

Theme V

Formation of Empires

Time line

Old Empires

Sumn-abu c. 1894-1881 BCE

Hammurabi 1792-1749 BCE

Samsu-ilunac. 1749-1712 BCE

Hittite Raids c. 1600 BCE

The Kassites 1595-1157 BCE

The Assyrian Empire

Shalmaneser I 1274-1245 BCE

Tiglathpileser I 1115-1077 BCE

New Assyrian Empire

Ashurnasirpal II 883-859 BCE

Shalmaneser III 858-824 BCE

Tiglathpileser III 744-727 BCE

Sargon II 721-705 BCE

Sennacherib 704-681 BCE

Esarhaddon 681-672 BCE

Sassanids

Ardashir I 224-242 CE

Shapur I 240-270 CE

Bahran I 271-274 CE

Bahran II 274-292/93 CE

Bahran V 420-438 CE

Yardegard I 438-457 CE

Kavad I 488-531 CE



Photograph : Ardashir I's relief at Firuzabad, Fars, Iran

Credit: MiladVandae

Source : https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ardashir_i%27s_relief_at_Firuzabad,_Fars,_Iran.JPG

UNIT 12 FORMATION OF EMPIRES: ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN*

Structure

- 12.1 Objectives
- 12.2 Introduction
- 12.3 The Babylonian Empire: Rise and Territorial Expansion
- 12.4 The Assyrian Empire
 - 12.4.1 Territorial Expansion
 - 12.4.2 Administration and Military System
- 12.5 The Division of Assyria and Conflicts with Babylon
- 12.6 Society and Economy
 - 12.6.1 Socio-Economic Developments
 - 12.6.2 Cultural Developments
- 12.7 Summary
- 12.8 Key Words
- 12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
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12.1 OBJECTIVES

In the previous Unit, you have read about the Nomadic groups across Central and West Asia. This Unit focuses on the Babylonians and the Assyrians. It will introduce you to the formation of empires in the region of Mesopotamia. After reading this Unit you would be able to:

- Outline the process of formation of Assyrian and Babylonian empires;
- Identify the factors that helped the empires to expand their kingdoms;
- List the socio-economic features of the empires;
- Appreciate the cultural features of the empires; and
- Understand the stages of growth and development of empires, and their demise.

12.2 INTRODUCTION

From c. 1800 BCE a new political formation came into being which can be referred to as an 'empire'. This political formation originated in West Asia. Spread over a large area, these empires were in most cases monarchical in nature. These states did not have any dearth of military resources and functioned through the collection of tribute which was syphoned to the central authority of the empire. These empires were ruled by an elite group comprising of people who came from the core area of the empire. The core of the empire included the capital city and surrounding areas. While people from peripheral areas (places that were far away from the capital of the empire) were also a part of ruling class, the majority were from the core area and had kinship ties with one another owing to either ethnic or tribal links between them.

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To unify this large geographically extensive and culturally, socially and economically diverse area that was encompassed by an empire, various systems needed to be put in place. For this, systems of taxation, elaborate bureaucratic structures and standing armies were maintained. The legal system needed to accommodate the requirements of various communities of the empire not all of whom had reached the same level of social advancement. Given the vast expanse of the empire, in many cases the region beyond the core area was allowed to govern itself, with the power to manage their internal affairs as long as tribute was paid regularly. In many cases the control over the outlying regions was not complete and needed frequently to be reinforced through military interventions.

Empire was the product of the necessity for expansion coupled with the strength of a standing army. Through constant expansion, the ruling elite maintained their position of power and dominated over larger expanses of territory. The situation was such that the larger the empire grew; the more resources it controlled. The size and expanse of the empire demanded a larger standing army as well. In order to maintain such an army, greater amounts of resources were required. Therefore, there is an intrinsic link between the expansion of the empire, the collection of tribute and the maintenance of the army.

In West Asia, the attempt to build empires was underway from around 1800 BCE. The Babylonians of Mesopotamia initiated the process and were followed by the Hittites. The raids conducted by the Hittites led to the eventual demise of the Babylonian empire. The Assyrians that followed and lasted several centuries, ensured that the Mesopotamian empires would serve as a model for various early empires in the region.

12.3 THE BABYLONIAN EMPIRE: RISE AND TERRITORIAL EXPANSION

Babylon (Bab-ilani, which means ‘gate of the gods’) was one of the Amorite settlements that came up in Akkad in North Mesopotamia and Syria.¹ The Amorites, who were a part of the larger tribe known as the Western Semites, were crucial in the development of the Old Babylonian Empire. Akkadian was the official language of the empire and continued to be the main language in Mesopotamia for a significant amount of time. Religious practices and features such as the cuneiform script of the Sumerian and Sumero-Akkadian civilization were adopted by the Amorites. The Babylonian Empire adopted its monarchical traditions inspired by the powerful Sumerian and Akkadian rulers such as Sargon (c.2334 BCE) and the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c.2094-2047 BCE).

The Old Babylonian Empire became significant during the rule of the first dynasty founded by Sumu-abum (c. 1894-1881 BCE). During the reign of the sixth ruler, the famous Hammurabi (reign 1792-1749 BCE), south Mesopotamia was unified and the empire extended to large parts of northern Mesopotamia as well. His dominion extended over the cities of Eridu, Ur, Lagash, Zabalam, Larsa, Uruk, Adab, Isin, Nippur, Keshi, Dilbat, Borsippa, Babylon, Kish, Malgium, Mashkam, Shapir, Kutha, Sippar, Eshnunna, Mari and Tultul. Samsu-iluna (c.1749–c.1712 BCE), his successor, made several attempts to add more territories and expand the empire, especially in the South: Ida-Maras, Emutbal, Uruk and Isin. The empire declined soon after. Babylon continued to be a significant political centre till the Hittite raids (c.1600 BCE) in southern Mesopotamia, due to which the region was known as Babylonia with reference to the Old Babylonian Empire.

¹ Amorites were Semitic-speaking people who established and ruled several city states in southern Mesopotamia during 21st century BCE to 17th century BCE.



Map 12.1 : Extent of Babylonian Empire during the rule of Hammurabi

Credit: Map Master, 2008

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Hammurabi%27s_Babylonia_1.svg

The Hittite raids which took place in c. 1600 BCE brought about the downfall of the Old Babylonian Empire.² The Kassites (known as Kanshu in Akkadian records) moved from the Zagros mountains during the Hittite raids taking advantage of the instability to set up a new kingdom in Mesopotamia which lasted from 1595-1157 BCE. The Kassites upheld the traditions of Mesopotamia and added to it skills such as horse rearing. They popularized the use of the horse in Mesopotamia. The Kassite power was strongest in south Mesopotamia with the north being controlled by various groups of which the most significant were the Mitanni till about 1350 BCE.

12.4 THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

The year 1350 BCE saw the emergence of Assyria as a significant power in West Asia. The large empire established by the Assyrians had a significant impact on the history of West Asia and brought about what can be understood as the 'Age of Empires'.

As has been mentioned above, there was a large amount of movement by various **Semitic** groups in the northern Mesopotamian region.³ Some of the groups which settled in the Upper Tigris area came to be known as the Assyrians. It should be noted that the 'Assyrians' constituted a mixed group consisting of the Semitic settlers as well as the local population. The name Assyria was derived from the name of the most prominent deity, Ash-shur. Modern historians refer to the city as 'Assur' and subsequently the kingdom as 'Assyria' and the people as 'Assyrians'.

12.4.1 Territorial Expansion

The first phase of the rise of Assyria saw major territorial expansions. As the Mitannian rule (c. 1500-1300 BCE) over north Mesopotamia waned, the Assyrians took control

² Hittites belonged to ancient Anatolia. By 15th century BCE they became master of northern Levant and Upper Mesopotamia.

³ The term Semitic group is largely used for that ethnic and cultural group who spoke Semitic (an Afro-Asiatic family of languages spoken in West and North Africa) languages. Racially, they are believed to be of Caucasian race.

Formation of Empires

over the Upper Tigris area by 1300 BCE and moved westwards towards Syria which was under the rule of Shalmaneser I (1274-1245 BCE). It was the rule of Tiglathpileser I (1115-1077 BCE) that saw the subjugation of Syria and Babylon along with the extraction of tribute from the Phoenicians on the coast of Lebanon, resulting in the rise of Assyria as a major power in West Asia.

There were however significant concerns that this newly established empire had to face in terms of tribal incursions in the tenth century which they managed to quell by 900 BCE. This however was dealt with the establishment of the 'New Assyrian Empire' by Ashurnaipal II (883-859 BCE). With the aim of restoring Assyria to the size it had achieved under Tiglathpileser I, Ashurnaipal II undertook campaigns into Syria and consolidated control over northern Mesopotamia. Near Assur he built a new city of Kalhu (modern day Nimrud) which was made the seat of government. In spite of his campaigns into Armenia, Syria, Palestine and areas along the Persian Gulf, his successor Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE) was unable to expand the empire. Though he was unsuccessful in annexing Syria, Babylon nominally accepted Assyrian suzerainty. After Shalmaneser III, Assyrian power was on the decline for several decades but revived during the reign of Tiglathpileser III (744-727 BCE).

Tiglathpileser III managed to expand Assyrian territories by annexing Syria and significant parts of Palestine while reinforcing the control over Babylon. Expansion was also carried out to the east, where crossing the Zagros mountains, Tiglathpileser III took control of Iran, known then as Media. The expanse of the Assyrian empire under Tiglathpileser III therefore stretched from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and from the Zagros and Taurus mountains to the Persian Gulf. Assyrian power grew further under Tiglathpileser's successor Sargon II (721-705 BCE). Sargon II's descendants rule was disrupted in 626 BCE when a rebellion broke out in Babylonia against Assyrian rule which shall be explained in greater detail subsequently. In 612 BCE, Nineveh (Ninua), a major city of Assyria was captured by the joint forces of the Babylonians and the Medes.



