

VI. THE AGE OF EMPIRES: BABYLONIA , ASSYRIA , PERSIA

The territorial ambitions of the Akkadians under Sargon the Great and Narim Sin in the twenty-fourth and twenty-third centuries B.C. were taken up by the vigorous Amorites under Hammurabi in the eighth century B.C. Babylon, on the Euphrates, became the capital of this powerful southern Mesopotamian kingdom. Hammurabi's successors were unable to stave off the invasion of the Kassites in the sixteenth century B.C., but Babylon recovered under Nebuchadnezzar I in the twelfth century B.C. and more significantly under his namesake in the sixth century in what is called the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire. Babylon remained a great cultural center, preserving the Sumerian-Akkadian cultural legacy despite the Hittite destruction, the Kassite and Assyrian occupations, and Persian conquest under Cyrus the Great.

The centuries-long struggle of the Assyrians, who were first centered in the agriculturally rich area of the northern Tigris River at Ashur, resulted in a ruthlessly powerful empire. It eventually included all of Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and for a time, even Egypt. Only Urartu, farther to the north, resisted their incursions. The Assyrians were tested and toughened for generations in their struggle with the likes of the Hittites, Hurrians, and the Mitanni. The Assyrian agricultural economy was supplemented by the importation of horses, metals, and timber from their neighbors in the mountainous areas to their east. Under Tiglath-pileser III in the eighth century a thousand-year effort produced a large-scale empire. This empire was built by dynamic leaders who employed a highly refined military machine and terror tactics. The Assyrian Empire was administered in succession from Ashur, Nimrud, Khorsabad, and finally at Nineveh. It was, in fact, ultimately overstretched beyond its resources and lacked the vital element of consensus.

Under Cyrus II, the Great, the Achaemenid Persians surpassed their one-time allies, the Medes, to build the Near East's largest and most efficient empire. Their ancestors were Indo-European speakers originally from central Asia. They settled on the Iranian plateau between Mesopotamia and India to the east. The Lydian Kingdom and Ionian Greek cities in Western Anatolia and Babylonia soon fell to Cyrus. Egypt, too, along with Syria and Palestine, were brought into the Persian orbit. To the east the areas up to the Indus River were incorporated into the empire by the end of the sixth century, under Darius. Persian attempts to penetrate Europe beyond the Bosphorus were less successful in the long run, and the Greek city-states frustrated further expansion there in the fifth century under Xerxes.

Administrative organization, leadership, and a national will to power created and held the Persian Empire together. The kings operated out of their capitals of Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Babylon, Sardis, and Pasargadae. The twenty satrapies or provinces were linked by a network of royal roads which made for efficient communication and military movement. Maritime traffic moved through a Persian-developed canal between the Nile River and the Red Sea. Phoenician fleets were utilized in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. This largest of empires tolerated a measure of ethnic and national diversity in return for obedience, financial tribute, and military conscription. The Persian Empire was, however, threatened by nomadic incursions on its northwest frontier, suffered humiliation at the hands of the numerically weaker Greeks, and was destined to be plagued by internal dynastic problems until overrun by an even more ambitious empire-builder, Alexander the Great of Macedon.

