

The Assyrians

Assyria was a civilization in Mesopotamia on the upper Tigris River. The civilization lasted many centuries, but was most prominent between 1600 B.C. and 612 B.C. Assyria had several advantages over Babylonia. Assyrians could farm without the elaborate irrigation that was needed in Babylonia. The land not only received water from the Tigris River and its tributaries, but it also received a moderate amount of rainfall annually. Also, Assyria had rocks and stones that could be used for building. Assyria had two disadvantages, however, compared to Babylonia. The Assyrian land was harder to cultivate, and they were often attacked by barbarians who raided their villages.

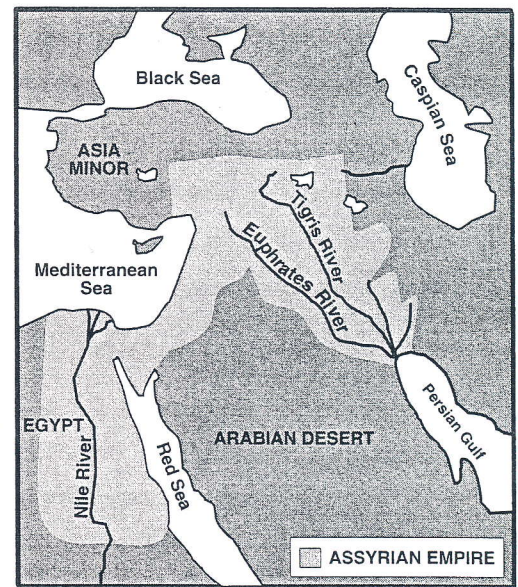
Assyrians were a Semitic-speaking people who arrived in Mesopotamia about 2000 B.C. Assyria was named after its original capital, Ashur. Ashur became part of the Mesopotamian empire but eventually gained its independence in about 1365 B.C. Assyrians developed a thriving trade in Anatolia (Asia Minor). Eventually, the Hittites drove the Assyrians out of Anatolia, and when the Babylonian Kingdom became stronger under the leadership of King Hammurabi, Assyrian power in Mesopotamia grew weaker. By 1550 B.C. Assyria became part of the Mitanni Kingdom. The notable achievement of the Mitanni Kingdom was that it introduced trained horses and chariots into this part of the world.

Gradually, Assyrian power grew and by 1100 B.C. it was strong enough to begin expanding. Assyria's method of expansion was very different from those of other civilizations. The Assyrians developed a **standing army**, which is composed of soldiers who choose the army as their career. When the soldiers are not fighting, they are still in the army training to fight. This was a revolutionary idea in this period. Other countries fought their wars with citizen-soldiers. A **citizen-soldier** fights a war, and after it is over, he returns home and resumes his life working at his former craft or career.

The Assyrian soldiers were fierce and cruel warriors. They had weapons made of iron rather than copper or bronze. They also had battering rams. They not only had foot soldiers, they had archers, chariots, and a cavalry. Whenever they captured enemies, they would either murder them or make them slaves.

Captured cities were plundered and looted. Once a city was conquered by the Assyrians, the citizens of the city were required to pay taxes and tribute to the Assyrians. The Assyrians built forts close to these cities, and a governor was appointed to administer each of these forts. The governor reported directly to the king by sending reports by messengers on horseback—the first mail delivery service.

However, the success of the Assyrians was also their undoing. Because their kingdom was so large, it was impossible to maintain. There were too few soldiers, so mercenaries were hired to serve in the army. A **mercenary** is a foreign soldier hired by another country to fight in its army. Eventually, the Assyrians were vanquished by the Medes, Chaldeans, and the Babylonians. The capital city of Nineveh was razed.



ASSYRIAN CIVILIZATION AT A GLANCE

WHERE: Northern Mesopotamia

WHEN: 1600 B.C.–612 B.C.

ACHIEVEMENTS:

- Created the first library
- Built a system of roads
- Ruled their extended kingdom with appointed governors
- First to develop a standing army
- Developed a mail service