Map 12.2 : Different stages of the extension of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-911 BCE)

Credit: Semhur, 2010

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/Empire_neo_assyrien.svg

12.4.2 Administration and Military System

The stability that Tiglathpileser III managed to achieve during his reign was because of the nature of the military and administrative systems he put in place. The ruler realized that in order to achieve the most efficient rule he could not concentrate all the power in his own hands. To this end he attempted to strengthen monarchical authority by dividing his territories into administrative districts which were placed under governors. Directly answerable to the king, these governors were given financial, administrative, judicial and military powers over the area which they governed. However, they were not allowed to use absolute power as the ruler was the final authority on all matters. Nevertheless, they were given the authority to carry out these powers in the name of the king. The tribute collected from these areas made up the bulk of the revenue of the state. The troops for the Assyrian army were also recruited from these districts which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Moving from a system where the ruler was dependent on large landlords in Mesopotamia to provide troops, during the reign of Tiglathpileser III a standing army was formed. Instead of the poor peasants who were forced into military service, Tiglathpileser III realized that it was in the best interest of controlling the vast expanse of his empire to have an army trained and ready for its protection. The governors had to raise contingents from their areas and provide them to the central army of the empire. In this way the army consisted of various specialized units. The infantry, for example, came from Anatolia and Syria-Palestine, while the camel riders came from Arabia. This helped in significantly increasing the efficiency of the Assyrian army.

This standing army is what ensured Tiglathpileser III's success in expanding his territories into areas like Media in northern Iran. In fact, the very basic upkeep and sustenance of such a large army required constant conquests and the plunder that they conducted through the raids of the army. It must also be noted that since the emphasis in the army was shifted to cavalry and chariots, the constant requirement of horses was met through the annexation of the northern Iranian mountain pastures which specialized in horse-rearing.

Moreover, in his efforts to curb the possibility of conflict and rebellion, Tiglathpileser III initiated a policy wherein the population was made to move over to the conquered areas. This was done especially in the case where there was a fierce conflict which led to the subjugation of an area. For example, in Iran approximately 65,000 people were moved in 744 BCE at the end of the campaign. The hatred that the people felt towards the Assyrian empire is reflected in the Old Testament of the Bible. These measures, harsh as they were, helped Tiglathpileser III build his empire which was carried on by his Sargonid successors and provided a blueprint for many empires to model themselves on.

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) How did Assyrian empire expand and maintain itself?

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- 2) Describe the nature of empire that existed during the time of Hammurabi and his successors.

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- 3) What were the concerns facing Ashurnipal II and what did he do to deal with them?

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- 4) How does a good army help in the consolidation of empire?

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12.5 THE DIVISION OF ASSYRIA AND CONFLICTS WITH BABYLON

As has been discussed earlier, during the reign of Tiglathpileser III, Assyrian control over Babylon had been established. By this time, Chaldean tribes had settled here.⁴ These tribes initiated a struggle against Assyria along with their ally, Elam⁵. Babylon went to war against the Assyrians in 692 BCE, in which neither side won. In 690 BCE, the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 BCE) completely devastated Babylon. The impact was to the extent that the prices of commodities went up by seventy-five times because of the famine created by this destruction. The conflict lasted a year before Babylon surrendered and the people of Babylon paid a heavy price as their city was

⁴ The Chaldean tribes were those tribes which settled in the region of Babylon from the beginning of the tenth century BCE and joined in the fight for independence against the Assyrians.

⁵ The traditional ally of the Chaldean tribes, which ensured that they were pulled into conflict every time there was a struggle against the Chaldeans and the Assyrians.

razed, flooded and added to the Assyrian empire as a regular province, reducing it from an independent kingdom that it once was.

The son of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, who came to power in 681 BCE, ordered that Babylon be restored and invited the surviving inhabitants back. Before his death in 672 BCE, Esarhaddon divided the Assyrian empire between his sons. The elder son, Ashurbanipal received Assyria, while his younger son, Shamas-shum-ukin was made the ruler of Babylon with the rights of a prince yet he was not an independent ruler and was subject to the larger control of his brother. In 652 BCE Shamas-shum-ukin led troops against Assyria having forged a secret alliance with Egypt, some Syrian states and Elam. However, Ashurbanipal managed to remove Elam from the alliance using intrigue and a palace revolution. The remaining allies were not able to support Babylon sufficiently and after three years of Assyrian assaults on Babylon it fell in 648 BCE, with it, its leader Shamash-shum-ukin also died on the battle field. In 646 BCE, Ashurbanipal was able to defeat Elam as well and brought its capital Susa under his control.

The next uprising of Babylon against Assyria took place in 626 BCE, by a Chaldean chief, Nabopolassar (658-605 BCE). He managed to bring back the joint forces of Elam and Babylon. Yet it took ten years to finally rid Babylon of the Assyrian presence. The Medes in 614 BCE helped the Babylonians by capturing the city of Assur, the old capital of Assyria and sealed the alliance through the marriage of Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar to Amytis, the daughter of the Median King Cyaxares. In 612 BCE, the city of Nineveh was captured by the joint forces of the Medes and Babylon. Though some Assyrian troops were able to break through and retain control of Upper Mesopotamia, by 609 BCE Babylon managed to remove them entirely and consolidated their position over Phoenicia, Syria and Palestine. At this time, the Egyptian ruler, Necho II (610-595 BCE) was also vying for power in this region bringing all of West Asia under the powerful control of three major powers: Media, Babylonia and Egypt. In 605 BCE, following a hard fought battle between Egypt and Babylon, Syria and Palestine and later some Phoenician cities submitted themselves to the victorious Babylon. The death of Nabopolassar in 605 BCE, saw his son Nebuchadnezzar II's (605-526 BCE) ascension to the throne. By 597 BCE Nebuchadnezzar II captured Jerusalem, the capital of Judah and replaced the King. He then went to war with Apries, the Pharaoh of Egypt who made the ruler at Jerusalem to rise in rebellion against Babylon. Having quelled the rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar II recaptured Jerusalem and sent the King and many craftspeople into exile in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar II's death in 526 BCE was followed by the rule of three rulers in the next twelve years. In 556 BCE it went to Nabonidus who introduced religious reforms giving importance to the Moon-God Sin. It is possible that it was an Aramaean practice and by giving it importance he was trying to unite the Aramean tribes around him. This, however, did not went well with the priests of Babylon. Nabonidus managed to capture the caravan route towards Egypt which went through the oasis of Teima. He moved to Teima and left his son, Belshazzar in Babylon. Babylon was soon faced with the threat of the Persian King Cyrus II (c. 600-530 BCE) on the eastern border of Babylon. After ten years at Teima, Nabonidus returned to Babylon to raise its defences. However, in 539 BCE, Babylon fell to the Persians and lost its independence forever.

12.6 SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

The social, economic and cultural milieu of Mesopotamia went through a significant series of changes depending on the political authority prevalent in the region.

12.6.1 Socio-economic Developments

In analyzing the socio-economic features of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, we need to take into account the people and the manner in which society was structured. These factors indicate the manner in which trade was conducted, land was distributed and in general determined the economic and social position of an individual.

In Mesopotamia through the first millennium BCE, the economic focus changed from royal estates to that of the temple and private holdings. The economy depended on agricultural production. The best lands belonged to the temple, the royal family and the rich. Smaller land owners did not have access to large chunks of land and they largely used their land for market farming since land was very expensive. Farming could take place only through irrigation. The land was irrigated through canals owned by the state and the temple, the water of which could be accessed by paying a fee. Small landowners cultivated their land with the help of their families while the larger landowners leased out their estates.

In trade Babylonia was an intermediary between Palestine, Phoenicia and countries to the south and east of Mesopotamia. There was significant trade between Egypt, Elam, Syria and Anatolia in items such as tin, copper, iron, wine and timber among other things. Babylonian woollen goods were in high demand in neighbouring areas. Big business families like that of Egibi, which had its headquarters in Babylon, played a significant role in local and international trade through performing various banking and financial activities. Artisans like weavers, smiths, carpenters etc., managed to enter into contracts to supply their goods at fixed rates, over and above selling them in the market.

The society at this time had three kinds of citizens. Those who enjoyed full rights, those who were dependent or semi-free and finally the slaves. The citizens who enjoyed full citizenship sat on the assemblies of the town and helped in dispute resolution. They were also active participants in the temple rituals and were also entitled to a share in the temple revenue. This legal status accorded to the priests, state officials, large landowners, free artisans and scribes was inherited. The depended population worked for generations on lands owned by the state, private landowners and the temple. These individuals were not considered as slaves and could not be sold. The development of agriculture rested on the availability of these free peasants and tenants who would labour on the land. Even craft production was primarily conducted by these free peasants. In both the cases it has been noted that these occupations were all hereditary.

On account of paucity of data very little is known about the society and economy under the Assyrians. However, dominant form of production was agriculture, though small-scale industrial production did flourish. The landholdings were largely composed of crown lands, temple lands and lands controlled by the nobles. Assyrian expansion provided them access to the rich mineral resources of Lebanon, Amanus and Eastern Anatolia. Trade also flourished in which both the crown and private merchants equally participated. Foreign trade was mostly focused on luxury goods like linen, precious stones, ivory and dyes.

Assyrian society was divided into free men and slaves. Slaves were largely recruited from among the war captives and employed in the construction activities on a large scale.

12.6.2 Cultural Developments

Mesopotamia during this time was particularly admired for its contribution to writing and later the development of libraries. Though writing was primarily done on clay,

Assyrians and Babylonians by the first millennium BCE started using skin and importing **papyrus**. It was also at this time that they used large boards covered in a thin layer of wax on to which the cuneiform script was inscribed. An impressive achievement of the Mesopotamians was how they established a number of libraries, notably the one at the palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. Scribes from around Mesopotamia either made copies of books written in clay or procured the books themselves. The 30,000 tablets in the library included court chronicles, histories of major events, literary and scientific works.

Significantly, Ashurbanipal's library was the first to be symmetrically organized in a particular order. The long texts took up the largest amount of space as some texts were as large as forty to a hundred tablets long. Attention was paid to cataloguing them and ensuring that they could be accessed and replaced as was required. Each tablet contented a 'page number' and the title of the book could be determined through the first few words of the tablet. The literary texts were accompanied by something that would look like the top page of a book, giving the details of the book in brief. In order to assist in finding the book, chords were attached with a label which contained the name of the book, the series it belonged to and the number of tablets connected to it. These tablets were in effect a kind of catalogue.

