

## THE RISE AND FALL OF MEDIA

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### 1. The image of Media in the classical sources

Before the archaeological discovery of the Assyrian royal palaces and cuneiform archives, in the mid 19th century, the history of the Near Eastern civilizations in the period before the Achaemenid Empire was based on the classical and biblical sources only. The Medes, like the Assyrians and the Babylonians were known from information contained in the works of Herodotus and of later historians, who had no direct knowledge on those peoples and empires, but collected information in the learned circles of the Achaemenid empire itself. This information was neither direct nor coeval, nor even based on sound archival or historical materials. No wonder that the fresh evidence coming from the archaeological discoveries of the past century —both in Assyria and in Babylonia— resulted in a complete reassessment of the history of those countries. If we compare now the histories of Assyria and Chaldea written before the mid 19th century, with those current nowadays, we have to admit that they do not resemble each other at all. In other terms: the information available to Herodotus and to his heirs had no reliability, and is now used in order to reconstruct Greek historiography and not Assyrian or Babylonian history.

Quite different has been the fate of Media, probably because —differently from Assyria and Babylonia— no Median archive has been recovered. But this is just an explanation, not a justification thereof. Even if no Median source has been discovered so far, the information contained in the Assyrian and Babylonian sources is available and quite relevant. Nevertheless, if we compare the histories of Media written in the 19th century (e.g. Rawlinson 1871-73, II, 371-431) with those current nowadays (e.g. Diakonoff 1985a), we find that they keep a great deal of mutual resemblance — to the point that modern archaeological and textual discoveries seem to have provided a rather limited impact. It should be clear that the current reconstructions of the history of Media, based as they are on the classical information, run the risk of being so distant from historical reality as the pre-modern reconstructions of Assyrian and Babylonian histories are now assumed (and proved) to have been.

Obviously the classical information, indirect and later, could have been easily influenced by distorting factors pertaining both to the nature of the information itself and to the historiographic conceptions obtaining in the Greek world. In my opinion, the basic distortions are two, one related to the political structure of the Median state, and the other related to the time of its burgeoning. Among more specific

1. Cf. e.g. Baumgartner 1950; Drews 1970; Kuhrt 1982; Zawadzki 1984; McQueen 1978; lastly Rollinger 1993 (with extensive bibliography). Cf. also, more in general, Drews 1973.

(but relevant) points, the relationship of the Median and the Persian empire can also have been a factor of major distortion, since the information basically came from Persian circles.

As for the period during which the Medes flourished, the choice was basically dictated by the theory of the succession of empires (Kratz 1991; Wiesehöfer *forthc.*). Empires, being by their very nature "universal", had to follow one another in time. And since the Medes were known to have destroyed the Assyrian empire, and to have been vanquished by Cyrus the founder of the Persian empire, the choice was apparently obvious. In terms of our chronology, a Median empire could have been located only in the period between 612 (destruction of Nineveh) and 550 (victory of Cyrus over Astyages).

For similar reasons, Media was assumed by Greek historians to have the political and administrative structure of an "empire", even a "universal empire". We get the impression that the state structure of the Medes was derived by the (sound and contemporary) knowledge of the structure of the Persian state.<sup>2</sup> Of course we cannot pretend that the Greek historians (nor their informants, at that) could reconstruct a process in which the Medes occupied a stage different from that of Persia: they had no information about that, and the basic idea of an "Oriental" empire was modelled on the Persian case, considered as paradigmatic. Consequently, the victory of Cyrus over Astyages was the sufficient event that caused the *translatio imperii* from Ecbatana to Pasargadae, and the inheritance of the imperial structure by the new dynasty. Now that we do have information on the formative process involving the Median polities, we still continue to figure out the Median state on the model of the following structure (*i.e.*, the Achaemenid empire), while we should figure out it on the model of the previous structures (*i.e.*, the Zagros chiefdoms in their way to statehood).

In the last years, the doubt has been advanced, notably by Heleene Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1988), whether the Median empire did really exist; and the doubt has also been advanced, namely by Peyton Helm (1981),<sup>3</sup> whether Herodotus' account on the origins and development of the Median royal dynasty is a reliable account, still to be used as a guide-line for our historical reconstruction, or it is rather a patchwork of folk-tales whose value is rather political (as "foundation legends" of the Median state) than properly historical. The present paper intends to elaborate on former doubts and critical approaches in order to formulate an explicit alternative model.<sup>4</sup> My indebtedness to the seminal paper by Helene Sancisi-Weerdenburg is quite evident, yet I think the alternative model can be formulated in a more precise and extreme way.

