

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER 1

# THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE MEDES AND THE PERSIANS AND THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE TO THE DEATH OF CAMBYSES

T. CUYLER YOUNG, JR

## I. THE DIMENSIONS OF THE SUBJECT

The Median and Achaemenid periods define a critical disjunction in history. Some would argue that the ancient Near East ended when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon; others assert that the Persian empire was itself the final expression of the old Near East, which died only when Alexander burned Persepolis. Whichever view one prefers it remains true that significant and lasting changes in the historical course of both the Near East and Europe are associated with the earliest rise of the Iranians to power.

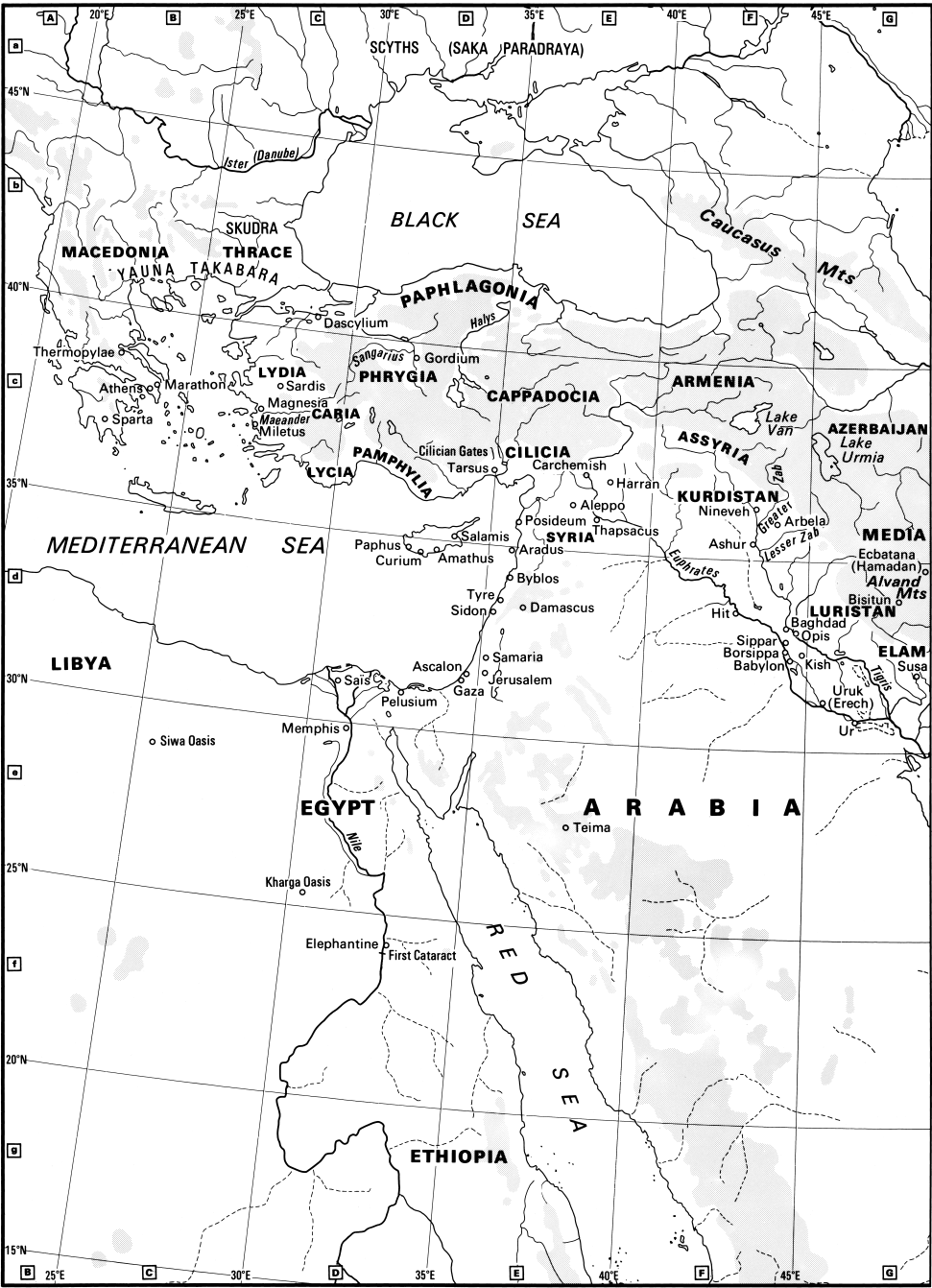
First, an entirely new people had arrived on the scene, with two notable effects. For the first time the Iranian plateau became politically unified, shattering the old balance of power within the Near East, a balance whose principal weights, with rare exceptions, had always been Mesopotamia and Egypt. What was true politically was also manifest culturally in the extent to which this new linguistic and ethnic group, with innovative forms of government, society and art, made its mark on the shape of civilization in the Near East.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the Achaemenid empire achieved a greater quantitative and qualitative unification of the Near East than had any previous multinational polity. For the first time people of Central Asia beyond the Oxus owed allegiance to the same government as did Libyans, and a remarkable number and variety of ethnic groups experienced for something over two hundred years both the benefits and drawbacks of central authority. It has been argued, perhaps convincingly, that the Achaemenid Persians created the first real empire in the Mediterranean World.

