



The Assyrian Empire

MAIN IDEA

EMPIRE BUILDING Assyria developed a military machine and established a well-organized administration.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Some leaders still use military force to extend their rule, stamp out opposition, and gain wealth and power.

TERMS & NAMES

- Assyria
- Sennacherib
- Nineveh
- Ashurbanipal
- Medes
- Chaldeans
- Nebuchadnezzar

SETTING THE STAGE For more than two centuries, the Assyrian army advanced across Southwest Asia. It overwhelmed foes with its military strength. After the Assyrians seized control of Egypt, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon proclaimed, “I tore up the root of Kush, and not one therein escaped to submit to me.” The last Kushite pharaoh retreated to Napata, Kush’s capital city.

A Mighty Military Machine

Beginning around 850 B.C., **Assyria** (uh•SEER•ee•uh) acquired a large empire. It accomplished this by means of a highly advanced military organization and state-of-the-art weaponry. For a time, this campaign of conquest made Assyria the greatest power in Southwest Asia.

The Rise of a Warrior People The Assyrians came from the northern part of Mesopotamia. (See the map on page 96.) Their flat, exposed land made them easy for other people to attack. Invaders frequently swept down into Assyria from the nearby mountains. The Assyrians may have developed their warlike behavior in response to these invasions. Through constant warfare, Assyrian kings eventually built an empire that stretched from east and north of the Tigris River all the way to central Egypt. One of these Assyrian kings, **Sennacherib** (sih•NAK•uhr•ihb), bragged that he had destroyed 89 cities and 820 villages, burned Babylon, and ordered most of its inhabitants killed.

Military Organization and Conquest Assyria was a society that glorified military strength. Its soldiers were well equipped for conquering an empire. Making use of the ironworking technology of the time, the soldiers covered themselves in stiff leather and metal armor. They wore copper or iron helmets, padded loin-cloths, and leather skirts layered with metal scales. Their weapons were iron swords and iron-pointed spears.

Advance planning and technical skill allowed the Assyrians to lay siege to enemy cities. When deep water blocked their passage, engineers would span the rivers with pontoons, or floating structures used to support a bridge. Before attacking, the Assyrians dug beneath the city’s walls to weaken them. Then, with disciplined organization, foot soldiers marched shoulder to shoulder. The foot soldiers approached the city walls and shot wave upon wave of arrows. Meanwhile, another group of troops hammered the city’s gates with massive, iron-tipped battering rams.

TAKING NOTES

Analyzing Causes Use a chart to identify the causes of the rise and decline of Assyrian power.

| Causes for Rise | Causes for Decline |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Need to defend against attacks | Hated by conquered people |



Assyrian Empire, 650 B.C.

GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

- 1. Location** What is the approximate distance between Nineveh and Thebes?
- 2. Location** What is the southernmost part of the Assyrian Empire and to what other empire did it previously belong?

When the city gates finally splintered, the Assyrians showed no mercy. They killed or enslaved their victims. To prevent their enemies from rebelling again, the Assyrians forced captives to settle far away in the empire's distant provinces and dependent states.

The Empire Expands

Between 850 and 650 B.C., the kings of Assyria defeated Syria, Palestine, and Babylonia. Eventually, the Assyrians ruled lands that extended far beyond the Fertile Crescent into Anatolia and Egypt.

Assyrian Rule At its peak around 650 B.C., the Assyrian Empire included almost all of the old centers of civilization and power in

Southwest Asia. Assyrian officials governed lands closest to Assyria as provinces and made them dependent territories. Assyrian kings controlled these dependent regions by choosing their rulers or by supporting kings who aligned themselves with Assyria. The Assyrian system of having local governors report to a central authority became the fundamental model of administration, or system of government management.

In addition, the military campaigns added new territory to the empire. These additional lands brought taxes and tribute to the Assyrian treasury. If a conquered people refused to pay, the Assyrians destroyed their cities and sent the people into exile. Such methods enabled the Assyrians to effectively govern an extended empire.

Assyrian Culture Some of Assyria's most fearsome warriors earned reputations as great builders. For example, the same King Sennacherib who had burned Babylon also established Assyria's capital at **Nineveh** (NIHN•uh•vuh) along the Tigris River. This great walled city, about three miles long and a mile wide, was the largest city of its day. In the ruins of Nineveh and other Assyrian cities, archaeologists found finely carved sculptures. Two artistic subjects particularly fascinated the Assyrians: brutal military campaigns and the lion hunt.

