

Assyrians after Assyria

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The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project (State Archives of Assyria)

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In 612 BC, after a prolonged civil war, Assyria's two former vassals, the Babylonians and the Medes, conquered and destroyed Nineveh, the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The great city went up in flames, never to regain its former status. Three years later the same rebels razed Assyria's Western metropolis, Harran, crushing the last-ditch resistance of Assyria's last king, Ashur-uballit II. This event sealed the fate of the Assyrian Empire, and that is where the story of Assyria usually ends in history books.

What happened to the Assyrians after the fall of Assyria? This is a question that is not easy to answer for two reasons. Firstly, the issue has hardly been touched by Assyriologists. Most of them seem to tacitly agree with the idea of a more or less total wipe-out, as suggested by Sidney Smith in 1925: "The disappearance of the Assyrian people will always remain a unique and striking phenomenon in ancient history. Other, similar kingdoms and empires have indeed passed away but the people have lived on... No other land seems to have been sacked and pillaged so completely as was Assyria."

Secondly, in contrast to the abundance of information from the imperial period, information on post-empire Assyria and Assyrians is scanty and scattered. The near-total lack of information from Assyria itself would seem to support the idea of a genocide, which also seems to be supported by ancient eye-witness testimonies. When the Greek historian Xenophon 200 years after Nineveh's fall passed through the Assyrian heartland and visited the sites of two great Assyrian cities, he found nothing but ruin and could not retrieve much about them from the nearby villagers. The territory where these deserted cities lay was now Median, and the Greeks assumed that their former inhabitants had likewise been Medes.

Yet it is clear that no such thing as a wholesale massacre of all Assyrians ever happened. It is true that some of the great cities of Assyria were utterly destroyed and looted -- archaeology confirms this --, some deportations were certainly carried out, and a good part of the Assyrian aristocracy was probably massacred by the conquerors. However, Assyria was a vast and densely populated country, and outside the few destroyed urban centers life went on as usual. This is proved by a recently discovered post-imperial archive from the Assyrian provincial capital Dur-Katlimmu, on the Chabor river, which contains business documents drawn up in Assyrian cuneiform more than a decade after the fall of Nineveh. Apart from the fact that these documents are dated by the regal years of a Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, nothing in their formulation or external appearance would suggest that they were not written under the Assyrian Empire. Another small archive discovered in Assur, written in a previously unknown, presumably Mannean variety of cuneiform, proves that Assyrian goldsmiths still worked in the city in post-empire times, though now under Median command.

Moreover, over a hundred Assyrians with distinctively Assyrian names have recently been identified in economic documents from many Babylonian sites dated between 625 and 404 BC, and many more Assyrians undoubtedly remain to be identified in such documents. We do not know whether these people were deportees or immigrants from Assyria; their families may have settled in Babylonia already under the Assyrian rule. In any case, they unequivocally prove the survival of many Assyrians after the empire and the continuity of Assyrian identity, religion and

culture in post-empire times. Many of these names contain the divine name Ashur, and some of the individuals concerned occupied quite high positions: one Pan-Ashur-lumur was the secretary of the crown prince Cambyses under Cyrus II in 530 BC.

Distinctively Assyrian names are also found in later Aramaic and Greek texts from Assur, Hatra, Dura-Europus and Palmyra, and continue to be attested until the beginning of the Sasanian period. These names are recognizable from the Assyrian divine names invoked in them; but whereas earlier the other name elements were predominantly Akkadian, they now are exclusively Aramaic. This coupled with the Aramaic script and language of the texts shows that the Assyrians of these later times no longer spoke Akkadian as their mother tongue. In all other respects, however, they continued the traditions of the imperial period. The gods Ashur, Sherua, Istar, Nanaya, Bel, Nabu and Nergal continued to be worshiped in Assur at least until the early third century AD; the local cultic calendar was that of the imperial period; the temple of Ashur was restored in the second century AD; and the stelae of the local rulers resemble those of Assyrian kings in the imperial period. It is also worth pointing out that many of the Aramaic names occurring in the post-empire inscriptions and graffiti from Assur are already attested in imperial texts from the same site that are 800 years older.

