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THE MARDIANS: A NOTE

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In the spring of 59 AD, Emperor Nero's war against the Parthians for control of the kingdom of Armenia and supremacy over western Asia was rapidly reaching its climax.¹ Domitius Corbulo's legions, after taking possession of Artaxata, the historical capital of the Artaxiad dynasty, almost without fighting, headed westwards to storm Tigranocerta, the former capital of Tigranes the Great. During the journey, as Tacitus says, the general crossed some mountainous regions, whose inhabitants, faced with the approaching army, preferred to leave their remote villages and seek refuge in caves than surrender to the enemy.²

The march proceeded close to the territory of the Mardians, *latrociniis exerciti contraque inrumpentem montibus defensi*, a people committed to robbery and protected from external assaults by the mountainous nature of their lands, which probably lay on the Niphates mountains, nowadays Ala Dagh, to the north-east of the Van Lake.³ They attempted an attack on Corbulo, but were quickly driven off by the Iberians, a population allied with the Romans and themselves mountaineers warriors.⁴ In this phase of the conflict the Mardians

* I am grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.

¹ Schur 1923, 7–12; Schur 1926, 215–222; Debevoise, 1938, 184; Chaumont 1976, 104–107; Dąbrowa, 1983, 138–139.

² Tac. *Ann.* 14.23.2.

³ Dillemann 1962, 95; Pigulevskaja 1963, 61; Chaumont 1976, 83–84; Schippmann 1980, 50; Frye 1984, 237; Briant 1976, 167; Olbrycht 1998, 142. On the Niphates range see Strab. 11.12.4; 11.13.3; 14.2.8; Plin. *N.H.* 5. 27; Pomp. Mela. 1.15.81; Plut. *Alex.* 31.10; Ptol. 5.13.4; 6.1.1; Amm. Marc. 23.6.13; Steph. Byz. s.v. Νιφάτης; Hor. *Carm.* 2.9.20; Verg. *Georg.* 3.30; Flav. Ioseph. *Ant. Iud.* 18.51–52. Cfr., Jones 2000, 479–80.

⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 14.23.3.

seem to be the only ones able to organize some form of resistance against the Roman advance on Armenia. They are therefore among the very few oriental tribes explicitly mentioned by Tacitus, though after this reference, they disappear completely from the Roman author's narration of the events that followed. The mention of the Mardians by Tacitus, though isolated, is also striking given the fact that Cassius Dio, dealing with the same events, makes no mention at all of this mountain tribe.

A quick investigation on the ethnic name reveals that the Mardians were known and mentioned by many ancient historians, both Greek and Romans, who dealt with Western Asia in very different periods. Given the surprisingly lack of a specific entry for them in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, more information can be found scattered in other general entries concerning Iranic peoples.⁵ A more detailed account is given in the quite old article in the *Pauly-Wissowa* by F. Weissbach, which provides only a partial overview on the history of the Mardians.⁶

The purpose of this contribution is thus to provide the scholar with a complete panorama of the question in the light of the elements present in the ancient sources, which span different ages and refer to various geographical regions.

The first to mention them is Aeschylus in his *Persians*; the Mardians belonged to the army Xerxes gathered to attack Greece.⁷ In Herodotus' account, Hyroeades, a nimble Mardian climbed the walls of Sardis' acropolis leading the rest of the Persian army to the conquest of the city.⁸ Herodotus mentions the Mardians, along with three other nomad tribes (the Dai, Dropices and Sagartians, Δάοι, Μάρδοι, Δροπικοί, Σαγάρτιοι) among the ten tribes that supported Cyrus the Great in his rebellion against the Medians.⁹

A later tradition, surely originated in an anti-Persian *milieu*, probably reported by Ctesias and followed by Nicolaus Damascenus, states that Cyrus' father, a certain Atradates, was a Mardian bandit, while the mother raised goats. According to the customs of that people the young Cyrus was given to a rich man, Artembares, cupbearer at the court of Astyages, who before dying handed his titles and wealth to the now grown-up Cyrus.¹⁰ The existence of this tradition shows clearly that at the Persian court the Mardians, despite having been early supporters of Cyrus, were considered an uncivilized¹¹ people living off robberies and goat breeding.¹²

⁵ Brunner 2004.

⁶ Weissbach 1894. Much shorter is Kaletsch 1999.

⁷ Aesch. *Pers.* 1.994.

⁸ Hdt. 1.84.

⁹ Hdt. 1.125. 4; Briant 1996, 17–18.

¹⁰ Nic. Damasc. *FGrH* 90, F 66.6 and 9. Dandamayev 1993; Briant 1996, 15.

