



# ART IN IRAN II. MEDIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

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## ART IN IRAN, History of

### ii. Median Art and Architecture

*Median art and architecture.* The Median period is one of the least well defined periods of Iranian Archaeology. To speak of Median Art means, first of all, mentioning the huge gaps in our knowledge of Median history. We know that Medes were mentioned in neo Assyrian annals from the year 836 B.C. onwards; as late as in King Esarhaddon's vassal treaties (672 B.C.) they are represented by petty princes: central kingship had not yet been established, the foundation of which was later ascribed to the legendary judge, Deïokes (Herodotus 1.96ff.). When the Assyrian empire fell in 615 612 B.C., the Medes played a major role (D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldaean Kings*, London, 1956, pp. 13, 15, 57). The end of their dynasty is shrouded by legends around Cyrus the Great (Isaiah; Herodotus; Xenophon).

Apart from these few facts, most of the history and geography of the Median empire remains obscure. We do not know when the Medes first entered the Iranian plateau, nor from where they came; accordingly, the many theories connecting special wares or cultures with the immigrating Indo Aryans, Medians, or Persians are mere guesswork. Even if we are concerned with archeological material from the right period—i.e., late ninth to early sixth



century B.C.—we often do not know whether the place it comes from really was already Median at that time. The boundaries of the two provinces, Media Magna and Media Atropatene, were formed by Alexander the Great and his successors; in the eighth/seventh centuries, however, the greater part of modern Azarbaijan was definitely part of the Urartian empire, or within the sphere of influence of its civilization, as shown by the fortresses of Bastam (*Bastām*) or Libliuni (W. Kleiss, *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1979, pp. 145ff.; idem and St. Kroll, *AMI* 12, 1979, pp. 183ff.) and the reliefs at Doğubayazit (D. Huff, *Istambuler Mitteilungen* 18, 1968, pp. 58ff.) or Evoğlu (in *Bastam I = Teheraner Forschungen*, ed. W. Kleiss, Berlin, 1979, pp. 186f., table 44.1). Another culturally independent province was that of ancient Mannai, represented by Ḥasanlū III with its Urartian type city wall and the (unpublished) cemetery of Ziwiye (Zīwīya) with its seals and impressions in Assyrian and Urartian style. Outside of Media proper, on its southern border, there is the sanctuary of Surkh i Dum (Sorḵ e Dom) in southern Luristan (Lorestān) with its peculiar style of seal engravings and its bronze reliefs that show Elamite influence (O. Muscarella and E. Williams Forte, *Journal of Field Archaeology* 8, 1981, pp. 327ff.; the greater part is not published).

It is between these three lands that we have to look for truly Median material: near to the old route “to Khorassan”, used for the East West trade during the Iron Age as well (L. Levine in *Le plateau iranien et l’Asie centrale des origines à la conquête islamique* = Colloques internat. du CNRS no. 567, Paris, 1976, pp. 17ff.), between modern Kermānšāh and Hamadān, the capital of ancient Media Magna; probably a large part of the central Iranian plateau north of there also belonged to Media from the beginning or became Median in the course of Median history. This would include the material from the excavations at Godīn Tepe in the Kangāvar valley, Nūš e Jān near Malāyer, and perhaps Sialk near Kāšān and Bābā Jān in northern Luristan.

These excavations and some adjoining surveys give us some general features of the architecture and the ceramics of the area. The columned halls of Godīn, Bābā Jān, and Nūš e Jān form an important link between pre Median (Ḥasanlū IV) and proto Achaemenid (Pasargadae) forms; the temple and fortress at Pasargadae are unique but may also be called typically Zagros architecture of the Iron III phase, as attested to on the reliefs of Sargon II. (For a more detailed evaluation see under [ARCHAEOLOGY ii. Median and Achaemenid](#), with Figures 6 and 7.)

