first conquering Mari, Larsa, and Eshnunna, eventually prevailed over Ishme-Dagan's successors, and conquered Assyria for Babylon in 1756 BC. With Hammurabi, the various karum colonies in Anatolia ceased trade activity — probably because the goods of Assyria were now being traded with the Babylonians. The Assyrian monarchy survived, however the three Amorite kings succeeding Ishme-Dagan; Mut-Ashkur (who was the son of Ishme-Dagan and married to a Hurrian queen), Rimush and Asinum were vassals, dependent on the Babylonians during the reign of Hammurabi.

Assyrian dynasty restored

The short lived Babylonian Empire quickly began to unravel upon the death of Hammurabi, and Babylonia lost control over Assyria during the reign of Hammurabi's successor Samsu-iluna. A period of civil war ensued after the deposition of the Amorite vassal king of Assyria Asinum, who was a grandson of Shamshi-Adad I, by a powerful native Akkadian vice regent named Puzur-Sin. A native king named Ashur-dugul then seized the throne with the help of Puzur-Sin, and a period of internal instability ensued with five further kings (Ashur-apla-idi, Nasir-Sin, Sin-namir, Ipqi-Ishtar and Adad-salulu) all reigning in quick succession. Babylonia seems to have been too powerless to intervene or take advantage of this situation. Finally, a king named Adasi came to the fore c. 1720 BC and completely freed Assyria from any pretence of Babylonian dominance. Adasi drove the Babylonians and Amorites from Assyria during the late 18th century BC and Babylonian power began to quickly wane in Mesopotamia as a whole, although the Amorites would retain control over Babylonia and southern Mesopotamia until 1595 BC when they were overthrown by the Kassites, a people from the Zagros Mountains who spoke a language isolate and were neither Semites nor Indo-Europeans.

Assyrian, 1400 BC

Adasi was succeeded by Bel-bani (1700-1691 BC). Little is known of many of the kings that followed such as; Libaya (1690-1674 BC), Sharma-Adad I (1673-1662 BC), Iptar-Sin (1661-1650 BC), Bazaya (1649-1622 BC), Lullaya (1621-1618 BC), Shu-Ninua (1615-1602 BC), Sharma-Adad II (1601-1599 BC), Erishum III (1598-1586 BC), and Shamshi-Adad II (1585-1580 BC). However Assyria seems to have been a relatively strong and stable nation, existing undisturbed by its neighbours such as the Hatti, Hittites, Hurrians, Amorites, Babylonians or Mitanni for well over 200 years. When Babylon fell to the Kassites in 1595 BC, they were unable to make any inroads into Assyria, and there seems to have been
no trouble between the first Kassite ruler of Babylon, **Agum II** and **Erishum III** of Assyria, and a treaty was signed between the two rulers. Similarly, **Ashur-nirari I** (1547-1522 BC) seems not to have been troubled by the newly founded **Mitanni** Empire in **Asia Minor**, the Hittite empire or Babylon during his 25 year reign. **Puzur-Ashur III** (1521-1498 BC) proved to be a strong and energetic ruler. He undertook much rebuilding work in **Assur**, the city was refortified and the southern quarters incorporated into the main city defences. Temples to the moon god **Sin (Nanna)** and the sun god **Shamash** were erected during his reign. He signed a treaty with **Burna-Buriash I** the Kassite king of Babylon, defining the borders of the two nations in the late 16th century BC. He was succeeded by **Enil-nasir I** (1497-1483 BC) who appears to have had an uneventful reign.

**Assyria under Mitanni domination**

The emergence of the **Mitanni** Empire in the 16th century BC did eventually lead to a period of **Mitanni-Hurrian** domination in the 15th century. The **Mitanni** were an **Indo-European** people who conquered and formed the ruling class over the indigenous **Hurrians** of **Asia Minor/Anatolia**. The Hurrians were a Caucasian people who spoke a **language isolate** and were neither Semites nor Indo-Europeans. Some time after the death of the capable **Puzur-Ashur III** in 1498 BC, **Saushtatar**, king of **Hanigalbat** (Hurrians of **Mitanni**), sacked **Assur** and Assyria became a sometime vassal state. This event is most likely to have happened during the rule of **Nur-ili** (1483 - 1471 BC). The Assyrian monarchy survived, and the Mitanni influence appears to have been only sporadic, and they appear not to have been always willing or able to interfere in Assyrian internal affairs For example the son of Nur-ili, **Ashur-shaduni** (1470 BC) was deposed by his uncle **Ashur-rabi I** in his first year of rule, and similarly, **Ashur-nadin-ahhe I** (who had made an alliance with **Egypt**, which sent him a consignment of gold) was deposed by his own brother **Enil-nasir II** in 1420 BC. Assyrian kings seemed to have been free of Mitanni influence regarding international affairs at times also, as evidenced by the border treaty between **Ashur-bel-nisheshu** (1417–1409 BC) and **Karaindash** of Babylon in the late 15th century. **Ashur-rim-nisheshu** (1408–1401 BC) and **Ashur-nadin-ahhe II** (1400–1391 BC) were the final two kings subject to the Mitanni empire. **Eriba-Adad I**, a son of Ashur-bel-nisheshu, ascended the throne in 1390 BC and the ties to Mitanni began to unravel.

There are dozens of Mesopotamian **cuneiform** texts from this period, with precise observations of solar and lunar eclipses, that have been used as 'anchors' in the various attempts to define the chronology of **Babylonia and Assyria** for the early 2nd millennium BC (i.e., the "high", "middle", and "low" chronologies.)

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**Middle Assyrian Empire — Assyrian resurgence**

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<td><strong>1365 BC–934 BC</strong></td>
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Map of the Ancient Near East during the Amarna Period (14th century BC), showing the great powers of the day: Egypt (green), Hatti (yellow), the Kassite kingdom of Babylon (purple), Assyria (grey), and Mitanni (red). Lighter areas show direct control, darker areas represent spheres of influence. The extent of the Achaean/Mycenaean civilization is shown in orange.

