



CHAPTER 22

ASSYRIA AND THE MEDES

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INTRODUCTION

Western Iran has a long history of contacts with Mesopotamia. Continual Assyrian involvement in the Zagros and beyond is attested only from the second half of the ninth century BC onward. This is a consequence of the kingdom of Urartu emerging as the overlord of eastern Anatolia, which had immediate political and economic consequences for Assyria. Being cut off from its traditional horse supplies endangered Assyria's military power directly but also threatened to limit its political weight in the wider region.

Assyria reacted to this threat by turning its attention toward Western Iran. First, the incursion into the Zagros were raids undertaken with no view of establishing permanent control and primarily intended to capture horses (Radner 2003: 38–43). From the mid-eighth century onward, however, this changed to territorial conquest after the political rivalry between Assyria and Urartu had shifted to the east and increasingly concerned access to, and territorial control of, the ancient overland trade route known as the Great Khorasan Road. It is that part of the Silk Route that leads from the plains of Mesopotamia along the Diyala headwaters into the Zagros mountain range and onto the Iranian plateau.

This chapter is a survey of the Assyrian presence in Iran, with a particular focus on the empire's interaction with the Medes. In addition to the relevant historical documents, we will discuss sites in Iran that offer evidence for Assyrian and/or Median occupation in the eighth and seventh centuries BC.



THE FIRST ASSYRIAN PROVINCES IN IRAN: BIT-HAMBAN AND PARSUA

During their excursions into the east, the Assyrians often encountered evidence of previous cultural contacts with Mesopotamia: for example, the city of Silhazi was also known under the name “Fortress of the Babylonian” and there was a temple for Marduk at the city of Til-Aššurī, whose name means “ruin mound of the Assyrians” (Kroll and Radner 2006: 221). The usual route from central Assyria led through the province of Mazamua (established in 842 BC; Radner 2008: 51–2, no. 22), which corresponded to the Shahrizor plain in the Iraqi province of Sulaimaniyah. The city of Dur-Aššur (Bakr Awa near Halabja; Miglus et al. 2011), conquered and renamed (from Atlila) by Assurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 BC), constituted Assyria’s most important gateway into the east and fulfilled the function of a gathering point for the army before they set off into the Zagros, until the reign of Assurbanipal (r. 668–c.627 BC; Borger 1996: 220: Prism B III 21–2 and parallels).

While there was always an awareness of the long shared history of the regions on both sides of the Zagros range (cf. Reade 1978; Abdi and Beckman 2007), the political and cultural contacts gained significantly in depth and focus when Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (r. 744–726 BC) established as the result of his very first military campaign in 744 BC two provinces in Iran, Parsua and Bit-Hamban (Radner 2003: 44, 49–50, 57). For the first time in its history, Assyria directly controlled territory situated on the eastern slopes of the Zagros and along the Iranian part of the Silk Road.

The province of Parsua was situated in the northeastern headwaters of the Diyala (= Ab-e Sirwan), in the region of modern Sanandaj in the Kordestan province (Zadok 2001). Its capital was Nikkur (Radner 2003: 57) but the location of that city is unknown. Parsua adjoined Mazamua and the boundary between these two Assyrian provinces coincides roughly with the modern border between Iraq and Iran. Parsua shared its northern border with the kingdom of Mannea (south of Lake Urmiya, with Qalaichi Tepe near Bukan as one of its centers: Hassanzadeh and Mollasalehi 2011) while Tiglath-pileser’s second Iranian province Bit-Hamban, with the capital of the same name (Radner 2003: 57), was situated to the south of Parsua in the region of Kermanshah (Reade 1978: 138–9) along the main route of the Great Khorasan Road.

The governor of Mazamua, Aššur-da’nanni (year eponym in 733 BC), was tasked with supporting the newly established provincial administrations of Parsua and Bit-Hamban. He was specifically charged with monitoring and controlling the Medes, who were Assyria’s new neighbors in the east. This is clear from one of his letters to the king (NL 100; Luukko in press: no. 90) but especially from the fact that he led the campaign “against the mighty Medes of the rising sun” (Tadmor and Yamada 2011: nos. 41: 13’–15’ and 47: 42) in 737 BC. This expedition brought the Assyrian forces into Median territories as far east as Mount Bikni: if this is indeed the Demavend range just north of Tehran (Reade 1995: 40), then only this mountain ridge separated the Assyrian troops from reaching the Caspian Sea. Unlike the war of conquest in 744, this second campaign

had the character of a reconnaissance mission, undertaken in order to gather knowledge and make new contacts in the east.

