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An Overview of Military Confrontations between of the Assyrian Army against the Medes in the 7th centuries BCE

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Abstract: *The article discusses the military confrontation between Neo-Assyrian kingdom and the Median polities in the 7th century BCE. At the beginning the outline of the history of wars between the Medes and Assyria from the 9th century onwards is presented which is followed by the brief description of the Assyrian forces of the era and detailed examination of the events until the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire. In conclusions an attempt to reconstruct possible principles of the Median warfare was made.*

Key words: the Assyrian Empire, the Medes, Iran, cavalry, chariot, military system

Introduction

The Medes were the first Iranian-speakers to play a significant role in the history of the Near East. Although their significance remains beyond any doubt, they remain mysterious ethnos. The nature of their social organization remains obscure and, in light of large and important ethnic groups dwelling large areas in the regions like the Kurds, who never created actual state but remained nevertheless culturally and politically important, their history cannot be expected to be clearly drawn. Their position between two Semitic (Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian) and an Iranian

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(Achaemenid) empires somehow induces expectation of imperial nature but that view has been successfully tackled and abolished. The clearest line which defines Median affairs was constituted by the state of affairs between Neo-Assyrian kingdom and the Medes. The relations which were rarely peaceful as relations which Assyria held with most unless all of her neighbors. This emphasizes importance of the research of the history of military confrontation between the Medes and Assyria, being actually the factor defining the Median history until their incorporation into Achaemenid state. In fact, it is justified to say that the history of wars with Assyria is in fact the actual history of the Medes. The article aims in providing an outline of the Assyrian-Median warfare from 9th to 7th century BCE with emphasize on the last century of this period. The 7th century is one of the pivotal periods in the history of the Near East, which marks appearance of the Iranian powers in the region formerly dominated by the Semitic nations and consequent shift which would lead to the period of Iranian overlordship in the region.

Sargon II and the Medes

The first recorded Assyrian encounter with the Medes was mentioned in the inscription of the so-called Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (858-824) in 835 BCE:¹

“Moving on from the land Namri. I received tribute from twenty-seven kings of the land Parsua. Moving on from the land Parsua I went down to the lands Mēsu, Media (Amadāiia), Araziaš, (and) Ḥarḥār, (and) captured the cities Kuakinda, Ḥazzanabi, Esamul, (and) Kinablila, together with the cities in their environs. I massacred them, plundered them, (and) razed, destroyed, (and) burned (those) cities. I erected my royal statue in the city Ḥarḥār.”

According to the Assyrian inscription Šamši-Adad V's (823-811)²:

“I marched to the land of the Medes. They took fright in the face of the angry weapons of Aššur and of my strong warfare, which have no rival, and abandoned their cities. They ascended a rugged mountain (and) I pursued them. I massacred 2,300 soldiers of Ḥanasiruka the Mede. I took away from him 140 of his cavalry (and) carried away his property and possessions in countless quantities. I razed, destroyed, (and) burned Sagbita, (his) royal city, together with 1,200 of his cities.”

¹ Grayson, 1996: 68 (119-125); Radner, 2003: 38; Dandamayev & Medvedskaya, 2006.

² Grayson, 1996: 185-186 (iii 27b-36); Radner, 2003: 40-42; Dezsó, 2012b: 17, 151; see Diod. 2.1.9-11.

It should be noted that “the Medes are described as a settled peoples, living in cities”.³ On the one hand, the Assyrian king’s strategy was focused on undermining (if not destroying) the equestrian base of their Iranian enemies, and on the other this region was a source for horses of Assyrian army.⁴ The Stela of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) mentioned of the tribute gained from the Medes⁵:

“I received the payment of ... the Medes, (and) all the eastern mountains: horses (and) mules broken to the yoke, Bactrian camels, oxen, [and] sheep and goats, without number.”

In 737, Tiglath-pileser III invaded the lands of the “mighty” (*dannu*) Medes, reaching as far as Mount Bikni.⁶

Sargon II (722-705) after assuming the throne of Assyria, was forced to target the northern Israelite kingdom of Samaria.⁷ With the western marches of the Assyrian Empire secured, he was now able to focus his military might against foes in Mannaea and the country of the Medes.

In 716 Sargon II conquered the city Kišesim and renamed the city Kār-Nergal (the capital of the new province).⁸ Afterwards the king captured Ḥarḥar, who rebelled four years earlier, and turned into an Assyrian province. Sargon ordered the construction of a fortress and the city was given the new name of Kār-Šarrukin.⁹ Already in the following year, Ḥarḥar revolted, but the revolt was suppressed by the Assyrian army.¹⁰ At the same time the Mannaeen king Ullusunu, gave some twenty-two border strongholds to the king Rusa I of Urartu (735-714).¹¹ Rusa also encouraged the Median chieftains Daiaukku to sever ties with Assyria. Sargon II

³ Radner, 2003: 41.

⁴ Reade, 1979: 179; Lanfranchi, 2003: 79; On the creation of the Assyrian provinces in the Zagros see Vér, 2020.

⁵ Tadmor & Yamada, 2011: 84 (35. 11-14).

