

The Iranian Highlands as a borderland of the Neo-Assyrian empire: notes on cultural and political dynamics

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During the 8th and 7th cent. BC the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian state reached areas that can be defined as borderlands, both for their geographical location in or near landscapes that represented natural barriers, and for their history which was characterized by different cultural and political trajectories. The conquests extended from the Mediterranean coast to the Zagros, the Arabian desert and the Nile delta, the Anatolian Taurus, south Mesopotamian marshlands and the Persian Gulf. The geopolitical scenario of the eastern Taurus and Zagros mountain region – the Iranian northern highlands – included smaller and larger buffer states and border provinces belonging to the imperial states, i.e. Assyria and Urartu.¹

The written sources for the 9th–7th cent. BC period stem from these two major powers, the most informative being the Assyrian ones. They illustrate the lengthy confrontations between these states, which were located in different environmental and strategic positions, to control the area of smaller polities that occupied intermediate mountain valleys and through which communication and commercial routes crossed the mountains. In this confrontation the role of the areas that were transformed into frontier provinces incorporated into the imperial states, was obviously crucial, not only as military outposts, but also as communication and interface zones. The situations and roles of the borderlands – buffer states and border provinces – in the developments and outcomes of this confrontation, which included events of fighting, negotiation, annexation, resistance, and also deculturation and acculturation, are however only partially or scarcely illustrated by the available sources, which mainly concentrate on individual phases or episodes. This dearth of data is also due to the border position that the area still occupies today and has consequences for the archaeological policy implemented by modern governments, that only in recent years has shown some new trends and begun to provide an increasing flow of data.²

1 Recent syntheses of the geopolitical context and the system of relations, with previous bibliography, are Lanfranchi / Ponchia, 2019; Lanfranchi / Rollinger, 2021; Lanfranchi, 2021.

2 On the border zone and its uncertain definition up to modern times see Potts, 2021; on research policy cf. Mohammadpour / Soleimani, 2022. For a general view of research trends and perspectives, Boucharlat, 2019.

To illustrate the system of interrelations that characterized these borderland regions within the mosaic of geopolitical entities from the 9th to 7th centuries BC, I have selected three case studies to represent the various political and institutional statuses. They are presented proceeding from north to south.

1. An independent polity: Mannea

The kingdom of Mannea was located to the south of Lake Urmiah, in a fertile area famous for horse-breeding and a crossroads between the Rowanduz pass and various Zagros itineraries reaching as far as the Caspian Sea area, therefore a central and advantageous position in the Iranian highlands. This, however, exposed the country to interference and attacks from the stronger polities. Mannea was generally able to adopt an independent policy of alliance, reaction and resistance against imperial powers – with varying vicissitudes and degrees of success – thanks to the role it had in providing certain crucial resources, such as horses, and the relations its ruling class managed to establish with other components of the socio-political landscape of the Iranian region.³

The kingdom of Mannea is somehow an elusive entity, since its extension, borders and organization cannot be precisely determined on the basis of our sources. Written documents stem exclusively from Assyria and Urartu, and concern the military confrontation of which these countries were protagonists. Their pressure induced opposing dynamics of internal divisions and dissention, or cohesion in the Mannean ruling class. The country, however, maintained a relatively independent position, possibly also due to its old culture which was seemingly rooted in the Hurrian context and had long-standing relations with Mesopotamia and the West.⁴ Archaeological remains show both individual characteristics and cultural openness.⁵ Fortifications and palaces with characteristic columned halls have been discovered at various sites, among which the most representative are Ziwiye,⁶ built on an impressive rock outcrop overlooking a fertile valley, in an appropriate position for territorial control, and Qalaichi, around 70 km north of Ziwiye and close to the modern town of Bukan, where an Aramaic inscription was found.

The fortified and defensive character of Ziwiye is enhanced by its citadel structure, which included an outer section with a courtyard, a service/administrative area and a res-

3 Lanfranchi, 2021 : 121: “at least in the regions south of Lake Urmia, a political reaction against external “imperialism” provoked the emergence and expansion of the Mannean kingdom, which absorbed some other local kingdoms, perhaps incorporating them into a semi-provincial status”.

4 For a general presentation of artistic motifs of the Mesopotamian and Assyrian repertoire see Sheikhi et al., 2017.

5 While this paper was being prepared for publication the article by Hassanzadeh, 2022 appeared. It provides an ample review of the sources, with particular attention to the archaeological data. The reader is therefore referred to this updated synthesis in addition to the other references indicated here.

6 On the name and its identification cf. Zadok, 2002 : 92: “(I-)zi-bi-ia (Fuchs 1994, 429); = Úz-bi-a, Ú-zu-bi-i[a] (Piepkorn, 1933, Prism B, iii: 47, cf. Borger, 1996 : 34), modern Zivya (see Godard, 19 : 5; Adamec, 1976, map I-20-D has “Ziviyah” which is very probably for Zivya)”.