## 2. The impact of the archaeological discoveries

Modern archaeological activity in the core area of ancient Media (*i.e.*, the area between Kermanshah and Hamadan) has been especially intensive and fruitful in the years 1960s and 1970s, when the excavations of Godin Tepe, Nush-i Jan, Baba Jan have been carried out.<sup>5</sup> In the adjacent area of ancient Mannea the excavation of Hasanlu and a short operation at Ziwiyeh have been as well productive. The capital city of Media, Ecbatana/Hamadan, would obviously be the key-site for our problem, but the

2. Cf. Briant 1984a, 98; 1996, 36 on the court manners of the Medes reconstructed on the Persian model, the only ones to be known to Herodotus. The very same use of the term "Medes" in order to refer to "Persians" (Tuplin 1994) resulted from and contributed to their mutual identification.

3. Cf. also Brown 1988. The criticism by Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1994 seems unconvincing to me.

4. The critical views are rejected—in a confused yet symptomatic way—e.g. by Muscarella 1994.

5. Briant 1984a, 78-80, 84 is rather minimalist on the impact of the archaeological discoveries in Media.

ancient settlement excavated so far<sup>6</sup> seems to belong to the Sasanian period, and a "Median" level is still to be localized.

Now, the basic result of such archaeological activity, for the period which is relevant here (namely, the second quarter of the first millennium BC), is that the Median sites underwent a notable burgeoning during the late 8th and the 7th centuries, but were dismissed during the first half of the 6th century, that is exactly when the assumed Median empire should have reached the peak of its development.

The evidence from Nush-i Jan, excavated by David Stronach and Michael Roaf, is the most clear (Stronach 1969; Stronach – Roaf 1973; 1978). The phase Nush-i Jan I is dated to the period ca. 750 to 600 BC. The excavators were able to articulate the sequence of the various buildings: the "Central Building" (an "imposing Fire Temple") was built at the beginning of the phase, well inside the 8th century, while the "Fort" and the Western Building (with its columned hall) were added during the 7th century. These public buildings were subsequently abandoned, and in the first half of the 6th century the mound was occupied by squatters. In advancing an explanation for the abandonment, the excavators underscore that the archaeological evidence is not in agreement with what expected from the historical sources — of course the classical sources. In their first report they write that "both the collapse of Assyria and the gradual erosion of Scythian power may have led to the desertion of a number of strongholds, at least where these lay near the heart of Media's extensive territory" (Stronach 1969, 16). And in their second report they write that "the various buildings appear to have been abandoned in different ways during the period when Median power was still in the ascendant" (Stronach – Roaf 1973, 138). They did not notice, however, that the archaeological data, so badly fitting the classical sources, are on the contrary in perfect agreement with the ancient Mesopotamian sources.

Level II of Godin Tepe, excavated and published by T. Cuyler Young and Louis Levine (1969; 1974), tell us a similar story: one of a progressive growth of public buildings (first the columned hall, then a first row of storerooms, to be eventually complemented by a second row and by fortified towers) during phases 1 to 4, to be followed by "peaceful abandonment" and "squatter occupation" during phase 5.<sup>7</sup>

In their second report the excavators do not dare to provide any (as much approximate) date, but it is evident how similar the architectural structures of Godin II are to Nush-i Jan I, and how similar the sequence of public buildings and squatter occupation is. Elsewhere one of the excavators supports the mid 8th century as the beginning of Godin II and stresses the striking similarities with Nush-i Jan. As to the correspondence of archaeological and historical chronology, a statement by Roaf and Stronach is worth quoting: "A similar [*i.e.*, to Nush-i Jan] sequence occurred at Godin Tepe, where the steady growth of the first monumental concept was followed all too soon by neglect and some sort of peaceful abandonment" (Stronach – Roaf 1973, 138).

Again a similar story is told by the results of the excavations at Baba Jan (Goff 1968; 1969; 1970; 1977; 1978), although the excavator supports a higher chronology with the burgeoning phase III (Manor, Painted Chamber, etc.) in the 9th-8th centuries and the squatter occupation in the 7th — but mostly for historical reasons (assumed Assyrian and Scythian raids). In any case, the first half of the 6th century (be it coincident with, or subsequent to the squatter occupation) seems to be one of complete abandonment.

6. Cf. Sarraf in this volume. The author seems to suggest a Median date for the buildings he excavated, but the radiocarbon datings and the urbanistic layout point to the Sasanian period.

7. Cf. Gopnik in this volume: 7th century "manor"; squatters occupation from mid-6th to early 5th century; abandonment due to "the centralization of power by an expanding Median state".

Since parallels between Baba Jan II and Hasanlu III B-A seem to provide a strong reference point for chronology, it must be underscored that Hasanlu III B and Ziwiyé "parallel one another in time and that both end in the late 7th century" (according to Robert Dyson 1965, 207), while Hasanlu III A is a period of clear decay corresponding to the 6th century. Therefore the archaeological developments in Mannea seem to have been quite the same as in Media: burgeoning settlements with public buildings in the second half of the 8th century and through the entire 7th century, followed by a period of squatting in the first half of the 6th century.<sup>8</sup>

Such a picture is not fitting at all into the current reconstruction of a Median empire as based on the classical historians, while it is much better fitting into the history of Media as based on ancient Assyrian and Babylonian sources.