⁶ Tadmor & Yamada, 2011: 97-98 (39. 18): “as far as the city Zakruti of the mighty Medes”; (39. 19-20): “I received the payment of the city rulers of the Medes, as far as Mount Bikni”; Bikni is usually identified with the Damavand mountain to the north of Teheran, or the Alvand, one of the peaks of the Zagros bordering on the Hamadan plain, not far from the city of Hamadan, see Medvedskaya, 2002; *contra* Alibaigi & Rezaei (2018), that Bikni must be identified with the Karkas mountains; of the economy of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the Central Zagros see Vér, 2014.

⁷ Sargon II’s capture of the northern Israelite capital, resulted in the transformation of Samaria into an Assyrian province named ‘Samerina’ with the military consequence of Judah; See Fuchs, 1994: 89; Becking, 1992; Park, 2012; Aster, 2019; Of interest are the Biblical reference to these events: “And the king of Assyria did carry away Israel unto Assyria and put them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes” (2 Kings 18:11-12).

⁸ Levine, 1972: 38-39 (39-40); Radner, 2003: 50.

⁹ Fuchs, 1994: 102-105, 317-318; Radner 2003: 50-51; the discussion on the identification in Alibaigi, Aminikhah & Fatahi, 2016 with further references.

¹⁰ Gopnik, 2011: 291, 293.

¹¹ On the relationship between Urartu and Assyria in the reigns of Sargon and Rusa, see: Chahin, 2001: 85-92; Roaf, 2012; on the land of Urartu and the Mannean provinces, see Potts, 2018: 234, 245-250.

counterattacked against the Urartians, defeating them in 715-714,¹² Daiukku and his family were deported.¹³ In 713 Sargon entered new Median region: “those district of the mighty Medes that had shed the yoke of Assur and roamed the desert and mountains like thieves”.¹⁴ The twenty-three Median city lords gave tribute to Sargon.¹⁵

It is possible that Sargon II then established an unspecified number of military outposts within recently conquered Iranian territory. Interestingly Sargon II (much like his predecessors) also targeted the Iranian equestrian base by forcing the Medes to cede large numbers of their horses to the Assyrians.¹⁶ This is confirmed by the text of the Najafabad stele¹⁷:

“At that time, the people of the city of Ḥarḥar who are submissive to Aššur (and) perform corvée duty [...] They drove off [Kibab]a, their city ruler and withheld the horses (which were) to be given yearly as their tribute.”

Sargon II was able to re-focus Assyrian military attentions to the south, having successfully concluded his campaign against the Iranian Medes in 713, he successfully invaded Elam in 710 forcing the Elamite king Šutruk-Nahhunte (717-699) to flee. With his victory in Elam now secured, Sargon II successfully invaded Babylon that same year, forcing Marduk-apla-iddina II (722-710, 703-702) to escape as his armies proved incapable of defending Babylon’s cities against the Assyrian advance.¹⁸

Assyrian Military Capabilities in the 7th century

Statement that Neo-Assyrian army consisted of chariots, cavalry (or different cavalry types) and infantry (or various infantry types) is as true however of the greatest importance was functional co-operation of the forces of different types.¹⁹

Chariots. The Neo Assyrian army of the 7th century BCE employed two-wheeled battle carts pulled by four horses which evolved from earlier variety reminding heavier versions of the Bronze Age battle carts, pulled by two horses.²⁰

The main feature of the Neo Assyrian chariots is their large size which allows four men crew. They have also side and front walls reaching well above waists of

¹² Marriott & Radner, 2015; Melville, 2016: 116-140; Rollinger, 2018.

¹³ Luckenbill, 1927: 6 (12); On detail, see Kristensen, 1988: 49-54. The discussion of the Daiukku /Deiokes problem, see in Wiesehöfer, 2004; Gufler, 2016 with further references.

¹⁴ Fuchs, 1994: 120-121.

¹⁵ Radner, 2003: 56.

¹⁶ Roaf, 2012: 199; Fuchs, 1994: 191-194.

¹⁷ C.f. Gopnik, 2011: 293.

¹⁸ Grayson & Novotny, 2014: 48 (3b-4); During the following years (709-707), Sargon conquered Dūr-Jakīn, and Marduk-apla-iddina escaped; see Brinkman, 1964: 18-22; Dandamaev & Lukonin, 1989: 48; Frame, 2009.

¹⁹ De Backer, 2007; Dezső, 2012a: 13-23; Healy, 1991: 8-23; Nadali, 2019.