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**King**

- 1365 - 1330 BC  Ashur-uballit I (first)
- 967 - 934 BC    Tiglath-Pileser II (last)

**Historical era**

- Independence from Mitanni 1365 BC
- Reign of Ashur-dan II 934 BC

Scholars variously date the beginning of the "Middle Assyrian period" to either the fall of the Old Assyrian kingdom of Shamshi-Adad I, or to the ascension of Ashur-uballit I to the throne of Assyria.
Assyrian expansion and empire 1390 - 1076 BC

See also: Military history of the Neo-Assyrian Empire

By the reign of Eriba-Adad I (1390 BC - 1366 BC) Mitanni influence over Assyria was on the wane. Eriba-Adad I became involved in a dynastic battle between Tushratta and his brother Artatama II and after this his son Shuttarna II, who called himself king of the Hurri while seeking support from the Assyrians. A pro-Hurri/Assyria faction appeared at the royal Mitanni court. Eriba-Adad I had thus loosened Mitanni influence over Assyria, and in turn had now made Assyria an influence over Mitanni affairs.

During the reign of Ashur-uballit I (1365 BC – 1330 BC). Assyrian pressure from the east and Hittite pressure from the north-west, enabled Ashur-uballit I to gain the upper hand over the Mitannians, and again make Assyria an imperial power at the expense of not only the Mitanni themselves, but also Kassite Babylon, the Hurrians and the Hittites; and a time came when the Kassite king in Babylon was glad to marry Muballitṭat-Šērūa, the daughter of Ashur-uballit, whose letters to Akhenaten of Egypt form part of the Amarna letters. This marriage led to disastrous results, as the Kassite faction at court murdered the Babylonian king and placed a pretender on the throne. Assur-uballit promptly invaded Babylonia to avenge his son-in-law, entering Babylon, depositing the king and installing Kurigalzu II of the royal line king there.

Ashur-uballit I then attacked and defeated Mātiwaza the Mitanni king despite attempts by the Hittite king Suppiluliumas, now fearful of growing Assyrian power, attempting to preserve his throne with military support. The lands of the Mitanni and Hurrians were duly appropriated by Assyria, making it a large and powerful empire.

Enlil-nirari (1329-1308 BC) succeeded Ashur-uballit I. He described himself as a "Great-King" (šarru rabû) in letters to the Hittite kings. He was immediately attacked by Kurigalzu II of Babylon who had been installed by his father, but succeeded in defeating him, repelling Babylonian attempts to invade Assyria, counterattacking and appropriating Babylonian territory in the process, thus further expanding Assyria.

The successor of Enlil-nirari, Arik-den-ili (c. 1307-1296 BC), consolidated Assyrian power, and successfully campaigned in the Zagros Mountains to the east, subjugating the Lullubi and Gutians. In the Levant, he defeated Semitic tribes of the so-called Ahlamu group.

He was followed by Adad-nirari I (1295-1275 BC) who made Kalhu (Biblical Calah/Nimrud) his capital, and continued expansion to the northwest, mainly at the expense of the Hittites and Hurrians, conquering Hittite territories such as Carchemish and beyond. Adad-nirari I made further gains to the south, annexing Babylonian territory and forcing the Kassite rulers of Babylon into accepting a new frontier agreement in Assyria's favour. Adad-nirari's inscriptions are more detailed than any of his predecessors. He declares that the gods called him to war, a statement used by most subsequent Assyrian kings. He referred to himself again as Sharru Rabi (meaning "The Great King" in the Akkadian language) and conducted extensive building projects in Ashur and the provinces.

In 1274 BC Shalmaneser I ascended the throne. He proved to be a great warrior king. During his reign he conquered the powerful kingdom of Urartu that had encompassed most of Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus Mountains, and the fierce Gutians of the Zagros Mountains in modern Iran. He then attacked the Mitanni-Hurrians, defeating both King Shattuara and his Hittite and Aramean allies, finally completely destroying the Hurrian kingdom in the process.

During the campaign against the Hittites, Shattuara cut off the Assyrian army from their supply of food and water, but the Assyrians broke free in a desperate battle, counterattacked, and conquered and annexed what remained of the Mitanni kingdom. Shalmaneser I installed an Assyrian prince, Ilu-ippada as ruler of Mitanni, with Assyrian governors such as Meli-sah, installed to rule individual cities.
The Hittites tried unsuccessfully to save Mitanni. In alliance with Babylon, they fought an economic war against Assyria for many years. Assyria was now a large and powerful empire, and a major threat to Egyptian and Hittite interests in the region, and was perhaps the reason that these two powers, fearful of Assyrian might, made peace with one another.\[15\] Like his father, Shalmaneser was a great builder and he further expanded the city of Kalhu (the biblical Calah/Nimrud) at the juncture of the Tigris and Zab Rivers.

Shalmaneser's son and successor, Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244 BC - 1208 BC), won a major victory against the Hittites and their king Tudhaliya IV at the Battle of Nihriya and took thousands of prisoners. He then conquered Babylonia, taking Kashtiliash IV as a captive and ruled there himself as king for seven years, taking on the title "King of Sumer and Akkad" first used by Sargon of Akkad. Tukulti-Ninurta I thus became the first native Akkadian speaking Mesopotamian to rule the state of Babylonia, its founders having been Amorites, succeeded by Kassites. Tukulti-Ninurta petitioned the god Shamash before beginning his counteroffensive.\[16\] Kashtiliash IV was captured, single-handed by Tukulti-Ninurta according to his account, who "trod with my feet upon his lordly neck as though it were a footstool"\[17\] and deported him ignominiously in chains to Assyria. The victorious Assyrian demolished the walls of Babylon, massacred many of the inhabitants, pillaged and plundered his way across the city to the Esagila temple, where he made off with the statue of Marduk.\[18\] He then proclaimed himself "king of Karduniash, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of Sippar and Babylon, king of Tilmun and Meluhha.\[16\] Middle Assyrian texts recovered at ancient Dūr-Katlimmu, include a letter from Tukulti-Ninurta to his sukkal rabi'u, or grand vizier, Ashur-iddin advising him of the approach of his general Shulman-mushabshu escorting the captive Kashtiliash, his wife, and his retinue which incorporated a large number of women,\[19\] on his way to exile after his defeat. In the process he defeated the Elamites, who had themselves coveted Babylon. He also wrote an epic poem documenting his wars against Babylon and Elam. After a Babylonian revolt, he raided and plundered the temples in Babylon, regarded as an act of sacrilege. As relations with the priesthood in Ashur began deteriorating, Tukulti-Ninurta built a new capital city: Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta.\[20\]

However, Tukulti-Ninurta's sons rebelled and besieged the ageing king in his capital. He was murdered and then succeeded by Ashur-nadin-apli. Another unstable period for Assyria followed, it was riven by periods of internal strife and the new king only made token and unsuccessful attempts to recapture Babylon, whose Kassite kings had taken advantage of the upheavals in Assyria and freed themselves from Assyrian rule. However, Assyria itself was not threatened by foreign powers during the reigns of Ashur-nirari III, Enlilkudurri-usur and Ninurta-apal-Ekur (1192-1180 BC), although Ninurta-apal-Ekur usurped the throne from Enlilkudurri-usur.