The history of the journeys of the troops to foreign lands written as is particularly noteworthy for its artistic style of rhythmic prose. A famous Assyrian work is that of the story of the wise scribe and counsellor of the ruler Ahiqar which was translated at the time into Greek, Armenian and Syrian amongst other languages, the most extensive version of this text has been found in Aramaic.

The 'codes' of justice issued by Hammurabi is the greatest contribution of the Babylonians. Though, certain radical departures were made by Hammurabi, rather more humane, particularly he reverted the old existing idea of 'an eye for an eye'. He borrowed ideas from earlier codes – 'Codes of Urukagina', 'Ur-Nammu' and 'Lipit-Ishtar'. However, he modified earlier existing 'monetary compensations'.

Babylonians were interested in a big way in astronomy and had collected and recorded empirical data on the sun, the moon, various constellations and planets. Their experts looked at the movement of heavenly bodies in relation to the moon and mapped the movements of the heavenly bodies that were visible to the naked eye. These observations made over time led to the development of Babylonian mathematical astronomy. The great astronomers such as Naburianus and Kidinnu who lived during the fifth century BCE introduced creative developments in this field. Between them they developed an understanding of lunar phases and the length of a solar year.

With regard to the field of art, Mesopotamia flourished in the creation of Assyrian relief sculpture during the eighth and seventh centuries. In these the capture of cities, expeditions to enemy territory and hunting scenes were depicted. The artists moved away from the tradition of creating static images, people and animals, introduced landscapes as well. Assyrians were excellent metal workers. They particularly created embossed bronze strips. Mesopotamia was also famous for its temples known as **ziggurats**. Referred to as the Tower of Babel in the Bible, was a seven-storey ziggurat believed to have been built by Nebuchadnezzar. He is also believed to have built the famous hanging gardens of Babylon, considered to be one of the wonders of the ancient world.



Figure 12.1 : Painting of the Tower of Babel

Credit: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_%28Vienna%29_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg



Figure 12.2 : Painting of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon

Credit: Marten van Heemskerck (1498-1574)

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ae/Hanging_Gardens_of_Babylon.jpg

In the field of craft production, Phoenician cities were well known for their glassware which was made for export, and also for purple dyed woollen and linen cloth which was very famous. By the middle of the first millennium BCE the cities of Southern Arabia also became involved in the trade of spices and gems that came from India and the Somali coast.

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) What were the causes for the downfall of the Assyrian empire?

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- 2) What was the main source of revenue of the economy? Who were the primary participants?

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- 3) Give a brief account of Assyrian books and their upkeep.

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- 4) What were the main items of trade and where all did they reach?

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12.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have gone through the way in which an empire was formed, it developed and sustained itself, and what caused its decline. While the story of each empire is different what we see here helps to explain as to how the movement of tribes led to the expansion of territories. Once lands are taken over they are maintained via the means of taking tribute from the local population for the maintenance of the army. The stability of the empire is also visible through the nature of the army. A stable empire is dependent on a standing army to control and it needs larger resources to maintain the army. The large empire also helps in developing an economy through the means of trade and other economic activities. It was under the confines of a stable empire that the rulers were able to develop art, architecture and invest significant time in cultural pursuits.

12.8 KEY WORDS

Papyrus	: A tall plant like grass from which a kind of paper is made which was used especially by the ancient Egyptians.
Semitic	: Being or having to do with the Arabs and Jews of the Middle East.
Ziggurat	: A pyramidal step temple tower found in the major cities of Mesopotamia.

12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) See Section 12.4
- 2) Answer must include discussion on the expansion and consolidation of empire under Hammurabi. See Section 12.3
- 3) See Sub-section 12.4.1
- 4) See Sub-section 12.4.2

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) Discuss internal conflict, rise of Persia. See Section 12.5
- 2) Discuss agriculture, small land holders. See Sub-section 12.6.1
- 3) See Sub-section 12.6.2
- 4) Answer must include glass, metals, etc. See Sub-section 12.6.1

12.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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**Formation of
Empires: Assyrian
and Babylonian**

12.11 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Assyrian Empire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZhEcoBPO1k>

The Power of Babylon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpHIw-NPGJI&t=628s>



UNIT 13 FORMATION OF EMPIRES: SASSANID*

Structure

- 13.1 Objectives
- 13.2 Introduction
- 13.3 Growth and Consolidation of the Empire
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 - 13.3.2 Successors of Shapur I
- 13.4 Byzantine and Sasanian Relationship
- 13.5 Administrative Institutions
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- 13.7 Social Organization
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- 13.13 Suggested Readings
- 13.14 Instructional Video Recommendation

13.1 OBJECTIVES

In the previous Unit you have been introduced to the concept of empire, how it grows and declines. Here we will look at the Sasanian Empire, its growth and development. After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

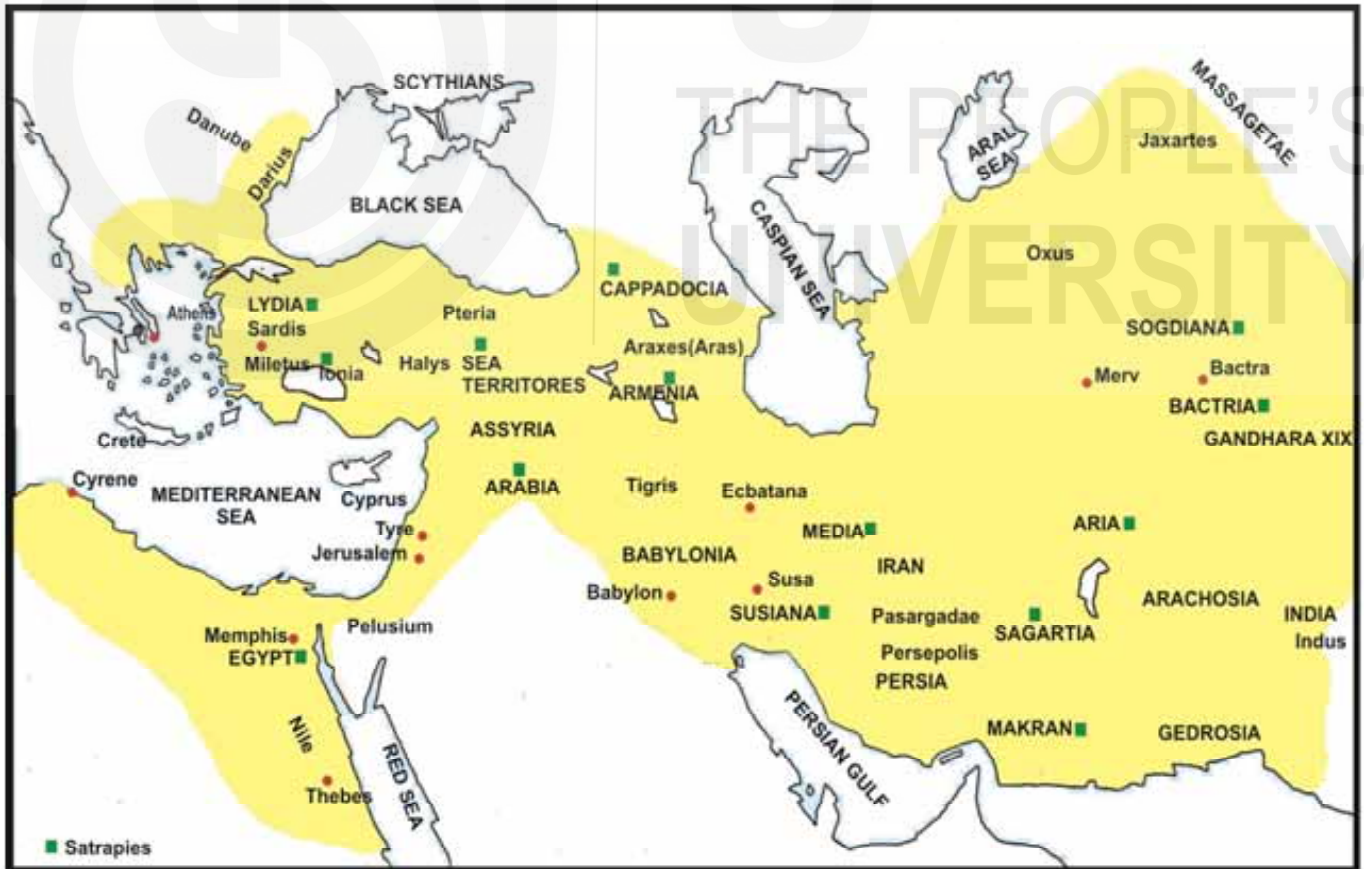
- Identify the expansion and growth of the Sassanid empire;
- Draw out a relationship between religion and state;
- Understand how art and architecture contribute to the development of the empire; and
- The manner of military expeditions of the empire and its affects.

13.2 INTRODUCTION

The Sasanian Empire was a prominent empire in the region of present-day Iran from the third century CE till the seventh century CE. The importance of this empire lay in the fact that in Iran during this period major developments took place in the fields of art, agriculture and urbanization. It was even considered to be the 'Golden Age' of pre-Islamic Iranian empires.

Not much is known about the history of the Sasanians and a reconstruction of its early history is very difficult. The empire is believed to have grown from the successful struggle of a minor ruler from the province of Persis, against the Parthian 'state' as well as a number of neighbouring rulers. It is believed that the empire in some ways displayed a continuation of the Achaemenian traditions as the names of Achaemenian rulers such as Darius (550-487 BCE) and Artaxerxes (465-424 BCE) appearing on the coins of local rulers indicate.

