Akkadian Empire

Over 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia—the area of modern-day Iraq—the Akkadians set up the first known unified kingdom. Before the rise of the Akkadians Mesopotamia was made up of many city-states (states centered around a city), each with its own king, territory, and towns. In the south were the Sumerians, and in the north were peoples who spoke a Semitic language. This language was quite distinct from the language spoken by the Sumerians, but otherwise the northerners were similar to their Sumerian neighbors.

In around 2334 B.C. a Semitic-speaking official at the court of the king of a city-state in Mesopotamia called Kish overthrew the king and assumed the royal powers himself. He called himself Sargon (meaning “true king”), and from Kish he marched against the strongest ruler in the region—the Sumerian overlord and king of Uruk, Lugalzagesi. Sargon defeated Lugalzagesi and then attacked and defeated three more cities in southern Mesopotamia—Ur, Lagash, and Umma—and tore down their walls. He then marched to the shores of the Persian Gulf and, to show that his authority was unchallenged from Kish to the gulf, washed his weapons in its salt waters.

A New Capital City

Sargon built his new royal capital at Agade (or Akkad) on the Euphrates River near modern-day Baghdad. His kingdom, Akkad, and its people the Akkadians were named after the city. People came from all over the empire to Agade to trade their goods, such as goats, cattle, and asses. The city had a vast port, and ships from as far away as Egypt and India docked there.

Sargon led more campaigns to Elam, in the mountains east of Mesopotamia, and westward toward the mountains of Lebanon. In the west the Akkadians gained access to important resources, such as silver and cedar wood. In the east the Akkadians made the Elamites move their capital from Elam to Susa and forced them to speak Akkadian.

Sargon the Great, as he now called himself, ruled over his empire until

▲ This copper head is a portrait of the first Akkadian king, Sargon the Great, who ruled his empire in Mesopotamia for more than 50 years.
2279 B.C. His authority weakened in the later years of his reign, when he had to face revolts from some of his subjects in Sumeria. But he crushed them and handed over his mighty empire to his son Rimush.

Rimush (ruled 2278–2270 B.C.) continued to subdue rebellious cities but was killed by his courtiers, who stabbed him with their cylinder seals (stamps used for cuneiform writing).

Rimush was stabbed to death with cuneiform cylinder seals

He was succeeded by his brother Manishtusu (ruled 2269–2255 B.C.). Manishtusu found that although Elam had been defeated, the western part of the empire had recovered its independence. This threatened the routes Akkadian traders used in search of metals to make bronze. So the king led an expedition to the eastern end of the Persian Gulf, where he found a regular supply of the metals needed.

Manishtusu's heir Naram-Sin (ruled 2254–2218 B.C.) spent most of his reign at war. In the west he returned northern Syria to Akkadian rule. In the north he conquered the Assyrians and defeated the Hurrians. In the east he put down a revolt among the Akkadian subjects around the waters of the Persian Gulf. He also defeated his most powerful enemy, the Lullubi, who lived in the foothills of the nearby Zagros Mountains. Naram-Sin liked to call himself “king of the four quarters, king of the universe.”

The Akkadian Empire did not survive long after the death of Naram-Sin. His successor, Shar-kali-Sharri (ruled 2217–2193 B.C.), was killed by his own people. Internal divisions among Shar-kali-Sharri's successors, invasions by tribes from the Zagros Mountains, and a long period of drought all contributed to the end of the Akkadian Empire.

The Akkadians ruled their empire with the help of a mighty army. King Sargon had 5,400 soldiers—all of whom he fed every day. The Akkadians tore down the walls of cities that rebelled,