### 3. The impact of the Assyrian and Babylonian texts

The corpus of Assyrian royal inscriptions, dating from Shalmaneser III to Esarhaddon (ca. 850-670 BC) contains by far the largest set of historical data about the Medes. Their value as strictly contemporary records of the growth of the Median polities has been recognized since the start, and their information has been repeatedly framed into a coherent narrative (cf. e.g. Diakonoff 1985a; Cuyler Young 1988).

This narrative has a scarce—if any at all—resemblance to the narrative of Herodotus on the beginning of the Median state. The Zagros chiefs attested in Assyrian records and identified with Herodotus' predecessors of Cyaxares (the Mannean Daiukku, the Kassite Kaštaritu) are neither Median nor relatives (cf. Labat 1961; Lanfranchi 1990, 95-108). Therefore the Assyrian information has been used for its own value, and the Herodotean one has mostly been discarded—when dealing with the period before Cyaxares—as an unreliable patchwork of oral sagas assembled by the later Median royal family in order to better validate her power. The basic point is that in the Assyrian texts the Medes appear as a loose set of tribes, presenting no special features as compared to other Zagros tribes, lead by local chiefs and devoid of political unity or even coordination. It is possible to sketch their way from loose tribes to secondary state formations, but nothing hints at the existence of a royal dynasty whose authority had been accepted by the various tribes.

The assumed unification has been therefore pushed down in the time of Ashurbanipal (ca. 670-630) or his successors (ca. 630-615), but this has been made possible by the absence of Assyrian (or other contemporary) records, an absence that has left the field "free" to an acceptance of the Herodotean account which has proved to be unreliable when contemporary sources are indeed available.

Still different is the case for the following period (ca. 615-550 BC): the Babylonian chronicles contain two important pieces of information, that are in accordance with the story narrated by Herodotus: in 614-610 the Medes under the united leadership of Cyaxares (Umakištar) destroyed the Assyrian capital cities (Grayson 1975, 94); in 550 the Median army, again under the united leadership of Astyages (Ištumegu), deserted in front of the Persian king Cyrus, and the Median capital city Ecbatana was plundered (Grayson 1975, 106). The beginning and end of an independent Median kingdom are therefore explicitly recorded; yet the nature of such a kingdom is not necessarily the same as described by Herodotus as a true and proper empire foreshadowing the Persian empire.

8. Cf. also the valuable review by Brown 1990, as usual influenced by the traditional historical view (612-550 = "imperial period"; abandonment of the manors due to centralization in Ecbatana, etc.).

On the contrary the Babylonian sources for the period ca. 610 to 550 BC do not support such a view. On the one hand, the Babylonian documents keep a sensational silence on a kingdom assumed to share one thousand miles of common border with the Chaldean territory. On the other hand, the few times the Medes are mentioned they are described as an irregular destructive force, culprit for plundering not only the Assyrian cities but the Babylonian cities as well (Nabonidus stela in Schaudig 2001, 514-529). It seems as if the role of the Medes had been to carry out the "dirty job" of the destruction, leaving to Babylonia the more honourable role of reconstruction and political continuity.

On the common basis of the archaeological and textual sources — that we have just sketched in a few words, because already well known— we can now try to suggest a coherent development for Median history in the two centuries ca. 750 to 550 BC.

#### 4. First phase, ca. 750-670: tribes, pastoralism and trade

The first phase, ca. 750-670 BC is already correctly described in current literature, based on Assyrian inscriptions only, and needs no special clarification (cf. Radner in this volume). The Medes were a set of tribes, with local chiefs (called *bēl āli*, "city-lord", in the Assyrian sources; cf. Lanfranchi in this volume) and no unitary political structures — but for those dictated by common ethnicity (hence the summarizing term of Medes, *Madāyu* in the Assyrian sources) and by common ecological setting and economic resources (rather similar, however, to the other Zagros peoples and polities).

They had "towns", probably small fortified settlements of the kind that has been archaeologically recovered at Nush-i Jan I, at Baba Jan II 1-3, at Godin Tepe II: the "fortified manors" (to use Clare Goff's term) of local chiefs (or "khans", to use Cuyler Young's term, but we could less anachronistically use the definition of "city-lords" that the Assyrians refer to them), with forts and store-houses (as in Godin Tepe and Nush-i Jan), cultic buildings (the "Fire temple" of Nush-i Jan) and ceremonial buildings (the "columned halls" of Nush-i Jan and Baba Jan). The common people were not living inside these manors, nor even necessarily adjacent to them, as far as we know: we can assume that they lived in small villages or pastoral camps.

