

**When the Historical Events  
are Hidden in a Story  
Origins and Reliability of  
the *Medikos Logos* Written  
by Herodotus<sup>1</sup>**

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**I**n his huge and famous work we know under the name of *Historiae*, Herodotus has amply dealt with the question of Persia and the history of its kings. Therefore, concerning the period which preceded the reign of Cyrus, many scholars asserted that the passage concerning the history of the Medes, the so-called *Medikos Logos* (Herodotus, I, 95 - 107), is a pure narrative

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construction devoid of any historical reality. Contrary to them, others have commonly taken the text for granted and strongly defended its reliability. Anyway their opposite opinions – we even could say about positions – nurtured very long and sometimes very harsh debates between historians.

Whatever appreciation we can give to the work of the Greek Historian, it seems for us very difficult to follow either point of view. We have first to take account that the main goal of the Greek Historian was to report political events that happened about a century and half before he began to gather information. Obviously, Herodotus wrote for the Greeks of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC to give them a better knowledge about the history and the people of the far from well known Oriental World<sup>2</sup>. Certainly Persia was for him a delicate topic according to the particularly hectic political situation of the time where war operations and diplomatic negotiations between the Greeks cities and the Achaemenid dynasty followed each other.

At the time when Herodotus writes his story, the great majority of the Greeks were not acquainted with the genesis of Cyrus and the history of the Iranians. Even amongst the cities of Ionia where the existence of the Medes was relatively better known, the rise of Cyrus was seen as a simple dynastic change<sup>3</sup>.

The main objective of the Greek historian is to explain to his readers how this Persian nobleman was able to seize the power to rule successfully over a mighty empire and how he led victoriously his army from a remote and mysterious country to the border of the Greek world (i.e.. the Aegean coast of Anatolia). This goal forced Herodotus to reconstruct the political events that took place before Cyrus as a sort of historical introduction. Probably, he was aware of the gap that lasted between the fall of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of a new powerful kingship under Cyrus. Obviously to prepare the ground of his main chapter about Persia he had to fill this gap before. Herodotus' choice was to write a history of a Median dynasty through a chronological succession of four kings at the end of which he cleverly introduced the figure of Cyrus as the last successor of a royal lineage. Conspicuously, we have to recognize that his story may be on scholarly and historically points of view little convincing. But through his literary and narrative construction the Greek historian can introduce the beginnings of Cyrus' life in a satisfactory and comprehensive form for the Greeks readers. The most problematic point matched by Herodotus was the unusual procedure con-

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<sup>2</sup> Herodotus is traditionally believed to have begun his work in the year 435.

<sup>3</sup> Recently some careful analysis of the Greek sources have proved that the terms of Persia/Persian replaced very lately at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC the usual terms of Mede/Median (GRAF (1984), p. 17-19; p. 27-28; TUPLIN (1994), p. 235-236). The comprehension about the existence of an imperial power seems to have occurred during or after the campaigns led by Darius and Xerxes against the Greeks.

cerning the historical succession of a Median ruler by Cyrus the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. We don't know if this passage of the text have worried the Greek readers, but the fact that such event has been related in a historical work seems prove the story was agreed by the readers.

Maybe here it reveals a deep-rooted characteristic of the Greek historical concept of the succession of empires. According Herodotus' mind – and to the Greek mind of his epoch as well – an empire like Assyria with its mighty army and organization could only be crushed down by a political power as powerful and as organized as him.

Most of the detractors of the Greek author's work have concluded that there are no traces of a centralized Median empire as asserted by him<sup>4</sup>. Indeed it isn't possible to confirm its existence through the archaeological discoveries or the historical sources (i.e. the Assyrian and Babylonian written documents). However we have to admit that it would have been impossible for Herodotus to write about the so-called *Median dynasty* without the help of documents or oral traditions referring to the Medes.