Ashur-Dan I (1179-1133 BC) stabilised Assyria during his unusually long reign. He maintained friendly relations with Babylonia and other neighbours of Assyria, and seems to have quelled internal instability. However, another brief period of internal upheaval followed the death of Ashur-Dan I when his son and successor Ninurta-tukulti-Ashur (1133 BC) was deposed in his first year of rule by his own brother Mutakkil-Nusku and forced to flee to Babylonia.

Mutakkil-Nusku himself died in the same year (1133 BC) leaving a third brother Ashur-resh-ishi I (1133 - 1116 BC) the throne. This was to lead to a renewed period of Assyrian expansion and empire. As the Hittite empire collapsed from the onslaught of the Indo-European Phrygians (called Mushki in Assyrian annals), Babylon and Assyria began to vie for Aramean regions (in modern Syria), formerly under firm Hittite control. When their forces encountered one another in this region, the Assyrian king Ashur-reshishi I met and defeated Nebuchadnezzar I of Babylon on a number of occasions. Assyria then invaded and annexed Hittite controlled lands in Asia Minor and Aram (Syria), marking an upsurge in imperian expansion.
Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1077 BC), vies with Shamshi-Adad I and Ashur-uballit I among historians as being regarded as the founder of the first Assyrian empire. The son of Ashur-resh-ishi I, he ascended to the throne upon his father's death, and became one of the greatest of Assyrian conquerors during his 38 year reign.\[^{[21]}\]

His first campaign in 1112 BC was against the Phrygians who had attempted to occupy certain Assyrian districts in the Upper Euphrates; after driving out the Phrygians he then overran the Luwian kingdoms of Commagene, Cilicia and Cappadocia in western Asia Minor, and drove the Hittites from the Assyrian province of Subartu, northeast of Malatia.

In a subsequent campaign, the Assyrian forces penetrated Urartu, into the mountains south of Lake Van and then turned westward to receive the submission of Malatia. In his fifth year, Tiglath-Pileser again attacked Commagene, Cilicia and Cappadocia, and placed a record of his victories engraved on copper plates in a fortress he built to secure his Cilician conquests.

The Aramaeans of northern Syria were the next targets of the Assyrian king, who made his way as far as the sources of the Tigris.\[^{[21]}\] The control of the high road to the Mediterranean was secured by the possession of the Hittite town of Pitr\(^{[22]}\) at the junction between the Euphrates and Sajur; whence he proceeded to conquer the Canaanite/Phoenician cities of (Byblos), Sidon, and finally Arvad where he embarked onto a ship to sail the Mediterranean, on which he killed a nahiru or "sea-horse" (which A. Leo Oppenheim translates as a narwhal) in the sea.\[^{[21]}\] He was passionately fond of hunting and was also a great builder. The general view is that the restoration of the temple of the gods Ashur and Hadad at the Assyrian capital of Assur(Ashur) was one of his initiatives.\[^{[21]}\] He also invaded and defeated Babylon twice, assuming the old title "King of Sumer and Akkad", forcing tribute from Babylon, although he did not actually depose the actual king in Babylonia, where the old Kassite Dynasty had now succumbed to an Elamite one.

**Assyria in the Ancient Dark Ages, 1075-912 BC**

The period from 1200 BC to 900 BC was a dark age for the entire Near East, North Africa, Caucasus, Mediterranean and Balkan regions, with great upheavals and mass movements of people.

Assyria and its empire were not unduly affected by these tumultuous events for some 125 years, perhaps the only ancient power that was not. However, after Tiglath-Pileser I died in 1076 BC, Assyria was in comparative decline for the next 150 years. The empire shrank significantly, and Assyria appears to have controlled only areas close to Assyria itself, essential to keeping trade routes open in eastern Syria, south eastern Asia Minor central Mesopotamia and north western Iran.

Semitic peoples such as the Arameans, Chaldeans and Suteans moved into areas to the west and south of Assyria, including overrunning much of Babylonia to the south, Indo-European/Iranic peoples such as the Medes and Persians moved into the lands to the east of Assyria, displacing the native Gutians and pressuring Elam and Mannea (which were both ancient non Indo-European civilisations of Iran), and to the north the Indo-European Phrygians overran their fellow Indo European Hittites.urtarians (Armenians) rose in the Caucasus, and Cimmerians, Colchians and Scythians around The Black Sea. Egypt was divided and in disarray, and Semitic Israelites were battling with other fellow Semitic Canaanite peoples and the Peleset(Philistines) for the control of southern Canaan.
Assyrian horsemen pursue defeated Arabs.

Despite the apparent weakness of Assyria in comparison to its former might, at heart it in fact remained a solid, well defended nation whose warriors were the best in the world. Assyria, with its stable monarchy and secure borders was in a stronger position during this time than potential rivals such as Egypt, Babylonia, Elam, Phrygia, Urartu, Persia and Media[23] Kings such as Ashur-bel-kala, Eriba-Adad II, Ashur-rabi II, Ashurnasirpal I, Tiglath-Pileser II and Ashur-Dan II successfully defended Assyria's borders and upheld stability during this tumultuous time.

Assyrian kings during this period appear to have adopted a policy of maintaining and defending a compact, secure nation and satellite colonies immediately surrounding it, and interspersed this with sporadic punitive raids and invasions of neighbouring territories when the need arose; For example, during the reign of Ashur-rabi II (1013–972 BC) Aramaean tribes took the cities of Pitru and Mutkinu (which had been taken and colonized by Tiglath Pileser I.) This event showed how far Assyria could assert itself militarily when the need arose. The Assyrian king attacked the Arameans, forced his way to the far off Mediterranean and constructed a stele in the area of Mount Atalur. Similarly, Ashur-Dan II (935–912 BC) is recorded as having made punitive raids outside the borders of Assyria to clear Aramean and other tribal peoples from the regions surrounding Assyria. Ashur-dan II concentrated on rebuilding Assyria within its natural borders, from Tur Abdin to the foothills beyond Arbela, he built government offices in all provinces, and as an economic boost, provided ploughs throughout the land, which yielded record grain production.

**Society in the Middle Assyrian period**

Assyria had difficulties with keeping the trade routes open. Unlike the situation in the Old Assyrian period, the Anatolian metal trade was effectively dominated by the Hittites and the Hurrians. These people now controlled the Mediterranean ports, while the Kassites controlled the river route south to the Persian Gulf.