The basic economic resource was pastoralism, as descriptions of Assyrian booty and tribute confirm. But we have to underscore that sheep-and-goats transhumant pastoralism could sustain the miserable tribes of the Zagros (as it did through the course of millennia), but cannot explain the concentration of wealth that is the reason for the existence of the fortified manors with their mixture of economic treasuring, of armed force, of lordly ceremony. A first factor for economic development was the breeding of such valuable breeds as horses (to be used in warfare) and Bactrian camels (to be used as pack-animals in trade). Proximity to the Assyrian empire (but also to the Urartian, Elamite, and Babylonian states) made the breeding of these valuable animals quite rewarding. Such proximity made also convenient an activity of the warlike Median tribes as auxiliary forces for the imperial armies, as we shall see for the following phase.<sup>9</sup>

But the most important economic factor was the strategic location of the Medes along the main trade route (the so-called Khorasan road) linking Mesopotamia to Central Asia. This factor differentiated the fortunes of the Medes from those of the adjacent and similar peoples of Mannea in the northern Zagros and of Ellipi in the southern Zagros. Although Mannea and Ellipi were more advanced toward statehood than the "remote Medes", nevertheless the topographical position of the

9. According to Lanfranchi (in this volume) the competition between Assyria and Urartu (in the northern Zagros) or Elam (in the southern Zagros) on the control on the human resources is the main reason for the Assyrian intervention — much more than control on the trade routes.

Medes submitted them to a different kind of interference. The control of the "gate" of the Iranian plateau, the road from Kermanshah to Hamadan, was a major target for Assyria, and the very reason why the Assyrian armies tried to penetrate inside the plateau exactly along such a road and not in more northerly and southerly areas.

Under Sargon II (in the two last decades of the 8th century) the Assyrian presence in Media reached its culmination. Sargon tried to establish a direct administrative control in those far-away regions, according to the provincial system which had already been established in more close and easily accessible lands. The Assyrian governors, however, coexisted with the local city-lords: probably the former had to control the long-distance trade and the collection of tribute, while the latter remained in power for the local affairs (Lanfranchi in this volume). The attempt was unsuccessful on the long run, but it brought about the foundation of Assyrian "cities" in Media, to serve as an economic and ideological reference point for the local people, and as a model for more strictly patterned administrative and political organizations.

It seems clear that the proximity to a great and aggressive empire, namely Assyria, was the basic factor for the transition of the poor pastoral tribes of the Zagros into rich and powerful chiefdoms engaged in war and trade activities, and attracted by the alien model of the lowlands states (Brown 1986). It seems also possible that the specific location of the Medes, as opposed to other peoples of similar starting conditions, could have made this process more effective in their case.

##### 5. Second phase, ca. 670-610: the "secondary states" in function

After Sargon II, Assyria had to renounce to base her control over Media upon the presence of fixed structures (governors' residencies, garrisons, fiscal collectors, etc.), but did not renounce to keep some kind of control. The retreat of Assyria, however, left the space free for the establishment (or re-establishment) of Median secondary states, that could profit of the enduring relationships in running the trade, in providing specialized warriors, and in selling horses. Towards the end of the reign of Esarhaddon the famous treaties (*adê*) are the most detailed set of documents dealing with such relationships. It is obvious that the presence of Median body-guards inside the Assyrian palaces had a sensible effect on reshaping the organization of Median warfare according to more advanced techniques (Liverani 1995; Lanfranchi 1998).

Yet the Esarhaddon treaties are also an important reference point for the assumed existence of an unified Median state. Until 672 the Medes are still divided into many chiefdoms, lead by "city-lords", with no common strategy (some of them allied to Assyria, the others her enemies), even fighting the ones against the others. Nothing could make us to predict that these tribes would become soon a unified state.

But did they really become a unified state? The current reasoning is that the course toward the unified state must have taken place in the period from 670 to 615 because we know that in 614 Media was lead by a common king, namely Cyaxares, and we know from Herodotus that Cyaxares started his reign around 625, with no Assyrian sources to contradict such a "fact". It is true that Herodotus' information about the previous kings and the previous periods have turned out to be unreliable, but in the case of Cyaxares his existence and his role in the fall of Nineveh are proved by the Babylonian chronicle so that also the other information (about his chronology and about his status as king of a mitray state) can be taken for granted as well.

This is just a possibility, a reasonable hypothesis, but not an ascertained fact. The Assyrian sources do not provide any hint for that, nor do the archaeological sources: the 7th century developments at Jush-i Jan and Godin Tepe do not imply any change in the function of those centres — from being the centers of local khans to being the administrative cells of a united state, they rather imply continuity. So the entire reasoning is based on Cyaxares, with the two possibilities both open, either that he was

the king of a unitary Median state already before the fall of Nineveh, or that he was just appointed as a common leader for the unusual task of pulling down the Assyrian empire, and later on he could profit of his success in order to keep some kind of leadership widely accepted by the other local chiefs of the Median tribes.