²⁰ Healy, 1991: 8-23; Fields & Delf, 2006; Dezső, 2012b: 65-144; De Backer, 2013; Dijk-Coombes, 2018.

the crew. Their wheels were large, reaching height of the standing man, and had wide rims which allow extra durability and robust spokes. Illustrations of the chariots in action show the driver, the archer and two men actively protecting the others with the round shields. Such tactics derives from Hittite tradition and stands in contrast with earlier Bronze Age chariot tactics.²¹ Active, movable protection allowed security comparable to static covers with reduced weight but also allowed the shooter greater visibility. The same principle can be observed among Urartian chariots.²² In the royal hunting reliefs the king successfully employs both bows and spears against the lions which suggests that the chariot crews might be also prepared for close combat.²³ Clearly these carts vary from nimble, light and fast Bronze Age chariots, manned by the driver and the archer, usually pulled by two horses and designed as high velocity shooting platforms which could not withstand the new, Iron Age force of the mounted archers. The development of the Bronze Age chariotry was possible because of lack of efficient riding force.²⁴ The Neo-Assyrian chariots were slower than the riders but significantly better protected, heavier and thus creating greater impact in clash, combined qualities of movable fortifications with powerful momentum. Neo-Assyrian iconography shows that the similarity constructed enemy war wagons manned by three-four crew members (but pulled seemingly by a single horse), despite their advantages, were not invincible and could be countered by coordinated actions of infantry and cavalry. Naturally, these were not Assyrian but Elamite and they do not have protective walls which might illustrate local varieties of the idea.²⁵

Development of large and heavy chariots acting as movable fortifications was possible or rather enforced by the appearance of the strong and efficient cavalry contingents which left no place for light Bronze Age constructions. The horse mounted warriors appeared around 9th century BCE.²⁶ It is important to state that the invention of double reflex composite bows predates employment of cavalry or creation of mounted archers. Neo-Assyrian army was no exception in adoption of the new force both in shape of lancers and archers. How novel was the skill of tactical employment of horse riding may be attested by the Nimrud reliefs where the shooter is accompanied by an assistant holding his reins as if following the scheme known in the Bronze Age chariots where one man was responsible for shooting and his comrade drove the wagon. In the 7th century Assyrian warriors were fully capable of shooting in gallop, however they did not adopt the recurved bows and the *gorytoi* hanging on

²¹ Moorey, 1986; Crouwel, 2002; Crouwel & Tatton-Brown, 2002; Drews, 2002: 50-56; Fields & Delf, 2006; Kelekina, 2009: 95-98.

²² Gökce, Isik & Degirmencioglu, 2013.

²³ Reade, 2018; as was illustrated in Urartian warfare (Dezső, Niederreiter & Bodnár, 2021) and on ivory plaques from Ziwiyé (Amelirad, 2019).

²⁴ Even though some argue for knowledge of riding as early as 3500 BC, the actual cavalry appeared in the early last milenium BCE which deprives the opinions of actual riding in 4th millenium BCE of the historical relevance.

²⁵ Nadali, 2018;2019.

²⁶ Nadali, 2019.

the left hip, the devices developed by the steppe dwellers archetypal associated with the ancient mounted archery.²⁷ Instead, the Assyrians used typical Mesopotamian bows with single curvature and the quivers carried on the shoulder.²⁸ Both the horse archers and lancers were armoured in the 7th century, wearing lamellar corselets and conical helmets, often riding protected horses.²⁹ The lancers employed no shields. It is possible that the riders were trained to perform both functions depending on tactical necessity. The relief of Ashurbanipal depicting crushing defeat of Elamites by the battle of Tuba shows horse archers and lancers cooperating on tactical level in what seems rather pairs of lancer and archer than separate units. The lancers carry archery equipment, however other reliefs do not confirm such exchangeability.³⁰

Neo-Assyrian infantry was not less remarkable. Again, the main condition of success was cooperation between different troop types as the missile troops were always accompanying those designed for hand-to-hand combat.³¹

Seventh century Assyrian infantry wore at least helmets but armours were very frequent. Most common were lamellar corselets but the discs covering crucial area of central rib cage were also frequent.³² Armour allowed reduction of losses, increase of morale but in the reliefs it also marks Assyrians from the foe who is usually inferior in equipment. This could be part of propagandistic message but might also arise from actual situation where armour saturation in Assyrian Army could be much higher than among neighbouring nations. Regardless of armour type, Neo-Assyrian army of the 7th century BCE included several types of heavy infantry differentiated by the shield types. Most remarkable are the bearers of the large shields in shape of letter U turned upside down.³³ These were formed in deep half-pipe creating a kind of small tower in front of the soldier. These heavy covers were often placed on the ground but were light enough to be carried single handed and lifted against high attacks or covering man behind. These soldiers used spears but were almost always paired with unarmored archers, occasionally additional armoured spearman teamed up. The 'shield-wall' packed with spear heads from behind of which the opponent was showered with arrows must have been remarkable obstacle of great tactical efficiency. The other type of heavy infantry were the spearmen carrying large round, deeply domed shields.

²⁷ Chugunov, 2013; Chugunov, Rjabkova & Simpson, 2019; Cunliffe, 2019: 85-110; Karasulas, 2009: 7-12, 18-27; Simpson, 2017.

²⁸ Dezső, 2012b: 23-38; Healy, 1991: 8-23; Poisel, 2009; Nadali, 2019.

²⁹ Barron, 2010: 147-201; De Backer, 2011-2012; Stepanova, 2012; Nadali, 2018; 2019.

³⁰ Dezső, 2012b: 22-23; Healy, 1991: :8-23; Poisel, 2009.

³¹ Dezső, 2012b: 13-24; Healy, 1991: 8-23.

³² Barron, 2010: 147-178; De Backer, 2011-2012; 2012.

³³ De Backer, 2013; Nadali, 2019.

