
UNIT 10 FORMATION OF STATES AND EMPIRES – A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

In Block 2 you have already studied about Mesopotamia and Egypt the two major bronze age civilizations which had emerged by about 3000 BC. In the next five hundred years or so these civilizations acquired greater sophistication and became increasingly complex. Their influence extended to neighbouring areas of West Asia. In Sumeria (the southernmost part of Mesopotamia where the earliest bronze age civilization evolved), city-states gradually grew into petty-kingdoms. Some of these, as for example Ur, tried to extend their control over large parts of Sumeria. By 2350 BC the whole of southern Mesopotamia, i.e. Sumeria and Akkad (the comparatively backward area lying just north of Sumeria), became a politically unified entity for a short period under the Akkadian ruler Sargon (Sharru-kin). The Egyptian state, which was territorially quite extensive from an early date, also consolidated its position during these centuries. As a political unit Egypt was relatively more compact and remained confined to the Nile valley and surrounding areas. It was only occasionally that attempts were made to bring some of the adjoining parts of West Asia under Egyptian rule.

In this Unit we will discuss the changes and developments in adjoining regions of Mesopotamia in the subsequent centuries. In the first millennium BC new empires and states emerged not only in Asia but in other parts of the world also. This Unit would provide you a general introduction to the formation of states and empires in West Asia region. More specifically it would help you in understanding the conditions that were prevailing prior to the establishment of the Persian Empire.

10.2 BACKGROUND TO THE EMERGENCE OF EMPIRES

With the growth of bronze age technology both Egypt and Mesopotamia had established relationships of exchange with those parts of West Asia which could regularly supply goods such as metal (especially copper and tin, but also gold and silver) and wood, which were in short supply in these two centres of civilization. These relationships led to contacts with the less advanced communities which lived on the margins of settled agrarian societies. We know that Anatolia (roughly corresponding the Asian part of modern Turkey), Lebanon, and areas lying south of the Caspian Sea were important for procuring copper, tin and wood. We have evidence, for instance, of the existence of colonies of Mesopotamian merchants in central Anatolia who were involved in this trade. Records which have survived from one such settlement at Kanesh (modern Kultepe, Turkey), north of the Taurus mountains, indicate that the rich Anatolian deposits of copper were being systematically exploited much before c. 2000 BC. The thriving trade in minerals speeded up Anatolia's transition to the bronze age. Anatolia became the home of another great bronze age civilization, the Hittite civilization (c. 1800-1200 BC). Of course the historical roots of this civilization lay in the social development of Anatolia itself. However, one can be certain that the influence of Mesopotamia and Egypt acted as a catalyst for the development of neighbouring areas.

10.2.1 Tribal Migration

The second half of the third millennium BC (i.e. c. 2500-2000 BC) was a period of large-scale tribal migration throughout most of West Asia and the eastern part of Central Asia. Numerous tribes and/or ethnic and linguistic groups were on the move, mingling with or displacing earlier settlers. Some of these groups were nomads in search of better means of subsistence or were looking for fresh pastures for their animal herds; many were dislocated by other tribal groups; several were pushed out of their original habitations due to the pressure of settled agrarian societies. This process continued with great intensity for nearly 1500 years and brought about many changes in West Asia, Egypt and the lands of the eastern Mediterranean zone.

The history of these tribes is obscure. However their interaction and conflict with the great civilizations of the region was reflected in some contemporary historical records. Historians have used the clues available in these records to reconstruct the tribal movements. It has been found convenient to classify these tribes on a linguistic basis. The languages of the tribes can be grouped into two broad divisions: Indo-European and Semitic. There are a few linguistic groups which do not fall into either category. The prominent Semitic tribes were the Amorites, who were to be found in Syria and parts of Mesopotamia; and the Canaanites in Syria and Palestine. One branch of the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, settled along the Lebanese coast and played a key role in the expansion of trade in the Mediterranean. The Indo-Europeans included the Indo-Aryans, the Nesians (who settled in Anatolia and developed the Hittite civilization), the Greeks and the Mitanni. Besides, there were the Hurrians and the Kassites whose languages were neither of Indo-European nor of Semitic origin.