According to the Assyrian sources from Tiglath-pileser III onward, both in royal inscriptions and archival documents, the Medes were politically organized in small principalities led by a hereditary ruler called “city lord” (*bēl āli*), highlighting the limited geographical influence they exercised (Lanfranchi 2003: 92–6); while all Median states encountered by the Assyrians are said to be controlled by a city lord, this political setup is not exclusive to the Medes but shared by other small states along the Great Khorasan Road such as in Namri, Bit-Sangibuti and Bit-Abdadani (Radner 2003: 49–50). The local rulers entered vassal treaties with the Assyrian king which gave them protection—against the empire’s aggression but also against other powerful territorial states such as Mannea and Urartu—in return for their loyalty in war and peace and regular tribute payments, which were expected in the form of horses (unlike Assyria’s vassals elsewhere, whose tribute was calculated in metal moneys).

The army’s horse supplies were now secured, but maintaining control over the new provinces was more than anything a diplomatic challenge, as the region’s political geography was as complex and difficult to navigate as the physical environment.

MEDIAN CENTERS TURNED ASSYRIAN STRONGHOLDS: KIŠESSIM AND HARHAR

In 719 BC, Sargon II became actively involved in the succession war that tore apart the vassal kingdom of Mannea and threatened to destabilize the entire Zagros region: in Mannea and in several Iranian principalities, rulers who were allied with the empire were forcefully replaced by men actively promoting an anti-Assyrian agenda (Radner 2003: 50). The ensuing military engagement led to a permanent Assyrian presence east of Parsua and Bit-Hamban and to the establishment of two further provinces in what is today the province of Hamadan. After the conquest of the city of Kišessim, it was renamed Kar-Nergal (“trading quay of the god Nergal”) and made the center of a new Assyrian province that included the territories of six other rulers. One of these principalities was Bit-Sagbat which had already once before, a century earlier around 820 BC, found the attention of an Assyrian king when Šamši-Adad V (r. 823–811 BC) plundered “Sagbita, the royal city of Hanaširuka the Mede” (Grayson 1996: A.0.103.1 iii 35). This place has been identified with reasonable certainty with Ecbatana, modern Hamadan (Medvedskaya 2002), famous as the capital of what Herodotus described as a Median territorial state. To commemorate his conquests, Sargon had a stele set up at Kišessim which has survived on the site and therefore allows us to identify this Median city with the tell of Najafehabad, a village in the valley of Asadabad in Hamadan province (find circumstances: Levine 1972: 25; Gopnik 2011: 292–3; I follow Reade 1995: 39 in assuming that the stele cannot have been moved far due to its weight).

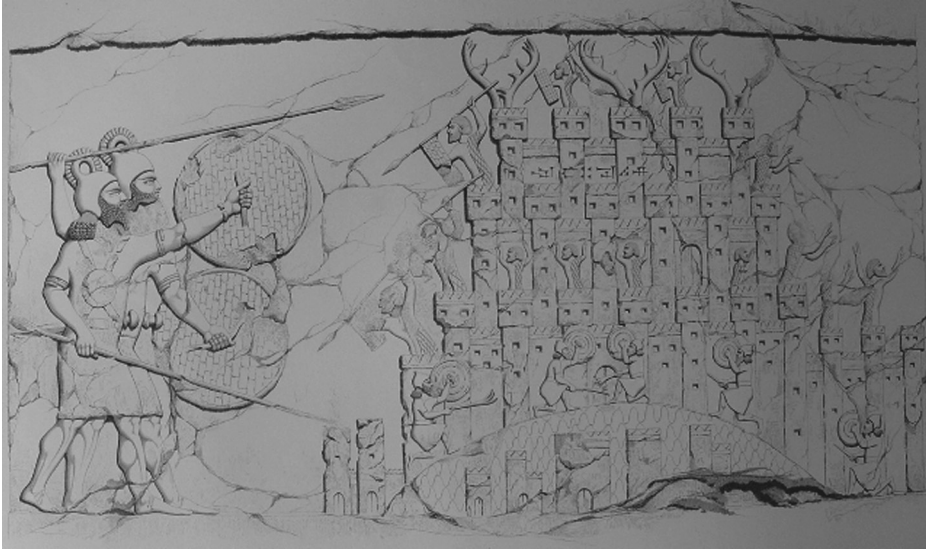


FIGURE 22.1 The Median fortress of Kišessim as depicted in Room 2 of Sargon II's palace at Dur-Šarrukin (mod. Khorsabad). Reproduced from P.-E. Botta and P. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, vol. 1, Paris, 1849, pl. 68bis.

