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The Median “Empire”, the End of Urartu and Cyrus’ the Great Campaign in 547 B.C.

(Nabonidus Chronicle II 16)

by

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1.) Introduction

In 1988, 1994 and in 1995, the late Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg questioned with arguments of considerable weight, the existence of a Median “Empire” as a political entity possessing structures comparable to those of the so called Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian or the Achaemenid “empires”.¹ She pleaded for a methodologically fresh approach by not only casting doubt on the general validity of our most important source, i.e. Herodotus’ *Medikos Logos*, and pointing to gaps in the non-classical sources, i.e. primarily for the first half of the sixth century B.C., but also taking into consideration anthropological models of state formation and conceptual systems of the social sciences.

Independently from each other Burkhart Kienast and I adduced arguments calling into question the presumed vassal status of the early Persians vis à vis the Medes.² Amélie Kuhrt has recently shown that the Assyrian heartland as well as its eastern fringes (the region around Arrapha) were part of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Both regions stayed under firm Babylonian control after the downfall of its Assyrian predecessor.³ In 2001 an international

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¹Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1988. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1994. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1995. Cf. also Briant 1996, 36f.

²Kienast 1999, 65. Rollinger 1999, 127-134.

³Kuhrt 1995.

conference held in Padova focussed on the problem of the Median “Empire” from an interdisciplinary viewpoint taking into consideration historical, archaeological and philological perspectives. Though it became clear that even modern reconstructions of the so called Median language do not rest on too firm ground⁴ there remained disagreement concerning the existence of a Median “Empire”. Whereas some scholars questioned the existence of such a structure⁵ others still believed that a Median “Empire” played an important role in the history of the Ancient Near East.⁶ In any case it became clear that modern views of this “empire” are heavily built upon the picture Herodotus presents in his *Histories* written around 420 B.C.⁷ Cuneiform sources dealing with the Medes from the 9th century B.C. onwards do not support this view⁸. This is also true for the archaeological remains the interpretation of which is often dependent on the picture the written sources offer⁹. In the present study I want to draw the attention to one specific problem connected with the Median “Empire” and its geographical dimensions which has only partly been treated in Padova but which deserves further examination.

This topic which is inextricably linked to the problems of the Median “Empire” is the end of the kingdom of Urartu.¹⁰ We know very little about this event because the evidence of the written sources ends in the forties of the seventh century B.C.¹¹ Yet there seems to be a general consensus that the state of Urartu was destroyed by the Medes at the end of this century. One reason for this view is the information of Herodotus’ *Histories* that the Median “Empire” reached as far west as the River Halys. This Halys border is generally accepted as a fact. It is assumed that the Medes somehow were able to extend their dominion westwards. But as has been demonstrated recently Herodotus’ image of the Median “Empire” has been

⁴Schmitt 2003.

⁵Henkelmann 2003. Jursa 2003. Liverani 2003. Reade 2003. Rollinger 2003a. Wiesehöfer 2003.

⁶Panaino 2003. Parpola 2003. Roaf 2003. See also Tuplin 2003.

⁷Lanfranchi-Roaf-Rollinger 2003. Rollinger 2003a. Cf. now also Rollinger 2004.

⁸Lanfranchi 2003. Liverani 2003. Radner 2003a. Radner 2003b. See also Fales 2003. Greco 2003.

⁹Curtis 2003. Gopnik 2003. Kroll 2003. Roaf 2003. Rollinger 2003b. Sarraf 2003. Stronach 2003.

¹⁰See Kroll 2003.