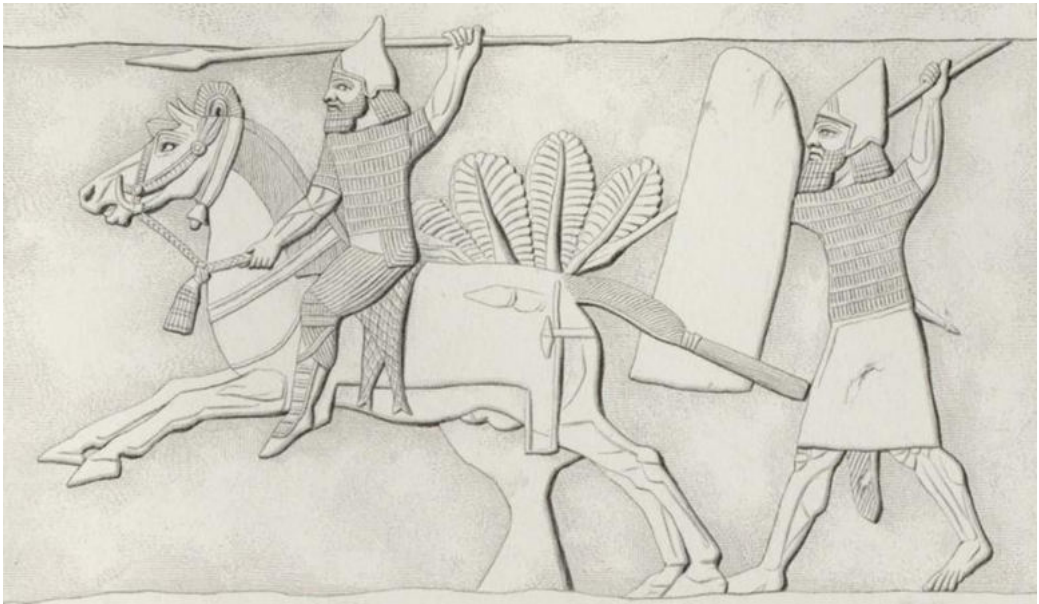


Fig. 1. Relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh (after Place, 1867: pl. 59; <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.3706#0075>)

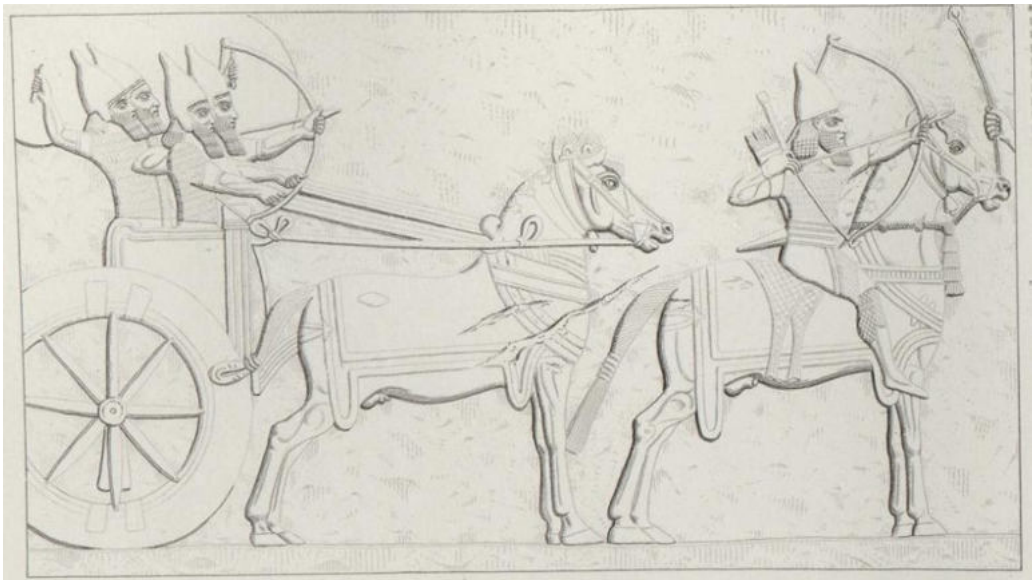


Fig. 2. Relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh (after Place, 1867: pl. 60; <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.3706#0076>)



Fig. 3. Relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh (after Place, 1867: pl. 61; <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.3706#0077>)

The light infantry consisted of unarmored archers, javelin-men and slingers who either swarmed at the flanks of the heavy infantry lines, or stood just behind and were shooting from behind cover provided by the heavier troops. It must be noted that the armoured troops are sometimes depicted using slings and far more often shooting from the bows.

