

# Early Iron Making Empires in the Middle East / Mediterranean

## Introduction

Illustration

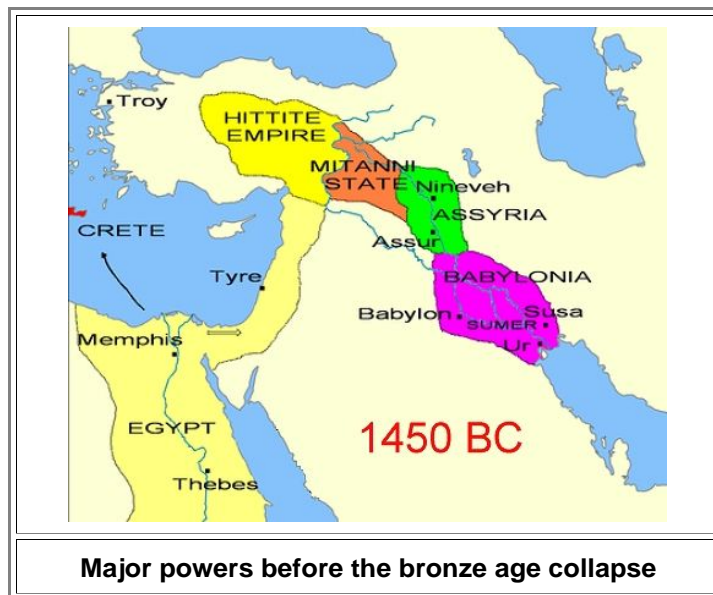
Iron technology came into its own [around 1200 BC](#) in the Middle East / Mediterranean. However, complex iron / steel objects like swords were not produced before roughly 800 BC, see [this module](#). Always allowing exceptions, of course. The most complex early swords are the iron [Luristan](#) mask swords are dated to 1100 BC - 550 BC. We have looked into this [in detail](#) and favor the "around 800 BC" dating.

Swords are used in empire building, and we had quite a few empires in the Middle East / Mediterranean after 1200 BC and before the Romans took over.

If we now look at [iron swords from the main empires](#) after 1200 BC, we find: *not much or nothing*. "Not much" refers to [akinakai](#), more dagger than sword, and I have dedicated several modules to this (accessible [here](#)), where you will find more information about empires and their iron technology.

● In this module I give you just the bare essentials of the rise and decline of some of the major empires, together with some maps.

Let's start with a map showing where the major powers were situated around 1450 BC:



Major powers before the bronze age collapse

● The major players were the [Hittites](#), the Mittannis, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Egyptians. We already know the Hittites as the "inventors of iron" the Mitannis from the [Armarna letters](#), and the Assyrians from their [hoard of iron](#) in Khorsabad. The Babylonians have not yet appeared in the context of iron, and the Egyptians only in the context of the [great pyramid iron plate](#).

To make life easy, we might as well decide right here that there is no such thing as an interesting Egyptian iron / steel culture. To be sure, the Egyptians must have smelted some iron after 1200 BC but nothing remotely interesting seems to have been produced. The same might be said for the Babylonians.

▶ The situation changed completely around 1200 BC during the [Bronze Age collapse](#). Only Egypt survived without too much damage.

● Assyrians, Babylonians and some others survived in their heartlands but lost much power. The Hittite empire was wiped out and replaced, to some smaller extent, by states that are called Neo-Hittite, or more recently Syro-Hittite, Luwians, or Arameans since the Arameic language came to be the lingua franca of the entire [Fertile Crescent](#) and beyond. The term "Aramaization" even turns up since Assyro-Babylonian Akkadian-speaking people became Aramaic-speaking during the first millennium BC. Jesus spoke Arameic. Saul, David and Solomon in the late 11th to 10th centuries fought against the Arameans.

In other words; there were many smaller to mid-sized kingdoms with fluctuating boundaries or in short: a mess.

The first major empire encompassing much of the Middle East states after 1200 BC was formed by an old culture: **Assyria**.