Nineveh also held one of the ancient world's largest libraries. In this unique library, King **Ashurbanipal** (AH•shur•BAH•nuh•PAHL) collected more than 20,000 clay tablets from throughout the Fertile Crescent. The collection included the ancient Sumerian poem the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and provided historians with much information about the earliest civilizations in Southwest Asia. The library was the first to have many of the features of a modern library. For instance, the collection was organized into many rooms according to subject matter. The collection was also cataloged. Europeans would not use a library cataloging system for centuries.

> Analyzing Primary Sources

INTERACTIVE

Assyrian Sculpture

This relief shows ferocious Assyrian warriors attacking a fortified city. A relief is a sculpture that has figures standing out from a flat background. The Assyrian war machine included a variety of weapons and methods of attack.

1 Ladders

Assyrian archers launched waves of arrows against opponents defending the city walls. Meanwhile, Assyrian troops threw their ladders up against the walls and began their climb into the enemy's stronghold.

2 Weapons

Troops were armed with the best weapons of the time, iron-tipped spears, as well as iron daggers and swords. They were also protected with armor and large shields.

3 Tactics

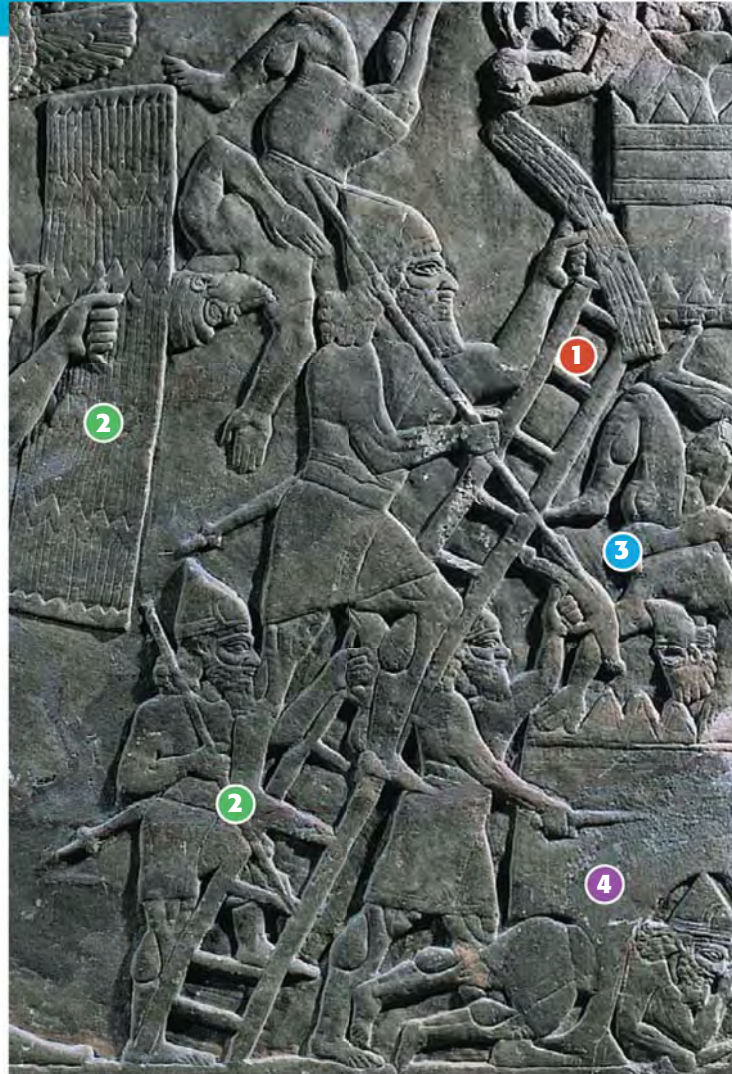
The Assyrians were savage in their treatment of defeated opponents. Those who were not slaughtered in the initial attack were often impaled or beheaded, while women and children were sometimes murdered or sold into slavery.

4 Tunnels

The Assyrian army used sappers—soldiers who dug tunnels to sap, or undermine, the foundations of the enemy's walls so that they would fall.