The period of the empire has been divided into three phases. The third and fourth centuries are considered to be the time-period during which the empire was established and the rulers aspired to create a large and sprawling empire. Second, the fifth and the initial part of the sixth century, is considered a period of decline owing to attacks on the borders by the Hephthalites¹. However, the rest of the sixth and the seventh centuries saw a kind of renaissance, under Khusrau I (531-579 CE), during whose reign the empire rose to great heights which was emphasized by opulence and splendour that eventually led to competition for power that saw rapid change of rulers. This instability gave way to the invading Arab armies to move into the region.



Map 13.1 : Expansion of Persian Empire till the reign of Darius I

Source: MHI-01: Ancient and Medieval Societies, IGNOU Study Material, 1990, Block 3, Unit 11, Map 1, p. 22

¹ The Hephthalites were the most powerful nomadic group of Central Asia, as discussed in Unit 11 of this Course. Later, the occupation of Turkistan became the cause of conflict between the Persians, Huns and the Hephthalites.

An interesting point that must be noted is that for the Sasanians time began at the beginning of each ruler's reign. Therefore, it is difficult to understand a particular 'Sasanian era'. While Pabag's rebellion in 205-206 CE has been seen as the beginning of the Sasanian era, Hamza writes that the defeat of the Parthians by Ardashir I (r. 224-242 CE) gave rise to a new era in 224 CE.

Information regarding the Sasanians comes from both the Iranian and non-Iranian sources. Archeological remains from sites along the Euphrates river have helped to reconstruct the military organization of the Sasanians. Yet it should be noted that there are a number of areas like Anatha and Thilutha that still remain unexplored. The French teams which have excavated areas like Bactra have helped in forming ideas regarding the fortifications. Coins, which shall be studied in detail later in the Unit, also give a clearer understanding of the chronology of the Sasanian Empire. Inscriptions and seals further help in streamlining the study of this period. Inscriptions exist from the beginning of the period of the Ardashir I, founder of the empire. These inscriptions offer a view of not just the political but the religious lives of the Sasanians as well. Unfortunately, not all the written records of the Sasanian period are available as we see in the case of the **papyri** and the parchments² which are illegible and therefore not available to be interpreted.

Greek and Latin texts such as those written by Dio Cassius (a Roman statesman and historian of Greek origin) include details on the rise of the Sasanians. Chroniclers such as Procopius – who accompanied the Roman general Belisarius (500-565 CE) in his campaigns against the Sasanians – also has chronicled some parts of the history of the Sasanians. Byzantine sources are not considered to be very reliable. Armenian sources, on the other hand, though plenty should be used judiciously as they are at times unreliable. The Syriac work, 'Chronicle of Arbela', is considered to be of great value for the study of early Sasanian period. Even Chinese travellers have left records of their interactions with the Sasanians. The *Shahnameh* by Firdowsi (c. 977 CE) is an authoritative history for the Sasanian period in Persian language. *Fars-nama* by Ibn al-Balkhi (written during the twelfth century) is considered to be one of the most valuable primary sources which provides a substantial amount of authentic information.

13.3 GROWTH AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE EMPIRE

The Sasanian Empire is believed to have been founded by Sasan (early third century CE) of whom we do not have much information. Ardashir I, who is believed to have been the grandson of Sasan, is considered to be the first major ruler of the Sasanian Empire. However, this story has a number of variations. From the Arabic history provided by Tabari, Sasan was the grandfather and Pabag, the father of Ardashir. However, the trilingual inscription in Greek, Middle Persian and Parthian from the period of Shapur I (c. 240-270 CE) does not mention Sasan as the father of Pabag. While Sasan is mentioned only as a lord, Pabag is called a king. Ardashir I is referred to as the 'King of kings of Iran' and his son Shapur I is described as the 'King of kings of Iran and non-Iran'. Scholars suggest that the most likely explanation is that Sasan was possibly a remote ancestor of Ardashir I whose name was ascribed to the empire. It can also be considered that Sasan was the father of Ardashir I who was adopted by Pabag after his death as was common practice amongst the Zoroastrians.

² For further details on these written records, refer to: Zeini, Arash. 2018. 'Middle Persian Papyri, Ostraca and Parchments: An Introduction'. *Sasanika Papyrological Studies*. No. 1. Jordan Centre for Persian Studies. University of California. Irvine (https://www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/Sasanika_PS01_Zeini.pdf).

The dates around Pabag's rule are not clear. The year 58 has been mentioned but it is not clear as to which era does this date belonged. What can be established is that Pabag was a ruler who managed to consolidate much of the region of Fars during the Parthian reign. He may have overthrown a ruler of Stakhr or might have proclaimed his independence from the Parthians at this time. The date of Pabag's death is unknown and it is believed that he may have been brought under the Parthian yolk once more. Pabag's rule seems to have been limited to the area of Fars, and whatever expansion took place may have most likely been done by Ardashir I.

The *Book of the Deeds of Ardashir*, written sometime during 224-651 CE, provides stories of the ruler in the form of legends. It is believed to be of some historical value because of the large number of places mentioned in it. However, the origin of Ardashir I is not very clear. In 224, after the death of his father Pabag and his brother Shapur who were revolting against Arsacid rule (over the kingdom of Armenia from 54-428 CE), Ardashir I managed to conquer Persis, Khuzistan and Kerman. He also managed a decisive victory over the Parthians. This victory has been committed to stone at Firuzabad in the relief work. This is when Shapur I took on the title of 'King of kings' (*shahanshah*), yet was defeated in the battle at Hatra (241 CE) and was driven away from Armenia where a collateral line of the Arsacid dynasty was ruling. He also reached as far as Merv in eastern Iran. In the south-west, the Sasanian armies reached Bahrain and in the north-west they reached the old border between Parthia and the Romans. Scholars believe that it is not possible to trace the boundaries of his kingdom beyond this accurately. Ardashir I realized that he needed to change the structure of the administration of the region. The need was felt because the Roman Empire, which reached till the borders of Iran, was taking advantage of the weak and small kingdoms at the border regions by using them as a buffer. The loss of Hatra to the Sasanians in 239 CE was a major blow to the Roman Empire. The Romans also lost Dura in 239 CE as well as Carrhae and Nisibis earlier in 235 CE to the Sasanians.



Map 13.2: Borders of the Sasanian Empire at its greatest extent

Credit: Keeby101 Sasanian Empire alternate background 2.png

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sassanian_Empire_621_A.D.jpg)

13.3.1 Shapur I

Shapur I came to power in 240/241 CE after the death of his father, the date of which is not known. Some information regarding the reign of Shapur I is available from a trilingual inscription (in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek) on the base of a monument known as the *Ka'ba of Zoroaster* near Persepolis. From this we know about military campaigns, the organization of the empire and the court as well as various provinces that were a part of the empire. Militarily he managed to overcome the Roman ruler Gordian III (238-244 CE). Philip the Arab (244-249 CE) who succeeded him managed to maintain his position by paying a heavy tribute to Shapur I. Shapur invaded Syria, taking control of a large number of cities. He also defeated Valerian (Roman Emperor from 253-260 CE) in 258 CE after which he managed to take control of close to 40 cities including the major ones like Antioch.

The eastern extent of the empire is disputed. Places like Herat, Turan and Sindh were included in the empire, but it is difficult to establish their exact boundaries. The territories of the Western Kushanas were conquered by Shapur I and were placed under the control of the royal Sasanian family. Regions such as Armenia and Georgia were also under his control. From the inscriptions on his coins we get evidence that he had taken on the title of 'King of kings of Iran and An-Iran (non-Iran)'. This shows that he had control over a large area that expanded beyond the boundaries of ancient Iran. The largest area to come under the Sassanid empire was during the reign of Shapur I. Recent studies suggest that the idea of 'Iran' was something that went beyond ethnicity and language. It also denoted a religious and cultural identity.

13.3.2 Successors of Shapur I

During the reign of Narseh (292-302 CE), son of Shapur I, control over the 'non-Iranian' areas was considerably relaxed. This gave the regional governors a lot of freedom to do as they pleased. The Romans had already given Tigranes the Great (95-55 BCE) control over western Armenia. Narseh was the ruler of the eastern region of Armenia. Narseh's predecessors, Bahram I (271-274 CE) and Bahram II (274-292/93 CE), both lost control over a number of territories in the eastern region of the empire.

Shapur II (309-379 CE) was another powerful Sassanid ruler, his long reign of 70 years was mostly taken up in various campaigns to secure the eastern borders against the Chionites – 'a tribe of probably Iranian Origin prominent in Bactria'. He began constructing *limes* (the defense series of the Sassanids) in Iraq to keep the Arab Bedouins (the Arabic-speaking nomadic people of the Middle Eastern desert) from entering into his territory. It is believed that he was possibly inspired by the *limes* built by the Romans on the side of the Syrian desert. From inscriptions on the coins we get to know that Shapur II lived in the city of Merv. During his reign, Shapur II managed to put on the throne of Georgia a ruler of his choice. At this time the Romans lost their protectorate over Armenia. However, towards the closing years of his reign Shapur II had to divide Armenia, with the smaller part going over to the Romans. The most significant aspect of Shapur II's reign was that it was during this time that the central authority was consolidated and a hierarchy of religious power was created around the fire temples.

Bahram V (420-438 CE) was considered an ideal ruler in terms of his heroism and hunting abilities. However, he was not too keen on administration which he left to his ministers. During his reign there was more trouble from the Chionites on the eastern front over whom he emerged victorious.

Peroz (459-484 CE) was attempting to maintain peace with regions like Albania, Georgia and Armenia which by this time had become mostly Christian. He was captured by the

Hephthalites in 469 CE who defeated and killed him by 484 CE. His successor Valakhsh had to pay a heavy tribute to the Hephthalites which embarrassed the Iranians greatly. There had already been great sufferings for Iranians under a seven-year long famine during the reign of Peroz.

An interesting occurrence took place during the reign of the next ruler, Kavad I (488-531 CE), son of Peroz. A movement, which has been compared to communism, had begun led by Mazdak whose views were very close to Manichaeism (a major religious movement founded by the Iranian Prophet Mani during the Sasanian Empire). Kavad I was favourably disposed to the ideas that wealth and women need to be equally divided so that the power of the nobility could be reduced considerably. For his efforts the nobility and clergy deposed him and imprisoned him. He managed to escape and went to the Hephthalites who helped him regain power. He introduced a new system of taxation and land ownership which benefitted the smaller nobility, while the large landlords could not regain their previous privileges. Khusrau I (531-579 CE) brought the empire to a period of splendour and prosperity. He contained the disorder caused by the Mazdakites and introduced a large number of reforms in the realm of taxation and army.