idence with a columned hall. Separated defensible spaces were created inside the main citadel areas, with escape routes and grain storage spaces.⁷ A hoard illegally excavated in the site and sold on the antiquities market after World War II includes an ivory plaque, golden repoussé and bronze belts that have been identified as objects of northern inspiration –⁸ but for whose motifs various origins and their re-interpretations by local artisans have also been recognized – and glazed bricks decorating the columned hall. As described by Muscarella, the circumstances of discovery of this material, the arbitrary association with the site of individual pieces of unknown provenance, plus the inclusion of pieces added afterwards (including even forgeries), make it problematic to distinguish the original finds and represent a severe hindrance to a precise evaluation of the data.⁹ Later excavations have unearthed ivory and bone strips with narrative scenes reminiscent of Assyrian models, but also showing other sources of inspiration.¹⁰

Other illegal excavations have afflicted the site of Qalaichi and its patrimony of decorative art, of which there are c. 450 pieces of glazed tiles that might have ornamented a religious building.¹¹ The identification of the site as Izirtu mentioned in Assyrian sources, on the basis of interpretation as Z^{tr} of the toponym recorded on a stela in Aramaic from the site, is contested on philological and linguistic grounds. The first letter, *b*, of the toponym *bz/s^{tr}* is not necessarily to be interpreted as a preposition and the metathesis of the following letters to match the Assyrian name remains an unsupported hypothesis. Due to these problems, the ancient name of the site of Qalaichi /Bukan is probably better interpreted as the hitherto unknown Bz/s^{tr}.¹² Comparing the archaeological evidence from Qalaichi Tepe with the evidence of the Bukan stela which refers to the god Ḫaldi, to whom a renowned sanctuary was dedicated in the site of Muşasir, it seems probable that the site was the location of a temple of the god.¹³ The iconography of the ornamental tiles found there shows what may be considered a local interpretation of a widespread artistic and symbolic lexicon. This would fit with the role of these mountain sanctuaries as points of meeting and interaction.¹⁴

Though perhaps not belonging to Mannea, but to the smaller and probably allied kingdom of Gilzanu, the site of Hasanlu can be considered within the same cultural

⁷ Hassanzadeh, 2022 : 21.

⁸ Nobari et al., 2015 with bibliography.

⁹ <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ziwiye>: “The plunder itself, and equally the unquestioning scholarly acceptance of unprovenanced, orphaned artifacts as if archaeologically excavated, is a cultural disaster. The only archaeological data we possess for the site of Ziwiye are the finds from surveys and recent excavations.” Muscarella, 2017.

¹⁰ Amelirad, 2019.

¹¹ For this hypothesis and description of the material see Hassanzadeh / Mollasalehi, 201 .

¹² For a detailed discussion of the various proposals and related bibliography see Younger, 2022 : 481–484.

¹³ Younger, 2022 : 484: “Qalaichi Tappeh was probably the location of another temple to Ḫaldi in the land of Mannea, with its ancient name being Bz/s^{tr}. Other temples to Ḫaldi besides the one in Muşasir did exist. Finally, although the location of the city of Izirtu is unknown, a few scholars have suggested an identification with Saqqez”.

¹⁴ On mountain kingdoms and the role of sanctuaries see Radner, 2012 and Lanfranchi / Ponchia, 2019.

and artistic framework.¹⁵ It is located SW of Lake Urmiah in the Solduz Valley, easily accessible from Urartu, and could be reached from Assyria through the Ushnu Valley and the Kelishin pass. During the excavations conducted from 1956 to 1977, extraordinary remains were unearthed, that are fundamental illustrations of the areas' cultural and socio-economic history.¹⁶ They also include evidence of a tragic episode of destruction and the massacre of hundreds of people. It has been hypothesized that this destruction that ended the flowering of Hasanlu was caused by an Urartian offensive, for which some suggestions may be made: the expedition led by kings Išpuini and Menua south of the Lake Urmiah on their march to the core of Mannea and to Paršua in around 810–805 BC,¹⁷ Menua's campaigns against Mannea,¹⁸ or even later incursions. Interpretation of the archaeological data from the site reveals a plurality of contacts and cultural inputs, but also social differentiations possibly connected with the militarization of society in the framework of a general conflict situation.¹⁹

Various finds, including architectural remains, have been recovered from other sites in the area.²⁰ They reveal similarities with those mentioned above, e.g. tiles, belts, pottery etc., and contribute to the definition of some distinctive traits of Mannean culture and art and its connections with other regions. The finds from the area might moreover be compared with the references to the various provenances of objects in the Assyrian account of Sargon II's 8th campaign concerning the booty plundered from the small and close-by mountain kingdom of Mušašir and its sanctuary.²¹ The typology and styles of the Hasanlu finds show that, although Assyrian influence can generally be clearly recognized, Urartian and other inputs are quite evident as well.²² In general, Mannean cities, as well as those of neighbouring polities, appear to have been centres of interregional contacts and exchange involving in particular the upper class and royalty.

15 For the columned hall with benches dating back to period IV (9th cent. BC) see Dyson, 1989 : 115. The chronology of the site has been debated (for a synthesis see Cifarelli, 2019), but it seems important to note that buildings with columned hall have also been recognized in the Late Bronze Age.

16 See also the most recent research on the site of Jowšātū Fort (Mollazadeh / Binandeh, 2021).

17 See the Karagündüz stela, Salvini, 200 : 137–140, text A 3–9.

18 Salvini, 2008 : 198–201, texts A 5–9 and 5–10.

19 Recent synthesis with bibliography in Cifarelli, 201 and 2025. Particularly problematic is the interpretation of the last phase of the site (period III, after the destruction around 800 BC).