Question arises about the sources used by Herodotus. From where Herodotus got his information it is till now difficult to assert. According the existence of a well-developed system of chancellery records that existed in the palaces of Assyria and after in the libraries of many temples in Babylon, the latest still in function during his time, it's not impossible to suppose he was in contact with some Babylonian educated circles.

Probably, these intellectual councils must be considered as the informants who gave him historical accounts. Indeed it is very difficult to believe that Herodotus took his information directly on place. Many details in his story seem to prove that he did not have the possibility to access directly to complete and authentic historical documents. For that reason, it is highly possible the Greek historian was forced to trust in accounts of his correspondents. Numerous chronological, historical incoherencies (especially about the yoke of the Medes on the Persians<sup>5</sup>) and anachronisms (the story about the rise to the throne of the first Median king Deiokkes who organized his court in the manner of the Persian) betray stereotypes based on a somewhat light acquaintance about the historical evolution of Persia. Also, the existence of passages of different nature, real historical and purely narrative, show undoubtedly that efforts were made to gather different traditions together in a continuous historical framework according to the traditional Greek perception of the history. For Helm, the

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<sup>4</sup> HELM (1981); SANCISI-WEERDENBURG (1988 and 1994); KIENAST (1999).

<sup>5</sup> This yoke is now definitively considered as a Persian invention coming from the time of Cyrus (KIENAST (1990), p. 62 and 64; ROLLINGER (1999), p. 118-121 and p. 127-134). Nevertheless we are surprised to find this anachronism in the Herodotus' *Medikos Logos*.

Herodotus' story depicts a sort of saga of national liberation in which events and heroes are grouped in a continuous chronological but artificial framework<sup>6</sup>. In his efforts to reject the truth of the information, he stated that the *saga* was directly passed on to the Greek historian and simply reported by him without paying much attention en cautions. Of course, this opinion may be excessive even the reliability of some parts of his *Medikos Logos* are really doubtful and obviously anachronistic. Indeed the description of the Median state clearly reflects the organisation of the later and well-known Persian empire. If the honesty of the historian could not be dismissed some passages of the text give the impression to be reported to make the story more attractive.

Unfortunately for us, this historical patchwork of the Median period doesn't correspond to the accounts on the Medes given by the historical written Assyrian and Babylonian sources from the end of 8<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Helm severely criticized all the attempts to compare events coming from these sources and those cited by Herodotus. He pointed out the absence of any possibility to bound one and another source by setting a common chronology<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, on the chronological level the *Medikos Logos* rise serious problems when using the years of the reigns as given by Herodotus. However it's beyond the aims of this study to present them here<sup>8</sup>.

Whatever the origins of the sources, a careful lecture of these two types of sources reveals that some passages in the Herodotus' text sound as echoes of ancient historic events. Many words and formulations that could appear something strange, enigmatic or even perplexing to the reader seem to bear traces of some far-off historical facts. The difficulty is that these historical clues or signs are deeply hidden under the course of the narrative developments of the story.

Curiously, the majority of the parallels we can propose here concern precisely the reigns of the two last kings of the Herodotus' list, Cyaxares and Astyages. For these two rulers, the Herodotus' report seems more trustworthy and reliable than the stories about the former reigns of his *Medikos Logos*. Indeed the Babylonian sources fit very well with some events mainly happened during the reigns of Cyaxares and Astyages as well<sup>9</sup>. However, we have to point out the great difficulties caused by the oral tradition in its role of passing on the historical information. With the Herodotus' story, the reality of this problematic may find its best illustration. Whatever the critical look we can have at the Herodotus' text, we have not to forget that most probably he was forced to rely to his informers to obtain information surely not translated

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<sup>6</sup> HELM (1981), p. 81 and 88.

<sup>7</sup> HELM (1981), p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> We invite the readers to consult the works of HENIGE (2004) and SCURLOCK (1990). See our bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> SANCISI-WEERDENBURG (1994), p. 51-52; LIVERANI (2003), p. 5.

directly by himself. Did these sources were of good or poor quality, partial or complete, reliable or erroneous? How to know? Unavoidably, Herodotus was alone to judge and he had to gather all of these in a uninterruptedly textual but intelligible story.

