

Media and the Medes

Medesmēdz; **MEDIA** *mē dē-ə* [Heb *mādî, māday*; Aram *māday*; Assyr *Madai*; Old Pers *Māda*; Gk *Mēdoi, Mēdia*]; AV also **MEDIAN** (Dnl. 5:31 [MT 6:1]). An ancient people and land SW of the Caspian Sea, between the Zagros Mountains and the Salt Desert (Dasht-i-Kavir), including Azerbaijan in the north (Media Atropatene). Most of this area is mountainous, with fertile valleys and some broad plains where horses were raised.

I. Culture and Religion

So little excavation has been done in the Median homeland that there is only scattered material evidence for cultural and religious history. The Medes were Aryans (cf. Gen. 10:2), closely akin to the Persians, and entered Iran as nomads ca 1000 b.c. Their religion may have begun as a form of nature worship with animal sacrifices, the Magi tribe having a privileged role. Before the rise of Cyrus this faith had been altered by assimilation of the teachings of Zoroaster (7th cent?). Zoroaster conceived of two gods — a good power, Ahuramazda, and an evil power, Ahriman — and propagated a nonsacrificial cult that involved the sacred fire and lacked images. Details of Median beliefs remain hypothetical in the absence of early documentation.

That the Medes had knowledge of writing is unquestionable, but the nature of their script, if any, is uncertain. It could have been a complicated cuneiform script like Babylonian, a simple form like Urartian, Old Persian, or Elamite, or a hieroglyphic script. Consequently the Median language can be only incompletely reconstructed from philological research in related tongues and from occasional quotations and loanwords.

Sculptures of the Persian period give hints of Median appearance, and a few objects unearthed in Persia can be called Median by comparison with these sculptures (e.g., a golden dagger sheath from the Oxus Treasure, now in the British Museum).

Some rock-cut tombs in the Zagros Mountains were probably made for Median nobles of the Achaemenian court.

II. History

From the 9th cent b.c., Assyrian inscriptions record attacks on Median settlements in northern Iran (ARAB, I, § 581, Shalmaneser III; § 739, Adad-nirari III). At that time there was no single Median state but instead numerous tribal groups that often fought each other and raided the neighboring states of Mannai and Urartu. Tiglath-pileser III established control over some Median territory, claiming capture of 65,000 men, ca 740 b.c.; Sargon II fought against Medes, Manneans, and Urartians, with numbers of chieftains submitting to him. One leader, Dayaukku, was deported to Syria, and Israelite citizens were settled in Media.

Apparently Media posed little threat to Assyria for the next two decades. Cimmerian and Scythian invasions, however, ousted Assyria from Mannai and pressed upon Media so hard that three Median chiefs sought Assyrian aid ca 676 b.c. Having lost his supply of valuable horses from Mannai, Esarhaddon of Assyria was ready to take them from more distant Media. His troops penetrated as far as the Salt Desert near Tehran, and various cities were subjugated. Vassal treaties were imposed upon the principal Median rulers in 672 b.c., binding them to Assyria and its kings. The number of chieftains mentioned shows that Media was still a collection of separate principalities.

Little is known of the course of Median history through the subsequent decades. Ashurbanipal claimed conquest of one chieftain and several Median settlements in the course of his campaign against the Mannai, ca 660 b.c. (ARAB, II, § 854). The cuneiform records mention nothing more about Media until 615 b.c. This gap may be partly filled from Herodotus's account of the rise of Media (i.97ff), although it is open to varying interpretations, only one of which is given here. He named four kings of Media: Deioces, Phraortes, Cyaxares, Astyages. The first may be the Dayaukku whom Sargon exiled or another prince of the same name. Unification of the six Median tribes is credited to Deioces, while his son Phraortes subjected the

adjacent Persian tribe, conquered Asia (Armenia and Anatolia), and died in an attack on Assyria. Phraortes is commonly identified with Kashtaritu, a chieftain who troubled Esarhaddon ca 670 b.c., but the tenuous argument for this equation should most probably be discounted.

With Cyaxares more information becomes available through the combination of Greek and Babylonian sources. His first years were clouded by Scythian dominance, brought about by a continued Median attack on Assyria, who summoned these barbarian allies. By 616 b.c. Cyaxares had regained Median independence, enabling him to launch a new assault on Assyria. After Median troops had sacked the ancient capital of Asshur, Cyaxares made alliance with Babylon, and one of his princesses married the crown prince Nebuchadrezzar (who built the “Hanging Gardens” of Babylon to counter her pining for the Median hills, according to Berossus, *apud* Josephus CAp i.19 [141]). Cyaxares destroyed Nineveh, in conjunction with Babylonian forces, in 612 b.c. and the last remnants of Assyrian power at Haran in 610 b.c. While Babylon established its sway over Syria and Palestine, Cyaxares extended Median rule across Anatolia to the kingdom of Lydia. After an inconclusive war, Media and Lydia concluded a peace treaty through the mediation of their respective allies, Babylon and Cilicia (585 b.c.; Herodotus i.74).

Cyaxares died about that time, and the throne passed to his son Astyages, whose daughter Mandane was mother of Cyrus, ruler of the related subject nation of Persia. Cyrus built up his strength, overthrew his grandfather in 549 b.c. with the help

of disaffected Median generals, and inaugurated the Persian (Achaemenian) Empire. Only in this period does Media figure in the OT; Jeremiah saw her drinking the cup of wrath (25:25) and soon afterward participating in the fall of Babylon (539 b.c.; Jer. 51:11, 28; Isa. 13:17; 21:2).

Media’s loss of power did not involve loss of identity or influence, however. A Mede attempted to assert independence at the beginning of Darius’s reign, claiming royal lineage, and was crushed with difficulty. Cyrus made the Median capital Ecbatana (modern Hamadân) his capital, a position it retained beside Persepolis and Susa until Alexander’s conquest (cf. Ezr. 6:2). Moreover, he adopted the system of government set up by Median kings and retained Medes in high office. It is significant that the term “satrap” (governor of a province) is Median in origin and that the word for king is written in Median form in Old Persian texts. The predominating Median influence is also shown by the word order in the phrase “Medes and Persians” (cf. Dan. 5:28; 6:8, 12, 15; 8:20) during the early decades, and Greek writers spoke of the great Persian War as “the war with the Medes” in some cases (Thucydides i.14). Later the names were reversed (cf. Est. 1:3, 14, 18f), although an official chronicle kept the old usage (10:2).

1 Maccabees mentions Media under Syrian rule (6:56) and under the Parthians (14:1–3; cf. Josephus Ant. xx.3.1–4 [54–74]). Among the Pentecost crowd (Acts 2:9) there were Jewish Medes, most likely from Media Atropatene, a state allied with Rome against the Parthians.