10.2.2 State Formation

Social differentiation and state formation among these tribes led to the emergence of a large number of new states in northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean (Crete) and, later, in Iran. The new ethnic groups formed a major component of the ruling classes of these states. These states borrowed several features of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilization such as writing, military techniques, and administrative organization. Thus, even though they were dominated by tribal groups which were relatively backward in terms of their social development, many of the recently formed states made very rapid progress. The Amorites contributed to the establishment of a Babylonian empire in Mesopotamia, the Nesians founded the Hittite empire in Anatolia, and the Phoenician settlements grew into city-states along the Lebanese coast.

10.3 EMERGENCE OF EMPIRES

A new type of state, which may loosely be referred to as an 'empire', began to emerge, initially in West Asia, from around 1800 BC onwards. As a type of state the empire encompassed a fairly large territory which was not confined to a given geographical zone; was usually (though not always) monarchical; had extensive military resources; and was based on the collection of a large tribute. Every empire had a core area as its political centre, and the ruling class of the empire belonged overwhelmingly to this core area. Though some élites from other parts of the empire might be coopted into the ruling class, it was the élites from the core area who were dominant. Often the élites from the core area came from a specific ethnic or tribal group and had kinship bonds among themselves. The bulk of the tribute flowed to the core area.

An empire was a geographically extensive entity which brought together diverse peoples and communities within a single, unified political unit. This obviously involved the creation of elaborate bureaucratic structures for governance and systematic collection of taxes, development of communication facilities, and maintenance of huge armies. There had to be legal systems which could accommodate the varied requirements of the communities which inhabited the empire, many of these communities being at different levels of social development. Since it was not possible under the given historical conditions for pre-modern empires to carry out centralization beyond a certain point, considerable autonomy had to be allowed to local and regional élites to regulate the day to day affairs of their respective areas. This was especially true of territories which were not part of the core area. Such territories might, for all practical purposes, be left free to manage their internal affairs as long as tribute was paid on a regular basis. In fact outlying areas were rarely integrated on a long-term basis and their subjugation depended upon the success of occasional military campaigns.

Empires were the result of military conquests carried out over an extended period. It was through conquest that the ruling élite of an area could establish its domination over other areas. The process of conquest and expansion could at times go on for several generations till a stage was reached beyond which it was just not possible to expand further given the specific limitations of pre-modern empires. The sheer logic of empire-building necessitated the

mobilization of a large well-trained army and resources to sustain such an army. Regular expansion provided more resources and each expansion made it both possible and necessary to have an even bigger army. Thus empire-building, appropriation of large surpluses in the form of tribute, and maintaining huge armies were all closely interlinked.

From around 1800 BC onwards we find a number of states located in West Asia attempting to build up large empires. These attempts were being made at regular intervals in different parts of the region. Initially the Babylonian state in Mesopotamia and, somewhat later, the Hittite state in Anatolia were successful at bringing large territories under their control. Hittite raids were responsible for the destruction of the first Babylonian empire. Yet from a historical point of view it was the Mesopotamian experiment which was to have far-reaching consequences. The Assyrians, who were one of the people settled in northern Mesopotamia created a mighty empire—the Assyrian empire—which lasted for several centuries and became the model for many of the other early empires of the region.

10.4 THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE

It was under the First Dynasty of Babylon that Mesopotamia became a great power in West Asia. This dynasty was founded by Sumu-abum (1894-1881 BC). The sixth ruler of the dynasty, the famous Hammurabi (1792-1749 BC), unified southern Mesopotamia and then extended his control over large parts of northern Mesopotamia. Hammurabi created an empire and his successor, Samsu-iluna (1749-1712 BC) expanded the empire by adding new territories. This empire is usually referred to as the 'Old Babylonian Empire'. Although the empire began to decline after Samsu-iluna, henceforth Babylon was to remain the main political centre of southern Mesopotamia, for which reason ancient southern Mesopotamia is designated as Babylonia while referring to the history of this region from the period of the Old Babylonian Empire onwards.