We agree very much the opinion of H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg who asserted that it is not unlikely that an oral tradition may have kept some traces of true historical events<sup>10</sup>. However these clues may be hidden by the use of words and the development of thoughts and ideas that make the story interesting, pertinent or simply presentable.

The difficulties may be still more important if the subjects and topics gathered during a limited span of time were historically unrelated between them, of different versions or if they proved to be incomplete and hence of restricted interest. How was it possible in those conditions to enable him to reconstruct step by step a structured history of the Medes with more precision?

However we have to bear in mind that without these sources even if they are imprecise and incomplete, it would have been impossible for the Greek historian to produce with some accuracy a comprehensive history about kings, people and events that has been passed away for more than 150 years before he began to write. We have to take in mind that the *Medikos Logos* has been written to introduce the story of the Achaemenid dynasty.

If we dismiss the work of Ctesias considered as not very reliable and some brief or mundane mentions by Greeks authors<sup>11</sup>, Herodotus is the unique writer to have worked on the history of the Medes and on their dynasty. Also he is the unique author to have spoken about a Median empire<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore this is not the unique source about the existence of this people. Information about the Medes (under the name of *Mada'a/Mada/Madaya*) may be come across many Assyrian military campaign's reports and also in some Babylonian chronicles from the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. A comparison with the Greek text would have been very interesting, but we have to recognize unfortunately these sources don't offer enough detailed information about the Median homeland, neither the nature of the political structure of the Medes, nor their cities, language and rulers<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately, through these meagre accounts the Medes

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<sup>10</sup> SANCISI-WEERDENBURG (1994), p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> See Tuplin and his study about the references of the Medes in the Greek literary sources (TUPLIN (1994), p. 237-244).

<sup>12</sup> His work was considered as a true historical report until the work of Helm (1981) who was the first to develop multiple arguments against the Herodotus' version of the history of Persia before Cyrus. The Median Empire has been for long time considered without any critical reflexions or doubts as an anticipation of the Persian Achaemenid Empire. It's a dramatic example of both anachronism and absence of valuable scientific questioning. See SANCISI-WEERDENBURG (1988).

<sup>13</sup> RADNER (2003), p. 63

seem to have played a distant role in the political history of this troubled epoch. They were considered more as a cluster of groups or tribes of loosely relationships and by no means a true politically structured nation (people)<sup>14</sup>.

That the position of the Medes doesn't square with the facts told in the text of Herodotus led and lead till now many scholars to consider the Herodotus' report as a pure literary imagination devoid of any historicity<sup>15</sup>. Others like Brown and Genito or Sancisi-Weerdenburg prefer to consider the work of the Greek author as a narrative adaptation of different stories coming from an oral tradition<sup>16</sup>. If so, we prefer to speak about a constructed gathering of different and uneven sources.

The difficulty for any researcher is to find his way between these two points of view reflecting two significant differences of analysis. Nevertheless, we preferred to choose the method of a careful and meticulous reading of the *Medikos Logos* where are told the events and the deeds of the Median kings. Whatever the sources gathered by Herodotus, by no means they could allow to an historian to create a work based only on a freely inspired interpretation or imagination. We have no right to doubt about the honesty of the writer. His *Medikos Logos* should contain traces and indications of historical events that would allow us to reconstruct at least some short fragments of the history of the Medes. For that reason and to put these evidences to light, we have to pay a great attention to the text itself to establish connexions with events reported in the Assyrian and Babylonian sources.

The problem is the difference of the nature of the Greek text and the ancient written sources. We have to recognize that many of the events developed by Herodotus as major ones do not have been reported at all in the Assyrian and Babylonian sources. We have to suspect that some of them to have been chosen with the hope to enhance the interest of his story. Maybe these circumstances come across when somebody has to work with a bulk of dispersed and unconnected accounts.

