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DOI: https://doi.org/10.32859/yezidistudies/1/6/161-239

From Heaven to Earth: The Bull Sacrifice as a Tool for the Mithraisation of the Yezidis [1]

Abstract:
The study examines the significance of the Yezidi ritual of killing a bull during the autumn Festival of the Assembly. For eighty years, this ritual has been regarded by scholars and politicians alike as irrefutable evidence of the presence of elements of Mithraism in the Yezidi religious tradition. This interpretation has also shaped the perception of their own religion among the Yezidis, as many of them, influenced by scholarly and political authority, accept it unquestioningly. This belief is, however, contradicted by my own observations of the Yezidi ritual in Lalish and an analysis of Yezidi religious hymns, which demonstrate that the assumptions underlying this interpretation are not supported by evidence and are open to criticism. Furthermore, I put forward alternative interpretations by highlighting similarities between the Yezidi ritual and religious practices and myths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the rites of Harran, and the mystery cults of late antiquity.

Key words:
Bull sacrifice, *Qabagh*, Festival of the Assembly, Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, *taurobolium*, Harran, *Hajj*, cosmogonic myth, element of earth, Behemoth, Abraham, Jesus Christ, paradigm shift

In the absence of Yezidi written sources that would allow to resolve the question of the origin of Yezidism and clarify the meaning of its religious symbols, many researchers have attempted to make statements on these topics by referring to Yezidi religious practices. One of these is the ceremony, which takes place during the autumn Festival of the Assembly (‘Eid al-Jama’ayat), when a young bull is sacrificed near a shrine dedicated to the personification of the essence of the Sun, Sheikh Shams. The ceremony and the

[1] The preparation of this article was supported by the National Science Centre (Poland), through the research grant No. 2019/33/B/HS2/00397. Reading it only makes sense in one case: if the reader, contrary to the increasingly widespread belief of representatives of the social sciences in the causal power of self-identification, agrees that beyond this belief there is also truth, understood as reality, and that the purpose of science is to expand knowledge of reality, by expanding the set of plausible hypotheses and true statements. In other words, if someone believes themselves to be X, this does not yet mean that he is X – he may or may not be X; and whether he is X or not is a fact (understood as the existence of states of affairs), regardless of what he believes about himself. The purpose of the article is precisely to arrive at the fact, or at least to come close to it, by providing arguments and plausible hypotheses.

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fact that many Yezidi sanctuaries are located in caves have been linked by analogy to the tauroctony ritual associated with Mithraism and to the Zoroastrian myth of the killing of the first animal by Ahriman. This in turn strengthened the hypothesis that Yezidism was rooted in the religiosity of the ancient Iranian world. Over time, under the influence of this hypothesis propagated by scholars, Kurdish politicians, and academically educated Yezidis, more and more Yezidis began to see their religion as a continuation of Mithraism, Zoroastrianism and Sun worship.

Although the whole hypothesis shines like a beautiful stained-glass window, however, on closer inspection, one notices that the binder that holds the coloured glass together is merely the belief of the artists who ignored the facts, and were motivated, moreover, by a desire to ground Yezidism in the ancient tradition of the Iranian peoples. However, apart from stating the fact that a young male of the *bos taurus* species is slain during a Yezidi festival, and that there is a cave not far from where this is done, and that many Yezidi shrines are located in caves (as is the case with Mithraism as well as many other religions), it is difficult to defend both the hypothesis of the Mithraistic[2] origins of Yezidism and the assumption that the symbolism of the bull in Yezidism is linked to the Sun. The beautiful structure falls apart.

Nevertheless, the bull remains significant in the Yezidi religion as both a ritually slaughtered animal and a metaphysical symbol. The following study will first examine the arguments of those who view the Yezidi ceremony and Yezidism itself as remnants of Mithraism and Zoroastrianism (1) and compare them with sources on Iranian and Mithraistic beliefs (2). Alternatives to this hypothesis will then be presented (3 and 4). A description of the ceremony of the killing of the bull during the Yezidi festival (5), the symbolical meaning of the bull in Yezidi myths (6), and the origins of this mythical theme, together with the supposed origins of the ritual itself (7), will lead to eight conclusions, including that with regard to the unfoundedness of the Mithraistic hypothesis (8).

1. The Mithraisation of the Yezidis

We have very little information about Mithraism, a religion also known as Roman or Graeco-Roman Mithraism, which flourished in the Roman Empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD and contained elements of Greek mythological-philosophical concepts. Apart from the fairly large number of *mithraea* found in natural and artificial caves containing statues depicting Mithras plunging a knife into the side of a bull and

[2] The term 'Mithraic' is used when referring to Mithras, while 'Mithraistic' when referring to a system of thought and religion, known as Mithraism.

minor accompanying scenes on frescoes and reliefs, there are only traces of textual information about this religion. To quote the recently deceased eminent scholar of Mithraism, Roger Beck, "the sacred texts of the cult have all perished, as has almost all contemporary writing about it by outsiders"[3]. Therefore, the image is visible, but it is unclear what the worshippers believed it symbolised or what role it played in the cult. It is unclear how the religion originated and why the deity, known as Mitra, and Mithra in the Vedic (Indian) and Avestan (Iranian) religious traditions, who was the guardian of contracts, became so popular in Rome and in the areas of the Roman Empire where we find the cult of the Invincible Sun Mithras (*Sol invictus Mithras*) and numerous *mithraea* where mysteries dedicated to him were celebrated.

In some ways, Yezidism is similar to Mithraism since it can also be considered a mystery religion. This is due to the mysteriousness and secrecy of its religious content (which for centuries was transmitted only orally), and to the ceremonies celebrated by its followers, which could be classified as mysteries. As a religion, Yezidism also remains a mystery, both to scholars and to the Yezidis themselves, as its origins, as well as many of its religious principles and symbols, remain either secret or obscure.

In order to illuminate this obscurity, in 1940–1941 Taufiq Wahby, a Kurdish linguist and Iraqi politician (Minister of Education in 1948) with an interest in Yezidism, published an extensive series of articles in the Kurdish journal گەلاوێژ (*Gelawêj, 'The* Morning Star') entitled دینی جارانی کورد (*The Ancient Religion of the Kurds*) where he pointed to the pre-Islamic, ancient Iranian roots of Kurdish beliefs.[4] Twenty-five years later, Wahby published *The Remnants of Mithraism in Hatra and Iraqi Kurdistan, and its Traces in Yazidism: the Yazīdīs are not Devil-Worshippers*,[5] a booklet in which he repeated and developed the ideas from his previous work. He also collaborated with another scholar, Cecil J. Edmonds, author of *A Pilgrimage to Lalish*,[6] with whom he published *A Kurdish-English Dictionary*[7] in 1966.

In the booklet, referring mainly to the theses of Franz Cumont on Mithraism and Sadiq Damluji on Yezidism, he tried to prove the Mithraic roots of Yezidism, but instead of providing evidence, he mainly provided pillars of faith in these roots, which are still professed by the supporters of the Mithraistic hypothesis of the genesis of Yezidism. Therefore, it is useful to trace his reasoning, which begins with statements about Mithra, who:

[3] Beck 1993.
[4] Wahby 1940–1941.
[5] *Idem* 1962.
[6] Edmonds 1967.
[7] Wahby and Edmonds 1966.

> is mentioned in the oldest of the Indian sacred books the Rig-Veda in the form of Mitra, and in the Avesta in the form Mithra. […] In Iran the word "Mithra" has been modified to "Mihr" since the first century A.D., and Mihr became god of the sun and contracts. During the Islamic era Mihr remained a name of the sun and the idea of kindness and faithfulness.[8]

Wahby also referred to the origins of Mithraism itself, which he argued arose from a mixture of local beliefs with elements of the religion of the ancient Greeks:

> With the coming of the Macedonians in 331 B.C., this time the Iranian gods were identified with the Greek gods; Zurvān with Kronos, Ahura Mazda with Zeus, […], and Mithra, who was worshipped in Babylon as Shamash, was identified with Helios. Thus, Mithraism grew up as a result of the mixture of the Zurvānian religion with the Greek faith. […] Mithraism was a form of Zurvānism in which Mithra, the god of sun, and Angra Mainyu, the god of evil, the Devil, are worshipped.[9]

Then, into the web thus woven, Wahby knitted the Yezidis, making assumptions (under the guise of the obvious) about their Kurdishness and the beliefs of the Kurds themselves, who, in his view, had one common belief system:

> The Yazīdīs are Kurds, were certainly the followers of the lndo-Iranian religion and its consecutive developments in Iran until the Islamic period. […] In fact the *magnate* god of all the Kurds was their beloved Mihr (Mīr in the present Kurdish pronunciation), their god of oath, heroism and victory, redeemer, Sun-god. They worshipped him and offered sacrifices to him according to the rites of the different religions to which they belonged, in which Mihr was worshipped.[10]

Having made these assumptions, Wahby was able to delve into the beliefs of the Yezidis and their holy sites:

> The sacred cave under the temple of Shaikh 'Adi in the holy valley of Lālish […]. It seems probable that this cave and its spring was a place of worship to the god Mihr and the goddess Anāhitā […] who was the goddess of flowing springs and running fertile waters, and that a fire temple was built over it. […] This cave was used by Christian Monks and I believe by Mithraists before them.[11]

After this confession of faith, which unites Mithraism, the cave, and Yezidism, Wahby moved on to 'traces of Mithraism' in the Yezidi Festival of the Assembly, during which the ritual of killing a bull takes place:

[8] Wahby 1962: 3.
[9] *Ibid:* 5.
[10] *Ibid*: 8–10.
[11] *Ibid*: 13–14.

> The outstanding thing about this ceremony is that the animal which is sacrificed is a bull and that it is sacrificed in front of the tomb of Shaikh Shams. Shams is Mihr. Thus, it can be said that the ceremony is concerned with Mithra and that it is a debased form of Mithra's capture and slaughter of the bull.[12]

Not stopping there, Wahby went on to try to convince that "it is reasonable" to assume that not only Sheikh Shams, but also the main figure of the Yezidi cult, the Peacock Angel, is identical to Mithra, because:

> the founder of Yazidi Sun-worship […] raised the number of the Angels to seven to be equivalent to the seven Mithraic Gods, Ṭāwūs ē Malak retained his supremacy over all other Angels and became equated with the Sun-god, Mihr (Mithra). […] It is reasonable to conclude that the seven Yāzīdī gods were inspired by the Mithraic planet gods and that the Ṭāwūs ē Malak is the equivalent of the Sun, that is Mithra.[13]

The second best-known author in the Middle East, and perhaps the most popular among the Yezidi intelligentsia, who saw in Yezidism a remnant of Mithraism, was the Christian Arab historian George Habib, who devoted a book to the subject entitled اليزيدية بقايا دين قديم (*Yezidism: Remains of an Ancient Religion*), which appeared almost forty years after the publication of Wahby's works. He tried to prove almost the same theses, that the Yezidi religion and its bull-slaying ritual were derived from Mithraic sun worship, albeit mixed with remnants of ancient Babylonian religion, and that in Lalish one could see a Zoroastrian temple inherited from the ancient Assyrians and Mithraists.[14]

A few decades after Wahby and Habib, the same hypotheses about the Mithraic origins of Yezidism and its rituals were, almost verbatim, put forward (though without reference to these two authors) by one of the most eminent Western Kurdologists, Philip G. Kreyenbroek. In 1992, he fully developed his hypothesis in the article, *Mithra and Ahreman, Binyāmīn and Malak Ṭāwūs: Traces of an Ancient Myth in the Cosmogonies of Two Modern Sects*.[15] In addition to discussing the various cosmogonies, he also referred to the Yezidi Festival of the Assembly, which he believes is dedicated to the mythical gathering of the seven angels who determine the history of the world for the coming year:

> Mention should also be made of the ritual slaughter of a bull for the Feast of the Assembly. During this feast the Heptad, presided over by Malak Ṭāwūs, is held to gather annually in solemn conclave, in order to decide the events of the coming year. The festival thus probably mirrors a primeval gathering of the Heptad, at which the sacrifice of a Bull took place.[16]

[12] *Ibid*: 31.
[13] *Ibid*: 45–47.
[14] Cf. Habib 1978: 37–43, 70.
[15] Kreyenbroek 1992: 57–79; cf. Silêman 2009: 22–23.
[16] Kreyenbroek 1992: 74.

Kreyenbroek reiterated his hypotheses in two well-known books: *Yezidism*, and *God and Sheikh Adi are Perfect*,[17], as well as in numerous articles and speeches. In the latter book, written in collaboration with the Yezidi scholar Khalil Jindy Rashow (who made no secret of his fascination with Wahby's writings)[18] it was claimed, among other things, that the Yezidi Festival of the Assembly was oriented towards the rituals of the fifth day, when the bull is killed, and that all this occurs at the same time as the Festival of Mithra:

> The central occasion of the Yezidi religious year is undoubtedly the autumn Feast of the Assembly *(Jema'iye)*. […] At the time of the festival religious dignitaries gather at Lalish, and their terrestrial meeting is thought to be mirrored by a celestial assembly of God and the Seven Angels. […] The observances for the Festival include seven solemn *sema'* sessions, and culminate in the sacrifice of a bull at the shrine of Sheikh Shems (lit. 'Lord Sun') on the fifth day. The ancient Iranian Zoroastrian Feast of Mithra (*Mehragan*), who has links with the sun, was also an autumn festival, characterised by the sacrifice of an animal; similarly, Mithras' bull-sacrifice forms a central clement of the imagery of the European cult known as Mithraism, which may be based in part on an Iranian religious tradition. There are good grounds, therefore, for the assumption that traces of an ancient Iranian tradition can still be found in the Yezidi Festival of the Assembly.[19]

However, the monumental construction turned out to be a colossus with feet of clay, as what appeared on the surface to be the 'good grounds' of the whole construction was merely the belief of the authors ignoring the facts; in this case, two facts in particular. First, the Yezidi festival, which lasts seven days, is not oriented towards the fifth day, and the ceremonies on that day are not central to the festival. Second, the Festival of Mithra and the Yezidi Festival, although celebrated at the same season of the year, do not coincide.

The best way to follow Kreyenbroek's reasoning leading to the above theses can be traced in one of his conference speeches, delivered during the World Congress of Kurdish Studies in Erbil in 2006. As one could discover, the formulation of the hypothesis of a Mithraic genesis of Yezidism was only made possible by adopting a breakneck methodology burdened by the logical fallacy of assuming the conclusion (*petitio principii*). The premises of his argument already contained the conclusion, as Kreyenbroek had constructed such a vision of the cosmogony and beliefs of the Iranian peoples that already included elements present in Yezidism:

[17] Cf. Kreyenbroek 1995: 50, 55–61, 153–154; *Idem* and Rashow 2005: 3, 17.
[18] Rashow 2006.
[19] Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 16–17.

> a reconstruction, based on a comparison of the creation myths of the Indian Veda, of Iranian Zoroastrianism, and of the Roman cult we call Mithraism.[20]

His reconstruction was as follows:

> It seems likely that the ancient Indians and Iranians originally believed that there was one Creator God who, like a father, had engendered the essence of the world, which was small, and contained in rock as an unborn child is contained in its mother's body. The world was small, without movement, without light, floating in the ocean. On it were the prototypes of animals and plants one bull and one plant. Then Mithra — the Lord of Fire, the Sun, and Energy, who was the become the Lord of this world but who had been hidden in the rock — came from the rock into the cave that held the embryonic world (as fire can spring from flint). Mithra offered the first ritual sacrifice, killing the bull and pounding the plant to extract its juice, as many generations of priests were to do later for every major ritual.[21]

Given the very limited knowledge we have about Roman Mithraism, Kreyenbroek's hypothesis was quite bold. All that was needed to 'prove' it was to point out its common elements with Yezidism. Kreyenbroek did no different. He referred to a Yezidi cosmogony, reconstructed on the basis of *qewls*, in which reference is made to the Pearl, from which emerged a world subjected to the authority of the Seven Angels and their leader, the Peacock Angel, whom Kreyenbroek (like Wahby) identified with Mithra. The only missing element to complete the picture was the association of the Yezidi angel with evil and Zoroastrianism:

> God made a Pact (Avestan *mithra*) with the Peacock Angel, and then the world became as we know it. […] Given that a link existed between the Peacock and the Devil, and that an act by Mithra, was regarded by Zoroastrians as devilish, I think it is at least possible that the Kurds, using their usual genius for synthesis, decided that Mithra might be a devil, but they still loved him, and continued to worship Mithra in the shape of a Peacock.[22]

An element that strengthened Kreyenbroek's hypothesis, and at the same time demonstrated his genius for synthesis, was the reference to the mention of a peacock in an Armenian text:

> Now we know from the work of Eznik of Kolb, an Armenian author who wrote some 200 years before Islam, that the Zoroastrians believed that the Peacock was the only creature made by Ahriman, who was otherwise too lazy to create things.[23]

[20] Kreyenbroek 2006.
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] *Ibid*.
[23] *Ibid*; cf. Kreyenbroek 1995: 60; *Idem* 1992: 75–76; *Idem* 2020: 26–27.

That allowed him to completely ignore, for example, the fact that in Muslim sources the "Peacock of the angels" (*Tawus al-malaikat*, a term also used by the Yezidis) is repeatedly referred to as the angel Gabriel, to whom no evil qualities are attributed.[24] The construction of Yezidism as a cult of the Peacock-Ahriman-Mithra/Mithras already seemed quite completed. However, one crucial element was still missing, namely the testimony of the *qewls* about the ritual killing of the bull. However, as Kreyenbroek was unable to find it despite his best efforts, some other 'evidence' was needed to tie all the elements together. This was the sacrifice of a "white bull" and the linking of this with an Iranian rite in honour of Mithra:

> So far, no reference to the killing of a bull has been found in the Yezidi texts, but on the other hand the sacrifice of a white bull forms the culmination of the great Yezidi Autumn festival. This festival, it seems corresponds to the Iranian feast of Mithra (*Mehragân*), which was typically celebrated with animal sacrifice.[25]

No doubt the white colour of the bull, already mentioned by Layard long ago,[26] was intended to emphasise its association with light and the sun. Unfortunately, here too a declaration of faith was presented instead of facts, for firstly, the killing of the bull is not the 'culmination' of the Yezidi festival, which lasts for two more days. Secondly, the Yezidis do not kill an adult bull, as one might think from these descriptions, but a young one, or even a calf. Thirdly, the bull is not necessarily white, but can be black or brown. However, a dark bull would not fit the Mithraistic construction. Also, in earlier times the calf was definitely not white, as is well demonstrated by a photograph from the 1930s published by Edmonds in *A Pilgrimage to Lalish* and his comments:

> The local cattle are miserable creatures […]. This particular animal was no exception, it was not decked with garlands, nor was it white, as so many authors who had never seen the ceremony have alleged it must be.[27]

[24] Cf. Rodziewicz 2021: 969–979.
[25] Kreyenbroek 2006. Cf. *Idem* 2015: 502: "Although no reference to a bull killing has so far been found in the Yezidi texts, the ritual sacrifice of a bull is made every year during the autumn feast, which may correspond to Zoroastrian Mehragān".
[26] Cf. Layard 1849: 289.
[27] Edmonds 1967: 16–17.



The Qabäkh.
After: C. J. Edmonds, ***A Pilgrimage to Lalish***, London 1967, plate II (a)



A brown bull just before being killed, Lalish 2018
– photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.