Babylon (*Bab-ilani* or 'gate of the gods') was one of the many Amorite settlements which had come up in Akkad, in northern Mesopotamia and in Syria. The Amorites, who are placed in the large group of tribes called Western Semites, played a crucial role in developing the Old Babylonian Empire. Akkadian became the official language of the empire and continued to be the main language of Mesopotamia for many centuries. Several features of Sumerian and Sumero-Akkadian civilization, such as the cuneiform script and religious practices, were adopted by the Amorites/Western Semites. Monarchical traditions which had evolved under powerful Sumerian and Akkadian rulers, as for example Sargon and the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, formed the basis of the concept of monarchy in the Babylonian empire.

As has already been mentioned, the Old Babylonian Empire eventually collapsed as a result of Hittite raids (c. 1600 BC). Soon afterwards another tribal people, the Kassites (known as Kanshu in Akkadian records), who certainly included an Indo-European component, established themselves as the rulers of Mesopotamia. The Kassites were earlier settled in the area of the Zagros mountains. They took advantage of the disturbed conditions following Hittite raids and set up a new kingdom in Mesopotamia which lasted from c. 1595 to 1157 BC. The Kassites ruled from Babylon. They maintained and continued Mesopotamian traditions. At the same time they brought with them

horse-rearing skills, which they had learnt earlier, and are credited with having popularized the use of the horse in Mesopotamia. Kassite power was mainly concentrated in the south while the north was controlled by different groups, of whom the Mitanni were the most noteworthy, till about 1350 BC.

10.5 THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

Around c. 1350 BC a significant new development took place in northern Mesopotamia. This was the rise of Assyria, which was to have a profound impact on the history of West Asia. The Assyrians founded a vast empire which dominated West Asia for several centuries. We may say that it was the Assyrians who really inaugurated the ‘age of empires’.

During the course of the tribal movements which we have referred to above, numerous Semitic groups had moved into and occupied northern Mesopotamia. Some of the groups which settled in the Upper Tigris area came to be known as Assyrians. The people whom we refer to as ‘Assyrians’ consisted of Semitic immigrants and the original inhabitants of the area. They got their name from *Ash-shur*, the main god worshipped by them. Although *Ash-shur* was the name by which their most prominent city and subsequently their empire was known, modern historians usually designate the city as ‘Assur’ and the kingdom and the people as ‘Assyria’ and ‘Assyrian’ respectively, whereas *Ash-shur* is used primarily while referring to the god of the Assyrians.

10.5.1 Territorial Expansion

The Assyrian state rose to prominence following the end of Mitannian domination over northern Mesopotamia. Having brought most of the Upper Tigris area under their rule by about 1300 BC, the Assyrians began to expand westwards into Syria under king Shalmaneser I (1274-1245 BC). They also threatened the Kassite kingdom of Babylon. The Assyrians enlarged and consolidated their power under the successors of Shalmaneser I. Eventually the Assyrian king Tiglathpileser I (1115 – 1077 BC) conquered Syria, extracted tribute from the Phoenician cities on the Lebanese coast, and subjugated Babylonia, thereby making Assyria a great power in West Asia. This was the first phase of the rise of the Assyrian empire.