The Middle Assyrian kingdom was well organized, and in the firm control of the king, who also functioned as the High Priest of Ashur, the state god. He had certain obligations to fulfill in the cult, and had to provide resources for the temples. The priesthood became a major power in Assyrian society. Conflicts with the priesthood are thought to have been behind the murder of king Tukulti-Ninurta I.

The main Assyrian cities of the middle period were Ashur, Kalhu (Nimrud) and Nineveh, all situated in the Tigris River valley. At the end of the Bronze Age, Nineveh was much smaller than Babylon, but still one of the world's major cities (population c. 33,000). By the end of the Neo-Assyrian period, it had grown to a population of some 120,000, and was possibly the largest city in the world at that time. All free male citizens were obliged to serve in the army for a time, a system which was called the ilkut-service. A legal code was produced during the 14th-13th century which, among other things, clearly shows that the social position of women in Assyria was lower than that of neighbouring societies. Men were permitted to divorce their wives with no compensation paid to the latter. If a woman committed adultery, she could be beaten or put to death. It's not certain if these laws were seriously enforced, but they appear to be a backlash against some older documents which granted things like equal compensation to both partners in divorce. The women of the king's harem and their servants were also subject to harsh punishments such as beatings, mutilation, and death. Assyria in general had much harsher laws than most of the region. Executions were not uncommon, nor were whippings followed by forced labour. Some offenses allowed the accused a trial under torture/duress. One tablet that covers property rights has brutal penalties for violators. A creditor could force debtors to work for him, but not sell them.
Assyrian troops return after victory.

The Middle Assyrian Period is marked by the long wars fought during this period that helped build Assyria into a warrior society. The king depended both on the citizen class and priests in his capital, and the landed nobility who supplied the horses needed by Assyria's military. Documents and letters illustrate the importance of the latter to Assyrian society. Assyria needed less artificial irrigation than Babylon, and horse-breeding was extensive. Portions of elaborate texts about the care and training of them have been found. Trade was carried out in all directions. The mountain country to the north and west of Assyria was a major source of metal ore, as well as lumber. Economic factors were a common *casus belli*.

Assyrian architecture, like that of Babylonia, was influenced by *Sumero-Akkadian* styles (and to some degree Mitanni), but early on developed its own distinctive style. Palaces sported colourful wall decorations, and seal-cutting (an art learned from Mittani) developed apace. Schools for scribes taught both the Babylonian and Assyrian dialects of *Akkadian*, and *Sumerian* and *Akkadian* literary works were often copied with an Assyrian flavour. The Assyrian dialect of Akkadian was used in legal, official, religious, and practical texts such as medicine or instructions on manufacturing items. During the 13th-10th centuries, picture tales appeared as a new art form: a continuous series of images carved on square stone steles. Somewhat reminiscent of a comic book, these show events such as warfare or hunting, placed in order from the upper left to the lower right corner of the stele with captions written underneath them. These and the excellent cut seals show that Assyrian art was beginning to surpass that of Babylon. Architecture saw the introduction of a new style of *zigurat*, with two towers and colorful enameled tiles.

**Neo-Assyrian Empire**

Map of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its expansions.

*Main articles: Neo-Assyrian Empire and Military history of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*
The Neo-Assyrian Empire is usually considered to have begun with the accession of Adad-nirari II, in 911 BC, lasting until the fall of Nineveh at the hands of the Babylonians, Medes, Scythians and Cimmerians in 612 BC.

Expansion, 911-627 BC

Beginning with the campaigns of Adad-nirari II (911-892 BC), Assyria once more became a great power, growing to be the greatest empire the world had yet seen. He firmly subjugated the areas previously under only nominal Assyrian vassalage, conquering and deporting troublesome Aramean, Neo-Hittite and Hurrian populations in the north to far-off places. Adadinirari II then twice attacked and defeated Shamash-mudammig of Babylon, annexing a large area of land north of the Diyala River and the towns of Hit and Zanqu in mid Mesopotamia. He made further gains over Babylon under Nabu-shuma-ukin I later in his reign.

His successor, Tukulti-Ninurta II (891-884 BC) consolidated Assyria's gains and expanded into the Zagros Mountains in modern Iran, subjugating the newly arrived Persians and Medes as well as pushing into central Asia Minor.

Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) was a fierce and ruthless ruler who advanced without opposition through Aram and Canaan (modern Syria) and Asia Minor as far as the Mediterranean and conquered and exacted tribute from Aramea, Phrygia and Phoenicia among others. Ashurnasirpal II also repressed revolts among the Medes and Persians in the Zagros Mountains, and moved his capital to the city of Kalhu (Calah/Nimrud). The palaces, temples and other buildings raised by him bear witness to a considerable development of wealth, science, architecture and art. He also built a number of new heavily fortified towns, such as Imgur-Enlil (Balawat), Tushhan, Kar-Ashurnasirpal and Nibarti-Ashur. Ashurnasirpal II also had a keen interest in Botany and Zoology; collecting all manner of plants, seeds and animals to be displayed in Assyria.

Shalmaneser III (858–823 BC) attacked and reduced Babylonia to vassalage, and defeated Aramea, Israel, Urartu, Phoenicia, the neo Hittite states and the Arabs, forcing all of these to pay tribute to Assyria. Shalmaneser III fought the Battle of Qarqar against an alliance of 12 nations (including Egypt, Israel, Hamath, Phoenicia, the Arabs, Arameans, and neo Hittites among others). His armies penetrated to The Caucasus, Lake Van and the Taurus Mountains; the Hittites of Carchemish were compelled to pay tribute, and the kingdoms of Hamath and Aram Damascus were subdued. In 831 BC he received the submission of the Georgian kingdom of Tabal. He consolidated Assyrian control over the regions conquered by his predecessors, and by the end of his 27 year reign Assyria was master of Mesopotamia, The Levant, western Iran, Israel, Jordan and much of Asia Minor. Due to old age, in the last 6 years of his reign he passed command of his armies to the "Turtanu" (General) Dayyan-Assur.
Jehu, king of Israel, bows before Shalmaneser III of Assyria, 825 BC

However, his successor Shamshi-Adad V (822-811 BC) inherited an empire beset by civil war in Assyria. The first years of his reign saw a serious struggle for the succession of the aged Shalmaneser. The revolt was led by Shamshi-Adad's brother Assur-danin-pal, and had broken by 826 BC. The rebellious brother, according to Shamshi-Adad's own inscriptions, succeeded in bringing to his side 27 important cities, including Nineveh. The rebellion lasted until 820 BC, preventing Assyria expanding its empire further until it was quelled. Later in his reign, Shamshi-Adad V successfully campaigned against both Babylon and Elam, and forced a treaty in Assyria's favour on the Babylonian king Marduk-zakir-shumi I. In 814 BCE he won the battle of Dur-Papsukkal against the Babylonian king Murduk-balassu-ıqbi, and went on to subjugate the Arameans, Suteans and Chaldeans newly settled in parts of Babylonia.

