
UNIT 11 THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Structure

- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Expansion and Consolidation of the Empire
 - 11.2.1 Cyrus
 - 11.2.2 Cambyses
 - 11.2.3 Darius I
- 11.3 Administrative Reorganisation
- 11.4 System of Coinage
- 11.5 Language and Communication
- 11.6 Religion
- 11.7 Decline of the Empire
- 11.8 Summary
- 11.9 Exercises

11.1 INTRODUCTION

As we saw in the previous Unit, the Medes were the first empire-builders in Iran. However it was the Achaemenids who created the first Iranian world empire. Within a few decades of the replacement of Median rule by Achaemenid rule, the region of Fars (Parsa) in Iran had become the centre of a huge empire which included most of West Asia, Anatolia and Egypt—one of the most extensive empires of the ancient world. Parsa, which more or less corresponds to the province of Fars in modern Iran, was called Persis by the ancient Greeks. Since Parsa or Persis was the homeland of the Achaemenids, their empire came to be known as the Persian empire and Iran itself was identified with Persia (Iran was referred to as Persia till very recently). Thus in antiquity the place of origin of the Achaemenids was adopted as the name for the entire Iranian plateau by the Greeks and subsequently by other peoples as well.

In this Unit we will discuss some of the salient features of this empire. The expansion and consolidation of this biggest empire of the region was accomplished in a span of fifty years. The administrative apparatus and the system of control on the extensive territories was one of the major achievements. This was achieved through developing a mechanism of decentralized governance. We will study the growth of language and means of communication and development of a common language in such a heterogeneous region. We will devote some space to the standardization of monetary system and coinage which was probably the first such attempt covering such vast territories as in Persian empire. We will also discuss growth of a new religion and tradition of religious tolerance a unique achievement during this age.

11.2 EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE EMPIRE

The territorial expansion and consolidation of the Persian empire was accomplished in more than fifty years. A number of rulers contributed in the whole process. However, Cyrus the great and Darius I stand out as the key figures in the process of expansion and consolidation.

11.2.1 Cyrus

After Cyrus (generally referred to as Cyrus the Great to distinguish him from other rulers of the same name) had overthrown Astyages he continued with many of the features of the Median state. Like the Medes the Persians too were initially a confederacy of several Iranian tribes settled in Parsa. They were closely linked with the Medes. The overthrow of Astyages did not imply a sudden disruption of the Median state. Cyrus combined in his person the unified kingship of the Median and Persian tribal confederacies. In view of the active support which Cyrus had received from a section of the Median aristocracy in the struggle against Astyages, he allowed the Median elite to have a share in political power. The Median aristocracy was not immediately dislodged and continued to perform various functions in the new Achaemenid state. Over a period of time the Persian element became more pronounced in the governance of the empire. Simultaneously, the state became more centralized and monarchy as an institution became more powerful.

Having stabilized his position Cyrus immediately embarked upon an ambitious programme of expansion. The Achaemenids rapidly filled the political vacuum that had been created in West Asia by the disappearance of the Assyrian empire. Their expansion, however, was on a much bigger scale. The Babylonians were unable to consolidate their hold over the territorial acquisitions of Nebuchadnezzar II. In fact Babylon seems to have lacked the resources to build an empire that could have lasted for a long duration. The Medes under Astyages had already begun to encroach upon Babylonian possessions. The successors of Nebuchadnezzar II were unable to resist these onslaughts. They eventually succumbed to the Achaemenids who became the real successors to the Assyrian empire.

Cyrus first concentrated on the conquest of Anatolia. The Median rulers had been attempting to subdue the states of Anatolia, especially the kingdom of Lydia. There were at this time several states in Anatolia, of which Lydia was the most powerful. This was one of the states that had emerged in the region after the collapse of the Hittite empire. The Lydian language was closely related to the Hittite language. Croesus, who ruled over Lydia from 561 to 545 BC, was responsible for making Lydia the paramount power in western Anatolia. Lydia under Croesus is credited with having been the first state in history to issue coins on a regular basis.