Furthermore, Kreyenbroek, while pointing out the parallels between the Yezidi and Yaresan (*Ahl-e Haqq*) cosmogonies, risked another logically dubious hypothesis: that the very fact of their similarity proved their origin in ancient Iranian beliefs. He went even much further in his speculations, suggesting that it was the Kurds who influenced the

Romans through their Mithraic cult, which was practised for centuries, giving rise to what we call Roman Mithraism:

> Since the rest of the Yezidi myth is practically identical to the Ahl-e Haqq one, I think we may conclude that both go back to the original, ancient Iranian Cosmogony. Thus, the Roman soldiers who brought Mithraism to their homeland presumably learned about it, not in the Zoroastrian Persian heartlands, but in a Western Iranian milieu whose culture was apparently coherent and attractive enough make it interesting to Romans.[28]

The same elements and reasoning have been present in Kreyenbroek's numerous publications for years.[29] Sometimes, at most, he adds additional 'arguments' to reinforce the original assumption, as when he compares a grotto with sacred functions in ancient Iranian worship with the cave beneath Sheikh Adi's shrine at Lalish, whose "hall strongly resembles a Roman Mithraeon", which he frames with the claim that "in both cases there is evidence that the caves were used for religious purposes before Islam became dominant".[30]

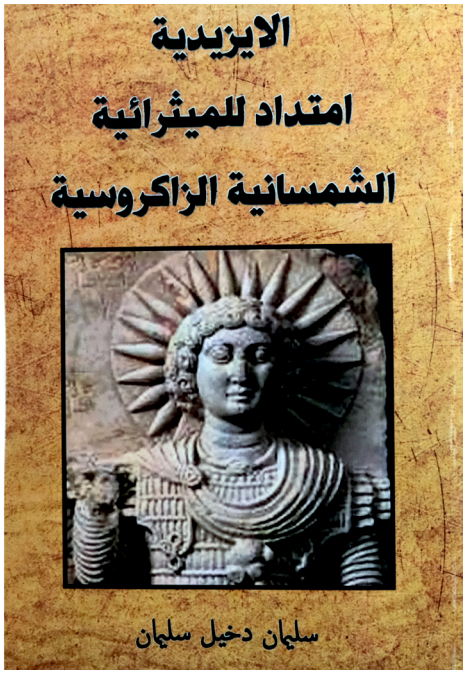
The hypotheses, constructing a vision of Yezidism based on Mithraism, which were disseminated in the Middle East in the works of Wahby, Habib, and in the Western Academy by Kreyenbroek, were also propagated by the first generation of Yezidi scholars, such as the aforementioned Khalil J. Rashow, Khidir Sileman, and the former Iraqi federal minister Mamo Othman[31]. They contributed to the emergence of a paradigm (in Thomas Kuhn's sense of the term).[32] that took on a life of its own, because it had a unique cultural-political attraction – it provided answers to questions about the roots of Yezidism as well as the cultural identity of the Yezidis, thereby linking them more closely to the Kurdish politics. The political world also understood this perfectly. It is no coincidence that in 2008 the very politically active Yezidi cultural centre Lalish in Duhok published a Kurdish translation (by Pir Khidir Sileman) of the book :الميترائية تاريخ ومعتقدات (*Mithraism: History and Beliefs*)[33] written by the politician of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Ali Tatar Nerway (a Director General of the intelligence unit of the Duhok Governorate and now governor of Duhok). It is also worth mentioning a treatise of over 500 pages published in 2021 in Arabic by the recently deceased Yezidi of

[28] Kreyenbroek 2006.
[29] Cf. *Idem* 2011: 161–162; *Idem* 2020: 16–17, 26–27.
[30] *Idem* 2011: 160. Unfortunately, the author does not refer to any specific evidence.
[31] Cf. Othman 2011–2012.
[32] Cf. Kuhn 1962.
[33] Cf. Ali Tatar 2008.

Bashiqe, Sulayman Dakhil Sulayman: الايزيدية امتداد إلميثرائية الشمسانية لزا كروسية (*Yezidism is an Extension of Zagrosian Solar Mithraism*)[34].

At present, it is difficult to count all the Yezidi publications on their Mithraic and Mithraistic past. One can even find in them attempts to juxtapose Yezidism and Mithraism in such detail that, in addition to deliberations about the sun and the bull, a close comparison is even made between the seven-stage Mithraistic hierarchy and the supposedly corresponding seven religious functions in Yezidism.[35] In the face of the increasing amount of literature of this kind, the question arises as to the state of consciousness of the average Yezidi, i.e. a person with a keen interest in his roots and brought up with a strong ethos of respect for elders and the initiated in the principles of religion, who is explicitly told by his academic and political authorities that his religion derives from Mithraism and that during religious festivals he worships Mithra?





Covers of books by Ali Tatar Nerway and Sulayman Dakhil Sulayman.

[34] Cf. Sulayman 2021.
[35] See detailed tables in: *Yazidis in Syria*... (2022): 41–43.

2. Bovine and its Slaying in Mithraism and Zoroastrianism

The main problem facing those who support the idea of a connection between Yezidism and Mithraism is the lack of information about Mithraism as a religious system, including its cosmology and associated rituals (which were supposedly concerned with the migration of souls, astronomical symbolism, the seven planets, and the seven degrees of initiation)[36], and even less about its links with Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Mazdaism. The larger the area of unknowns, the greater the probability that imagination will fill it with fantasies. Unfortunately, this problem cannot be circumvented, for it is Mithraism that is the necessary link for those wishing to prove the connection between Yezidism and Mithras associated with solar symbolism (as *Sol Invictus*) tauroctony (bull slaying), and caves.

However, Mithras does not always appear in both roles – that of the sun god and the bull slayer. He is frequently mentioned in hundreds of Greek and Latin inscriptions, which usually repeat the dedicatory formula for the Invincible Sun Mithras, the Invincible Sun God Mithras, and simply Helios/Sun-Mithras.[37] However, our main informant on Mithraic mysteries[38] – the Neoplatonist Porphyry of Tyre (ca. 234 – ca. 305 AD) – while mentioning the bull, Zoroaster, caves, and astronomy, does not associate Mithras with the Sun at all. Instead, when writing about the Mithraic bull, he connects it with the planet of Venus. Porphyry, referring to the lost works of other authors, describes Mithras primarily as a demiurge:

> As Eubulos [author of the multi-volume *History of Mithras*][39] says: Zoroaster was the first to consecrate a natural cave, having flowers and springs, located in the mountains near Persia, in honour of the maker and father of all – Mithras. For to him the cave bore the image of the world which Mithras had crafted […]. He holds the sword of Aries – the sign of Ares [Mars] – and rides a bull, and [the sign] of Aphrodite [Venus] is Taurus. For Mithras, being the craftsman, is also the lord of *genesis*…[40]

[36] Porphyrius, *De antro nympharum* (Seminar Classics 609) 6; 17; 24; *Idem, De abstinentia* (Nauck) IV 16; Origenes, *Contra Celsum* (Borret) VI 22.

[37] Cf. *CIMRM, "Invincible Sun Mithras"* (e.g. nos. 17, 53, 72, 170, 213, 422, 449, 510, 660, 674, 1295, 1438); "Invincible Sun God Mithras" (89, 134, 152, 248, 360, 416, 436, 566, 577, 639, 863, 864, 890); "Helios/Sun-Mithras" (23, 70, 140, 171, 363, 429, 473, 474, 475, 574, 704, 873).

[38] It is difficult to defend the thesis that the text known under the name Mithras Liturgy (invented by Albrecht Dieterich), preserved in the Paris Greek Magical Papyrus, where the "Great Sun God/Helios-Mithras" is mentioned only once (Betz 2003: 39; tr. A. R.), was in fact a record of a Mithraic rite and not a monument to the religious syncretism characteristic of the Late Antiquity.

[39] Cf. Porphyrius, *De abstinentia (Nauck) IV 16*.

[40] Porphyrius, *De antro nympharum* (Seminar Classics 609) 6, 15–19; 24, 10–12: "πρώτου μέν, ὡς ἔφη Εὔβουλος, Ζωροάστρου αὐτοφυὲς σπήλαιον ἐν τοῖς πλησίον ὄρεσι τῆς Περσίδος ἀνθηρὸν καὶ πηγὰς ἔχον ἀνιερώσαντος εἰς τιμὴν τοῦ πάντων ποιητοῦ καὶ πατρὸς Μίθρου, εἰκόνα φέροντος αὐτῷ τοῦ σπηλαίου τοῦ κόσμου, ὃν ὁ Μίθρας ἐδημιούργησε (…). κριοῦ μὲν φέρει Ἀρηίου ζῳδίου τὴν μάχαιραν, ἐποχεῖται δὲ ταύρῳ, Ἀφροδίτης δὲ καὶ ὁ ταῦρος. δημιουργὸς δὲ ὢν ὁ Μίθρας καὶ γενέσεως δεσπότης…"; tr. A. R.

Incidentally, even in the case of the Zoroastrian luminous guardian of contracts, Mithra (on whom the Roman Mithras may be modelled), it is not clear to what extent he symbolised the Sun and to what extent some of its aspects or position. For although Strabo had already written that "the Persians also worship the Sun, which they call Mithra, and the Moon and Aphrodite"[41], we find no such identification in the Avestan *Hymn to Mithra* (*Mihr Yasht*).[42] Also in the case of the Roman Mithras, it has long been speculated that he may only symbolise a particular aspect or position of the Sun, at its zenith at midday, between its sunrise and sunset phases. Already Plutarch wrote that Zoroaster, and after him the Persians, called the principle associated with light Horomazes, and that of evil and darkness Areimanios, while

> between the two is Mithras, and therefore the Persians call Mithras 'the Mediator'.[43]

The fact that so little is known about the metaphysics of Mithraism is due to the fact that, in the absence of surviving texts, the main source remains the statues of Mithras. This means that we see the image, but we do not know what it symbolises or how it relates to theology and cosmogony.



Mithras plunging a dagger into the side of a bull, National Museum in Warsaw (113396 MNW) – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.

[41] Strabo, *Geographica* (Meineke) XV 3, 13: "Πέρσαι (…) τιμῶσι δὲ καὶ ἥλιον, ὃν καλοῦσι Μίθρην, καὶ σελήνην καὶ Ἀφροδίτην…"; tr. A. R.

[42] As Ilya Gershevitch, the editor and translator of the *Mihr Yasht* pointed out, it is "the Iranian, but not Avestan, notion of Mithra as sun-god (…)" as the Avestan Mithra is "in general clearly distinguished from the sun" *(The Avestan Hymn to Mithra 1959: 35)*.

[43] Plutarchus, *De Iside et Osiride* (Sieveking) 369e: "μέσον δ' ἀμφοῖν τὸν Μίθρην εἶναι· διὸ καὶ Μίθρην Πέρσαι τὸν μεσίτην ὀνομάζουσιν"; tr. A. R.). Cf. Vermaseren 1963: 95–106.

Many such statues have survived to this day. Although they depict a scene that looked like the killing of a bull by Mithras, little is known about the practice of a similar ritual by his followers. Basically, they all show the same scene: a young man pressing a white[44] bull with his left knee and plunging a dagger into its right shoulder. It is unclear whether the scene depicts the wounding or killing of the bull. If it would be a killing, it is uncertain whether it is a butchering or a sacrifice. Additionally, it is unclear why Mithras does not cut the bull's throat as was customary.[45] Blood flows from the open wound, and the dog and the snake are attracted to it. The scorpion embraces or pinches the bull's genitals. In some depictions, wheat ears also grow from its tail. The placement of the animals and wheat has led to speculation that Mithras' act pertains to fertility forces (blood and semen), and depicts the transition from death to life. The central scene is supposed to represent the symbolic triumph of the Sun (Mithras) over the Moon (the bull), which is observed, among other things, at the appearance of the New Moon each month.[46] This scene is often accompanied by the image of a raven and astral symbolism in the form of personifications and symbols of the Sun and Moon placed above Mithras. Notably, Mithras is typically portrayed without any elements that would suggest its association with the Sun. Depictions linking Mithras with the Sun are mainly found in the less widespread group of images of the *dexiosis* scene, in which Mithras, shown with rays around his head, squeezes the right hand of the ruler, and those in which we see Mithras feasting with the Sun at a sacred meal.



Mithras with a bull from the mithraeum of Dura Europos
(Yale University Art Gallery)

[44] In the preserved frescoes, the bull is white or very light.
[45] Cf. Aldrete 2014: 28–50.
[46] Cf. Rutgers 1970: 303–315; Beck 2006: 198–199.

Representations of Mithras with a bull have mainly been found in *mithraea* located within caves and buildings where mysteries dedicated to him were celebrated. Many of these sites were discovered in the area of Roman military camps, where the cult of Mithras was particularly popular. However, no *mithraeum* has been discovered in the areas inhabited by the Yezidis. Traces of Mithraism in Mesopotamia are scarce.[47] The closest Mithraeum to the Yezidi homeland was discovered at Dura Europos (near the present-day Syrian-Iraqi border), 320 km distance from Lalish in a straight line and about 500 km by road.[48] The occasional sensationalist news about the discovery of new alleged *mithraea* in close proximity to the Yezidi territories (for instance in Duhok and Amadiya) leaves many doubts as they reveal themselves to be just caves and ruins about which nothing concrete is known. In addition, these discoveries are beginning to take on a life of their own and are being taken for granted not only by the scientific world but also by local communities.

A good example of this phenomenon is the so-called "Mithraeum of Zarzevan Castle", discovered in 2007 in Turkish Kurdistan, in a strip of the former Roman-Persian borderland, in the area of the ruins crowning the top of a hill between Diyarbakir and Mardin, i.e. in a region where the Yezidi people still live today. The site, dating to the 3rd century AD, is officially known as the '*mithraeum*'. There is also a separate exhibition dedicated to it at the archaeological museum in Diyarbakır, where even its inner parts have been reconstructed, along with an image of Mithra killing a bull surrounded by astrological symbols. However, if one goes to the excavation site and takes a closer look at the site, which is incidentally situated 200 m from the ruins of the Christian church, one does not see any traces of a *mithraeum*, but rather the outline of the symbols of a fish and a cross in a rock-cut room that looks like a typical Christian tomb or chapel, many of which have been preserved in southern Turkey.

In 2022, I spoke at the Zarzevan excavation site with representatives of the Turkish archaeological mission that discovered and described it. They were unable to provide any evidence for the place being a Mithraic site, other than the fact that it was a chamber carved into the rock, which may have contained an image of Mithras killing a bull. In fact, inside the chamber there is now no such scene, nor any artefacts or inscriptions related to Mithraism. Despite this, the official UNESCO website provides the following description:

[47] Cf. Bivar 1975: 275–289.

[48] Currently housed at the Yale University Art Gallery: artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/6746 (accessed: 06.02.2024).



The so-called "Mithraeum of Zarzevan Castle", 2022 – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.



The wall where "a bull sacrifice scene is carved on the plaque in the middle big niche";
Zarzevan Castle, 2022 – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.

> Mithraeum, the most important structure of Zerzevan Castle, was built on the north end of the walls by carving the main rock into the underground. […] A bull sacrifice scene is carved on the plaque in the middle big niche. Paint residues can be seen on the belt rising above the two columns around the big niche in the middle. Probably on the aforesaid belt there were symbols belonging to Mithras religion. The crown beam motif as one of the symbols of Mithras is carved on the eastern wall. There is a rather smoothly carved bull blood bowl in one of the small niches and a pool on the ground. The blood bowl and the pool are connected to each other with a channel through the wall and it is known that water was used in the Mithras religious ceremonies. In addition, there are four symmetrical points on the ceiling for hanging the animals during the ceremonies. The hanging points must have been used to sacrifice the bull in Mithras rituals. […] Considering that the belief in Mithras originates from the Persian country, it is quite possible that Mithraeum in the Zerzevan Castle is the first temple of the Mithras religion. […] Recently found Mithras Temple within the Castle is a unique testimony of Rome's mysterious Mithras religion. Mithraeum in Zerzevan Castle is one of the best-preserved temples of the Mithras cult in the world. […] Mithras is the god of the sun and the cult is based on worshipping the sun.[49]

For those who have not had the opportunity to visit the site, it is obvious that this is a *mithraeum*, indeed the oldest and best preserved *mithraeum* known to history. Unfortunately, it is only to be found in their imagination. Perhaps the site at Zarzevan was indeed a *mithraeum*, but this should be proven. The same applies to the cave under the Yezidi temple at Lalish, where some researchers see the remains of a Mithraistic cult. However, no traces of Mithraism – neither inscriptions nor cult objects – have been found at any of these sites, either in Turkey or in Iraq. Moreover, in the few places in Lalish where it is actually possible to see some images carved into the rocks, one can recognise the outlines of flowers, leaves, animals, the head of a ram, the sun, the moon, the stars and even a peacock, but nowhere is a representation of a bull, let alone a Mithras, and the only inscriptions are neither in Pahlavi, Greek, nor Latin, but in Arabic.

Based on the sites of finds attesting to the occurrence of Mithraism in the Roman-Persian borderlands, and the coincidence of the names and symbolism of the Iranian god Mithra with the Roman Mithras, Mithraism is most often seen as deriving from the religious systems of the East. This is how it was interpreted by its most renowned researcher, Franz Cumont, who saw in the scene of Mithras plunging a dagger into a bull a reference to the myth of Ahriman killing a primordial animal. This hypothesis was briefly expressed in his statement that "*le mithraïsme, en un mot, est la forme*

[49] *Zerzevan Castle and Mithraeum;* see also Mithraeum of Zerzevan.

romaine du mazdéisme"[50], and was later developed by his disciples, notably Maarten J. Vermaseren, who even quoted these words in the preface to the *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*.[51] This hypothesis still has many supporters who argue that the Iranian magi were the ones who introduced Mithraism to Anatolia, where a culture rooted in Hellenism, became enthralled with the oriental deity and then adopt the associated mythology and figures into its own religious and conceptual structure. The stelae erected by Antiochus I of Commagene (ca. 86 BC – ca. 36 BC), which bear Greek and Iranian names, are an example of this adaptation of Eastern cultural motifs. On them we see the ruler clutching the right hand of Apollon, called "Mithras-Helios-Hermes", who was given solar attributes in the form of rays of sunlight emanating from his head.[52]



Dexiosis stele depicting Antiochus I of Commagene grasping hand with Apollo identified as Mithras-Helios-Hermes, Gaziantep Museum, Turkey – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.

[50] Cumont 1949: 272.
[51] *CIMRM* 1956: vii.
[52] Cf. *CIMRM*, nos. 32, 33; Adrych et al. 2017: 129–151.

Although dozens of temples dedicated to Mithras have been found in Europe, only a few have been discovered in the former Roman-Persian borderlands. This might suggest that we are dealing with the adoption of an Eastern deity to express the mystical trends popular in the Roman Empire at the time, which were permeated by Platonism, in which the symbolism of the sun and planets also played a significant role. However, it is unclear to what extent Mazdaism, Zoroastrianism, and Iranian myths influenced the formation of Mithraism, or if it was rather Mithraism and Platonism that influenced Iranian beliefs.[53] Given that the most important Middle Persian compilation of Zoroastrian cosmogony, *The Primal Creation* (*Bundahishn*), was compiled relatively late, in the 8th and 9th centuries AD and which, according to scholars, bears the influence of Platonic concepts, both hypotheses seem likely.

Since there are no attested myths of Mithra slaying the bull in the Iranian tradition, and since the main Avestan text on Mithra, the *Hymn to Mithra*, contains essentially no elements in common with what we infer about Roman Mithraism, it is the *Bundahishn* that has been used to build a theory about the influence of Zoroastrianism on Mithraism. Although the cosmogonic myth described here is not present in the *Avesta*, and the Iranian deity Mithra does not appear in it, the myth contains an element in which scholars find an analogy with the tauroctony – the description of the murder of the primeval animal by the personification of evil, Ahriman. To reinforce their hypothesis regarding the link between this myth and Mithraism, researchers sometimes highlight that Ahriman (*Arimanius*) was explicitly named three times in inscriptions discovered on Mithraic altars. However, it should be noted that these are only three inscriptions from Western European sites, and Ahriman is not identified with Mithras in any of them.[54] Additionally, it is unclear whether the Zoroastrian tradition refers to a bull, as some versions of the myth mention a cow instead.[55] This is explicitly stated in *Zadspram*, a 9th century summary (and perhaps an interpretation) of Zoroastrian legends:

> …and he [Ahriman] came to the sole-created cow… And it was a female and bright like the moon.[56]

The *Bundahishn* describes Ohrmazd's creation of six ideal entities, including the bovine and human archetypes: the Sole-created Cow (*Gāv ī ēv-dāt*) and the first Man

[53] Cf. Turcan 1975; Ahmadi 2021: 453–484.
[54] From Austria, Rome, and England: *CIMRM*, nos. 222, 369, 834.
[55] Cf. Hintze 2005: 57–66.
[56] *Zasdspram* II 8-9, after Hintze 2005: 61.