The site of Najafehabad ($34^{\circ}46'59''$ N, $48^{\circ}04'55''$ E) has never seen systematic excavations and it is therefore impossible to check the accuracy of the depiction that Sargon's stone masons created of the city (Fig. 22.1) as part of the wall decoration for his palace of Dur-Šarrukin (Albenda 1986: pls. 125–6). Identified by name, Kišessim is shown as a strongly fortified city with three rings of walls, all equipped with towers at regular intervals, protecting the upper town on the settlement mound, and a single wall with heavily fortified gates and towers surrounding the lower town in the plain. The topmost fortifications are decorated with pairs of deer antlers. Satellite imagery of Najafehabad as available on Google Earth (dated 5/7/2007) certainly suggests that the tell (180×120 m) houses the ruins of a very substantial upper town, with the contours of the mound suggesting the triple fortification lines indicated by the Assyrian depiction, and the oval lower town (600×300 m) is clearly discernable in the surroundings of the tell. Judging from the satellite image, only a few modern houses would seem to encroach onto the northern part of the lower town but as the villagers dig tunnels deep into the mound in order to stable their sheep and goats in winter (Gopnik 2011: 293) the site is likely to be less well preserved than the satellite image would suggest. Nevertheless, excavating at Najafehabad would most certainly reveal the remains of one of the most important Median centers of the eighth century BC and the subsequent Assyrian provincial capital city of Kar-Nergal.

Sargon's troops continued their march to the Median stronghold of Harhar, which had been for the past four years in open contempt of an earlier treaty with Assyria by withholding the tribute after dethroning the pro-Assyrian city lord Kibaba. The city was

taken and renamed Kar-Šarrukin, “Sargon’s trading quay.” It was made the capital of a second new province that was made up of Harhar’s territories and those of six other Median cities that had hitherto been under the ruler of their own city lords (Radner 2003: 50).

Harhar has been traditionally identified with a city *Kar(a)har of the Ur III and Old Babylonian sources, but this reading has now been abolished in favor of Karakina (Wilcke 2006) and there is now even less reason to seek Harhar’s location near Kermanshah, as advocated, for example, by Levine (1975: 120; 1990: 258; also Radner 2008: 57, to be corrected). Geographical considerations instead favor a location further east in the area of Nehavand and Malayer. The best candidate is Tepe Giyan, where remains of a fortified palatial building with distinctive Assyrian architectural elements, such as the typical decorated door-socket capstones, were excavated in Level I on the settlement mound (Ghirshman 1951: 72, 78; Reade 1995: 39–40 and pl. II). This is most likely the seat of the Assyrian provincial administration, the construction of which is discussed in some letters from the correspondence of Sargon II (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: nos. 84, 94). Tepe Giyan is located in the Nehavand valley in Hamadan province, 12 km west of the modern town of Nehavand (34°10′53″ N, 48°14′38″ E). When the French excavations started in 1931, the substantial tell covered an area of 350 × 150 m and rose 19 m above the surrounding area but, during a visit in 2002, the present author found the high mound to be very badly disturbed. The results of the work undertaken in 2003 by a team led by Mehrdad Malekzadeh of Tarbiat Modares University (Tehran) have not yet been published. A lower town is attested in a letter to Sargon II mentioning building work on the “outer city wall” (*dūru ša kidāni*), parts of which needed to be accessed by boat for plastering (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: no. 94). This indicates that the city wall ran along the creek to the west of the high mound. Other than that, however, the intensive cultivation of the region and the modern settlement to the south of the tell make it difficult to trace the perimeter of this lower town.

Like Kišessim and some other Median fortresses, Harhar is depicted on the wall decoration for Sargon’s palace at Dur-Šarrukin (Albenda 1986: pl. 112). Identified by name, a strongly fortified city is shown (Fig. 22.2) alongside a narrow river, which runs next to the outer wall (shown without towers)—this matches well the evidence of the Assyrian letter. A single inner wall, with two gates and towers at regular intervals, encircles the high settlement mound whose buildings are illustrated in considerable detail: in addition to a tree, there is a high-rising pillared structure and five tower-like buildings in different sizes. The biggest one is in part supported by a terrace built into the flank of the hill. A fire is burning on the roofs of this building and of the two others situated prominently at the top of the mound, possibly indicating the presence of fire temples comparable to that excavated at Nush-i Jan (see below).