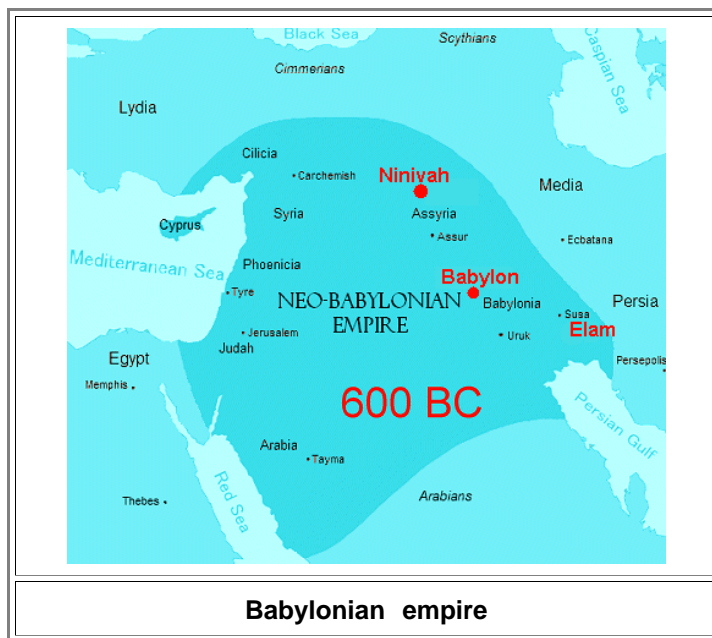
- Assyria existed in various forms from ca. 2500 BC to 605 BC or approximately nineteen centuries (the presently mighty USA as not quite reached puberty yet in comparison). Its rise to complete dominance started with the campaigns of one Adad-nirari II (whose [remote ancestor](#) we have met) in 911 BC. Before that they held much of the North with Ninivah in the center. The following people / cultures / civilizations were conquered in the years that followed (with chariots and iron weapons, presumably): Egypt, Babylonia, Elam, Urartu/Armenia, Media, Persia, Mannea, Gutium, Phoenicia/Canaan, Aramea (Syria), Arabia, Israel, Judah, Edom, Moab, Samarra, Cilicia, Cyprus, Chaldea, Nabatea, Commagene, Dilmun and the Hurrians, Sutu and Neo-Hittites. In addition the Ethiopians, Nubians, Cimmerians, Scythians, Phrygians, Magan and Puns were put in their place and had to pay tribute.

I give you this list (from Wikipedia, of course) just to show that there were plenty of other nations around, too. Dur-Sharrukin ("Fortress of Sargon"), present day [Khorsabad](#) close to Ninevah, was the Assyrian capital in the time of **Sargon II** of Assyria. The great city was entirely built in the decade preceding 706 BC. After the unexpected death of Sargon in battle, the capital was shifted 20 km south to Ninevah.

After 600 BC decline was quick. The Babylonians and Medes, together with the Scythians and Cimmerians to the north, attacked Assyria in 616 BC, [sacking](#) the city of Kalhu. After four years of bitter fighting, Ninevah itself was finally sacked in 612 BC, after a prolonged siege followed by house to house fighting. The Babylonians now took over.

- Next the **Neo Babylonians** (also called Chaldeans) replaced the Assyrians. Babylonians also had been around for quite some time long before the bronze age collapse, altogether 2500 years or so. And everybody knows a bit about the (Neo) Babylonians, if only because Jewish and Christian holy books have a lot to say about them (nothing good). We also have the tower of Babylon, the hanging gardens of Semiramis, [Hammurabi](#) (around 1759 BC) and his law code mentioning iron, the whore of Babylon, and so on.

- After overrunning and to some extent assimilating the Assyrians, the Babylonians held much of the Middle East in the Neo-Babylonian empire (**Chaldean era**) for a short time around 650 BC:



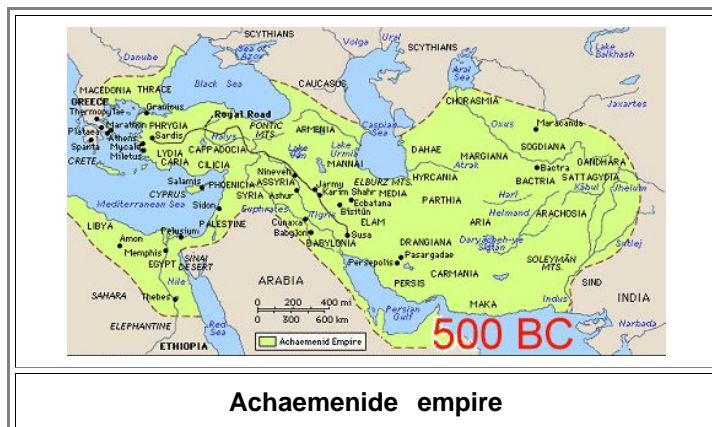
**Babylonian empire**

- The Babylonians even invaded Egypt for a brief period of time around 567 BC. **Nebuchadnezzar II** (605 BC – 562 BC) was the big King who crushed a Jewish rebellion, deposing Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, and deporting a sizeable part of the population (around 5000) to Babylon as was the custom of the time.

- The Babylonian empire didn't last long. In 549 BC **Cyrus the Great** made his first moves to power. He put an end to the empire of the Medes east of the Babylonians. In 539 BC, after having gained possession of "the East", Cyrus invaded Babylonia.