(*Gayōmard*). Their bodies were formed from earth and their seeds from fire. The myth also associates the primordial cow with the Moon and the first man with the Sun:

> Ohrmazd fashioned the forms of his creatures from his own essence, from light existence, in fire- form: bright, white, round, and distinct. […] He first created the material creatures spiritually, and then created them again in material form. […]. The first of the material creations was the sky, second water, third earth, fourth the plant, fifth the cow, sixth the man, and seventh Ohrmazd himself.[57] […] Fifth, he fashioned the sole-created cow […]. It was white and bright like the moon and three measured rods in height. […] Sixth, he fashioned Gayōmard, bright as the sun […].[58] He fashioned Gayōmard and the cow from the earth.[59]

There is no consensus among scholars as to whether the animal was male or female. Perhaps the difficulty arises from the fact that it is difficult to discuss the sex of the ideal animal model that preceded corporeal creatures (just as it is difficult to talk about the sex of the first Adam), since the distinction between the sexes did not appear until the next cosmogonic stage, when the seed of the ideal cow gave rise to other creatures. Before that happened,

> the light and strength in the seed of the cow was entrusted to the moon. The seed was purified in the moon's light, adorned with colours, and instilled with life. From there, a pair of cattle, male and female, then two of each species, which makes two hundred eighty-two, appeared on earth.[60]

Significantly, however, in the Zoroastrian myth the bull is killed neither by the luminous Mithra nor by the primordial man associated with the sun, but by Ahriman, who came from darkness:

> Then the Evil Spirit came to the cow. The cow fell toward the south, on his right side. It first folded its right leg. Ohrmazd took up the form and likeness of the cow and entrusted them to the moon; it is this light that the moon shines back to the world. […] Then he [the Evil Spirit] came to Gayōmard. Gayōmard fell toward the south, on his left side. He first folded his left leg. Ohrmazd took up his form and entrusted it to the sun; it is this light that the sun shines back on the world. For the cow was like the moon and Gayōmard was like the sun.[61]

57 *Bundahishn* I 43–53, after *Bundahishn* 2020: 9–10.
58 *Ibid.* IA 14–15: *Bundahishn* 2020: 13.
59 *Ibid.* IA 17: *Bundahishn* 2020: 14; *cf. Boyce* 1975b: 138–140.
60 *Ibid.* VIE 2–4: *Bundahishn* 2020 48; cf. XIII 4–5: *Bundahishn* 2020: 70.
61 *Ibid.* VII 4–9: *Bundahishn* 2020: 52. Cf. *Vendidad* XXI 1: *Pahlavi Vendīdād* 1946: 395.

The similarity between the Zoroastrian myth of the murder committed by Ahriman and the depiction of the scene of Mithras plunging a dagger into a bull lies mainly in the fact that the act involves an animal belonging to cattle, and that both the authors of the Zoroastrian myth and of the Roman statues emphasized the fact that the animal bends its right leg. This is accompanied by an astral symbolism – in Zoroastrian myth the animal is associated with the Moon, while Mithras statues are often accompanied by a symbolic representation of the Sun and Moon. However, this is far too little to prove a connection between Zoroastrianism and Mithraism, not to mention Yezidism.

Some scholars have sought to find another analogy between Mithraism and Iranian beliefs. Since in no Iranian text Mithra was described as killing a bull, it has been suggested that the cultic image of Roman Mithraism may have emerged from the combination of fragments of Zoroastrian and Greco-Roman myths with observations of cow and bull sacrifices that took place during Iranian festivals.[62] It was this analogy that the researchers of Yezidism (though a few were sceptical)[63], also reached, when finding in the Yezidi celebrations the remnants of an old Iranian festival dedicated to Mihr (Mithra), *Mihragān*.[64]

Unfortunately, *Mihragān* still holds many unknowns, leaving much room for speculation. A great deal of information and theory about this festival was provided by the Persian scholar Abu Rayhan Biruni (d. 1048) in his *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, who noted that *Mihragān* was celebrated in autumn on the day *Mihr* of the month *Mihr* (16th day of the 7th month). He also recorded the ambiguity of the word *mihr* (which means 'love' and 'sun' in Persian) and the similar sounding word *mīr* ('death'), writing that

> The name of the day is identical with that of the month; it means "the love of the spirit." According to others, Mihr is the name of the sun, who is said to have for the first time appeared to the world on this day; that therefore this day was called Mihr. […] On the same day the angels are said to have come down […] to the world […], [and] God spread out the earth and created the bodies as mansions for the souls. […] On the same day God is said to have clad the moon in her splendour and to have illuminated her with her light, after He had created her as a black ball without any light. Therefore, they say, on Mihrajān the moon stands higher than the sun […]. On the day of Mihrajān the sun rises […] in the midst between light and darkness. Then the souls die within the bodies; therefore the Persian called this day *Miragān*.[65]

62 Cf. Hinnells 1975: 307–310.
63 Cf. Arakelova 2002: 65-66; Asatrian 2009: 7–8.
64 On *Mihragān* see: Biruni, *Kitab alathar al- baqiyah an al- quran al- khaliyah* 222–224: Biruni 1879: 207–209; Calmard 1993: 15–20; Cristoforetti 2013.
65 Biruni 1879: 207–208.

Regarding the meaning of the festival itself, Biruni noted, citing "Persian theologians", that:

> they consider Mihrajān as the sign of resurrection and the end of the world, because at Mihrājan that which grows reaches its perfection and has no more material for further growth (…).[66]

Thus, *Mihragān* formed a special pair with the festival of the beginning and birth – *Nowruz*. The *Mihragān* was associated with the autumn equinox, which occurs at the end of September, while the New Year was celebrated during the spring equinox. As Biruni mentioned several times:

> God has created an ornament for his slaves, of rubies on Nauroz, of emeralds on Mihrajān. (…) God has made the treaty between Light and Darkness on Nauroz and Mihrajān.[67]

It is supposed that during the Parthian Empire, *Mihragān* was the festival of the New Year celebrated in autumn, which, as Mary Boyce noted, "coincided with the Babylonian festival of the month of Tishritu, which also appears to have its origin in an old autumn new year",[68] The festival's name in turn may have been inspired by Mesopotamian worship, "as the Babylonian priests placed the month of September/October, in which their autumn feast was held, under the protection of Shamash, Mithra's Mesopotamian counterpart"[69].

The duration of the festival has also changed. Originally, it lasted for one day (General *Mihragān* on 16 Mehr), but as a result of its fusion with the Great *Mihragān* (on 21 Mehr), which was celebrated five days later, the celebration period was extended (probably in the 3rd century AD) to six days, and then (after the 10th century AD) reduced to five days, so that it ended on 20 Mehr.

However, significantly, Biruni makes no mention of bull sacrifice during *Mihragān*, but emphasizes instead the eating of "a piece of pomegranate and smell of rose-water".[70] Further information on this subject provides Mary Boyce, who observed the festival in 1964 in the region of the Iranian city of Yazd, as the festival is still celebrated among the Zoroastrians under the name *Jashn-e Mehr*.[71] According to Boyce, during the accompanying rituals:

> the focal point of these is the animal sacrifice, which may take place during any one of

[66] *Ibid*: 208.
[67] *Ibid*.
[68] Boyce 1982: 34.
[69] *Ibid*: 35.
[70] Biruni 1879: 208.
[71] Boyce 1975a.

> the first four days […], always during the Hāvan Gāhm that is during the first period of the day from dawn till noon […] and it is always offered in the open, under the rays of the sun.[72]

The sacrificial ritual is usually performed by a priest. The blood of the sacrifice is collected in a bowl and used for consumption. The flesh is roasted, a solemn dedication is made to *Mihr* and then, along with pieces of bread, fruit and eggs, it is served to the dogs and only after that to the people.[73]

Currently, instead of a bull, a sheep, goat or poultry is sacrificed, but according to Boyce this is because, although such a costly sacrifice was often permitted in the past, at present „any 'beneficent' animal may ritually represent the Bull, and no especial ritual significance appears to have attached to the bull sacrifice as such […]"[74], which is consistent with the directive in the *Mihr Yasht*:

> You (Mithra) the worshippers of Mazdāh shall worship, together with the small and large cattle, together with the birds and fowls that fly on wings![75]

Ancient Greek authors writing about the Iranian sun cult also pointed out that the bull was not necessarily the animal sacrificed on this occasion. According to Xenophon, it was horses, not bulls, that the Persians were supposed to sacrifice to the Sun (Mithra), as the bull was offered to Zeus (Ahuramazda).[76]

In the context of Yezidism, a key question arises here: why do scholars seek an analogy in the ancient Iranian Zoroastrian festival, in which a bull was supposedly sacrificed (although this is not the case today), whereas many cultures of the Middle East practised and still practise the sacrifice of a bull? Is this not due to the a priori assumption that Yezidism is derived from Mithraism and Zoroastrianism? A vicious circle is thus created: the proof that the Yezidis kill the bull, like the Mithraists and Zoroastrians, is based on the assumption that they are descended from Mithraism and Zoroastrianism, which would be proven by the fact that they kill the bull…

3. Other Bulls and Sun, Moon, and Stars of Harran

The festivals, ceremonies and mythology of the Yezidi people may have been derived from ancient Iranian religions, as some Iranists and Kurdologists claim. This hypothesis is supported by analogous elements of myths and religious rituals in Zoroastrianism

[72] *Ibid*: 110.
[73] Cf. *Ibid*: 113.
[74] *Ibid:* 108. Cf. Modi 1922: 253–259.
[75] *Mihr Yasht 10*, 119: *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra* 1959: 133.
[76] *Cyropaedia* (Marchant) VIII 3, 11–12; VIII 3, 24; Xenophon also writes about the horse as an offering to the Sun-god Helios in Armenia: *Anabasis (Marchant)* IV 5, 35; cf. Herodotus, *Historiae* (Legrand) I 216, *Strabo, Geographica* (Meineke) XI 8,6.

and Mithraism. Notably, this is what many Yezidis believe today. However, it is important to consider alternative hypotheses and examine other possible origins of Yezidi rituals. Why should we ignore or exclude other analogies among cultures and religions – not going as far as the Old Babylonian New Year rituals, or the Greek festival of *Bouphonia*[77] – which practised the ritual killing of the bull, or in which the bull played a special symbolic role linked to astral and cosmological symbolism? This would, of course, upset a paradigm that has been in place for several decades and has already begun to take on a life of its own. However, it should not be overlooked that this is only a hypothesis, and the more we know about Zoroastrianism and Mithraism, the more it creaks at the seams.

First of all, proponents of the Mithraistic origins of Yezidism overlook the fact that in the religiosity of the Roman Empire, especially at a time when its citizens were succumbing to a fascination with oriental cults, the ritual of killing a bull was not exclusively associated with the Mithraic mysteries. Around the same time that Mithraism was popular, the ritual of sacrificing a bull was associated with deities other than Mithras. For example, a Latin inscription (134 AD) records the performance of the rite of *taurobolium* in honour of the goddess Venus Caelestis.[78] From the middle of the 2nd century AD until the 4th century, *taurobolium* as a religious ritual mainly concerned ceremonies associated with the cult of the Great Mother, Cybele (identified in Greece with Demeter), which was popular at about the same time as Mithraism, although some two hundred years older. Although the cult of Cybele originated in Asia Minor, it appears that Rome was the main centre of these rituals – assuming that the amount of epigraphic evidence corresponds to the extent of the rituals performed. Since the oldest inscriptions dedicated to the Magna Mater do not mention the *taurobolium*, it seems that this ritual was not originally part of her religion and did not come from the East.[79]

The *taurobolium* was not just part of a particular festival and could be performed both privately and on behalf of the state. It is assumed that the ceremony began with the pursuit of the bull, while the killing of the bull itself was treated either as a sacrifice to the Great Mother and other gods, or as a source of life-giving blood, which was probably poured over the person standing under the bull during a kind of baptismal

[77] Cf. Widengren 1969: 291–298; Burkert 1983: 136–149.

[78] No 50 in: Duthoy 1969: 29.

[79] Cf. Rutter 1968: 226–249. As mentioned by the author of a monograph on *taurobolium*, Robert Duthoy (1969: 1), who collected inscriptions relating to this rite, "the total number of inscriptions that record a *taurobolium* or criobolium is 133, and of these all but five dated before A.D. 160 belong in the context of the cult of Cybele. The taurobolium inscriptions have been found mainly in the western provinces of the Roman Empire. Only the four oldest inscriptions, which record taurobolia and criobolia in Asia Minor […]. Rome is the city that has produced the largest number of inscriptions".

ritual. The meat of the bull was distributed among the participants in the ceremony, and the bones were burnt on the altar. The purpose of this rite is unclear as there is no text to explain it. It may have originally been performed for the benefit of the Roman emperor and later for the prosperity of the dedicator, symbolically purifying them and providing spiritual rebirth.[80] The rite may have been influenced by the myth of the death and resurrection of Attis, the divine consort of Cybele, or by Mithraism or Christianity. We do not know.

The frequency of *taurobolium* rituals decreased with the rise of Christianity. However, they were revived with renewed vigour during the reign of the Emperor Julian (361-363 AD), known as the Apostate, famous for his rejection of Christianity and his hopeless attempt to convert the Roman Empire to paganism, of which he became an apostle, fond of sacrificing bulls on altars, worshipping the sun, Mithras, the Mother of the Gods, and the philosophy of Plato, to which he still referred in his last words.[81] Although he ruled for a short time (having spent his last breath during a battle with the Persians, between Ctesiphon and Samarra, near present-day Baghdad), many bronze coins depicting a bull standing under two stars have survived from his reign.

The image on the coins was widely commented on by his Christian contemporaries, who saw Julian above all as an ally of the pagan idols whose cult he tried to promote in every possible way. Unfortunately, as in the case of the Mithras statues, we do not know what exactly this image was intended to symbolise. There is no doubt, however, that Julian, who attached great importance to the symbolism of his coins,[82] considered the image of the bull and the heavenly bodies important enough to sow them the entire Roman Empire from west to east, just as he sought to sprinkle the imperial soil with the blood of bulls during the *hecatombs*[83] sacrificed to the heavenly gods. His extreme zeal for sacrifice was even criticised by Ammianus Marcellinus, a pagan historian sympathetic to Julian who accompanied him on his Persian campaign. Writing about Julian's stay in Syrian Antioch (where, incidentally, one of the mints was located), where the emperor stopped for the winter before marching through Mesopotamia, he noted reproachfully:

[80] The main source concerning the performance of this rite (though not its meaning) is the 4th century Christian author Prudentius, who described it very vividly and exaggerated the details in the poem *Peristephanon* (poem X 1006-1050); cf. English trans.: *Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs* 2020: 133–134.

[81] Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* (Seyfarth) XXV 3, 15–23.

[82] Cf. Julianus Augustus, *Misopogon* (Nesselrath) 355d.

[83] Literally the sacrifices of a 'hundred bulls'; cf. Homerus, *Ilias* (Allen) I 430–474.

But all too often he drenched the altars with the blood of sacrifices, sometimes sacrificing hundreds of bulls and countless flocks of various cattle and white land and sea fowl.[84]

The Christians of the time, who were outraged by Julian's behaviour on his arrival in Antioch, saw the coin as a reminder of his passion for sacrificing to foreign deities:

> for the emperor, being very superstitious and constantly sacrificing bulls before the altars of idols, he ordered an altar and a bull to be struck on his coin.[85]



Reverse of a double maiorina of Julian (minted in Antioch and Sirmium): a bull standing under two stars (361-363 AD), ***"Secvritas Rei Pvb[licae]";*** author's collection.

The symbols on the coin are of uncertain origin, and have been attributed various meanings, including the Apis bull, or the Jewish golden calf, as well as Mithraism, in which Julian is said to have been initiated, or even the symbol of Julian himself as a Sun worshipper, or his astrological representation – the zodiacal sign of Taurus (with its characteristic two stars, Elnath and Zeta Tauri).[86] However, these propositions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Julian, probably born in May, was interested in both Mithraism and the Egyptian mysteries associated with the Apis bull, dedicated to the moon,[87] and above all he was devoted to the cult of the Sun (in which there were clear

[84] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* (Seyfarth) XXII 12, 6: *"Hostiarum tamen sanguine plurimo aras crebritate nimia perfundebat tauros aliquotiens immolando centenos et innumeros varii pecoris greges avesque candidas terra quaesitas et mari adeo";* tr. A. R.

[85] Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (Bright) III 17; tr. A. R.; cf. Sozomenus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (Bidez, Hansen) V 19.

[86] Cf. Gilliard 1964: 135–141; Vanderspoel 1998: 113–119; Woods 2000: 157–169.

[87] Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* (Seyfarth) XII, 14, 6–8.

echoes of Platonism), which he expressed both in his letters and, for example, in the famous *Hymn to King Sun*, composed just in Antioch in 362. In the hymn, he not only referred to himself as:

> a follower of King Sun/Helios,[88]

but added that:

> We also worship Mithras, and celebrate quadrennial assemblies with games in honour of the Sun.[89]

After leaving Antioch, Julian set off for Hierapolis (now Manbij in Syria) and crossed the Euphrates. However, on his march through Mesopotamia, he did not head for the famous Edessa (present-day Sanliurfa), which he described in his eulogy as "sacred for ages as place of Helios"[90], but went south, as mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus:

> marching swiftly, he arrived at Carrae, an ancient town […], where he spent several days in order to make the necessary preparations and, according to the local ritual, to offer sacrifices to the Moon/Luna, who is religiously worshipped here.[91]

The emperor's motivation was not lost on the Christian historian Sozomenus, who noted that Julian:

> running beside Edessa, perhaps due to his hate towards people living there – because the city had long before adopted Christianity with the whole people – came to Carrae. Having found the temple of Zeus, he sacrificed and prayed.[92]

For the site of the sacrifice mentioned by both historians, Julian chose Carrae, a city also known as Hellenopolis and called 'the idol-mad nest of paganism' by the Christians. It was famous for its pagan cult of the planets and a religiosity imbued with elements of Greek mysticism and a particular devotion to figures such as Hermes and Agathodaemon, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Solon and Plato.[93] Many Medieval authors saw in the Harranians "the common Greeks and the dregs of the ancient philosophers"[94],

[88] Julianus Augustus, *In Solem* (Nesselrath) 130b: "εἰμι τοῦ βασιλέως ὀπαδὸς Ἡλίου"; tr. A.R.; cf. *Idem*, Caesares (Nesselrath) 336c; see also Rodziewicz 2022b: 544.

[89] Julianus Augustus, *In Solem* (Nesselrath) 155b: "…καὶ τὸν Μίθραν τιμῶμεν καὶ ἄγομεν Ἡλίῳ τετραετηρικοὺς ἀγῶνας"; tr. A. R.

[90] Julianus Augustus, *In Solem* (Nesselrath) 150c: "…τὴν Ἔδεσσαν (…) ἱερὸν ἐξ αἰῶνος Ἡλίου χωρίον"; tr. A. R.

[91] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* (Seyfarth) XXIII 3, 1–2: "*…et venit cursu propero Carrhas, antiquum oppidum* (…). *Ibi moratus aliquot dies, dum necessaria parat et Lunae, quae religiose per eos colitur tractus, ritu locorum fert sacra* (…)"; tr. A.R.

[92] Sozomenus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (Bidez and Hansen) VI 1, 1–2; tr. A.R.

[93] On Harran, cf. Rodziewicz 2022b: 541–565.

[94] Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab* I 8: tr. A. R. After Mas'udi 1861: 198.

and „the remains of the followers of the ancient religion of the West, separated (cut off) from it"[95] – to quote only Biruni and Mas'udi, who even identified Julian as a follower of the local religion.

Harran remained the centre of a pagan religious movement for many centuries after Julian's death (if the bull on his coins was meant to represent him, it did indeed meet its fate as a sacrificial animal)[96]. When the Roman Empire was dominated by Christianity and the ritual sacrifice of bulls ceased (the last known inscription relating to the *taurobolium* dates from 390 AD), and even later when its eastern territories came under Islamic rule, the so-called Chaldean Sabians living in Harran still tried to cultivate the ancient religious tradition, which centred on the worship of the seven deities and their celestial bodies: the Moon, the Sun, and the Stars.

In the Islamic era, the Harranian Sabians were renowned for their astronomical knowledge and the art of making astrolabes, as well as for their translation skills, which brought them fame in Baghdad, where they were involved in translating the works of the Greeks into Syriac and Arabic at the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah*. Harran was also linked to the legend of Zoroaster (Zardusht), which preserved in an Arabic translation of a Sasanian astrological book from the 4th century AD, contained a biography of the prophet, according to which he was born in Adharbayjan, but it was in Harran that he acquired his knowledge of Greek astrology, which he then took with him to Persia.[97] It was in the astrological religious cult of Harran that some Muslim authors tried to trace the genesis of Zoroastrianism. Biruni, for example, wrote of his Zoroastrian contemporaries that:

> still, they have some ancient traditions and institutes, which they trace back to their original creed; but in reality those things have been derived from the laws of the sun-worshippers [of the *Shamsiyya* sect] and the ancient people of Harran.[98]

Both the Babylonian stelae found at Harran and the later Roman coins minted there featured the symbols of the Sun, the Moon, and a Star.[99] Significantly, they also appear among the Yezidis – on the walls and doors of their shrines, as well as in the legend of Abraham, called by them Braîm/Birahîm Xelîl (Ibrahim the Friend (of God)) and

[95] Biruni 1879: 314.
[96] This analogy was also grasped by his contemporary, the Christian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus, who in his invective against Julian stated that "He receives a wound indeed appropriate/deadly [for him], and redeeming to the whole world, and with a single butcher's cut he renders justice to the many entrails of the [sacrificial] victims in whom he had wrongfully put his trust" (*Contra Julianum imperatorem* II 13 (Migne); tr. A. R.).
[97] Cf. Pingree 2002: 11–12.
[98] Biruni 1879: 314.
[99] Cf. Rodziewicz 2022b: 543–544.

regarded as their distant ancestor form Harran,[100] where he received a revelation. In one of the most important Yezidi religious hymns, the *Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr*, it is said that Birahîm originally worshipped the so-called Three Letters (Kurm. *Sê herf*) – the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars – until he discovered that behind them there was an incorporeal God and recognised Him in truth.[101] Some Yezidis also add that he was originally a *Shamsani*, because he worshipped the Sun (Ar. *Shams*).