20 For an updated synthesis and bibliography see Younger, 2022.

21 On the other hand, a recent analysis of a group of seals from the site identifies a portion of seals that can be considered “strongly related to the Neo-Assyrian workshops” and fruit of intense commercial relations and concludes that “The Neo-Assyrian group should be considered as a production of Assyrian artists settled at Ziwiye, or very near, between the last years of the 8th and the 7th century BC.” (Ascalone / Baseri 2014) A seal/amulet is moreover recognized as documenting the presence of an Assyrian elite in the site (pp. 37–39). On Sargon's campaigns in the area see also Ponchia / Lanfranchi, 2024 : 209–227.

22 Quite problematic is the interpretation of the finds from other contexts, such as the funerary ones, often subjected to illegal excavations. See e.g. the Kani Koter cemetery in the Ziwiye region (Amelirad / Azizi, 2021).

Mannean elites appear to have actively participated not only in the reception, but also the creation, interpretation and diffusion of motifs endowed with prestige value, besides being involved in the dynamics that external pressures induced in the borderlands, i.e. power struggles, varying alliances, and militarization.

The confrontation between Assyria and Urartu reached a peak during the reigns of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC) and Sargon II (722–705 BC). After the period of alliance between Tiglath-pileser III and the Mannean king Iranzu, the fight for hegemony of the major states involved Mannea and its leadership. During the reigns of Sargon II and his Urartian contemporary Rusa I (c. 730–713 BC), the sources, both royal inscriptions and letters, inform us of disorder and upheavals in Mannea caused by members of the local leadership that reluctantly bore the allied and tributary status the Assyrians had imposed.²³ Urartian support favoured the opposition of some Mannean governors and internal disorders especially in occasion of the local king's succession, in particular supporting the secession of Metatti, governor of the Mannean province of Zikirtu. Moreover, at the death of Iranzu, Ullusununu contested the succession of his brother Aza and the alliance with the Assyrians, finally killing him in battle.²⁴ Assyrian military intervention succeeded in subduing or punishing the rebel governors and allies of Metatti of Zikirtu, killed another governor, Bagdatti of Uišdiš, deported Dajukku who had been supported by the Urartians as new king, and obtained the final submission of the new king Ullusununu to Assyria, and the pacification of the country.²⁵

This operation was conducted in the framework of a successful offensive against Urartu, which took advantage of internal conflicts in that country. The tributary status of Mannea is recorded in Assyrian annals, together with that of Ellipi, Allabria, and the Medes.

The events briefly described here illustrate the particular structure of this polity – with a ruling class divided by internal rivalries, looking for advantages deriving from external support, and at the same time being caught in the net of their conflicts. Mannean leadership, however, managed to maintain a certain freedom of action and to resume an independent policy when the general equilibrium in the Iranian regions changed and both Urartu and Assyria had, for different reasons, to relax their aggressive policy. Internal strife in Urartu, the blow received from the Assyrians, plus other not clearly determined factors seemingly reduced Urartu's offensive capacity, and Assyria too appears to have encountered new obstacles in the north-east.

In Esarhaddon's times Mannea trusted in the alliance of Išpakā of Iškuza, an ethnonym that in the sources is sometimes mentioned together with the Cimmerians and for which identification with the Scythians has been proposed, although on an erroneous ba-

23 During Tiglath-pileser III's 2nd *palû* the tribute from the Mannean king is recorded in occasion of a campaign targeting Parsua and Bit-Ḫamban.

24 Lanfranchi, 2020: "In Sargon's Annals it is stated that Ullusununu, the king of Mannea who had been installed by Sargon himself, rebelled and instigated two local kinglets to "serfdom" to the Urartian king (Fuchs, 1994: Ann 85 p. 98), using a term (*urdūtu*) which implies a political submission tightly similar to that of the Assyrian system of the *adē*".

25 Hassanzadeh, 2022: 19 with references and further bibliography.

sis.²⁶ Assyria's efforts sought to maintain her position and defend the borders, also making incursions into the enemy territory. The condition of Assyrian districts facing the Mannean and Median lands and the border-line fortresses, in particular those guarding the passes between Hubuškia and Mannea, are the objects of some oracular queries (SAA 4 29–32) – seeking divine responses to specific questions. These were probably related to the campaign which is briefly described in royal inscriptions and also documented by letters of Bel-ušeziḫ, a Babylonian scholar expert in astrological omens.²⁷ To intervene in Mannean territory was considered risky, but the Mannaeans were judged vulnerable if they lacked Cimmerian support (SAA 10 111). These references show Cimmerians and Iškuḫu in the role of allies, or of professional troops at the service of the Mannaeans, and illustrate the capacity of the latter kingdom to attract these military elites and thus constitute a centre of opposition against Assyria. This situation required constant attention by the Assyrians to protect a border that could be maintained thanks to military planning and strategic alliances. In fact, Assurbanipal had to intervene to protect the integrity of the Assyrian province of Zamua – where the Mannean Aḫšeri (perhaps via an itinerary descending east of the Azmar range) had penetrated, reaching the crucial stronghold of Dur-Aššur (for which the identification with Tell Yasin has been proposed)²⁸ – and to re-establish the tributary/friendly status of the Mannean leadership.