Croesus exercised nominal suzerainty over the Greek settlements on the west coast of Anatolia. These Greeks were collectively referred to as Ionians (see Unit 12). The Ionians lived in self-governing city-states. They had formed a confederacy to pool together their resources and defend themselves. Cyrus first tried to persuade the Ionians to revolt against Lydia. When this strategy failed he invaded Lydia and succeeded in defeating Croesus in 545 BC. Lydia, and with it most of western Anatolia, became a part of the Achaemenid empire. Following this the Ionian states were also annexed. Cyrus's territories now extended to the shores of the Aegean Sea. During the next fifty years the Achaemenids launched a series of military expeditions to bring the entire Aegean and mainland Greece under their control. In Anatolia Sardis, the capital of the erstwhile Lydian Kingdom, became the seat of Achaemenid authority in the region.

The next phase of Achaemenid expansion resulted in the conquest of

Mesopotamia. We have already referred to the decline of the New Babylonian Empire under the successors of Nebuchadnezzar II. Nabonidus (556-539 BC) was the reigning Babylonian king at the time of Cyrus. Babylon was invaded and captured by Cyrus in 539 BC. This was a major event in the history of ancient West Asia and is mentioned in many contemporary records including the Old Testament and a cuneiform inscription dating back to the time of Nabonidus (called the 'Nabonidus Chronicle'). Cyrus allowed the Jews who had been deported to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II to return to their homeland. This might have been related to his policy to create a friendly buffer between Egypt and the Achaemenid possessions in Syria-Palestine. Nevertheless his action earned him the reputation of being a just and tolerant ruler. Cyrus pursued a liberal policy with regard to the religious and cultural traditions of many of the people he conquered. Apart from facilitating the return of the Jews, he showed respect for Babylonian traditions. Contemporary Greek writers also speak favourably of him. Cyrus seems to have been generally held in high esteem in antiquity.

With the victory over Babylon, all of Mesopotamia as well as Babylonian territories in Syria-Palestine were incorporated within the Achaemenid empire. This completed the shift in political gravity in West Asia from Mesopotamia to Iran, a process which had started under the Medes. We do not possess much information about Achaemenid expansion in the east under Cyrus. It is likely that Bactria (Baktrish) was added to the empire and that by the time Cyrus died Achaemenid rule extended to the Hindukush mountains.

11.2.2 Cambyses

Cyrus died in 529 BC while on a military expedition. He was succeeded by his son Cambyses (Kambujiya), 529-522 BC. Not much is known about the brief reign of Cambyses, except that he was mainly preoccupied with campaigns in Egypt. Under Cambyses Egypt was added to the Achaemenid empire. He invaded Egypt c. 525 and quickly defeated the Egyptian ruler Psamtek III, who belonged to the XXVIth Dynasty of Egypt, also called the Saite dynasty after Sais which was the place of origin of the dynasty. The Saite dynasty was already on the verge of collapse due to internal problems. This might account for the ease with which Cambyses conquered Egypt.

Later Greek accounts of Cambyses are highly prejudiced. They portray him as a mad and tyrannical ruler who had no respect for Egyptian traditions. This is not confirmed by the Egyptian evidence that has come to light in the past few decades. Cambyses took over the throne as a traditional Egyptian ruler and adopted the symbols associated with the pharaohs in order to legitimize his authority. Persian rule over Egypt lasted for nearly two centuries, i.e. till Alexander the Great's conquest. In the context of Egyptian history the Achaemenids are designated as the XXVIIth Dynasty, indicating an element of continuity from the Saite to the Persian period.

Cambyses is supposed to have undertaken a series of military expeditions into some of the areas surrounding Egypt proper. Most of these expeditions seem to have ended disastrously. These setbacks undermined his position in Iran itself. The last days of Cambyses are shrouded in mystery but the available evidence indicates that he was faced with revolts in his homeland. The long absence of the king from Iran and reports of his military failures must have

encouraged these revolts. Cambyses died in 522 BC while still in the midst of dealing with the upheaval. The events following his death are even more confusing. This confusion is largely due to the fact that soon after the death of Cambyses a different branch of the Achaemenids usurped power. The political crisis in the Achaemenid state towards the end of Cambyses's reign facilitated this development. It is hardly surprising that in this situation different versions of what actually happened were put forward.

