

Media (Old Persian *Mâda*): old, tribal kingdom in the west of modern Iran; capital Ecbatana (modern Hamadan).

Media poses a problem to the scholar who tries to describe this ancient empire: the evidence is unreliable. It consists of the archaeological record, several references in Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform texts, the Persian Behistun inscription, the *Histories* by the Greek researcher Herodotus of Halicarnassus, the *Persian history* by Ctesias of Cnidus, and a couple of chapters in the Bible. The trouble is that the archaeological record is unclear, that the oriental texts offer not much information, that the Greek authors are unreliable, and that several Biblical books appear to have been influenced by Herodotus. But let's start with a description of the landscape itself.

## The country

Although the boundaries of Media were never completely fixed, it is more or less identical to the northwest of modern Iran. Its capital Ecbatana is modern Hamadan; its western part is dominated by the Zagros mountains and border on Assyria; to the south are Elam and Persis; in the arid east, the Caspian Gate is the boundary with Parthia; and Media is separated from the Caspian Sea and Armenia by the Elburz mountains.

The country was (and is) dominated by the east-west route that was, in the Middle Ages, known as the Silk road; it connected Media to Babylonia, Assyria, Armenia, and the Mediterranean in the west, and to Parthia, Aria, Bactria, Sogdia, and China in the east. Another important road connected Ecbatana with the capitals of Persis, like Persepolis and Pasargadae.

Media controlled the east-west trade, but was also rich in agricultural products. The valleys and plains in the Zagros are fertile, and Media was well-known for clover (which is still called *medicago*), sheep, goats, and the horses of the Nisaeen plain. The country could support a large population and boasted many villages and a few cities (Ecbatana, Rhagae, Gabae). The Greek author Polybius of Megalopolis correctly calls it the most powerful of all Asian countries, and it was generally recognized as one of the most important parts of the Seleucid and Parthian Empires.

## Early history

Media is archaeologically poorly understood. Often, researchers have simply called those objects Median that were discovered under the stratum they had identified as Achaemenid. It would have been helpful if we could establish that certain types of archaeological remains (like house forms, ornaments, pottery, and burial rites) in the entire area of Media constantly recurred together, but until now this definition of a material culture has not been possible.

Still, it is reasonably clear that in the first quarter of the first millennium, nomadic cattle-herders speaking an Indo-Iranian language infiltrated the Zagros and settled among the native population. (The language of the newcomers can be reconstructed from loan words, personal names and toponyms.) The tribal warriors are mentioned for the first time in the Assyrian *Annals* as enemies of Šalmaneser III (858-824). <sup>KUR</sup>*Ma-da-a* ("the land of the Medes") included the Zagros, "bordered on the salt desert" and "continued as far as the edge of Mount Bikni" (i.e., Mount Damavand, east of Tehran); its inhabitants were divided into several smaller clans, and although the Assyrian kings were able to subdue several of them, they never conquered all of Media.

In fact, it is likely that the Assyrians were themselves responsible for the unification of the Median tribes. The repeated Assyrian attacks forced the various inhabitants of the Zagros and the country beyond to

cooperate and develop more effective leadership. The Assyrians also appreciated products from the east, like Bactrian lapis lazuli, and the east-west route through Media became increasingly important. Tribal chiefs along the road could make substantial profits if only they were willing to give up their nomadic way of life and settle in more permanent residences. Trade may explain the rise of Ecbatana (*Hâgmatâna*, 'gathering place') as the central town of Media, and may have been the trigger that started the process of unification. Other towns that may have grown as a response to the demands of the Assyrian market are Hasanlu and Ziwiye in the northwest. Tepe Nush-e Jan appears to have been a fortified sanctuary. Another early settlement is Godin Tepe.

