More than two decades have passed since Géza de Francovitch wrote that Median art “is a myth,” that “not a single work exists of proven Median origin,” and, further, that its discussion involves one in “the realm of myth and fable ...." That this strongly presented view still obtains, is still forcibly valid, even more so after the excavation of two apparent Median sites in western Iran, and after the appearance of more scholarly writings that claim to have unraveled and perceived the characteristics of Median art, will be the conclusion of this paper.

The political and social history of the Medes is difficult to chart and reconstruct in any of its specifics and at any point in time, and here we can only deal with it in the broadest terms. The sources are primarily the contemporary, often terse references in the Assyrian annals and records that begin in the ninth century BC (836 BC) and continue into the seventh, the brief but significant references in the seventh-sixth century sections of the Babylonian Chronicle, and the later fifth-century BC writings of Herodotus (I. 95–106). The Assyrian annals indicate that the Medes were powerful and occupied many towns and cities, each under a chieftain, they were attacked periodically by the Assyrians, and they fought with their neighbors. By the last two or three decades of the seventh century, some political events unknown to us had occurred, for by this time the Medes (or some Medes) became united under one king. This unification strengthened them to the degree that in the years between 614 and 609 BC under Cyaxares, “the king of the Medes,” they invaded Mesopotamia and participated in the destruction of the Assyrian state. By 585 BC it seems that Cyaxares had secured control...
over most of the peoples of western Iran including the Persians, and he or his son Astyages had advanced to the Halys river in Anatolia, where he maintained a border with the powerful Lydians. Within a generation all was lost. Cyrus II, the king of the Persians, rebelled against his father-in-law Astyages and in turn subjugated the Medes (553–550 BC). With this event began a new and, from a modern perspective, decidedly clearer phase of Iranian and Near Eastern history.

The heartland of the Medes in western Iran centered around Hamadan (Ecbatana) and extended for some distance to the southwest, northeast, and east in the Alvand mountain range. The Assyrian annals record wealthy Median cities, but the only kinds of booty mentioned are weapons, cattle, donkeys, horses, camels, and, rarely, lapis lazuli, the latter without doubt acquired by Median trade further east. By the time of their unification or shortly thereafter, they seem to have acquired the means to supply themselves with more substantial wealth. This may be inferred from the sixth-century BC section of the Babylonian Chronicle (7, ii, 3–4) that records Cyrus’s defeat of Astyages: “Cyrus (marched) to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold, goods, property … which he carried off as booty (from) Ecbatana, he took to Anshan.” The Chronicle does not define the nature and characteristics of the precious metals or of the goods and property, except to record that portable material is being discussed. Thus, whether the gold and silver was in the form of bullion or crafted artifacts, and whether Median Kleinkunst or state or religious objects were included in the spoils, is not vouchsafed. But something valuable was taken by Cyrus from Ecbatana, and I do not believe one can exclude the possibility that these valuables included products of Median craftsmen.

There is yet another possible interpretation that may be brought forth regarding the nature of the spoils taken from Ecbatana, an interpretation

---

3 A number of scholars have argued that the Median area of control extended as far northeast as Tehran on the assumption that the Mt. Bikni associated with the Medes in the Assyrian records is Mt. Damavand. However, L.D. Levine, “Geographical Studies in the Neo-Assyrian Zagros-II,” Iran 12 (1974): 118 f., nn. 167, 168, following König, correctly demonstrated that Mt. Bikni is most probably a mountain in the Alvand range, near Hamadan. J. Reade, “Kassites and Assyrians in Iran,” Iran 16 (1978): 38, continues to support the Bikni-Damavand connection.


5 For the references to the Babylonian Chronicle mentioned here and elsewhere in the text, see A.K. Grayson, Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles (Locust Valley, New York, 1975), pp. 91, 106.