¹¹Cf. Çilingiroğlu 2002. Kroll 1984. Kessler 1986. Salvini 1995, 117-119. Sevin 2002. Wartke 1993, 171-175.

modelled to a high degree on the Achaemenid Empire and the Halys border seems to be a much later invention.¹²

2.) The evidence of the chronicles

Apart from Herodotus we do not have even one single source that would shed light on how this Median expansion to the west unfolded. On the contrary, the scanty information provided by cuneiform sources seems to suggest Babylonian rather than Median influence in Eastern Anatolia.¹³ The Babylonian Chronicles again and again exhibit Babylonian and Median forces acting as allies but it is only the Babylonian army which is campaigning in Anatolia¹⁴. Thus in 609 B.C. Nabopolassar led his troops to the north on an operation against Izalla and as far as the “district of Urartu”:

*The king of Akkad went to help his army and ... [...] he went up [to] Izalla and / the numerous cities in the mountains ... [...] he set fire to their [...] / At that time the army of [...] / [ma]rched / as far as the district of Urartu. / In the land ... [...] they plundered their [...].*¹⁵

This advance is important because it documents Babylonian military activity not only in the far west but also in regions belonging to, or at least bordering on, the eastern part of Anatolia.

¹²Rollinger 2003a.

¹³Salvini 1995, 117f.

¹⁴The translations of the chronicles will follow Grayson’s edition (Grayson 1975) if not noted otherwise. But Grayson’s transliterations have been changed according to the standards adopted in the SAA volumes.

¹⁵Chronicle 3, lines 70-73: LUGAL URI.KI *an re-šu-ut ÉRIN.ME-šú DU-ma x [... ana KUR.] 'I'-za-al-la i-li-ma / URU.ME šá URU.ME ma-a-du-t[ú] x [...] x-'šú-nu' ina IZI iš-ru-up / ina UD-mi-šú-ma ÉRIN.ME [...] EN pi-hat URU.Ú-ra-áš-tu / 'D'U ina 'KUR^(?).¹ x [...]ME-šú-nu ih-tab-tu.*

For the location of Izalla see Grayson 1975, 258. Kessler 1980, 128-130. Zadok 1985, 184. For the problems connected with the “district of Urartu“ (pīhāt ^{urru}Uraštu) see Salvini 1995, 117-119. Kessler 1986. Kroll 1984.

Chronicle 4, which starts in the eighteenth year of Nabopolassar (c. 608 B.C.), represents the Babylonians as continuing their military advances. In 608 and 607 B.C. the Babylonian army operated again “in the district of Urartu”:

*The eighteenth year of Nabopolassar (c. 608 B.C.): In the month Elul the king of Akkad mustered his army and / following the bank of the Tigris / he went up / to the mountains of Bit-Hanunya / in the district of Urartu. He set fire to the cities (and) / plundered them extensively. In the month Tebet the king of Akkad went home.*¹⁶

This also true for the following year (c. 607 B.C.):

*... He (i.e. Nabopolassar) conquered all of the mountains as far as the district of [Urartu]*¹⁷.

In the meanwhile the Babylonian army must have gained considerable experience in campaigning in mountainous regions. Chronicle 6 which reports Neriglissar’s military advance in Cilicia against Appuashu of Pirindu stresses the capability of the Babylonian army to fight in mountainous terrain:

He (i.e. Neriglissar) captured / his (i.e. Appuashu’s) army and numerous horses. / He pursued / Appuashu / for a distance of fifteen double-hours of marching through difficult mountains, where men must walk in single file, / as far as Ura, his royal city. / He did [no]t capture him¹⁸, (but) seized Ura, and sacked it / (erasure) / When he had marched for a

¹⁶Chronicle 4, lines 1-4: MU.18.KÁM ^dAG-IBILA-ŠEŠ ina ITI.KIN LUGAL URI.KI ÉRIN.ME-šú *id-ke-e-ma* / GÚ ÍD.IDIGNA UŠ-*ma ana* KUR-*i* šá É-^lHa-nu-ni-ia / pi-hat KUR.Ú-ra-áš-tu *i-li-ma* URU.ME ina IZI ^riš-ru-up¹ / hu-bu-ut-su-nu ma-diš ih-tab-ta ina ITI.AB LUGAL URI.KI *ana* KUR-šú ^rGUR-ra¹.