Conversely, we noted from our own observations that Herodotus had correctly reported the gap that existed between the fall of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of Cyrus quoted historically as the beginning of the Achaemenid Empire. The Greek historian wrote: "*The Assyrians had been masters of upper Asia over a*

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<sup>14</sup> Recently, Lanfranchi has pointed out some very interesting historical parallels about names given to some populations. He cited in his article that a great amount of people were known under a generic (standard) name originally given by highly developed cultures like Italians for the Greeks, Germans for the Romans and others... The name of Medes could be given condescendingly and mockingly by the Assyrian to a group of people or societies living with a modest and insignificantly organized political administration (LANFRANCHI (2003), p. 92-96)

<sup>15</sup> HELM (1981), p. 87-88

<sup>16</sup> BROWN (1988), p. 85-86; GENITO (1995), p. 113-114 (see also Addenda); 2005; SANCISI-WEERDENBURG (1994), p. 42-43.

*period of five hundred and twenty years, when the Medes set the example of revolt from their authority. They took arms in the cause of liberty and fought with such gallantry that they shook off the Assyrian yoke and became a free people. Their lead was followed by the other nations within the Assyrian empire, until every people in that part of the continent had won its independence...* (H. I, 96)<sup>17</sup>. In his report, he gave the total number of years of each of the four reigns of the Median dynasty that lasted 150 years<sup>18</sup>.

If we accept the chronological sequence given by Herodotus, the so-called *Herodotean chronology*, the first king of the Median dynasty began his reign in the year 700. Beyond this round number, the date proposed here seems plausible. Indeed, the reign of King Sargon II (720 - 705) represents the peak of the Assyrian military campaigns in the North and Central Zagros<sup>19</sup>. During his reign Assyria tried to ensure the control on territories and cities against the military threat caused by mighty Kingdom of Urartu. The accounts of these Assyrians expeditions noted the Median as aggressive tribes but the lack of unite make them of less importance for the Assyrian. However after the reign of Sargon II, the written documents show a continuous decrease of the Assyrian political influence in this mountainous region. It seems that the situation is now mainly due to pressure of the Medes.

We have already pointed out that some passages cited in the *Medikos Logos* can conceal traces of real historical facts. It's noteworthy that these events concern for the most part the collapse of Assyria or the immediate period when the new Babylonian kingdom took over its succession. It seems that Herodotus has been

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<sup>17</sup> The English translation of the Greek source is due to A. de Sélincourt.

<sup>18</sup> Once again the Herodotus' work produce a controversial debate about his chronology. Scurlock proposed two possible chronologies for the Median dynasty and its four kings according the option to add up (or not) the 28 years of the Scythian yoke to the 40 years reign of Cyaxares (SCURLOCK (1990)). Henige rejected the two chronologies arguing that the Herodotus' count of years is devoid of any historical reality (HENIGE (2004)).

The only absolute chronological date is given by the year 585 during which appeared a great eclipse of the sun. This astronomical event, recorded by the Babylonian Magi, took place during the reign of Astyages and some years before his defeat before Cyrus. The Babylonian sources confirm the date of this victory by a sort of "count-down" whose explanation is beyond the limits of this article.

The four reigns of the Median dynasty are traditionally defined as: Deiokes (700-647) – Phraortes (647-625) – Cyaxares (625-584) – Astyages (584-550).

<sup>19</sup> The main goal for the Assyrians was to ensure and secure a continuous long distance trade to import horses and other strategic materials (wood, metal...) in Assyria. During the time the political effects of the military control transformed the Zagros region in a real Assyrian monopoly (TOUROVETS (2010)). The establishment of many trading centres (the *karni*) and four controlled provinces (during the reign of Sargon II: 721-705) has to be considered as a secondary task. This was only justified by the instability and the political weakness of the political and administrative organisation of the people with which the Assyrian were in contact (BROWN (1986), p. 111-112; LANFRANCHI (2003), p. 95-97; TOUROVETS (2010), p. 60-62).