The pottery shows more diversification. The vessel types, partly derived from



the earlier Iron Age phases, can be compared from one region to the other; the wares, however, differ widely and ornaments, incised, painted, or absent, do not fit into one homogeneous culture. L. Levine has drawn our attention to the fact that the “festoon” ware at Pasargadae (D. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, Oxford, 1978, p. 183) is associated with post Achaemenid coins: there seems to be no candidate for a pre Achaemenid or even early Achaemenid common type of pottery. The often quoted gray pottery is too early, and found too far north, to be characteristically or exclusively Median. The painted wares of Sialk B (date: R. Boehmer, *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1965, pp. 802ff.) and Bābā Jān, stylistically not much related to each other, are perhaps local products of population groups under Median domination or government.

Pictorial art, however, has so far been excavated in surprisingly small quantities and rather disappointing quality. The two probably most important objects, shown in the late 1920s to E. Herzfeld at Hamadān, have not yet been properly excavated. One is a firman in favor of an Assyrian merchant, in the name of a king of Abbadana, a petty kingdom known to have been situated west of the Assyrian outposts; it shows the king himself, as if speaking the text, in a dress similar to Babylonian dresses from the Late Kassite period (Figure 29). Human figures in a related style can be found on a group of Assyrianizing bronze quivers in private collections (Calmeyer, *AMI* 17, 1984, pl. 11). The only other inscribed object is a cylinder seal, now vanished, with a hero fighting a monster (Figure 30); the style of both the scene and the inscription is related to the latest Elamite style at Susa, but the hero’s headdress is the one typical of the Medes on Achaemenid palace reliefs. From Nūš e Jān comes an impression of a cylinder seal in crude, perhaps provincial style with the typical neo Assyrian motif of an archer and a huge snake (Figure 31), and the bronze head of the well known Assyrian demon Pazuzu (Curtis, *op. cit.*, pp. 33f., pl. XIII no. 296). Reportedly from the ruins as well as from the vicinity of Hamadān came, in 1980, cylinder seals in different Mesopotamian styles, amongst them some of 8th 7th century workmanship. All this shows heavy influence of the civilizations, but no trace of a genuine Median art.

Local workmanship is seen at least in the bronze jug, fragments of which were found in 1914 by a French mission on the very top of Mound Hamadān (the traces of the dig could be located by the present excavator M. Sarraf); it was reconstructed (Figure 32), but the most important part has been preserved in the Louvre: the *en face* figure of a rather crude winged demon or angel (Calmeyer, *op. cit.*, 1974, Abb. pp. 3ff; *ibid.*, p. 120 n. 27: the spout does not



belong to the same vessel; cf. Muscarella, op. cit., p. 31, figs. 7f.). Similar bronze jugs, with the same knobs around the spout, have been excavated in an area that could correspond to Media or part of it (Figure 33); some others, from art market, bear related winged figures. One piece from Samos sets the date of the group to around 700 B.C.

Architectural painting, attested both at Bābā Jān and Nūš e Jān, can be compared with the not very sophisticated geometric style of the painted Sialk B. ware. In spite of Herodotus' description of the rich Medians, especially of their capital Ecbatana, so far the search for a court style has not led to convincing attributions. Sometimes, it seems, the search even led to the production of falsifications. In the case of the rock tombs, H. v. Gall has argued convincingly that they are much later than was assumed by E. Herzfeld, who attributed them to the independent Median princes.

Of the other approaches to Median art, only one should be mentioned: R. D. Barnett has argued, that the so called Scythian style, more precisely the earliest phase of this style, appears roughly at the same time in southern Russia (Kelermes; Melgunov), in northern Urartu (Karmir Blūr), and in the "Treasure" of Zīwīya. Consequently, it would be reasonable to assume that it also was part of the contemporary (late 8th 7th cent. B.C.) Median art; especially since exactly the same forms occur on (ethnically) Median objects, daggers, and pickaxes in the Achaemenid period. So far, however, this theory has been neither proved nor disproved.

It seems that Median pictorial art was heavily influenced by Babylonians and Assyrians, Elamite seal cutters (and scribes), and finally perhaps by the earliest Near Eastern phase of "animal style," wherever its origins may have been.

See also [MEDIA](#).



