

Lesson 5

Student Handout 5.1—Student Reading

Empire-building: the Assyrians

A major factor in the development of the Indo-Mediterranean region between 1200 and 600 BCE, was the growth of the gigantic Assyrian empire. Its military and political policies, its religion and language, and its vast trading network dominated the period.

In ancient times, an **empire** may be described as a relatively large political unit in which a governing elite (headed by a monarch, or emperor) of distinctive origin, language, or ethnicity rules over peoples of other languages and ethnicities. Assyria began as a small kingdom located on the Tigris River. By 650 BCE, it had taken much of Southwest Asia by force.

Assyria began many centuries earlier as a commercial center in northern Iraq, near modern Mosul. Its homeland was no larger than the state of Connecticut, that is, about 5,500 square miles. Assyrian culture was based on the pre-existing culture of Mesopotamia. Assyrians used cuneiform writing, adapted the law code of Hammurabi, and worshiped the gods of Babylon, adding their own principal god, Ashur. Located in a land-locked region with barely enough wheat fields to support the population, Assyria was hemmed in by rival kingdoms or mountains. From about 1950 BCE, Assyrian merchants established colonies along trade routes and in regions as far away as the Anatolian peninsula.

By the fifteenth century BCE, the Assyrians had fallen under the power of other kingdoms and had lost their independence. When they regained it in the fourteenth century BCE, they were still land-locked and resource poor because they had insufficient amounts of food, metal, and timber. Unlike the early Assyrian kings, however, the new breed of kings used more aggressive tactics to gain resources and markets. They created a military state that, between 1120 and 606 BCE, made them the largest and most powerful empire in the world.

At its greatest extent, the Assyrian empire included Egypt, a chunk of the Anatolian Peninsula, the eastern edge of the Mediterranean (the Levant), and the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. (See Student Handout 4.1.) Through its trade relations, its influence extended to Britain, Iberia, West Africa, and the Persian Gulf.

The Assyrian empire achieved its enormous size through force. Its innovative military tactics—cavalry, battering rams, and guerrilla warfare—made it unbeatable. To insure order, the Assyrian kings kept troops in conquered territories. Often these troops were foreign **mercenaries** (hired soldiers). To move these troops quickly from one hot spot to another, the Assyrians built roads and developed a postal system that allowed the king to learn instantly of any unrest. This communication system also allowed the king's spies to keep him informed about the loyalties of his governors in the conquered lands. A governor's duty was to maintain the roads, feed the troops and traveling officials, and protect the merchants.

The Assyrians controlled subject populations harshly with taxes and force. When conquered peoples protested, the Assyrians kept them in line by “exiling” troublesome leaders to another part of the empire. When such tactics failed, the emperors made examples of stubborn cities by destroying them and slaughtering their populations. One Assyrian king bragged that he had sacked 9 cities and 820 villages, burned Babylon, and ordered most of its inhabitants killed. Another boasted of burning to death 3,000 captives. Still another let it be known that he had dealt with rebel chiefs by flaying (skinning) some of them, walling up others, and impaling still others.

As Assyria’s territory grew, so did its economy. Although its homeland had limited natural resources, its location gave it an economic advantage. It controlled the mountain passes through which traders brought horses from the Eurasian steppes. Along the camel routes from Arabia came spices and semi-precious stones. Most importantly, the expanding Phoenician trade network gave the Assyrians easy access to the Mediterranean marketplace. The Phoenicians provided the vast amounts of silver, mostly from mines on the Iberian Peninsula, needed to pay for the Assyrian military. Phoenician trade was so crucial to Assyria that the emperors allowed Phoenician cities like Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos to maintain their independence in exchange for giving Assyria both access to their trade and a substantial annual tribute.

The Assyrians financed much of their expansion by demanding tribute and taxes from conquered states. Plunder from conquered lands also added to their wealth. Under Assyria’s harsh rule and devastating economic policies, peoples of the empire were restless. Suppressing rebellions began to put an unbearable strain on Assyrian resources. Therefore, it is not surprising that, when the Chaldeans and Babylonians rose up against them in 612, Assyrian rule collapsed. Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, was burned to the ground. Assyrian power was eliminated.

The growth of the Assyrian empire played an important role in the development of Indo-Mediterranea between 1200 and 600 BCE. Assyria developed new ways to control large areas. Some of their tactics were cruel but others, like a well-organized administration, a postal system, and a road network, later became standard tools of governing. The Assyrians also contributed greatly to the expansion of trade. They allowed private merchants to trade for profit. These entrepreneurs, no doubt using the protected road system, became part of the far flung trading network that included the Greeks and Phoenicians in the west, the Arab camel merchants to the south, and the sea traders of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Moreover, their policies of moving conquered people around to diffuse rebellion resulted in a greater cultural mixing than had ever occurred in any previous empire.