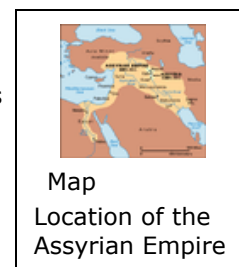


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Assyria

**Assyria**, «uh SIHR ee uh», was an ancient country on the upper Tigris River in Mesopotamia. It covered roughly the northern part of present-day Iraq. Assyria's civilization was similar in many ways to that of ancient Babylonia, its southern neighbor. People began settling in Assyria about 8500 B.C. In the 800's B.C., the Assyrians started to build an empire that lasted until the end of the 600's B.C.



The Assyrians have been called the *Romans of Asia* because they were great conquerors. During the days of their empire, they won their victories in the Roman way—by superb organization, weapons, and equipment.

### The land

Assyria was a land of rolling hills. The Tigris River and the small streams that fed it kept the valleys fertile. To the north rose the steep Armenian Mountains. On the east were the Zagros Mountains and the high hills of Iran. These mountainous lands did not attract the Assyrians much. The Assyrians were more interested in the rich lands of Babylonia and the fertile plains of western Mesopotamia and Syria. Assyria had a better natural climate for agriculture than Babylonia did. It was cooler there, and the rainfall was heavier. But irrigation was much easier on the Babylonian plain than in the Assyrian hills. Once started on the path of conquest, the Assyrians took much more than the fertile farmland nearby. Their empire came to include forests, areas with mineral resources, and other kinds of land. Assyria itself remained a farming country. It also had plenty of good building stone, some timber, and a small amount of minerals.

### Way of life

The Assyrian people dressed in coatlike garments called *tunics* and wore sandals. The men often wore their hair long, and many grew beards. Many high-ranking officials wore long, squared-off beards. Most other men had short beards. Married women often wore veils outside their homes.

Most Assyrians worked for Assyrian rulers or other powerful people. Farmers lived in small villages on estates and worked the land. They lived in houses with thatched roofs and walls made of intertwined branches and mud. Farmers raised livestock and produced milk and other dairy products. The chief crop was barley.



Assyria had few large cities. The most important were Assur, Nineveh, and Kalhu (also spelled Calah, but now called Nimrud). Most city dwellers were craftworkers or traders. Craftworkers made pottery, as well as objects of gold, silver, bronze, ivory, and wood. High walls, guarded by archers, encircled the cities to protect residents from attack. Citizens tended gardens and orchards just outside the city walls.

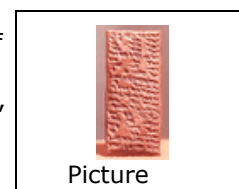
Some Assyrians roamed the countryside in seminomadic groups. These groups consisted mostly of runaway slaves, unsuccessful farmers, and people who had been expelled from the cities. Relations between the city dwellers and the seminomads often were tense. Monarchs always tried to strengthen control over the land as soon as they took the throne.

Slaves also lived in Assyria. Most slaves were prisoners of war or people who could not pay their debts. The slaves' owners probably treated them fairly well. Some Assyrians sold their wives and children into slavery to clear their debts.

**Language and literature.** A variety of peoples lived in Assyria and various languages were spoken there. The most important of these languages was Assyrian, a Semitic language related to modern Hebrew and Arabic and similar to the ancient Babylonian language.

The Assyrians used a writing system called *cuneiform* that was developed by the Sumerians in Babylonia. It consisted of wedge-shaped symbols on clay tablets. Assyrian *scribes* (writers) wrote letters and contracts, as well as texts that dealt with religion, literature, medicine, history, and other subjects. A few Assyrian kings collected the clay tablets in libraries. There, librarians carefully indexed the tablets and kept them on shelves.

In the 1850's, archaeologists discovered two major libraries in Nineveh, each containing thousands of clay tablets. King Sennacherib, who reigned in Assyria from 704 to 681 B.C., assembled one of the libraries. His grandson, King Ashurbanipal, assembled the other, which included Assyrian, Babylonian, and Sumerian tablets. Most of the tablets from Ashurbanipal's library are now in the British Museum in London.



The Assyrians also wrote legal texts. The *Middle Assyrian Laws* date from the 1300's B.C. Like the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, these laws consist of examples of cases, each with its judgment. But the Assyrians' penalties for lawbreakers were harsher than the Babylonians'.

Many later Assyrians probably spoke Aramaic and did much of their writing in the Aramaic script with ink on papyrus. Aramaic did not completely replace the cuneiform script, however. Both scripts survived until the end of the Assyrian Empire, but they were used for different purposes. The historical and religious texts were written in cuneiform, and Aramaic was used for everyday business. Most of the Aramaic papyrus documents decayed long ago, so scholars know little about later Assyrian business affairs.

**Religion.** Assyrian religion was related closely to the earlier Sumerian and Babylonian religions. Assyrians believed that many gods directed human destiny and controlled the sky, the earth, water, storms, and fire. The Assyrians also believed in good and evil spirits, and in magic.

Assyrian religion differed from the earlier religions in some ways. The chief god of Assyria was Ashur, or Assur, whose name was the same as the Assyrians' name for their country and most important city. The chief Babylonian god was Marduk. Babylonian kings were not religious leaders. However, Assyrian kings served as both rulers and head priests, and the people considered them Ashur's governors on the earth.