Third, during the Achaemenid period Near Eastern and European cultures were drawn into close contact and became engaged in

<sup>1</sup> The Iranians are one of the three major ethno-linguistic groups who define the modern Near East. The Arabs and Turks arrived later. On these grounds alone it could be argued that the Iranians' first rise to political power and cultural influence marks the end of the old and the beginning of the new in western Asia.

2 I. EARLY HISTORY TO THE DEATH OF CAMBYSES

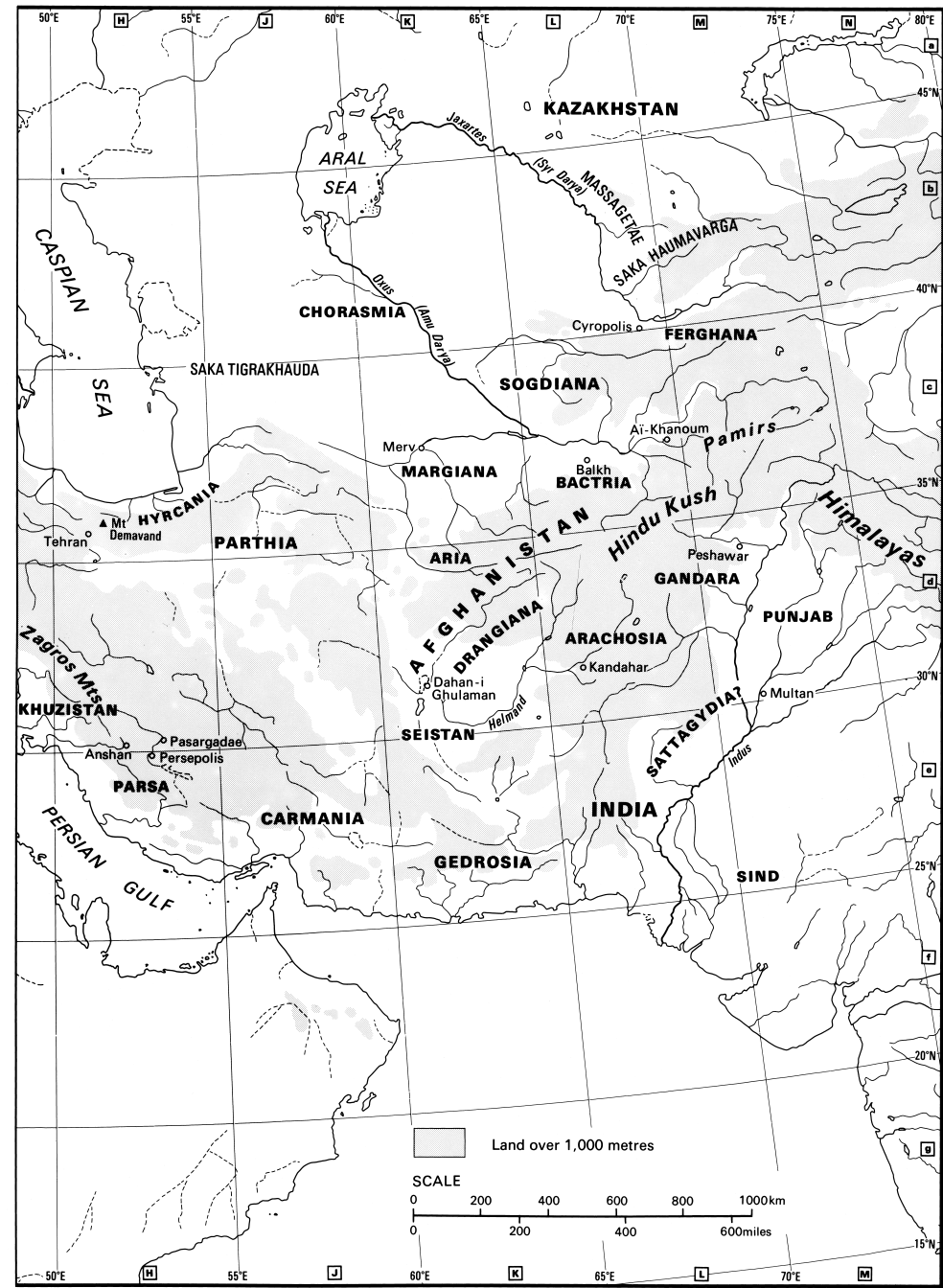


Map 1. The Achaemenid empire.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV  
Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

THE SOURCES IN GENERAL

3



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

interaction on levels and to a degree never experienced before. Greeks, with a strong sense of their European connexions, came under direct Persian control in Ionia, and a slice of Europe proper was ruled by Persians for some time. Off and on for decades at the turn of the sixth/fifth century, Asia was militarily engaged in Europe, and Persian political involvement in European affairs continued well into the second half of the fourth century B.C. Diplomats, politicians, scientists, physicians, merchants, scholars, explorers, tourists and thousands of soldiers (mercenaries or others) travelled regularly between the continents. As a result, to a considerable extent, it can be argued that the immediate post-Achaemenid world, from whose cultural ferment ultimately came the modern expressions of both the Near East and Europe, had its gestation period under the first Persian empire. Alexander was perhaps the midwife, not the father, of Hellenism.

## II. THE SOURCES IN GENERAL

Our sources for Median and Achaemenid history, referring now principally to the core story of the rise of the Iranian state and the early history of the Persians and not speaking directly to the provincial histories of the several non-Iranian regions of the empire, can be divided into four categories:

1. *Primary sources.* These sources are generally Iranian in the broad sense of the term, are contemporary with the events to which they relate, and are 'unedited' in terms of the purposes for which the historian uses them. Examples are: archaeological data; Elamite documents from Susa and Persepolis which provide information on economics, building activity, religion, social and governmental structures, and personages; and Aramaic materials, such as those found at Persepolis.

2. *'Edited' primary sources.* These include materials which were selected and edited at the time they were written, or which are only tangential to the issue under study, or both. They are, nevertheless, roughly contemporary with the events they describe and, in the main, traditionally have been treated as primary evidence. Examples of such sources are: the Old Persian inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings; other royal inscriptions from around the empire; the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cuneiform documents, which cast light on western Iran when the Median state was growing to power (see further below); biblical writings, such as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah; and the earliest Zoroastrian texts in Avestan.