He was succeeded by Adad-nirari III (810-782 BC) who was merely a boy. The Empire was thus ruled by his mother, the famed queen Semiramis (Shammuramat) until 806 BC. Semiramis held the empire together, and appears to have campaigned successfully in subjugating the Persians and Medes during her regency, leading to the later Iranic myths and legends surrounding her.

In 806 BC, Adad-nirari III took the reins of power from Semiramis. He invaded the Levant and subjugated the Arameans, Phoenicians, Philistines, Israelites, neo Hittites, Moabites and Edomites. He entered Damascus and forced tribute upon its Aramean king Ben-Hadad III. He next turned eastward to Iran, and subjugated the Persians, Medes and the pre Iranian Manneans, penetrating as far north east as the Caspian Sea. He then turned south, forcing Babylonia to pay tribute. His next targets were the Chaldeans and Suteans tribes who had settled in the far south eastern corner of Mesopotamia, whom he conquered and reduced to vassalage, then the Arabs in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula to the south of Mesopotamia were invaded, vanquished and forced to pay tribute also.

A lamassu from the palace of Sargon II at Dur-Sharrukin.
Adad-nirari III died prematurely in 782 BC and this led to a temporary period of stagnation within the empire. Shalmaneser IV (782 - 773 BC) seems to have wielded little personal authority, and a victory over Argishti I, king of Urartu at Til Barsip is accredited to an Assyrian General ('Turtanu') named Shamshi-ilu who does not even bother to mention his king. Shamshi-ilu also scored victories over the Arameans and neo Hittites, and again, takes personal credit at the expense of his king. Ashur-dan III ascended the throne in 772 BC. He proved to be a largely ineffectual ruler who was beset by internal rebellions in the cities Ashur, Arrapkha and Guzana. He failed to make any further gains in Babylonia and Aram (modern Syria). His reign was also marred by Plague and an ominous Solar Eclipse. Ashur-nirari V became king in 754 BC, his reign seems to have been one of permanent internal revolution, and he appears to have barely left his palace in Nineveh, although he did lead a successful campaign in Asia Minor in 750 BC. He was deposed by Tiglath-pileser III in 745 BC bringing a resurgence to Assyrian expansion.

Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC) initiated a renewed period of Assyrian expansion: Urartu, Persia, Media, Mannea, Babylonia, Arabia, Phoenicia, Israel, Judah, Samaria, Palestine, Nabatea, Chaldea, Cyprus, Moab, Edom and the Neo-Hittites were subjugated, Tiglath-Pileser III was declared king in Babylon and the Assyrian empire was now stretched from the Caucasus Mountains to Arabia and from the Caspian Sea to Cyprus. Tiglath-Pileser III had reorganised the Assyrian army into a professional fighting force, and greatly improved the civil administration of his empire, setting the template for all future ancient empires. Tiglath-Pileser III introduced eastern Aramaic as the Lingua Franca of Assyria and its vast empire.

Shalmaneser V (726-723 BC) consolidated Assyrian power during his short reign, and repressed Egyptian attempts to gain a foothold in the near east.

Sargon II (722-705 BC) maintained the empire, driving the Cimmerians and Scythians from Iran, where they had invaded and attacked the Persians, who were vassals of Assyria. Mannea, Cilicia, Cappadocia and Commagene were conquered, Urartu was ravaged, and Babylon, Aram, Phoenicia, Israel, Arabia, Cyrus, and the famed Midas, (king of Phrygia) were forced to pay tribute. His stèle has been found as far west as Larnaca in Cyprus. Sargon II conquered Gurgum, Milid, the Georgian state of Tabal, and all of the Hittite kingdoms of the Taurus Mountains. He was killed in 705 BC while on a punitive raid against the Cimmerians, and was succeeded by Sennacherib.
Medes, Manneans and Persians to the east, Asia Minor to the north and north west, and the Levant, Phonecia and Aram in the west. Sennacherib was murdered by his own sons (according to the Bible the sons were named Adrammelech, Abimelech and Sharezer) in a palace revolt, apparently in revenge for the destruction of Babylon.

Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) expanded Assyria still further, campaigning deep into the Caucasus Mountains in the north, breaking Urartu completely in the process. Tiring of Egyptian interference in the Assyrian Empire, Esarhaddon crossed the Sinai Desert, and invaded and conquered Egypt, driving its foreign Nubian/Kushite and Ethiopian rulers out and destroying the Kushite Empire in the process. He expanded the empire as far south as Arabia and Dilmun (modern Bahrain or Qatar). Esarhaddon also completely rebuilt Babylon during his reign, bringing peace to Mesopotamia as a whole.

The Babylonians, Egyptians, Elamites, Cimmerians, Scythians, Persians, Medes, Manneans, Arameans, Chaldeans, Israelites, Phoenecians and Urartu were vanquished and regarded as vassals and Assyria's empire was kept secure. Esarhaddon died whilst preparing to leave for Egypt to once more eject the Nubians, who were attempting to encroach on the southern part of the country. This task was successfully completed by his successor, Ashurbanipal.

Under Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC) Assyrian domination spanned from the Caucasus Mountains in the north to Nubia, Egypt and Arabia in the south, and from Cyprus and Antioch in the west to Persia in the east.

Ashurbanipal's brutal campaign against Susa in 647 BCE is recorded in this relief.

Ashurbanipal destroyed Elam and smashed a rebellion led by his own brother Shamash-shum-ukin who was the Assyrian king of Babylon, exacting savage revenge on the coalition of Chaldeans, Nabateans, Arameans, Sutu, Arabs and Elamites who had supported him. An Assyrian governor named Kandalanu was installed to rule Babylonia on Ashurbanipal's behalf.

Ashurbanipal easily crushed the Nubian/Cushite king Tantamani, who had attempted to invade Assyrian controlled Egypt, Tantamani fled back to Nubia and was never again to pose a threat. Persia and Media were regarded as vassals of Ashurbanipal.