¹⁷Chronicle 4, line 11 ... ih-[tab]-ta EN pi-hat KU[R... gi-m]ir KUR.ME ik-šu-du. But cf. Reade 2003, who proposes to read ... EN pi-^rhat¹ tam-^rtim², i.e. “...as far as to the district of the sea (Lake Van)”. Furthermore he suggest to restore line 7 KUR.za-^rtu-ri¹, i.e. Zaduri in the upper Tigris.

¹⁸For line 13 I follow Glassner 1993, 201 who translates “il [n]e mit pas [la main] sur lui (mais) ...”. Thus he obviously reads [ŠU.2 l]a ik-šu-ud-su ... Grayson’s 1975, 103 reads [qāt]a(?) ik-šu-ud-su and translates “He captured him ...”. But this cannot be correct since

*distance of six double-hours of marching through mountains and difficult passes from Ura to Kirshi – his forefathers’ royal city –, / he captured Kirshi, the mighty city, his royal metropolis. / He burnt its wall, its palace, and its people. / Pitusu, a mountain which is in the midst of the ocean, / and six thousand combat troops who were stationed in it / he captured by means of boats. He destroyed their city / and captured their people ...*¹⁹

Thus the chronicles adduce eastern Anatolian toponyms like Izalla, Bīt Hanunia and pīhāt Uraštu as well as the “numerous cities in the mountains” (ālāni ša šadāni) only in connection with the Babylonian army. The Babylonians seem to have been the principal political player in these regions since the chronicles mention only Babylonian (and no Median) action in the Urartian mountains and the only military advance into eastern Anatolia in the chronicles is that of the Babylonians²⁰.

3.) Nabonidus Chronicle II 16

There is one further source which sheds light on the history of eastern Anatolia in the first half of the sixth century B.C. For Nabonidus’ ninth year (c. 547 B.C.) Chronicle 7 (Nabonidus

lines 25f. explicitly mention that Appuashu was able to escape and not captured in this campaign.

¹⁹Chronicle 6, lines 9-23:... ÉRIN-ni-šú u ANŠE.KUR.RA-šú (erasure) / *ma-a-du-tú uš-ša-bi-ta ar-ki* ¹*Ap-pu-ú-a-šú* / 15 DANNA *qaq-qar* KUR-ú mar-su šá LÚ ár-ki LÚ il-la-ku / *a-di URU.Ú-ra-’ URU LUGAL-ú-ti-šú ir-dip-ma* / [ŠU.2 *l*] *a ik-šu-ud-su URU.Ú-ra-’ iš-ša-bat šil-lat-su iš-ta-lal* / (erasure) / *ul-tu URU.Ú-ra-’ EN URU.Ki-¹ir¹-ši* / URU LUGAL-ú-tú AD.ME-šú 6 DANNA ¹*qaq-qar* KUR-ú dan-nu / *ni-ri-bi mar-su ki-i il-li-ku* / URU.Ki-ir-ši URU *dan-nu URU LUGAL-ú-ti-šú iš-ša-bat* / BÀD-šú É.GAL-šú u UN.ME-šú *ina i-šá-tú iq-ta-li* / ¹*Pi-tu-su KUR-ú šá ina MURUB₄-tú ÍD.Mar-rat* / ù 6 LIM ÉRIN-ni *e-piš šal-tú šá ana ŠÀ i-lu-ú* / *ina GIŠ.sa-pi-na-a-tú iš-ša-bat URU-šú it-tab-lu* / u UN.ME-šú *uš-ša-bi-ta ...*

For the location of Ura, Kirshi and Pitusu see Grayson 1975, 265, 259, 261. Kessler 1980, 179 (Ura), Zadok 1985, 200, 251, 320.

²⁰We may also adduce the suggestions for how to read some of the damaged passages of the chronicles, put forward by Reade 2003, which all refer to the upper Tigris and eastern Anatolia. Reade proposes to restore in the broken lines 54 and 55 of Chronicle 3 (fifteenth year of Nabopolassar, c. 611 B.C.) “Tušhan” and “Šinigiša”, both on the upper Tigris. See for this region also Radner - Schachner 2001.