## Empire?

If we are to believe Herodotus, Media was unified by a man named Deioces, the first of four kings who were to rule a true empire that included large parts of Iran and eastern Anatolia. Their names sound convincingly Median: a Daiaukku and a Uxsatar (Deioces and Cyaxares) are mentioned in texts from the eighth century. Using the number of regnal years mentioned by the Greek researcher and counting backward from the year in which the last Median leader (who is mentioned in the Babylonian *Nabonidus Chronicle*) lost his throne, we obtain this list:

Deioces	53 years	700/699 to 647/646
Phraortes	22 years	647/646 to 625/624
<u>Cyaxares</u>	40 years	625/624 to 585/584
<u>Astyages</u>	35 years	585/584 to 550/549

Unfortunately, there are several problems. In the first place, Ctesias offers another list of kings. Secondly, there is something wrong with the chronology: the Daiaukku and Uxsatar mentioned above lived in c.715. Even worse, Daiaukku lived near Lake Urmia, not in Ecbatana. Besides, the story of Deioces looks suspiciously like a myth or saga about the origins of civilization. Finally, Herodotus' figures are suspect:  $(53+22) + (40+35) = 75+75 = 150$  years. There is no need to doubt the existence of the two last rulers, who are also mentioned in Babylonian texts, but we may ask what kind of leaders they have been.

One clue is a little list that Herodotus inserted in his *Histories*, in which he states that Deioces "united the Medes and was ruler of the tribes which here follow, namely, the Busae, Paretaceni, Struchates, Arizantians, Budians, and Magians" (1.102). But was Deioces the *only* leader to unite several tribes? It is not a strange or novel idea to interpret the various personal names we have as an indication of a fluid, still developing central leadership.

Herodotus' list can be seen as an attempt to create order in a confused oral tradition about earlier leaders; his description of Median history probably projects back aspects of the later, Achaemenid empire upon a loose tribal federation. He took the stories told by his Persian informers about the early history of Iran a bit too literally. Which does not mean that the leaders of tribal federations were not capable of exercising great political influence.

Although an Arbaces may have united several Median tribes too, Cyaxares and Astyages are generally recognized as the two last rulers of the federation of tribes. According to the *Fall of Nineveh Chronicle*, Cyaxares (called *Umakištar*) destroyed the Assyrian religious center Aššur in the summer of 614:

The Medes went along the Tigris and encamped against Aššur. They did battle against the city and destroyed it. They inflicted a terrible defeat upon a great people, plundered and sacked them. The king of Babylonia and his army, who had gone to help the Medes, did not reach the battle in time.

From this moment on, Cyaxares and the Babylonian king Nabopolassar joined forces, and two years later, the Assyrian capital Nineveh was captured by the allies:

The king of Babylonia and Cyaxares [...] encamped against Nineveh. From the month Simanu [May/June] until the month Abu [July/August] -for three months- they subjected the city to a heavy siege. On the [lacuna] day of the month Abu they inflicted a major defeat upon a great people. At that time Sin-šar-iškun, king of Assyria, died. They carried off the vast booty of the city and the temple and turned the city into a ruin heap. [...] On the twentieth day of the month Ulûlu [10 August 612] Cyaxares and his army went home. This proves that Cyaxares was more than just a tribal chief: he was a real king, capable of building an army that was strong enough to capture a city. Probably, the Persians, Armenians, Parthians, and Arians all paid tribute to the Medes. In other words, he controlled a large part of the Silk Road and had expanded his realm to Persis and Armenia, which appears to have been brought in submission after 609 and probably before 605.

Cyaxares' latest recorded act is the battle of the Halys, which he fought against the Lydian king Alyattes and can be dated to 30 May 585 BCE. This and the capture of Aššur in 614 fit within Herodotus' framework, which gives 40 and 35 years to the two last kings, but it is remarkable that Cyaxares was still firmly in charge in 585/584, and had been succeeded by Astyages in 584/583.