According to one version a person by the name of Gaumata declared himself as king. Gaumata is said to have claimed that actually he was Smerdis (Bardiya), the younger brother of Cambyses. A group of nobles then killed the fake Smerdis (i.e. Gaumata). This version holds that Smerdis had already been killed by Cambyses much earlier and that Gaumata was impersonating Smerdis. Another version states that Cambyses was succeeded by Smerdis, who had not been killed, and that it was the real Smerdis who was overthrown. In any case it is clear that there was a conspiracy by some of the prominent Achaemenid officials (referred to in contemporary records as the conspiracy of 'seven' nobles). The leader of this conspiracy was Darius I (Darayavaus). The coup was successful and Darius I became the ruler of the Achaemenid empire in 522 BC.

11.2.3 Darius I

Darius I (522-486 BC) was the son of Hystaspes (Vishtaspa), who was a leading Persian official, probably a provincial governor. Hystaspes was descended from a collateral branch of the Achaemenids. It was this branch which ruled from 522 BC onwards. Darius I was the most outstanding of the Achaemenid rulers. Under him the extensive territories acquired by Cyrus and Cambyses were systematically organized to create a stable empire. Till about 519 BC Darius was engaged in restoring order and reasserting Achaemenid authority in regions which were in rebellion. It may be mentioned here that after the death of Cambyses the Medes had attempted to break away from the Persian empire and Gaumata/Smerdis had the support of the old Median aristocracy of Ecbatana. Within a year of occupying the throne Darius had put down the Median revolt.

Darius continued the process of expansion, both in the east and the west. In the east the empire extended upto the Hindukush mountains and the outlying territories in this region were properly integrated with the empire. In the west a large part of the Aegean Sea and perhaps Thrace came under Persian control. Efforts were made to strengthen Persian control over coastal areas in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Aegean Sea. Ships were stationed in the Persian Gulf and a navy was maintained off the Anatolian coast. It should be borne in mind that the military strength of the Persians lay primarily in their land-based army. Darius also carried out campaigns in the Greek peninsula, but was unable to annex the states of mainland Greece. For the Greeks of the classical period (c. 500-338 BC) the Persians were a constant political and military factor to be reckoned with.

The historian Herodotus who wrote an account, in Greek, of the encounter between the Persians and the Greeks is a major source for the Achaemenids. Herodotus was born c. 485 BC at Halicarnassus located on the south-west coast of Anatolia. Halicarnassus was an Achaemenid territory. His famous

history is essentially a narrative of the westward expansion of the Persian empire. Herodotus had travelled widely (Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia etc.) before writing his account. Most of his information about Persia was derived from contemporary Greek sources and from some prominent people who had been connected with the Persian court. Another Greek source, though not very reliable, is the *Persica* of Ctesias. Ctesias belonged to Cnidus, situated just south of Halicarnassus in south-western Anatolia. He was taken as a prisoner by the Persians during the course of a military campaign and became a doctor at the Persian court, where he stayed for about seventeen years (till c. 397 BC). His account is frequently at variance with that of Herodotus. The consensus among modern scholars is that much of the information contained in *Persica* is inaccurate.

Darius I himself has left behind a record of the opening years of his reign in the form of a large trilingual inscription carved on the face of a cliff at Behistun in western Iran. This inscription, known as the 'Behistun inscription', is in the Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian (Akkadian) languages. It provided the key for the decipherment of the cuneiform script. The inscription is accompanied by a massive relief carving of Darius. The Behistun inscription and Herodotus's history are the two main written sources for this period.

We have noted that Herodotus was largely concerned with Persian military campaigns against Greek states. At this time the Greek-speaking world consisted of numerous states which were spread over a sizable area extending from western Anatolia in the east to southern Italy in the west and included the Aegean islands, Thrace, the Greek peninsula, Crete and Sicily. Sparta and Athens were the two most prominent states on the mainland. They were also militarily the most significant (see Unit 12). Anatolia was already a part of the Achaemenid empire and the Persians had acquired a foothold in the Greek world by subjugating the Ionian states. The Persian attempt to establish supremacy over the Greeks was a prolonged affair which continued almost till the end of the classical period. However Persian military campaigns in mainland Greece were confined to the beginning of the classical period.