Chronicle) II 16 reports a campaign of Cyrus the Great towards a land for which only the first sign is recognizable in the text anymore. Even if it is stated time and again that this land was Lydia, that interpretation cannot longer be defended because it is simply not supported by the chronicle itself²¹. In 1997 Joachim Oelsner has once more re-examined and collated the relevant passage of the text with a clear result:

“Unabhängig davon war er [i.e. Oelsner] jedoch bei seiner eigenen Kollation der Tafel im Frühjahr 1997 zu der Überzeugung gekommen, daß die Reste des teilweise abgebrochenen Zeichens nach dem Determinativ für Länder weder zu LU noch zu SU/ZU, IS oder IŠ passen, sondern allein zu Ú! Dies zeigt der Vergleich des Zeichens mit LU und Ú in II 17 bzw. Ú in II 3. Die Kopie von S. Smith ist im wesentlichen korrekt!” And further: “Unter den möglichen Ländernamen beginnt mit diesem Zeichen aber nur Uraštu = Urartu. Z. 16 ist somit zu lesen: ina^{itu}GU₄ ana^{kur}Ú¹-[raš-tu il-li]k (aus Platzgründen wird raš statt des überwiegend bezeugten ra-áš bevorzugt)”²²

This new reading must be the basis for all future discussion. Since line II 17 informs us that the king of the country mentioned in line 16 was defeated by Cyrus it is clear that lines 16f. deal with the end of a political entity and do not simply refer to a geographical toponym. Thus the passage contains important information for the end of Urartu. We must therefore translate Chronicle 7 15-17:

In the month Nisan Cyrus (II), king of Parsu, mustered his army and / crossed the Tigris below Arbail. In the month Iyyar [he march]ed to Ú¹[rartu]. / He defeated its king, took its possessions, and stationed his own garrison there.

It has been argued that the crossing of the Tigris below Arbail is evidence that this region towards the Lesser Zab was controlled by the Persians whereas the territory south of this river was Babylonian.²³ This view, however, contradicts all other sources according to which the Assyrian heartland was not under Median but under Babylonian control²⁴. Although there is

²¹Thus also the traditionally held view of the date of the conquest of Lydia, i.e. 547 B.C., is surely untenable. We simply do not know the year in which Cyrus defeated Croesus and conquered Lydia: Even a date after the fall of Babylon is possible. Cf. Rollinger 1993, 188-197. Oelsner 1999/2000, 378-380. Schaudig 2001, 25 n. 108.

²²Oelsner 1999/2000, 378f.

²³Curtis 2003.

²⁴Kuhrt 1995.

no evidence, however, for Median control, Babylonian control is at least hinted at. Thus the Cyrus-Cylinder testifies for the fact that after the conquest of Babylon Cyrus – besides others – returned (*ana ašrišunu utīrma*) the cult image of Aššur to its traditional place²⁵. This seems to be clear evidence that this territory was under Babylonian control until 539 B.C. Furthermore if John MacGinnis' reading of BM 63283 is correct we might even have evidence for a Babylonian governor at Aššur²⁶. It is also worth recalling that the Babylonians controlled at least considerable parts of the north-eastern Tigris region around Arrapha. This becomes clear from Nabonidus' inscriptions where we learn that Neriglissar was able to revive the cult of Anunitu in Sippar-Amnanum after the Guteans had plundered her sanctuary in Sippar-Anunitu and taken her statue to Arrapha from where Neriglissar seems to have reconquered it.²⁷ We should, however, ask why the Babylonian chronicler mentions the crossing of the river at all? He does so because everyone knew that it was by this way that Cyrus passed through Babylonian territory, which is the only logical explanation for his adducing this otherwise insignificant detail.