Two points are worth stressing: the growing instability of the eastern border, with increasing difficulties for the Assyrians after Sennacherib's reign,²⁹ and the strategic importance of the alliance with the Mannean dynasty, which appears to have been able to play a role in the Iranian system of relations, probably guaranteeing control that the Assyrians could not exercise directly. If and how this was connected with the possible exportation of cultural and political motifs and models from Mannea to other areas of the Zagros sector remains an open question, but appears plausible. Moreover, among other changes, the confrontation of the major powers Assyria and Urartu fostered the role of military elites and created new opportunities for militarily organized groups coming from outside. It appears plausible that common models of power representation spread widely and were appropriated together with local patterns.

26 Lanfranchi, 2011 argues that it is based on a misinterpretation since Scythia is a Greek “wide-ranging geographical concept” and a much later designation.

27 See Lanfranchi, 1989 : 9 –114.

28 New documents allow speculation on the identification of other sites and military itineraries, see Nishiyama, 2020.

29 Sennacherib intervened to annex Elenzaš to the province of ʿHarḫar (Radner, 2003 : 58). On the southern front the hostilities concerned the province of ʿHarḫar and Namri and the kingdom of Ellipi, and the Assyrians had to intervene in the area against the Mede Kaštaritu. Cimmerians were present in this sector too and, although their hostility is not attested by known sources, in the oracular queries referring to events that are likely dated to 670 BC, they are seen as potentially dangerous, together with the Mannaeans and the Medes. See Lanfranchi, 1990 : 107.

2. Zamua: an Assyrian borderland province

The formation of Assyrian provinces and border provinces in particular was a lengthy process with non-uniform outcomes regarding structures and status. We return to Zamua, which was mentioned above, to illustrate some aspects of the process of constitution of this Assyrian border province and their consequences in the area.³⁰

The inscriptions of the Assyrian king Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) describe in detail the conquest of the region located between the upper basin of the Lower Zab and the Tanjero-Diyala basin, i.e. the plain of Sulaymaniya and Shahrizor, which had represented an area of expansion of the Mesopotamian states since the remote past, and was much easier for them to reach than the northern area. The Assyrian account describes a blockade of the passes by a local leader, Nur-Adad, as the cause of the legitimate Assyrian military intervention, thus hinting at the economic interests at stake and the presence of resistance to Assyrian intrusions. It may be hypothesized that the itineraries through mountains and passes were controlled by local elites through fortified watchposts in strategic positions, likely a system that was also present elsewhere, for instance in the area of the Row-anduz pass and Lake Urmiah, as we have seen above.

After the Assyrian conquest, the area underwent a process of provincialization that presumably altered various aspects of local life, including the distribution and role of settlements, especially regarding their transformation into – or the creation of – centres of the new administration. In the north-eastern borderland, the process continued during the reigns of the following kings and included the establishment of other provinces, in particular those entrusted to the highest officials of the kingdom: the *rab šaqē* and the *nagir ekalli*. These formed a system of border provinces where deportees were settled and fortresses organized (e.g. Tiglath-pileser III, RINAP 1 5: 10).

These areas were centres of Assyrianization, as is shown by evidence of continuity and transformation – as well as discontinuity – in the settlement record, and also by certain epigraphic sources, i.e. a few cuneiform texts recently unearthed in the sites of Gird-i Gulak, Tell Sitak, Dinka.³¹ This implied the recruiting of local inhabitants into the Assyrian army, the manning of territorially strategic points, and the presence of both troops which were at the orders of the provincial governor and special corps of the Assyrian army and police, such as the *Ituayyu* and *Gurrayyu*, as attested by SAA 5 215.³²

This provincial system appears to have been vital for Assyria's position in the region due to the on-going expansionistic policy of Urartu. As seen above for Mannea, around the mid 8th cent. BC, Assyria had to react energetically to curb increasing Urartian ambitions, that had in the previous decades targeted and menaced Assyrian interests both in Syria and the Zagros. In the latter area this reaction took the form of an offensive policy

³⁰ A recent reconsideration of Assyrian conquest and organization of the province has been provided by Yamada, 20 . For an overview and discussion of recent investigations see Ponchia 20 . On the status and role of Zamua see also Ponchia / Lanfranchi, 2024, *passim*.

³¹ See respectively: MacGinnis / Skuldbøl / Colantoni, 2020; Radner, 2017; Radner, 2015.

³² Fales, 2010 : 10 –107.

in the regions where Urartu had created dangerous bridgeheads, such as in Parsua.³³ In the Assyrian front of expansion and confrontation with Urartu and other Zagros polities, the province of Zamua, while remaining a crucial enclave in the borderland, was flanked by the creation of new, more advanced provinces, i.e. Parsua and Bit-Ḫamban, created by Tiglath-pileser III, and later Kišesim³⁴ and Ḫarḫar³⁵ created by Sargon II in the Media area. In these more advanced provinces, the conquered centres were renamed with a specific type of toponym: Kišesim was changed to Kār-Nergal, Ḫarḫar to Kār-Šarukīn, Kišešlu to Kār-Nabû, Qindau to Kār-Sin, Anzaria to Kār-Adad, and Bīt-Bagāia to Kār-Ištar. These towns were thus qualified as emporia/trade centres and their function could be interpreted as that of junction points in the mountain and valley network, i.e. as termini where forced appropriation of resources was integrated with trade, both in local and long-distance circuits.