About the reign of Astyages, Herodotus tells an oriental fairy tale, which explains why he lost the throne. However, although the story may be more charming than reliable, the fact that Astyages lost his kingdom is confirmed by the *Chronicle of Nabonidus*, where we read that in the sixth year of the Babylonian king Nabonidus (550/549)

king Astyages called up his troops and marched against Cyrus, king of Anšan [*i.e.*, *Persia*], in order to meet him in battle. The army of Astyages revolted against him and delivered him in fetters to Cyrus. Cyrus marched against the country Ecbatana; the royal residence he seized; silver, gold, other valuables of the country Ecbatana he took as booty and brought to Anšan.

It is possible that the rise of Persia and the demise of Media had deeper, economic causes. It seems that in the mid-sixth century, qanats were dug in Persis, which gave this part of Iran a competitive advantage compared to Media. However, dating the villages near qanats is not easy, and it may be that this development in fact postdates Cyrus' victory.

Anyhow, Cyrus took over the loosely organized Median empire, including several subject countries: Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, and perhaps Aria. They were probably ruled by vassal kings called satraps. In 547, Cyrus added Lydia to his possessions, a state that had among its vassals the Greek and Carian towns in the west and southwest of what is now Turkey.

Eight years later, he captured Babylon, and Cyrus understood that cities were not only there to be looted by nomads -as Cyaxares had done with Nineveh- but could be integrated in an empire. The Persian king also founded a city of his own, Pasargadae, and it is not exaggerated to say that the evolution from tribal society to early state that had started in Media, reached its conclusion in Persis.

The evidence from Daniel

In the Biblical book *Daniel*, we encounter a famous summary of the history of the ancient Near East: the vision of the four beasts (text), which all represent an eastern monarchy that dominated the sacred city of Babylon.

1. The lion with eagle's wings: the Babylonian empire (which existed until 539 BCE). The image is well chosen, because animals like these were depicted in Babylonian art.
2. The bear: the Median empire.
3. The four-headed leopard with fowl's wings: the Achaemenid empire (539-330).
4. The ten-horned beast with iron teeth: the empire of Alexander the Great (336-323). Alexander was often depicted with the ram's horns of his divine father Ammon.

There is little doubt about this interpretation, but there is one problem: the Medes were only an important world empire in the *Histories* of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, who is also the first author to ignore the difference between Assyria and Babylonia. Elsewhere, the author of *Daniel* makes a king with the strange name "Darius the Mede" conquer Babylon. As we have already seen, the "real" Medes were a tribal federation and never captured Babylon. It is very likely that the author of *Daniel*, who wrote in c.165 BCE, was influenced by the Greek view of history, and gave the Medes more importance than they deserved.

## Media in the Behistun Inscription

However this may be, after 550/549 Media was part of the empire of Cyrus the Great. There must have been resentments against the new rulers, and the Medes revolted when Cyrus' son and successor Cambyses had died in 522. He was succeeded by his brother Bardiya, the *Smerdis* of the Greek sources, who announced that the provinces were for three years released from their obligation to pay tribute and took the Median citadel Sikayauvatiš as his residence.

This caused great indignation among the Persian elite, and a distant relative of Bardiya named Darius, together with six conspirators, assassinated the new king. Darius' own story can be read in the Behistun inscription and is also known from Herodotus' *Histories*. Both men agree that the man who had been killed was not the lawful ruler Bardiya, but his double, a Magian named Gaumâta. As the "Magians" were not only a group of religious specialists, but also a Median tribe, and the killed man's policy seemed to favor Media, Darius may be right.

Whatever Bardiya/Gaumâta's identity, his death meant the beginning of several revolts. In Babylonia, a man named Nidintu-Bêl proclaimed himself king, and when Darius had gone to Babylon, a new rebel leader stood up in Media, Phraortes, who descended from one of the Median kings of old, Cyaxares, and gained support in Sagartia, Parthia and Hyrkania. There were also insurrections in Armenia, Elam, and Persis.