informed more precisely about the political situation. Indeed the reigns (and the deeds) of Cyaxares and Astyages are more developed even we can not avoid the narrative style in the description of the events. Cyaxares is told to have defeated definitively the Assyrians and ruined their capital Nineveh (H, I, 103). Unfortunately the written documents that should come from any royal Assyrian chancellery and describing events dated of these last years (and the fall) of the Assyrian Empire are till now missing. The source of Herodotus, the chronological coincidence and the absence of any Assyrian document led many scholars to imagine the possibility that during this period of political confusion a outbreak of a Median centralised state took place. Indeed, the historical chronology places the fall of Assyria at the very end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC., a period, which coincides with the reign of Cyaxares<sup>20</sup>.

We have to recognize that any attempt to establishing real, objectives and fully detailed historical parallels between a narrative text like the one proposed by the Greek historian and historical records like the campaign's accounts, can not give us anything else than a desperately few number of similarities.

According to the opinion of Liverani<sup>21</sup> the text of Herodotus mentions only two events that could (directly) find their equivalent or counterpart in the Assyrian and Babylonian sources. These are the Cyaxares's attack on Nineveh and the surrender of the Astyages' Median army to Cyrus.

For us instead, the *Medikos Logos* can reveal much more. In Herodotus' account Cyaxares is said to have command the attack on Nineveh (H.I 103). This event is duly confirmed in the Nabopolassar Chronicle where the Median King appears at the most as a commander of the Umman-Manda bands<sup>22</sup>, a name already used in the written documents to design the bulk of the enemies of Assyria coming from the mountainous regions and among them the Medes. The historical chronology agrees with the Herodotean one. If the fall of Assur (and other cities not always mentioned) must have happened in the very end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (most probably in 612) the reign of Cyaxares, which lasted between 625 and 585 (Herodotean chronology) seems to

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<sup>20</sup> It's worthy to say that we have to take some cautions about the names of the Median Kings given by Herodotus. Some doubts remains till now since some former studies have proposed to establish parallels between them and those we can encounter in the Assyrian and Babylonian sources. However careful analysis of these occurrences based mainly on a firm historical chronology, have proved that the resemblances if not ambiguous or doubtful are purely fortuitous and must be rejected.

<sup>21</sup> LIVERANI (2003), p. 5-8

<sup>22</sup> Grayson supposes that for an unknown reason the scribe made a graphical fault by replacing the sign *ma* by *man*. This fault has been reported directly by the sculptor on the stele (GRAYSON (1975), p. 90-96 – Chronicle n°3). In the sources, the term Ummân(i) Manda/Mada seems to mean troops or armed bands of warriors and maybe a majority of them are seen as Medes at this epoch.

suit very well and to allow us to consider the king as the conqueror of the Assyrian city.

Even if the Median troops under the command of Cyaxares succeeded alone or not in the capture of Nineveh, at least we have to recognize the existence at this epoch of an organized force described as the Medes. The Herodotus' report establishes clearly a link between the development of this Median military force and the reign of Cyaxares who is said to have re-organised his army (H.I 103). The Greek historian seems to consider this event as representative of the great difference that distinguish his reign from the two former ones.

Of course the yet unexplained apparent disappearance of any written Assyrian sources at the same time increases the likelihood for the emergence of a centralized Median state during these years. Indeed this reference about the existence of a well-trained and organized army supposes the existence of a stable political power able to control its military forces during this period of troubles and regional disorder. If it is highly possible that Herodotus has been competent to judge about the truthfulness of the information he received, the question is open if he was able to distinguish or to feel changes in the situation of the Medes.

In other words, was he enough and completely informed to be able to link all the events together?

Returning to the Medes, it's not the only clue about major political modifications occurred during the reign of Cyaxares. In the Babylonian sources, the nature of the accounts about the Medes changed completely after the fall of Nineveh. Medes were hereafter considered as mighty enemies even we could not find any mention or allusion to the existence of a real Median state's army. Once again, it is very difficult to propose a suggestion without be stressed by a lot of unexpected questions. Sancisi-Weerdenburg pointed out the minor role of the Median troops in comparison with the efforts brought by the Babylonian State to destroy the Assyrian empire<sup>23</sup>.