He built vast libraries and initiated a surge in the building of temples and palaces. After the crushing of the Babylonian revolt Ashurbanipal appeared master of all he surveyed. To the east, Elam was devastated and prostrate before Assyria, the Manneans and the Iranian Persians and Medes were vassals. To the south, Babylonia was occupied, the Chaldeans, Arabs, Sutu and Nabateans subjugated, the Nubian empire
destroyed, and Egypt paid tribute. To the north, the Scythians and Cimmerians had been vanquished and driven from Assyrian territory, Urartu (Armenia), Phrygia, Corduene and the neo-Hittites were in vassalage, and Lydia pleading for Assyrian protection. To the west, Aramea (Syria), the Phoenicians, Israel, Judah, Samarra and Cyprus were subjugated, and the Hellenised inhabitants of Caria, Cilicia, Cappadocia and Commagene paid tribute to Assyria. Assyria now appeared stronger than ever. However, the long struggle with Babylonia and Elam and their allies, and the constant campaigning to control and expand its vast empire in all directions, left Assyria exhausted. It had been drained of wealth and manpower; the devastated provinces could yield nothing to supply the needs of the imperial exchequer, and it was difficult to find sufficient troops to garrison the huge empire.

At its height Assyria conquered the 25th dynasty Egypt (and expelled its Nubian/Kushite dynasty) as well as Babylonia, Chaldea, Elam, Media, Persia, Ararat (Armenia), Phoenicia, Aramea/Syria, Phrygia, the Neo-Hittites, Hurrians, northern Arabia, Gutium, Israel, Judah, Moab, Edom, Corduene, Cilicia, Mannea and parts of Ancient Greece (such as Cyprus), and defeated and/or exacted tribute from Scythia, Cimmeria, Lydia, Nubia, Ethiopia and others.

The Assyrian Empire at its height encompassed the whole of the modern nations of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Palestine and Cyprus, together with swathes of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Sudan, Libya, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

**Downfall, 626–605 BC**

The Assyrian Empire was severely crippled following the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 BC — the nation descending into a prolonged and brutal series of civil wars involving three rival kings, Ashur-etil-ilani, Sin-shumu-lishir and Sin-shar-ishkun.

Ashur-etil-ilani came to the throne in 626 BC, and was immediately beset by a series of internal civil wars. He was deposed in 623 BC, after four years of bitter fighting by Sin-shumu-lishir, an Assyrian Turtanu (General) who also occupied and claimed the throne of Babylon in that year. In turn, Sin-shumu-lishir was deposed as ruler of Assyria and Babylonia after a year of warfare by Sin-shar-ishkun (622 - 612 BC) — who was then himself faced with constant violent rebellion in the Assyrian homeland. This situation led to wholesale revolution in Babylonia, and during his reign many Assyrian colonies to the west, east and north similarly took advantage and ceased to pay tribute to Assyria, most significantly the Medes, Persians and Scythians.

By 620 BC, Nabopolassar, a member of the Chaldean people from the far southeast of Mesopotamia, had claimed the city of Babylon and much of Babylonia in the confusion. Sin-shar-ishkun amassed a large army to eject Nabopolassar from Babylon, however yet another revolt broke out in Assyria proper, forcing the bulk of his army to turn back, where they promptly joined the rebels in Nineveh; similarly, Nabopolassar was unable to make any inroads into Assyria despite its weakened state, being repelled at every attempt, and the next four years saw bitter fighting in the heart of Babylonia itself, as the Assyrians tried to wrest back control.[1]

However, Nabopolassar entered into an alliance with the Median king Cyaxares the Great, who had taken advantage of the upheavals in Assyria to free the Iranian peoples from Assyrian vassalage and unite the Iranian Medes, Persians and Parthians, together with the remnants of the pre-Iranic Elamites and Manneans, into a powerful Median-dominated force. The Babylonians and Medes, together with the Scythians and Cimmerians to the north, attacked Assyria in 616 BC, sacking the city of Kalhu. After four years of bitter fighting, Nineveh itself was finally sacked in 612 BC, after a prolonged siege followed by house to house fighting. Sin-shar-ishkun was killed defending his capital.
Despite the loss of almost all of its major cities, and in the face of overwhelming odds, Assyrian resistance continued. Ashur-uballit II (612-605 BC) took the throne and refused a request to bow in vassalage to Nabopolassar, Cyaxares and their allies. He managed to break out of Nineveh and successfully fight his way to Harran which he took and founded a new capital. However Harran too was eventually over run in 608 BC. Egypt, itself a former Assyrian colony whose current dynasty had been installed as puppet rulers by the Assyrians, then came to Assyria's aid, possibly in fear that without Assyria they would be next to succumb.[1]

Ashur-uballit II and Necho of Egypt made a failed attempt to recapture Harran in 608 BC. The next three years saw the remnants of the Assyrian army and their Egyptian allies vainly attempting to eject the invaders from Assyria. In 605 BC, the Babylonians and Medes defeated the Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish, bringing an end to Assyria as an independent political entity, although it was to launch a major rebellion against the Achaemenid Empire in 520 BC, and remained a geo-political region and colonised province until the late 7th century AD.

The fate of Ashur-uballit II remains unknown, his Limmu Lists end after the fall of Harran, and it is possible he was either killed at this time, at the battle of Carshemish in 605 BC, or simply dissapeared into obscurity.

Assyria after the empire

See also: Assyrian continuity

Athura, Assuristan, Assyria province

Assyria was ruled by Babylon from 605 BC until 539 BC, and in a twist of fate, Nabonidus the last king of Babylon was himself an Assyrian from Harran; however apart from plans to dedicate religious temples in that city, Nabonidus showed little interest in rebuilding Assyria. Nineveh and Kalhu remained in ruins, conversely a number of towns and cities such as Arrapkha, Guzana and Harran remained intact, and Assur and Arbela were not completely destroyed, as is attested by their later revival. However, Assyria spent much of this period in a degree of devastation following its fall.

After this, it was ruled by the Persian Achaemenid Empire (as Athura) from 539 BC to 330 BC (see Achaemenid Assyria). Assyria seems to have recovered dramatically, and flourished during this period. It became a major agricultural and administrative centre of the Achaemenid Empire, and its soldiers were a mainstay of the Persian Army.[3] In fact Assyria even became powerful enough to raise a full scale revolt against the empire in 520 BC. The Persians had spent centuries under Assyrian domination, and Assyrian influence can be seen in Achaemenid art, infrastructure and administration. Early Persian rulers saw themselves as successors to Ashurbanipal, and Mesopotamian Aramaic was retained as the lingua franca of the empire for over two hundred years.[3] Nineveh was never rebuilt however, and 200 years after it was sacked Xenophon reported only small numbers of people living amongst its ruins.