It looked like a formidable revolt, but Phraortes was defeated by the Persian general Hydarnes on 12 January 521. It was not a decisive Persian victory, however, and Phraortes managed to stand his ground during the winter, until Darius took charge of the war personally: on 8 May, he defeated the Medians near Kunduruš, which seems to have been the ancient name of modern Kangavar. The Persian victory was complete, and while Darius sacked Ecbatana, Phraortes fled to Rhagae (modern Tehrân), where he was intercepted; the rebel king was crucified in his former capital.

A Sagartian named Tritantaechmes, who also claimed to descend from the Median leader Cyaxares continued the rebellion, but was defeated by Darius' Median general Takhmaspâda. This rebel was crucified in Arbela.

This was the end of the latest Median insurrection. It seems that the Medes now acquiesced in the rule of their Persian overlord. They had a special position in the Achaemenid Empire, belonging to the elite. Ecbatana was one of Darius' residences, and in another capital, Persepolis, the Medes are often depicted as equals of the Persians. In the Biblical book Esther, the two nations are juxtaposed in the famous expression "laws of Medes and Persians". In Greek, the names of the two Iranian nations were used as synonyms: the conflict we know as "Persian war", was known to the Greeks as "Median war".

## Later history

In the first years after the coup of Darius, the Persian general Hydarnes was satrap of Media. After this, the country more or less disappears from sight. The cuneiform archives of Babylon are less informative after 484 (which may have something to do with the repression of the revolt of Šamaš-eriba); there are no Assyrian archives; the Persepolis fortification tablets do not reach beyond 493; Herodotus' story ends in 479; other Greek authors (e.g., Ctesias of Cnidus, Xenophon) ignored Media; and -finally- of all Achaemenid kings, only Darius left a historical inscription.

Archaeological research is not easy, too. We know that Ecbatana was an important city in the Persian age, but not many excavations have been conducted. The Achaemenid kings Darius II Nothus (424-404) and Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-358) have left inscriptions that prove that they were interested in this residence, but this is about everything we know.

Media becomes visible again during the war between the Macedonian king Alexander the Great and his ill-fated Persian opponent Darius III Codomannus. After the latter's defeat at Gaugamela (331), he tried to reassemble an army at Ecbatana, but in the spring of 330, he was forced to retreat to the east, and was murdered. Alexander initially left control of Media, which was strategically important as it controlled the Macedonian lines of contact, to his trusted general Parmenion, who, however, was assassinated when Alexander became suspicious of his son Philotas.

It is known that Parmenion and -later- two other Macedonian officers, Sitalces and Cleander, attacked native Zoroastrian sanctuaries. In 325, a local leader named Baryaxes revolted against the new rulers, but his rebellion was suppressed by Alexander's satrap of Media, Atropates. To restore order, he also had to charge the two officers, who were indeed convicted by Alexander and eventually executed.

After the death of Alexander in 323, Atropates was removed from office and replaced by a man named Peithon, but he was able to keep the northern part of Media, which was called Atropatene. (Today, Atropates' name lives on in the name Âzarbayjân, a province in the north of modern Iran that is not to be confused with the former Soviet republic with the same name.) Media Atropatene became one of the main centers of Zoroastrianism.

After the wars of the Diadochi, Media became part of the empire of Seleucus I Nicator, which included parts of Anatolia and Syria, all of Mesopotamia, and the Iranian platform. This meant that Media continued to be of the greatest importance: it was quite simply the heart of the Seleucid Empire, as it had been the core of the Achaemenid empire. There are monuments from this period along the Silk Road (like the charming reclining Heracles at Behistun) and elsewhere.

In the course of the second half of the third century, the Parni nomads began to infiltrate Parthia, east of Media, and started to act increasingly independently, calling themselves after the region they had just

conquered. The Parthian king Mithradates I the Great (171-138 BCE) was able to conquer Media and, having gained this strategically important satrapy, crossed the Zagros and proceeded to conquer all of Mesopotamia.

For centuries, Media was the center of the Parthian Empire: even though its capitals were at Hecatompylos in Parthia and Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, the kings always had to pass through Media, and we know of Parthian building activities at Ecbatana. Other monuments are known from Kangavar and Behistun.