13.4 BYZANTINE AND SASANIAN RELATIONSHIP

The Sasanians engaged in constant wars against Rome and Byzantine. Rulers like Yazdegerd I (399-420 CE), son of Shapur III, seemed ready to launch attacks against the Byzantines but the embassies sent to the Iranians seemed to have helped change their policies. The relationship further developed during the time of Yazdegerd I as the Byzantine ruler Arcadius (377-408 CE) asked him to be a guardian to his son, Theodosius II. It can be argued that this may have been just a polite gesture, but at that time it seemed to have meant quite a lot to both the rulers.

The relationship with the Byzantines got strained during the reign of Bahram I who resumed the persecution of Christians in his empire. They fled towards Byzantine empire for safety from where Bahram V (420-438 CE) demanded that they be extradited. However, the then ruler Theodosius II (401-450 CE) did not agree. This led to an outbreak of war which saw the success of the Byzantines in a number of skirmishes. Bahram V called for peace in 422 CE. Christians were given freedom to worship in the empire of Bahram V and the Byzantines agreed to contribute towards the upkeep of the pass at Durban in the Caucasus.

Bahram V's successor and son Yazdegerd II (438-457 CE) launched hostilities against the Byzantines as soon as he came to power. The Byzantines under Theodosius II (488-531 CE) sent commanders to his camps to help maintain the status quo. During the reign of Kavad I, hostilities broke out again between the Byzantines and the Sasanians because they refused to make the payment for the protection of Durban. Kavad needed the money to pay his allies, the Hephthalites. Hostilities started which saw the capture of Theodosiopolis and Amida in the northeast and the south of the empire. The fights between the Byzantines and the Sasanians continued without any real victory being claimed by either side. In 504 CE the Byzantines had an opportunity to take back Amida but they were unable to do so. Finally, peace was brokered with a seven-year treaty being signed which was eventually extended for longer time-period.

Khusrau I (known as Anushirwan), in order to deal with the troubles brought on by the Mazdakite movement as has been mentioned earlier, made peace with the Byzantines on the condition that the Persians would evacuate certain forts and that they would also help in the upkeep of defences on the Caucasus. The reforms that Khusrau I had

introduced in the taxation system and the army were possibly inspired by the Byzantines, but the army that emerged out of these reforms was used against the Byzantines.

After a period of peace, hostilities again broke out between the Byzantines and the Sasanians. One main concern of Khusrau I was that Byzantines had finally succeeded and reestablished the Roman Empire in the west. The Sasanians had the support of the Lakhmid Arabs (an Arab kingdom of Southern Iraq from c. 300-602 CE) and the Armenians. Though the ruler Justinian I (527-565 CE) tried to dissuade Khusrau I from war, but he failed. Moving to Syria, the troops of Khusrau I reached Antioch which, having dealt with an earthquake a few years back, was not in a position to withstand the attack of an army. The city was attacked and burnt to the ground. Justinian called for peace and it was decided that there would be peace if the Byzantines pay five thousand pounds of gold as a war indemnity as well as five hundred pounds annually. Moreover, as he was retreating Khusrau I extracted large sums from Byzantine cities on the way. He also laid siege to a city till the inhabitants paid him to leave them in peace. This led Justinian to call off the truce and send his commander against the Persians.

The Persians managed to capture many areas that were under the Byzantines including Petra. Justinian's armies also faced a number of reverses at various other areas. This news encouraged Khusrau I into believing that he would be able to overcome the Byzantines. Hoping to manage to take control over the entire portions of the Byzantine empire, beyond the Euphrates, Khusrau I launched an attack on Edessa. The people of Edessa however managed to repel the armies of Khusrau I. He had to pull out his troops and eventually a five-year peace was brokered between Justinian and Khusrau I. This was broken in the fourth year. After some more time, in 551 CE another five-year truce was made. After a terrible series of conflicts in 556 CE there was an attempt for a permanent settlement between the two. Eventually in 562 CE, after much deliberations, a fifty years' peace treaty was signed.



**Map 13.3 : Frontier between the Byzantine/Roman and Sasanian Persian Empires
from 4th-7th centuries**

Credit: Cplakidas

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman-Persian_Frontier_in_Late_Antiquity.svg)

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) Give a brief account of the growth and expansion of the Sassanid Empire under the rule of Shapur I and his successors.

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- 2) Discuss various sources for the study of the Sassanid Empire.

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- 3) Write a brief note on the chronology of the Sassanid empire and its prominent rulers.

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- 4) Analyze the relationship between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires.

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13.5 ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS

The Sasanian administration was largely modelled on the Parthian state where the kings were semi-independent of the central government and ruled provinces. There were also kingdoms within this administration that offered tribute to the ruler, known as the vassal kingdoms.

A large amount of information relating to the Sasanians comes to us from the inscription of Shapur I (known as SKZ). From this inscription we get to know the manner in which the state administration was organized. There were four kings who were governors. They had rights of succession, which meant that their children were to take over the reign after them. This was followed by three queens, the viceroy, the prime minister and members of important families. Along with these fifteen other important dignitaries have also been mentioned in the inscription. Their position in the hierarchy assumed as per

the significance of their roles in the administrative set-up. High society was divided into four sections: the vassal princes, the great families, the 'greats'³, and the nobles.

There were about a dozen titles that were given to various office bearers in the administration. However, it is not clear as to what was the exact nature of their duties as it is difficult to distinguish between religious and civil officers. At the fire temples there were various classes of *magi* (followers of Zoroaster) to conduct matters. The judicial functions were handled by a *dadvar* along with a more competent judge known as a *rad*.

From various seals that have been collected scholars have been able to piece together the administrative system of the Sasanians. The basic unit was the province which was governed by a 'satrap'. A number of provinces together formed a region which was under the control of *framadar* (the functions of whom are unknown) and an *amargar* (accountant). The smallest division was the district (*kust*) where the religious authority was particularly strong.

13.5.1 Legal System

The legal system and law was very significant to the Sasanians who gave lot of importance to legal purity. The *Vendidad*, which is very similar to the Biblical book of Leviticus, discusses the acceptable and unacceptable according to the law of the religion. During this period, law was not codified but was only available as a series of legal cases that dealt with a number of legal situations. The *Madayan i hazar dadestan* (*The Book of a Thousand Judgements*) is an extensive collection of such cases on family law, property law and judicial law. As is the case with most legal works of this period, the notions of law were situated in ethics based on religion. In the period of the Sasanians, the legal *nasks* ('books') of the Avesta were also used, however, in a limited manner. One of the main reasons for this was that there was a disconnect with the language used in the text as well as the fact that the legal arguments used in the text appears to be primitive when compared to the society in which it was to be employed. The compilation of the legal texts was done as early as the sixth century BCE and were not equipped to deal with the changed situations. There were oral commentaries that were added to these *nasks*. These were used during the early Sasanian period as the basis for legal matters. These commentaries also helped to introduce many earlier legal terms into the Sasanian legal tradition.

Evidence suggests that the high priests were also involved in judicial organization. There is the specific example of Veh-Shapur, who during the reign of Khusrau I wrote a 'Memorandum' which explained the procedure that was to be followed in conducting an interrogation. This was copied into a number of scripts and authenticated by his seal and distributed amongst various provinces. The law books of this period have also noted certain decrees issued by various Sasanian rulers. Apart from this there are also court records, excerpts from interrogations and archival materials that were available to those who compiled these law books.

13.5.2 Military

The Sasanians needed to develop a significant military system since they were continuously involved in wars. During the reign of Khusrau I, as has been mentioned above, reforms were made in the taxation system in order to fund the military. Earlier the tax collected would go to the nobility, Khusrau I brought it under the central

³ Grand noble who would be present at crucial royal ceremonies.

government. Earlier the big lords' forces supported the king's army, but after introducing reforms Khusrau I managed to have a standing army with the equipment and soldiers who were paid by the central government. The heads of these military units were given small villages as payment. This led to the rise of a new class of small landholders. Khusrau I also divided up the army into four groups corresponding to the points on a compass⁴. The reforms introduced were primarily concerning the organization of the army as the equipment and structure remained primarily the same throughout the period of the Sasanian empire.



Figure 13.1: Depiction of a Sasanian Clibanarii cavalry equipment in the mountain reliefs at Taq-e-Bostan

Credit: Zereshk

Source: Wikimedia Commons (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knight-Iran.JPG>)

It has been suggested that the tactics that were developed by the Sasanians borrowed heavily from the Byzantine books on strategies. At the same time scholars believe that it would be unfair to suggest that these ideas came out only of imitation and ideas, such as placing the army in such a way that it did not face the sun or to ensure that the armies were well supplied in the likelihood of a siege, could just have been the outcome of common sense rather than the adaptation of ideas.

⁴ This new quadripartition of the Empire into four zones: Mesopotamia in the West, the Caucasus region in the North, the Persian Gulf in the Central and Southwest region, and Central Asia in the East, created a more efficient military system.



Figure 13.2 : Shahnameh illustration of the Sasanian general Sukhra fighting the Hephthalites

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukhra%27s_Hephthalite_campaign#/media/File:Sukhra_defeating_the_Hephthalites.jpg)

13.5.3 Defence

The Sasanians used forts and walls extensively to keep the invaders at bay. However, this was not always very effective. A good example of the walls erected by the Sasanians are the five walls that have been discovered which is believed to be a part of a system of walls that had been built at Darband/Derbent/Durban in Caucasus to keep the nomads advancing from the north. On the eastern side too they had built walls, though it is relatively lesser known. A 170 km long wall, known as the Wall of Alexander, had been established. This had forts at regular intervals as well as a ditch along it to the north to ensure that enemies could not reach the wall. Khusrau I is credited with building an elaborate length of fortifications that ran parallel to the lines built by Justinian I. In the south the only evidence that exists is a fort at Siraf.

