The volume at hand is a collection of the proceedings of a conference entitled “Continuity of Empire: Assyria, Media, Persia,” held April 26–28, 2001, in Padua, Italy; a few of the papers were invited after-the-fact to supply additional perspectives for the published volume. The initial assertion of the conference title gave way to the addition of a question mark after “Empire” to reflect the editors’ “more conciliatory” approach as indicative of the open nature of many of the questions pursued at the conference and in the published proceedings. This volume is the mother load for any researcher interested in the history of the Medes from the third millennium B.C.E. and the first millennium B.C.E. and is essential for anyone interested in understanding the question of whether or not the Medes represented a true empire. The editors’ introduction sets the stage for the remainder of the volume, which is divided into three sections: 1) “Assyria and the Medes: Location, Identity, and Conception of Empire,” 2) “The Medes: The Internal World,” and 3) “The Medes: The External World.”

The question of whether or not there was truly a “Median Empire” underlies the volume. Whether the realm of the Medes may be—or should be—classified as an empire depends not only upon perspective, of course, but also on the types and range of evidence considered. For example, textual, archaeological, art-historical, Assyrian, Persian, and Greek evidence, among others. Definitions of the term “empire” vary widely (note the remarks by the editors in the “Afterword,” p. 402), and one’s choice of definition will ultimately determine one’s approach. This question of definition, while valid and interesting in its own right, does not concern the reviewer at present. Of the twenty-three contributions by twenty contributors (including the afterword, by the editors), ten authors adhere to or are comfortable with a Median Empire as traditionally defined, nine lean against, and the remainder do not come down on either side (i.e., the question of “empire or not” does not impact their contributions).

The collective weight of the contributions, regardless of specific focus, emphasizes that, despite modern scholarship’s massive gains in the last few decades regarding our understanding of ancient Near Eastern history, fundamental and vital questions about the Medes and Median history continue to elude satisfactory answers. A volume of this significance and magnitude deserves a broad audience and, therefore, is subjected to significant summary in this review, though the reviewer’s conclusions are rooted in the desire of attention deserved. These articles that receive most attention here are those that engage most immediately upon the overarching question of the Median Empire.

Media and Its Discontents

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“Media and Its Discontents” is a review article of a seminal volume on the Median Empire in the mid-first millennium BCE, and its place in the historiographic tradition in relation to its predecessor, the Assyrian Empire, and its successor, the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The Medes have been given a prominent place in this “continuity” of empires, primarily thanks to the Greek historian Herodotus. However, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian evidence offers an entirely different perspective of the Medes as a loose confederation of tribes lacking both centralization and lasting cohesion. This article develops and supports this alternate perspective, and it emphasizes the Elamite civilization and tradition in Iran as key to the continuity of empires.