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.
The Land Between the Rivers

Mesopotamia was the land between and around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It was located in what is now 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 scarce. This meant that societies in Mesopotamia had to trade or fight with each other to get the resources they needed.

In 3000 BCE, Mesopotamia was a land of city-states. Most people lived in walled cities under the rule of a king. Dozens of city-states along the Tigris and Euphrates fought with each other in a struggle for power. Around 2334 BCE, the city of Akkad grew strong enough to start conquering the others.

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 developed a system of writing called cuneiform.

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1 A city-state is a city and the surrounding land under its control. City-states can be ruled by a government or a single ruler.
Around 3000 BCE, a new people migrated into northern Mesopotamia. They spoke a Semitic language. We call them Akkadians after the city they built, Akkad. The Akkadians ruled history’s first empire. An empire is a political system in which a strong central 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 Akkadians

In 2334 BCE, Sargon of Akkad began a series of conquests. He quickly established Akkad’s control over several weaker city-states in the region. To support his wars, Sargon created the world’s first full-time army. This army was made up of around 5,400 soldiers. It allowed Sargon to build the world’s first empire. His empire stretched from the Persian Gulf to what is now Turkey.

The Akkadian Empire did not last long after Sargon’s death. Once the empire fell apart, Mesopotamia returned to being a collection of warring city-states. However, the region was not without an empire for long.

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2 Semitic languages are a family of related languages. Some are now spoken widely in North Africa and the Middle East. 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. Historians divide the Assyrian empire into three parts: “Old Kingdom,” “Middle Empire,” and “Neo-Assyrian Empire.” For about 1,400 years, the Assyrian Empire controlled Mesopotamia.

The Assyrian Empire began with the city of Asur. Originally, the city was ruled by Akkad. After the Akkadian empire fell, Asur won control over several nearby cities. One of these was Nineveh. Eventually, Nineveh became the Assyrian capital. By the seventh century BCE, the Assyrians ruled a huge empire. It stretched from Egypt to Iran.

Empire and power, violence and management

The Assyrians were really good at war. They were also merciless. They demolished cities and killed people in horrific 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 morale of conquered peoples. They also moved conquered people around their empire. The relocation of conquered peoples made cities less unified. That made them less rebellious and easier to rule.

The Assyrians closely managed the areas they conquered. They appointed Assyrian governors and officials to run conquered cities. This allowed them to keep their control over distant areas.

3 Neo is just a fancy way to say “new.”
Production, women, and enslavement

Mesopotamian (both Akkadian and Assyrian) society was patriarchal. This meant that women had less power than men. Women generally worked at home. They were expected to make food or to weave textiles. But women did sometimes hold jobs that were generally done by men. Some women also held political power. At least one woman ruled the Assyrian Empire. Female officials known as sakintus helped run the emperor’s palace.

Both the Akkadians and Assyrians had slaves. They enslaved their prisoners of war. Enslaved women produced textiles or acted as housekeepers for the rich. Enslaved men worked as farm workers, miners, or builders.

Trade networks

The Akkadian and Assyrian empires both 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 ports of the eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. The two cities’ rulers began their conquests with the same goal. They wanted to seize important trading centers and get access to the sea.
The Mesopotamian empires traded with distant societies. They traded with the Indus River Valley cities by sea. Land routes connected them with regions as far west as Egypt and as far east as Afghanistan. As goods moved along trade routes, so did ideas and new technology. Assyrian advances in ironworking spread through trade. So did the use of cuneiform writing.

**Conclusion:**

**The land between the empires**

Sooner or later, all empires fall. They might last for 100 years or 1,000. But they all end.

The Akkadian Empire only lasted for around 150 years. Why did it fall so quickly? Archaeologists now believe they have identified the reason: dust. Several centuries of dry and dusty conditions brought down the mighty Akkadian empire. As dust and drought made farming almost impossible, whole cities disappeared.

By contrast, the Assyrian Empire fell because it grew too large. The high cost of running the empire made it crumble from within. Many empires since then have met with the same fate.

Though these two empires fell, they provided a model for later empires. The Assyrians replaced the Akkadians with an even larger and mightier empire. The Assyrians were in turn replaced by the Persian Achaemenid Empire.
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.
Sources


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Image credits

*Cover:* The Palaces of Nimrud Restored’, 1853. A reconstruction of the palaces built by the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal on the banks of the Tigris in the 7th century BC. From Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon by Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894), 1853. © Photo by Historica Graphica Collection/Heritage Images/Getty Images


*Map of Akkadian Empire,* and map of *Assyrian Empire,* By WHP and Katrin Emery. https://kemery.ca, CC BY-NC 4.0.

-Stone relief showing the destruction of the city of Susa* by the Assyrian emperor Ashurbanipal in 647 BCE. By Zereshk, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Susa-destruction.jpg

*A rock relief showing Akkadian emperor Naram-Sin trampling on conquered people.* By Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naram-Sin_Rock_Relief_at_Darband-i-Gawr_(extracted).jpg

-A cuneiform letter between Assyrian merchants concerning trade in precious metals. Itur-ilili, 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-ilili, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Itur-ilili_-_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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