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# Assyrian Empire

## Type of Government

Based in what is today northern Iraq, the Assyrian Empire was led by a king who served as the earthly deputy of Ashur, most powerful of the gods. He presided over a highly militarized state that placed military officers throughout an enormous and sophisticated civil administration.

## Background

The Assyrians ruled a territory that stretched, at its height, from Egypt to Iran and from the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea. This expansion was not continuous, however. Indeed, a series of defeats in the tenth century BC was so devastating that some historians speak of two Assyrian Empires, the first from the fourteenth to the eleventh centuries BC and the second, or Neo-Assyrian, from the tenth to the end of the seventh centuries BC. It is only in the later period that the imperial bureaucracy assumed its most distinctive form.

## Government Structure

Immediately below the king were several assistants specializing in foreign policy, the military, or administration. One of the most important was the chief of staff, whose control of the daily schedule enabled him to grant or block access to the king at will. Beneath these advisers were the provincial governors, palace administrators, tax collectors, and scribes. Because the scribes were the only officials able to read and write, they had access to the most closely held state secrets. Their power was unobtrusive but enormous.



King Sennacherib of the Assyrian Empire. Sennacherib succeeded his father in 704 BC, when the empire was at its peak. (c) Bettmann/CORBIS

Most Assyrian kings preferred to rule their more distant territories indirectly, through client states and puppet kings. The annexation of a conquered territory as a province of the empire was expensive and time consuming. It could also prove dangerous, for every provincial governor was a potential rebel. Babylon, to the south of Assyria, was a constant worry in this regard, for it was a wealthy and culturally preeminent state, and it had once ruled the whole region. Thus, Ashurbanipal (seventh century BC), one of the ablest Assyrian kings, had to lay siege to Babylon when it revolted under the command of his own brother, Shamash-shum-ukin (d. 648 BC). The Assyrians never solved the Babylonian problem, and when the Assyrian Empire fell, it was again Babylon that filled the void.

### **Political Parties and Factions**

Rebellion at home was uncommon, but it did occur. Most historians believe, for example, that the famous king Sargon II (d. 705 BC) was a usurper, in part because there is no mention of him before he takes the throne. Sargon's sudden prominence illustrates the social and occupational mobility that was one of the major strengths of the Assyrian system. There is ample evidence that capable individuals, regardless of their origins, rose through the bureaucratic ranks. Some were freed slaves. Others were members of conquered ethnic groups that the Assyrians had brought to the capital in the forced migrations that were a hallmark of their rule. There were several motives for these transfers, including a desire for cheap construction labor. Equally important, however, was the desire to prevent the growth of potentially rebellious political factions based on ethnicity. By removing peoples from their homelands and settling them in the diverse, cosmopolitan capital, the kings hoped to Assyrianize them. Sargon's insistence on the use of the Assyrian language was part of this program. It was a shrewd scheme, but it faltered when the number of newcomers in the military and administration began to overwhelm the native Assyrians. By the end of the empire, there were so many unassimilated foreigners in the military that the kings could no longer rely on it.

### **Major Events**

The conquest of Egypt was a major preoccupation in the last century of the empire. On their way there in 701 BC, King Sennacherib's (d. 681 BC) forces laid siege to Jerusalem, an act vividly depicted in the Old Testament. Esarhaddon (d. 669 BC), Sennacherib's son, finally captured the Egyptian capital of Memphis thirty years later. Assyria's efforts to maintain permanent control failed, however, and a cycle of rebellion and repression continued until the invaders were expelled at the end of Ashurbanipal's reign.

## Aftermath

Ashurbanipal's rule ended in disaster. His twin sons each wanted the throne; their dispute sparked a civil war and a successful rebellion in Babylon. In 612 BC, fifteen years after the great king's death, an alliance between the Medes and Babylonians destroyed his capital and empire.

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