In 330 BC, Assyria fell to Alexander the Great, the Macedonian Emperor from Greece; it thereafter became part of the Seleucid Empire and was renamed Syria, a Hurrian, Luwian and Greek corruption of Assyria.[3] It is from this period that the later Syria Vs Assyria naming controversy arises, the Seleucids applied the name not only to Assyria itself, but also to the lands to the west (Aram modern Syria) which had been part of the Assyrian empire. When they lost control of Assyria itself, the name Syria survived and was applied only to the land of Aramea to the west, that had once been part of the Assyrian empire. This was to lead to both the Assyrians from Mesopotamia and Arameans from the Levant being dubbed Syrians in Greco-Roman culture.

By 150 BC, Assyria was under the control of the Parthian Empire as Athura (the Parthian word for Assyria) where the Assyrian city of Assur seems to have gained a degree of autonomy, and temples to the native
The gods of Assyria were resurrected. A number of neo-Assyrian states arose, namely Adiabene,Osroene and Hatra.

In 116 AD, under Trajan, it was taken over by Rome as the Roman Province of Assyria. The Assyrians began to convert to Christianity from Ashurism during the period between the early 1st and 3rd centuries AD. Romans and Parthians fought over Assyria and the rest of Mesopotamia until 226 AD, when it was taken over by the Sassanid (Persian) Empire.

It was known as Assuristan during this period, and became a main centre of the Church of the East (now the Assyrian Church of the East), with a flourishing Syriac (Assyrian) Christian culture which exists there to this day. The city of Ashur again flourished, and appears to have gained a great deal of autonomy during this period. The noted Assyriologist Simo Parpola has speculated that it may even have once again been independent for a while prior to being sacked by Shapur I in 256 AD. Temples were still being dedicated to the national god Ashur in his home city and in Harran during the 4th century, indicating an Assyrian identity was still strong.

After the Arab Islamic conquest in the 7th century Assyria was dissolved as an entity. Under Arab rule Mesopotamia as a whole underwent a process of Arabisation and Islamification, and the region saw a large influx of non indigenous Arabs, Kurds, and later Turkic peoples. However, a percentage of the indigenous Assyrian population (known as Ashuriyun by the Arabs) resisted this process, Assyrian Aramaic language and Church of the East Christianity were still dominant in the north, as late as the 11th and 12th centuries.\[33\] The city of Assur was still occupied by Assyrians during the Islamic period until the 14th century when Tamurlane conducted a massacre of indigenous Assyrian Christians. After that there are no traces of a settlement in the archaeological and numismatic record.\[34\] The massacres by Tamurlane massively reduced the Assyrian population throughout Mesopotamia. The Hamidian Massacre of the 19th Century further greatly reduced numbers. An Assyrian war of independence was fought during World War I following the Assyrian Genocide suffered at the hands of the Ottomans and their Kurdish allies. The Assyrians fought successfully against overwhelming numbers for a time, until their Russian allies left the war and the Armenian line broke. The Assyrian Levies were founded by the British in 1928, with ancient Assyrian military rankings such as Rab-shakeh, Rab-talia and Tartan, being revived for the first time in millennia for this force. The Assyrians were prized by the British rulers for their fighting qualities, loyalty, bravery and discipline, and were used to help the British put down insurrections among the Arabs and Kurds.\[35\] During World War II, Eleven Assyrian companies saw action in Palestine and another four served in Cyprus. The Parachute Company was attached to the Royal Marine Commando and were involved in fighting in Albania, Italy and Greece. Many persecutions have befallen the Assyrians since, such as the Simele Massacre, Anfal campaign and Baathist, Kurdish and Islamist persecutions.

Germany and West Africa theories

Thus far the only people who have been attested with a high level of genetic, historical, linguistic and cultural research to be the descendants of the ancient Mesopotamians are the Assyrian Christians of Iraq and its surrounding areas in north west Iran, north east Syria and south eastern Turkey. Assyria continued to exist as a geopolitical entity until the Arab-Islamic conquest in the mid-7th century, and Assyrian identity, personal names and both spoken and written evolutions of Mesopotamian Aramaic (which still contain many Akkadian loan words) have survived among the Assyrian people from ancient times to this day. (see Assyrian people).

However, there have been many wild claims of ancient mid eastern ancestry (including Assyrian) throughout Europe, Africa and even the Americas, none of which have been supported by mainstream opinion or strong evidence, let alone proof.
The most long standing and popularised theory has been the attempts to link Assyrian ancestry to the ancient Germans. The idea has also some backing in German legend, for example the *Gesta Treverorum* (a 12th century German medieval chronicle) makes Trebeta son of Ninus the founder of Trier. This legend of Trebeta as having founded Trier is also found in Godfrey of Viterbo's *Pantheon* (1185) and several other German chronicles of the 12th or 13th century, including the works of Sigebert of Gembloux. The legend is also found cited in compilations of historical sources from later periods, for example Gottfried Leibniz's *Scriptures rerum Brunsvicensium* (1710) and the *Anthologia veterum latinorum epigrammatum et poematum* (1835).

As with the West Africa theory, this idea does not have the backing of serious historians, nor contemporary written records of the time in the Near East. There have been no studies or records which show such a link, and it must be pointed out that Ninus and Trebeta were fictional figures, and not historically attested. In addition, there are no traces of Akkadian or Mesopotamian Aramaic in any Germanic Language.

According to a single unsupported piece of recent research, refugees from the collapsed Assyrian Empire claim to have reached the region of Lake Chad and founded the kingdoms of Kanem and Kebbi. These alleged refugees claimed the ancestry of Sargon of Akkad (whose dynasty died out some 15 centuries before the fall of Assyria), they also contradictionally claimed ancestry from Nabopolassar, a Babylonian king of Chaldean extraction who played a major part in the destruction of the Assyrian Empire. From the Medieval Arabic king lists of both African states, allegedly copied from earlier lists in ancient Near Eastern languages it appears that the state founders claimed to be deportees of the Assyrian empire who had fled from Syria and Samaria after the defeat of the Egyptian-Assyrian army at Carchemish in 605 BCE.