Assur was by no means the only city where Assyrian religion and cults survived the fall of the empire. The temple of Sin, the great moon god of Harran, was restored by the Babylonian king Nabonidus in the mid-sixth century BC, and the Persian king Cyrus claims to have returned Ishtar of Nineveh to her temple in Nineveh. Classical sources attest to the continuity of Assyrian cults in other Syrian cities until late antiquity; in Harran, the cults of Sin, Nikkal, Bel, Nabu, Tammuz and other Assyrian gods persisted until the 10th century AD and are still referred to in Islamic sources. Typically Assyrian priests with their distinctive long conical hats and tunics are depicted on several Graeco-Roman monuments from Northern Syria and East Anatolia.

We know little of the political status of Assyria in the decades following its fall, but it seems that the western part of the Empire as far as the Tigris fell into the hands of the Babylonians, while the eastern Trans-Tigris areas, including the Assyrian heartland north of Assur, came under Median rule. Under the Achaemenid Empire, the western areas annexed to Babylonia formed a satrapy called Athura (a loanword from Imperial Aramaic Athur, "Assyria"), while the Assyrian heartland remained incorporated in the satrapy of Mada (Old Persian for "Media"). Both satrapies paid yearly tribute and contributed men for the military campaigns and building projects of the Persian kings. Assyrian soldiers participated in the expedition of Xerxes against Greece (480 BC) according to Herodotus, and Assyrians from both Athura and Mada participated in the construction of the palace of Darius at Susa (500-490 BC).

Interestingly, it was the "Median" Assyrians who executed the gold works and glazing of this palace, whereas the Assyrians from the satrapy of Athura provided the timber for the palace from Mt. Lebanon. In the Babylonian version of the Persian inscription, the name Athura is at this point rendered Eber nari, "land beyond the river (Euphrates)." This shows that the Western, originally Aramean, half of the Assyrian Empire was already at this time firmly identified with Assyria proper, an important issue to which we shall return later on.

We thus see that by Achaemenid times, Assyria, though split in two, had re-emerged as a political entity of considerable military and economic strength. In 520 BC, both Athura and Mada joined the revolt against Darius, trying to regain their independence. This revolt was a failure, but in a sense the Assyrian Empire had already been re-established long ago. Actually, in the final analysis, it had never been destroyed at all but had just changed ownership: first to Babylonian and Median dynasties, and then to a Persian one.

Contemporaries and later Greek historians did not make a big distinction between the Assyrian Empire and its successors: in their eyes, the "monarchy" or "universal hegemony" first held by

the Assyrians had simply passed to or been usurped by other nations. For example, Ctesias of Cnidus writes: "It was under [Sardanapallos] that the empire (hegemonia) of the Assyrians fell to the Medes, after it had lasted more than thirteen hundred years. "

The Babylonian king Nabonidus, who reigned sixty years after the fall of Nineveh and actually originated from an Assyrian city, Harran, refers to Ashurbanipal and Esarhaddon as his "royal forefathers." His predecessor Nebuchadnezzar and the Persian kings Cyrus and Artaxerxes are correspondingly referred to as "Kings of Assyria" in Greek historical tradition and in the Bible. Strabo, writing at the time of the birth of Christ, tells us that "the customs of the Persians are like those of the Assyrians," and calls Babylon a "metropolis of Assyria" (which it, of course, in fact was too, having been completely destroyed and rebuilt by the Assyrians in the early seventh century BC).

The Babylonian, Median and Persian empires should thus be seen (as they were seen in antiquity) as successive versions of the same multinational power structure, each resulting from an internal power struggle within this structure. In other words, the Empire was each time reborn under a new leadership, with political power shifting from one nation to another.

Of course, the Empire changed with each change of leadership. On the whole, however, the changes were relatively slight, one could almost say cosmetic only. The language of the ruling elite changed, of course, first from Assyrian to Babylonian, Median, and Persian, and finally to Greek. In its dress the elite likewise followed its national customs, and it naturally venerated its own gods, from whom its power derived. Thus Ashur was replaced as imperial god first by the Babylonian Marduk, and then by the Iranian Ahura Mazda, Greek.