As soon as Darius had put down rebellions in the empire he embarked on an expedition in Thrace (c. 513 BC). He crossed the Sea of Marmara into Europe and placed a Persian garrison at the southern extremity of Thrace. At the same time he sent messengers to various Greek states, including Sparta, demanding that they acknowledge him as their ruler. The Greek response to this move was not favourable. Subsequently Darius had to turn his attention to the Ionian states in Anatolia. These states revolted against the Persians in 499 BC. The Ionian revolt lasted for about six years and was eventually crushed. The support extended to the Ionians by some states of the Greek mainland became one of the reasons for Darius to launch a full-scale invasion of the mainland. The coast of Thrace had been secured earlier and from here the Persians moved into Macedonia and then southwards in the direction of Athens. There is reason to believe that the elite of many Greek states were won over by the Persians and that they were integrated into the empire by being given leading positions in regional administration and the army. Nevertheless Darius's invasion ended in failure. The Persian army was defeated by the Athenians at the battle of Marathon (490 BC).

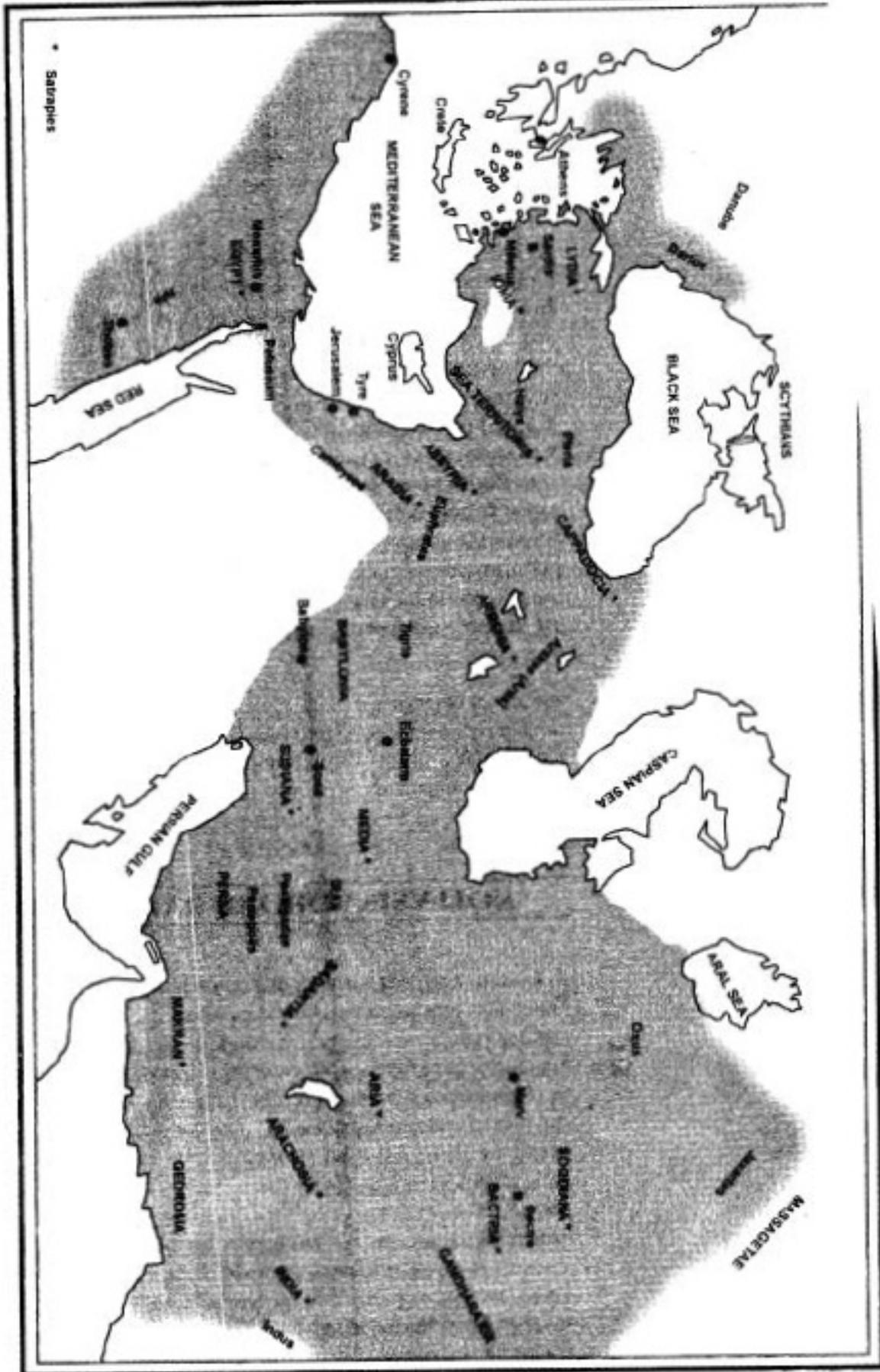
(Khshayarsha), 486-465 BC, renewed the invasion of the Greek mainland. He made elaborate arrangements for this purpose. These included setting up supply depots, laying of roads, construction of bridges, and securing allies. Xerxes attempted a two-pronged attack from both land and sea. The Persians were routed at sea by the Athenian navy in the battle of Salamis (480 BC). This was the turning point of the war. It dashed Persian hopes of controlling the Aegean Sea. The battle of Salamis was followed by a decisive victory of the combined Greek armies on land, at Plataea (479 BC). At Plataea the Greek troops were led by Sparta. The Persians completely withdrew from the Greek mainland after these reverses. Though there were no further military offensives into this region, from the point of view of the Greeks the Achaemenids continued to be a factor. Moreover, given their presence in Anatolia the Persians tried to interfere in Greek affairs whenever they got an opportunity to do so. For several decades during the fourth century BC they enjoyed a position of virtual hegemony over the Greek states. Yet in territorial terms Anatolia marked the extremity of the empire in the west.

