The Assyrians were a warlike people from Mesopotamia in the ancient Middle East. They fought and defeated many of their neighbors, building an empire that stretched west as far as the Mediterranean Sea and east to the Persian Gulf.

Originally, the people of Assyria lived in a region in northern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) around the Tigris River. This was a land of rolling hills and valleys. It was a fertile country where the people grew crops of barley and sesame, and kept herds of animals such as cattle, goats, and sheep.

The history of Assyria is often divided into three periods: the Old, Middle, and New Empires. In the Old Empire (2000–1450 B.C.) the Assyrians set up city-states, notably Ashur on the banks of the Tigris River. Each city was a collection of houses, temples, and palaces built inside a city wall. Assyrian merchants grew rich by trading copper with the people of Anatolia in the northwest—and Assyrian colonies grew up along the trading routes.

**The End of an Empire**

From 1813 to 1781 B.C. Assyria was ruled by a warrior-chief, Shamshi-Adad. His conquests greatly increased Assyrian lands. However, during his son's reign Assyria was attacked and conquered by Hammurabi, King of Babylon, which brought the Old Empire to an end. Assyria was ruled by Babylon and later, around 1450 B.C., by the Mitannians from northern Syria.

In 1363 B.C. King Ashur-uballit I restored Assyria's independence. This began the Middle Empire, which lasted until 1000 B.C. During this time Assyrian kings fought against their neighbors and won new lands. At the same time, Assyrian culture was enriched by neighboring civilizations, and its influence increased.

**A New Empire**

During the time of the New Empire (1000–612 B.C.) Assyrian power reached its greatest height. The empire was ruled by a series of ruthless warrior-kings who showed no mercy in their search for new lands to conquer. One of the fiercest, Tiglath-pileser III, conquered and destroyed the main
ASSYRIAN BATTLE TACTICS
Every campaign was carried out with minimum use of force to save Assyrian lives. When he had decided to conquer a new region, the king would select a target city and lay siege to it to cut off its supplies. When the enemy was weakened, the battle would begin.

During the assault the archers of the army and other soldiers with slings kept the defenders at bay with a hail of arrows and missiles. While this was going on, wooden siege engines were rolled up to batter the gates and walls. Soldiers would also scale the walls with ladders to get into the city.

Once the city was taken, the Assyrians showed no mercy to its citizens. They took some prisoners, to be taken away to be slaves. Most of the citizens were massacred, and their mangled bodies set on stakes around the edges of the city to scare the whole region into surrender. Back in the Assyrian capital, the king would lead a triumphal procession through the streets to the temple to give news of the victory to the warrior god Ashur.

When Sennacherib was king of the Assyrians in the seventh century, he moved the capital to Nineveh. There he built a magnificent palace with beautiful gardens. This stone sculpture on the walls of the palace shows a musician playing a harp in the gardens.
A MAGNIFICENT CITY
The Assyrians built many fine cities. Throughout the centuries, the capital of the empire was located in different places by various kings. During the Old and Middle Empires Ashur was the capital and held the kings’ tombs. Around 880 B.C. King Ashurnasirpal II built a new capital further north, at Nimrud (also called Kalhu).

Craftsmen from all over the empire were brought in to work on the buildings of the new city. When the royal palace was finally completed, King Ashurnasirpal celebrated by giving a huge banquet to which he invited 69,500 guests. The feasting lasted for 10 days, and during this time the guests consumed 10,000 vessels of wine and ate 14,000 sheep.

In the seventh century B.C. King Sennacherib moved the capital again, this time to Nineveh, which was also set on the banks of the Tigris River. There he built a “palace without rival,” with beautiful gardens.

Each of the Assyrian capitals was protected by high city walls and held temples to the chief gods and a ziggurat—a temple mound shaped like a pyramid with steps. The halls and shady courtyards of the palaces spread over several acres. The throne room was the most impressive building in the palace. The king’s throne was guarded by giant statues of winged lions or bulls with human heads. The palace walls were decorated with carvings showing battles, scenes of conquered peoples bringing tributes, or lion hunts.

▼ Hunting was a favorite sport of the Assyrian kings. This stone carving on the walls of King Ashurnasirpal’s palace at Nimrud shows the king in his chariot taking aim with his bow and arrow at a lion that is attacking him.
Assyria's position at the crossroads of east-west and north-south trade routes meant it could trade easily with its neighbors. The Assyrians exported textiles and imported wood, wine, precious metals and stones, horses, and camels. Goods were exchanged using a system of barter based on different metals—such as silver, tin, and copper.