Apart from having walls of forts as defence, Shapur II also settled a number of Arabs on the borders to repulse any attack from other Arabs from the desert or the Romans.

13.5.4 Weaponry

The Sasanian army gave maximum importance to the cavalry in the third and fourth centuries CE. They were heavily equipped with armour, lances and swords. Though the use of the light cavalry was in decline, they later became an important part of the army against the Huns who were well known for their superior archery skills. The bow, which was a characteristic weapon used by the Iranians was made lighter during the period of the Sasanians. This development was to their disadvantage as they would not

be able to pierce their opponents as opposed to those bows and arrows used by the Byzantines. Other weapons such as the battering ram and the moving tower seem to have been inspired by the Romans.



Figure 13.3 : The walls of Derbent

Credit: Oscar11234 (<http://sulim27.livejournal.com/38236.html>)

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Map 13.4 : Sasanian Defense Lines: Darial, Derbent, Gorgan and Basra

Credit: user:Kiyoweap user: historicaire (File: Hyrcania-Alexanders-gates-map.svg)

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sasanian_defense_lines#/media/File:Sassanian_defense_lines.svg)



Figure 13.4 : Medieval Manuscript depicting the Battle of Avarayr between Armenians and the Sasanian Empire

Credit: Karapet Berkretsi

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Avarayr#/media/File:Vartanantz.jpg)



Figure 13.5 : Sasanian Warriors; Sasanian era silver plate with gold coating, Azerbaijan Museum, Tabriz, Iran

Credit: Alborz Fallah

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tabriz_Sasanian_Plate_2.jpg)

13.6 ECONOMY

Both Shapur I and II were known for their extensive building activities which they managed to do, it is believed, owing to the large amount of labour that they brought in particular from Syria. New cities, palaces, dams, bridges, forts as well as irrigation systems, were built by them. The Sasanians continued the tradition of Alexander and the Seleucids of naming the cities after themselves.

A significant development was the establishment and promotion of textile workshops by the ruler. The Persians were introduced to the silk worms only by the sixth century. Shapur II introduced a number of artisans to work with silk but it developed under the reigns of Kavad and Khusrau I when many more experts arrived. Iran which was till now involved in the silk trade now began exporting silk goods which led to a silk 'war' between the Persians and the Romans which could be seen through the medium of monopolies and taxes. Some of the motifs include animals that are real like the ram or imaginary such as the *simurgh* which is the hybrid between a peacock, griffin and the winged horse.



Figure 13.6 : Simurgh on a Sassanid Era Textile

Credit: http://www.hp.uab.edu/image_archive/ugp/

Source: Wikimedia Commons (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Textile0001.jpg>)

The building of dams and irrigation facilities led to the surge in agriculture which led to the export of cereals, rice and cane sugar.

Coins provide a very important source to understand the history of this period as it provides continuity. Ardashir I's institution of coinage from the very beginning of the empire helps to connect to the Iranian past (**Figure 13.7**). Initially the coins bore a resemblance to the earlier Parthian style in the way in which the bust of the ruler was provided in portrait. This was quickly changed in subsequent years as the fire alter was used to replace the figures of divine beings which used to be printed on the coins. Along with this Greek was replaced by Pahlavi in the legends. Changes made to the images on the coins were initially incorporating elements such as the mural crown onto the Parthian style, later changing it to that of the mural crown. Eventually, each Sasanian ruler came to have his own characteristic crown, which has been well documented through these coins.



Figure 13.7 : Coin of Ardashir I (224-240 CE)

Credit: Classical Numismatic Group

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bahram_VCoinHistoryofIran.jpg)

Sasanian coins are also significant as the first true thin-flat coins. This manner of striking coins was extremely popular and travelled through time and space. Their influence can be seen on the Arab and Byzantine coins. Using the same technology, coins such as the *denar*, *denier* and *penny* were minted from the medieval into the modern period in Europe (**Figure 13.8**).



Figure 13.8 : Solidus of Justinian II, second reign (705-711 CE)

Credit: Classical Numismatic Group

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_coinage#/media/File:Solidus-Justinian_II-Christ_b-sb1413.jpg)

In general, the coin that was used was the silver *drachme*, which was four grammes, the weight of which never varied. It is significant to note that this coinage was internationally accepted especially in Central Asia and southern Russia, regions with which the Persians had significant trade relations. Gold was used only for making commemorative medals and not in everyday undertakings.

However, looking at the coins in closer detail it is acknowledged that during the period of Ardashir I and his successor Shapur I, the coins were of a very fine quality which had led to the belief that they were most likely made by Greek die cutters. Scholars question this assertion, some dismiss it saying that the quality of the coins from the period of Ardashir I's governorship to that of his kingship do not show a marked difference. Similarly, in the case of Shapur I, while there was a refinement in the nature of the coins, the qualitative difference was not to the extent that one could ascribe it to the craftsmanship of the Romans or Greeks. Given that the Achaemenian rulers had coins which were considered to be of high quality made by Iranian die cutters, it is also possible that the Sasanians too followed the same method.

The coins of the Sasanians are particularly noteworthy for the portraits of kings and of their specific crowns. This is a particular feature of the Iranian style of portraiture that attempts to disassociate from the earlier Arsacid tradition as well as challenge the Roman tradition. It could also be seen promoting the ideas of Zoroastrianism. The nature of the portraits also shows the break from the Arsacid period where the portrait were made to face right. Front facing portraits were uncommon except for the case of commemorative coins. The inscriptions around the edge of the coin were influenced by the Roman coins. The decline of coinage can be noticed from the period of the reign of Shapur II. The decline can be noticed both in terms of quality of the material as well as the technical aspects. The images on the coins began to be drawn with less care such that it eventually started looking like caricatures. The crown, which defined each ruler as they depicted their royal aura, began to be drawn haphazardly making it difficult to

identify. The initial coins, which could be compared to the sculptures on the walls had, by the later part of the empire, lost their character. As other art forms developed it could be considered that the coins no longer constituted spaces for artistic interpretation and were therefore relegated to their most basic economic function.



Figure 13.9 : Shapur II Sassanid Silver Coin

Credit: Reza Abbasi Meseum (TruthBeethoven)

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shapur_II_Sassanid_silver_coin.JPG)

Sasanian silver has often been identified and dated in its relation to the coins. An interesting feature of the Sasanian silver is the nature of the engraving on it. These pictures were primarily depictions of the ruler enthroned or during a hunt. Using the coins as a reference point the silver could be dated by comparing the figures on both. At the same time, it should also be noted that the depictions on the coins, owing to their limitations have not always been able to provide the information required as there were more detailed crowns than were depicted on the coins. Yet it can be noted that there was a large volume of silver particularly in the form of plates and vessels like bowls, begging the question why were these created and for whom. On some large bowls decorations of lions or the busts of females have been found. It has been suggested that without a crown, these individuals would not have been rulers or deities, but they may have been representations of members of the nobility or members of the royal family.

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) Write a brief note on the legal system under the Sasanians.

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- 2) Discuss the remarkable feature of defence of the Sassanid Empire.

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- 3) Underline the need for a strong military by the Sasanians. How were they equipped?

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- 4) Point out the significant features of the Sasanian coins.

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13.7 SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The Sasanian social organization is a product of developments that took place in the society over a long period of time. From the available sources it is very difficult to piece together an extensive picture of society. However, it seems that the society did not change much over a significant period of time remaining rather conservative and static. What is interesting is the complex nature of Iranian society which was highly stratified. In the ruling clan, there were not only the king and his family and the nobility, but also those rulers who were vassals of the ruler, court members and high officials who were fairly wealthy. The middle and petty service nobility were maintained by the state through payment, rations and lands which in certain cases could be passed down the generations. Other components of society were priests, those of the middle class who were primarily merchants and craftsmen, a large number of people living in village communities and finally, the slaves. During this period there were also a fair number of nomadic groups moving through the area.

The main divisions or estates in society consisted of four levels. The first included the priests and the judges; the second included the warriors; the third were the scribes and the large numbers of people from the bureaucracy; finally the fourth estate was that of the cultivators, merchants and craftspeople. These estates were rigid and based on heredity. Movement between the estates was not possible. Each estate was taken care of by an administrator who was not necessarily from that estate. In the fifth century there is evidence of the Prime Minister's sons being made the heads of various estates. However, all of these organizational changes still did not remove the entrenched

inequalities between the citizens and non-citizens, and the nobility and others. Along with all these various groups also existed the slaves who had no rights at all.

During this period, it can be observed that a citizen was given full citizenship rights only when they were a part of a civic community, in whichever estate they belonged to. This means that if they were not part of any community they were treated as outcasts. They could inherit and even buy property if they were a part of the civic society. The community was meant to offer a strong social binding which lent support and solidarity to its members. They cared for the orphaned minors and the widows collectively. Only members of the community could participate in religious worship and social activities. Women and children were given limited legal rights.

A person who gave up Zoroastrianism was not allowed to maintain any position in his former family or community. He was however allowed to maintain the personal property and contracts into which he had entered. But on becoming a part of another community he could resume his position as a member of that community and function accordingly.

Those who were not members of the community were the persons who casually settled in the area, the illegitimate children of the full right citizens, freed slaves or those who were turned out of the community. This meant that though they were free people, unlike slaves, they had no civic rights. Slaves were considered to be commodities which could be sold at will. The slaves could also be used as collateral along with a plot of land, or individually. While this was the general characteristic of a slave, scholars are of the opinion that this is rather one sided. Studies of religious and legal texts of the time suggest that the slave was considered to be a 'person' as they had the ability to speak, think and function. This differentiated the slave from other 'things' owned by the owner. The slave could be trained and made to carry out a number of functions including economic ones, which was within the realm of the limited rights that the owner could grant the slave and the extent he could move on his own. There is also evidence in the law books of slaves appearing in certain civil court cases. There is also evidence of slaves suing their masters for cruel treatment. In one case, the slave accused his master of throwing him into the Tigris river. In another case the owner of a slave was directed by the court to compensate the slave for mutilating his body. A slave's testimony could also be taken in court, but not on his own, only along with the testimony of a full citizen. Slaves could be manumitted either fully or partially by their owners. There were also those who were known as 'slaves of the temple' or sacred slaves, *hierdouloi*. These could be both men and women but they are distinguished from other slaves as their affiliation to the temple was completely religious. These individuals were dedicated to the temple. These individuals had 'freedom before men' but were under 'slavery' to 'the Fire' which refers to the fire alter of the Zoroastrians which was given as a requirement for a full citizen. Therefore, this slavery cannot be seen as a part of the slavery system of the Sasanians but rather as part of their religious system.