Assyrians worshiped other gods, including Nabu, the god of learning and patron of scribes; Ninurta, the god of war and agriculture; and Ishtar, the goddess of love and war. Ishtar was so famous that the Assyrians sent a statue of her from Nineveh to Egypt to help cure an ailing Egyptian king. Assyrians offered food and precious objects to the gods. Priests tried to foretell the future by examining sacrificed animals and by observing and interpreting such natural things as the weather and animals' behavior.



Picture  
Iraq Museum in  
Baghdad

**Art and architecture.** The earliest Assyrian art was similar to the art of Babylonia and other nearby cultures. A separate style of Assyrian art developed between 1400 and 1000 B.C. Assyrian craftworkers made some of the finest cylindrical seals ever produced in Mesopotamia. These seals were rolled over soft clay to seal documents and other objects.

The early Assyrians decorated their buildings with wall paintings and colorful bricks. Later, between 900 and 600 B.C., they decorated palace walls with carved stone slabs showing religious ceremonies or military victories. The wall carvings became the most familiar of all Assyrian artworks. Some of the finest carvings, found at the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, show hunting scenes. Human figures in Assyrian art never display emotion, but the carvings at Ashurbanipal's palace show vividly the ferocity and suffering of the hunted lions.



Picture  
Assyrian art

Assyrian sculptors were skilled at making *reliefs* (raised carvings) and they experimented with different perspectives. They also created enormous statues of human-headed bulls and lions to guard palace gates. Assyrian statues of humans and gods are rare, however.

Assyrians usually made their buildings of unbaked mud bricks. Some of the foundations and wall decorations were stone. All the buildings had flat roofs. Palaces sometimes had rooms with ceilings as high as 30 feet (9 meters). The magnificent palace courts, chambers, and hallways spread over several acres or hectares. Great temples and palaces as well as smaller buildings filled the cities of Assur, Nineveh, and Kalhu.

Assyrian craftworkers excelled in decorating small objects made of stone, metal, wood, and ivory. Some art objects were imported from Phoenicia and Egypt.

In the late 1980's, Iraqi archaeologists uncovered royal tombs at Kalhu containing exquisite examples of Assyrian goldwork. The tombs held hundreds of beautifully crafted gold vessels and pieces of jewelry, including crowns, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings.

### Government

Kings of the Assyrian Empire period were known as "the great king, the legitimate king, the king of the world, king of Assyria, king of all the four corners of the earth, king of kings, prince without rival, who rules from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea." The king served as supreme head of the Assyrian Empire and as chief priest of the god Ashur. He often led the army personally in military campaigns to various parts of the empire. These campaigns brought in *tribute* (forced payments) and defeated enemies were made to pay taxes. During the late period of the empire, the crown prince, the heir to the throne, usually handled administrative affairs. The crown prince lived in the Palace of Administration when the king was on military campaigns.

The Assyrian Empire was divided into provinces, each administered by a governor responsible to the central government. Residents of some of the older cities, such as Assur and Nineveh, enjoyed special privileges, including low taxes and freedom from military service. Landlords had to pay taxes and provide young men from their estates to serve in the army.

Written records and relief sculptures indicate that the Assyrians treated conquered peoples cruelly. But sometimes the Assyrians only threatened to be cruel to frighten other peoples into surrendering. The Assyrians sometimes allowed conquered peoples to keep their own rulers. But if the people rebelled or refused to pay taxes, the Assyrians often destroyed their cities and sent them to distant parts of the empire.

## History

People began to settle in farming villages in Assyria about 8500 B.C. The villagers cultivated plants and domesticated sheep and goats. They traded goods with both nearby and distant towns and villages. As the population grew, villages in Assyria developed into small towns, and trade increased. Some Assyrians became wealthy and powerful, while others lived in simple homes with few possessions. By about 3000 B.C., many different peoples lived in Assyria.

From about 2000 to 1700 B.C., Assyrian traders from the city of Assur established colonies in Anatolia (now part of Turkey) to acquire the silver and gold that were plentiful there. They traded tin and Babylonian cloth for the metals. Toward the end of the 1800's B.C., Shamshi-Adad, a forceful leader belonging to a desert people called the Amorites, took control of Assyria. He extended its powers and boundaries to western Syria, northern Mesopotamia, and the borders of Babylonia.

Few records have been found of the next few hundred years of Assyrian history. Historians believe that Assyria was ruled for part of the period by Mitanni, a kingdom in northern Syria. Records show that Assyria had shaken off foreign control by the mid-1300's B.C.

Assyria enjoyed brief periods of expansion in the 1200's and 1100's, before it began to build its empire in the 800's B.C. Shalmaneser III, who reigned from 858 to 824 B.C., gained control of some of the trade routes from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. Tiglath-pileser III, the king from 744 to 727 B.C., conquered large parts of Syria and Israel and became king of Babylonia. Sennacherib (reigned 704–681 B.C.) attacked Jerusalem. He turned Judea into an Assyrian *vassal state*—that is, a state controlled by Assyria. Esarhaddon, who held the throne from 680 to 669 B.C., added Egypt to the empire. Assyria declined after the mid-600's B.C., and Median and Babylonian attacks in 614 and 612 B.C. ended the empire.

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