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also for early Indo-Iranians in the Near East: M. Mayrhofer, *Die Indo-Arier im Alien Vorderasien*, Wiesbaden, 1966. Idem, *Sb. d. Wiener Akad. d. Wiss., Phil.-hist. Kl.* 294/3, 1974. The philological facts have sometimes been brought into an archeological context, often assuming that artifacts simply mirror migrations, e.g., R. Ghirshman, *L'Iran et la migration des Indo-Aryens et des Iraniens*, Leiden, 1977, who also treats the coming of the Medians. Different views: I. Aliev, *Istoriya Midii*, Baku, 1960; T. Cuyler Young, *Iran* 5, 1967, pp. 1 Iff. As for the closely connected problems of the Persian migration, the theory of I. M. D'yakonov, *Istoriya Midii*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1956, esp. pp. 69ff., a resume of which was given by R. Ghirshman, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 15, 1958, is still unrefuted. All these theories are reviewed with well-founded scepticism by R. N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* in *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* III/7, Munich, 1984, pp. 31ff., 45ff, 65ff.

On the Assyrian sources the translations by D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Chicago. 1926f., I, p. 206ff, and II, passim, still contain the most convenient treatment. Indispensable are D. J. Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," *Iraq* 20, 1958, pp. Iff. and L. Levine, "Geographical Studies in the Neo-Assyrian Zagros" *Iran* 11, 1973, pp. 1 ff.; pt. 2, *Iran* 2, 1974, pp. 99ff. [also published as a monograph]; cf. J. Reade, *Iran* 16, 1978, pp. 137ff.—Reliefs of Assurnasirpal II: J. Meuszynski, *ZA* 64, 1975, pp. 64f., pls. 17f.; not necessarily Iranians: *AMI* 16, 1983, p. 178; of Sargon II: E. Botta and E. Flandin, *Monument de Ninive*, Paris, 1849, I, pls. 55ff., II, pis. 14Iff. 141ff.

For the Greek sources: Justin Václav Prášek, *Geschichte der Meder und Perser bis zur makedonischen Eroberung*, Gotha, 1906, 1910 (must be quoted as seminal work); cf. D'yakonov, op. cit., passim; Frye, op. cit., pp. 78ff; against Prasek's judgement recently W. Nagel, *Ninos und Semiramis in Sage und Geschichte*, Berlin, 1982, tried to re-establish trust in classical accounts of a more legendary character.—On Herodotus: P. R. Helm, *Iran* 19, 1981, pp. 85ff.

Short excavation reports appeared annually in the periodical *Iran*, more detailed: T. Cuyler Young and L. Levine, *Excavations at Godin Tepe. First Progress Report* (and) *Second Progress Report*, Royal Ontario Museum



Occasional Paper XVII (and) XXVI, Toronto, 1969 (and) 1974. J. Curtis, *Nush-i Jan III. The Small Finds*, introd. D. Stronach, London, 1984, is the first of the series of final reports; the most important preliminary reports are in *Iran* 8, 1969, pp. Iff.; 11, 1973, pp. 129ff.; 16, 1978, pp. Iff.; 19, 1981, pp. 9Iff. by D. Stronach, M. Roaf and others. in Curtis, op. cit., V and pp. 65ff.—Especially on the temple: Stronach in *Temples and High Places in Biblical Times*, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 123ff.—Scarce evidence from Hamadan and its surroundings: Calmeyer in *Reallexicon der Assyriologie* IV, 1972ff., pp. 64ff., s.v. Hamadan; used with gross misunderstandings and misquotations by Muscarella in *Ancient Persia: The Art of an Empire*, ed. D. Schmandt-Besserat, Malibu, 1980, pp. 31ff.; cf. *AMI* 17, 1984, n. 48—R. Ghirshman, *Fouilles de Sialk pres de Kashan* II, Paris, 1939, contains the famous painted pottery from "necropole B," similar to the genre Luristan -pottery in and around Baba Jan: Cl. Goff, *Iran* 6, 1968, pp. 105ff. (with survey); *Iran* 15, pp. 103ff. (architecture); *Iran* 16, 1978, pp. 29ff. (pottery; metal objects).