¹¹ Clavel-Lévêque 1976.

¹² Also in a later episode that according to Aelian occurred during the reign of Artaxerses, a Mardian belonging to the lower level of Persian society is appointed royal judge for his sense of right and wrong, Ael. *Var. Hist.* I. 34; Briant 1996, 333 and 338.

The Romans, as apparent from Plutarch's *Life of Lucullus*, had already faced the Mardians. The Republican warlord Lucullus, more than a century before Corbulo's campaigns (68 BC), was forced to fight units of Mardian mounted archers recruited by Tigranes along with Iberian lancers and deployed just outside Artaxata.¹³ These were mercenaries, as were the Mardians recruited by Orontas and Artuchas, the former being satrap of Armenia, along with Carduchians and Chaldeans after the battle of Cunaxa (401 BC) to fight Cyrus' Greek mercenaries led by Xenophon.¹⁴

Antony during his campaign in Media Atropatene, also met "a man of the Mardian race, who had great familiarity with Parthian habits". On the way back from Phraaspa to the Roman frontier the Mardian gave Antony valuable advice concerning the best route to follow in order to avoid Parthian attacks and warned the Republican leader of an ambush that the enemy was preparing. Thanks to his assistance the Roman units had the chance to repel a sudden assault of the Arsacid mounted archers.¹⁵ The anonymous Mardian who Antony met, seems to be connected with the Mardians living on the shores of the Caspian Sea, a territory at least nominally controlled by the Atropatene dynasts. It is nonetheless very interesting that in the accounts of the same events provided by earlier historians the anonymous advisor is a Roman, a survivor of the previous Crassus' expedition and not a Mardian.¹⁶

Tacitus is the only one to explicitly mention a territory in Armenia belonging to the Mardians. It is possible that some of the mercenaries from Xenophon's or later times settled in Armenia or were possibly given some peripheral and remote territories by local kings or satraps to rule over as a reward for their services. Military colonies and settlements of soldiers far from their original land are known for the Achaemenid period. For example Medians, Hyrcanians and Bactrians had settled in Asia Minor¹⁷ and Lydia.¹⁸

The Mardians of Armenia appear again in the historical tradition concerning the Roman military campaigns against the Parthians that took place in the 2nd century AD. Some fragments of Arrian's *Parthikà*, reported in the Suda lexicon, describe the Mardians, using the usual ethnological *topoi* regarding the mountain tribes: they are portrayed as a poor people, living in a harsh land, they are farmers and robbers and do not ride horses. Some kind of military confrontation seems to have occurred during Traianus' campaign in Armenia, with the Mardians

¹³ Plut. *Luc.* 31.5.

¹⁴ Xenoph. *Anab.* 4.3.4.

¹⁵ Plut. *Ant.* 41; Debevoise, 1938, 128.

¹⁶ Vell. Pat. 2.82. 1; Flor. 2. 20. 4.

¹⁷ Diod. 17.19.4

¹⁸ Strab. 13.4.13; Athen. 14.636 ab; Briant 1996, 794.

ans being heavily defeated.¹⁹ This tradition is recalled by the later orator Themistius, who praises emperor Theodosius by comparing him to Traianus' general Lusius Quietus, the defeater of the Mardians.²⁰

In the Roman historical tradition concerning military initiatives beyond the Euphrates, or at least in a part of it, a common opinion thus seemed to exist concerning the presence of a Mardian community in Armenia, a presence unnoticed by high empire geographers.²¹ Of course, as stated above, it is perfectly possible that a branch of the Mardian people, described by the earliest authors as robbers and nomads, could have moved to the mountains of southern Armenia in connection with their service as mercenaries, and that presence was not recorded by the authors and the sources used by Strabo and Pliny.

Apart from Themistius' later reference, coming from a not strictly historical context, and probably connected with the uncertain and fragmentary testimony of Arrianus, who, describing the Mardians, uses largely stereotyped features common to all mountain tribes, only Tacitus explicitly mentions the existence of a Mardian controlled territory in Armenia. It would therefore be tempting to explain the reference to the "Mardians"²² as just a literary artifice used by Tacitus, or maybe already by Corbulo in his *commentarii*, and Arrian, to establish an ideal connection between the Roman present or recent past history and policy in Asia and the description of Asia and its conquest by Alexander made by previous Greek historians.

What constitutes the most intriguing aspect of the Mardians is that despite not having aroused much interest among scholars, they frequently appear in the Greek historical and literary tradition, although of course located farther east than Armenia, in regions that the Roman armies never actually reached.