3. *Important secondary sources.* Included here are non-Iranian documents which are selective, synthetic, secondary discussions of tolerable quality. Examples are: classical works, such as the *Anabasis* of Xenophon and, most notably of course, Herodotus' *Histories*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4. *Less important secondary and later sources.* Examples of this category are: Ctesias' *Persica*, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, and still later classical works, such as Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes*, or Strabo's *Geography*; Parthian or Sasanian documents in which one finds data on earlier Iran; and later Iranian legend and tradition, such as that preserved in the *Shahnameh* of Firdausi.

Two sources are of such critical importance that they require brief further discussion here: the Old Persian inscriptions, and Herodotus.

The Old Persian inscriptions are treated by many as primary sources. In a loose sense of the term, they are. Nevertheless, these documents, of which the Bisitun inscription of Darius I is the outstanding example (DB), all tell a highly selected, edited story designed by their authors to convey a particular message for a specific purpose. Thus, strictly speaking, they are as much secondary sources as are Herodotus' *Histories*. What we read at Bisitun is what Darius wanted people to know, and what he hoped they would believe. It should be remembered that, anxious for his subjects to hear his story, he arranged for the inscription to be translated into several languages and sent around the empire – proof, were such needed, that at Bisitun we are dealing with a piece of imperial propaganda, albeit one containing much truth, since many who read it must have known the real story. Thus one cannot take these important documents at anything like face value. Rather, their real worth is revealed only when they are read with their original purpose in mind and with much care, weighing their statements, when possible, against other evidence on the same events.

As for Herodotus, it is almost true to say that we would have so little early Iranian history without him that the subject would hardly exist. Thus it is sometimes difficult to remember that he too must be used cautiously.

Granted, Herodotus was an honest historian. He admits to ignorance with a reassuring frequency. When he has at hand different and conflicting stories, he often gives us several of them, and thus some choice of interpretation. Much of what he discusses involved public facts known to, or remembered by, many of his contemporaries. When this is clearly the case, we may assume comparatively accurate reporting of what was known or thought to be known. And where it has been possible to check him against independent evidence, he often emerges as an excellent source.

On the other hand, Herodotus collected his data by asking people what they recollected of events in which they had participated or of which they may have had some knowledge, by travelling and observing for himself, and by recording various national and ethnic traditions. Thus, we must use Herodotus on three different levels of confidence. First, when the matter at hand involves a description of something he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

himself probably saw or experienced, such as an Egyptian monument or religious festival, we have little reason to doubt. Second, when Herodotus describes an event on the testimony of actual witnesses to that event, for example a battle in the campaign of 480/79 B.C., we must treat that evidence with the same intelligent doubt any good historian has when questioning a witness to a complex event who is giving his testimony long after the fact and, inevitably, from a particularistic and limited point of view. Third, when Herodotus is dealing with more ancient history – a time for which he could tap no living memory – he must be used with extreme caution, if not complete scepticism (for example, his story of the rise of the Median state, or of the early life of Cyrus the Great). Finally, one must always have in mind an issue which colours the whole of this remarkable work of history: however noteworthy for fair-mindedness, Herodotus was a Greek with Greek eyes and ears, who wrote history with a Greek mind, heart, and world view.<sup>2</sup>

## III. THE MEDES AND THE EARLIEST PERSIANS

Iranians – more particularly the Medes and the Persians – first appear in history in the ninth-century B.C. cuneiform texts touching on the western half of the plateau which today bears their name. For some time thereafter the Medes and Persians are only two of several ethnic and political groups found in the Zagros mountains, and to understand their earliest history we must view them both in the context of this complex mosaic of peoples and in relation to the major powers of the first half of the first millennium B.C. – the Assyrians, Urartians, Babylonians and Elamites. Only late in the seventh century B.C. do the Medes apparently begin to become the dominant power even in Media.