#### **6. Third phase, ca. 610-550: loose chiefdoms or “pastoral empire”?**

Our third phase, from the fall of Nineveh to the victory of Cyrus over Astyages, is the one which is in need of a complete rethinking and new formulation. The archaeological evidence tells us that toward the end of the 7th century (exactly at the fall of the Assyrian empire) the fortified manors and ceremonial centres of Media were dismissed, not because of destruction but because of peaceful abandonment. In the meantime the Medes exit from written sources, to be mentioned again on the occasion of Cyrus' conquest of Ecbatana. The term “dark age” for the period 610-550 seems quite appropriate.<sup>10</sup>

The Babylonian account of Median intervention against Assyria —as already anticipated— is one of blame for their destructive power, in the long-standing Mesopotamian view of the peoples of the mountains threatening the cities of the lowlands (Liverani 2001). The idea that the two victors (Babylonia and Media) shared the territory of the Assyrian empire is completely wrong. The Medes assumed the dirty job of destruction, while the Babylonians assumed the role of the restorers. Almost the entire territory of Assyria was inherited by Babylonia, the Medes being left with the Zagros that Assyria had already lost beforehand.

Also the two episodes narrated by the chronicle of the fall of Nineveh and by the Nabonidus chronicle deserve a reading which goes in the same direction. On the occasion of the fall of Nineveh we are told that the Medes, after the slaughter and sack of the city, went back to their land, while the Babylonian army continued the military operations. We get the impression of a people interested in destruction and booty, but not in territorial gains or even in a rationally planned military strategy, and we suspect that the leader of the Median army, Cyaxares, did not have sufficient authority to keep his troops fighting after the enthusiastic moment of storming.

The doubt becomes a certainty on the occasion of the confrontation of Astyages and Cyrus: the Median leader collected an army in order to attack the Persian king, but the army deserted — perhaps because not sharing the motivations for the attack, but in any case revealing that the authority of Astyages was rather loose and dependant on the free will of his troops and obviously of their local leaders.

It seems clear that the Babylonian information on Media can be read as reference to a state (not to say an empire) only if we read it on the guidelines of the classical sources. But if we are able to forget for a moment such a pre-conceived opinion, the Babylonian sources can much better describe the image of a destructive and untamable force with a rather loose unifying leadership.

The same holds true, to a notable extent, also for the other positive information we have about Media in the period of its assumed hegemony, namely the expedition against Lydia. Also in this case we have the story of a long distance expedition, that got no positive issue because the army (after a

10. Roaf (in this volume) correctly describes the documentary vacuum, but seems rather puzzled in drawing conclusions, convinced as he is that Media was a formal state, with monumental buildings, administration, royal court, etc. Cf. already his position in Roaf 1995, 62: “From this date [585] on the Medes ruled a vast empire stretching from central Turkey to some unidentified region in north-eastern Iran and beyond. Yet almost nothing is known of this period.”

first victory on the battlefield) decided to retreat, in this case frightened by the famous eclipse, and proved unable to take a political advantage from its military power. It is commonly assumed that a military operation in central Anatolia must imply a Median territorial control on the entire area stretching from Ecbatana to the Halys.<sup>11</sup> This is not necessarily the case, once again it is just the result of assuming an imperial model for granted.<sup>12</sup> A well known Nabonidus inscription describes the Median coalition as “the *ummān-manda*” plus “the kings going at his sides” (Schaudig 2001, 417). A famous passage in Jer. 51, 27-28 describes a loose coalition of Urartians, Manneans and Scythians under the leadership of “the kings [in the plural!] of Media” as a possible threat against Babylon, most probably on the model of the recent action against Nineveh.<sup>13</sup> The same coalition under the same leadership could have been active in central Anatolia (at the western borders of Urartu) without implying a previous Median conquest of Urartu that remains completely devoid of any textual basis. Even in the classical sources, notably in Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, we have a king of Armenia,<sup>14</sup> a king of Cappadocia,<sup>15</sup> and of course a king of Cilicia,<sup>16</sup> and Median hegemony is based on alliances with other highlands polities, rather than on territorial control.<sup>17</sup>

The Biblical sources for the period between the fall of Nineveh and the fall of Babylon have been rather neglected in recent decades.<sup>18</sup> In the passage in Jer. 51, 11, the prophet hopes that the “kings” of Media will attack and destroy Babylon:

Yahweh has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it.<sup>19</sup>

The use of the plural implies that the Medes were led by tribal chiefs, and it is interesting to note that the Greek version of the LXX will correct the plural into singular, obviously influenced by the Greek notion of a unitary Median state. The anti-Babylonian tribal coalition of the Iranian peoples is described in more detail in the passage Jer. 51:27:

Prepare the nations for war against her, summon against her the kingdoms, Urartians, Manneans, Scythians; appoint a recruiting-officer against her, bring up horses like bristling locusts! Prepare

