Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-1 The Assyrian Empire
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7-1 The Assyrian Empire

The Assyrians were a Semitic tribal group who emerged from nomadism in what is now northern Iraq in the twelfth century B.C.E., following the decline of the Hittite monarchy based in Turkey. They entered history around 900 B.C.E. as challengers to other Semites in the Tigris Valley. Their chief town, **Nineveh** ((NIH-neh-vay) The main city and later capital of the Assyrian Empire.) (NIH-neh-vay), lay in the upper valley of the Tigris River, and their chief god was the fierce **Assur** ((AH-sher) The chief god of the Assyrian people.) (AH-sher), from whom the people derived their name. By 800 B.C.E., through their own ferocity and cunning in war, the Assyrian kings had conquered much of the Tigris-Euphrates region and were fighting the Babylonians for the southern portion (see Map 7.1). The Assyrians displayed great talent in military affairs. Their army was large and seemingly invincible, using new tactics to negate the traditional advantage of charioteers over foot soldiers.

Map 7.1

The Assyrian (c. 650 B.C.E.) and Persian (c. 494 B.C.E.) Empires

Although the Assyrians subdued most of the Near East and Egypt for a brief time, the later Persian Empire was much more extensive, reaching from Egypt to the borders of the Indus Valley. The “King of Kings” held most of this huge area through a network of Persian-ruled satrapies, or tributary kingdoms, whose rulers regularly acknowledged overlordship.

Thinking About This Map

Were the principal Assyrian cities in Mesopotamia or Iran?

By this epoch, the horse and chariot were the chief force in warfare. (It is believed that the chariot was introduced to Near Eastern warfare by the Hyksos invaders of Egypt in the 1500s B.C.E.) For centuries, leather-clad warriors armed with short swords had fought from chariots drawn by two or three horses. The chariots would split the loose ranks of the enemy foot soldiers, and the momentum of the horses combined with the raised platform of the chariot gave the swordsmen an almost insuperable advantage over opposing infantry. The early Assyrian kings took away this advantage, however, by fielding tight-knit infantry formations with long spears and swords, protected on the flanks by bands of horsemen who engaged the enemy charioteers while they were still far off. The infantry were heavily armored and so disciplined that they would stand up to a chariot charge without breaking. The Assyrians were also experts in siege warfare, and no enemy walled town or fort could hold for long against their artillery of stone-throwing catapults and rams (see the chapter-opening image).

To forestall rebellion, in many instances the Assyrians deported entire peoples from their native lands to eastern provinces. Once conquered, the Hebrew tribes of Israel met this very end. Assyrian armies also cultivated a reputation for violence so great that, supposedly, anyone who resisted them suffered a terrible fate: wholesale execution, pillage, rape, and enslavement. Historians have debated the actual level of violence the Assyrians and other ancient civilizations used; the threat of gory mass executions was a propaganda tool to discourage resistance. The kings lined the walls of their palaces in Nimrud and Nineveh with graphic bas-reliefs of their many victories and their bloody conclusions. Chronicles of Assyrian kings such as Tiglath-Pileser III (TIHG-lath pih-LEH-ser; ruled 744–727 B.C.E.) delighted in telling of the huge piles of dead left by their triumphant armies:

Like the Thunder, I crushed corpses of their warriors in the battle. I made their blood flow over into all the ravines and over the high places. I cut off their heads and piled them at the walls of their cities like heaps of grain. I carried off their booty, their goods, and their property beyond all reckoning. Six thousand, the remainder of their troops who had fled

before my weapons and thrown themselves at my feet, I took away as prisoners and added to the peoples of my country. (From J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 3rd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.)

The Assyrians were perhaps the most hated conquerors in ancient history. Only their expertly calculated plans to "divide and conquer" and their mass deportations of subject peoples enabled them to remain in power as long as they did. At one point, their empire reached from the upper Tigris River to central Egypt. It was governed from Nineveh by a network of military commanders who had no mercy for rebels and held large numbers of hostages to ensure the good behavior of the rest of their people.

Less than a century after its high point of power, however, Nineveh was in total ruins ("not a stone upon a stone," asserts the Bible's Old Testament, or the *Tanakh*), and the Assyrians were swept from the pages of history as though they had never existed. Their many enemies and rebellious subjects, led by the Chaldees of New Babylon and the Medes of western Persia, united against their oppressor and took full revenge for Assyrian atrocities. When they captured Nineveh in 612 B.C.E., the victors even salted the fertile irrigated lands that ringed the city to prevent the site from ever being inhabited again. With such determined erasure of their history, how can we know anything about the Assyrians' past? Remarkably, they combined their delight in slaughter with a sophisticated appreciation for all forms of pictorial and architectural art. Much of our knowledge about the Assyrians comes from their extensive portrayals of court life in bas-relief sculpture, as well as from archaeological discoveries from their ruined cities. One of the last kings of the Assyrians, Assurbanipal (ah-sher-BAH-nih-pahl), established the largest library known in the ancient Near East. More than 20,000 "books" of clay tablets have been recovered from the site in Nineveh since the nineteenth century.