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Visual Sources

1. **Making Inferences** *What emotions might the relief have inspired in the Assyrian people?*
2. **Making Inferences** *How might the Assyrians' enemies have reacted to the sculpture?*



The Empire Crumbles

Ashurbanipal proved to be one of the last of the mighty Assyrian kings. Assyrian power had spread itself too thin. Also, the cruelty displayed by the Assyrians had earned them many enemies. Shortly after Ashurbanipal's death, Nineveh fell.

Decline and Fall In 612 B.C., a combined army of **Medes** (meedz), **Chaldeans** (kal•DEE•uhnz), and others burned and leveled Nineveh. However, because the clay writing tablets in Nineveh's library had been baked in a pottery oven, many survived the fire.

Most people in the region rejoiced at Nineveh's destruction. The Hebrew prophet Nahum (NAY•huhm) gave voice to the feelings of many:

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Primary Sources

A What was Nahum's opinion on the collapse of the Assyrian Empire?

PRIMARY SOURCE **A**

And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon thee shall flee from thee, and say, Nineveh is laid waste: who will bemoan her? Whence shall I seek comforters for thee? . . . Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria: thy nobles shall dwell in the dust: thy people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathereth them.

NAHUM 3:7, 18 (Bible)

Rebirth of Babylon Under the Chaldeans After defeating the Assyrians, the Chaldeans made Babylon their capital. Around 600 B.C., Babylon became the center



▲ This is an artist's rendering of the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon. Slaves watered the plants by using hidden pumps that drew water from the Euphrates River.

of a new empire, more than 1,000 years after Hammurabi had ruled there. A Chaldean king named **Nebuchadnezzar** (NEHB•uh•kuhd•NEHZ•uhr) restored the city. Perhaps the most impressive part of the restoration was the famous hanging gardens. Greek scholars later listed them as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. According to legend, one of Nebuchadnezzar's wives missed the flowering shrubs of her mountain homeland. To please her, he had fragrant trees and shrubs planted on terraces that rose 75 feet above Babylon's flat, dry plain.

Indeed, the entire city was a wonder. Its walls were so thick that, according to one report, a four-horse chariot could wheel

around on top of them. To ensure that the world knew who ruled Babylon, the king had the bricks inscribed with the words, "I am Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon."

The highest building in Babylon was a great, seven-tiered ziggurat more than 300 feet high. It was visible for miles. At night, priests observed the stars from the top of this tower and others in the city. Chaldean astronomers kept detailed records of how the stars and planets seemed to change position in the night sky. They also concluded that the sun, moon, Earth, and five other planets belonged to the same solar system. The Chaldeans' observations formed the basis for both astronomy and astrology.

Nebuchadnezzar's empire fell shortly after his death. The Persians who next came to power adopted many Assyrian military, political, and artistic inventions. The Persians would use the organization the Assyrians had developed to stabilize the region.

SECTION

2

ASSESSMENT

TERMS & NAMES 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Assyria
- Sennacherib
- Nineveh
- Ashurbanipal
- Medes
- Chaldeans
- Nebuchadnezzar

USING YOUR NOTES

2. Why did the Assyrians develop into a great military power? Why did their power decline?

Assyrian Power

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Causes For Rise</i> | <i>Causes for Decline</i> |
| <i>Need to defend against attacks</i> | <i>Hated by conquered people</i> |

MAIN IDEAS

3. What methods did the Assyrians use when they attacked enemy cities?
4. What contributions to government administration and culture did the Assyrians make?
5. Why did the people in the region rejoice when the Assyrian Empire was defeated?

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **FORMING OPINIONS** Do you think the Assyrians' almost exclusive reliance on military power was a good strategy for creating their empire? Why or why not?
7. **MAKING INFERENCES** Why might the Assyrian warrior kings have had such a great interest in writing and reading?
8. **COMPARING** In what ways were King Ashurbanipal and King Nebuchadnezzar similar?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **EMPIRE BUILDING** Write a one-paragraph **essay** on how developments in technology influenced the rise and decline of the Assyrian Empire.

CONNECT TO TODAY CREATING A POSTER

Research an instance when a modern ruler used excessive force to govern or put down opposition. Create a **poster** that tells about and illustrates the ruler and the event.