

## Mesopotamia, 668-332 B.C.E.: The Neo-Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians

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The Encyclopedia of World History

12-01-2001

[Table of Contents](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

### Mesopotamia, 668-332 B.C.E.: The Neo-Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians

#### 668-627

The reign of Ashurbanipal. Ashurbanipal was both a great military commander and a patron of arts and letters. His palace reliefs are among the finest examples of Assyrian art, and he gathered a great library of tablets, which remains one of our main sources for knowledge of Sumero-Akkadian literature. The king boasted he could read and write the cuneiform script. Ashurbanipal attacked Egypt and, in two campaigns (667-666 and 664-663), defeated Pharaoh Taharka and his son Tenuatamun and extended Assyrian power as far south as Thebes. In 652, Shamash-shuma-ukin tried to overthrow his brother with Elamite help, and civil war raged until 648, when Shamash-shuma-ukin finally surrendered in Babylon. Susa was taken and sacked in 639, but the civil wars had revealed Assyria's weakness to its enemies.

#### 626-609

The last days of Assyria. The Assyrian **Empire** collapsed quickly. There was apparently a revolt on Ashurbanipal's death, and his son Ashur-etil-ilani (626) ruled only a few months. The usurper, Sin-shum-lishar (626), also kept the throne only a short period. At this point, the Chaldean Nabopolassar declared himself king of Babylon. Sin-shar-ishkun (626-612), another son of Ashurbanipal, took back the throne of Assyria and stabilized the internal situation. Soon, however, Cyaxares, king of the Medes, and the **Babylonian** king, Nabopolassar, joined forces to attack Assyria. After a protracted struggle, Nineveh fell in 612 and was completely destroyed. An Assyrian noble, Ashur-uballit II (611-609) proclaimed himself king at Harran in Syria. The **Babylonians** took Harran in 610, however, and an attempt by the Assyrians, now allied to the Egyptians, to retake the city failed. Ashur-uballit died in obscurity.

#### 977-626

8th and 9th Dynasties of Babylon. After a period of political confusion, Nabu-mukin-apli (977-942) reestablished an 8th Dynasty of Babylon, though his rule did not extend far beyond the city itself. While unimportant politically, Babylon continued to be a cultural and intellectual center. Under Nabonassar (Nabu-nasir, 747-734) an important calendar reform was instituted in which the monthly lunar cycle was reconciled with the solar year, a standard system still used in the Jewish calendar. In 731 an Aramean dynasty came to power under Nabu-mukin-zeri (731-729), and the first use of Aramaic is attested in **Babylonian** documents. The Assyrians conquered Babylon in 728, but the Chaldean King Merodach-Baladan II (Marduk-apal-iddina) drove them out. From 710 to 626, Chaldean kings, often supported by Elam, alternated with Assyrian rulers.

#### 626-539

The Chaldean or **Neo-Babylonian Empire**.

#### 626-604

The rise of the **Neo-Babylonian Empire**. The Chaldeans, an Aramean tribe, entered Lower Mesopotamia around 1000, and became the dominant ethnic group in Babylon in **Neo-Assyrian** times. **Babylonian** gave way to Aramaic as a spoken tongue, though **Babylonian** and Sumerian both continued to be used as scholarly languages until Seleucid times. Nabopolassar (Nabu-apal-usur, 626-605), the Chaldean king of the Sealand, rebelled from the Assyrians and in 626 took the archaic title king of Akkad. In 612, he allied himself with Cyaxares of Media and destroyed Nineveh. Nabopolassar then marched west and defeated the remnants of the Assyrians at Harran. Meanwhile, the Egyptians had taken Palestine and were driving into Syria, but they were defeated by the **Babylonians** at the decisive Battle of Carchemish in 605.

### **604-562**

The reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562) took the **Babylonian** throne in 604. He marched against Egypt in 601, but after an indecisive battle fought on the frontier, both sides withdrew. In 598-7, Nebuchadnezzar defeated Judah and placed a vassal king, Zedekiah, on its throne. After he returned to Babylon to quell a revolt, Tyre and Judah rebelled, and in 588 Jerusalem suffered a second siege. Jerusalem finally fell in July of 586; the city and Solomon's Temple were laid waste and Judah became a **Babylonian** province. Tyre, an island city with control of the sea, was besieged for 13 years. Nebuchadnezzar spent much of his enormous wealth on the city of Babylon, which became a byword for urban splendor.

### **561-539**

The end of the **Neo-Babylonian Empire**. After Nebuchadnezzar's death the **Babylonian Empire** quickly declined. Evil-Merodach (Awil-Marduk 561-560) was assassinated by his brother-in-law Neriglissar (Nergal-shar-usur, 559-556), who took power. In 555, a usurper, Nabonidus (Nabu-na'id 555-539) became king. Nabonidus worshipped the moon-god Sin, whom he attempted to promote over Babylon's god Marduk, alienating Marduk's powerful priesthood. Shunning the city and leaving his son Belshazzar (Bel-shar-usur) as regent, Nabonidus spent many years at Teima in north Arabia, 480 miles from Babylon. Meanwhile, Cyrus the Great had united the Medes and Persians and defeated the Lydians (547). In 539 Cyrus marched on Babylonia and took the country almost without a struggle. Nabonidus fled and Babylon opened its gates to the Persians, probably with the connivance of the priests of Marduk.

### **539-332**

Mesopotamia under Persian rule. Cyrus appointed a Persian satrap, or governor, to rule both Assyria and Babylonia, but left the native religious and political institutions intact. Cuneiform script continued to be used, and it is in this period that astrology developed in Babylonia and spread to the west. Alexander the Great defeated the Persian army under Darius III at the Battle of Arbela (331) in Upper Mesopotamia. He then marched to Babylon where he was invested as king of Babylon at the temple of Marduk, which he restored. After a long campaign in the east, Alexander returned to Babylon, where he died of fever in 323.

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[Preface](#)

[Appendix I. Roman Emperors](#)

[Appendix II. Byzantine Emperors](#)

[Appendix III. Caliphs, to 1256](#)

[Appendix IV. Roman Popes](#)

[Appendix V. Presidents of the United States](#)

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"Mesopotamia, 668-332 B.C.E.: The Neo-Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians." *The Encyclopedia of World History*. 2001. *eLibrary*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

"Mesopotamia, 668-332 B.C.E.: The Neo-Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians." *The Encyclopedia of World History*. 2001.