11.3 ADMINISTRATIVE REORGANISATION

During the rule of Darius I the Persian Empire was the largest empire of the period. Its territorial expansion included Asia minor, Armenia, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Northern part of Arabia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tazakistan, Macedon, parts of Indus Valley and a number of smaller regions. Administrative governance of such a vast empire required an effective administrative apparatus. Darius I set about to undertake the job.

His lasting achievement was reorganization of the Achaemenid empire. He welded into a compact political unit the farflung territories inherited by him. A regular system of tribute realization was instituted in order to ensure sufficient resources for supporting the centralized administrative structure of the state and a large army. A powerful monarchical state emerged under Darius with a vast amount of wealth concentrated in the hands of a very small ruling elite. This elite was increasingly drawn from prominent Persian families (especially the immediate family of Darius) who now completely monopolized political power, at least at the central level. The prestige and authority of the king was crucial for legitimizing the enormous power exercised by the imperial elite. An elaborate court ceremonial emphasized the majesty of the king. The evolution of the monarchical state under the Achaemenids was influenced by Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian monarchical traditions. In turn Achaemenid traditions were adopted or imitated by later rulers including Alexander the Great and his successors.

A prominent feature of the organization of the Achaemenid empire was its division into a number of provinces governed by 'satraps' (*khshatrapavan*). Greek texts use the term 'satrapy' to designate a Persian province. The division of the empire into satrapies goes back to the Median era when these units corresponded to the respective conquered lands. Darius I made satrapies the basic unit of administration at the provincial level. Henceforth the boundaries of satrapies did not necessarily coincide with the original boundaries of conquered lands. However, they were often named after the principal people who inhabited them. A satrap could be a semi-autonomous provincial ruler or



Map 1

a high official appointed by the king. In either case satraps had wide-ranging authority within their own domains, but were subject to overall supervision by the imperial government through civil and military officials appointed directly by the king.

Herodotus enumerates twenty satrapies while the Behistun inscription has a list of twenty-three satrapies. Some of these can be easily identified—as for example Parsa (Persis), Babairus (Babylon), Yauna (Ionia), Mada (Media), Armina (Armenia), Sparda (Sardis, i.e. Lydia), Parthava (Parthia), and Bakhtrish (Bactria). As has been pointed out some of these satrapies were already established prior to Darius. Darius gave to the satrapies a concrete shape as units of provincial administration. It was in this form that the satrapies survived for several centuries, though with some modifications. Alexander took over the satrapy structure when he conquered the Persian empire and the structure remained more or less intact in the successor states as well.

The ruler enjoyed the absolute power over the territories of the empire through the army and appointment of Satraps. The Satraps were supposed to keep regular contact with the rulers through frequent correspondence. The kings had special officials to keep a vigil called ‘listeners’ the ears of the king. They sent reports from provinces. The Satraps were to look after local administration, maintain law and order and contingents of Army.

The large size of the Satrapies at times made Satraps powerful and encouraged them to rebel. The situation demanded regular attention of the ruler because of the vast size of the empire.