The newly created Assyrian empire was disrupted by fresh tribal incursions during the tenth century, but had recovered by about 900 BC. From c. 900 BC onwards the Assyrians steadily expanded their influence and established the ‘New Assyrian Empire’. The real founder of the New Assyrian Empire was Ashurnasirpal II (883-859). Ashurnasirpal II attempted to restore the Assyrian empire to the size that it had attained under Tiglathpileser I. He consolidated Assyrian hold over northern Mesopotamia and undertook several military campaigns into Syria. Ashurnasirpal II built a new capital near Assur, named Kalhu (modern Nimrud) as the seat of his government. He was succeeded by his son, Shalmaneser III (858-824). Shalmaneser III carried out numerous campaigns in Armenia, Syria, Palestine, and the areas lying along the Persian Gulf. However, he was unable to make any significant additions to Assyrian territories. Shalmaneser III failed to annex Syria, but Babylon accepted nominal Assyrian overlordship (Babylonian rulers were allowed to remain on the throne so long as they accepted Assyrian suzerainty). Thereafter Assyrian power declined for several decades till the time of Tiglathpileser III, one of the most

outstanding Assyrian kings. The reign of Tiglathpileser III (744-727) witnessed a revival of the empire. In fact it was under Tiglathpileser III and his successors that the Assyrian empire reached its greatest extent.

Tiglathpileser III succeeded in annexing Syria and a large part of Palestine to the Assyrian empire. He reasserted Assyrian supremacy over Babylon. In the east he crossed the Zagros mountains and conquered the region of Iran which was then known as Media (the history of Media will be discussed in greater detail below). In other words Tiglathpileser III created a vast empire extending from the Mediterranean coast to the Caspian Sea and from the Taurus and Zagros mountains to the Persian Gulf. Assyrian power continued to grow under his successor Sargon II (721-705). Sargon II's descendants (the Sargonid dynasty) ruled down to 612 BC when the empire was destroyed. Under the Sargonids the city of Nineveh (Ninua) became the capital of the empire.

10.5.2 Administrative and Military Apparatus

Tiglathpileser III was instrumental in developing an elaborate administrative and military apparatus for the Assyrian empire. This stabilized the empire for nearly a century. An important objective of Tiglathpileser III was to centralize the structure of the Assyrian state and to strengthen monarchical authority. The conquered territories were constituted into administrative districts. These units or districts were placed under 'governors' who were directly answerable to the king. The 'governors' had extensive administrative, financial, judicial and military authority in their respective areas. They were responsible for the collection of taxes and the regular flow of tribute to the centre. Further they were expected to mobilize troops for the Assyrian army.

One of the most important achievements of Tiglathpileser III was the formation of a well-trained standing army. Assyrian rulers had so far relied on troops supplied by big landowners of Mesopotamia. These were invariably peasants and slaves from the core areas of the Assyrian kingdom, who were forced to serve as soldiers for the duration of a military expedition. Tiglathpileser III realized that a permanent professional army was essential in order to control and expand his vast empire. Troops were now recruited from different parts of the empire and provincial 'governors' were entrusted with the task of raising armed contingents from the territories under their jurisdiction. Instead of being a loose formation in which different types of troops were all mixed up, the army was now divided into separate units. Each unit had specialized military duties. Chariot units and the cavalry had a special place in this new type of army. The infantry was mainly recruited from Anatolia and Syria-Palestine, while there were camel riders from Arabia. These measures resulted in a significant increase in the size and effectiveness of the Assyrian army.

It was with this new army that Tiglathpileser III was able to conquer territories which had earlier never formed part of the Assyrian empire, such as Media in northern Iran. It has been pointed out that the need to find resources for such a large standing army itself required constant campaigns of conquest. Igor Diakonoff has remarked that Tiglathpileser's reform of the Assyrian army was based on its being kept permanently active and sustaining itself by plunder. Moreover, since there was greater emphasis on chariots and the cavalry, the army needed to have an assured supply of horses. The people living in the mountain pastures of northern Iran specialized in horse-rearing. The annexation

of Media placed a major source for the supply of horses at the disposal of the Assyrians.

Tiglathpileser III also initiated a ruthless policy of large-scale transfers of populations from one part of the empire to another as a strategy to minimize the possibilities of rebellion within the empire. People or communities living in one part of the empire would be uprooted from their original areas of settlement and forcibly settled in another part of the empire. This was often the fate of territories which were subjugated after a fierce military contest. In Iran, for instance, almost 65,000 persons were deported at the end of a campaign in 744 BC. This policy of mass deportation was one of the reasons for the intense hatred which subject peoples of West Asia had for the Assyrian empire, something that is reflected in the Old Testament of the Bible. Nevertheless, Tiglathpileser III laid the foundations of a powerful empire and his Sargonid successors continued with his traditions. These traditions provided the inspiration and framework for many of the subsequent empires in the area.