Strabo, describing the tribes of Persia, is the first to provide the Mardians with a specific geographical location.²³ Clearly recalling Herodotos' enumeration of Cyrus supporters, he presents a very different list of tribes, whose common elements are the Pasargadae, the tribe which included the Achaemenids, the Persian royal clan, and the Mardians, described along with the Cyrtii, one more time as marauders, but also as a migrant people.

Following the account written by Nearchos, Alexander's admiral in charge of the exploration of the Persian Gulf, Strabo mentions four tribes of marauding

¹⁹ Arr. *Parth.* fr. 86–87 (ed. Ross); Guey 1937, 28–29, 32–35, 50–65; Debevoise, 1938, 224; Lepper 1948, 88–96, 207.

²⁰ Them. *Orat.* 16.205a and 250d (ed. Dindorf); Roberto 2008, 76 and 82.

²¹ With one exception by Strabo as later shown and the later geographer Ptolemy: 5.12.9. In Plin. *N.H.* 31.75 the Mardians are mentioned, associated with the Armenians.

²² Something similar happened later with the reference to the Cadusii in novelistic passage of the *Life of emperor Caracalla* (*H.A. Car.* 6.4) concerning his campaign against the Parthians.

²³ Strab. 15.3.1; Briant 1996, 189.

mountaineers living in the ranges in the south-west of Iran: the Uxians, Elymeans, Cossaeans and Mardians.²⁴ These peoples lived close to one another along the borders of Persia. They shared common ethnologic features like inhabiting a poor region, being inclined to brigandage²⁵ and keen on war, and were characterized by a way of life rather different from that of the neighboring Persians. So the Uxians are said to have no money and no arable land at their disposal,²⁶ the Cossaeans live in caves, are barely dressed and obtain food through goat breeding and hunting²⁷. It is thus understandable how these peoples appeared closely associated in the classic writings. Under Persian rule, they all received a tribute from the Persian Great King, though the Cossaeans also received gifts, and with the exception of the Elymeans, they are mentioned among the nations which took part on Darius III's side in the battle of Gaugamela.²⁸

Another important element that associates Uxians, Cossaeans and Mardians is the fact that after Alexander's victory over Darius, the Macedonian conqueror had to force each of those mountain tribes into submission by penetrating into their well-defended and harsh territories, devastating the land, chasing and slaughtering the inhabitants.²⁹ All the three major extant historians of Alexander's campaign, Diodoros, Curtius Rufus and Arrian, dedicate a passage in their work to the submission of the Uxians³⁰ (330 BC). The fate of the Cossaeans is mentioned by Diodoros and Arrian,³¹ while the Mardians of Persis are conquered only according to Curtius Rufus, probably around 331–330 BC.³² Even among the historians of Alexander's *Anabasis*, from 1st century BC to 2nd AD, it seems that there was confusion concerning this group of mountain peoples of south western Iran, who would appear almost indistinguishable to the western writers.

Thus the famous episode concerning the kidnapping of Alexander's horse, Bucephalos, which provoked the king's anger and merciless revenge, is placed by Arrian during the fighting against the Uxians,³³ while all the other authors agree in attributing it to the later campaigns against the Caucasian Mardians (in the Alborz Mountains).³⁴

²⁴ Strab. 11.13.6; Ptol. 6.4.3; Briant 1976, 170–171, 214–221; Digard 1976, 267; Briant 1996, 469 and 728

²⁵ The Mardians are said to be raiders and live close to Persis; Arr. *Ind.* 40.6.

²⁶ Arr. *Anab.* 3.17.6.

²⁷ Strab. 16.1.18; Diod. 17.3.4–6.

²⁸ Diod. 17.59.3; Arr. *Anab.* 3.11.5; 13.1; Curt. 4.12.7. Schmitt 1993.

²⁹ Cook 1985, 239, 243–244, 281.

³⁰ Diod. 17.67–68; Arr. *Anab.* 3.17.1–26; Curt. 5.3.1–16.

³¹ Diod. 17.3.4–6; Arr. *Anab.* 7.15.1–2; and Strab. 11.13.6; 16.1.18; Plut. *Alex.* 72.4

³² Curt. 5.6.17.

³³ Arr. *Anab.* 5.19.6.

³⁴ Diod. 17.76.7–8; Curt. 6.5.18–21; Plut. *Alex.* 44.