The organization of a powerful army also provided the king with striking capability and help in suppressing the rebellions. The Persians formed the core of the army with men from other nationalities joining in. The elite group of the army most loyal to the king was termed ‘Imperishable Ten Thousand’ comprising of Persian spearmen and cavalry.

The empire was territorially too large to be efficiently governed from a single fixed capital. The king usually found it necessary to move one major administrative centre to another. This was particularly the case with the early Achaemenid rulers. Once Achaemenid rule had stabilized under Darius and his successors, preference was increasingly shown for Susa (Shush) in south-western Iran. Darius built a large palace at Susa and in the following centuries this city was the ‘normal recognized centre of government’ of the Achaemenids. Babylon retained its prominence both due to its strategic location and its historical importance. Babylon was, in fact, the foremost urban centre of the empire. In Parsa proper the Achaemenids developed an impressive imperial city which was known to the Greeks as Persepolis (modern Takhi-i-Jamshid). Darius and his successors constructed a series of grand palaces at Persepolis. This city primarily served a ceremonial purpose. This was the place where the kings celebrated the New Year festival and where local chieftains made ritual offerings of tribute. It has been suggested that the main treasury of the Achaemenid rulers was located at Persepolis. The magnificent royal city was destroyed by Alexander the Great, but the remains which still survive point towards the huge dimensions of the palace. Large blocks of stone were used to construct the palace. The walls are decorated with relief carvings. There were several rows of pillars. Persepolis is one of the finest examples of Achaemenid art and architecture.

The Achaemenid rulers were buried near Persepolis, at a place called Naqsh-e Rostam. Persepolis was situated close to the city of Pasargadae which was founded by Cyrus the Great as the capital of the Persian empire. Under the early Achaemenids the old Median capital, Ecbatana, still had considerable significance as an administrative centre. As already noted, Sardis was the main centre of Achaemenid government in western Anatolia.

11.4 SYSTEM OF COINAGE

The Achaemenids ruled over an empire which was inhabited by diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. It is remarkable that they were able to keep the empire unified over a long period of time despite this diversity and heterogeneity. Darius introduced a uniform coinage, standardized weights and measures, and promoted a new script to make the empire more cohesive. A uniform coinage with a high level of metallic purity promotes economic activities and exchange. At the same time circulation of this currency over a wide area is an assertion of political authority. The conquest of Lydia, the first state in history to issue coins on a regular basis, had a profound impact on Achaemenid monetary development.

The striking of coins was at this time a relatively new phenomenon. Issuing of coins by the state implied stamping pieces of precious metal (in convenient units of predetermined size, weight and purity) with symbols that signified the authority of the government and guaranteed the value of each piece. This was preceded by, and closely linked to, a long process of standardization of weights and measures. Over a period of nearly two centuries the Assyrian and Babylonian empires had achieved such standardization. The Achaemenids inherited the Babylonian standard that was widely prevalent in most of West Asia. Silver was the main standard for worth, i.e. the value of other precious metals as well as goods was measured in terms of their value in relation to silver. The metal was used for exchange without being coined. Fine silver was simply weighed for the purpose of exchange. Nevertheless the standardization of weights was crucial for developing a generally acceptable system of determining the worth of goods for exchange, and was an important prerequisite for the introduction of coinage.

The Babylonian weight standard was based on a sexagesimal system of multiples (the origins of which go back to the Sumerian civilization) in which 1 biltu ('talent') of 29,472 grams equaled 60 manu ('minae'); 1 manu of 491.2 grams equaled 60 shiqu ('shekels'); and 1 shiqu of 8.18 grams equaled 2 zuzu ('drachmae'). This standard was revised by Darius I (c. 515 BC) so that henceforth the weight of the talent was 30,240 grams, that of the mina was 504 grams and that of the shekel was 8.40 grams. The coins of Darius were based on the revised shekel. Coinage was an innovation which the Achaemenids borrowed from the Lydians.

A somewhat different system had evolved in western Anatolia, especially under Lydian influence. Here gold (often in an impure form), rather than silver, was initially the standard for worth. The earliest coins to be issued were struck out of an alloy of gold and silver (electrum). Electrum was available as a natural alloy in many parts of western Anatolia. Lydia and probably some of the Greek settlements in Anatolia began issuing electrum coins around 600 BC. By the time of Croesus Lydia had a bimetallic currency. Croesus is credited with this

reform. This meant that both gold and silver coins were issued and that the state established a fixed exchange rate between the two. The fixed rate of exchange between gold and silver as metals was expressed in the form of a guaranteed exchange rate between gold and silver coins.