The task of liaising with the new provinces in Iran fell again to the governor of Mazamua whose correspondence with Sargon concerns Bit-Hamban and Parsua and now also Kar-Nergal/Kišessim and Kar-Šarrukin/Harhar (Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990: nos. 199, 207, 226; Fuchs and Parpola 2001: no. 100). The distance from Mazamua (in or near modern Sulaymaniyah) to Harhar (Tepe Giyan) is 300 km as the crow flies,



FIGURE 22.2 The Median fortress of Harhar as depicted in Room 2 of Sargon II's palace in Dur-Šarrukin (mod. Khorsabad). Reproduced from P.-E. Botta and P. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, vol. 1, Paris, 1849, pl. 55 (detail).

which although still considerable, is of course significantly shorter than the distance of 525 km that separates Harhar from the region of modern Mosul where Dur-Šarrukin and Nineveh are situated.

Besides Najafehabad and Tepe Giyan, one other site in Iran has long been rumored to have yielded substantial Assyrian remains. This is Chogha Gavaneh, the settlement mound of Islamabad-e Gharb (formerly Shahabad) in Kermanshah province. However, the Akkadian cuneiform tablets unearthed in 1970 in a palatial building turned out to be from the early second millennium BC (Abdi and Beckman 2007) rather than Neo-Assyrian as previously reported (Kordevani 1971). While it is of course perfectly possible that this substantial but, due to its urban location, very badly damaged site was inhabited in the early first millennium there is at present no pressing reason to assume that there is an Assyrian occupation.

A FAMILY OF MEDES AT ASSUR

The situation in the two provinces Kar-Šarrukin and Kar-Nergal, which Sargon established in 716, was initially far from stable. This emerges very clearly from the king's correspondence with his governors and vassals in the area. For one, the Assyrian administration suffered from the effects of the unfamiliar and unforgiving weather conditions which slowed down building up the necessary infrastructure (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: nos. 85, 98, 100), and the twin horrors of snow and cold often cut off the new provinces from communication with central Assyria (e.g., Fuchs and Parpola 2001: no. 83). But local insurgence was the most pressing problem. Already in 715, the new provinces rose

in rebellion on a scale that the local Assyrian officials were unable to contain. The imperial army had to return in order to regain control. The ensuing fighting was bloody and resulted, according to the inscriptions of Sargon II (Fuchs 1994: 108–9, 319: Khorsabad Annals 109–15; 210–11, 346–7: display inscription 64–5), in 4000 enemy warriors losing their heads and in the deportation of 4820 persons from the region. Some of them were brought to the city of Assur where people from Harhar and Hundir, the hinterland of Kišessim, are attested from the reign of Sargon II onward.

One extended family from Hundir lived in the residential quarter situated within the monumental gateway leading into the northwestern part of Assur. The remains of their two adjoining houses were excavated and found reasonably well preserved as they were buried under the debris of the adjoining city wall, which collapsed at some point after Assur was conquered in 614 BC (Miglus 1999: 301: Haus 65 and Haus 66). The houses and especially the family's archive found there give us insight into the household and its social and economic standing, especially in the later seventh century BC (Åkerman 1999–2001). This was a well-to-do family with members of three generations and their servants living together in two sizable, well-constructed houses of a surface of 240 and 320 m². Unlike the Egyptians who came to Assur in 671, after Esarhaddon's conquest of Memphis and Thebes, and whose distinct cultural heritage, including names, deities, and material culture, is apparent in the surviving sources of the late seventh century, the Iranian deportees—who of course had arrived at Assur already two generations earlier—seem to have adopted an Assyrian lifestyle by that time: nothing recognizably Iranian was found in the remains of their houses and by then, the whole family used Assyrian names.

The men of the family held positions at the Aššur temple (as did most of the city's notables) since the reign of Sargon II but as their profession was called "Hundurean," after their place of origin, it is not immediately obvious to us what their actual occupation was. They worked with a certain type of textile (*massuku*), which Soden (1972: 619) tentatively—but unaware of the geographical connection with Iran—identified as a rug. If this is correct then we may perhaps credit these deportees from Western Iran with introducing to central Assyria the art of hand-knotting carpets with a pile, the oldest surviving examples of which are known from the fifth century BC burials of Pazyryk (Rudenko 1970). The family was also involved in overland trade (Radner 2007); the destination for their caravans is not mentioned in any of the surviving documents but as caravan staff were given contracts for seven to twelve months, which were to cover both legs of the trip, it is clear that these were long-distance journeys. Given the family's origins, it is the most likely assumption that they were trading with their former homeland in Iran.