Given this, it is hard to clarify the role of the Persian Mardians during Alexander's conquest, and to distinguish them from the other mountaineer tribes. Diodoros reports that Peucestas, the satrap of Persis gathered an army of a thousand soldiers with the support of the Uxians and Mardians,³⁵ just after Alexander's death. Pliny later reports that these same people, the Uxians and Mardians, were finally subdued by the newcomers, the Parthians³⁶ in the late 2nd century BC.

If there is no consistency concerning the Persian Mardians among Alexander's historians, on the contrary all three main authors dedicate a chapter of their work to Alexander's campaign against the Caucasian Mardians.³⁷ According to Diodoros after conquering Hyrcania, Alexander headed westwards to conquer the mountain passes held by the Mardians.³⁸ In Quintus Curtius the Mardians were the only people not to send envoys to the Macedonian leader because they did not acknowledge any superior authority. Alexander interpreted this act as a challenge to his royal authority and decided to lead his army into their rugged and wooded territory and hunt them like wild beasts, *venantium modo*.³⁹ Finally in Arrian, the Mardians, made too confident by the asperity of their land, were taken by surprise by Alexander's expedition and defeated.⁴⁰ They were soon given a governor, a certain Autophradates.⁴¹

The location of the Caucasian Mardians is better defined by Strabo. He lists them among the tribes settled on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, with the less famous Gelae, Cadusians, Vitii and Anariacae. Some of these tribes had already been mentioned by Erathostenes.⁴²

In later times also the Caucasian Mardians were subdued by the Parthians. The Great King Phraates I (176–171 BC) deported them to the newly founded city of Charax in Rhagiane, close to the Caspian Gates between Media and Parthia.⁴³

It seems clear that in the classic literature and geography two main areas of Mardian settlement existed: the southern Caspian Sea shores and Persis. It is very likely that the Mardians acquired a certain level of notoriety in the West thanks to the part they played in Alexander's *Anabasis*. Due to the fact that in

³⁵ Diod. 19.14.5.

³⁶ Plin. *N.H.* 6.134; Briant 1976, 166.

³⁷ Briant 1976, 166–167. Later attested also by the Anonymous Ravennatis, 60.12, Tabula Peutingeriana, *Mardiane* and Stephanus of Byzantium, s.v. Ἀμαρδοί and Μαρδοί.

³⁸ Diod. 17.76.3–4.

³⁹ Curt. 6.5.17.

⁴⁰ Arr. *Anab.* 3.24.1–3.

⁴¹ Arr. *Anab.* 3.22.7; 3.24.3; 4.18.2; Phradates in Curt. 6.5.21.

⁴² Strab. 11.6.1; 7.1; 8.8; Plin. *N.H.* 6.36 and Ptol. 6.2.5, where they are recorded as Amardians in connection with the river Amardus, today's Sefid-Rūd. Pliny mentions them also among the peoples on the western shore of the Black Sea, most probably by mistake, Plin. *N.H.* 6.16.

⁴³ Isid. *Mans. Parth.* ch. 7 = Isid. *FGrHist* 781 F2.7; Just. 41.5.9–10. Debevoise 1938, 19; Wolski 1966, 81; Chaumont 1973, 203–204.

some accounts Alexander was forced to face them twice, in the Caucasus Alborz mountains and in Persis, they probably became a name closely associated to the idea of the uncivilized inhabitants of the mountains the Greek met in the East.

Tacitus' reference concerning the Armenian Mardians would thus be isolated if it was not for a reference in Strabo. Dealing with the kingdom of Media Atropatene invaded by Antony he lists the Mardians, or Amardians, among the mountain peoples living on the northern edge of the kingdom, on the Caspian shore, along with the Cadusii, Tapyrii and Cyrtii. For the first and only time the Mardians (and the Cyrtii) of the north, the Caucasians, are associated with the Mardians of the south, the Persians. He states explicitly that they are "transhumants and predatory, *metanástai* and *lēstrikoí*" and that the two groups have common origins, they have been scattered and separated by the mountain ranges of the Niphates and the Zagros. In the same passage the geographer further develops the topic, also including those living in Armenia among the Mardian tribes of common origins.⁴⁴

Strabo's is the earliest reference concerning a stable Mardian settlement in Armenia, close to the Niphates mountains, and it seems to prove that Tacitus' statement reflected historical reality. Besides Strabo's passage perfectly summarizes the geographical question concerning the Mardians. Due to their nomadic nature, according to ancient authors, the Mardians settled in different regions. Traditionally the main Mardian territories were the southern Caspian shores and the borders of Persis, in south-west Iran. It is generally thought that before the creation of the Persian empire some Mardian tribes moved south from the Caspian area towards the borders with Persis.⁴⁵

Both these Mardian groups are mentioned in most of the geographical works concerning western Asia and they were also present in the historical works narrating Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid empire. In later periods Alexander's and the Parthian campaigns were probably successful in subjugating both Mardian communities, whose importance decreased. Surely in Roman times the Mardians groups became part of that oriental world lying well beyond Rome's domains which the imperial authors decided to ignore or describe in an extremely stereotyped way.

