

# Rise of Empires: Akkadians and Assyrians

*By Bennett Sherry*

The Akkadian and Assyrian empires were two of the world's first empires. Their conquests reshaped Mesopotamia. The many empires that would follow, worldwide, had much in common with these originals.

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## The Land Between the Rivers

Mesopotamia was an ancient land. It lay between and around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Most of it was in what is now the country of Iraq. There are some river valleys like the Nile where yearly flooding is predictable. This was not the case for Mesopotamian rivers. The currents were more violent. That meant people living there had to work harder to produce food. Also, resources like wood were rare. This meant that societies in Mesopotamia had to trade or fight with each other to get the resources they needed.



*Map of Mesopotamia.* By Goren tek-en, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Five thousand years ago, Mesopotamia was a land of city-states.<sup>1</sup> Most people lived in walled cities. There were dozens of city-states. Each was ruled by its own king. The city-states were often at war with each other. Over time, the city of Akkad grew stronger than the others. Around 2334 BCE, it began conquering the other cities.

## Five-thousand-year-old text messages!

Before 3000 BCE, the cities of Mesopotamia were mostly Sumerian. Sumerian was the major language of Mesopotamia until this time. It was also the world's first written language. The Sumerians invented a writing system. It is called cuneiform.

<sup>1</sup> A city-state is a political system. It consists of a city and the surrounding land under its control. City-states can be ruled by a government. Or, they can be ruled by a king.

Around 3000 BCE, a new people arrived in northern Mesopotamia. They spoke a Semitic language.<sup>2</sup> We call them Akkadians. The name comes from the city they built, Akkad. The Akkadians ruled history's first empire. An empire is a political system. A strong state is at its center. That state controls weaker states around it.

A bunch of different ancient empires rose in Mesopotamia because it was pretty easy to get to. By contrast, the Nile river valley was surrounded by desert and hard to reach. This is why Mesopotamia was home to the first empires. It was a bunch of separate city-states on fertile land that was easy to march an army across.



*The Tigris River outside Mosul, Iraq. By Matthew Glennon, public domain.*

## The Akkadians

One of Akkad's kings was a man named Sargon. He was the founder of the Akkadian Empire. In 2334 BCE, Sargon began conquering weaker city-states. Sargon had the world's first full-time army with 5,400 soldiers. With it, he built the world's first empire. It ran from the Persian Gulf to Turkey.

The Akkadian Empire did not last long. It fell apart soon after Sargon died. Mesopotamia then returned to being a group of warring city-states. But before long, another empire arose.



*Map showing the extent of the Akkadian Empire. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.*

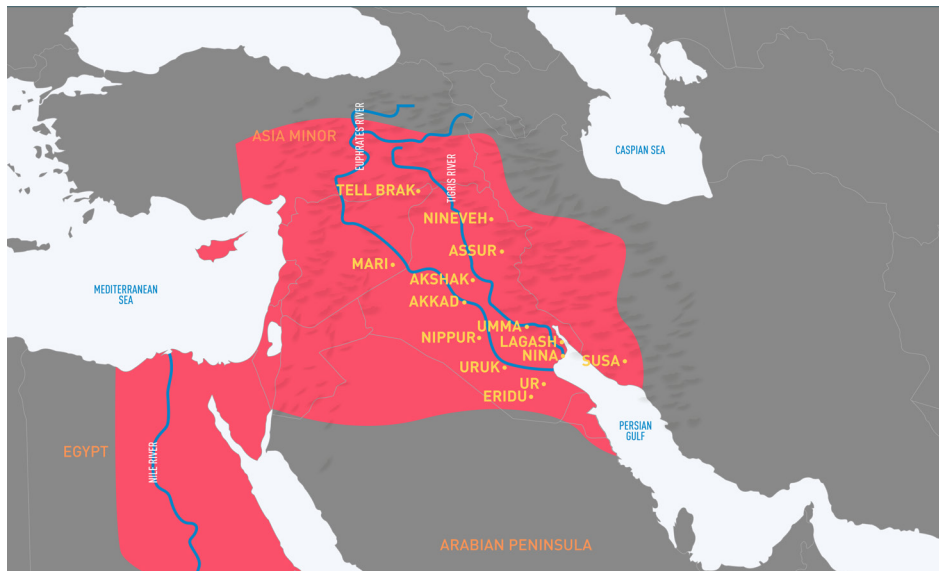
<sup>2</sup> Semitic languages are a family of languages. They are all related. Today, some are still spoken widely. Among these are Arabic and Hebrew. Assyrian, of course, is no longer spoken.

## The Assyrians

The Assyrian Empire followed the Akkadian Empire. It was much longer-lived. It lasted from 2025 to 609 BCE. The Assyrian empire had three stages: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Empire, and the Neo-Assyrian Empire.<sup>3</sup> For 1,400 years, the Assyrian Empire controlled Mesopotamia.

The Assyrian Empire began with the city of Asur. This city had been ruled by Akkad. After the Akkadian empire fell, Asur conquered several nearby cities. Nineveh was one of them. It later became the Assyrian capital.

By the seventh century BCE, the Assyrians ruled a huge empire. It stretched from Egypt to Iran.



Map showing the extent of the Assyrian Empire. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

## Empire and power, violence and management

The Assyrians were really good at war. They were also merciless. They destroyed cities and killed people in horrible ways. One example of this is that when they conquered a new place, the Assyrians stole religious statues from temples and brought them home. This practice of “godnapping” was meant to lower the confidence of conquered peoples.

They also moved conquered people around their empire. Moving conquered people to new areas made cities less unified. That made them less likely to rebel and easier to rule.