Campaigns of Sennacherib and Medes

In 702 Sennacherib (705-681) undertook an expedition against the Zagros kingdom of Ellipi.³⁴ According to his inscription the Assyrian king received tribute from “the distant Medes, of whose land none of the kings, my ancestors, had heard mention. (Thus) I made them bow down to my yoke.”³⁵ It seems, that the “distant” (*ru-qu-ú-ti*) Medes living outside of the Assyrian provincial administration.³⁶

Just four years after his ascension as king, Sennacherib attacked westwards against the fortified cities of Judah in c. 701. The Assyrian army captured a number of cities, however Jerusalem, though besieged, was not to be captured.³⁷

Sennacherib undertook military action against Babylonia and Elam.³⁸ In 703 Marduk-apla-iddina II returned from Elam and ignited rebellion in Babylonia. Contrary to him, Aššurnādin-šumi (702-694) Sennacherib’s son, was appointed by his father as the king of Babylon.³⁹ In sometime 694 Elamite king Hallušu-Inšušinak (699-693)⁴⁰ by attacking into Babylon and capturing Aššurnādin-šumi, who was probably executed in Elam.⁴¹ Sennacherib however, himself retaliated successfully by defeating a combined Elamite-Babylonian army.⁴² Following this defeat, Babylon in c. 692 struck a new anti-Assyrian alliance with Elam and the Parsua (Parsuash).⁴³ In 691 the Assyrians fought a heated battle against the allied forces at the city Ḫalule.⁴⁴ In 689 Sennacherib decided to destroy the city of Babylon, while Babylonia was annexed to Assyria as an ordinary province.⁴⁵

Campaigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal into Iran and the Rise of the Mede kingdom

The Assyrians were now facing a new military threat, as the king of the invading Scythians, Išpakaia, had forged a military pact with the Mannaeans resident in northwest Iran’s Lake Urmia region. In response, the Assyrian king

³⁴ Sennacherib turned the city of Elenzaš (in the Ellipi territory) into a stronghold; Grayson & Novotny, 2014: 79 (15b-17a) “I took the city Elenzaš as a fortress for that district, (and then) I changed its (former) name and called it Kār-Sennacherib. I settled therein the people of the lands that I had conquered. I placed (it) under the authority of the governor of the city Ḫarḫar.”

³⁵ Grayson & Novotny, 2014: 79 (17b).

³⁶ Helm, 1981: 59; Radner, 2003: 58.

³⁷ Kalimi & Richardson, 2014; Kim, 2018.

³⁸ On the chronology of the years 704-689, see Levine, 1982; Elayi, 2018.

³⁹ Grayson & Novotny, 2014: 48 (5); 81 (33-34a).

⁴⁰ Weisberg, 1984.

⁴¹ The Babylonians handed Aššur-nādin-šumi over to the Elamites, see Parpola, 1972.

⁴² Levine, 1982: 41.

⁴³ A province of the Assyrian empire during the reign of Sargon II (Hansman, 1972: 107, n. 49); on the location of Parsua, in Levine, 1974: 105-113; Farrokh, 2007: 25.

⁴⁴ Grayson & Novotny, 2014: 315 (34b-37a).

⁴⁵ Levavi, 2021 with further references.

Esarhaddon (680-669) launched a new series of attacks into Iran. The Assyrian army scored successes by defeating Išpakaia's Scythian-Mannaean force (c. 675),⁴⁶ followed by another successful military campaign in which Assyrian armies invaded the country of Patušarri,⁴⁷ which also led to the capture of two Mede leaders. Esarhaddon deported the inhabitants to the Assyria⁴⁸:

“(As for) the land Patušarri, a district in the area of the salt desert, which is in the midst of the land of the distant Medes, borders Mount Bikni, the lapis lazuli mountain, (and) upon the soil of whose land none of the kings, my ancestors, had walked – I carried off to Assyria Šidir-parna (and) E-parna, mighty chieftains, who were not submissive to (my) yoke, together with their people, their riding horses, oxen, sheep and goats, donkeys, (and) Bactrian camels, their heavy plunder.”

Before 672, the Median city lords of Partakka, Partukka and Urakazabarna requesting Esarhaddon's protection and alliance⁴⁹:

“(As for) Uppis, chieftain of the city Partakka, Zanasana, chieftain of the city Partukka, (and) Ramateia, chieftain of the city Urakazabarna, Medes whose country is remote (and) who had not crossed the boundary of Assyria nor trodden on its soil in the time of the kings, my ancestors – the awe some fear of the god Aššur, my lord, overwhelmed them and they brought to Nineveh, my capital city, large thoroughbreds (and blocks of) lapis lazuli, hewn from its mountain, and they kissed my feet. Because of the chieftains who had threatened them, they implored my lordship and begged me for help. I sent my officials, the governors of the boundary areas of their land, with them and they trampled the people living in those cities and made (them) bow down at their feet. I imposed the tribute (and) payment of my lordship upon them yearly.”

In 672, a treaty was concluded with the Median chiefs, guaranteeing their loyalty and the security of their possessions, of which the one with Ramataia of Urakazabarna is extant.⁵⁰ It's seem, that the result of this treaty was the presence of an armed Median corps at the Assyrian court, as protectors of the crown prince's

⁴⁶ Leichty & Frame, 2011: 29-30 (ii 20-23).

⁴⁷ Most likely an Assyrian reference to territories bordering the Dasht-e Kavir; For location of Patušarra see Medvedskaya, 1992: 78; Dandamayev & Medvedskaya, 2006.

⁴⁸ Leichty & Frame, 2011: 32 (iii 53-61); On the deportation of indigenous populations from the Iranian Zagros, see MacGinnis, 2020: 48-50; Vêr, 2020: 221-223.