One of the first acts of Cyrus was to allow the Jewish exiles to return to their own homes, carrying with them the images of their god and their sacred vessels. The permission to do so was embodied in a proclamation, whereby the conqueror endeavored to justify his claim to the Babylonian throne. That has been much publicized. Less coverage was given to the fact that a lot if not the majority of exiled Jews elected to remain in Babylon; producing in due course the Talmud there.

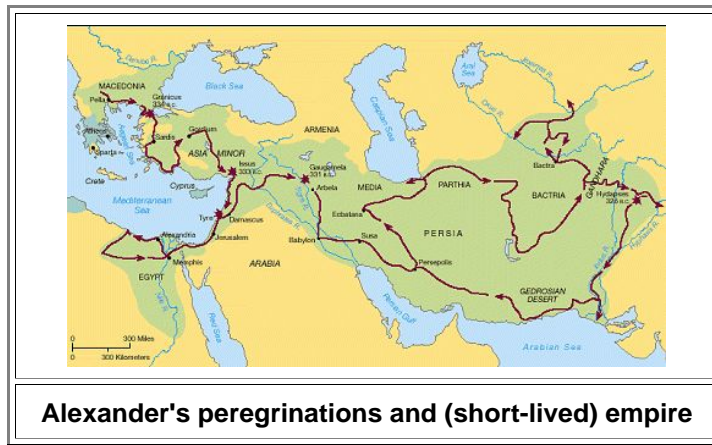
- The new "**Achaemenide empire**" (named after some mystical founder of the dynasty Cyrus belongs to) or **First Persian Empire** was huge:



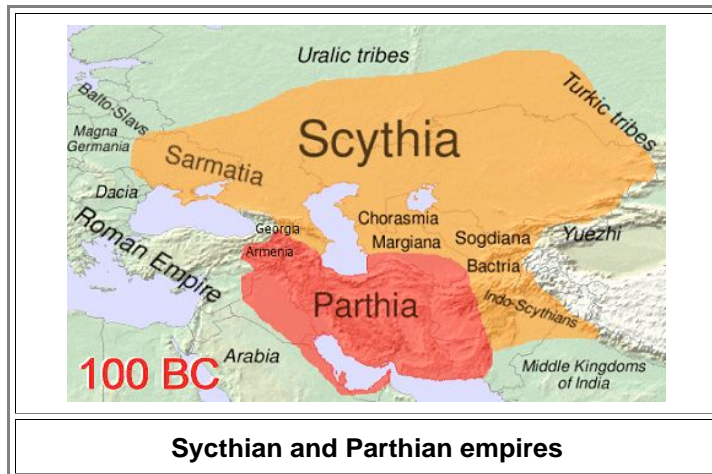
**Achaemenide empire**

- Since you enjoyed a [half-way decent education](#) you know something about the history of the Achaemenide empire. But only as far as the Greek side was involved. They won. 490 BC in Marathon. And so on. And the winner writes history. Things were going badly for for the Persians after that.

Enter **Alexander the Great**. He really did it:



- The Alexander empire didn't last long. It was divided up among his generals (the Diadochi), one of which, Seleucus, got the upper hand and some empire kept on going for a while under the heading "**Seleucid Empire**". But by now the real action had shifted to the West, anyway. The Romans, the Phoenicians, the Celts and so on were warming up for major empire building. The Romans won.
- ▶ However, the East also saw some empires of new cultures. Interesting for us are the **Parthians** and **Scythians**, riding about on their horses and being mighty in 100 BC:



- The Parthian Empire (247 BC – 224 AD), also known as the Arsacid Empire, took over parts of the Seleucid Empire.  
"The Parthians largely adopted the art, architecture, religious beliefs, and royal insignia of their culturally heterogeneous empire, which encompassed Persian, Hellenistic, and regional cultures. The Arsacid rulers were titled the "King of Kings", as a claim to be the heirs to the Achaemenid Empire; indeed, they accepted many local kings as vassals where the Achaemenids would have had centrally appointed, albeit largely autonomous, satraps. The court did appoint a small number of satraps, largely outside Iran, but these satrapies were smaller and less powerful than the Achaemenid potentates. With the expansion of Arsacid power, the seat of central government shifted from Nisa to Ctesiphon along the Tigris (south of modern Baghdad, Iraq), although several other sites also served as capitals." say Wikipedia  
More interesting to us: The Parthians (like everybody else) used *iron swords* - and from them we have [some of the remains](#) (unlike from everybody else). Well big deal, you might think! It's now 100 BC. Yes, it is. The problem, however is: As far as "the East" is concerned: there are hardly any iron artifacts, much less swords, from the time between the Luristani swords of 1000 BC and the Parthian swords of 100 BC!