13.8 CULTURE

While the growth of Sasanian art and sculpture started under Ardashir I, it was a continuation of the art of the earlier period. One reason was that Ardashir I, though, became a ruler and still could not overcome the Parthians. Further, the coinage system which was one of the major contributions made by the Sasanians, also reaffirmed their continuity from the previous rulers of Iran. The finesse that can be seen in the nature of the art on these coins can also be seen in the early relief sculptures of the empire. As time progressed, however, this high level of sculpture declined and the nature of artwork significantly deteriorated. This period also saw few works of profane literature as opposed to the fairly large corpus of religious literature.

13.8.1 Architecture

There is not much information regarding the architecture of the Sasanians as not much excavation has taken place. However, after studying the ruins of forts and palaces scholars have been able to determine the wealth and refinement of the kings. According to the Arabic-Persian sources, the labour for building these structures came primarily from Syria from where the population was moved in large numbers. With the use of this labour cities, dams, palaces, forts and irrigation networks were built.

Sasanian architecture is characterized by the vault, the dome and the *iwan* which is a courtyard with rooms surrounding it that made up the public space of the palace. The living quarters were situated around the central courtyard. This plan became the standard for building palaces. The buildings were often covered with **stucco** for decoration as the material used for building changed from ashlar (finely dressed stone) to roughly dressed stone and mortar.



Figure 13.10 : The Palace of Ardashir I, Firuzabad, Iran

Credit: Ali Parsa

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Palace_of_Ardashir#/media/File:Ardeshir.jpg)

Of the very few buildings which can be reconstructed with the imagination and the help of some of the sources which describe the buildings are those such as Ardashir I's palace at Firuzabad. It predates the establishment of the Sasanian Empire as it was built by Ardashir, then a prince of Fars. The monumental style and form that the palace represented was developed, it is assumed, on a modest scale at Fars. It appears from the plan of the palace that it was to be a continuation of the architectural styles of the Achaemenids. The style employed by them was to have two principle complexes, the public and official palace, the *apadana*, and the private residential complex, the *harem*, which would be attached to each other. The *apadana* was, in the Parthian style made into a large open *iwan*. Here, however they changed the open nature of the *iwan* to something of a vestibule (a hallway or an entrance) which led to the large room, supposedly the reception or the throne room itself. The square room had a large dome built over a **squinch** (a straight or arched structure across an interior angle of a square

tower to carry a superstructure, i.e. dome). The squinch principle employed in the making of domes was one of the most significant contributions to architecture made by the Sasanians. This feature would continue into the future, even helping architects of mosques in subsequent years. No provisions were made for window and the only entry for light would have been through small slits placed in the domes.

In essence the ground plan of the palace at Firuzabad is a large rectangle with the northern part at a slight elevation to the rest of the building. This was the public area, the access to which was through an open *ivan*. On both sides of the *ivan* were rooms set at right angles above which there were barrel vaults. Three large square rooms, the throne room and the attendant chamber could be found on the south side of the complex. All of these had domes above them which had been set on squinches. The same door that provided the only access to the outside from the residential complex was also the one which allowed circulation of air. Symmetrically opposite there was another door which facilitated this circulation. Small private apartments, with barrelled roofs, seem to have been placed around the court area. As mentioned above, stucco was used as a cover over the quick drying gypsum and mortar which, being the locally available material, was historically used in construction.



Figure 13.11 : The Archway of Ctesiphon, the only visible remaining structure of the Sasanian capital city of Ctesiphon

Credit: San Diego Air & Space Museum

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ctesiphon_Arch.jpg)

Though this was the main plan that had been followed for most palace constructions, a departure can be noticed during the reign of Shapur I in his palaces at Bishapur and Ctesiphon. These palaces adopted more Parthian and Hellenistic features. For the palace at Ctesiphon it can be argued that this was because of its location and the fact that it was built at the site of a previously existing Parthian palace. The *ivan* here led to a closed court and had a similar structure on the other side. The plan of the palace borrows much from the Parthian palace of Assur. In terms of size the palace makes its mark, and was larger than anything that had been constructed by the Parthians. Unfortunately, not

much of it remains. The remains of the foundations indicate that the building was divided into five large rectangular rooms. These were connected by corridors and separated by a number of small rooms of various shapes and sizes. Scholars suggest that the larger rooms had barrel vaults above them while the smaller rooms had domes above them.

The excavations at Bishapur were interrupted by World War II, and were not resumed afterwards. It appears only cross shaped room, formed of four triple *iwans*, the vaults of which are topped by a large dome covered the entire complex. Within this area a fire temple has also been located. While the use of gypsum, rubble and mortar marks continuation of the feature that makes this palace stand out for the decorative art which had been inspired by the Graeco-Roman motifs. Some of the relief work of men standing or on horseback seem to be directly taken from Persepolis.



Figure 13.12 : Perso-Roman floor mosaic detail from the Palace of Shapur I at Bishapur, Iran

Credit: Cordanrad

Source: Wikimedia Commons (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bishapur#/media/File:Mosaic01.jpg>)

13.8.2 Art and Sculpture

In the stucco used as decoration various paintings, primarily illustrating war and hunting have been noticed. These scenes also have beautiful floral and geometric patterns as decoration.



Figure 13.13 : Stucco relief with confronted ibexes, 5th or 6th century

Credit: Daderot

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Relief_plaque_with_confronted_ibexes,_Iran,_Sasanian_period,_5th_or_6th_century_AD,_stucco Originally with polychrome painting_-_Cincinnati_Art_Museum_-_DSC03952.JPG)



Figure 13.14 : Anahita Vessel, 300-500 CE, Sasanian silver and gilt, Iran

Credit: Daderot

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anahita_Vessel,_300-500_AD,_Sasanian,_Iran,_silver_and_gilt_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art_-_DSC08131.JPG)

Large relief sculptures are a fundamental feature of the art of the Sasanian period. It is through this art that individuals and their activities were immortalized. Apart from one sculpture in the early years of the empire, the sculptures were mainly made at Fars. However, this was not an original idea as these kinds of monumental sculptures can be seen under the Akkadians also. Sculpture seemed to have developed by the third century CE. It is significant to note that most of the sculptures have been found near rivers or other such water sources. There are mainly two themes that come through in these sculptures. One is of a deity investing the king with the power to rule. This is represented through the depiction of a ring with a ribbon tied to it, which symbolized power. While it is believed that these scenes had religious connotations it is assumed that it was primarily made for political propaganda. These were created to propagate the idea of the ruler as being invested with the divine right to rule. In doing this the artist depicted the ruler and the deity as mirror images of each other as can be seen in the relief at Naqsh-e Rostam. Here Ardashir I and Ahura Mazda⁵ are shown on horseback symmetrically opposed to each other. At the feet of both the deity and ruler lie their opponents.



Figure 13.15 : Ardashir I receives the ring of power from Ahura Mazda

Credit: Hara 1603

Source: Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naqsh-e-Rostam_\(Iran\)_Relief_Sassanid_Period.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naqsh-e-Rostam_(Iran)_Relief_Sassanid_Period.JPG))

The second theme that can be seen is one depicting triumph over the enemy. One of the earliest sculptures was made at Firuzabad where Ardashir I is depicted as overthrowing the Parthian power. Keeping to tradition the entire battle was not depicted. On the other hand, it was depicted as jousting matches between Ardashir I or his son Shapur I against the Parthians in which they had vanquished their opponents. The most significant development that can be noted is that, as opposed to the earlier sculptures which were very plain comparable to line drawings, the ones made by the Sasanians were elaborate with extensive details of the costumes, weaponry, crown, etc. Another interesting example of this type of sculpture is a panel, where on the left side the god Ohrmazd's

⁵ The Supreme god and the highest spirit of worship in Zoroastrianism.

(Ahura Mazda) horse is trampling Ahriman⁶, while on the right side Shapur I's horse is depicted trampling the emperor Gordian III underfoot. Depicting scenes like this together was an artistic device particular to that time. Other scenes such as the ruler surrounded by other dignitaries or his own family, or that of hunting were also popular. During the reign of Khusrau II there were hunting scenes which were depicted in great detail. During the reign of Ardashir I, sculpture gained great prominence and continued to grow under until the time of Shapur III (383-388 CE) when it lost its importance. It then revived two hundred years later under Khusrau II (590-628 CE), who commissioned relief sculpture in a sacred space at Taq-e Bostan. This is one of the most complete pieces of Sasanian art that has survived. However, the full meaning of the art work used in it has not been fully explained and therefore its significance remains to be fully understood.



Figure 13.16 : Boar hunt in Taq-e Bostan

Credit: Philippe Chavin

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taq-e_Bostan_-_Low-relief_the_boar_hunt.jpg)

13.8.3 Literature

There is no evidence to prove that there was any literature from the period of the Sasanians. They gave more importance to the system of oral transmission rather than writing. The language that was primarily in use at that time was Greek, at least till the third century if not later. After which it was most likely the Parthian which was used and spoken even after the Sasanians took over. Pahlavi, or middle Persian was also used. Both these languages could only be written in a form of the Aramaic script which did not accurately reflect the phonetics of the language. There was a dictionary of sorts created to explain the words in their Iranian form. The reduction in the number of letters, the cursive writing and various other changes that have occurred has made it

⁶ Considered to be the adversary of Ahura Mazda.

difficult to read any of the surviving literature. Most of this literature was compiled between the ninth and tenth centuries CE.