⁴⁹ Leichty & Frame, 2011: 32 (iv 1-20).

⁵⁰ Wiseman, 1958; the discussion in Helm, 1981: 57-59; see Liverani, 1995; Scurllock, 2012.

body.⁵¹ It's also possible that they were the contingent troops of the crown prince's army corps.⁵²

Esarhaddon's victories led him to forge a military alliance with the new king of the Scythians, Bartatua. While the exact chronology of these events remains to be fully ascertained, it is generally agreed that by the early 670s, Bartatua and the Scythians were now supporting the Assyrian army in their on-going operations against the Medes.⁵³

The last mention of the Medes in the Assyrian sources is the information about the battle (probably in 656)⁵⁴ of the new king Ashurbanipal (668-c. 630) against three Median city lords⁵⁵:

“At that time Birišatri, a chieftain of the Medes, Šarati, Pariḫia, sons of Gagi, chieftain of the land of Saḫi, who had thrown off the yoke of my dominion – 75 of their strong cities I captured and carried off their spoil. Them I seized alive with my own hands and brought to Nineveh, my royal city.”

According to the Babylonian *Fall of Nineveh Chronicle* Cyaxares (Umakištar), a leader of the Median army, who sacked Assur, and formed an alliance with the Babylonian king Nabopolassar (626-605) in 614⁵⁶:

“They went along [the T]igris and encamped against Baltil (Ashur). They did battle against the city and [...] destroyed ... [The king of A]kkad and his army, who had gone to help the Medes, did not reach the battle (in time). [The king of Akka]d and C[yax]ares (the king of the Medes)⁵⁷ met one another by the city

⁵¹ Helm, 1981: 59-62.

⁵² Lanfranchi, 1998: 107-109.

⁵³ “If Esarhaddon gives him a daughter of the king in marriage, will Bartatua, king of the Scythians, truthfully speak with [Esarhaddon, king of Assyria], true and reliable words of peace? Will he guard the treaty of [Esarhaddon, king of Assyria?] Will he do [whatever] is pleasing to Esarhaddon, king of Assyria?”, SAA 4 20, cf. Daneshmand, 2017: 17.

⁵⁴ Radner, 2003: 62.

⁵⁵ Luckenbill, 1927: 328 (854).

⁵⁶ Grayson, 2000: 93 (26-30).

⁵⁷ Hilary Gopnik (2017: 48) suggests that maybe he wasn't the king, but the Median *bēl-ālāni*: “Although one line in the chronicle (l. 38) refers to ‘the king of the Umman-manda’ (an archaic name for powers from the east) seemingly in reference to Umakištar, Umakištar himself is never directly called the king of the Medes.”; but according to the texts of Eḫulḫul-Cylinder, Astyages was the king (Schaudig, 2001: 416-417, lines 15-29): “In the beginning of my everlasting reign they (Marduk and Sin) caused me to see a dream. Marduk, the great lord, and Sin, the luminary of heaven and the underworld, were standing together. Marduk spoke to me: ‘Nabonidus, king of Babylon, carry bricks on your horses, build the Eḫulḫul and establish the dwelling of Sin, the great lord, in its midst’. Reverently I spoke to the Enlil of the gods, Marduk: ‘(but) that temple which you told (me) to build, the Ummān-Manda surrounds it, and his might is excessive’. But Marduk spoke to me: ‘The Ummān-Manda whom you mentioned, he, his country and the kings who march at his side will cease to exist.’ (And indeed), when the third year arrived, they (Marduk and Sin) had Cyrus, king of Anšan, his young servant, arise against him (the Ummān-Manda). He scattered the large (armies) of the Ummān-Manda with his small army. He captured Astyages,

(and) together they made an entente cordiale. [... Cyaxa]res and his army went home.”

In 612 the Medes, led by Cyaxares, and the army of Nabopolassar brutally sacked Nineveh, Assyria's capital.⁵⁸ In the Babylonian sources the Medes were mentioned only once, in the sixth year of Nabonidus's reign (c. 550). According to the *Nabonidus Chronicle* the Median king Astyages (Ištumegu), was occupied dealing with a military coup, allowing Cyrus, king of Anšan, to loot the Median royal city at Ecbatana.⁵⁹

The reconstruction of the establishment of Median empire, is a difficult and uncertain affair. There are two main historical sources for the history of Median kingdom: the contemporary accounts of the Assyrian Empire (the mentioned above Assyrian sources and the Babylonian texts), and the informations given by Herodotus⁶⁰ and Ctesias.⁶¹

According to Herodotus the Medes were united by the lawgiver Deioces, son of Phraortes.⁶² The founder of the Median dynasty ordered a capital to be built, was called Hagmatāna.⁶³ After Deioces's death, his son Phraortes (647-625) inherited the throne. Phraortes subjugated the Persians and began to conquer other nations of Asia, but was militarily defeated by the Assyrian army, with Phraortes having been killed in battle.⁶⁴

Herodotus wrote that Phraortes' successor, Cyaxares (625-585), reorganized the Median army⁶⁵:

“He [Cyaxares] is said to have been a much greater soldier than his ancestors: it was he who first organized the men of Asia in companies and posted each arm

the king of the Ummān-Manda, and took him to his country as captive.” (english c.f. Rollinger, 2020: 206), see also Harrān-Cylinder (Schaudig, 2001: 473 lines 7-17).