Recently, Jursa has focused our attention on the Babylonian reports dated of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, which describe territories that were previously in the hands of the Assyrian like North Mesopotamia, Syria and the South-East Anatolia, as under the control of the Neo-Babylonian Empire<sup>24</sup>. There are no evidences that a sharing out of the ancient territory controlled by Assyria has been established between Babylonia and the Medes.

If we return to the text of Herodotus we can be really surprised to find some passages where are described the situation of conflict that existed between Assyria and the other polities of the Zagros. He seems to make a connection between the rise of the

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<sup>23</sup> SANCISI-WEERDENBURG (1988), p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> JURSA (2003), p. 173-174.

Cyaxares' military power and a sudden desertion of the allies of Assyria (H, I, 102). In another passage, as an echo of historical events Herodotus tells us that his father named Phraortes succeeded to unite all the Asian people (and forces) under his wing. Some scholars had seen in these accounts the evidence that the Medes already formed if not an empire, at least a centralized state already at the time under the Cyaxares' predecessor. It means that Media conquered, absorbed by union treaties or at least federated a number of polities in the Zagros during the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. According the information given by the Assyrian sources the control of the Zagros was a huge task for the kings of Assyria but we have no precise historical information how Assyria withdrew and lost its former territories. Who were the real winners of the competition? If we follow Herodotus the ancient allies of Assyria abandoned their tutor gradually to fell sometimes later in the hands of a bulimic Median state under a mighty king. Once again questions arise about the reality of such a state. As we have already assessed it doesn't seem that a centralized kingdom of the Medes existed. Is this passage of the story a pure fiction or a literary addition to the story? We don't know. However, in his search to produce a continuous logical development for the history of Media Herodotus probably transferred a glorious event belonging to the Cyaxares reign to enliven a modest and poorly documented reign of his father.

As we have already seen, Herodotus' story does not represent the unique source of documentation about the Medes. Here again we can find some support through the Assyrian written accounts on the growing difficulties for their kings and army to keep the control on the mountainous regions of the Zagros during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. After the reign of Sargon II (in 705 BC), territories once placed under the control of Assyrian governors and very important trade centres on the strategic *Khorassan* road<sup>25</sup> ceased to pay tribute<sup>26</sup>. The so-called Omen texts of Essarhaddon (dated of 672) prove that at that time the eastern border of Assyria was threatened by the military pressure of a number of enemies among them are different groups of Medes<sup>27</sup>. Documents called *Treaties* (dated of 672) show the deep motivations for Assyria in its search of (new) alliances. Indeed, alliances were concluded

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<sup>25</sup> The so called *Khorassan* Road is for the Assyrian the main way of penetration in the Zagros. Along its course were placed the most part of the cities, towns and people controlled or encountered by the Assyrians. It is supposed this road followed the line of the modern motorway from Kermanshah to Hamedan (former Ecbatana). Unfortunately the geographical location and the setting of the majority of the names appearing in the written documents are till now conjectural.

<sup>26</sup> BROWN (1999), p. 73-74.

<sup>27</sup> One of these tribal groups was under the leading of a chief named Kashtariti. This one was believed to be the same person as the Median King Pharortes/Fravartish. This assertion was based on the text of Bisutun in which Fravartish a opponent to Darius I is said to have taken the name of Khshatrira which was compared with Kashtariti. (PARPOLA and *al.* (2002): vol 2/II L-N, p. 608, see Kashtaritu)

with different people and cities of the Zagros to hold back this menace.