The function as connecting points is also evident at the institutional level. Various contacts with leaders designated as *bēl āli*, literally “city lord”, are attested in Assyrian sources. They were present in the provinces, Zamua included, and were the intermediaries between the Assyrian administration and groups that maintained their own organization, often being employed as military contingents that effectively cooperated with the Assyrians. The widening of economic circuits, as well as rivalry and hostility between the imperial states, probably combined to increasing requirements connected with the control of routes and enclaves and in the long term fostered the employment of auxiliary troops of professional soldiers, among whom Cimmerians, Iškuzu and Medes can be counted.³⁶ Zamua remained under Assyrian control until the end of the empire, probably with the role of outpost facing an area where profound changes were taking place and new difficulties arising.

As a borderland province between Assyria and further conquests, external/tributary or hostile territories and forces, Zamua served as a fundamental connecting and negotiation point with the various components of the Zagros lands in situations that changed over time.

33 On Parsua see Lanfranchi, 2003 : 100–103. On the problem of differentiating between the designations Parsua, Parsuaš and Parsumaš, see Waters, 2011a, who refers to the distinct entities of the Assyrian province of Parsua in the Zagros and Parsumaš in Fars with which Elamites were in close contact, and discusses the identification of Anšan or Parsu(m)aš.

34 Sargon says in his Annals that he erected an image of himself at Kišesim and it has been hypothesized that the Najafābād stele is that very monument. Najafābād, which is located in the Asadabad valley (between Kangavar and Hamadan), may therefore be the site of ancient Kišesim (Potts, 202 : 57 citing Reade 1995). See also Alibaigi et al., 2017.

35 Tentatively identified with Tepe Giyan (Radner, 2013 : 446 with bibliography). For possible identification with the site of Tapeh Kheibar in north/north-west Mahidasht, see Alibaigi et al., 2017. For the alternative possibility of identifying it with Quwakh Tepe – around 20 km north of the former – in the Kouzaran plain, where recent investigations have been conducted and two fragments of a Sargon II's inscribed stela were most recently found, see Rezaei/Alibaigi/MacGinnis, 2023, who propose that Tepe Giyan was ancient Irnisa (Nišai/Nišša) (pp. 137f.).

36 Lanfranchi 2003; Vêr, 2020.

3. Military elites and state formation: the Medes

The Medes are the last case of the complex system of interconnections in the Iranian borderlands that we briefly consider in these pages. As is well known, it is the most debated; the focus of the debate being the primary role in the transmission of the imperial model inherited from Assyria they have been assigned by Herodotean and classical historiography. The question of the existence of a Median empire was posed on a new basis by H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg in 1988, and examined using a multi-directional approach in a seminal work collecting the proceedings of the conference held in Padova in 2001 and published in 2003 by its organizers, G.B. Lanfranchi, M. Roaf and R. Rollinger, who have also reconsidered the matter in subsequent contributions, giving new fuel to discussion. For brevity's sake, here I simply propose some observations concerning the general scenario in the light of what has been noted above, adding references to more recent studies considering local sources and the evidence of methods and structures of the Assyrian control.³⁷

As to the nature of the Medes' organization, H. Gopnik has recently proposed reading the Herodotean tale, especially that of the Medes' unification by Deiokes, vis-à-vis the archaeological evidence from the sites she defines as the "Median congregational centers", or, more precisely, from the few centres that have been investigated and can be identified as representatives of a group that was certainly larger.³⁸ These sites occupied positions at the interface between lowland and highland circuits, areas of diverse production and strategies, and along trade routes that they controlled.³⁹ We might add that this position can be compared with references to the creation of trade centres in the Assyrian provinces, that have been mentioned above, and viewed together as an expanding system of interrelations. It was presumably stimulated by the growing borders of the empires whose need for goods and men exceeded the limits they were able to control directly.

³⁷ Also including the construction of palaces and fortifications, as attested by archaeological remains, which can be compared with written documents referring to these activities or to the implementation of legal and administrative procedures. Assyrian letters from the provinces reporting to the king the governors' activities are a major, though insufficient, source of information; among the archaeological finds, especially interesting is the case of Tepe Giyan, mentioned above. For an overview of the various sources, see Radner, 2013. A comprehensive outline of linguistic and archaeological approaches to the Median question has been proposed by Rossi, 2017, who remarks how the Medes' identity remains elusive (see in particular pp. 478–479).

³⁸ According to the scholar, Herodotus' sources – i.e. his Persian informants – must have described Median organization "as a series of independent chiefdoms rather than a state". This system would have made it "still possible for the Median people as a whole to control decision making", a view that can be compared with that provided by Assyrian sources (Gopnik, 2017 : 42).

³⁹ "The Malayer valley, for instance, has four identified centers (Nush-i Jan, Gūnespān, and two found on survey) (...), located at the four entry points into the valley." (Gopnik, 2017 : 152). Commenting on a difficult Herodotean passage (1.134.3), Ctesias, and the Biblical references of Jer 25:25, 51:11, and 5 :27–28 which mention a plurality of Median kings, Waters, 2013 : 250 suggests the possibility of a "Median domination over multiple, neighboring peoples, each of whom owed allegiance, directly or indirectly to a Median overlord, chief, or king, however the Median ruler styled himself."