When Lydia was annexed by the Achaemenids the type of gold and silver coins which were most common in the region were of a type referred to by historians as 'light Croeseids'. These were struck separately in gold (weight 8.05 grams) and silver (weight 5.40 grams). The 'light Croeseids' remained in circulation within Persian territories in the west for several years after the conquest of Lydia, and were even minted by the Achaemenids for some time. It was under Darius that coins of a different design began to be issued—both in silver and gold. These were the first truly Achaemenid coins and were minted at Sardis, the former capital of Lydia and headquarters of the Persian territories in western Anatolia. The silver coins were known to the Greeks as siglos (from shiqu or shekel, though their actual weight was different), while the gold coins of Darius are referred to as 'Darics'. The gold Darics conformed to the shekel and weighed 8.40 grams (the weight of the revised shekel) while the silver siglos were of the same weight as the former silver Croeseids (5.40 grams). The exchange rate was 1 gold Daric = 20 silver sigloi. The evidence from coin hoards indicates that the circulation of coins issued by Darius and his successors remained confined mostly to the western portions of the empire, particularly Anatolia. Apart from Achaemenid coins Athenian coins too were in circulation in this region. In other parts of the empire uncoined precious metal remained the medium of exchange.

The standardization of coinage, weights and measures helped the trading activities. A unified large empire with comparative security provided markets for large scale trading activities. We get evidence of fairly good quality artisanal production with craftsmen of different nationalities engaged in production of goods.

11.5 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

In order to rule over an empire inhabited by so many different linguistic groups the Achaemenids needed to evolve a link language which would facilitate communication. Darius actively pursued a policy for encouraging the development of such a link language. It is generally recognized that the most widely spoken language of the empire was Aramaic. Aramaic was originally spoken by some of the tribes living in northern Mesopotamia. The use of Aramaic had steadily grown in the Assyrian empire and the language had subsequently penetrated the New Babylonian empire. In other words, Aramaic (with the various dialects derived from it) was already spoken by a large proportion of the population in Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine by the time the Persian empire came into being. What is more, Aramaic had emerged as the main language of trade in West Asia. It is not surprising that Darius and his successors promoted the use of Aramaic throughout the empire. An Aramaic script had also evolved which, because of its simplicity, could be used for a variety of purposes. This was an alphabetic script of twenty letters. It was derived from the Phoenician script and influenced the development of many other scripts of West Asia, including Hebrew.

Whereas Aramaic was essentially the language of the common people, the

language of the Achaemenid elite was a form of Persian which is designated as Old Persian. This may be regarded as the official language of the Achaemenid state. Old Persian was the language used in inscriptions and royal proclamations. The cuneiform script of the Mesopotamians was modified for writing Old Persian. Darius categorically states in one of his inscriptions that he invented a new cuneiform script. Though the process of adapting cuneiform to suit the requirements of Old Persian might have begun earlier it was probably completed under Darius. However, Aramaic (both language and script) was the main language of official documents and day-to-day imperial communication. The Aramaic script was sometimes also used for writing Old Persian. It needs to be noted that several other languages (Elamite, Babylonian, Egyptian etc.) were routinely used for official purposes, of which the trilingual Behistun inscription is an outstanding example.

11.6 RELIGION

The fast expansion of the Persian empire brought a large number of territories inhabited by people of different faiths and beliefs. The attitude of the Achaemenid state was open towards them. The Achaemenid state had a well-deserved reputation for religious tolerance. Although by the time of Darius I Zoroastrianism had become the dominant creed of the Persian elite, the religious traditions of the several communities which inhabited the empire continued to thrive. This was a key element of Achaemenid policy towards the conquered people's right since the time of Cyrus the Great. Cyrus definitely seems to have protected local cults as is apparent from his support to the Jews. He also helped to rebuild some of the sacred shrines of the Babylonians, for example the temple of the moon-god at Ur.