In addition to the legend of Birahîm, there are several other connections between the Yezidi religion and Harran. These involve the veneration of the four elements and the seven celestial bodies, which are viewed as manifestations of the seven divine essences (emanations of the one God who has nothing to do with evil and who has entrusted them with power over the world), the belief in metempsychosis and the special importance given to Wednesday, which in Harran was dedicated to Hermes (Mercury/Utarid),[102] while in Lalish to the Peacock Angel, and the celebration of the beginning of the year in the month of Nisan, as well as similar dietary prohibitions and dress.

It should also be remembered that Harran played a significant role in the history of the Umayyad dynasty, whose distant descendant was Sheikh Adi. It was the second capital of the Umayyad caliphate after Damascus and the place where Yezid ibn Mu'awiya, famous for his religious tolerance and restraint towards Islam, was particularly respected, as is explicitly mentioned in the *Syriac Chronicle to the year 1234*:

> still today the Harranites honour Yazid, the son of Mu'awiya, because of his undying enmity towards the party of ' Ali.[103]

But two hundred years before that date, around 1032, as the historian of the time, Yahya of Antioch wrote, the persecution of the Sabians by the Muslims intensified and their last temple, "the temple dedicated to the moon (…) they transformed into a stronghold" and „many of the Sabians who lived in Harran then (…) converted to Islam by fear"[104]. As a result of persecution, the Sabians either changed their religion or left the city, which continued until the 13th century, when, after the destruction of Harran by the Mongols in 1271, the largest migration of the local community took place, including those who were popularly known as the 'Sun Worshippers' (*Shamsi*). At that time:

[100] On a similar myth in Islam, cf. Biruni 1879: 186–187; Green 1992: 10–14, 107.
[101] Cf. *Qewlê Zebûnî Meksûr,* st. 45–48 *apud* Rodziewicz 2022b: 568.
[102] Depicted in astrological iconography as a man riding a peacock and holding a serpent in his hand; cf. Rodziewicz 2022b: 578–580.
[103] Syriac text *apud Chronicon anonymum ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens* (Chabot) 281 *(Chronicon anonymum…* 1920: 252-253), tr. Palmer 1993: 187.
[104] Tr. A. R. following Yahya of Antioch 1997: 518–519 [150–151]; *Idem* 1998: 362.

most of the inhabitants had removed to Mardin and Mosul[105]

which is precisely the area where Yezidism began to take shape in the 12th and 13th centuries – the isolated areas of Kurdistan, inhabited by representatives of local peoples bound by the idea of the worship of the seven angels and reverence for the Umayyad family, gathered under the leadership of a distant descendant of Yezid ibn Muʿawiya: ʿAdi ibn Musafir ibn Zayn al-Din ibn Ismail ibn Utuba ibn Umaya ibn Yazid ibn Muʿawiya ibn Abu Sufiyan[106] and an enigmatic group of sheikhs called the *Shamsanis* (perhaps descended from refugees from Harran).[107]

Ibn al-Nadim (d. ca. 995) who collected in his monumental work *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, among other things, the accounts of various authors who wrote about the Harranian Sabians, quotes a remark by the father of Arabic philosophy, al-Kindi (after his disciple Ahmad ibn al-Tayyib al-Sarakhsi), who, when discussing the principles of their theology and psychology and speaking of religious practice, explicitly mentions the sacrifices they offered:

> They have offerings with slaughtering which they offer to the planets. […] The things which they sacrifice for the offerings are the males of cattle, sheep, goats, and other four-legged beasts which do not have teeth in both of the two jaws, with the exception of the camel. They [also sacrifice] birds which do not have talons, with the exception of the pigeon. The method of slaughtering is by cutting the jugular veins, with no interval intervening.[108]

Further details of the offerings made by the Harranian Sabians were provided by the Christian, Wahb ibn Ibrahim (Abu Said), who gave both a list of daily offerings and those on special festivals each month:

> [On] Sunday, to al-Shams (the sun), whose name is Aylīyūs (Helios); [on] Monday, to al-Qamar (the moon), whose name is Sīn (Sin); [on] Tuesday, to al-Mirrīkh (Mars), whose name is Lārīs (Ares); [on] Wednesday, to ʿUṭārid (Mercury), whose name is Nabiq (Nebo); [on] Thursday, to al-Mushtarī (Jupiter), whose name is Bāl (Bel); [on] Friday, to al-Zuhrah (Venus), whose name is Balthā (Belit); [on] Saturday, to Zuhal (Saturn), whose name is Qirqis (Cronus). […].
>
> The beginning of their year is Nīsān (April). […] On the sixth day they slay for their divinity, the Moon, a bull, which they eat at the end of the day. On the eight day they fast and then break the fast with the meat of lamb. On this day they also hold a feast in

[105] Part of MS cited and tr. by Rice 1955: 445–447.
[106] His full name is recorded in a Yezidi manuscript from 1207/1208 (*apud* Pirbari, Mossaki, Yezdin 2020: 28).
[107] Cf. Rodziewicz 2021; *Idem*, 2022b: 567–623.
[108] Ibn al-Nadim 1998: 747–748; cf. Biruni 1879: 188.

> honour of the seven deities, the devils, jinn, and spirits. […] On the twentieth day […] they slaughter three *zabrukh*, a *zabrukh* being a bull. One is for the god Cronus, who is al-Zuḥal (Saturn); one is for Arīs, who is al-Mirrīkh (Mars), the Blind God; and one is for the Moon, which is Sīn. […] On the twenty-eight day […] they slay a large bull to Hermes […].[109]

Taken together, all this information shows that the custom of sacrificing animals, including the bull, preserved in Yezidism is not necessarily of Zoroastrian or Mithraistic origin. The sacrifice of the bull, associated with the worship of the heavenly bodies, especially the Sun, Moon, and Stars, was known to many other cultures.[110] Nevertheless, what we know about the culture of Harran and its links with the Umayyads leads us to conclude that Yezidism has much more in common with it than with Mithraism or Zoroastrianism.

4. From Harran to Mecca: Abraham's Sacrifice

Although there are clear parallels in Yezidism with the religion of the Harranian Sabians, it should not be forgotten that Yezidism was strongly influenced by the culture of early Islam and the environment in which it was formed. It is no coincidence that the Yezidis refer to the original Meccan tradition and that their spiritual capital in Lalish and its holy sites located there have their counterparts in Mecca. Moreover, just as Muslims make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, Yezidis also make a pilgrimage to Lalish. Both groups also offer a blood sacrifice at this time.

The encouragement of the sacrifice of large animals is explicitly mentioned in the *Quran*:

> 32. That [is so]. And whoever honours the symbols [i.e., rites] of Allāh – indeed, it is from the piety of hearts.
>
> 33. For you therein [i.e., the animals marked for sacrifice] are benefits for a specified term; then their place of sacrifice is at the ancient House [*al-bayt al ʿatīq*].
>
> 34. And for every [religious] community We have appointed a rite [of sacrifice] that they may mention the name of Allāh over what He has provided for them of [sacrificial] animals. […]

[109] Quoted by Ibn al-Nadim 1998: 755–757.
[110] Cf. Tubach 1986.

> 36. And the camels and cattle [*wal-bud'na*][111] We have appointed for you as among the symbols [i.e., rites] of Allāh; for you therein is good. So mention the name of Allāh upon them when lined up [for sacrifice]; and when they are [lifeless] on their sides, then eat from them and feed the needy [who does not seek aid] and the beggar. […]
>
> 37. Their meat will not reach Allāh, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you.[112]

The main Muslim festival during which animals are sacrificed is the Feast of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*/*Eid al-Qurban*), which begins at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, where, according to legend, even Adam and Alexander the Great made the pilgrimage.[113] However, Muslims mainly attribute the origin of the *Hajj* to events related to two prophets: Abraham and Muhammad.

First, they refer to the legend of Abraham, a figure that links Harran, Islam, and Yezidism together. This myth clearly points to the pre-Islamic origins of the festival, which, it should also be remembered, takes place in the former religious centre of the Qurayshites. According to the legend, after leaving Harran, Abraham built the Ka'ba here with his son Isma'il and was put to a test by God, from which he emerged victorious and sacrificed a ram in place of Isma'il (or Isaac), thus becoming a friend of God. The Feast of the Sacrifice is celebrated to commemorate this event.[114] As Biruni wrote:

> On this day God selected Abraham as a friend (*Khalil*). […] It is called the day of the victims […], because on this day the animals, that had been brought to Mekka to be sacrificed, were slaughtered. It is the last day of the days of the pilgrimage. On this day Isaak was ransomed with the ram.[115]

Second, in their festival and its rituals, Muslims commemorate and follow Muhammad, who, in commemoration of Abraham's deed, established the custom of making an annual sacrifice precisely during the *Hajj* and then celebrating the Feast of the Sacrifice. Three months prior to his death, Muhammad embarked on a farewell pilgrimage to Mecca. There, he sacrificed animals in the valley of Mina, where Abraham is said to have done the same, and where, as 9th century Muslim historian Muhammad

[111] The *b-d-n* root means "torso, body; to be fat […]; a camel or cow fattened for sacrifice in pre-Islamic ritual": *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* 2008: 81–82.
[112] *Quran* XXII 32–37, tr. Saheeh International.
[113] Cf. Webb 2013: 6–14; see also Munt 2016: 13–30.
[114] Cf. *Quran* II 125; XXII, 26–29. On Abraham in Arabic and Muslim traditions cf. Wheeler 2022: 200–216.
[115] Biruni 1879: 333.

al-Azraqi wrote in his chronicle of Mecca (*Akhbār Makkah*), seven idols associated with pagan gods had previously been worshipped.[116]

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the memory of the seven deities of the Qurayshites is preserved in a Yezidi tradition, as the Yezidis connect Abraham's distant descendant and Yezid ibn Mu'awiya's grandfather, Abu Sufyan, to the seven most sacred objects of Yezidism known as *Sanjaqs* (copper standards topped with peacocks). According to the Yezidi prince Ba-Yazid al-Amawi:

> These peacocks, were set up in the Holy Ka'abah side by side with the Quraish's gods which were worshipped at that time. After Islam, Abu Sufyan saved the seven *Sanjaqs* for being holy for Quraishites and for a memorandum of his great grandfather Ibrahim Al-Khalil. Those *Sanjaqs* remained with him until his son Mu'awiya inherited them and transferred them from Holy Mecca to Al-Sham [i.e. Syria] when he was amir over it in the caliphate of Omar ibn Al-Khattab.[117]

The Yezidis still refer to a pre-Islamic tradition linked to Abraham. They believe that it was preserved by some members of the Umayyad clan of the Quraysh tribe, who, before the advent of Islam, controlled Mecca, to which pilgrims went and where blood sacrifices were made. It is supposed that at that time the *Hajj* was held in the autumn and coincided with the autumnal equinox, and only since the time of Muhammad it fell in spring.[118] Moreover, some of the rituals performed during the *Hajj*, such as offering a sacrifice or the shaving of one's hair, may indicate that the festival was related to, or even grew out of, the original funerary rituals celebrated at sites where the tombs of saints were located.

Muhammad himself offered a sacrifice at the conclusion of his farewell pilgrimage to Mecca in 632 AD (10 AH). After delivering a sermon on Mount Arafat, the Prophet prepared a sacrifice of 100 animals (*badanah*) and ordered the meat to be distributed among the people, while he himself consumed pieces of meat from all the animals in a bouillon, then shaved (which seems to have been part of a pre-Islamic ritual) and gave

[116] Wheeler 2010: 348; *Idem* 2022: 45.

[117] [Chol] 1973: 172.

[118] According to Wensinck (1986: 31–32) "[it] may be regarded as certain that in Muhammad's time the sacred festival fell in the spring. Wellhausen has, however, made it appear probable that the original time of the *ḥadjdj* was the autumn". Wensinck traced the origin of the Muslim Hajj to the North Semitic autumnal Feast of Tabernacles, also called ḥag in the *Old Testament:* "similar customs are found all over the world at the beginning of the four seasons. With the expulsion of the sun-demon, whose harsh rule comes to an end with summer […]. The name *tarwiya*, 'moistening', may also be explained in this connexion as a sympathetic rain-charm, traces of which survive in the libation of Zemzem water. These are again parallels to the Feast of Tabernacles (or Day of Atonement): the goat, which was thrown from a cliff for 'Azazel, is not difficult to identify as the type of the sun-demon; and the libation of water from the holy well of Siloam was also a rain-charm, for the connexion between the Feast of Tabernacles and rains expressly emphasized (Zach., xiv, 17)" (*Ibid:* 32).

out his hair to be distributed among the people. After that, he returned to the Kaaba and drank water from the Zemzem spring. As per the account based on the testimony of the prophet's cousin, Abdallah Ibn Abbas (619–687), quoted by the seventeenth century Muslim scholar Nur al-Din 'Ali al-Halabi:

> The apostle of God led to the sacrifice on his farewell pilgrimage 100 camels [*badanah*] […]. Then […] he said: "Distribute the meat, the skin, and the coverings among the people, but the butcher does not get any of it. Take for us from each camel a piece of meat and put it in a single pot, so that we might eat the meat and drink from the broth." And he did it. He related that all of Minā is a place of sacrifice, all the valley of Mecca is a place of sacrifice. Then the apostle of God shaved his head, […] and […] distributed his hair […] to the people, one or two hairs at a time.[119]

This act holds symbolic importance in Islamic tradition, as the distribution of the Prophet's body fragments was compared to the distribution of parts of a sacrificial animal among the faithful. At the same time, one can see in it a triumphant finalisation of Muhammad's mission to establish Islam,[120] as well as a reference to the ancient sacrifice made of a hundred animals, the *hecatomb*.

The *Hajj* currently takes place in the last month of the Muslim year, *Dhu al-Hijjah*, which is the twelfth month of the lunar year, and the ceremonies that accompany it last about six days. The sacrificial ritual takes place on the third day of the pilgrimage (10th *Dhu al-Hijjah*), called the Day of Sacrifice (*Yaum al-Nahr*).[121] On the same day, the entire Muslim world begins to celebrate the Great Festival (*Eid al-Kabir*), the Feast of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*/*Eid al-Qurban*), which lasts for three to four days.

The sacrifice of an animal is one of the four religious obligations of this day of the pilgrimage, which also concerns Muslims from around the world who are away from Mecca. After spending the pr evious day on Mount Arafat, pilgrims go to Mina, where, according to legend, Abraham and Muhammad made sacrifices. An animal is killed here, and the flesh is distributed to the poor. After completing the sacrifice, pilgrims shave their heads and proceed to Jamrah before returning to Mecca to circumambulate the Kaaba seven times.

The pilgrims make the sacrifice either by themselves or through a proxy. The animal is killed in the morning, but not before dawn. It must be a livestock animal (of any sex), such as a sheep, ram, goat, camel, or bovine.[122] A larger animal incurs more expense

[119] Quoted and tr. by Wheeler 2010: 342.
[120] Cf. a monograph by Wheeler (2022), who traces analogies, among other things, to the cosmogenic act known from Iranian cosmogony (*Ibid:* 3).
[121] Cf. Wensinck and Jomier 1986: 36; Grunebaum 1976: 33–34.
[122] Cf. *Quran* VI 142–144.

and represents a larger number of people. The animal must be healthy, free of defects, and belong to the person who wants to sacrifice it. It must also be of the right age: cattle must be two years old, camel – five, lamb – more than six months, goat, sheep, ram – at least a year old.[123] Traditionally, the sacrificial animal would be slaughtered by the pilgrim themselves or in their presence. Currently, the sacrifice can still be performed individually, but for sanitary and economic reasons, it is recommended to be carried out in state-supervised slaughterhouses. Alternatively, the animal can be ordered to be killed by proxy, eliminating the need for the pilgrim's presence at the ritual. The flesh is then distributed as alms for the poor by the relevant institutions.[124]

However, importantly for us, although in pre-Islamic Arabia the bull was supposed to be a sacrificial animal linked to the Moon deity,[125] in Islam it has no particular symbolic role, and any other animal can be killed during the Feast of Sacrifice.

It is worth noting that the Yezidis also celebrate a festival with the same name as the Muslim *Hajj*. During their Festival of Pilgrimage *(Îda Hecîya/Eyd al-Hajj)*, they observe both the Day of Arafat *(Yawm 'Arafah/Roja Erefatê)* and the Day of Sacrifice *(Yawm al-Nahr)*, which includes the Feast of Sacrifice *(Îda Qurban/E'yda Qurbanê/Eid al-Qurban)*.[126] The festivals not only share the same names as those of the Muslim ones, but, unlike most Yezidi festivals, the date of their celebration is determined by the same lunar calendar used for the pilgrimage to Mecca.[127] As it was stated by a son of Mir Ismail Beg, Mir Ba-Yazid al-Amawi:

> when the Muslims stand on 'Arafat Mountain at Mecca, we stand at the same time on 'Arafat Mountain by the luminous Mergeh[128] at Lalish.[129]

To avoid any association with Islam, the Yezidis argue that their festival is of a different nature and is dedicated to the Angel Sheikh Sin.[130] They also claim that it was the Muslims who forbade them to enter Mecca, so Sheikh Adi caused the Zemzem spring (miraculously connected underground to Mecca) to gush forth in Lalish so that they could celebrate their festivals there.[131] The fact that Lalish became a place of pilgrimage

[123] Cf. the *fatwa* by the *mufti* Maulana Mohammed Ubaydah Badat.
[124] Cf. detailed rules of *The Saudi Project for Utilization of Hajj Meat.*
[125] Cf. Ryckmans 1975: 365–373; Dostal 1983: 196–213.
[126] Cf. Ishak of Bartella 1900: 65–66; Furlani 1938: 80–83; Kreyenbroek 1995: 157–158; Joseph 1909: 137. Among Yezidi publications, cf. [Chol] 1934: 92–93; Baqsrî 2003: 153–154; Xidir 2013: 252–266.
[127] Only two Yezidi festivals, out of many, are celebrated according to the lunar calendar. The second one is Şevberat. Cf. [Chol] 1934: 92; cf. Lescot 1938: 72; Damluji 1949: 192.
[128] The name of the region in which Lalish is located, sometimes used interchangeably with the name of Sheikh Adi's sanctuary.
[129] Jabiri 1981: 229 after Jundi 1976: 19.
[130] Cf. *Qesîda Şêxsin*, st. 10: *Reşo* 2013: 696; cf. Guest 2010: 222.
[131] Cf. Chaukeddin 2016: 113–114.

is emphasised many times in Yezidi religious poetry, such as in the first verse of *Qewlê sibeyek ji yêt E'dewîye* (*Hymn of the Adawi Morning*):

Çi sibeyek ji yêt E'dewîye,	**What a morning of Adawis!**
Da bidin medehêt Şêxê 'Edîye,	**Let us praise Sheikh Adi!**
Heca me Zimzime û mixare û kafe û Kaniya Sipîye.	**Our hajj is Zemzem, the grotto and cave and the White Spring.**

But above all, the Yezidis point out that the tradition of the pilgrimage to Mecca predates Islam because it concerns the figure of Abraham, who is not only revered by Muslims. They have preserved legends about Abraham, in particular in two religious hymns and one story: the *Hymn of Abraham the Friend and Nemrud* (*Qewlê Birahîm Xelîl u Nemrûd*), the *Hymn of the Prophet Ismail* (*Qewlê Nebî Simaîl*), and the *Tale of Abraham the Friend (Çîroka Birahîm Xelîl)*.[132] Among other things, these legends tell of Abraham sacrificing a ram from Paradise in place of his son Ismail. To commemorate this event, Yezidis sacrifice animals during the Festival of Pilgrimage and the Festival of Sacrifice, and climb the mountain during the Day of Arafat. The holiday was mentioned explicitly in the *Hymn of the Prophet Ismail* (*Qewlê Nebî Simaîl*):

...Îdoke û Erefaye	**There is the Festival and Arafat**[133]
Beranek ji bana têdaye	**[when] a ram from above is present**
Qurbaniya serê Nebî Simail dişaye.	**A sacrifice is sent instead of Prophet Ismail.**
Îdoke û Erefate	**Festival and Arafat**
Beranek ji bana dihate	**A ram comes from above**
Qurbaniya serê Nebî Simail dişate.	**Sacrifice is sent instead of Prophet Ismail.**[134]

The main ceremonies of the Yezidi festival take place in Lalish, where Mount Arafat is located. They last three days and are full of ceremonies, including the offering of sacrifices. At the end of the festival, all those gathered proceed to the temple of Sheikh Adi and go down to the cave of Zemzem and spray water on themselves. The festival ends with the ceremonial dancing of a *govend* at the White Spring. In turn, those Yezidis who remain in their villages celebrate for one day and then make a sacrifice, depending on each family's financial capacity. It can be a sheep, a ram, or a pigeon. The *mijêwirs* ('custodians', 'guardians') make offerings in front of the shrines' doors or

[132] Cf. Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 226–256.
[133] In Yezidism, the word *arafat* can also mean 'eve' or 'vigil' – the evening before a festive day.
[134] *Ibid*: 239; Reşo 2013: 336; tr. A. R.

at their houses and then they welcome visitors and offer them *simat* and the meat of the lamb symbolising the sacrifice of Abraham.[135] Significantly, however, the bull is not one of the sacrificial animals slaughtered during the festival, and for the Yezidis, the most important holiday, which includes the obligatory annual pilgrimage, is not, as one might expect, the Festival of Pilgrimage, but the Festival of the Assembly, which is celebrated in the autumn.