The possibility of fixing a comprehensive and precise chronology would be of the utmost importance to define possibly interconnected dynamics, such as the floruit and decline of the Median towns, attested archaeologically between the mid-8th and the mid- or even early-7th cent. BC, and the vicissitudes of the Assyrian dominion, i.e. especially the difficulties the latter met to maintain the control of the eastern provinces due to the hostility of some Median lords, such as Kaštaritu during Esarhaddon's reign, and of the Manneans (as mentioned above).⁴⁰ While it is difficult to assess the effective impact of these episodes on the solidity of Assyrian frontier areas, they appear to point to the growing organizational and military capacity of the local leaders, as a result of their long-lasting contacts with the major states.⁴¹ The imperial model influenced those who remained outside it and those who learnt to organise their resistance and opposition against its dominion.

An increasing instability in the area might be connected – as cause or consequence – with changing large-scale relations. The developing exploitation of other trade routes, such as the Levantine ones as far as the Arabian peninsula, also including the most important resource of horses from Egypt to be deployed in the cavalry units, might have determined the loss or decrease of the economic importance of the so-called Median heartland (the Hamadan, Malayer, Kangavar triangle).⁴² Moreover, the diminished strategic importance of this region in the Assyro-Urartian confrontation might have induced the Assyrians to reduce their investment there.⁴³ Further data are needed to evaluate these hypotheses.

As mentioned above, the Median leaders and troops were also included in the Assyrian ranks in accordance with a system already employed with other groups such as the Ituyyu and Gurrayyu. Their leaders became members of the Assyrian governing hierarchy, being attracted by the imperial system that determined changes in their organization at various levels. In the words of Esarhaddon's royal inscriptions, the lords of the Zagros chiefdoms were compelled by necessity to appreciate the advantages of their alliance with

40 For the problematic reconstruction of Kaštaritu's revolt, which threatened the provinces of Harhar and Namri, see Lanfranchi, 1990 : 84–108.

41 Lanfranchi, 2021 maintains that the strengthening of the relations “introduced the peripheral élites into the most crucial mechanisms of the imperial functioning, turning them into a true component of the central imperial élite. Decisive matters like royal succession, foreign policy, management of the imperial army, were made available to the tributary kings and to the élites surrounding them, who increasingly received more or less ample delegations in those matters, so that they tended to be more and more involved in the central decision-making process”.

42 As to the chronology of the Median sites: Nush-i Jan has been dated from late/mid 8th to early 7th cent., Godin Tepe from mid-8th to mid-7th, with a squatter occupation until the 6th century. Gopnik, 2003 : 257 maintains that the centralization of the Median state might have been the cause of the abandonment of sites such as Godin Tepe, in the late 7th-early 6th cent., and also Nush-i Jan, which occurred slightly earlier. Stronach, 2003 points to interpretive difficulties due to the fact that sites such as Hamadan/Ecbatana have been looted and variously affected by following conquests and occupations. The scholar also mentions the possibility that Erbil became a Median centre along the northern section of the “Transtigridian corridor”.

43 Cf. Lanfranchi / Rollinger, 2021 : 24 on the strategic importance of this area in blocking Urartian expansion.

Assyria: “Because of the chieftains who had threatened them, they implored my lordship and begged me for help”.⁴⁴

In fact the Medes, or groups of them who deemed it convenient to side with the empire, became a buttress of Assyrian defensive policy in the north-east and increased their involvement in the administration.⁴⁵ In this phase, as attested by the loyalty oaths sworn by the Median chiefs to the Assyrian dynasty, the Medes were a fundamental interlocutor from a military perspective and had probably a primary role in maintaining Assyrian control over the eastern border provinces.⁴⁶ It may be assumed that these provinces progressively became their headquarters, and the regions where the Medes definitely took on the role of governance during the confused phase of the last Assyrian kings, i.e. possibly already in the last, undocumented years of Assurbanipal.

The lands they took control of were Assyrianized territories – and they could take advantage of the existing organization – as also suggested by an intriguing piece of evidence dating after the end of Assyrian power. This is a contract found in the vicinity of Hasankeyf, in the Kašiyari region, an area that had been part of the Assyrian northern province of the *rab šaqē*, the “chief cupbearer”. It bears a date formula according to the Babylonian system: “Month Shebat (XI), 10th day, 9th year of Lābaši, chief cupbearer”, which is preceded, as recently pointed out by M. Roaf, by the name of ¹*ú-ba-ki-is-te-ri* LUGAL *Mat-a-a*, i.e. the Cyaxares that, together with the Babylonians, brought to its end the Assyrian empire. For the rest, the document is perfectly analogous to Assyrian contracts and suggests a context of mixed population (as far as onomastics can be significant in this respect), probably the development of a process that began during the Assyrian administration.⁴⁷ The document thus appears to illustrate the reception of the Assyrian heritage by the Medes in this changed context and their taking control of power structures.

The relation of the Medes with the other power in the north-east, Urartu, is another crucial issue and the long debate on the question must therefore be at least briefly consid-

44 RINAP 4 1: iv 32–35 and duplicates record the name of Uppis, chieftain of the city Partakka, Zanasana, chieftain of the city Partukka, (and) Ramateia, chieftain of the city Urakazabarna, for whom see below.

45 This became evident at the end of Assyria. Lanfranchi, 2021 writes: “I would suggest that those who drove the attack against Assyria together with the Babylonian king were members of the top of the ruling class of Assyria itself. They were the heirs of an almost two centuries old experience of relations with, and governing within the Assyrian Empire, albeit maintaining their original role of local rulers.”