Although the surviving textual and material sources would initially seem to suggest that the Median deportees were thoroughly assimilated, maintaining their own distinct occupation (whatever its nature), whose designation invoked their native land, and also trading with the old country will have ensured that the Medes at Assur always preserved some part of their Iranian identity. Nothing in the sources informs us about their role in the Median assault on Assur or their fate after the conquest in 614. It is of course

tempting to link the swift Median success with the fact that Medes lived right next to one of the city's principal gates and were therefore in a prime position to help the besiegers enter the city. After all, it is otherwise surprising that the Medes succeeded so swiftly when the Babylonian army had failed to take Assur during its surprise attack in the previous year, especially as the city's fortifications and food reserves had been increased in anticipation of a further attack (Miglus 2000: 88–9). It is in any case clear that the Medes attacked Assur from the north and that the main assault on the city wall was staged in the close vicinity of the Hundureans' houses (at the Tabira Gate: Miglus 2000: 86–7); after the taking of the city, the ensuing lootings were centered on the northern part of the city, with its temples and palaces. But whether we see them in 614 BC as loyal Assyrian citizens or collaborators of the Median invaders, the attack of Cyaxares and his Median army (see below) happens to mark with the centennial of this family's arrival in the city of Assur as deportees from Hamadan province, 480 km to the east as the crow flies.

THE ASSYRIAN ADMINISTRATION OF THE IRANIAN PROVINCES

Let us turn our attention back to Western Iran. In all Iranian provinces, the Assyrian strategy was to maintain and strengthen the local dynasts and thereby ensure their cooperation. Rather than replacing them with Assyrian officials, a dual system was operated that established an Assyrian administration alongside the traditional local power structures, which were actively supported provided that the leaders swore allegiance to the empire (Radner 2003: 53; Lanfranchi 2003: 111–12). Despite ruling over people and areas formally considered part of the Assyrian provincial system the city lords were treated like vassal rulers and in an extraordinary concession to their influence, rather than being expected to come to central Assyria in order to pay homage and deliver tribute to the Assyrian king, the governors (and their troops) instead went out to meet with them and collected the all-important horses (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: xxviii–xxix). The loyalty oaths of the Iranian allies required more than just words and good intentions. Tiglath-pileser and his successors kept Medes and other Iranians at the royal court (Radner 2003: 44), and while these individuals will have enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle they of course served as hostages who guaranteed their communities' collaboration with their lives. Although usurpers tried on several occasions to gain political capital among the native population by agitating against the Assyrian occupation, this system proved to be successful as the local elites stood to gain much from their cooperation with the empire. Their political and economic status was enhanced, rather than damaged, by their association with the Assyrian king (Lanfranchi 2003: 116–17):

However, when the new Assyrian administrations were established in Kišessim and Harhar in 716 it took some time before the peaceful coexistence with the occupiers became the norm. As we have already heard, Sargon's army had to return to Iran in 715

to regain control over the rebelling regions. Once subdued, some of the most important Median strongholds were turned into Assyrian fortresses, sharing the fate reserved earlier only for the administrative centers Kišessim and Harhar.