5. The Yezidi Autumn Festival and the Sacrifice of the Bull

The Yezidis ceremonially kill a bull once a year in Lalish during the autumn Festival of the Assembly (*'Eid al-Jama'ayat*, *Îda Cemayê*, or *Cejna Cemayê*),[136] also called the Festival of the Assembly of Sheikh Adi (*Îda/Cejna Cimaya Şîxadî*), the Festival of Sheikh Adi (*Îda/Cejna Şîxadî*), and the Assembly of Lalish (*Cemaya Lalişê*).[137] The animal is slaughtered during the *Qabakh* ceremony, which takes place on the fifth day of the festival, according to the traditional Yezidi calculation of days (from sunset to sunset). Currently, this is the only time a bull is killed, although the sacrifice of various animals is permitted during other festivals, both in Lalish and where the believers live, for example in the spring during the New Year festival (*Serê Salê*). The reason maybe that rarely someone can afford to kill such an expensive animal and hence, usually a lamb, sheep, ram, or poultry is used.[138]

In order to understand the meaning of this ritual, it must be seen in the context of the entire festival, and thus linked to the purpose for which the Yezidis gather in Lalish on these days. Regrettably, the festival's meaning, much like its name, is not self-evident. For the term 'assembly' can refer to either the seven-day gathering of all Yezidis, who pilgrimage annually to the holy valley of Lalish, or to the gathering of the Seven Angels they worship, or to both groups at once, i.e. the gathering of the faithful to worship these figures. Additionally, the meaning behind the name Sheikh Adi in the festival's title is unclear, as it refers to both the sheikh worshipped by the Yezidis and the Lalish valley where the festival takes place. Regrettably, the significance of certain rituals performed during the festival has been lost. Furthermore, some of the rites have been modified, leading to different interpretations not only of the general meaning of the festival, but also of the names and meanings of the individual ceremonies that take

[135] Cf. Xidir 2013: 261.

[136] Many Yezidis emphasise that the replacement of the term *îd (Ar. 'eid)* with the Kurdish *ceyn* to designate Yezidi festivals is a novel phenomenon resulting from the growing influence of Kurdish nationalism on the Yezidi elites. The objective of this substitution of the traditional names, rooted in Arabic, with their Kurdish equivalents is to redefine Yezidism as an original Kurdish religion. Cf. Rodziewicz 2020: 285.

[137] Cf. Layard 1849: 271; *Idem* 1853: 78; Карцев 1891: 258; [Chol] 1934: 83; Edmonds 1967: 3–21; Feqîr Hecî 2013: 130–153; Baqsrî 2003: 147–152.

[138] Cf. Bah'zanî 2007.

place over the seven days. However, it cannot also be excluded that the name of the festival refers to the ceremony of collecting and assembling the elements of a sacred object, which can be considered the most important for this festival. For, if one excludes the ceremonies that are also held during other festivals (e.g. *sema'*, *simat*, *govend*, the display of the *Sanjak*, the recitation of hymns and prayers), one will see that the main rituals that mark the beginning and end of the festival are associated with a sacred object called *Berê Şibakê* (lit. 'direction of the window', 'window grille'), *Textê* ('throne'), and *Textê Êzîd* ('Throne of Yezid'). This brass window grille, made up of dozens of pieces, was kept for most of the year in Bahzani, under the care of the Shamsani sheikhs, in the *Berê Şibakê* House (*Bayt Bereshibaqi*),[139] which is considered to be the oldest place belonging to the Shamsanis. The Yezidis believe that the *Berê Şibakê* was prepared by Sheikh Shams for Sheikh Adi, who looked through it during his lifetime, and at the end of which it served as a bier (*darbest*), on which he ascended to the heavens.

On Friday night before the Festival of the Assembly,[140] *Berê Şibakê* is assembled during special rituals (preceded by the sacrifice of sheep) and then taken to pieces and ceremonially carried in procession to Lalish on the first day of the festival and placed in the Shrine of the White Spring. On the sixth day, which is the anniversary of the departure of Adi's soul from the world, the *Berê Şibakê* is reassembled at night in the courtyard in front of the Sheikh Adi Temple and taken out of the temple during the day for a few tens of seconds, baptised with holy water and displayed next to Sheikh Adi's tomb, instead of the *Sanjak*. At the end of the Festival of the Assembly, *Berê Şibakê* is dismantled and taken back to Bahzani in a ceremonial procession.

This would lead one to assume that the main idea behind the festival, which unites the various ceremonies, is to commemorate Sheikh Adi and the departure of his soul from the earthly world. If this interpretation is correct, the festival could be considered mournful. However, the joyful mood that accompanies it, and the *govend* dances that are performed daily, are not of a mournful character. This may be due to the fact that

[139] Since the genocide in 2014, it is, for security reasons, kept at a secret place in Ain Sifni.

[140] As Peter Nicolaus reminded me, Fridays are selected because they are the first days of any weekend in Iraq and more Yezidis are, therefore, able to attend the ceremony. In other words, in the years, when the Festival of Assembly was celebrated again after the genocide, the baptism took place on the following Fridays: 28.09.2018, 27.09.2019, 01.10.2021 (the festival was cancelled 4 days later namely on 05.10.2021), and 30.09.2022 (in 2020 the festival was cancelled because of Covid). In 2023, the Tuesday before the festival (03.10.2023) was selected because of the tragic events in the course of which "at least 94 people died and 100 were injured after a fire broke out during a wedding in Iraq's biggest Christian town" (Qaraqosh) on 27.09.2023 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66932327). Although only one Yezidi youth came to death, the Yezidi community mourned together with the Christian population in Bashiqa and Bahzani. However, some informants linked the delay more to a disagreement between the *Mir* and *Peshimam Merge* over the expected revenues from the display of the *Berê Şibakê* during the festival.

the Yezidis believe that Sheikh Adi never died, but ascended to heaven with his throne (therefore, when speaking of him, they never use words that imply death or dying).

Another explanation would be that the festival was probably not originally associated with Sheikh Adi and was already known both before and during his presence in Lalish. This could be suggested by another important ritual that accompanies this festival – namely the *Parî Suwar Kirin* – which takes place on the fourth day, when a ceremonial baptism is performed in the White Spring of seven pieces of cloth that are then placed on tombs and holy spots associated with angels and saints of Yezidism. In other words, the older form of the autumn festival may have referred to the gathering of the seven angels (and their followers), while the later one, after the departure of Sheikh Adi, included this important event. Also, the ritual of killing the bull itself may have been practised already in the earliest version of the festival and retained in the subsequent one, or if it was a novelty somehow connected to the commemoration of Sheikh Adi's ascension. If this were true, it is possible that the meaning of the offering changed. For instance, it may have transformed from an offering made to the deities to one made to Sheikh Adi. However, these are only speculations.

Due to the centuries-long ban on writing and the Yezidis' fear of contact with other people, our knowledge of Yezidi festivals and accompanying ceremonies from the past is limited. Therefore, researchers have to rely mainly on observations of their current forms and the accounts of travellers, archaeologists, missionaries, and Yezidis themselves, which cover a relatively short period of time and often contradict each other.

Among the earliest references to the festival, the most important are two remarks by Layard (1849 and 1853) who, in his account of his visit to Lalish during the Festival of the Assembly, mentions both the white oxen dedicated to Sheikh Shams and the ceremony of chasing a bull by the Qayîdî tribe:

> …It is called the sanctuary of Sheikh Shems, or the Sun. (..) At sunset, as I sat in the alcove in front of the entrance, a herdsman led into a pen, attached to the building, a drove of white oxen. I asked a Cawal, who was near me, to whom the beasts belonged. "They are dedicated," he said, "to Sheikh Shems, and are never slain except on great festivals, when their flesh is distributed amongst the poor".[141]

> The Kaidi, a Yezidi tribe, perform at the annual festival, the following curious ceremony, said to be of great antiquity (…). They ascend, in company with all those who have fire-arms, the rocks overhanging the temple, and, placing small oak twigs into the muzzles of their guns, discharge them into the air. After having kept up a running fire for nearly half an hour, they descend into the outer court and again let off their pieces.

[141] Layard 1849: 288–289.

> When entering the inner court they go through a martial dance, before Hussein Bey, who stands on the steps of the sanctuary amidst the assembled priests and elders. The dance being ended, a bull, presented by the Yezidi chief, is led out from the temple. The Kaidi rush upon the animal with shouts, and seizing it, lead it off in triumph to Sheikh Mirza, one of the heads of the sect, from whom they also receive a present, generally consisting of sheep. During these ceremonies the assembled crowd of men, women, and children form groups on the steep sides of the ravine, some standing on the well-wooded terraces, others on projecting rocks and ledges, whilst the boys clamber into the high trees, from whence they can obtain a view of the proceedings. The women make the *tahlel* without ceasing, and the valley resounds with the deafening noise.[142]

Although Layard was not an eyewitness to the very ceremony of killing the bull, it is important to note that his mention of the white bull being offered to the sun has been repeated by others.[143] Although there were also researchers who do not mention the killing of the bull at all during the Festival of the Assembly, like Kartsov, who only noted that "on the last day three or four rams are boiled, which are blessed and distributed to the people for money".[144]

Leaving aside the mentions of other authors, let us examine what these ceremonies look like today. The autumn festival is celebrated in Lalish. It begins in the evening of the 23rd of September according to the Seleucid calendar and lasts until noon of the 30th of the same month that is from the 6th to the 13th of October according to the Gregorian calendar. The ritual of killing the bull takes place on the 11th of October, the fifth day of the festival, which is the day before the main festivities associated with *Berê Şibakê*. This implies that this rite does not crown the Festival of the Assembly, as the proponents of the thesis of the Mithraic nature of the festival believe. However, it should also be noted that according to some Yezidis the killing of the bull took place earlier on another day, e.g. the fourth or the last day.[145] However, it is possible that these voices are not solely a result of centuries of memory, but rather influenced by the 'Mithraistic' lobby.

The killing of the bull is the culmination of a larger multi-element ceremony called *Qabakh*, which lasts about three hours. The ceremony begins at around 9:00 a.m. and is announced by the firing of rifle shots by representatives of the three *Murid* tribes (Tirk,

[142] Layard 1853: 88–89.
[143] Cf. Badger 1852: 117; Parry 1895: 359; Empson 1928: 84.
[144] Карцев 1891: 258–259; tr. A. R. Cf. Чжимбэ 1928: 237–238. This mention, however, seems to refer to another ritual, called the Breakfast of the *Mir* (*Taştê Mîr*), which takes place the day after the bull-killing ceremony. Following a short but impressive ceremony in which *Berê Şibakê* was elevated on a wooden platform and baptized, the meat is cooked and served to pilgrims along with wheat. The meal is accompanied by typical feast day foods, including fried chicken, vegetables in okra and tomato sauces, bread, rice, and bulgur. All the dishes are spread out on long tables set up in the hall of the *Mir* and in the courtyard in front of it, where due to the large number of participants they are eaten standing up.
[145] Cf. Feqîr Hecî 2013: 151.

Mamusî, and Qayîdî), who arrive in the Lalish valley dressed in festive attire. The group greets Baba Sheikh in the temple courtyard (*Celsa Şîxadî*) and then moves to the nearby audience hall of the *Mir*. Around 11:00 they gather again in the courtyard, where they are joined by the *Baba Sheikh*, the *Mir*, *Baba Chawush* and other religious dignitaries. They kiss the threshold and the frame of the temple entrance and proceed to the small courtyard of *Gaikush* (Kurm. *Gaykuj* or *Gaykuş*) adjacent to the temple walls where the waters of two holy springs (White Spring and *Zemzem*) converge. According to legend, the tomb of Adam is located here. It is where the Yezidis store firewood that has been ceremonially harvested during another ceremony. They also keep animals here to prepare food for the people of Lalish and visiting pilgrims, as the name of the courtyard suggests, which literally means the place where bulls (Kurm. *ga* or *gay*) are killed (Kurm. *kujtin*/ *kuştin*).[146]

A tethered young bull is waiting here. According to some Yezidi informants, traditionally it should be a yearling male that has been in *Gaikush* for a year and has not had sexual contact with other animals. At around 11.30 am, *Dai Kabani*[147] with a smoking censer and a *Qewwal* with a flute, accompanied by *Baba Chawush*, wait in the corridor leading out of *Gaikush*. The procession begins and they walk in front of it (as in many other ceremonies). The animal, whose muzzle is tied with a rope and held by its tail, is pulled by an assembled group of *Murids*, assisted by young members of the *Mir*'s family and *Hilmatkars* (temple acolytes). The men, gathered in a cluster, try to keep the bull away from the large crowd. The whole procession makes its way up the stairs to the largest square in Lalish, the *Sûka Merîfetê*, and heads towards the shrine of Sheikh Shams.[148] Along the way, hundreds of pilgrims try to get as close as possible to the bull to touch it and pluck its hair, which brings good luck for the coming year. This leads to fistfights as the group dragging the bull tries to protect it from attackers. Emotions run high and fists (and, until recently, sticks) are in motion.

The procession crosses a stone bridge and turns left just before the Sheikhs Shams shrine to enter its courtyard (*Celsa Şêşims*). This is one of several locations in Lalish where animals are slaughtered. Only those necessary to perform the ritual of killing the bull and the *Hilmatkars* assisting them are allowed to participate. Hundreds of pilgrims gather on the rooftops and terraces surrounding the courtyard to observe the ritual. The bull is handed over to Sheikh Wezir, the head of the Shamsanis and the guardian

[146] Pîrbehrî, Îavasko, Grîgoriyêv 2008: 30. It seems that *Gaikush* was established around 1840; cf. Ishak of Bartella 1900: 60; Parry 1895: 386.
[147] The main *feqraya*, head of the Yezidi nuns.
[148] Inside, in addition to the tomb of Sheikh Shams, there is also a small cave of the Sheikh of the Jinn.

(*mijêwir*) of the Sheikh Shams shrine. He blesses it with water from the White Spring and rewards the representatives of the three tribes who led the bull with a stretch of white cloth. They tear it into white ribbons and wrap it around their heads and shoulders and head back to the *Sûka Merîfetê*. Led by a *Dai Kabani* with a censer, a flute-playing *Qewwal* and *Baba Chawush*, they proceed to Mount Arafat, where they pray at the holy spots (*nîşans*) and then break twigs from the surrounding bushes and trees, which they carry in their hands, tuck into turbans, or behind their white headbands. They also fire decorative shotguns and dance a *govend* together. Afterward, the procession descends to *Sûka Merîfetê*, where religious dignitaries are awaiting them to return with them to the sanctuary of Sheikh Adi.

Meanwhile, the bull is fed and given water to drink, then tied to a pole by the wall of the *Celsa Şêşims*, where at noon its throat is slit and its blood drained, then its head is cut off, its skin removed, and its flesh cut into pieces. Crowds of believers watch this spectacle from outside the wall surrounding the courtyard. However, after the bull is killed, they can already enter the courtyard to get the desired bull hair and touch the spilled blood, with which they mark their foreheads and cheeks (as in other Yezidi sacrificial ceremonies), or they take it with them by soaking their handkerchiefs and pouring it into plastic cups to share with others. Any remaining traces of blood in the courtyard are quickly washed away with water.

The bull's meat is boiled and served to pilgrims after the *govend* dance as a *simat*, a religious meal, along with wheat, at a feast organised by the Steward of the Kitchen (*metbexçî*) of Lalish, who paid for the bull. The meal usually lasts until 15:00.

This is the present course of the ceremony, which has, however, been modified in recent decades. For instance, the rule regarding the strict age of the bull and its yearly residence before the festival no longer applies. The bull is simply bought and is often not even a year old, although the Yezidis stress that it should not be older than two years. There are also no requirements as to whether it has had sexual contact. Nowadays it is the Guardian (*mijêwir*) of Lalish, a *feqîr* in his function as *metbexçî*, who purchases the bull for the festival. Given that the *metbexçî* is appointed in August, the bull can only be at *Gaikush* for a period of two months. According to the current *metbexçî*, the bull is purchased two or three weeks before the festival and taken to *Gaikush* at the beginning of the festival.

It is unclear whether the colour of the bull was previously relevant, as proponents of the Mithraistic thesis believe. Some educated Yezidis reiterate, presumably influenced by this doctrine, that the bull should be white or has at least some sort of white birthmark. However, this is not true, at least not for some 60 years, when Edmonds

recorded a dark bull in a photograph. Also in 2013, the bull was black. In turn, during the ceremonies I observed in 2018, 2020 and 2023, the bull was once black and twice brown, in 2024 it was brown and white, while in 2019, due to the death of Mir Tahsin Beg, there were hardly any pilgrims in Lalish and the *Qabakh* ceremony did not take place at all, although many others, especially those related to *Berê Şibakê*, were held.[149] This would allow one to assume that it is *Berê Şibakê* and not the killing of the bull that is the key element of the autumn festival (at least in its current form).

Among other changes, in the past, instead of the slow dragging of the bull, there was a chase and run (*qebaxgêran*)[150] and sticks were used to disperse the crowd, leading to bloodshed. These have now been banned by the *Mir*. In addition, until recently, the white cloth that accompanies the ceremony was carried over the heads of the three representatives of the three *Murid* clans during the procession leading the bull.[151] Moreover, while the bull is usually killed in the courtyard in front of the Sheikh Shams shrine, in 2018 it was slaughtered behind closed doors in a cave next to the courtyard, and no one was allowed to watch this ritual (although those who wished to obtain the animal's hair and blood were allowed in after). Conversely, in 2020, due to the delay, the ceremony was rushed, and the animal was killed in the courtyard without being fed or tied to a pole. According to my Yezidi informants, earlier the bull used to be slaughtered by the Shamsani *sheikhs*. Nowadays, instead of Sheikh Wezir (who does not want to kill the animal himself), this action is carried out by a professional butcher (*qesab*) from Lalish, who is a *Murid* (currently from the Qirani tribe). Before cutting the bull's throat, he asks Sheikh Wezir's permission, and when the words "*Bi destûri Xwedê*" ("With the permission of God") are uttered, the butcher proceeds.

What is the meaning of the whole ceremony and especially the killing of the bull? Is this ritual the culmination of the *Qabakh*, or is it merely an intermediate step before going to Mount Arafat or eating the meat of the bull as a communal meal? Was the bull originally ceremonially slaughtered for the feast of those gathered in the valley, or was its killing rather an offering, and if so, to whom and for what reason?

In order to approach the answer, let us start with the name of the ceremony. The Yezidis refer to it as *Qabakh* (Kurm. *Qebax* and *Qabax*), *Gabakh* (Kurm. *Gabax*), and *Qapakh* (*Qapax*). However, there is disagreement among them as to whether it is one name or many, and what exactly those names mean.[152]

[149] In 2021, the whole festival was cancelled (due to the conflicts surrounding the elections of the *Mir* and *Baba Sheikh*).
[150] Cf. Ahmed 1975: 364–365; Spät 2004: 156f; *Eadem* 2005: 58
[151] Cf. Baqsrî 2003: 178.
[152] Cf. Dilkovan 2005: 23–30; Feqîr Hecî 2013: 141–146; Baqsrî 2003: 148–150.

The name may simply be an onomatopoeia. This possibility was pointed out as early as the 19th century by Syrian Catholic priest Ishak of Bartella, who mentioned an expression "present in the Kurdish language – *Kubuc Kebuc*".[153] According to him, it refers to the noise of the gunshots of the Yezidi tribesmen who, on the occasion of the festival, climb Mount Arafat and fire ten loud shots. Some contemporary scholars share a similar opinion. Sami Ahmed translates "*Qabagh* [as] Simultaneous Gun Shooting"[154], and Al-Hasani notes that "*al-Qabagh* means group shooting (and it is a Turkish or Kurdish word by origin)", which takes place in the hills surrounding Lalish "when the fifth day of Festival of the Assembly ends and the 'following day' comes"[155]. So, if we were dealing with onomatopoeia, it would probably concern the moment when the three main tribes participating in the *Qabakh* ceremony announce their arrival in Lalish and Mount Arafat with loud gunshots.