This policy seems to find an echo in the Herodotus' passage about the yoke on the Medes from the Scythians (H, I 105). Indeed the Scythians invaded Asia from the Caucasus and launched raids near the territory of Assyria since 689. For the Greek historian this episode lasted for 28 years before Cyaxares was able to defeat their king Protothyas<sup>28</sup>. This invasion is confirmed in the written sources. Also they inform us that the king Essarhaddon of Assyria established a treaty with the Scythians by giving his daughter to the chief named Partatua king of the *Isbkuza* (the name under which the Scythians were known by the Assyrian)<sup>29</sup>. We have some problems to fix a date for this political agreement. Therefore the end of the reign of Phraortes (in 653 according the *Herodotean chronology*) is marked by the failure to capture Niniveh and resulted in the death of the king (H, I 103). The real and deep nature of this event arise some very important remarks. Indeed one can imagine that if the military and political implications of this event were not so important, Herodotus would simply not have recorded it. Was it really politically significant or not? As the report of the campaign ends abruptly we lack of more information coming especially from the Median camp.

However this failure could be considered as the results of the military assistance of the Scythians troops. However it's clear that no one Assyrian document confirms such hypothesis. If it would have been known by any local governor or chief paying tribute this help could be considered as a proof of the weakness of Assyria. Indeed Assyria could be seen as unable to control Babylonia and Syria and, in the same time, to secure his northern border.

On the other hand, the silence of the Assyrian sources can be highly logical if the vain "Median" assault was seen as a simple raid of some unorganized enemy forces or some audacious tribes. By no means, this attack could be launched neither by a centralized state nor a neighbouring empire. If so, it would have been encountered (and reproduced on many documents) as a triumphal victory by the Assyrian. Though, the silence of the documents proves the contrary. It means that at that time Media was not the mighty state that Herodotus tries to make us believe. Obviously Herodotus derived from the reality by transforming what appears to be a simple raid as a great performance of a king. As we have already seen, by no means Phraortes who is said to have reigned

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<sup>28</sup> This invasion seems to have left no direct archaeological traces even some triangular-shaped arrow-heads attributed to the Scythians have been discovered in a burned layer in the famous citadel of Ziwiyeh (GENITO (2005), p. 328 ; MO'TAMEDI (1995), p. 143-170).

<sup>29</sup> Here we point out the similarity of the names borne by the chief of the Scythians in the two texts.

between 647 and 625, could be seen as the king who commanded the united Medes against Assyria.

In some Babylonian documents like the so-called *Chronicle of Nabopolassar*, dated from the year 614, the fall of Nineveh (also with other cities like Arrapha and Assur) was reported but contrary to the story told by Herodotus, Cyaxares (who is named here Umakishtar) doesn't appear as the king of the Medes but only a sort of commander of little structured and loosely united bands. Much more, Cyaxares is considered in this document as an ally or a sort of assistant of the Babylonian troops<sup>30</sup>. Here the Herodotus' account seems to deviate seriously from the political reality.

Two Babylonian texts report the submission of the Median army to Cyrus in 550 BC, the above mentioned *Chronicle of Nabonidus* and the *Inscription of Nabonidus*, which was engraved on a stele placed in the temple of Harran<sup>31</sup>. These sources are considered as bearing clear similarities with what is told in the *Medikos Logos* (H.I 123-128). Astyages who appears under the name of Ishtumegu, is said to have been betrayed by his army, which joined the Persian forces of Cyrus<sup>32</sup>. It's very worthy to note that in the Babylonian texts Ishtumegu and Umakishtar (Cyaxares) are neither cited as chief-commanders of the Median forces (an organized army?) but as kings of the Medes. Unfortunately we are not informed about the political preamble of what seems to be an internal or dynastic war and the reason that could explain this final clash between the two members of the same family<sup>33</sup>. If the event is likely to have happened, the Herodotus version in which he introduced the Median army commander in chief Harpagus may represent a much-romanced reworked adaptation (H.I 108-129). However the difference of the function between Harpagus and Astyages suits better with the historical sources where it's told that the military forces were only commanded and led by the great commander of the army and never by the king himself<sup>34</sup>.

