

# Ancient Hebrew History: The Assyrians (1170 - 612 BCE)

The Assyrians were Semitic people living in the northern reaches of Mesopotamia; they have a long history in the area, but for most of that history they are subjugated to the more powerful kingdoms and peoples to the south. Under the monarch, Shamshi-Adad, the Assyrians attempted to build their own empire, but Hammurabi soon crushed the attempt and the Assyrians disappear from the historical stage. Eventually the Semitic peoples living in northern Mesopotamia were invaded by another Asiatic people, the Hurrians, who migrated into the area and began to build an empire of their own. But the Hurrian dream of empire was soon swallowed up in the dramatic growth of the Hittite empire, and the young Hurrian nation was swamped. After centuries of attempts at independence, the Assyrians finally had an independent state of their own since the Hittites did not annex Assyrian cities. For the next several hundred years, the balance of power would shift from the north to the south

Beginning with the monarch, Tukulti-Ninurta (1235-1198 BC), Assyria began its first conquests, in this case the conquest of Babylon. The Assyrian dream of empire began with the monarch, Tiglat-Pileser (1116-1090), who extended Assyrian dominance to Syria and Armenia. But the greatest period of conquest occurred between 883 and 824, under the monarchies of Ashurnazirpal II (883-859 BC) and Shalmeneser III (858-824 BC), who conquered all of Syria and Israel, all of Armenia, and, the prize of prizes, Babylon and southern Mesopotamia. The Assyrian conquerors invented a new policy towards the conquered: in order to prevent nationalist revolts by the conquered people, the Assyrians would force the people they conquered to migrate in large numbers to other areas of the empire. Besides guaranteeing the security of an empire built off of conquered people of different cultures and languages, these mass deportations of the populations in the Middle East, Mesopotamia, and Armenia, turned the region into a melting pot of diverse cultures, religions, and languages. Whereas there would be little cultural contact between the conquered and the conquerors in early Mesopotamian history, under the Assyrians the entire area became a vast experiment in cultural mixing. It was the Assyrian monarch, Sargon II (721-705 BC), who first forcefully relocated Hebrews after the conquest of Israel, the northern kingdom of the Hebrews. Although this was a comparatively mild deportation and perfectly in line with Assyrian practice, it marks the historical beginning of the Hebrew diaspora. This chapter in the Hebrew diaspora, however, never has been really written, for the Hebrews deported from Israel seem to have blended in with Assyrian society and, by the time Nebuchadnezzar II conquers Judah (587 BC), the southern kingdom of the Hebrews, the Israelites deported by Sargon II have disappeared nameless and faceless into the sands of northern Mesopotamia.

The monarchs of Assyria, who hated Babylon with a passion since it constantly contemplated independence and sedition, destroyed that city and set up their capital in Nineveh. Later, however, feeling that the Babylonian god, Marduk, was angry at them, they rebuilt the city and

returned the idol of Marduk to a temple in Babylon. The last great monarch of Assyria was Ashurbanipal (668-626 BC), who not only extended the empire, but also began a project of assembling a library of tablets of all the literature of Mesopotamia. Thirty thousand tablets still remain of Ashurbanipal's great library in the city of Nineveh; these tablets are our single greatest source of knowledge of Mesopotamian culture, myth, and literature.

After Ashurbanipal, the great Assyrian empire began to crumble; the greatest pressure on the empire came from their old and bitter enemies, the Babylonians. Aided by another Semitic people, the Medes, the Babylonians led by Nabopolassar eventually conquered the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and burned it to the ground, ending forever Assyrian dominance in the region.

## **The Assyrian State**

Simply put, the Assyrian state was forged in the crucible of war, invasion, and conquest. The upper, land-holding classes consisted almost entirely of military commanders who grew wealthy from the spoils taken in war. The army was the largest standing army ever seen in the Middle East or Mediterranean. The exigencies of war excited technological innovation which made the Assyrians almost unbeatable: iron swords, lances, metal armor, and battering rams made them a fearsome foe in battle.

## **Science and Mathematics**

The odd paradox of Assyrian culture was the dramatic growth in science and mathematics; this can be in part explained by the Assyrian obsession with war and invasion. Among the great mathematical inventions of the Assyrians were the division of the circle into 360 degrees and were among the first to invent longitude and latitude in geographical navigation. They also developed a sophisticated medical science which greatly influenced medical science as far away as Greece.

Sources:

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