11. At this point I have to say that I see no reason to attribute to the Medes (and not to a local kingdom) the site of Kerkenes Dağ, as strongly asserted by Summers 1997; 2000.
12. Cf. also Rollinger in this volume (Media as “some kind of ‘tribal confederacy’ lacking political stability” and about the Medio-Lyidian war and assumed border). Cf. already —among others— Briant 1984b, 40-41.
13. It is interesting to notice that the Manneans, who were pro-Assyrians during the events of 614-612, became part of the Median confederation during the 6th century.
14. *Cyr.* III.2.1 – 43: the king of Armenia continues to reign even under Cyrus.
15. *Cyr.* IV.2.31. The site of Kerkenes Dağ (cf. fn. 11 above) could well be the capital city of such kingdom of Cappadocia, the heir of Tabal.
16. In the Nerglissar Chronicle (557, well after Cyaxares’ war against Lydia, 585) *Humē* is part of the Babylonian empire, Pirindu is independent, and there is no mention of a Median presence in the area.
17. Cf. especially Petit 1990, 28-30: Median system of alliances vs. Cyrus’ institution of provinces and governors.
18. Among earlier studies, cf. especially Smith 1944 (on the period 556-538 BC); cf. his p. 32 on the Medes as a tribal league.
19. I follow (here and in the following passages) the translation of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford 1991, with minor corrections.



the nations for war against her: the kings of the Medes, with their governors and deputies, and every land under their dominion!<sup>20</sup>

Also in this case, the LXX version will correct “the kings” into “the king”.

Also Jer. 25, 25-26, foredooming for all the nations a fate similar to that of Jerusalem, just conquered and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, describes the political condition of the highlands in terms of a plurality of loose statehoods:

All the kings of the Cimmerians,<sup>21</sup> all the kings of Elam, all the kings of the Medes, all the kings of the North, far and near, one after another.

Is this a fair description of a “Median Empire”?<sup>22</sup>

We have hardly to remember, at this point, that although literacy had been present in the area of Media during the period of Assyrian penetration, it completely disappeared during the period of the assumed Median hegemony, ca. 610-550.<sup>23</sup> Not only public buildings, but also written administration (the two most obvious markers of statehood) are completely missing in the period of the assumed Median empire.

The interpretation for such an apparently “puzzling” and “contradictory” state of affairs is quite clear and coherent. The “secondary states” of the Medes had grown up at the periphery of the Assyrian empire and largely in function of the Assyrian empire. On the one hand the Zagros tribes had suffered, since time immemorial, from the repeated attacks by the lowland empire of Assyria, bringing about destruction and robberies. But on the other hand the proximity of the empire generated a notable development in their military and political apparatus, a development of their economy in function of trade and of production of strategically valuable items. The Zagros polities were true and proper “secondary” states in the sense that their very existence was dependent on relationships with the empire. Once the exasperated tribes decided to put an end to the aggressive empire, in the same time they put an end to their own political formations and reverted to the stage of tribal pastoralism.

At this point we can go back to the information provided by Herodotus and by Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, in order to read them with this new model in mind. And we find that the stories told by the classical historians speak about features which are distinctive of chiefdoms and not of states: warfare and hunting, hospitality and gift-exchange, inter-marriage and alliance, cruelty and revenge, chivalry and bravery, banquets and conspicuous consumption. And we can figure out the fabulous Ecbatana as something like an enlarged example of those “lordly manors” with whom archaeology has made us familiar. Cyaxares and Astyages were not emperors on the model of the following Persian empire, but just a line of authoritative “chiefs”. They got a special prestige (but not an absolute power) from having been the leading family on the occasion of the great national enterprise of pulling down the “empire of evil” that had so long oppressed and exploited the Zagros pastoral tribes.<sup>24</sup>

20. The passage makes use of Babylonian terminology (*tpsr* = *tušarru*, *phh* = *pāhatu*, *sgn* = *šaknu*) in order to define the Median state officials.

21. The text has *zmry* (*hapax*), the emendation *gmry* seems obvious.

22. On the date and historical context of the passage cf. Diakonoff 2000.

23. This point has already been made by Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1988, 198. That the Old Persian script must have had a Median model is just another pre-conceived idea based on the classical view.

24. The “model” for the Median hegemony could be framed into the concept of “shadow empires” suggested for Central Asian nomadic imperial confederacies by Barfield 2001, 33-38.