If the Babylonian *Chronicle of Nabonidus* agree with that Astyages first have attacked the Persian forces, how to explain however that the Median empire really existed in the form described by Herodotus? This question could be arisen when the Greek historian try to explain the victory of Cyrus by the reversal

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<sup>30</sup> Lines 59-64 of the *Chronicle of Nabopolassar* (see GRAYSON (1975), p. 90).

<sup>31</sup> This inscription is now considered as less reliable than the *Chronicle of Nabonidus* because it seems to postdate what it is previously announced for example, the accession of Cyrus to the throne. See SCHAUDIG (2001), p. 514-529.

<sup>32</sup> *Chronicle of Nabonidus* (II, 1-4). This passage is now considered as an anachronism operated by a scribe during the period of Darius the Great (late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC or early in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC). Cyrus is recognized as king of Anshan (under Elamite cultural influence) and the language of the court during the first Achaemenid kings was without any doubt Elamite.

<sup>33</sup> GRAYSON (1975), p. 106 n°42.

<sup>34</sup> *IBID.*, p. 91 and 106.

of the “imperial” army’s attitude? This situation seems very curious in the case of an army of a centralized state. Probably, Herodotus was aware of the lack and the weakness of the historical information he can bring in the report of these events. Instead the highly surprising introduction of the story of the commander Harpagus has been done to form a literary continuum for his readers.

Did Herodotus lie? Did Herodotus overemphasize the information he received from his informants? Maybe he was enough sincere and honest to do not. However, obviously he had to work with different and not connected events. The major critic we can oppose to the Greek historian is to have sought for a historical continuity between the Assyrian and the Achaemenid dynasty. Most probably he felt into the trap searching to please and interest his readers.

However did he have enough time and possibilities to control his sources and to connect them together as an historian has the obligation to do? Instead to criticize too much the Greek historian’s work, we have to turn against the informants who gave him incomplete or non-connected information. The objective of Herodotus was to create an introduction to the following and main story of Cyrus and the Achaemenid. Obviously, the latest was far more interesting for the Greeks.

As a final point of this article, we propose to illustrate the problem of the distortion that could affect every passing on of information from an informant to anybody else. As an example, we choose the very well known description by Herodotus of the fortification walls of the royal city of Ecbatana (modern Hamedan) (H, I 98).

Most probably, Herodotus never visited the city but he was certainly aware how the capital of the Medes was important and great. In the passage concerning the construction of the city and the palace by the first king of the Medan Dynasty, Deiokes, he focuses his description almost exclusively on the ramparts. He notes the city was surrounded by seven concentric and differently coloured walls whom the last one encircled the palace of the king. The walls “*were planned that each successive circle was higher than the one below it by the height of the battlements*”. Obviously this architectural (and urban) description of such a succession of walls seems more fantastic and imaginary than real. It would be very difficult to find a point of view outside a walled city where it’s possible to observe exactly the same panoramic arrangement.

By chance, the British Museum in London owns in its collections an Assyrian palace relief where a multi-lined walled city is depicted in detail with its fortifications<sup>35</sup>. The artists who were in

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<sup>35</sup> Wall relief n° WA 124938. Origin: Nineveh, North Palace, Room H, panel 7. Period: around 645-640. (Illustrated in CURTIS and READE (1995), pl. 23 (full color).

charge to produce this image displayed the different walls in overhanging parallel lines showing only their battlements. It results of a succession of battlements placed exactly in the same position as in the Herodotus' description. This very strange connexion between a text and an image is really interesting. We can assert that Herodotus received his information about the walls of the city by someone who has really seen Assyrian reliefs in which cities are depicted in the same way. Unfortunately for Herodotus, his informer did not know or understand the artistic conventions for space and landscape representations on the reliefs, as it was the rule during the Assyrian period.

Through this example we can see that the distortion that could affect any passing down of information may take its origin in the wrong understanding of the document. Herodotus who could not have direct access to the original sources and documents was dependent to the information brought by his informant. Of course, he was limited in his judgements to keep or to reject information about so strange and so unusual things for him.

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