1. *The sources for this period*

There are two types of evidence on this period of Iranian history. First, we have archaeological data, our only truly primary source material. Second, we have epigraphic materials from neighbouring areas, mostly from Assyria, and ‘historical’ materials from later periods, such as Herodotus’ account of the rise of the Median state. As always, of course,

<sup>2</sup> Scholarly opinion on the reliability of Herodotus has gone through numerous changes of fashion, perhaps beginning as early as the writings of Ctesias. Different stands on this issue are taken by different scholars writing for this very volume. The view expressed here is one which, while decidedly sceptical of any given statement by Herodotus, nevertheless remains ultimately optimistic. For a distinctly different opinion, see B 5. On the specific issue of the Greek bias of Herodotus, see A 14 (reviewed A 46).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

there are methodological problems with such sources. Those related to the written evidence require brief further discussion.

The reports of military campaigns in the Zagros mountains contained in the royal inscriptions of the Assyrian kings are our most important source for the study of the history of western Iran in this time range.<sup>3</sup> Once one moves beyond the idiom of these documents, they appear to give a fairly accurate account of what happened in the field. Yet, there are difficulties still. We have no document unless a campaign was conducted, and we have reason to believe that we never hear of an Assyrian defeat. This silence is sometimes particularly hard to interpret. It can mean: (1) that Assyria was unable to campaign in a certain area because of weakness; or (2) that a campaign was undertaken but resulted in an Assyrian check; or (3) that Assyrian authority was so firmly established in a particular region that no campaign was called for. On yet another level of understanding it must be confessed that we are just now beginning to come to grips with the underlying ideology of this literature, and a correct historical interpretation of the documents depends on our grasp of that crucial issue.<sup>4</sup>

As for the lacunae in the Assyrian royal inscriptions, fortunately, in part, other cuneiform sources fill some of the gaps. We have letters to and from the Assyrian court, particularly during the reign of Sargon II (721–704 B.C.). There are vassal treaties and omen texts from the reign of Esarhaddon (704–681 B.C.). And there are occasional Elamite and Urartian inscriptions which are relevant.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we have Herodotus on the history of the Median state. Yet it has already been noted above that Herodotus must be used with extreme caution when he writes about events in the distant past. His *Medikos logos* has, in fact, recently been shown to be of dubious historical value, and is best characterized as a ‘saga of national liberation’ with an ‘artificial chronology and an unhistorical narrative constructed from independent sagas based on the lives of a few unrelated Zagros heroes’.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. *Western Iran's emergence from prehistory*

Reports on the campaigns to the east of Shalmaneser III of Assyria (858–824 B.C.) provide us with those first historical references to the Iranians

<sup>3</sup> The main source in translation for the Assyrian royal documents remains B 304, now in large part out of date. B 276 provides up-to-date coverage to the end of the reign of Assur-nasir-apli II (Ashurnasirpal), 883–859 B.C. References for the inscriptions of later kings are scattered in the literature and of variable quality. See also CAH III<sup>2</sup>.1, chs. 22–4.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent and admittedly preliminary effort to confront this important matter, see B 268.

<sup>5</sup> For the letters, B 283, B 353 and most recently B 319. For the omens, B 286, B 287. Elamite sources are widely scattered. For the Urartian inscriptions, B 291. Further to the Neo-Assyrian sources in general, CAH III<sup>2</sup>.1, 238–44. <sup>6</sup> B 90, 88.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in the Zagros mountain region. How much earlier than this they may have arrived in the west is difficult to determine, for we must rely on archaeological sources before the ninth century B.C. Those materials show a fairly clear cultural break throughout western Iran shortly after 1500 B.C. This break marks the boundary between the Bronze and the Iron Ages and is defined in part by the replacement throughout the region of various painted pottery traditions by plain ceramics. This is most striking in the central plateau, in the north west, and, to a lesser extent, in the central west where the so-called Early Western Grey Wares appear at the start of the Iron I period.<sup>7</sup> It is tempting (and it has been tried) to associate the arrival of the Iranians in the Zagros with this major cultural shift, but this can be only a suggestion, and as yet remains undemonstrated.<sup>8</sup> Two points, however, seem reasonably certain. First, Iranians probably did penetrate the Zagros mountains before the ninth century B.C. Second, they almost certainly came west across the central plateau from the north east and did not enter the Zagros from across the Caucasus mountains.<sup>9</sup>