The Assyrians closely managed the places they conquered. They picked Assyrians to govern conquered cities. This allowed them to keep their control over distant places.



Stone relief showing the destruction of the city of Susa by the Assyrian emperor Ashurbanipal in 647 BCE. By Zereschk, CC BY-SA 3.0.

<sup>3</sup> Neo just means “new.”



## Production, women, and enslavement

Women had less power than men in Mesopotamian (both Akkadian and Assyrian) society. Most worked in the home. Still, some did have political power. The Assyrian Empire had at least one female ruler. Also, women helped run the emperor's palace.

Both the Akkadians and the Assyrians had slaves. They enslaved their prisoners of war. These slaves did all kinds of work.



*A rock relief showing Akkadian emperor Naram-Sin trampling on conquered people.*  
*By Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), CC BY-SA 4.0.*

## Trade networks

The Akkadian and Assyrian empires started for the same reason. Their rulers wanted to control more trade routes. Both Akkad and Asur were inland cities. They were far from the important trading (sea) ports. This made it hard for them to get the goods they needed. Through conquest, they seized important trading centers. They also gained a path to the sea.

Mesopotamian empires traded with distant societies. Not only goods moved along trade routes. New ideas and new technology did too. Assyrians had invented new kinds of ironworking. Their methods spread through trade. So did the use of cuneiform.

## Conclusion:

### The land between the empires

Sooner or later, all empires fall. Some last for 100 years. Others last a 1,000 years. But they all end.

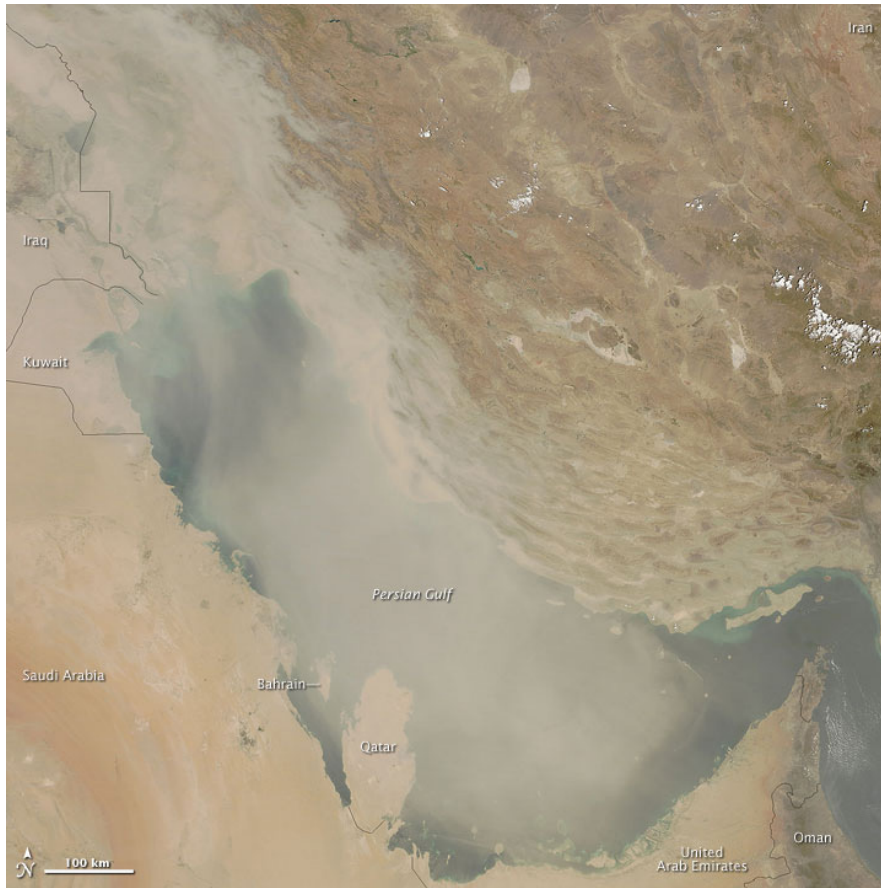
The Akkadian Empire only lasted for around 150 years. Why did it fall so quickly? Archaeologists blame dust. Years of dry and dusty weather made farming almost impossible. The empire could not feed its people.

The Assyrian Empire fell for a different reason. It grew too large. Running such a huge empire was very expensive. The high cost made the empire fall apart from within.



*A cuneiform letter between Assyrian merchants concerning trade in precious metals. Itur-ili, the senior partner, offers wise words of advice to Ennam-Ashur: "This is important; no dishonest man must cheat you! So do not succumb to drink!" Good advice in any era. By Itur-ili, public domain.*





Satellite image of a dust storm over the Persian Gulf in 2009. Similar storms likely led to the collapse of the world's first empire.  
NASA, Jeff Schmaltz, public domain.

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## Bennett Sherry

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## Image credits

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**A cuneiform letter between Assyrian merchants concerning trade in precious metals.** Itur-ili, the senior partner, offers wise words of advice to Ennam-Ashur: "This is important; no dishonest man must cheat you! So do not succumb to drink!" Good advice in any era. By Itur-ili, public domain. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Itur-ili\\_-\\_Business\\_Letter\\_-\\_Walters\\_481462\\_-\\_View\\_A.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Itur-ili_-_Business_Letter_-_Walters_481462_-_View_A.jpg)

**Satellite image of a dust storm over the Persian Gulf in 2009.** Similar storms likely led to the collapse of the world's first empire. NASA, Jeff Schmaltz, public domain. <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/39630/dust-storm-over-the-persian-gulf>





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