A counterpoint to this argument would be that neither Samaria nor Syria where these refugees were claimed to have originated from were actually ever part of Assyria, but were colonies inhabited largely by Hebrews, Nabateans and Arameans respectively. In addition, there is no evidence whatsoever in Assyrian, Babylonian, Median, Persian, Greek or Egyptian records of the time mentioning deportations of Assyrians from their homelands.

Additionally, the claimants to this ancestry also claim descendancy from Sargon of Akkad (whose dynasty died out over 1500 years before the Assyrian dynasty fell), and from Nabopolassar, who was a Chaldean, politically and militarily opposed to Assyria, and not in fact an Assyrian.

**Assyrian Religion**

The Assyrians, like the rest of the Mesopotamian peoples, followed the Sumero-Akkadian Mesopotamian Religion, with the national god Ashur having pride of place at the head of the pantheon.

Other major gods within the pantheon were: Anu, Baal, Ea, Enlil, Ishtar (Astarte), Shamash, Tammuz, Adad/Hadad, Sin (Nanna), Dagan, Ninurta, Nisroch, Nergal, Tiamat, Ninil, Mullissu, Zababa and El.

Native religion survived at least until the 4th century, although Assyrians had begun to adopt Eastern Rite Christianity which had its birthplace in Assyria between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, which they still adhere to this day.

**Language**

During the 3rd millennium BC, there developed a very intimate cultural symbiosis between the Sumerians and the Akkadians, which included widespread bilingualism. The influence of Sumerian on Akkadian (and vice versa) is evident in all areas, from lexical borrowing on a massive scale,
to syntactic, morphological, and phonological convergence. This has prompted scholars to refer to Sumerian and Akkadian in the 3rd millennium BC as a *sprachbund*.

Akkadian gradually replaced Sumerian as the spoken language of Mesopotamia somewhere around the turn of the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BC (the exact dating being a matter of debate), but Sumerian continued to be used as a sacred, ceremonial, literary and scientific language in Mesopotamia until the 1st century AD.

In ancient times Assyrians spoke a dialect of the Akkadian language, an eastern branch of the Semitic languages. The first inscriptions, called Old Assyrian (OA), were made in the Old Assyrian period. In the Neo-Assyrian period the Aramaic language became increasingly common, more so than Akkadian — this was thought to be largely due to the mass deportations undertaken by Assyrian kings, in which large Aramaic-speaking populations, conquered by the Assyrians, were relocated to Assyria and interbred with the Assyrians. The ancient Assyrians also used the Sumerian language in their literature and liturgy, although to a more limited extent in the Middle- and Neo-Assyrian periods, when Akkadian became the main literary language.

The destruction of the Assyrian capitals of Nineveh and Assur by the Babylonians, Medes and their allies ensured that much of the bilingual elite (but not all) were wiped out. By the 7th century BC, much of the Assyrian population used Akkadian influenced Eastern Aramaic and not Akkadian itself. The last Akkadian inscriptions in Mesopotamia date from the 1st century AD. However, Eastern Aramaic dialects, as well as Akkadian and Mesopotamian Aramaic personal and family names, still survive to this day among Assyrians in the regions of northern Iraq, southeast Turkey, northwest Iran and northeast Syria that constituted old Assyria.

After 90 years of effort, the University of Chicago has published an Assyrian Dictionary, whose form is more encyclopedia in style than dictionary.

**Arts and sciences**

*Main articles: Art of Mesopotamia and Architecture of Mesopotamia*

![Relief from Assyrian capital of Dur Sharrukin](image)

Relief from Assyrian capital of Dur Sharrukin, showing transport of Lebanese cedar (8th century BC)

Assyrian art preserved to the present day predominantly dates to the Neo-Assyrian period. Art depicting battle scenes, and occasionally the impaling of whole villages in gory detail, was intended to show the power of the emperor, and was generally made for propaganda purposes. These stone reliefs lined the walls in the royal palaces where foreigners were received by the king. Other stone reliefs depict the king with different deities and conducting religious ceremonies. Many stone reliefs were discovered in the royal palaces at Nimrud (Kalhu) and Khorsabad (Dur-Sharrukin). A rare discovery of metal plates belonging to wooden doors was made at Balawat (Imgur-Enlil).
Assyrian sculpture reached a high level of refinement in the Neo-Assyrian period. One prominent example is the winged bull Lamassu, or shedu that guard the entrances to the king's court. These were apotropaic meaning they were intended to ward off evil. C. W. Ceram states in The March of Archaeology that lamassi were typically sculpted with five legs so that four legs were always visible, whether the image were viewed frontally or in profile.

Although works of precious gems and metals usually do not survive the ravages of time, some fine pieces of Assyrian jewelry were found in royal tombs at Nimrud.

There is ongoing discussion among academics over the nature of the Nimrud lens, a piece of quartz unearthed by Austen Henry Layard in 1850, in the Nimrud palace complex in northern Iraq. A small minority believe that it is evidence for the existence of ancient Assyrian telescopes, which could explain the great accuracy of Assyrian astronomy. Other suggestions include its use as a magnifying glass for jewellers, or as a decorative furniture inlay. The Nimrud Lens is held in the British Museum.

The Assyrians were also innovative in military technology with the use of heavy cavalry, sappers, siege engines etc.

## Legacy and rediscovery

*Main articles: Achaemenid Assyria, Assyriology, and Assyrianism*

A number of at least partly neo-Assyrian kingdoms existed in the area between in the late classical and early Christian period also; Adiabene, Hatra and Osroene.

Classical historiographers had only retained a very dim picture of Assyria. It was remembered that there had been an Assyrian empire predating the Persian one, but all particulars were lost. Thus
Jerome's *Chronicon* lists 36 kings of the Assyrians, beginning with *Ninus*, son of *Belus*, down to *Sardanapalus*, the last king of the Assyrians before the empire fell to *Arbaces* the Median. Almost none of these have been substantiated as historical, with the exception of the Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian rulers listed in *Ptolemy's Canon*, beginning with *Nabonassar*.

The *modern discovery of Babylonia and Assyria* begins with excavations in *Nineveh* in 1845, which revealed the *Library of Ashurbanipal*. Decipherment of *cuneiform* was a formidable task that took more than a decade, but by 1857, the *Royal Asiatic Society* was convinced that reliable reading of cuneiform texts was possible. *Assyriology* has since pieced together the formerly largely forgotten history of Mesopotamia. In the wake of the archaeological and philological *rediscovery of ancient Assyria*, *Assyrian nationalism* became increasingly popular among the surviving remnants of the *Assyrian people*, and has come to strongly identify with ancient Assyria.