46 The names and origins of leaders swearing the oath recorded in the preserved documents show that the system was not limited to the Medes, but extended to various Zagros enclaves where troops under Assyrian orders operated (SAA 2 6): Ĥumbareš, city lord of Naḥšimarti; Ramateia, city lord of Urakazabarna; Bur-dadi, city lord of Kar-zitali; Tuni, city lord Ellipayu; Ĥatarna, city lord of Bit-sikris; Larkutla, city lord of Zamua; [PN], city lord of Izai. A man named Ĥumbareš is known from two fragmentary letters (SAA 16 146 and 147), in which it seems that there is a connection between this man and Elam. The texts are too fragmentary for any conclusions to be drawn.

47 Cyaxares might be recognized as king in a territory identified as the jurisdiction of governor Lābaši. Due to the impossibility of dating the document precisely, it cannot be established whether this implies a certain autonomy, and the relations with the Babylonian dominion.

ered.⁴⁸ The position of Urartu and especially the date of its demise, for which the alternative proposals of the mid-7th or end of the 7th century/beginning of the 6th BC have been put forward, appear particularly important to define the extension and characteristics of Median power and evaluate the Herodotean account of their sovereignty in Anatolia. The hypothesis that dates the collapse of the Urartian state to around the mid-7th century BC, after Rusa II's great construction works, is based on the evidence of destruction by groups of invaders identified in the remains of the fortress of Bastam and other sites, and the diffusion in the Urartian area of the so-called Median Pottery Tradition.⁴⁹ Discoveries dated to the late Urartian period have been analysed as possibly attesting the diffusion of Median models, or the formation of a wide *koinè* in which the same models of power representation had spread.⁵⁰ Stronach *et alii* 2008–2010 in their analysis of the architectural remains at Erebuni hypothesize that the late Urartian 30-column hall unearthed in the site appears “to owe something to arguably earlier features in the architecture of Media” and corresponds to a phase of major openness to external influences.⁵¹

However, the origin of these developments has also been searched for in Mannean and earlier Urartian examples, in their turn probably not isolated from a wider circulation that in the 9th–8th BC century included Syria,⁵² with the possibility of even more complicated cultural interactions, considering the existence of examples from south-eastern Arabia.⁵³ Moreover, chronologically the collapse of the Urartian kingdom would have roughly corresponded to the decline of the Median heartland.⁵⁴

According to another perspective, the Urartian kingdom continued until the end of the 7th/beginning of the 6th century BC. This view is supported by a different interpretation of archaeological and written evidence. The latter is represented by Babylonian

48 The proposal of an earlier date for the Urartian decline was put forward by S. Kroll in 1984, criticizing the currently accepted date of between 61 and 585 BC, see Hellwag, 2012 for an overview of the lengthy debate on the problem and references. She considers Kroll's hypothesis of the destruction of Urartian main sites around the mid-7th cent. BC as the best supported by available evidence, although a definite date and answers to questions concerning causes cannot be given. See also Kroll / Roaf / Zimansky, 201 .

49 This tradition is also identified by S. Kroll, 200 , who maintains however that there was an ongoing Urartian tradition, although with slight alterations.

50 According to Gopnik an example would be the presence of a columned hall derived from models from the Zagros area in Urartian contexts (Karaosmanoğlu / Korucu, 2012). The chronology is however debated.

51 Stronach *et al.*, 2008–2010 : 148: “Furthermore, the vivid wall paintings that are connected with the Columned Hall offer an eloquent tribute to the continuing vitality of Urartian art and religion down to the end of the 7th century, if not even for a few years beyond that date. In short, the majestic Columned Hall at Erebuni must have come to represent one of the more renowned centers of late Urartian power and ceremonial, not least with reference to areas situated to the north of the Araxes.”

52 Cf. Lanfranchi / Ponchia, 2019.

53 Gopnik 201 . She maintains that “columned halls were not exclusively associated with an ethnic or political group such as the Indo-Europeans or Medes but were instead part of a new architectural expression of social position.”

54 Kroll, 2003 : 283.

Chronicles, which, though fundamental to identifying events and a chronological grid, are not without problems concerning the supposed objectivity that their apparently unbiased chronicle form might induce one to attribute to them. They are a product of the scribal interpretation of history, in which stylistic models – e.g. the description of mountain itineraries – or geographical designations may be founded on tradition, and thus cannot be uncritically accepted. Particularly intriguing is a passage of the Nabonidus Chronicle for the king's 9th year, i.e. 547 BC, which has been interpreted as follows: "In the month of Nisan, King Cyrus (II) of Parsu mustered his army and crossed the Tigris downstream from Arbela and, in the month of Iyyar, [march]ed to 'U'[arṭu] (*ana^{kurf} Ū-[raš-ṭu il-li]k*). / He defeated its king (or: put its king to death), seized its possessions, [and] set up his own garrison [there]. After that, the king and his garrison resided there".⁵⁵ If interpreted correctly, this attestation would indicate that the Medes had not taken control of Urarṭu and extended their empire in a north-westerly direction – as far as the Halys according to the Herodotean narrative – but that the region still preserved some autonomy, although its political structure cannot be defined. Moreover, the later reference to a military intervention, at the time of Darius' accession to the throne after an attempted rebellion, would confirm the retention of a local identity in the area.⁵⁶ These pieces of evidence at least illustrate that the definition of Median rulership is a controversial matter and might suggest the hypothesis that the Medes were able to organize direct control only in the regions that had belonged to the Assyrian administration and some neighbouring areas, where they were already members of the government establishment.