In Roman times thus only a secondary historical account survived concerning the Mardians, that is to say the existence of a Mardian community in Armenia controlling a portion of mountain territory close to the Niphates range, in an area where the Romans armies had been active since Lucullus' campaigns. It is interesting though that the Mardians are not mentioned among the

⁴⁴ Strab. 11.13.3.

⁴⁵ Or from even further in central Asia judging from some general references in the sources: Plin. *N.H.* 6.47; Arr. *Anab.* 4.6.6; Ptol. 6.12.4.

inhabitants of Armenia in Pliny's chapters concerning that region, but even more interesting is the fact that not even Strabo himself mentions them in his description of Armenia.

If we exclude a mistake by Strabo or his sources at the origin of the later tradition on the Armenian *Mardi*, it must be assumed that in effect a Mardian settlement, probably linked to the Mardians of Media and the Caspian Sea, developed in later times and was recorded only by some of Strabo's sources. These were the Mardians later met by Corbulo and Lusius Quietus in their campaigns beyond the Euphrates.⁴⁶

In his *Antiquitates Judaicae* concerning the events that occurred in Armenia between 12 and 16 AD, Flavius Josephus⁴⁷ mentions "the people of authority among the Armenians about the Niphates mountains", who supported the Parthian Great King Artabanus II against Vonones, perhaps referring to the territory of the Mardians. He does not mention the Mardian tribes, but it seems that the Niphates mountains, close to the Van Lake, were very close to the Mardian territory.⁴⁸ As mentioned the elements provided by the sources seem to indicate that a branch of the Mardians actually lived in south Armenia or at least a mountain people did who, thanks to their common nature, as Strabo says, the contemporary authors associated with the Mardians.

A more careful analysis of Tacitus' account concerning Corbulo's fighting on the way to Tigranocerta reveals striking similarities with the description of the mountain peoples and their behavior provided by Alexander's historians. Some Armenians are said to leave their houses in remote villages to seek refuge in caves. Corbulo, like Alexander, shows no mercy towards those who fled, using fire to drive them out of their hiding places.⁴⁹ In this context, the elements of which recall Alexander's feats, the Mardians, explicitly indicated as *latrociniis exerciti contraque inrumpentem montibus defensi*, are presented using the same stereotypes, as those which has been employed to describe the mountain people Alexander marched against.

Independently of the actual the presence of Mardians in Armenia, which by the way cannot be excluded, it seems undeniable that any author mentioning that people established a link between the Roman present and Alexander's past, evoking in the readers mind the well-known stories of the Macedonian conqueror. This probably explains the unique mention of the Mardians in Tacitus' work, in a context already full of striking similarities with Alexander's stories. Prob-

⁴⁶ As Prof. E. Kettenhofen kindly suggested to me, the name of the Mardians survives in the toponym Mardastan, east of Lake Van, see Ps. Sebeos, 48.165. Hübschmann 1904, 207; 239, n. 2 and 343–344; Adontz 1970, 247–249; 322–323.

⁴⁷ Joseph. *Ant. Jud.* 18.51–52.

⁴⁸ Strab. 11.13.3. and supra n. 3.

⁴⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 14.23.2.

bly also later historians like Arrian, himself the author of an *Anabasis* of Alexander, gave relevance to the Mardians to establish an ideal link with the past.

Since Crassus' times every Roman general or emperor crossing the Euphrates, but also every historian narrating his feats and every cultured Roman reading those narratives had Alexander's example in mind. From this point of view, Corbulo chasing and defeating the Mardians in Armenia was only following Alexander's example. He crushed with the same iron fist the very same enemies the Macedonian forced into submission in Persis and on the shores of the Caspian Sea many centuries before.

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Abstract

The Mardians were an Iranian mountain tribe which inhabited many different regions of the Near East. Despite the fact that they are frequently present in the narratives of both Greek and Roman historians, they never aroused much interest among scholars. This contribution remains the only attempt to put together all the references concerning the Mardians, providing at the same time some general hypothesis about their apparent geographical diffusion. It cannot be excluded that the Roman authors who introduced the Mardians among the enemies the imperial armies had to face in their eastern campaigns, wanted to establish a historical link between the current events and Alexander's campaigns.



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