Personally Cyrus might have accepted some Zoroastrian rituals, but we have little information on this point. It is certain that under Darius Zoroastrianism had come to occupy a prominent place in the religious life of the Persian ruling class. The rise of Zoroastrianism goes back to the seventh century, or perhaps even earlier, when the prophet Zarathustra (Zardusht, Zarat-ushtra) taught the main tenets of this religion. Most scholars are of the view that Zarathustra lived and preached in north-eastern Iran. The semi-nomadic people of this area were his earliest followers. From here the ideas and beliefs of Zarathustra spread to other parts of Iran. We know that Zoroastrianism had made a lot of progress among the Medes.

During the course of its evolution Zoroastrianism incorporated some of the older Iranian religious traditions, including some aspects of polytheism. Zarathustra had taught a monotheistic doctrine, the fundamental feature of which was the worship of Ahura-Mazdah. As this doctrine developed, the universe was seen as being governed by two opposing forces. On the one hand are the forces of light and goodness, and on the other are the forces of darkness and evil. A cosmic struggle is constantly going on between the two. The forces of light and righteousness are represented by Ahura-Mazdah. Ahura-Mazdah is worshipped as the divine creator and lord of wisdom. The worship of fire is an important component of Zoroastrian ritual. Fire symbolizes light in the struggle against darkness. Subsequently some other divinities were accommodated within Zoroastrianism. It is significant that whereas Darius usually projected himself as a worshipper of Ahura-Mazdah he patronized some ancient Iranian cults as well.

Despite his adherence to Zoroastrianism Darius continued with the liberal policy of Cyrus. He is known to have respected Greek gods and goddesses. A Greek inscription from Darius's reign records his regard for Apollo. The successors of Darius too, by and large, left non-Iranian cults undisturbed. At the same time Zoroastrianism emerged as the official religion of the state. In other words it became an integral part of the state apparatus. This development was linked to the growing importance of the Magi, a hereditary priestly class which began to monopolize Zoroastrian rituals especially at the official level. The Magi had become quite powerful under Xerxes and their influence continued to grow. However the religious outlook of the Achaemenid state remained remarkably eclectic right till the end.

11.7 DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE

The Achaemenid empire flourished for more than 200 years with minor ups and downs. Every time a ruler died there was some sort of upheaval in different satrapies. The revolts in different regions occurred intermittently and were suppressed. Skirmishes on the borders were also taking place and making small dents but by and large the empire remained intact. The biggest blow came in the form of the attack of Alexander.

The Achaemenid empire came to an end as a result of the invasion of Persian territories by Alexander the Great. The Achaemenid ruler at this time was Darius III (336-331 BC). Alexander inflicted a series of defeats on the Persian army, beginning with the battle of Granicus (334 BC) in western Anatolia. Following this battle western Anatolia became a Macedonian territory. Subsequently Alexander moved toward Syria and defeated the Persian army led by Darius III at Issus (333 BC). Egypt was taken in 331 BC. Alexander then marched towards the Tigris and after crossing it defeated Darius at the battle of Gaugamela (331 BC). While Darius fled to Ecbatana, Alexander captured Babylon, Susa and Persepolis. As a symbolic act, marking the end of the Persian empire, Alexander ravaged the city of Persepolis. Darius himself was assassinated in 330 BC. Alexander the Great's conquests in effect amounted to the conquest of the Achaemenid empire. The consequences of these conquests will be discussed in the next Unit in the context of the history of ancient Greece.

11.8 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have discussed the process of the expansion and consolidation of the largest Persian empire of the period. Cyrus and Darius I played a key role in its formation. The division of the empire into administrative units called satrapies provided it certain stability. Satraps worked as an organised bureaucracy to sustain it. Standardization of the coinage and safe transportation of merchandise gave a fillip to economic activity.

Darius and his successors promoted Aramaic as a link language for the empire. Zoroastrianism which incorporated some of the older Iranian traditions became the most dominant religion. However, it was not forced on all regions of the empire and state followed a policy of high degree of religious tolerance.

The empire after flourishing for more than 200 years declined as a result of the invasion of the Alexander the Great around 334 BC. The empire gradually

disintegrated. In the 3rd Century A.D. we again witness the rise of another mighty empire – the Sasanid Empire in Iran.

11.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Give a brief account of the expansion of the Persian empire under the rule of Cyrus and Darius I.
- 2) Analyse the system of satrapies in the Achaemenid empire.
- 3) Write a brief note on the standardization of coinage in the Persian empire.
- 4) Write a short notes on:
 - (i) Aramaic
 - (ii) Zoroastrianism