However, if the word *qabakh* is not an onomatopoeia, its ambiguity may be due, for example, to its archaic origin. According to some Yezidis, the practice of sacrificing a bull predates the time of Sheikh Adi, who, upon arriving in Lalish accepted the local customs practised there.[156] Therefore, the meaning of the ceremony, as well as the term used to describe it, may have become blurred over time.

The term *qabagh* may have also been borrowed from another language, such as Syriac (Aramaic) or Turkish. According to Dilkovan, "the word is unknown in the Arabic language, and the form *qabagh* is of Turkish origin, from *gapak*"[157], which may refer to the game called *Kabak oyunu* ('zucchini game') played in the Turkish army that originally involved shooting at a zucchini or pumpkin stuck on a pole.[158]

The term may have also been adapted from a name that was once connected to the event, such as the place name Qabaq or Qabag from the Mosul area.[159] The word could also be derived from the Kurdish *qepax* or *qapax* (Tur. *kapak* and *kabak*)[160] which means 'cover' or 'lid' (such as the lid of a pot or the upper part of a skull).[161] The name might then refer to the covering with a white cloth of the *Murids* who led the bull, or to the symbolic 'culmination' of the whole festival – the 'closing' of the most important

[153] Ishak of Bartella 1900: 62.
[154] Ahmed 1975: 364.
[155] Hasani 1951: 79; cf. *Idem* 1973: 14.
[156] Cf. Feqîr Hecî 2013: 140.
[157] Dilkovan 2005: 25–26. Cf. *qabak* in Левитская, Дыбо, Рассадин 1997: 162–163.
[158] There is also another popular Turkish game called *Kabak* oyunu, which involves counting the number of zucchinis by successive players and their quick reactions.
[159] Cf. Furlani 1937: 489. Qabakh and Tappeh Qabakh are also the names of villages in north-eastern and north-western Iran.
[160] Cf. Левитская, Дыбо, Рассадин 1997: 163.
[161] Cf. Цаболов 2010: 137–138.

ceremony.[162] However, there is another ceremony the following day. Therefore, if the name of the festival were to derive from this word, it would have to mean that *Qebax* was previously the final ceremony.

Although there are some Yezidis that in search for the etymology of the word point to the Greek name Gaia equated with Earth (Gr. *ge*), the majority of them consider the first part of the name to be a form derived from the word *ga*, meaning 'bull' or 'ox',[163] as in the name of the place where the animals are killed – *Gaikush*. The second part of the name *-bagh* (Kurm. *-bax*), however, may have two specific meanings according to the Yezidis. Firstly, as Dilkovan writes, it can mean 'big'. In Kurdish, the phrase "*Gayê box*" means 'a fat bull', which may be connected to the fattening of a bull before sacrificing it (although the bulls killed in recent years were rather emaciated).[164] Some of the Yezidis also suggest that *-bagh* may have originated from the Middle Persian word *bag*/*bagh*, meaning 'god' (as seen in the name Baghdad: 'God-given'). They link the word to both the figure of Mithra and Sheikh Shams, who is personified as the Sun and to whom they believe the bull is sacrificed.

However, in their desperate search for evidence of a link between their festival, Sun worship, and Mithraism, the Yezidis seem to have overlooked two etymologies that could much better explain the name of their ceremony. Although they make no metaphysical reference to God or the Sun, they seem quite plausible.

The first refers to the Kurmanji word *boẍ* (also *boẍe* or *boxe*), meaning 'fertile bull' and 'young uncastrated bull'.[165] There is a similar word in Turkish – *boğa* – meaning 'uncastrated young bull', 'two-year-old bull', and 'calf'.[166] A word with a similar root is also found in Syriac, where *bar-baqro* means 'calf', 'bullock that has not yet been yoked'.[167] It is also worth mentioning a Kurdish word with a parallel structure to *qa-bax*, namely *kaçax*, meaning a young, 'two-year-old buffalo'.[168] Given that the bull that is killed during the ceremony is not more than two years old and is not a large, mature bull, it seems likely that *qebax*/*qabax* derives from *ga-boẍ* and simply means 'bull (that is) young': a calf.

The second possibility is that the name *Qabakh* may come from the Arabic root *b-kh-'* meaning 'tendon that runs close to the neck', 'to cut such tendon', 'to cut the throat',[169]

[162] Cf. Dilkovan 2005: 25–26.
[163] Cf. Chyet 2020: 252, Qazzaz 2000: 468; Qurdo 1960: 268. Cf. Pers. *gav* 'bull', Syr. *gamusho*, 'a bufallo bull' (Payne Smith 1903: 72).
[164] Cf. Dilkovan 2005: 27; Feqîr Hecî 2013: 143. Cf. Gorani *gaw* ('bull') and *gawra* ('big').
[165] Cf. Chyet 2020: 98; Бакаев 1957: 73.
[166] Cf. Севортян 1978: 230–232.
[167] Cf. Payne Smith 1903: 53; cf. Pers. *baqar* 'cow', 'bull', 'cattle'; Ar. *baqara*, 'cow'.
[168] Cf. Qazzaz 2000: 431.
[169] Cf. *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* 2008: 78; cf. Ar. *bakhi*: "tormenting, killing (oneself with sorrow or worry)" (*Ibid*).

'to slaughter', 'to cut the bone of the neck',[170] and 'to kill' (*bakh*),[171] which would perfectly describe the final moment of the ceremony: the slaughter of the bull. Such a combination of an Iranian or Kurdish word with Arabic in a single expression is common in the Yezidi phraseology, so it could also have occurred in the case of the name of the ceremony.

In turn, when asked about the meaning of the whole ceremony and the ritual of killing the bull, however, contemporary Yezidis usually immediately link it to Mithraism. This is the answer given by university-educated intellectuals and others who, out of respect for the older and more educated, take their answer for granted. Kurdish political and cultural organisations also strongly 'support' the Yezidis in this interpretation. All this makes the hypothesis more and more a 'knowledge' of 'facts' that are difficult to discuss without fear of being accused of harming the identity basis of both the Yezidi and Kurdish communities.

Apart from the reference to Mithraism, some Yezidis explain the act of killing the bull as an offering made to the Sun (personified as Sheikh Shams) to ensure a mild winter and auspicious vegetation for the coming year. They associate this with the fact that the bull was originally to be a yearling. Such interpretations also appear in Yezidi publications. For example, according to Khalaf Salih, referring to the ideas of George Habib and Mamo Othman (original spelling):

> Till now the yezidis practice some religious rituals whose origin stems from Mithraism. It is not easy to study and analyse the ideology of yezidis as an academic study without studying and understanding the beliefs of ancient religions especially Mithraism. It is considered the key to understand the Yezidism. […] The name Mithra is the name of the god of the Sun, and in Yezidism Sheshims, the god of the Sun. […] Yezidis canonize and estimate the Sun, and the chief of Angels (Tawoos Malas) is the god of the Sun in Yezidian mythology. […] The Mithraistic festival of Mehrkan, which takes place between 23 of September and 23 of October is identical to the *Jamaya* festival of yezidis. In these two festivals, they sacrifice the bull, as holly oblation. The sacrificing of bull accompanies with sacred dance which denotes the celebration of productivity and prosperity of the earth and scarifying [sic!] for a rainy and green winter (spring).[172]

In turn, Rezan Shivan Aysif, an academic from Duhok, in his book on the same subject – *The Role of Nature in Yezidism* – published by Universitätsverlag Göttingen, writes that:

[170] Cf. *An Arabic-English Lexicon* 1863: 159–160.
[171] Cf. *Arabic-English Dictionary* 1976: 43.
[172] Salih 2013: 10–11.

> Yezidis slaughter a bull at Lalish annually as a sacrifice to *Şemsedîn (Şêşims)* or the sun during the *Cema* feast. It is a remnant of a ritual of Mithraism. […] Many sources explain that in the Yezidi belief, the bull is sacrificed for the sun and its lord for blessing. Moreover, some authors give details about this belief that the blood of the sacrifice results in the fertility of the earth and the good crops produced from the earth in spring. A number of religious men believe that eating Simat (boiling wheat with bull's meat) as religious food and carrying a small branch of a tree in their turbans on their heads after the sacrifice of the bull by those attending, all this symbolizes the coming of the greenness of the earth and the germination of wheat in spring as a result of the sacrifice of the bull.[173]

However, it is important to note dissenting voices, as not all Yezidis accept the theory about the killing of the bull as a Mithraic sacrifice to the Sun. For instance, during our joint fieldwork with Peter Nicolaus in 2019, we heard from a representative of the priestly caste, a sheikh from Bozan, the legend that the genesis of the Yezidi ceremony stems from a tragic accident. One of the Yezidi leaders, called Karajar, reportedly killed a bull and sent it as a gift to Sheikh Adi during the Festival of the Assembly. Unfortunately, Sheikh Adi passed away during the festival, and as a result, the practice of an annual bull sacrifice was initiated to commemorate his last celebration. The autumn festival at Lalish would therefore have predated the time of Sheikh Adi, and some of the ceremonies associated with it were added later.

This hypothesis would explain why a bull is being slaughtered and not another animal, but it does not solve the question of why this is happening next to the temple of Sheikh Shams (and the Sheikh of the Jinn). The Yezidi answer to this question is that when Sheikh Adi ascended, the second most important leader of the religious community in Lalish, Sheikh Shams (identified by the Yezidis as Shams Tabrizi, master of Jalaladin Rumi), sacrificed the bull in memory of this event or in honour of the Sun. Still others claim that when Sheikh Shams came to Lalish from Tabriz, a bull was killed in his honour. However, this does not explain why the animal slaughtered would be a bull and why three particular tribes of *Murids* are involved in the whole ceremony, rather than just the Shamsani sheikhs.

There are also many theories about the involvement of the three tribes in the ritual. It is believed, for example, that they were the ones who announced the death of Sheikh Adi with gunshots,[174] or that there was a major conflict between these three tribes and when it finally ended, they sacrificed a bull. Still others claim that these three tribes, together with the family of the *Mir*, fought against the Peshimam of Lalish – Sheikh Hassan (incarnation of Melek Sheikh Sin), who was finally killed and, depending on

[173] Aysif 2021: 218.
[174] Which sounds unlikely, given that gunpowder was unknown in the Middle East at the time.

the version, cut into three pieces – either by the Qatani and Shamsani sheikhs or by the Atabeg of Mosul, Badr al-Din Lu'lu'. Both of these theories, however, do not explain why the bull is to be killed.

Another puzzling element to add to this list of unknowns is why, while other ceremonies are accompanied by a tambourine (*def*) and flute (*shibab*), the ceremonial leading of the bull to be killed is performed with only one *qewwal* – the one who plays the flute? According to Yezidi tradition, the flute is a sacred instrument that is primarily associated with the angel Sheikh Sin. The name of this angel is commonly linked to the Akkadian name for the Moon,[175] while the round tambourine is the instrument of Sheikh Shams, who is associated with the Sun. This could indicate that the bull is in some special way connected with lunar or solar symbolism, and the killing of the bull in front of the shrine of the Sheikh Sun could signify both the dominance of the Sun over the Moon (which could be explained as a hope for the onset of spring and the shortening of the night) as well as referring to obscure legends concerning the death of Sheikh Hassan. The reason for the absence of the tambourine may also be that, according to some Yezidis, it is made from the skin of a bull, the animal involved in the ceremony. However, these are mere speculations that can be spun endlessly.

If we concentrate on the actual ceremony of the killing of the bull and the facts surrounding it, and refrain from fantasy and references to Mithraism, we are left with the undeniable fact that hundreds of pilgrims watch as a procession – in which representatives of three tribes and a flautist play an important role – leads a young bull to a courtyard near the Sheikh Shams shrine to be sacrificed so that its flesh and blood can be distributed to the pilgrims, while the white cloth is cut up and distributed to the participants of the procession. The killing of the bull is seen by the Yezidis as a sacrifice, and not just a means of providing meat for the feast. This is evidenced not by the fact that the killing is done next to the Sheikh Shams shrine, but that, first, the animal is led in a ceremonial procession to the place where it is killed (otherwise it would have been slain earlier – in *Gaikush*), and second, that after its death the Yezidis treat its blood, with which they mark their faces, like that of other sacrificial animal. It seems most likely that this sacrifice is offered to Sheikh Shams, for otherwise, if it was an offering to Sheikh Adi, the bull would have been killed in *Gaikush*, which is directly adjacent to Sheikh Adi's temple.[176]

[175] This conflicts with another Yezidi belief that associates the Moon with the figure of Melek Fakhradin.
[176] The accounts of Ishak of Bartella (1900: 60, using the form *Cabdosh)* and Parry (1895: 386, *Gavdush*) seem to indicate that the sacrificial bull was previously slaughtered here.





Leading the bull to be sacrificed, Lalish 2018 – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.



Feeding the bull just before the sacrifice, Lalish 2018 – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.



Marking the forehead with the blood of a sacrificed bull, Lalish 2023
photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.

6. The bull as a Symbol of the Earth Element

To gain a deeper understanding of the ritual of killing the bull, it is important to determine whether the bull as such has any symbolic significance in Yezidism. This meaning can be found not in the ritual, but above all in the sacred hymns and prayers of the Yezidis, which are part of the oral tradition and constitute the most important body of religious knowledge that goes far back into the past. While references to the ancient worship of the bull can also be found in this poetry,[177] they most often refer to a huge mythical creature that carries the earth's globe on its back. This creature, in turn, is said to stand on a Fish seven times its size.

The significance of this topic is evidenced by the existence of a distinct *Hymn of the Bull and the Fish* (*Qewlê Gay û Masî*) dedicated to both animals. The passages related to the bull contain the following:

3. […] *Neye bi buxtane, neye bi zore,* *Li xasa sayîye li xafila ewre,* *Jêr û bere û jêr Gaye.*	…Neither by slander, nor by force. For the chosen it is clear, for the ignorant – cloudy, From below and in front, down below – there is the Bull.
4. *Bêje min weke dibûye,* *Ewî Gayî serî li şerqêva,* *Bi xerbêva dûve.*	Tell me how it was, This Bull's head is in the east, The tail is in the west.
5. *Ba êrifa wa eyane,* *Ewî Gayî çî nîşane,* *Çend stirone, çend didane*	Those with knowledge know, What are the signs of this Bull? How many horns, and how many teeth it has.
6. *Ew Gaye sehtî pîre,* *Qurnet û qurnet yî xebîre,* *Rêya pênc sed salî meyzîre.*	This Bull is ancient, He has the knowledge of the ages, On a 500-year long way.
7. *Gaye sebrê dêrî,* *Sicûdê dikêşte yekî bêrî,* *Heta dema ruhê bispêrî.*	This Bull has a long-standing patience, He bows to the King Maker, Till he gives up his spirit.

[177] The worship of the bull is one of the themes in *The Hymn of the Sultan Jumjum* (*Qewlê Cumcumî* Siltan), where the deceased Sultan, explicitly named "the worshipper of the Bull" (st. 33: *Gay-perese*) says to Jesus: "my religion was the Bull which I worshipped" (st. 21: *"Ola min Gay bû diperast"*, *apud* Reşo 2013: 248–250).



A sheep sacrifice on the doorstep of a household before the start of the New Year spring festival, Bahzani (2018) – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.



The master of the house marks the foreheads of household members with the blood of a sacrificial animal, Bahzani (2018) – photograph by © Artur Rodziewicz.

8. *Ew Gayî sehtî qewîye,*	This Bull is strong,
Ji pêşve sexrekî sipîye,	In front there is a white rock,
Jêr û bere û jêr kesekî nedîye. [...]	From below and in front, down b low no one saw [him/it].
10. *Ecêba di wêda*	The wonder in that
Nîva simê di gê da	Between the hooves of the Bull,
Sê sed û şest û şeş bacarê binî adema têda. [...]	There are 366 cities of men. [...]
14. *Dilê min yî bi êşe,*	My heart aches,
Pêşwî Gayî heye mêşe,	There is a fly in front of this Bull
Ew gayî ji mêşêyî bi hindêşe.	And because of this fly the Bull is anxious
15. *Behir a jêrî gêy e,*	There is a sea[178] under the Bull,
Kursîya pedşayî lêye	The Throne of the Lord is there.
Şêx Fexrê Adîya li hemû erda û rêya.	Sheikh Fakhr Adiya is in all lands and paths.
16. *Fexro tu xasî,*	O Fakhr, thou art holy!
Tû bi xaliqê xwe kî û libasî,	I conjure you by your Creator and your garment –
Gayî mezintire yan Masî?	Is the Bull bigger or the Fish?
17. *Pedşê minî ekbere,*	My King is Great,
Ser pişta Masî heftî perî keskî kebere,	On the back of the Fish, there are 70 girdles of green wings[179]
Perekî Gayî wê li sere. [...]	One wing of the Bull on the Fish.
37. *Kûfe û her êk û tişte*	Mountain and every thing –
Çiya û baniye, zilêmat û deşte	Mountains and heights, darkness, and valleys –
Ewî Gayî hilgirt bi pişte.	This Bull carries on his back.[180]

This monumental ancient Bull seems to embrace the entire inhabited earth: between its hooves are cities, and on its back are bright mountains and dark valleys. Below the Bull there is water, where the Fish lives. This motif is also present in the *Yezidi Noon Prayer (Du'a Nîvro)*:

> Ya Rebî! Tu bideye xatira Gayê binê dinê, Masiyê bi tenê.
> Oh Lord! Remember the Bull [which is] at the bottom of the world, and the Fish![181]

Both creatures seem to represent two of the primordial elements on which the world is founded. In *The Evening Prayer* (*Du'a Êvarê*), the invocation to the personification of the Sun, Sheikh Shams, they are mentioned alongside cosmogonic principles such as Tablet and Pen.

[178] Or 'ocean'.
[179] Also possible: 'fins' or 'feathers'.
[180] Reşo 2013: 270–276 (with a few amendments); cf. *Qewlê Gay û Masî* 1999: 208–201. I am grateful to Pir Dima for his help in the translation of these passages.
[181] *Du'a Nîvro*, st. 2 *apud* Reşo 2013: 1018; tr. A. R.

1. *Ya Siwarê rojhilatê, rojavayê* […]	Oh, the Rider of sunrise and sunset[182]
Ya Şêx Şims […]	Oh, Sheikh Shams!
2. *Hûn bidene xatira ʻErş û Kursî, Gay û Masî* […]	Remember the Throne and the Seat[183], The Bull and the Fish! […]
3. *Hûn bidene xatira Lewḥ û Qelema…*	Remember the Tablet and the Pen![184]

They are also mentioned in the *Praise God* (*Medhê Xwedê*) prayer, where the supreme Angel is portrayed as the Pantocrator whose authority extends to them:

2. *Ya Rebbî tu melekê melikê cîhanî* […]	Oh Lord, you are the Angel-King of the world
3. *Tu Melekê ʻErşê ʻezîmî*	You are the Angel of the majestic Throne
Ya Rebbî ji ʻenzel da her tuyî qedîmî […]	Oh Lord, you have always been ancient, from pre-eternity.
4. *Ya Rebbî tu Melekê ʻins û jinsî*	Oh Lord, you are the Angel of humans and the jinn
Ya Rebbî tu Melekê ʻErş û Kursî	Oh Lord, you are the Angel of the Throne and the Seat
Ya Rebbî tu Melekê Gay û Masî	Oh Lord, you are the Angel of the Bull and the Fish
Ya Rebbî tu Melekê ʻalem û qudsî	Oh Lord, you are the Angel of the world and the sacred.[185]

While the terrestrial world rests on the Bull standing on the Fish, the Throne seems to be located both below the Bull (as the *Hymn of the Bull and the Fish* implies) and above him, as mentioned in the *Hymn of Rabia al-Adawiyya* (*Qewlê Rabiʻe il-ʿEdiwiye*) by its main character, who:

14. *…Berejor rênî, dît ʻErş û Kursiye*	*Looked up and saw the Throne and the Seat*
Berjêr rênî, dît Gay û Masiye	*Looked down and saw the Bull and the Fish*.[186]

Details of the appearance and size of these monumental animals are provided in the *Hymn of the Thousand and One Names* (*Qewlê Hezar û Yek Nav*):

5. *… Heft cara Masî meztire ji Gêye*	The Fish is seven times bigger than the Bull.
6. *Bi qudreta êkî ekbere, Masî heftî û du pere*	Through power of the Great One, the Fish has 72 wings[187]
Perek jê kembere	One wing from it [is a] girdle
Wî perî Gay lisere. […]	The Bull [stands] on the top of that wing.