One of these cities was Kišešlu, which was renamed Kar-Nabû “Trading quay of the god Nabû” after its conquest. This took place at some point before October 715 BC as we know from a clay tablet found in Assur that documents the sale of a garden Kar-Nabû on the 22nd day of the seventh month of the Assyrian calendar (Faist 2007: no. 15). The vendor is the Third Man of the chariot team of Emuq-Aššur, the Assyrian commander (*šaknu*) of Kar-Nabû, who had previously made him a present (*tidittu*) of this garden. The buyer’s name is lost but the list of witnesses provides us with information on those present when the sale was agreed. The first and therefore highest-ranking witness is Šamaš-bel-ušur, identified as an “Assyrian magnate”; he was very probably the governor of Arzuhina at the time (and certainly in 710 BC when he serves as year eponym with that title), and he and his troops were therefore part of the imperial army dispatched to Iran. As Arzuhina adjoins the province of Mazamua in the southwest, this makes good sense from a logistical point of view. Kar-Nabû’s commander Emuq-Aššur is the next witness, followed by the eunuch Tarditu-Aššur. The horse trader Ibû is listed after three witnesses without titles. Horse traders were part of the Assyrian army and oversaw the acquisition of horses for military purposes. The presence of all these witnesses makes it clear that although the document was found in Assur, the sale transaction was conducted in Western Iran, at the time the Assyrian military and administrative presence was established in Kišešlu. Replacing the treacherous local city lord as the highest-ranking official, Emuq-Aššur commanded the Assyrian garrison at Kišešlu. It is likely that the garden that he gifted to his Third Man had come into his possession when he took over from the disposed city lord. The volatile situation in Western Iran at that time may explain why the recipient of the gift would sell it on so quickly and with the explicit endorsement of Emuq-Aššur, who witnessed the sale. A professional soldier in active service will have had more use for silver in his pocket than a garden in need of regular care in order to yield fruit and profit, especially one in a war zone.

The Third Man’s decision to sell his garden proved wise. The conflicts in the new provinces did not end with the war of 715 and the Assyrian army had to return in the following two years to assert the empire’s control (Radner 2003: 53–5). But the strategy to leave the city lords locally in power, provided they accepted Assyrian sovereignty, eventually paid off and the dual system with the Assyrian provincial administration on the one hand and the local city lords on the other hand found an equilibrium that was profitable to both sides. After 713, the troubles subsided.

Kišešlu was one of six Median cities renamed by Sargon II as “Trading quay of (a god or king),” highlighting their importance in the overland trade. Sennacherib (r. 705–681) later followed his father’s example and added another case to the list, giving it his own name. Kar-Nergal (Kišessim), Kar-Šarruken (Harhar), Kar-Nabû (Kišešlu), Kar-Sin (Qindau), Kar-Adad (Anzaria), Kar-Issar (Bit-Bagaia), and Kar-Sin-ahhe-eriba (Elenzaš) were all situated along the Great Khorasan Road and must have profited enormously from the rich trade between Mesopotamia and Central Iran and beyond. One

can easily imagine how the heavily fortified strongholds, as we find them depicted in Sargon's palace, which control the narrow valleys that traverse the Zagros offered excellent opportunities to extract tolls from the passing caravans (Radner 2003: 51–2).

After observing the intensity with which Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II devoted themselves to military actions in the Zagros Mountains, we see that Sennacherib, despite being active in the area, operated only on a very low-key level compared to his predecessors. The Iranian provinces were still under Assyrian control under the reign of Esarhaddon (r. 680–669 BC) as the extant sources and especially the so-called Oracle Queries, which sought divine guidance for imperial decision making (Starr 1990: nos. 41–73), demonstrate. But while these highlight that Medes but also Cimmerians, Scythians, and others in the region were perceived as a threat against the Assyrian administration the political situation, while as ever in constant flux, was stable enough for regular tribute-collecting campaigns to be undertaken as far east as Mount Bikni (see above) and the salt desert of Dasht-e Kavir (Radner 2003: 58–61): the Assyrian sources for Esarhaddon's reign clearly indicate that, as already in the mid-eighth century BC, the region around Tehran was considered Median.

The last mention of Medes in an official Assyrian inscription dates to *c.*656 and describes how three city lords rebelled against Assurbanipal (r. 668–*c.*627 BC), only to be punished by seeing their cities sacked before being brought to Nineveh before the king (Radner 2003: 61–2). Two Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs at Shikaft-i Gulgul (33°29'28" N, 47°27'40" E; discovered 1972) and nearby Heydarabad-e Mishkhas (33°31'46" N, 46°34'24" E; discovered 2009), both situated some 30 km southwest of the modern city of Ilam (Alibaigi et al. 2012: 37, pl. 4), may date to that time; the near identical depictions show the Assyrian king with five divine symbols but the inscription that accompanies the first relief is too poorly preserved to allow a secure identification with Assurbanipal. No further Assyrian sources are available that discuss the political situation in Western Iran and would allow us to bridge the forty-year gap before we see Cyaxares leading a unified Median army into what is today northern Iraq, allying with Nabopolassar of Babylon after the sack of Assur in 614 and succeeding in bringing down the Assyrian Empire with the fall of Nineveh in 612. Let us therefore turn to the archaeological exploration of Media itself.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MEDIA

The two best-known Median sites in Iran are Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-i Jan where large-scale excavations were undertaken in 1965–1973 and 1967–1977, respectively. They share common architectural features (Gopnik 2011: 319–20) and the pottery is similar (Gopnik 2003: 253, 264).