⁵⁸ Grayson, 2000: 94 (40-45); Reade, 2003.

⁵⁹ Grayson, 2000: 106 (1-4): “[The sixth year] mustered (his army) and marched against Cyrus, king of Anšan, for conquest [...] The army rebelled against Astyages and he was taken prisoner. Th[ey handed him over] to Cyrus. ([...]) Cyrus <marched> to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold, goods, property, [...] which he carried off as booty (from) Ecbatana, he took to Anšan. The goods (and) property of the army of [...]”

⁶⁰ Hdt. 1.96.1-1.130.3. On the chronological problems of the Median dynasty in Herodotus's *Histories*, see Medvedskaya, 2004; Dandamayev & Medvedskaya, 2006; see also Rollinger, 2010; Zournatzi, 2013.

⁶¹ Ctesias' book *Persica* is lost, but we know of its contents by later compilations and from the work of Diodorus Siculus; Llewellyn-Jones, 2009: 1-87; Wiesehöfer, Rollinger & Lanfranchi, 2011.

⁶² Hdt. 1.96.1-1.98.1; Hdt. 1.101.1.

⁶³ Hdt. 1.98.2-1.99.1; see Gufler, 2016.

⁶⁴ Hdt. 1.102.2: “until he marched against the Assyrians ... who held Ninus ... Marching against these Assyrians, then, Phraortes and most of his army perished”; According to Reade (2003: 151) “A plausible reason for this invasion, if it really happened, would be that Nabopolassar had hired the Medes as allies.”

⁶⁵ Hdt. 1.103.1.

apart, the spearmen and archers and cavalry: before this they were all mingled together in confusion.”

According to Herodotus he conquered all Asia beyond the Halys river,⁶⁶ and marched against the Assyria,⁶⁷ but invading Scythians led by Madyes, launched a decisive offensive in support of the Assyrians to then inflict a comprehensive defeat upon the Medes.⁶⁸ After 28 years⁶⁹ Cyaxares disposed of his Scythian overlords, and capturing Nineveh.⁷⁰

The last king of the Median ‘Empire’ was Cyaxares’ Astyages son (585-550). According to Herodotus, Cyrus, being a grandson of Astyages⁷¹ and his vassal, rose in rebellion against him.⁷² A Median nobleman Harpagos organized a plot against Astyages,⁷³ and during a battle he defected with a large part of the troops to the Cyrus’s side.⁷⁴ Then Astyages himself commanded the army in the second battle, but the Medes were defeated, and their king was taken prisoner.⁷⁵

⁶⁶ Hdt. 1.103.2: “This was the king who fought against the Lydians when the day was turned to night in the battle, and who united under his dominion all of Asia that is beyond the river Halys”.

⁶⁷ Hdt. 1.103.2: “Collecting all his subjects, he marched against Ninus, wanting to avenge his father and to destroy the city.” see Medvedskaya, 2004: 97-98.

⁶⁸ Hdt. 1.103.3-1.104.2: “He defeated the Assyrians in battle; but while he was besieging their city, a great army of Scythians came down upon him, led by their king Madyes son of Protothyas. They had invaded Asia after they had driven the Cimmerians out of Europe: pursuing them in their flight, the Scythians came to the Median country ... the Medes met the Scythians, who defeated them in battle, deprived them of their rule, and made themselves masters of all Asia.” This report contradicts the evidence of the oriental sources; see analysis of Diakonoff (1985: 117-118) and Anderson (2016: 8).

⁶⁹ According to Herodotus (1.106.1-2) Scythian overlordship of the Medes lasted 28 years, however Pompeius Trogus (Just. II 5.1-7) reports a period of just eight years.

⁷⁰ Hdt. 1.106.1-2: “the Medes took back their empire and all that they had formerly possessed; and they took Ninus”. This is confirmed by the *Fall of Nineveh Chronicle*.

⁷¹ Hdt. 1.107.1-1.108.3; Similarly by Xenophon (*Cyrop.* 1.2.1): “His mother, it is generally agreed, was Mandane; and this Mandane was the daughter of Astyages, sometime king of the Medes”; see also Xen. *Cyrop.* 1.3.1-1.4.1; According to Ctesias Cyrus was neither the grandson of Astyages nor even an Achaemenid but rather a man from the nomad tribe of Mardi (Nicolas of Damascus, F8d*, 9); The Babylonian sources don’t mention on the kinship relations; see also Zournatzi, 2013.

⁷² Hdt. 1.125.1-1.127.2; Xenophon (*Cyrop.* 8.5.17-19) reported that the reigning Median king was not Astyages but his son Cyaxares, whose daughter was married to Cyrus, with the Median kingdom being a dowry.

⁷³ Hdt. 1.123.2: “Even before this the following had been done by him [Harpagus]: since Astyages was harsh toward the Medes, he associated with each of the chief Medes and persuaded them to make Cyrus their leader and depose Astyages.”; Ctesias (Nicolas of Damascus, F8d*, 14) claims that the initiator of the plot was a Persian named Oebaras; According to Xenophon (Xen. *Cyrop.* 1.1.4) Cyrus: “became the leader of the Medes by their full consent”.