As to the archaeological evidence, the identification of Median pottery types "as a distinct archaeological culture" and the evaluation of its diffusion as a significant marker for reconstructing the demise of the Urartian kingdom have been questioned when considered vis-à-vis the general pottery horizon of the area.⁵⁷ Since archaeological evidence, with various connected problems of chronological definition,⁵⁸ is largely used in this debate,

⁵⁵ Nabonidus Chronicle 7 II 15–18. Trans. Rollinger, 200 : 57, who accepts the reading proposed by Oelsner and comments on the historical meaning of the passage, concluding: "The history of Urartu as a political element in the ancient Near East did not end in the last decades of the seventh century. It continued until 547 BC when Cyrus conquered this region and integrated it into his empire."

⁵⁶ Rollinger, 2008 : 61.

⁵⁷ Khatchadourian, 2018 : 18 . The author also observes that "In recent decades, scholars in Armenia who work on the pottery of this 'late Urartian' period have established as the research priority to give attention to the coexistence of Urartian material culture alongside 'local' pottery styles whose origins are to be traced to the early Iron Age or earlier (Lchashen-Metsamor 6), and to identify shifting patterns in the contextual association of these two assemblages". He concludes that in the Ararat plain the three vessels types classified by Kroll as Median Pottery Tradition (MPT) are to be dated to the 7th–6th century BC and that "The introduction of these three shapes in the 7th century represents minor morphological developments in a potting tradition that, on present evidence, appears to have remained largely unchanged across the 8th-early 6th centuries, in terms of most vessel forms, surface treatments, and firing conditions." (p. 191).

⁵⁸ Through the analysis of pottery remains Gopnik, 2003 : 256–257 proposes the identification of distinct assemblages and their chronology as follows: the Baba Jan and Nush-i Jan earliest ceramic assemblages are probably dated to the second half of the 8th cent. BC, followed by a mid to late

together with the results of recent research, it is perhaps appropriate to point out that, in the complex system of relations that characterized north-western Iran (as briefly described above), there had long been a wide-ranging circulation of men and power representations. Therefore, whereas evidence such as monumental architecture or pottery styles presents us with images of changing roles and relations, it seems risky to use them as archaeological diagnostics of the affirmation of a Median state – and more specifically an imperial organization covering a vast territory, also including the hypothesis that this empire extended to the eastern segment of the Great Khorasan road towards the region of the Caspian sea and Turkmenistan,⁵⁹ or (in the opposite direction) to the Halys border.

4. Conclusion

It appears that pressure from and hostility between the imperial powers of Assyria and Urartu in the Iranian borderlands fostered the development of local military elites, affected commercial and cultural relations, determined changes in the demographic composition, as well as in social and government institutions, and enhanced the spread, in both conquered and independent countries, of their ideology. However, borderlands were in their turn active participants in these dynamics, progressively taking a preeminent role in determining them, and their elites contributed to the construction and diffusion of a political lexicon of international prestige.

The Medes appears to have been Assyria's heirs, both through right of conquest and because of their previous inclusion in the Assyrian government hierarchy – to which, in the area's complex system of interrelations, they mainly owed their uniform Median identity. In any case, perhaps because the connecting fabric of the Assyrian military ranks and administrative machine to which the Medes belonged was already fading, or because the destruction of the Assyrian core centres they caused made it impossible for them to grasp the system's reins and revive it, the Median leaders were not able to retain the legacy of a

7th cent. BC phase. A following pottery phase is dated from the late 7th to early 6th century BC. A squatter period is then attested in the same sites and at Jameh Shuran, provisionally dated from the mid 6th to early 5th cent. BC. See also, more recently, Stronach / Roaf, 2007 on the disputed dates of Median centres (in particular p. 217).

59 Particular interest has been devoted to discoveries in a north-eastern direction from the Median heartland, such as those in the fortress of Tepe Ozbaki 70 km from Teheran, in the area of Rayy along the Khorasan Highway where architecture and pottery attributable to pre-Achaemenid Medes have been found, and dated to the 7th-early 6th cent. BC (Stronach, 2003). Boucharlat, 2020: 415 upholds: "In such conditions, I don't see how we could conclude to a Median *entity* – to avoid to speak of empire, kingdom, etc. – on such a so large extension as it was sometimes suggested. This prudent attitude derives from observations: several components are common to the architecture of the 1st mill BC in western, northwestern Iran, eastern Anatolia and Caucasus: buttressed walls (...), narrow arrowslots crossing a thick wall, long parallel rooms, some pottery shapes."

real empire, although they had certainly contributed to the diffusion of the symbols and methods of imperial dominion.⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ Tuplin concludes his critical reconsideration of various points of the recent debate on the Median empire and trustfulness of the Herodotean account: “Above all, let us reaffirm the importance of the Median interlude in creating conditions from which other Iranians—heirs both to the Scytho-Median and to a more Mesopotamian (and literate) state-model—would create the largest empire (properly so-called) the Near Eastern and Western worlds had yet seen.” (Tuplin 2015: 243).

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