Godin Tepe is situated in the valley of Kangavar in Kermanshah province (34°31'06" N, 48°04'06" E). In its Level II.2 phase, the top of the ancient settlement mound was taken up by an impressive fortified citadel (120 × 50 m; Fig. 22.3), which was constructed

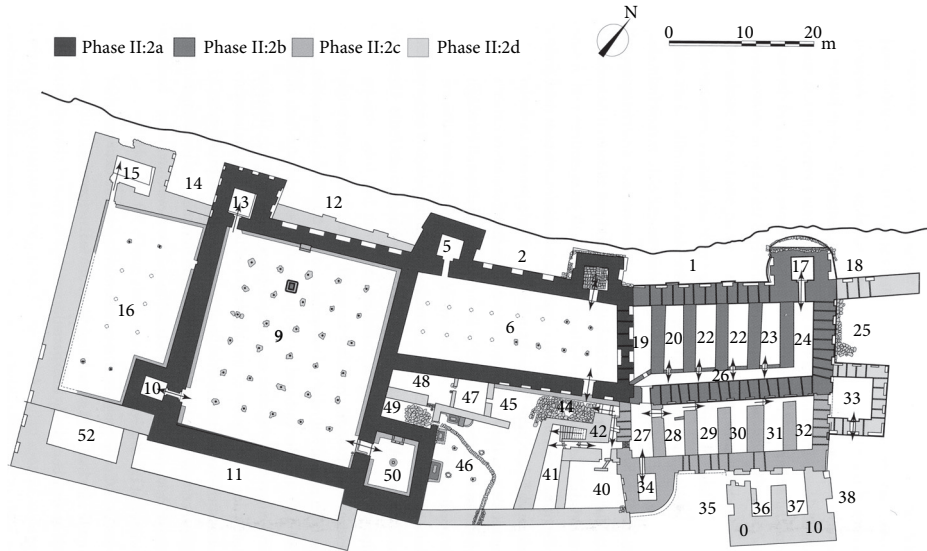


FIGURE 22.3 Plan of the citadel of Godin Tepe during building phase II: 2. Reproduced from Gopnik 2011: 304, fig. 7.7, with kind permission of Hilary Gopnik, Emory University.

in four consecutive building stages and consisted of three columned halls, an enormous kitchen with three huge hearths, and very substantial storage vaults (Gopnik 2011: 302–322). At some point in the mid-seventh century BC, as suggested by the radiocarbon analysis of charcoal excavated in the firebox of one of the kitchen hearths (Gopnik 2011: 343–5), the imposing fortress was peacefully abandoned by its inhabitants. Before that it certainly served as the seat of the Median city lord in control of the Kangavar valley but what was his territory's name?

Godin Tepe lies halfway between the Assyrian provincial capitals of Kar-Nergal/Kišessim (Najafehabad), situated further upstream of the Sarab Kangavar river, and Kar-Šarrukin/Harhar (Tepe Giyan), which is reached by following the river to its confluence with the Gamasiyab and then by tracking that river upstream. A possible candidate for identification with Godin Tepe is Araziaš (Aranzešu), which is located somewhere between Sagbita (Hamadan) and Harhar according to the Assyrian records (Grayson 1996: 68: l. 121 [Shalmaneser III, r. 858–824 BC]; 186–7: III 27–44 [Šamši-Adad V, r. 823–811 BC]; 212: l. 6 [Adad-nerari III, r. 810–783 BC]). Only from the reign of Sargon II is Araziaš explicitly designated as a Median principality controlling a region called the Upper Riverland (*nartu elitu*); it is one of the territories assigned to the new province of Harhar (Radner 2003: 50). Godin Tepe's identification with Araziaš is attractive also because the sources suggest that there was never any permanent Assyrian presence established at the site: its city lord is still attested under Esarhaddon (Starr 1990: no. 73).