But what about the thrust of this campaign, i.e. Urartu? Oelsner did not draw the necessary consequences from his observations. He nevertheless suggested that at the end of the seventh century Urartu was overrun by the Medes but rebelled after Cyrus' victory over Astyages, only to be reconquered by Cyrus in 547 B.C. The notion of an Urartian rebellion was based on a new reading of line II 18 of the Nabonidus Chronicle where Oelsner suggested transliterating 'sar-ri' instead of 'šar-ri'.²⁸ But this remains very hypothetical not only because these 'wrong-doers' should have been mentioned already earlier in the text. Oelsner's suggestion that Cyrus crossed the river from west to east and not from east to west also seems to be not very plausible. He states: "Die Frage ist nur, ob von Ost nach West oder von West nach Ost. Hüsing hat das Problem durchaus richtig gesehen und bemerkt – u. E. zu Recht –, daß bei einem Zug nach Sardis der Text anders aussehen müßte. Nach ihm (und nach

²⁵“K2.1” 30-34; Schaudig 2001, 553.

²⁶MacGinnis 2000, 335f. See also Jursa 2003 with further evidence. That also after 614 B.C. important elements of Assyrian culture remained alive in Aššur has recently been shown conclusively by Oelsner 2002, 32f who pointed to the fact that the gods Aššur and his wife Seru (Šeru'a) are still mentioned in Aramaic inscriptions of the second and third centuries A.D. originating from Parthian Aššur. For the survival of the Assyrian culture in Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dūr-Katlimmu after 612 B.C. see now Kühne 2002.

²⁷“Inscription 3.3” IV 14'-33'; Schaudig 2001, 517. For Takrit see Jursa 2003.

²⁸Oelsner 1999/2000, 380.

anderen) wäre bei einer Flußüberquerung von Ost nach West das Ziel in Mesopotamien zu suchen, was wohl ausscheidet. Dann bleibt aber nur der Flußübergang in Richtung Osten. Kyros muß also von Süden auf der Hauptverbindungsstraße, die am Tigris entlang führt, Richtung Assyrien gezogen sein”²⁹.

This argument, however, is unconvincing because in this case Cyrus would already have had to cross the Tigris once at an earlier stage of his campaign and further the south. It is inconceivable that the chronicler could have concealed this fact especially since Cyrus would have had to march that far to the south and through Babylonian territory! By comparing the campaigns of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar in eastern Anatolia in the years after the fall of the Assyrian cities a more plausible solution to the problem emerges. The mention of a military advance against Izalla, Bīt Hanunia, pīhāt Uraštu and the “numerous cities in the mountains” seems to refer to operations which took place after the army had crossed the Tigris from east to west. And indeed recent research has shown that in order to get from the Assyrian heartland to the upper Tigris the route along the Tigris river is not preferable because the terrain in this region is extremely rough and mountainous. Instead three other routes are much better suited:

All three reach the southern piedmont of the Ṭūr Abdīn (Mazı Daiları) on different tracks east and west of the Tigris. The first one is located in the central part of the Ṭūr Abdīn. It goes via Kibāku to Madiyātu (Midyat). The second and third one are both going west towards Naşībīna across the Jezira; from here the Ṭūr Abdīn can be crossed either via Mardin or Midyat to reach the upper Tigris valley.³⁰ One of these routes was probably the one taken by the Babylonian army and more than half a century later by Cyrus to attack Urartu. In view of the fragility of Median power in the west and how problematical a “Median empire” with its western border abutting the Halys River seems³¹, it is much more probable that Urartu survived the Median “episode” and was conquered by Cyrus only in the middle of the sixth century³².

²⁹Oeslner 1999/2000, 379.

³⁰Cf. Radner - Schachner 2001, 761. See also Kessler 1980, 77 ‘Karte II’ and 78 ‘Karte III’. Parpola - Porter 2001, 3 and 4.

³¹Rollinger 2003a.

³²See now also Çilingiroğlu 2002, who questions the general held view that the Urartian fortresses had been destroyed by foreign powers. He reckons with internal turmoil and takes into consideration the further existence of an Urartian “Reststaat”.

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