### 7. Media or Elam at the roots of the Persian empire?

It is commonly taken for granted, on the score of the classical sources, that the Achaemenid empire was built upon a direct inheritance of the Median empire. Cyrus' victory over Astyages is assumed to have handed over to Cyrus an already built empire, stretching from the border of Lydia to central Asia (including Bactria? on the problem of pre-Achaemenid Bactria cf. Briant 1984b). In a sense, the extent of the assumed Median empire has been deduced from the extent of Cyrus' empire (detracting his eventual annexation of Babylonia and Lydia), as if no other explanation could be possible.<sup>25</sup>

Now, it is a symptomatic case that when the Bisutun inscription was being deciphered, once ascertained that one version was Old Persian and the second was Babylonian, the third enigmatic and undeciphered version was assumed to be Median! This was a reasonable hypothesis, since Bisutun is located in Media and Media was assumed to lie at the basis of the Persian empire. Later on it became sure that the third version was Elamite, that no Median writing system had ever existed,<sup>26</sup> and that Elamite remained the administrative language for the Persian archives. This fact is a symptomatic parallel to the fact that the classical sources seem to have attributed to Media a role that in reality belonged to Elam instead.

Obviously, the very geographical location of the core of Persia is identical with the core of Elam. The capital city of Elam, Anšan (at Tall-i Malyan), is a few miles away from Pasargadae and Persepolis and the area left "empty" after the decline of Anšan (cf. de Miroschedji 1985; 1990a; Amiet 1992; Potts 1999, 288-307) was revitalized by the new Persian dynasty. This dynasty was quite independent already in mid-seventh century, when Cyrus I sent an embassy to Ashurbanipal after his conquest of Susiana (cf. lastly Rollinger 1999, 118-121). The idea that Persia had been a "vassal" of Media rests on later classical sources only, and seems rather improbable (Rollinger 1999, 127-135).

Persia is the heir of Elam, not of Media.<sup>27</sup> Elam had a long tradition in statehood, in centralized administration, in written records kept in formal archives. Elam had also a long tradition as centre of large coalitions of peoples and states on the Iranian plateau, as centre of a network of relationships with the surrounding areas, not only with Susiana (these relationships being the best known because of the archaeological selection of our information) but also with regions in central, northern, and eastern Iran. Persia inherited the Elamite state organization and administration (cf. Briant 1984b, 92-96; Potts 1999, 306-307), and inherited the Elamite network of relationships, not a quite improbable network centred on the poor and illiterate pastoral tribes of the central Zagros.

In the Greek reconstruction of the sequence of empires, Media was given a role that belonged to Elam. The Greeks—and especially the Ionians of Asia—were well aware of the role of Media since Cyaxares' foray against Lydia, and could have received information through the Lydian channel. They were, on the contrary, completely ignorant about Elamite power and Elamite history, so that Elam was excluded from their sequence of empires and from their reconstruction of the genesis of the Persian empire.

To make a more peculiar case, the famous topos of the Medes as "luxury-loving" as opposed to the frugal and energetic Persians (a topos endowed with relevant moral values in Greek historiography)

25. Högemann 1992, 75, 83-85 describes a territorial empire divided into satrapies (the very same satrapies of the Achaemenid empire).

26. The same holds true for the attempt to find out tablets with Median texts in the Assyrian archives—an attempt that goes on since Sayce 1890 (cf. now Hinz 1986) and until Radner 1999a. By the way, Radner's archive belongs to the period 661-614 and the building was destroyed by a huge fire in 614.

27. It is hardly necessary to remind that Cyrus' title (in his Babylonian "Cylinder", cf. Schaudig 2001, 551-556) is "king of Anšan", certainly not "king of Media"!

does not fit at all with the Medes as known from Assyrian and Babylonian sources — both the “fierce” Medes (*Madāyu dannūti*) of the military *élites*, or the pastoralists of the common populace. On the contrary the topos fits the Elamites much better, and could even go back to Assyrian literary traditions. Just think of the Elamites at the Ḫalule battle, as described and ridiculed by Sennacherib:

Their (= *i.e.* the Elamites) nobles ... who stood on silver chariots, were bedecked with golden ornaments, wore golden daggers, had their fingers bound with golden rings ... they let their dung go into their chariots, they ran off alone, and fled to their land (Luckenbill 1924, 89).

Yet the role of Media inside the Persian empire remains quite peculiar, at least according to the classical sources (the Old Persian royal inscriptions are more ambiguous on this point),<sup>28</sup> and we have to look for an adequate explanation thereof. If the explanation cannot have recourse to the state administration, we can suspect that some reasons did exist in the field of religious and social ideologies.

### 8. The “revolution” and its ideology

An unbiased evaluation of the extant data leads us to believe that in the period from 610 and 550 BC the tradition of “empires” was preserved by Chaldean Babylonia and by Anšan/Persia, while the Zagros area under Median hegemony reverted to a stage of tribal chiefdoms, with no literacy and no administrative tools, the forts and ceremonial buildings of the previous period being dismissed as no longer in line with a new social and political order.