10.6 MIGRATIONS, CONFLICTS AND NEW PHASE OF EMPIRE BUILDING

A new phase of empire building began in the mid-seventh century BC in West Asia with the rise of the Median empire which was succeeded by the much larger Achaemenid empire. The core areas of these empires were located in Iran. The Achaemenid empire may be regarded as the first 'world empire' in the sense that it had a vast territorial extent, encompassing Egypt, most of West Asia (barring the Arabian peninsula, but including Anatolia) and extended from Aegean Sea in the west to the Hindukush mountains in the east. It lasted for more than two centuries, till it was destroyed by Alexander the Great.

As a result of several centuries of tribal migrations a large number of new tribes, especially those belonging to the Indo-Iranian or Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European people, moved into Iran in the latter half of the second millennium BC. Iran came to be inhabited predominantly by tribes of the Indo-European linguistic family. By about the eighth century BC these tribes were dispersed throughout Iran (including parts of present-day Afghanistan) completely altering the linguistic character of the lands lying between the Zagros mountains in the west and the Hindukush mountains in the east, and between the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf in the south. This phenomenon was more conspicuous in the eastern parts of Iran whereas in the west pre-Indo-European elements survived for somewhat longer. Nevertheless, by the seventh century BC Iran had acquired a high degree of linguistic and cultural uniformity.

Many of the Iranian tribes had given up their nomadic lifestyle and adopted a sedentary existence. Different parts of Iran came to be associated with specific tribal groups. The Medes were settled in the area lying south-west of the Caspian Sea; the Persians in the region of Fars, i.e. south-western Iran; the Parthians east of the Caspian Sea; and the Bactrians north of the Hindukush. Apart from their linguistic affinity, these tribal groups also shared many cultural and religious traditions. With the rise of Zoroastrianism (c. sixth century BC) in the eastern settlements and the spread of this belief to other parts of Iran, the ties which linked the Iranian tribes were further strengthened.

The Iranians succeeded in exploiting the natural resources of the region more efficiently than earlier settlers and developed a new pattern of subsistence based upon specialized animal husbandry and better utilization of water resources. As we have already noted, Media specialized in horse-rearing. Rearing of the double humped camel became an important feature of the Bactrian economy. Goats and sheep were reared in arid and semi-arid zones. This specialized animal husbandry was combined with traditional cattle-rearing. Historians have drawn attention to the fact that horses and camels played a significant role in the growth of the Iranian economy at this stage. They helped to expand trade and exchange both by facilitating travel and bringing commodities for exchange. These animals augmented the surplus available to the communities which bred them. Horses and camels increased the overall mobility of the tribes. In the case of the Medes, horses ensured their initial economic and military superiority, without which they could not have created an empire. In agriculture the Iranians initiated new irrigation techniques to optimize the use of water. This they did by introducing underground canals which prevented the water from rapid evaporation. An extensive network of such canals (called *qanat* in Iran and *karez* in Afghanistan/Central Asia) was created in the entire region. The construction of such a network required greater cooperation within and among the agrarian communities, which in turn led to the growth of a more complex social and economic organization.