[182] Or 'East and West'.
[183] *'Erş û kursî*' means lit. 'throne and throne'.
[184] *Duʻa Êvarê*, st. 1–3 *apud* Reşo 2013: 1020; tr. A. R.
[185] Also known as the *Hymn of the Peacock Angel* (*Qewlê Tawûsî Melek*), st. 2-4 *apud* Kreyenbroek 1995: 244; tr. A. R.
[186] *Qewlê Rabiʻe il-ʿEdiwiye*, st. 14 *apud* Reşo 2013: 457; tr. A. R.
[187] Or 'fins' or 'feathers'. The number 72 can be related to the number of angels, human nations, or genocides (cf. Nicolaus and Rodziewicz 2023: 500–412).

7. *Heft Meleke sekinîne liber serê wî Gayî…*	The Seven Angels stand on the head of that Bull…[188]

In *The Prayer of Belief* (*Du'a Bawiriyê*), their creation is attributed to the angels:

9. *Meleka* […]	The Angels
10. *Xulqandin Gay û Masî* […]	Created the Bull and the Fish […]
11. *Through Belief they placed the foundations* *Heft tebeq 'erd û 'ezman liser pişta* *Gay û Masiye.*	of Earth and Heavens Seven spheres of Earth and Heaven are on the back of the Bull and the Fish.[189]

The process of giving life to both creatures is described in detail in the *Hymn of the Thousand and One Names* (*Qewlê Hezar û Yek Nav*). It resembles giving life to Adam's body, known from the Yezidi anthropogonic myths, namely by "drinking from the Cup"[190]. In addition to the Bull and the Fish, the Seven Angels also drank from the Cup and thus took physical form, which can be interpreted either as the incarnation of the spirits in the specific forms of the Yezidi saints, or as their revelation as heavenly bodies ruling the world:

10. *Kasek ji minra di'îna* *Her hefta vedixwîne* *Pê dibûn melik lizemîne.* […]	A Cup was brought to me, [And] all Seven drink, By means of it they became kings on earth.
12. *Gay û Masî jê vedixware* *Lew liser pişta xo qebûl dikirin,* *deşt û banî û berî û behre.*	The Bull and the Fish drink from it, Therefore, on their back they receive, plain and mountain, desert, and ocean[191].[192]

If we interpret the meaning of these symbols in terms of cosmology, and if by the Seven we mean the planets, it would seem that the Bull and the Fish symbolise two of the four elements – earth and water – on which the world as we know it is based, and which, originally incorporeal, took on a physical form when they "drank from the Cup". This interpretation is also confirmed by the Yezidis themselves from whom one

[188] *Qewlê Hezar û Yek Nav*, st. 5–7 *apud* Reşo 2013: 231 (cf. Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 75); tr. A. R.
[189] *Du'a Bawiriyê*, st. 9–11 *apud* Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 105; tr. A. R.
[190] Rodziewicz 2022b: 115–116, 288–289, 296–297.
[191] Or "plains and mountains, deserts and oceans".
[192] *Qewlê Hezar û Yek Nav*, st. 10–12 *apud* Reşo 2013: 232 (cf. Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 75–76); tr. A. R.

can hear explicitly that "in this hymn, the Bull is understood as earth and the Fish as water"[193].

The myth of the giant Bull and the Fish is also known to the religious tradition closest to Yezidism, namely Yarsanism – although somewhat younger. Almost identical formulations to those in the Yezidi *qewls* are contained in the oldest Yaresan religious hymns – *kalams* – e.g. in the *Dawra-y Diwan-a-Gawra* (dated to the 16th century) it is spoken of Binyamin (the leader of the Seven, corresponding to the Angel Peacock and Gabriel in the Yezidi tradition) as having appeared even before the creation of the world, and before the Bull and Fish:

> 171. […] When there was no Tablet, no Pen, no Bull [*Gaw*], no Fish,My King [*Padsham*] was in the boundless ocean, He brought Binyamin to light.[194]

Similar phrases are found, for example, in the hymn by Sheikh Amir (b. 1713) entitled *The Fifty-Two Verses*, or simply *Kalam*:

> 7. …The whole universe exulted from the Bull to the Fish, and the heart was flooded with light.
>
> 8. [The Pearl] was modelled on the sky.
>
> The Pearl became a firmament and was modelled on the sky.
>
> The seven spheres [*tabaq*] dropped anchor on the back of the Fish, who settled on the Bull standing on the Stone.[195]

However, while the Yaresan and the Yezidis clearly share elements of the same myth, in Yaresan religious practice the sacrifice of a bull is not a distinctive ceremony. Moreover, neither the Yaresan nor the Yezidis have any ritual in which the sacrificial animal is a fish. According to Yaresan beliefs, the sacrificial rite commemorates the mythical moment when, at the very beginning of the creation of the world, a sacrificial animal was killed, cooked, and eaten, which is understood to be the distribution of the essence of God among the angels. It is not clear, however, what species of animal this was.[196] The blood sacrifice usually accompanies the most important ceremony for the

[193] An excerpt from an interview I conducted with a Yezidi expert on the oral tradition of the *Qewlê Gay û Masî* during the 2023 the Festival of Assembly.

[194] Tr. A. R. after Mokri's translation: *Dawra-y Dīwāna-Gawra 1977: 173 (Gurani text: Ibid:* 352). Later in this hymn st. 204–206 (Ibid: 346–345) Benyamin himself is also literally referred to as the "Great Bull" (*Gawra Gaw*), although the Yaresan representatives, I have consulted, say that this expression should be understood as meaning 'butterfly'. *Cf. Kalam*, st. 21 *apud Mokri* 1956: 398 (Gurani text: Ibid: 417).

[195] Tr. A.R. after Mokri 1956: 395 (Gurani text: *Ibid:* 416).

[196] Although other sources do not confirm this, according to Gobineau (1859: 350) it was the ox: "Le premier Office qui se soit accompli dans le monde le fut après la création par les cinq premières Manifestations Divines. Elles se réunirent, prirent un bœuf, et, l'ayant sacrifié, en firent un repas commun. Lorsqu'elles se trouvèrent en

Yaresan, the *Jam'* ('Assembly'), which commemorates the original sacrifice made by the Seven. As Sholeh Paknejad, an Iranian follower of Yarsanism, told me:

> the *gaw* symbolizes the essence of God (*Zaat Khodavand*), however there is no difference between the sacrificial ceremonies, in which cows, sheep or roosters are used. The sacrificial calf must be at least six months old, and its meat should be sufficient for the sacrifice ceremony.

However, this sacrifice is not held once a year, as in the case of the Yezidis, but at least seventeen times a year and then rooster, camel, and domestic oxen or sheep may be offered.[197]



A contemporary vision of the Yezidi cosmogony, including the Bull and the Fish, by Yezidi painter Ammar Salim – courtesy of the artist.

présence du festin mystique, Pyr Daoud fit la prière. Après la prière, il invita Pyr Rezbar à diviser le mets en autant de portions qu'il y avait d'assistants; celui-ci obéit. Sur une seconde injonction, il remit à chacun la part qui lui revenait. Ainsi tous mangèrent, sous rinspiration d'un même sentiment de fraternité et d'union, après avoir rendu hommage en commun à la puissance divine dont ils étaient émanés." Cf. ibid: 357; Ivanow 1953: 102, 122–123.

[197] On the blood sacrifice in Yarsanism cf. Hamzeh'ee 1990: 166–177; Moosa 1988: 236–239; Ivanow 1953: 158–159. Significantly, participation in it is compared to a pilgrimage to Mecca (cf. Ivanow 1953: 158).

7. The Jewish Bull Behemoth and the Christian Calf

Both Yarsanism and Yezidism, in the myth of the Bull and the Fish, refer to an ancient cosmogonic motif that was spread in the Middle East in the popular legends of the Behemoth and the Leviathan (probably originating in India, from Vedic teachings),[198] which in modified versions took root in Kurdistan with the cultural expansion of Judaism, Gnostic sects,[199] Christianity, and Islam. The concept of the ancient monumental animal as a bull probably comes from the *Book of Job*,[200] where an unusual creature is described by an incomprehensible word, Behemoth (which has been attempted to be translated as 'water ox', 'hippopotamus'), compared to cattle and called the first of God's created animals:

> Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you; he eats grass like an ox (*bāqār*). […]He is the first of the works of God, let him who made him bring near his sword![201]

The Hebrew word *bāqār* can mean any representative of cattle: ox, bull, cow, heifer, or calf.[202] The *Septuagint* translators rendered it with the Greek word βοῦς, which also means bull, ox, or cow:

> But behold, wild beasts beside you – they eat grass equally with bulls. […] This is the beginning of what was fashioned by the Lord, made to be played with by his angels.[203]

Later passages in both the Hebrew and Greek texts depict this primordial creature as a huge animal. According to the Jewish apocrypha, it is the primordial earthly beast, while Leviathan is the aquatic animal, and the two were originally meant to be united, which may be an allegorical description of how the elements of water and earth were first one and then separated. Much like the bull in Yezidi myths, the Behemoth may represent the earth element somehow connected to the water (symbolised by the Fish in Yezidi tradition). Its creation is said to have taken place on the fifth day, when, according to the sequence given in the *Book of Genesis* (I 20-23), God created animals that swim in the water and fly in the air. The origin of both creatures is described in detail in the apocalyptic *Fourth Book of Ezra* (also known in the Eastern Christian tradition), dated to the end of the 1st century BC:

> On the fifth day you commanded the seventh part, where the water had been gathered together, to bring forth living creatures, birds, and fishes; and so it was done. The dumb and lifeless water produced living creatures, as it was commanded […]. Then you

[198] Cf. Березкин 2009: 144–169.
[199] Origen (*Contra Celsum* (Borret), VI 25) writes of them as allegories popular with the Sethians.
[200] Cf. *Book of Job* 40, 15 – 41, 26; see also: Hirsch et al. 1906: 37–39.
[201] *Book of Job 40, 15–19: Old Testament* 2014: 1228.
[202] Cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 1980: 124–125.
[203] *Book of Job (Rahlfs)* 40, 15–19; tr. A. R.

> kept in existence two living creatures; the name of one you called Behemoth and the name of the other Leviathan. And you separated one from the other, for the seventh part where the water had been gathered together could not hold them both. And you gave Behemoth one of the parts which had been dried up on the third day, to live in it, where there are a thousand mountains; but to Leviathan you gave the seventh part, the watery part; and you have kept them to be eaten by whom you wish, and when you wish. On the sixth day you commanded the earth to bring forth before you cattle […].[204]

According to the Syriac pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse of Baruch* (the Greek translation, dating from the 1st to 2nd century), at the end of the world, when the Messiah appears, these two megalithic creatures will become a meal for the survivors:

> And it will happen that when all that which should come to pass […] has been accomplished, the Anointed One will begin to be revealed. And Behemoth will reveal itself from its place, and Leviathan will come from the sea, the two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation and which I shall have kept until that time. And they will be nourishment for all who are left. The earth will also yield fruits ten thousandfold.[205]

The motif of the great Bull and the Fish, present in the Jewish story of Job, was also known to Christianity and early Muslim culture, although it is not mentioned in the *Quran*. Nevertheless, it appears frequently in the popular lives of prophets and holy men as well as in cosmographies, which were circulated in the areas inhabited by the Yezidis during the period when their religious community was taking shape (11th to 13th centuries). These works not only collected local legends but also contributed to their popularisation. The Bull and the Fish appear in them as part of a more complex jigsaw puzzle, forming various configurations with other elements, such as a Ruby, a Rock, or a Stone, and an Angel. The Fish is usually at the bottom, although sometimes the Angel holds it up, and the earth is at the top. The two mythical animals are mentioned in particular in the richly illustrated versions of *Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence* (ʿAja'ib al-makhluqat wa ghara'ib al-maujudat) by Zakarya Qazvini (1203–1283), which, significantly, also contains other mythical elements with parallels in Yezidism.[206] Prior to Qazvini, Yaqut al-Hamawi (1179–1229), among others, documented "the narratives of Muslim storytellers"[207] in his *Dictionary of Countries* (*Kitab Mu'jam al-Buldan*). In this

[204] *The Fourth Book of Ezra* (6, 47–54) tr. B. M. Metzger: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1983: 536. Cf. *the Book of Enoch* (60, 7–8): "And on that day were two monsters parted, a female monster named Leviathan, to dwell in the abysses of the ocean over the fountains of the waters. But the male is named Behemoth, who occupied with his breast a waste wilderness named Dūidāin, on the east of the garden where the elect and righteous dwell, where my grandfather was taken up, the seventh from Adam, the first man whom the Lord of Spirits created" (tr. R. H. Charles: *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* 1913: 224).

[205] *Apocalypse of Baruh* II 29, 3–5; tr. A. F. J. Klijn: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1983: 630.

[206] Cf. Rodziewicz 2022b: 576–578.

[207] [Yaqut] 1987: 34.

work, he mentions the creation of the earth by God and the subsequent sending of an angel to support the "seven earths", who found a stable footing by standing on a monstrous Bull with 40,000 horns and limbs, sent by God from paradise (which would correspond to the vision present in the Yezidi hymns that the Bull existed before it took visible form). The Bull, in turn, is said to have been mounted on the back of a great "whale named Balhut"[208]. The story was previously mentioned by Abu Ishaq al-Tha'labi (d. 1035) in his *Lives of the Prophets* (*Qisas al-Anbiya'* also known as *Tafsir al-Thalabi*), who quoted some of its details after the Jewish convert to Islam, Kaʿb al-Ahbar (d. ca. 653). According to the story, after the creation of the earth, God sent an angel to support the "seven earths". So that the angel could stand stable,

> God sent down from the heights of Paradise an ox with seventy thousand horns and forty thousand legs, and made a resting-place for the angel's feet on its hump. […] God created a fish [*nun*][209], and this was the great whale the name of which was Lutiyah, its nickname Balhut, and its by-name Bahamut.[210]

The Muslim tradition features a confusion arising from a distortion of the biblical myth of Leviathan and Behemoth, which took the form of the myth of *Kuyūthā* (or *Kīyūbān* or *Kibūthān*) – as the Bull is often called – and the Fish as Bahamut.[211] However, the names are often misplaced. For instance, Tha'labi writes about a huge white bull, using a description very similar to that found in the Yezidi hymns:

> …an ox whose name is Bahamut. He is white, and his head is in the East, while his rear portion is in the West, between his horns is the distance of a thirty thousand year journey.[212]

He also refers directly to the story of Job, where the motif originated from:

> Job! God says to you […]. Where were you on the day I created the *behemoth*, whose place is at the end of the Earth, and the *leviathan*—both of whom bear the mountains and the villages and cultivated lands, their tusks like the tall pine trees and their heads like mountains, the veins of their thighs like brass pillars?[213]

[208] *Ibid*.
[209] The Arabic word for 'fish', *nun*, is also the name of one of the Arabic letters, which plays a role in the mystical interpretation of the *Quran* (cf. Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* I 50: Tabari 1989: 220).
[210] Tha'labi 2002: 6–7.
[211] Due to mistake, the Fish was also called 'Behemoth', e.g. by Muhammad al-Kisa'i (11th century?) in his *Lives of the Prophets (Qisas al-anbiya')*: "God created a great bull with forty thousand heads, eyes, ears, nostrils, mouths, tongues and legs […] The name of the bull is al-Rayyan. As the bull had no place to rest its feet, God created a huge fish […]. This fish God commanded to be foothold for the bull […]. The name of this fish is Behemoth." (Kisa'i 1997: 9–10).
[212] *Ibid:* 601.
[213] *Ibid:* 262–263.

And he adds that, according to Hasan al-Basri, it was Bahamut that the Jews worshipped in the image of the golden calf:

> The name of the Calf that the Children of Israel worshipped was Bahamut.[214]

What do these examples prove? That the symbolism of the bull in Yezidi religious legends and hymns can be directly linked not so much to Mithraism as to a motif known from folk legends. In contrast to the Zoroastrian or Mithraic myths, many people in the region inhabited by the Yezidis were familiar with the legend of the ancient Bull (and Fish), which was present in folk tales (into which it had probably found its way from Jewish and Christian literature), and which, with the spread of Islam, not only reached the followers of this religion, but reached much further afield – including Yezidi and Yaresan communities. In some of these legends it was emphasised that the Bull was created on the fifth day and that its end would be the time when a Messiah will be revealed who will complete the full cycle of creation and then "will be nourishment for all who are left" and "the earth will also yield fruits ten thousandfold", which would make it possible to find a link here with the Yezidi ritual taking place on the fifth day (and even with the Zoroastrian myth of the creation of the cow/bull as the fifth creature). However, it is important to note that in Yezidi myths about the Bull (and the Fish), which clearly refer to the Behemoth motif, there is no mention of a sacrifice. Although the *Hymn of the Bull and the Fish* says that "he bows to the King Maker, till he gives up his spirit", these words refer neither to killing nor to sacrifice. Moreover, if the Yezidi ritual of sacrificing the bull were a deliberate reference to the myth of the Bull mentioned in the Yezidi legends, one would also expect some kind of ceremony involving the fish, for in this myth the Bull does not function alone (like the Behemoth), but in pair with it. Thus, it seems unlikely that there would be a connection between the ancient great Bull of Yezidi myths, symbolising the earth element, and the small, scrawny yearling that is sacrificed during the autumn festival.

When looking for the symbolic meaning of this rite, one should not underestimate the fact that it is not an adult animal that is sacrificed, but a young one, and that it is its meat that is eaten by the pilgrims. So far, I have omitted an important analogy with the Yezidi ritual, which is significant in that it concerns Christianity, a religion of the community that is particularly close to the Yezidis, given that the Yezidis have lived for centuries in close proximity to Christians, or even alongside them (as in Bashiqe and

[214] *Ibid*: 347; cf. *Quran* VII 148; XX 88–91.

Bahzani). Their interactions are well known, and some elements of Yezidism, as well as religious artefacts, show significant similarities with Christian ones.[215]

What I have in mind is the connection between the Yezidi sacrifice of a young bull and the Holy Sacrifice (*Qurbana Qaddisha* and *Qurobo Qadisho* in the Eastern and Western Syriac traditions), which in Christianity replaced animal offerings, and which is celebrated during the mystery of the Holy Mass. It is then that Christians, believing "that Jesus was going to die […] in order to gather the scattered children of God into one"[216] and that "in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins"[217], they sacrifice Him symbolically on the altar by breaking bread and then, in the rite of communion under the form of bread and wine, they consume the body and blood of the incarnate God – Jesus Christ – who sacrificed himself for them, and who recommended this ritual. When speaking in the synagogue in Capernaum, he compared himself to a slaughtered animal and promised the faithful that they would receive communion with God, overcome death, and be reborn:

> He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live through the Father, also he who eats me will live through me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died – he who eats this bread will live forever.[218]

The analogy is all the stronger because in Christian tradition Jesus Christ was compared not only to a lamb, but precisely to a young bull, a calf. This comparison is based, among other things, on the parable handed down by Saint Luke about the prodigal son and his father, who, when the son returned, ordered the young bull to be killed (or sacrificed):

> bring the fattened calf[219], kill[220] [it], let us eat and be merry, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.[221]

[215] Cf. Rodziewicz 2022a: 1–23.

[216] *Evangelium secundum Joannem* (Nestle-Aland) 11, 51–52: "ὅτι ἔμελλεν Ἰησοῦς ἀποθνήσκειν (…) ἵνα καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ τὰ διεσκορπισμένα συναγάγῃ εἰς ἕν"; tr. A. R.

[217] Cf. *Epistula Pauli ad Ephesios* (Nestle-Aland) 1, 7: "ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων"; tr. A. R.

[218] *Evangelium secundum Joannem* (Nestle-Aland) 6, 54–58: "ὁ τρώγων μου τὴν σάρκα καὶ πίνων μου τὸ αἷμα ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον, κἀγὼ ἀναστήσω αὐτὸν τῇ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ·ἡ γὰρ σάρξ μου ἀληθής ἐστιν βρῶσις, καὶ τὸ αἷμά μου ἀληθής ἐστιν πόσις. ὁ τρώγων μου τὴν σάρκα καὶ πίνων μου τὸ αἷμα ἐν ἐμοὶ μένει κἀγὼ ἐν αὐτῷ. καθὼς ἀπέστειλέν με ὁ ζῶν πατὴρ κἀγὼ ζῶ διὰ τὸν πατέρα, καὶ ὁ τρώγων με κἀκεῖνος ζήσει δι' ἐμέ. οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, οὐ καθὼς ἔφαγον οἱ πατέρες καὶ ἀπέθανον· ὁ τρώγων τοῦτον τὸν ἄρτον ζήσει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα"; tr. A. R.

[219] μόσχος means 'calf' or 'young bull'.

[220] θύω means 'sacrifice', 'offer sacrifice', as well as 'slay', 'kill'.