Tepe Nush-e Jan lies further to the east in the valley of Malayer in Hamadan province (34°21'55" N, 48°38' E). Excavations there have yielded the extremely well-preserved ruins of a tower-like temple that was erected on the highest point of a prominent rock

outcrop and held a freestanding altar with a fire bowl (Stronach and Roaf 2007: 212). Gradually, the so-called Central Temple was surrounded by additional buildings, including a second temple, a heavily fortified structure, and a columned hall, that were with the help of walls and arches combined into a coordinated building ensemble (Stronach and Roaf 2007: 203–9). Small finds, including a hoard of silver currency, make it certain that the citadel was in use in the seventh century BC (Curtis 2005) but beyond that, establishing the absolute chronology of the site remains difficult. At some point, the citadel and its buildings were systematically filled up with stones and bricks, creating a high terrace platform which, if it was indeed intended to serve as the base of a successor to the now-entombed Central Temple, does not seem to have ever been used for that purpose (Stronach and Roaf 2007: 171–6, 216–17). Why this enormous amount of labor was undertaken in the first place remains tantalizingly unclear.

Pottery parallels with Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-e Jan in Level II of Tepe Baba Jan near Nurabad in Lorestan province (34°01'14" N, 47°56'01" E; Levine 1987: 234–5, 238) suggest the possibility that the small fortified manor excavated there (Goff 1977) may have served as the residence of a minor Median city lord.

We have already highlighted that according to the Assyrian sources, the Medes controlled the region of Tehran and this was recently confirmed by the results of the excavations of Tepe Ozbaki at Nazarabad in Tehran province (35°58'47" N, 50°35'11" E; Madjidzadeh 2001) that began in 1998. On the top of the settlement mound the ruins of a fortress came to light whose architecture and pottery finds offer close parallels to those of Godin Tepe and Tepe Nush-e Jan (Stronach 2003: 237–40), both situated at a distance of some 250 km as the crow flies: the fortress of Tepe Ozbaki is certainly a Median site and, who knows? perhaps even one of the Median principalities mentioned in the accounts of Tiglath-pileser III and Esarhaddon (Radner 2003: 49, 58–9) about their campaigns deep into the eastern territories of the Medes.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

What remains to be addressed is the elephant in the room—Herodotus' account of the early history of the Medes in the first book of the *Histories*. The Greek historian credits one Deioces with uniting the six Median tribes and thereby founding a Median empire, with Ecbatana (Hamadan, see above) as its capital; the Medes supposedly elected him to be their king, and Herodotus then traces Median history until the sixth century BC. According to Herodotus, the Median state reached as far west as the River Halys in Central Anatolia. Yet so far, contemporary evidence for a unified Median state in the eighth and seventh centuries has proven to be elusive. Excavations in sites such as Nush-e Jan, Baba Jan, and Godin Tepe support the idea of small independent states centered on fortresses controlling the region and passage through it, which emerges so clearly from the Assyrian sources. On the other hand, archaeological evidence for a unified Median state stretching from Iran to Inner Anatolia is conspicuously lacking while

the Assyrian sources fail to back up any part of Herodotus' account on the genesis of such a state. Recent scholarship therefore prefers to see Herodotus' Medikos Logos as largely fictitious and cautions against its use as a historical source for the history of the Medes (cf. Waters 2005: 517–18).

Although the Assyrian sources and the archaeological evidence emphasize the political plurality of the Median (and non-Median) principalities in Iran, the testimony of the Babylonian Chronicles leaves of course no doubt that Cyaxares conquered Assyria at the head of a Median army that stayed united under his leadership for at least six years (Grayson 1975: 90–96; Chronicle 3). Whatever led to him being recognized as the “king of the Medes” by 615 BC remains tantalizingly unclear from the available sources (Liverani 2003: 6–7) although there is a possibility that the seemingly peaceful abandonment of Godin Tepe was the result of fundamental changes in the political organization of the Medes (Gopnik 2011: 345). Some answers at least could be reasonably expected to result from further exploration of Najafehabad and Tepe Giyan, where a clearer understanding of the end of the Assyrian occupation could offer a fresh perspective on the consolidation of Cyaxares' power. But the Medes' invasion of Assyria aside, it is important to remember that even less is known about the period from 610 to 550 BC, when Cyrus of Persia successfully replaced the Median king Astyages as the overlord of Iran (Liverani 2003: 7–9; Jursa 2003: 170–71 for the scarce Babylonian sources).

Our brief survey of the interaction between Assyrians and Medes in the early first millennium BC has left us with many uncertainties and open questions surrounding a crucial period of Iranian history. Reason enough, surely, to hope for an intensification of the archaeological fieldwork to be undertaken on the settlement mounds along the Iranian stretches of the Silk Route.

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