During the Iron I period in western Iran (c. 1500/1450–1100 B.C.) two broad cultural zones can be defined archaeologically. One is characterized by the presence of Early Western Grey Wares and includes the Tehran–Kashan region, the north west or modern Azerbaijan, and parts of the central western Zagros along the Great Khorasan Road.<sup>10</sup> The extensive spread of this particular ceramic type must be an indication of the fairly high level of interchange throughout this region. The other zone is best characterized by the distribution of an Elamite or Kassite goblet, which is a form well known in lowland Mesopotamia and Khuzistan and is found in the highlands in Fars and western Luristan where, in the region of Kermanshah, it is associated with Early Western Grey Ware.<sup>11</sup> The lowland origins of this form suggest that at this time the southern parts of the Zagros were in contact with the dominant

<sup>7</sup> On Early Western Grey Ware and the Bronze/Iron Age boundary, see B 226, 70–2. For a different view, B 136.

<sup>8</sup> For an attempt to associate the Bronze Age – Iron Age cultural change with the arrival of the Iranians in the west, B 228. For further discussion, amongst others, B 135, B 232.

<sup>9</sup> The most recent statement in favour of the Caucasus as the route taken by the Medes and the Persians is found in B 75. This work must, however, be used with much caution; see B 231.

<sup>10</sup> The Great Khorasan Road (sometimes called the Silk Road or the High Road) is the most important pass through the Zagros mountains linking lowland Mesopotamia with the Iranian plateau. It follows up the Diyala River to the foothills of the mountains, passes the first high ridge through the ‘Zagros gates’ and climbs gradually to the area of modern Kermanshah. It then cuts through the great *chaîne magistrale*, the highest range of the Zagros, in the neighbourhood of Bisitun, passes through the Kangavar valley, and mounts one more major pass through Mount Alvand to reach modern Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana) and the Iranian plateau proper. For the various stages on this route at a later date, see Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations* (B 183).

<sup>11</sup> For the most recent evidence, see B 124A; also B 76, 151 and n. 85. For Kassite relations with central western Iran, see also B 164.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

powers of the lowlands, the Kassites and Middle Babylonians and the Elamites. The northern Zagros showed no such contacts.

The picture changes markedly in the following Iron II period (c. 1100–800 B.C.).<sup>12</sup> In the north, the Late Western Grey Wares of this time-range evolve out of the earlier grey wares of Iron I, but ceramic traditions are much more diversified. The excavations at Hasanlu in Azerbaijan reveal in Period IV (the typical level for Iron II in that area) an important small city with large public buildings and numerous elements of material culture which show strong links with Assyria.<sup>13</sup> At this time Hasanlu may have been an important entrepôt on an east–west trade route through the northern Zagros.<sup>14</sup>

The areas to the south of Azerbaijan are more poorly documented during Iron II times. In northern Luristan a local style of ceramics known as ‘Genre Luristan’ emerged, but its range is restricted. One site with this pottery, Baba Jan, has been excavated and the assemblage there of level III is much poorer than that of Hasanlu IV and shows no Mesopotamian connexions.<sup>15</sup> Further south in Fars nothing has yet been found which can be dated with certainty to this period (see further below, pp. 29–30). To the east in the mountains along the Caspian Sea shore the cemetery of Marlik yielded a rich assemblage of items of the so-called Amlash type. Mesopotamian trade goods were also found here, but the date of this material remains problematical.<sup>16</sup> Finally, at Tepe Sialk near Kashan yet another local assemblage with stylistic links both to the north west and to Luristan appears, but it is as yet an isolated cultural phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, two distinct cultural patterns are found in the early Iron Age of western Iran. In the Iron I period the areas characterized by Early Western Grey Ware seem to have little contact with the lowlands of Mesopotamia. On the other hand, the southern highlands do have marked links with Elam and Babylonia. Assyria, whose principal interest naturally lies in the central west and north west, thus appears to have no important contact at this time with the highlands. In the following Iron II period the southern Zagros loses its connexions with the lowlands, probably in part as a result of the declining fortunes of Babylonia and Elam at this time.<sup>18</sup> The northern and central highlands, where a marked decline in unity from the patterns of the Iron I period is the cultural feature of Iron II times, come under the influence of an increasing Assyrian interest in the east. That interest, probably focused on the