⁷⁴ Hdt. 1.127.2-3: “Astyages armed all his Medes ... and appointed him [Harpagus] to command the army. So when the Medes marched out and engaged with the Persians, those who were not in on the plan fought, while others deserted to the enemy, and most were deliberate cowards and ran.”; In Ctesias’ version (Nicolas of Damascus, F8d*, 32-34) the first battle resulted in a complete victory for Astyages.

⁷⁵ Hdt. 1.128.2-3: “then him [Astyages] armed the Medes who were left in the city, the very young and very old men. Leading these out, and engaging the Persians, he was beaten: Astyages himself was taken prisoner, and lost the Median army which he led.” ; According to Ctesias (Nicolas of Damascus, F8d*, 35-38) in the second battle, near Pasargadae, Cyrus’ army routed the Medes.

Despite the fact that the *Medikos Logos* given by Herodotus, raises a lot of controversy,⁷⁶ there is no doubt that Cyaxares conquered Assyria at the head of a Median army. Of course, in research on the Median history, especially in the early period, it is important to consider whether it was the realm of the Medes truly existed, or it was “a short-lived confederation of Zagrosian polities, which were united to fight the Neo-Assyrian empire and broke up after defeating the enemy”.⁷⁷

Conclusions

The Median military forces remain possibly more obscure than the political organisation of this ethnos. Because the horses were the tribute imposed on the Medians and in later times the region was also famed for horse breeding, it is justified to believe the significant role of cavalry in Median forces. It seems impossible however to reconstruct the ratio of infantry to cavalry, the tactics, armament, organisation, way of command or type of recruitment. Despite the clues allowing to determine important role of horse troops, it is unlikely that the Medians could represent Scythian type of warfare.⁷⁸ It is clear that they were sedentary population, therefore the horses were bred by them very different way than by the nomads who travelled with their flocks and the horses were working animals of the basic necessity. Such situation is impossible among sedentary agriculturalists toiling the soil, as such a lifestyle could not support all cavalry armies consisting of all male and often female members of the tribe.⁷⁹ Similarly identification of the personages in tunics and trousers on the reliefs of Persepolis as the Medes is far from convincing. In Greek iconography of the 5th century BCE such clothes are worn by all Iranians⁸⁰ and this is confirmed by various iconographic material from Persian Empire with the examples ranging from Tatarli wooden beams⁸¹ to Erebuni rhyton,⁸² Bactrian silver bowl and terracotta figurines.⁸³ There does not seem to be anything specifically Median about the dress, just as the ‘Persian’ or ‘Elamite’ dress does not seem to have ethnic denomination, being rather sign of prestige or representation of power. Even if the Medes were to adopt such grab earlier, it is impossible to determine when would that be and whether in 7th century such adoption would have already taken place.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ On the discussion see also Helm, 1981; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1988; Wiesehöfer, 2003, 2004; Tulpin, 2004; Waters, 2005; Radner, 2013; Gopnik, 2017; Balatti, 2017; Rossi, 2017; Rollinger, 2020.

⁷⁷ Degen & Rollinger, 2020: 273.

⁷⁸ Chernenko, 1981; 1983; Karasulas, 2009: 7-10; Chugunov, 2013; Chugunov, Rjabkova & Simpson, 2019; Cunliffe, 2019.

⁷⁹ Woźniak, 2010: 40-42; Head, 1992; Sekunda, 1992.

⁸⁰ Woźniak, 2010: 75; Boardman, 2001; Tuplin, 2020.

⁸¹ Summerer, 2007.

⁸² Treister, 2015.

⁸³ Stronach, 2009.

⁸⁴ Gorelik, 1982; Baughan, 2008; Ma, 2008; Briant, 2020.

Clearly Median art of war must have went through considerable development but virtually no details of this process are known except that from the easy victims of Assyrian punitive expeditions focused rather on fleeing their persecutors, they turned to one of the forces which destroyed Neo-Assyrian empire. Adoption of the Scythian grab is naturally possible in course of the 8th century but that seems part of the wider process not limited to the Medians only. The fact that both Assyrians and Babylonians refrained from copying these solutions proves only that they were confident in efficiency of their military technology and the Medes attempted to imitate the 'second best', the solutions which proved very efficient but required less expenses and less of the tactical finesse of the Neo-Assyrian army. Something that was possible to recreate only for the Achaemenids.

The clash of the Neo-Assyrian Empire with the Medes marked an extremely important moment in the history of the Near East, unless one of the pivotal historical events which changed the whole region for centuries and laid foundation for the shape of the world. Strangely, these events are depicted one sided, from Assyrian point of view and later were incorporated into imperial legend of the Achaemenids. Well researched Assyrian army stands in contrast with almost unknown force of the Medes whose shape can be reconstructed only hypothetically. Such attempts are nevertheless important, given the importance of the events but also, considering modern unsymmetrical conflicts where native or religious groups successfully face imperial forces significantly better equipped, trained and led within elaborated military schemes.

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