EXERCISE 6
THE AGE OF EMPIRES: BABYLONIA, ASSYRIA, PERSIA

I. MAKING THE MAP

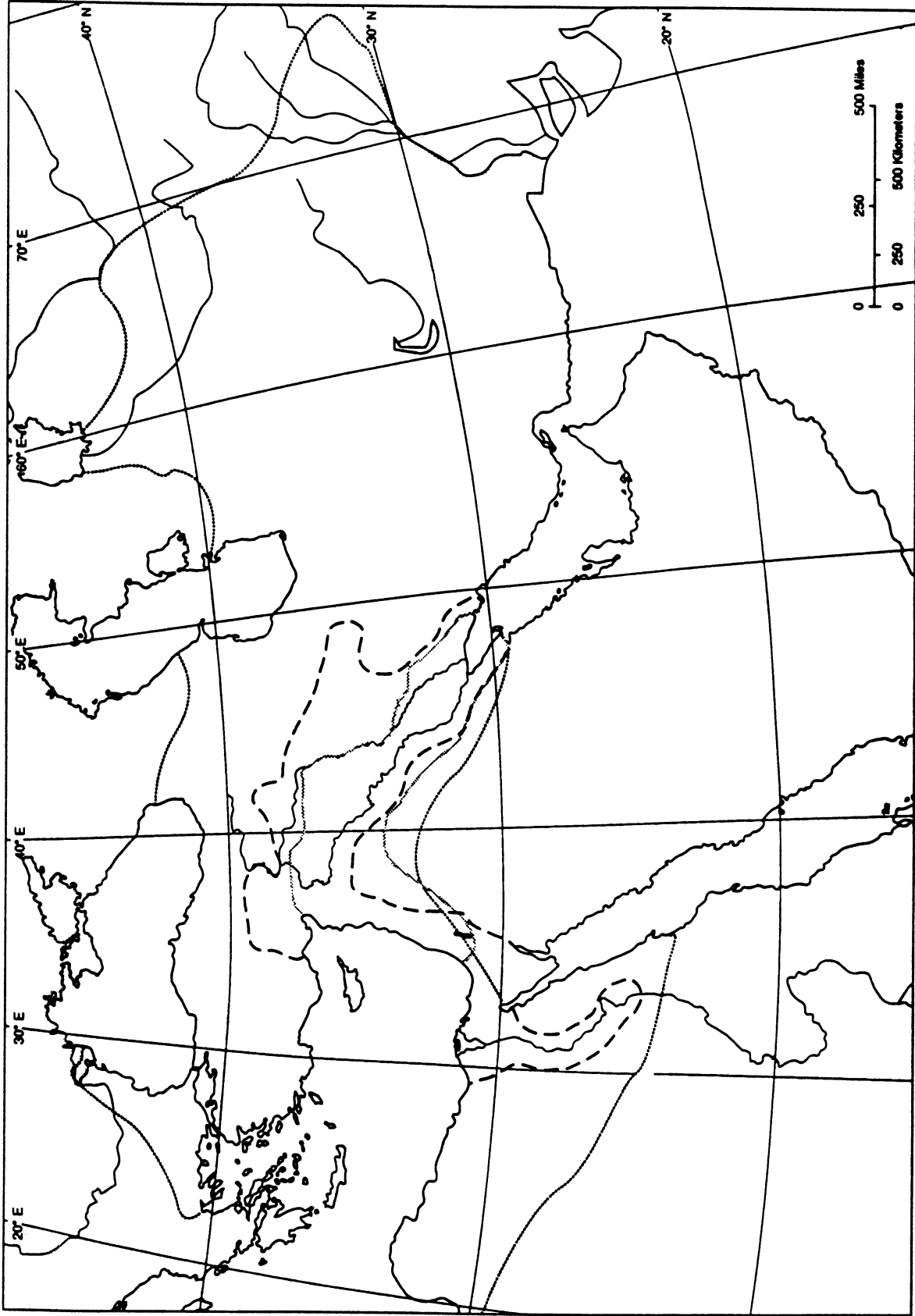
1. Locate and label the Tigris River, the Euphrates River, the Aegean Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the Nile River, the Indus River, the Caspian Sea.
2. Locate with a black dot and label Ninevah, Babylon, Memphis, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Sardis, Jerusalem, Damascus.
3. Color in blue the area of the Assyrian Empire at its peak under Esar-Haddon.
4. Color in red the area of the Neo-Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar II.
5. Color in yellow the area of the Persian Empire under Darius I.
6. Locate and label Lydia, Ionia, Media, Egypt.

II. READING THE MAP

1. The approximate distance in miles from Nineveh to Babylon is _____.
2. Name the mountain chain to the east of the Tigris River.
3. Name the states which fell under Assyrian rule at its peak of power.
4. What is the approximate size in square miles of the Neo-Babylonian Empire?
5. What is the approximate distance in miles from Persepolis to Sardis?
6. What major states were incorporated into the Persian Empire?
7. Where did Persian expansion meet major resistance and defeat in the early fifth century B.C.?

III. UNDERSTANDING THE MAP

1. What do you think enabled the Assyrians and Persians to conquer and administer such vast empires?
2. What was the fate of Egypt in the conflict with Persia?
3. How did Israel fare under the Assyrians, Neo-Babylonians, and Persians?
4. What major river system formed the eastern limits of the Persian Empire?



Exercise 6: The Age of Empires: Babylonia, Assyria, Persia