These were the historical conditions in which the Median kingdom came into existence. Media (Iranian *Máda*; Akkadian *Madáí*) was the ancient name for north-western Iran, roughly the triangle formed by the modern cities of Zanjan, Hamadan and Tehran. Towards the end of the eighth century BC the Median tribes settled in this area were living in fortified villages, some of which subsequently developed into urban centres. The tribes came together as a confederacy at the beginning of the seventh century BC. We have already referred to Assyrian military expeditions into this area, and the annexation of Media by Tiglathpileser III. Later, taking advantage of the weakening of Assyrian control the Median tribes constituted themselves into a confederacy. This would have helped the Medes to fight the Assyrians more effectively. Although we have very little information about the early phase of the rise of the Median kingdom it would seem that in c. 675 BC the tribes were unified by a ruler named either Phraortes (Fravarti) or Khshathrita (675-653 BC). Initially he may have been an elected king, chosen from among the chieftains of the Median tribes and clans. As such he would just have been the first among equals. However, as soon as Khshathrita had consolidated his position he further increased his authority and established a hereditary monarchy. Khshathrita was succeeded by his son Uvakhshtra, known as Cyaraxes in Greek sources—the name by which he is more familiar (we will be generally using conventional Greek versions of Iranian names in order to avoid confusion).

The Medes suffered a setback for a brief period when their kingdom was conquered by a nomadic people called the Scythians. Scythian domination lasted from c. 652-625 BC. In c. 625 BC Cyaraxes eliminated the Scythian chiefs and re-established the Median state. He founded a powerful Median kingdom and expanded it by annexing many of the neighbouring parts of Iran. The event which transformed this new kingdom into an empire was the conquest of Assyria.

Cyaxares (625-585 BC) made use of the existing resources of Media to create a regular standing army along the lines of the Assyrians. The army was divided into separate units with specific functions. There were infantry units, cavalry units and units of specialist archers. It may be recalled that the Medes were expert horse-breeders and easy access to horses greatly increased the strength of their army. With this army Cyaxares extended his territories beyond the Median homeland. Several parts of the Iranian plateau, as for instance Fars, came under the Medes. It is likely that Cyaxares undertook expeditions as far as Bactria in the east, but there is no hard evidence to suggest that this region was incorporated within the empire.

For the invasion of Assyria the Medes allied themselves with Babylonia. Assyrian authority over Babylonia had weakened under the later Sargonids and in c. 626 BC Babylonia reasserted its independence. This was the time when a new dynasty rose to prominence in southern Mesopotamia. The rulers of this dynasty are usually referred to as the Chaldean kings. They had their origins in Chaldea (Kaldu in Assyrian), the ancient name for the marshland in the southernmost part of Mesopotamia. The Chaldean king Nabopolassar (626-605 BC) captured Babylon from the Assyrians. Under the Chaldeans Babylonia became a major power in West Asia for nearly a century. This is known as the New Babylonian Empire that reached its zenith under Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC). The resurgence of Babylonia was reflected in its outstanding achievements in the fields of science, culture, art and architecture. There are several references to these events in the Old Testament of the Bible. In biblical literature Chaldean is used as a synonym for Babylonian.

The Medes and the Babylonians formed an alliance against their common enemy, Assyria, at a time when the power of Assyria was declining. The widespread resentment in West Asia against the oppressive policies of the Assyrians and the huge burden they had placed on their subjects resulted in intense hostility against the small Assyrian ruling elite, facilitating the downfall of the empire. The Assyrian empire was destroyed as a result of the combined onslaught of the Medes and the Babylonians. Cyaxares invaded Assyria and occupied its leading cities in 612 BC. Nineveh was captured and its palaces were burnt down. The Assyrian state survived only in name for another three years with its centre in Harran in northern Mesopotamia. Then in 610 BC the Medes and the Babylonians together invaded Harran and put an end to the Assyrian state. Assyria itself was partitioned between the Medes and the Babylonians, although some historians are of the view that the Medes did not occupy any territory but only took with them a huge booty. A substantial portion of the enormous wealth which the Assyrians had accumulated for centuries was now at the disposal of the Medes and considerably enhanced their resources. The wars against Assyria also flooded Media with slaves (*maniya* was the term used for slave). Babylonia now became the dominant power in Mesopotamia.