Only some of the profane literature has survived over time. Small works like *Khusrau and the Page* in which the ruler asks a young man questions in order to describe the refinement of the court or a poem of Parthian origin titled the *Memories of Zarer*; the remains of an epic, tell the story of the mythical rulers of the Kayanids. The *Book of Kings* which contains the stories of mythical and historical kings is known about only through fragmentary Arabic translations and less directly through Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* of the eleventh century.

There is a larger availability of religious literature from this time other than translations of commentaries of the *Avesta* into Pahlavi translations. Most of the literature was by those who were apologists for Mazdaism which had become the minority religion by this time. The *Skand Gumanig* and the *Denkard* are examples of such literature. There are also works that deal with the mythical history of the world, the legends of Zoroaster and works on the formation of man in which the influence of Greek philosophy can clearly be seen. A theme which dominated Zoroastrian ideology is the afterlife and fate of the soul. This can be seen in the story of Viraz in *Arda Viraz Namag*, a tale popular in Iran in which terrible punishment was given to those whose souls were damned, as recorded.

Dadestan-i denig or the Pahlavi *Rivayat* are works that bring together matters on various subjects. As Mazadism was on decline the theologians wanted to salvage all the information regarding the laws, beliefs and customs of their religion which was preserved partially through a medieval manuscript tradition. The writings of the Manichaens were much better preserved as the leader of the religion, Mani, depended on his disciples to write his teachings which spoke of universalism, in various languages. Mani's teachings can be seen to be influenced much more by pagan and Judeo-Christian understandings of spiritual matters rather than of Mazdaism, which was the religion of the region. A large volume of his literature has been found on various subjects, some of which have been translated into all the languages spoken in Central Asia.

Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) Analyze, with examples, the characteristics that marked the Sassanid architecture. Give examples.

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- 2) What were the art forms that developed under the Sassanid Empire?

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- 3) Describe the various developments in the realm of literature under the Sassanids.

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- 4) Define the major features of social organization under the Sassanid empire.

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13.9 RELIGION

In the period before the Sasanians there were huge conflicts among religions between the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. The various religions were attempting to come to terms with each other. This came to an end during the period of the Sasanians as the state established its own religious orthodoxy. During the period of the Sasanians there was a clear relationship that existed between the state and the religious institutions.

Mani (216-276 CE), founder of Manichaeism, came onto the Iranian religious scene in the period prior to the Sasanians. He made a significant impression by presenting Iranian ideas in a simple manner. The literature of the Manichaean's has been well preserved as Mani wanted his disciples to ensure that his teaching were available in a number of languages. His ideas are known to have influenced the Sasanian emperor Shapur I extensively. He preferred it over the Zoroastrian faith, proclaimed by his father, possibly because of its international character. It was during this time that these teachings managed to get the traction they did within Iran. Manichaeism also reached very far and wide with the development of trade routes to China – where Mani was considered a legitimate successor to Buddha until the Ming dynasty in China proclaimed this interpretation as a heresy.

It can be seen that the Christians enjoyed a fair bit of support from Shapur I. A legend suggested that later Varhran II (276-293 CE) even adopted Christianity. However, what has been recorded is that he, in fact, persecuted some Christians. The Christians had to face persecution by the Mazdaean clergy in the fourth century CE. This has been recorded in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* written in Syriac. This text also provides information regarding the behaviour of the Christians in Iran. New schools of theology were established. One such significant school was the school that came up at Gundesapur. When other schools of theology shut down, the teachers moved to Gundesapur due to which the teaching of Aristotelianism entered Iran in a major way. The closure of the School of Athens by the Emperor Justinian led to the movement of seven teachers to this School at Gundesapur. Beyond philosophy, the School at Gundesapur also had a significant interest in medicine which at that point of time was very closely related to theology. It has been recorded that during the reign of Shapur II, the doctors and

theologians attended religious office together before they conducted the day's work.

The most significant religion of the Sasanian period, however, was that of Zoroastrianism. With Ardashir I at the throne, the relationship between state and religion became one and the same. The coins from the period offer some insight into the nature of relationship between the king and the state with Zoroastrianism where the portrait of Ardashir I was shown on one side and that of a fire alter on the reverse (**Figure 13.7**). The fire represents kingship as it symbolized the beginning of the reigns of each of the rulers of the empire. Ohrmazd, the chief deity of the religion, has been depicted on reliefs built by Ardashir I. He is also depicted giving the investiture ring to a number of other rulers of the Sasanian Empire (**Figure 13.15**). The rulers vacillated between being overtly dependent on Zoroastrianism and persecuting other religions, and accepting other religions in their empire.

The main deities of the religion were Ohrmazd, Mihr, Anahita and Varhran. Ohrmazd precedes all other deities as the one who invested the rulers with the right to rule. The presence of Ohrmazd, whose name meant that the sun was possibly inspired by the importance given to the sun by the Saka-Kushans who brought the solar cult as far as India. Mihr is considered to be the god with the chariot. Anahita was the goddess of the waters. The last of the deities, Varhran, was a name that was adopted by a large number of the Sasanian rulers. Varharan was also the name given to fire in Zoroastrianism. There were also other gods, however, they were not represented as frequently as these four.

For the regular individuals in the empire, the religious teachings were passed down by the priests only to their sons who were to succeed them. However, everyone in the community needed to be inducted into the religion through a ritual which would be carried out when the child was between 7 to 10 years of age. The child was made to recite prayers and a confession of the faith among other rituals.

During the course of their lives, all individuals on a regular basis had to deal with the priests extensively. Ceremonies of purification which were of various types had to be conducted before marriage, after childbirth, after death or even after ceremonies remembering the departed and towards the last ten days of the year. Ceremonies called *yasna* or sacrifice in front of the fire, could be conducted where in sponsoring the ceremony, the patron needed to make a payment for performing it known as the 'foundation for the soul'. The fire was given a special place such that it could also receive gifts and behaved as an autonomous entity. The fire held a place of prominence for the rulers as is evidenced by their existence on the back of coins. General people, however, could not do much more than observe the flame from a distance along with the other devotees they walked around the corridor surrounding the fire alter. The fire received a lot of importance in their religion as it was seen as a master that will not accept any other rival. In moving the fire, or renewing it, a large flame could not be added to an existing fire. Only the glowing embers may be added. Though this ceremony was of great importance under the Sasanians, it can be seen that it has not continued and is not practiced by the Parsees today.

Check Your Progress Exercise-4

- 1) What was the attitude of Sassanids towards Christians?

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- 2) Discuss the main aspects of religion under the Sassanids.

- 3) What role did the coins play under the Sassanid Empire? Elaborate this in the light of religion and economy.

13.10 SUMMARY

Through this Unit we have looked at the Sasanian Empire, how it expanded and developed into a major force. Following from the Parthians, the Sasanians grew from the time of Ardashir I till the time of Khusrau I. They underwent a large number of military operations with various groups. Particular to note were the conflicts with the Mazdakite group as well as with the Byzantines. The Sasanians put up brave fights, winning and losing in their way. During the reign of Khusrau I reforms in taxation and the army made a marked difference. This is evident by the large number of military victories during the reign of Khusrau I. The weaponry used by the Sasanians underwent some changes and were possibly not the best suited to their needs. They also adopted a number of weapons from the Romans such as the battering ram.

Over time, the Sasanians also made their mark in the areas of art, architecture, trade and coinage. Coins help date the art work, and though initially the relief work and the portraits on the coins showed a similar kind of quality, which is not found in the later coins as relief sculptures became more important form of art. From the few ruins that have been excavated it can be safely said that the structures that the Sasanians created could rival any of their contemporaries. They introduced new styles of collaborating open spaces with closed vaulted rooms. Perhaps the most significant contribution made to the realm of architecture was the building of domes using squinches.

Religion played a major role in the development of the empire as it gave legitimacy to the rulers. However, there was also a large amount of religious persecution as well as shifts and changes brought into the Zoroastrian religion. Legal and religious texts leaned heavily on each other whereby law depended to a great extent on religious ethics as the basis for deciding disputes.

13.11 KEY WORDS

Nasks	: Books in the Avesta, the religious text of the Zoroastrians. There were around 21 <i>nasks</i> .
Papyri	: Plural of papyrus, the paper made out of the papyrus plant.
Squinch	: A straight or arched structure across an interior angle of a square tower to carry a superstructure such as a dome.
Stucco	: Fine plaster used for coating wall surfaces or moulding into architectural decorations.

13.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) See Section 13.3.
- 2) See Section 13.2. The answer should include various Iranian and Non-Iranian sources along with Greek and Latin sources of information.
- 3) See Section 13.3 (including Sub-sections 13.3.1 and 13.3.2).
- 4) See Section 13.4. The wars and sieges between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires should be included in the answer.

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) See Section 13.5.1.
- 2) See Section 13.5.3.
- 3) See Section 13.5.2 and 13.5.4.
- 4) See Section 13.6.

Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) See Section 13.8.1. Mention can be made of the Palace at Firuzabad and the changes introduced in the later palace construction.
- 2) See Section 13.8.2. In the stucco used as decoration various paintings, primarily illustrating war and hunting have been noticed. These scenes also have beautiful floral and geometric patterns as decoration. Large relief sculptures are another fundamental feature of the art of the Sasanian period.
- 3) See Section 13.8.3.
- 4) See Section 13.7.

Check Your Progress Exercise-4

- 1) See Section 13.9. Do include the aspect of conflict between different religions under the Sassanid rule.
- 2) See Section 13.9.
- 3) See Section 13.6 and 13.9. Coins were also a major source for studying the reigns of different rulers of the empire.

13.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

Herrmann, Joachim and Zurcher, Erik (ed.) 1996. *History of Humanity: Scientific and Cultural Development*. Vol. III. Paris: UNESCO.

Yarshater, Ehsan (ed.). 2008. *Cambridge History of Iran*. Vol. 3. Part I and II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ansari, Ali. 2014. *Iran: Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

13.14 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATION

The Sassanid Empire: BBC RADIO 4

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008g2x5>

Byzantine-Sasanian Wars

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5et5qmbATYc>



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