The turning point from a process towards statehood to a process of re-tribalization is clearly the destruction of the Assyrian empire. On the motivations of such turning point we have no explicit data, but we can advance some hypotheses. It seems clear to me that the Median *élites* living in the “manors” along the trade routes could have been happy with their relationships to Assyria, providing them with additional wealth and power — while the pastoralists living in the highland villages and hamlets could have suffered most of the negative effects of the repeated attacks by the warlike and aggressive empire of the Mesopotamian plains. We can suspect some difference in strategies, or at least in feelings, in the various social groups inside the Median people, and we have to assume that at some point the strategy of reaction and vengeance got the upper hand on the strategy of interaction and profit.

The enraged fury of the mountaineers that annihilated the Assyrian empire left space to fifty years of freedom on the Zagros highlands. Such a “revolution” could have left some traces in the Iranian traditions, and I will repeat here a suggestion that I have already advanced on the occasion of another conference (Liverani 2001, 374-377), by introducing in our debate the foundation legend of the Kurdish people, celebrated every year in their Nowruz (New Year) festival. As well known, the modern Kurds pretend to be descendants of the ancient Medes.

The legend says that there was once a despotic and “satanic” king, Zohak by name, suffering from two tumours (in the shape of snakes) on his shoulders, and used to treat them with the daily application of two children’s brains. The vizier in charge of the affair took pity on the children and let them (actually one out of two, every day) fly to the mountains, providing the king with a sheep brain instead. On the mountains, the children increased in number and gave origin to the Kurdish people.

28. In the Bisutun inscription (I quote from Kent 1953), Darius uses many times the expression “both in Persia and in Media and in the other provinces” (§§ 10, 11, 12, 14, etc.), but when listing his countries Persia is followed always by Elam (§§ 6, 21, 52), not by Media.

Down in the city, Zohak continued his tyrannic rule, until a smith, Kawa by name, exasperated by the execution of his nine sons by the tyrant, decided not to tolerate any longer, and to react. He hoisted his working apron like a flag, summoned from the mountains the escaped children, and all together they attacked the royal palace, put fire on it, and killed the tyrant in its ruins. This happened on March 21, which is the date of the Nowruz, in 612 BC, which is the date of the Median entrance into history, by their destruction of Nineveh.

The historical background of such a foundation legend is highly problematic, of course, since the identification of Medes and Kurds seems more literary than popular, and the precise dating of the event to 612 BC must depend on modern rediscovery of the Babylonian chronicle on the fall of Nineveh (which has been published in 1923). Moreover, the story is just a variant of a well-known chapter in the Persian national epos, as made famous by Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, relating the despotic reign of the monster Zohak (Dahhak) and his defeat by Faridun (Yarshater 1983, 426-429). Yet the story of Zohak and the escaped children is already connected with the origin of the Kurds at least since Mas'udi historical work, written in 943. The most detailed treatment of the "foundation legend" of the Kurds is then recorded in the *Sharafnameh*, a Persian epic of the late 16th century, well before any modern knowledge about the Median destruction of the Assyrian empire.<sup>29</sup>

Above all, the Kurdish legend is able to evoke the secular struggle between city and highlands, between empire and mountain tribes, the mountaineers' desire for revolt and vengeance against the oppressive rule of the imperial palace, the persistent dream about a spring during which the oppressed people will finally come down from their refuges, punish the tyrant and proclaim freedom. Such might have been the feelings of the Median tribes when they descended from the mountains in order to fight against the "empire of evil". On the other hand, it is not impossible that a decisive event like the destruction of the Assyrian empire left some traces in the Iranian legendary corpus.

A final question could be asked at this point, even though the answer is not easy at all. The question is: was the enraged, destructive action of the mountain tribes against the "empire of evil" connected to—or motivated by—some early stage of Mazdean religious ideology,<sup>30</sup> or even to the very start of Zoroaster's preaching? This is hard to say, in the lack of appropriate records: but it could explain why the role of the Medes was acknowledged as quite peculiar by the later Achaemenid rulers. And the traditional (or "low") dates for Zoroaster's "revelation" either 300 or 258 years before the collapse of the Persian empire in 330 BC (lastly Gnoli 2000) would take us to a date in 630 or in 588 BC, *i.e.* slightly before or slightly after the destruction of the Assyrian empire. In the first case Zoroaster's religious revolution could have been a cause, in the second case an issue, of the socio-political upheaval. In any case it is a remarkable fact that two lines of research completely unconnected to each other—one based on later Iranian and Classical traditions, one based on contemporary Assyrian sources—both arrive at fixing a pivotal and "revolutionary" period in Iranian history in the period ca. 620-550, the period of the Median hegemony and of Zoroaster's life (618-541 is the final choice by Gnoli 2000, 165).

29. Edited by Charmoy 1868, 16-17 (Ma'sudi version of the legend), 32-33 and 343-345 (comments on the *Sharafnameh* version); 1870, 25-27 and 208-209 (translation of the pertinent passage).

30. The social (we could say "populistic") aspects of Mazdean ideology are not denied by Gnoli 1980, 187 and 228, although considered as a side aspect of a "revolution" that was basically religious and ethical.