The Assyrians wrote using cuneiform script, a system of wedge-shaped symbols developed by the Babylonians. During the seventh century B.C. King Ashurbanipal built up a large library of clay tablets that came from all over Assyria, Babylonia, and neighboring countries. Some of the tablets were historical accounts of Assyrian conquests; others were legal documents, medical records, or records of myths and prayers.

The Assyrians also worshiped some of the same gods and goddesses as the Babylonians. They revered Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war, the storm god Adad, and Ninurta, the god of war and hunting. However, their main god, the warrior-god Ashur, was their own. The king held the position of chief priest as well as being ruler and commander of the army.

**THE ORDINARY PEOPLE**
Most Assyrians were simple farmers or herders. They kept flocks of goats, sheep, and cattle, and grew crops such as barley, sesame, vegetables, and grapes in irrigated fields. In the cities people might work as craftsmen or traders. They, too, grew fruit and vegetables in little gardens outside the city walls. Everyone, from wealthy landowners to peasants and slaves, had to follow the strict code of Assyrian law. The law punished wrongdoers harshly. Penalties for crimes ranged from beatings to mutilation, and even death.

**SEE ALSO:**
- **AKKADIAN EMPIRE**
- **BABYLONIA**
- **HITTITES**
- **LEGAL CODES**
- **MESOPOTAMIA**
- **SUMERIANS**
cities of Israel and the Mediterranean kingdom of Phoenicia during the eighth century B.C. Prisoners were either killed or exiled to other parts of the empire, so that there would be no resistance to Assyrian rule.

**Luxuries for the King**

Conquered lands became provinces of the empire, ruled by governors appointed by the king. Each year the provinces were forced to send gold, silver, food, animals, or fine cloths and luxuries to the Assyrian capital. Tiglath-pileser's successors used the same tactics. In the eighth century B.C. Assyrian kings conquered Israel and the state of Urartu in Anatolia. In the seventh century even Egypt was conquered, and the cities of Babylon, Thebes, and Susa were sacked. By now, however, the Assyrian Empire had become so vast that it was difficult to rule. The Assyrians had made many enemies. Now these enemies attacked their oppressors. In 614 and 612 B.C. Babylonians and Medes from Persia invaded Assyria and sacked the cities of Ashur and Nineveh. By 608 B.C. the Assyrian Empire had been destroyed.

**Assyrian Crafts**

The Assyrians were skilled craftsmen. They learned many of their techniques from the Babylonians, but they developed their own style. Assyrian sculptors were very good at carving pictures in stone on walls. When they were first done, the carvings were painted in bright colors, but today only the beautiful lines of the bare stone remain. The Assyrians also worked with gold, bronze, and other metals, and made smaller carvings in ivory, stone, and wood. Small cylinders with pictures carved on their surface were used to make marks on clay tablets to seal important documents. These delicate impressions show scenes from myths and legends.
A DEADLY ARMY

At its height during the New Empire the Assyrian army was one of the deadliest and most efficient fighting forces the world had ever known. In earlier years, most Assyrian soldiers had been part-time—peasants and farmers forced to fight in times of war. But in the eighth century B.C. the army was reorganized into a force of full-time soldiers.

The army was mainly made up of foot soldiers, provided by landowners and the conquered provinces. But there were divisions of cavalry and chariot troops too, who came from the rich elite. Soldiers were issued leather or chainmail armor and shields, and spears, slings, battleaxes, maces, swords, and daggers for hand-to-hand fighting. Each unit of 50 men was led by a captain. Units of archers were protected by their own soldiers who carried large shields and spears.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

An inscription from the time of King Sennacherib describes in his own words how he overcame King Hezekiah of Judah:

"I besieged 45 of his 46 towns and many small villages nearby. I conquered them, building embankments, putting up siege towers, and pushing them close to the walls with assault troops. ... I looted the towns and deported 200,150 people as prisoners."

A carving on the walls of the palace of Nineveh shows Ashurbanipal II and his queen being served a victory feast.

Usually the king led the army into battle himself. By the eighth century it had become customary for the king to lead a new campaign every year, either to collect taxes from distant parts of the empire or to conquer new lands. First, the king would inspect his troops, then he led them through the provinces.