<sup>12</sup> On Iron II and Late Western Grey Ware, B 226, 74–8.

<sup>13</sup> For example, B 142.      <sup>14</sup> B 123.

<sup>15</sup> On the pottery and small finds from Baba Jan and their foreign relations, see B 77.

<sup>16</sup> On Marlik, see especially B 147–9.

<sup>17</sup> B 72 (Sialk VI or Necropole B). See also B 226, 61–2; B 61, 201.

<sup>18</sup> On the declining fortunes of Babylon at this time, see *CAH* III<sup>2</sup>.1, 301–9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22804-6 - The Cambridge Ancient History: Perisia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.: Second Edition: Volume IV

Edited by John Boardman, N. G. L. Hammond, D. M. Lewis and M. Ostwald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

control of trade routes, is what provides us with our first Assyrian textual evidence bearing on the area and brings the Medes and the Persians into written history.

### 3. *Iran and the Neo-Assyrians*

During the last century of the Iron II period, Assyria once again became a major Near Eastern power. This resurgence reached an initial climax in the reigns of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.). These kings established Assyrian rule over all of northern Mesopotamia, from the Euphrates to the Zagros foothills, and sometimes became involved in the affairs of neighbouring regions. Western Iran was such an area.

The most prominent ridge of the Zagros mountains, the *chaîne magistrale*, divides the region into two zones.<sup>19</sup> West of this ridge one finds a series of long, narrow valleys running north west–south east. Only two open into large units which can support a considerable population: the Sharizor of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Mahidasht/Kermanshah valley in Iran. Moving east across the *chaîne magistrale* one comes to a series of higher, less elongated valleys, often poorly watered. The countryside is broken, travel is difficult, and population is generally sparse. Only in favoured locations, such as the Lake Urmia basin and the valleys along the Great Khorasan Road, are larger concentrations of people possible. Finally, one reaches the great mountain chain of the Alvand alignment, and crossing this, one arrives on the Iranian plateau proper and enters the large, high, open, poorly watered Hamadan plain.<sup>20</sup>

Until the reign of Ashurnasirpal II almost all of the Zagros was considered beyond the borders of Assyria. Ashurnasirpal, however, extended permanent Assyrian control into those parts of the mountains immediately adjacent to the lowlands, specifically the Sharizor plain (ancient Zamua) west of the *chaîne magistrale*. His son and successor, Shalmaneser III, went further. During his long reign of thirty-five years he conducted or ordered no fewer than five major campaigns to the east, which carried Assyrian arms beyond the *chaîne magistrale* and deep into the Zagros proper. It is in the reports of these campaigns that we first find evidence for the diverse cultural, ethnic and political landscape in which the Medes and the Persians operated.

Ashurnasirpal II's campaigns in Zamua, a relatively restricted area around modern Sulaimaniyeh, introduce us to a large number of distinct groups of people each 'ruled' by an individual.<sup>21</sup> Shalmaneser III's efforts

<sup>19</sup> For the basic topography of the Zagros, particularly as it relates to the historical geography of this period, see B 122, 5–14. <sup>20</sup> B 226, 12. <sup>21</sup> B 191; B 122, 16–22.