Unfortunately we hardly have any information about the organization of the Median state or its administrative structure. It would appear that the empire was loosely organized and that the aristocracy drawn from the leading families of the Median tribes continued to wield considerable authority. Eventually it was this aristocracy, or rather a section of it, that undermined the position of the king and paved the way for the overthrow of Median rule. The city of

Ecbatana or Agbatana (modern Hamadan) was the capital of the empire. Since Media was a relatively backward region as compared to Mesopotamia, it borrowed many features of Mesopotamian civilization. Babylonian culture left a strong imprint on Media. Its ruling class adopted several Babylonian customs. At this time early Zoroastrianism was making inroads into Iran from the east.

Cyaxares was succeeded by his son Astyages (Ishtumegu) who ruled from 585 to 549 BC. Not much is known about the reign of Astyages. The Median empire continued to expand under Astyages. Some of this expansion was at the expense of Babylon. It may be mentioned here that the New Babylonian Empire had reached its climax under Nebuchadnezzar II. Most of Mesopotamia (including Assyria) had come under Babylonian rule and Syria-Palestine was added to the empire. However the Babylonians found it difficult to control Palestine. This was partly due to frequent rebellions in this area and partly due to Egyptian military intervention. Egypt was at this time attempting to bring Palestine under its control. There had been two Jewish kingdoms in Palestine since around the ninth century BC: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem was the capital of Judah. In 722 BC Israel, i.e. the northern kingdom, had been subjugated by the Assyrians. However Judah had survived. Then in 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar II besieged and captured Jerusalem. Thousands of Jews were forcibly deported to Babylon and a heavy tribute was extracted from Judah. The Babylonians invaded Judah a second time in 586 and destroyed Jerusalem. Babylonian influence was now supreme in Palestine. For a short time Babylon was the centre of a vast empire in West Asia. This empire did not last very long and came to an end within a few decades after Nebuchadnezzar II. The centre of political gravity in West Asia shifted from Mesopotamia to Iran.

Significant political changes were taking place within the Median empire at this time. Astyages had expanded the empire, but he was facing internal problems. For reasons which are not very clear a section of the Median aristocracy had become hostile to the Median king and plotted to overthrow him. Some provincial elites who were not Medes were also involved in this plot. These provincial elites included Cyrus (Kurash), 559-29 BC, the semi-independent ruler of the region of Parsa (modern Fars). This region was located south of Media in south-western Iran. Parsa was a part of the Median empire and Cyrus was subject to the overlordship of Astyages. Cyrus was probably related to Astyages. Cyrus belonged to the Achaemenid dynasty which traditionally ruled over Parsa. The Achaemenids were descended from Achaemenes (Hakhamanish), an Iranian warrior chieftain of the seventh century BC. They were subsequently subjugated by the Medes.

In the mid-sixth century BC the Achaemenids under Cyrus revolted against the Medes. In this they had the support of the section of the Median aristocracy which was opposed to Astyages. Cyrus defeated Astyages and occupied the Median capital Ecbatana in 549 BC. This brought the Median empire to an end. The territories ruled by the Medes now came under Achaemenid rule.

As we have already noted the Achaemenids created a vast empire in West Asia. This empire lasted for about two centuries, c. 549-330 BC. We will examine the Achaemenid empire in more detail in the next Unit.

10.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we provided a general introduction to the process of formation of States and Empires. The second half of third millennium BC witnessed large scale tribal migration in West Asia and eastern part of central Asia. In due course social differentiation and state formation gave rise to large number of new states in the region. The empires encompassed fairly large territories transgressing geographical zones with some what developed administrative structures. The Babylonian and Assyrian empires have been discussed in brief. The emergence of Median Kingdom is also given some space in our discussion. The territories under Median kingdom later on came under the Achaemenid rule and developed into Persian empire the mightiest empire of the region. This Achaemenid empire will be discussed in detail in the next Unit (Unit 11) of the this Block.

10.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Write a brief note on the background of the emergence of empires.
- 2) Discuss the main characteristic features of early empires.
- 3) Analyse the administrative and military apparatus developed under Assyrians.
- 4) How did Cyaraxes strengthened the Median Kingdom?