General on the pottery: L. D. Levine, "The Iron Age" (forthcoming presumably in *Archaeological Perspectives on Iran. From Pre-history to the Islamic Conquest*, ed. F. R. Hole).—For the preceding period: I. N. Medvedskaya, *Iran: Iron Age I*, BAR International Series I, 26, Oxford, 1982.

Very often objects in a half-Assyrian, half-Achaemenian style have been ascribed to Median art. Two gold cups of uncertain date may serve as warning examples: R. Ghirshman et al., *Sept mille ans d'an en Iran*, Paris, 1961, pp. 31, 113, no. 159, 674, pp. LIff.; W. Culican, *The Medes and Persians*, London, 1965, pls. 26-28; H. Kantor in *A Survey of Persian Art* XIV, Tokyo, 1967, pp. 2985, 2992, n. 31.—Similar: Culican, op. cit., pls. 18, 24, 30, 31.—Many other objects shown here are probably genuine, but not Median. Much more cautiously E. Porada, *The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library*, Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections I, New York, 1948, pp. 102f., first spoke of a proto-Achaemenian style in cylinder seals; more evidence (P. Amiet, *Arts Asiatiques* 28, 1973, pp. 1 ff. esp. nos. 28f., 51 ff.) showed that those seals were used at Susa and bore Elamite inscriptions; at least one seal (Figure 30), and the use of Elamite, must have found its way to Hamadan (Calmeyer in *Proceedings of the IIIrd Annual Symposium on Archaeological Research in Iran 1973*, Tehran, 1974, p. 113: inscription after E. Reiner: n. 23), where also writing in Akkadian occurred (ibid.; Herzfeld, *AMI* 9, 1939, pp. 159ff; idem, *The Persian Empire*, ed. G. Walser, Leiden 1968, p. 239; see Figure 29).—Seals in new-Assyrian style are attested at Nūš-e Jān (Figure 31) and were collected



from Hamadan and its surroundings by J. de Morgan, *Mission scientifique en Perse IV: Recherches archéologiques I*, Paris, 1896, pp. 235ff., figs. 161.3, 6; 162.2, 4, 5: probably imported.

The aspect of Median art as mainly Assyrianizing was put forward by Calmeyer in *Proceedings*, pp. 112ff.; cf. idem, in *Reallexicon*, p. 65 for the difference between home-made local and imported foreign artifacts; on types of Bronze objects from presumably Median territory: idem, *Datierbare Bronzen aus Luristan und Kirmanshah*, Berlin, 1969, pp. 99ff., 149f.—Fibulae from Nūš-e Jān are not to be distinguished from those of Nimrud: Curtis, op. cit., fig. 5 pp. 294.

The scabbard from the Oxus (O. M. Dalton, *The Treasure of the Oxus*, 3rd ed., London, 1964, pl. IX; R. Ghirshman, *Perse*, Paris, 1964, figs. 118, 387) formed the starting point for R. D. Barnett's argument on the Median origin of the "Scythian" style: *Iranica Antiqua* 2, 1962, pp. 77ff.; idem, *Iranica Antiqua* 8, 1968, pp. 38f., pl. VI (probably without knowledge of D'yakonov, op. cit., pp. 403ff.).—The same variant of the "animal style" occurs on Achaemenian material, especially scabbards: B. Goldman, *Ars Orientalis* 2, 1957, pp.43ff.; R. A. Stucky, *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1976, pp. 13ff.—The same huge western Iranian cultural unity can be traced through the harnesses of Persepolis: Calmeyer, *AMI* 18, 1985, pis. 40ff.—Earlier material, including *akinakeis*, in Georgia: B. V. Tekhov, *Sovetskaya Arkheologiya*, 1972, 3, pp. 18ff. For the late date of the rock-tombs in the province of Media: H. v. Gall, *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, 1966, pp. 19ff.; idem in *Proceedings of the 2nd Symposium* (op. cit.), pp. 128ff.; D. Huff, *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 21, 1971, pp. 161ff.