[221] *Evangelium secundum Lucam* (Nestle-Aland) 15, 23–24: "φέρετε τὸν μόσχον τὸν σιτευτόν, θύσατε καὶ φαγόντες εὐφρανθῶμεν, ὅτι οὗτος ὁ υἱός μου νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἀνέζησεν, ἦν ἀπολωλὼς καὶ εὑρέθη".

The association of the incarnate God, Christ, with a calf also appears in an early Christian text, the *Epistle of Barnabas* (1st to 2nd century), whose author, referring to the Jewish custom of sacrificing a male calf for a sin offering, wrote:

> The calf is Jesus, [and] the sinners offering him are those who offered him up for slaughter.[222]

This comparison was especially well known in Eastern Christianity, particularly in the Syrian and Ethiopian Churches. In these traditions, even the mother of Jesus was likened to a young cow, possibly under the influence of much older Mesopotamian ideas.[223] This does not mean, of course, that the Yezidis took their ritual from Christianity, as Christians do not practice blood sacrifice and do not sacrifice bulls. Rather, what is important is the symbolic meaning of the sacrifice that can be present in the Yezidi ritual, namely that in this particular case the young bull may not so much symbolise an element of the natural world, but a particular person.

It is worth noting that there are other parallels between the Yezidi festival and Christianity. For Christians commemorate the events surrounding the passion and death of Christ during the seven-day celebration of the Holy Week, which precedes Easter, dedicated to his resurrection. During the Holy Week, some Christian communities, in a ceremony reminiscent of the rites accompanying *Berê Şibakê*, carry in procession a wooden platform called a '*paso*' or 'throne' on which is displayed either the cross, and therefore the place of Christ's death, or the image of Christ.[224]

8. Conclusions

The material collected above allows eight conclusions to be drawn about the Yezidi bull-sacrifice ceremony, which clearly show how little we still know about it. However, acknowledging what is not known is also a form of knowledge, revealing that what was previously considered knowledge may not be so.

1. The sacrifice of a bull is an element of the *Qabagh* ceremony, which is a component of the seven-day Festival of the Assembly. The killing of the young bull during the *Qabagh* ceremony is not a self-contained, isolated ritual, but part of the Yezidi festival. Therefore, when interpreting the event and its symbolism, the overall meaning of the

[222] *Barnabae epistula* (Kraft) 8, 2: "Ὁ μόσχος Ἰησοῦς ἐστίν, οἱ προσφέροντες ἄνδρες ἁμαρτωλοὶ οἱ προσενέγκαντες αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὴν σφαγήν"; tr. A. R. Cf. *Liber Leviticus* 9, 1–2.

[223] Cf. Widengren 1969: 314–317.

[224] This ceremony, which is probably a continuation of the rites in which relics were carried in this way, is particularly popular in Spain, where it spread in the 16th century. Cf. Barker 1957; Webster 1992; Herrero et al. 1999; a similar ritual is also observed in Shi'ism.

festival should be taken into account. However, we do not know whether the Festival of the Assembly only began to be celebrated after Sheikh Adi's death, or whether it was celebrated during his lifetime, or even before his arrival in Lalish. The *Qabagh* ceremony is also subject to the same considerations. Additionally, it is unclear whether it has always been a part of the Festival of the Assembly. This gives the following possibilities: (a) the Festival of the Assembly was celebrated in Lalish before the arrival of Adi and included the *Qabagh* ceremony; (b) the Festival of the Assembly was celebrated in Lalish before the arrival of Adi and did not include the *Qabagh* ceremony; (c) the Festival of the Assembly was celebrated in Lalish before and during the life of Sheikh Adi and included the *Qabagh* ceremony; (d) the Festival of the Assembly was celebrated in Lalish before and during the life of Sheikh Adi and did not include the *Qabagh* ceremony; (e) the Festival of the Assembly was first celebrated in Lalish during the life of Sheikh Adi and included the *Qabagh* ceremony; (f) the Festival of the Assembly was first celebrated in Lalish during the life of Sheikh Adi and did not include the *Qabagh* ceremony; (g) the Festival of the Assembly began to be celebrated after the death of Adi and included the *Qabagh* ceremony.

In each of the four cases – (a), (c), (e), (g) – the *Qabagh* ceremony and the killing of the bull would have a different meaning. In case (a):

- the festival may have referred to the autumnal dying off of the forces of nature, and its purpose was to ensure a bountiful harvest in the spring;

- the bull may have been sacrificed to the Seven Angels, or to one of them, notably Melek Shamsadin (Sheikh Shams' essence);

- both variants may have occurred simultaneously, as the coming year depends on the angels.

In the case of (c):

- there may have been a continuation of the previous form of the festival without change;

- a new meaning might have been given to the earlier festival, e.g. an imitation of the Christian Holy Week or Muslim *Hajj* by the mystical community in Lalish.

In the case of (e):

- there may have been an imitation of the Christian Holy Week or Muslim *Hajj*.

In the case of (g):

- there may have been an imitation of the Christian Holy Week or Muslim *Hajj*;

- there may have been an imitation of the of the Christian Holy Week or Muslim *Hajj* and Muhammad's last pilgrimage by the mystical community in Lalish;

- there may be a mourning commemorating the death of Sheikh Adi, and the *Qabagh* ceremony is associated with events related to this;

- there may be a mourning commemorating the deaths of Sheikh Adi or Sheikh Hassan, and the *Qabagh* ceremony is associated with related events.

All of these options are possible. However, it is unclear whether the timing of the Yezidi festival has changed, as it occurred with the autumn and spring Zoroastrian festivals, which have interchanged places. The Yezidis believe that the Angels determine the events for the coming year during the spring festival of the New Year, not in the autumn.[225] Furthermore, it is possible that new ceremonies have been added over time, or that new rituals have been combined with old ones or were given a new meaning. For example, the Yezidis may have started to associate the death (or ascension) of Sheikh Adi or other community representatives with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or autumnal dying of nature and the belief in the rebirth of the soul. However, in its current form, the Festival of the Assembly is primarily concerned with Sheikh Adi and his departure from the earthly world.

2. The *Qabagh* ceremony takes place on the fifth day of the Festival of the Assembly. It is unclear whether the bull sacrifice at the Festival of the Assembly has always taken place on this specific day. However, we must rely on the current state of affairs. If we assume that a specific number is important in this case, and not that it was just a coincidence that a bull was killed on this day many years ago, then in seeking the meaning of this fact we can try to explain it by analogies provided by both Zoroastrian and Jewish traditions. In both religions, the number five can be interpreted as being related to the bull. Regarding Zoroastrianism, the cow or bull was the fifth creation, and in Jewish myths, the Behemoth compared to the bull, was created on the fifth day. If there was a connection with the Yezidi ritual, then the killing of the bull would have to be a reference to the creation of the bull, and thus to the completion of the entire cosmic cycle of life. In Jewish myth, this moment is linked to the revelation of the Messiah, and at the same time it is mentioned that the bull will be the source of food for all and that the earth will produce a wonderful harvest, analogies to which can be drawn in the practices and beliefs surrounding the Yezidi festival. Within this parallel, the Messiah would be Sheikh Adi.

3. The young bull is slaughtered at noon in a courtyard of Sheikh Shams. The killing of the bull at the time when the sun is at its zenith does not seem to be a coincidence. This may be due to at least three reasons: (a) the participants may want to emphasise the

[225] Cf. Browski 1889: 481; Rodziewicz 2020: 259–293.

importance of the Sun (personified by Sheikh Shams), (b) the fact that the events this ritual commemorates took place at this particular time of day, (c) the usual sequence of events, which takes as long to complete as it does to end at midday. The importance of the location, however, is largely dependent on when the *Qebagh* celebration first began. The choice of *Celsa Şêşims* may be due to its association with: (a) the symbolism of the Sun (*Shams*) and with the angel, Melek Shamsadin; (b) the historical figure of Sheikh Shams al-Din and his role in the events surrounding the death of Sheikh Adi; (c) the historical figure of Sheikh Shams al-Din and his role in the events surrounding the death of Sheikh Hassan; (d) the mixing of the above variants; (e) the fact that it is the most conveniently located courtyard for pilgrims to observe the ritual.

Each of these possibilities is plausible, including the last one. It is important to note that while *Celsa Şêşims* is one of at least four places in Lalish where animals are slaughtered during ceremonies, the others are located in areas (near the Sheikh Adi temple and next to the *Mir*'s seat) where it is challenging to gather a large number of people willing to watch the ritual.

4. The flesh, blood, and hair of the slaughtered bull are distributed to pilgrims. The fact that every pilgrim has the opportunity to eat the meat and receive a hair and a few drops of the blood of the sacrificed bull shows the communal dimension of the whole ceremony – everyone shares in the sacrifice and its effects radiate out to everyone. The blood of the offered bull is used to mark the foreheads of the worshippers, the hair is kept for good luck, and the flesh is cooked and eaten. Similarly, the accompanying ritual of dividing a white cloth into strips and distributing them to the representatives of the three tribes who bring the bull to the courtyard of Shiekh Shams can be understood as a kind of special communion.

Eating the meat of a sacrificial animal is familiar to many cultures. It also resembles the Christian rite of the Holy Communion. This sense could also be seen in the Yezidi ritual, if the bull is thought to symbolise Sheikh Adi, i.e. God incarnate. On the other hand, the importance attached to hair, which may symbolise the masculine creative principle, is also known in Zoroastrianism (and other cultures),[226] and one may also recall the custom known from Mecca, when during the *Hajj*, after the sacrificial animals had been killed, Muhammad shaved his hair and gave it to pilgrims. It should also be remembered that in the religion closest to Yezidism – Yarsanism – participation in the sacrificial feast is seen as an imitation of the feast of the first angels and a symbol of participation in the essence of God.

[226] Cf. Modi 1922: 286–288; cf. Marco Polo 1938: 401.

5. The meaning of sacrificing a young bull is not clear. The choice of a particular young bull may be because (a) it is a large animal; (b) it is associated with a particular historical event; (c) it has symbolic significance; (d) all of these reasons together.

In the case of (a), this would imply that the purpose of the ceremony required the Yezidis to sacrifice a large animal, both because of the prestige of the event and because they wanted to distribute the meat to a large number of pilgrims. In this case, however, this does not justify the choice of a young bull; either a large adult animal, a cow, or the killing of several animals would have been more appropriate.

In the case of (b), it could refer to one of the legends about the killing of such a bull after the death of Sheikh Adi.

In the case of (c), the bull could be a symbol of the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, the Earth and the Moon, a particular person, or the whole community. The first of these six possibilities should be rejected, as it seems unlikely that the Sun would be symbolised by a young bull, which often has a dark hide. It is possible that the Yezidis sacrificed white bulls in the past, as Layard claimed, but this is not the case today. Moreover, there is no connection between the bull and the Sun in Yezidi myths.[227] If the bull was a symbol of the Moon, this may be due to the adoption of such symbolism from other cultures, where the bull's horns were associated with the sickle of the Moon. However, in the case of the Yezidi ritual, we are dealing with a young bull whose horns are barely visible. Its association with the Moon could also be linked to the Zoroastrian myth in which the first cow or bull was connected to the Moon. However, it is unlikely that this link exists, as it is not supported by Yezidi myths. Another possible connection could be made by linking the bull to the figure of the Yezidi leader Sheikh Hassan, known as Sheikh Sin (i.e. Moon). This would suggest that the killing of the bull is linked to one of the legends of the killing of Sheikh Sin. This interpretation is made plausible by the observation that only the instrument dedicated to him, the flute, leads the procession that escorts the bull to the sacrifice. At the same time, however, this hypothesis is weakened by the fact that in Yezidi tradition it is Melek Fakhradin and his incarnation, Sheikh Fakhr, who are associated with the Moon. Moreover, the absence of the tambourine player could be due to the fact that the skin of a bull was used to make this instrument, as some Yezidis claim.

[227] There is another possibility, however also unlikely, that the sun symbol refers to a Yezidi saint, Sheikh Hassan, called Sheikh Sin by the Yezidis. Although his name contains a root referring to the Moon (*Sin)* in Mesopotamia, it is believed that his full name referred to the Sun (*Shams*): Hasan ibn ʻAdi Shams al-Din, also known as *Taj al-Arifin Shams al-Din* (see: Guidi 1933: 421; Patton 1991: 65). With such a possibility, the killing of the bull could allude to his death. However, apart from his full name, Sheikh Hassan is not associated with the Sun in Yezidi tradition.

The strongest hypothesis seems to be that the bull is linked to the symbol of the Earth, because that is how this animal is depicted in the Yezidi cosmogonic myths. However, the Bull known from the myths is not a young bull, it does not appear alone in the myth and there is no mention of killing or sacrificing it. As an aside, it is possible that also in Mithraism the bull symbolises the earth (sculptures and paintings depict ears growing from the bull's body) or the death and rebirth of the natural world, which one could try to link to one of the supposed meanings of the Yezidi ritual. If this connection exists, the killing of the young, year-old bull would have to be interpreted as the dying of the earth for winter and the preparation of its life forces for rebirth in spring.

In turn, the association of the bull with two symbols, the Earth and the Moon, could have a Zoroastrian origin, as the myths of this religion mention the formation of the primordial cow or bull from the earth and its subsequent association with the Moon. However, if the Yezidi ritual refers to this symbolism, it is unclear what it would mean to sacrifice the symbol of the Earth and the Moon in the courtyard of the Sheikh Shams, as the nearby cave dedicated to Sheikh Fakhr would be more appropriate.

Apart from the association with some of the elements of nature, the bull could be a symbol of a particular figure in the history of Yezidism. The most likely ones would be Sheikh Adi or Sheikh Hassan, or even both of these leaders, whose passing away left a clear mark on the history of Yezidism. In this situation, the rite of killing the bull could be understood in a similar way to the sacrifice celebrated by Christians – as the enactment of a mystery to commemorate the death of a holy man, or even God incarnate (Sheikh Adi). It is not clear, however, why this would take place in the courtyard of Sheikh Shams.

Besides the symbolic act of commemorating the death of a particular person, the killing of the bull could also refer to the entire community of believers and be understood either as a sacrifice for their sins or as an offering for their future prosperity.

6. The origin of the Yezidi ritual of sacrificing a bull is unknown. The origin of the Yezidi custom cannot be definitively determined due to a lack of knowledge regarding its dating, which may be traced back to (a) before Sheikh Adi (before the 12th century), (b) during Sheikh Adi's time (12th century), (c) Sheikh Hassan's time (13th century), (d) after the 13th century.

In cases (b), (c) and (d), the ritual may have been developed within the Yezidi community, without reference to its significance in a particular religion, and may have had a particular meaning, or may have been due to a belief in the need to sacrifice an animal during a large festival celebrated by many participants. However, in all cases

– (a), (b), (c), (d) – the ritual could also be a borrowing from another culture, such as ancient Mesopotamian religions, Judaism, Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, Sabeanism, Christianity, or Islam.

7. Considering the Yezidi ceremony as a remnant of Mithraism and Zoroastrianism is only a myth. Based on current knowledge, it is not possible to prove that the Yezidi ritual originated from Mithraism or Zoroastrianism. It is highly improbable that the Yezidis would have sacrificed a bull as a Zoroastrian or Mithraic offering to the Sun. For, if Mithraism had been significant to them, any references to it would have been identifiable in the Yezidi festivals, iconography, sacred hymns, and legends passed down by their tradition. Meanwhile, neither Mithras nor Zoroaster are mentioned anywhere in them (if one does not count contemporary modifications of ancient poetry, additions, forgeries, or completely new works, such as the *Hymn of Zoroaster* (*Qewlê Zerdeşt*), created to support the Mithraistic hypothesis). Furthermore, even if one considers that the Yezidis offer a sacrifice to the Sun during the ritual of killing a bull, this does not necessarily imply an influence of Mithraism, as this could just as well be under the influence of Harranian Sabeanism, for example. The Sun and figures associated with it, such as Sheikh Shams, are an important part of the Yezidi faith. However, this does not necessarily mean that their worship has Mithraistic roots. It may be asked: if Mithra, Mithras, and Zoroaster were such important figures for the Yezidis over a period of nearly 1000 years, why did they not mention them or create images of them in their religious works during that time, but only started to do so recently?

Moreover, the defenders of the Mithraistic hypothesis argue that non-corporeal creation precedes the corporeal one in both Yezidi and Zoroastrian cosmogonies. However, this argument is misplaced since the same distinction can be found in cosmogonies of other cultures, especially those inspired by Platonism, such as Gnosticism, Sabeanism, the mystical currents of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Also, the *argumentum ab antrum* does not apply. This is because, usually (if one incident is not counted), the bull is killed in the open courtyard and not in the cave. If Yezidism drew on Mithraism in the ritual of killing the bull, in order to appeal to the (presumably Mithraistic) idea of the rebirth of the life forces of nature, it would seem that a more appropriate time for this ritual than the autumn festival would be the spring New Year festival, which celebrates the triumph of the Sun and light. It should be once again stressed that it cannot be ruled out that Yezidi ritual has its roots in Mithraism. However, since the current state of research does not allow us to prove this, it cannot be confirmed, only believed.

8. The ceremonial killing of a bull by the Yezidis has universal meaning. The act of killing obviously leads to death and what comes after. In the case of the community of believers in the life of the soul after the death of the body – that something is the life of the soul, which either enters another, non-corporeal dimension for eternity, or passes away and is reborn. The awareness of this, in turn, is a cause of joy and celebration. Over the centuries, this belief has accompanied many religions, cults and rituals, such as those of Dionysus, Tammuz, Attis, and Christ, which also make use of the symbolism of the bull, associated either with the life-giving forces of nature (sun and blood) or with a specific figure who is an apostle of religion or an incarnation of divine light, who is believed to have conquered death with his soul and whose flesh and blood is distributed to the faithful. The same belief seems to be present in Yezidism. Thus, in the most general terms, the meaning of the Yezidi ritual of killing a young bull may be to draw the attention of the faithful to the cycle of rebirth after death. More specifically, this applies both to the cycle of the year determined by the Sun and to the forces of nature and the earth that die in the autumn to be reborn in the new year in the spring, but also to the specific figure to whom the Festival of the Assembly is dedicated – Sheikh Adi.

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არტურ როჟევიჩი (Artur Rodziewicz)

სამოთხიდან დედამიწამდე: ხარის მხვერპლშეწირვა, როგორც ეზიდების მითრაიზაციის საშუალება

აბსტრაქტი: კვლევა ეხება ხარის დაკვლის რიტუალის მნიშვნელობას შემოდგომის ჯამაის დღესასწაულის დროს. გასული ოთხმოცი წლის განმავლობაში, აკადემიკოსებისა და პოლიტიკოსების მიერ ეს რიტუალი მიიჩნეოდა მითრაიზმის ელემენტების არსებობის უტყუარ მტკიცებულებად ეზიდურ რელიგიურ ტრადიციაში. ამ ინტერპრეტაციამ გავლენა იქონია ასევე თავად ეზიდების მიერ საკუთარი რელიგიის აღქმაზე. ბევრი მათგანი, აკადემიური თუ პოლიტიკური ავტორიტეტების გავლენით, ამას უტყუარ ფაქტად მიიჩნევს. ამ შეხედულებას ეწინააღმდეგება ჩემს მიერ გამოკვლეული ეზიდური რიტუალები ლალიშში, ასევე - ეზიდური რელიგიური საგალობლების ანალიზი, რომელიც აჩვენებს, რომ ამ ინტერპრეტაციის საფუძველში არსებული წარმოდგენები არ დასტურდება მტკიცებულებებით და საკამათოა. გარდა ამისა, მუსლიმურ, ქრისტიანულ, ჰარრანის რიტუალებსა და გვიან ანტიკური ხანის საიდუმლო კულტების რელიგიურ პრაქტიკასა და მითებთან ეზიდური რიტუალების შედარების საფუვველზე, გთავაზობთ ალტერნატიულ ინტერპრეტაციებს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ხარი, მსხვერპლშეწირვა, ყაბაღ, შეკრების დღესასწაული (ჯამაი შიხადი), მითრაიზმი, ზოროასტრიზმი, taurobolium (ტაურობოლიუმი), ჰაჯი, კოსმოგონიური მითი, მიწა, ბეჰემოთი, აბრაამი, იესო ქრისტე, პარადიგმის ცვლილება

Artur Rodziewicz

Ji bihuştê heta erdê: qurban kirina gê (gayî) wek amûrê ji bo mîtrayîzekirina êzdiyan

Abstrakt: Di vê lêkolînê da girîngiya rê û resmên êzdiyan ya serjê kirin û qurban kirina gê di e'yda payîzê ya Cemayê da hatîye lêkolîn kirin. Ev êdî 80 salin, ku ev rê û resm ji aliyê zaniyar û siyasetmedaran va wek delîl û belgeyên nerast yên hebûna sembol û hêmanên mîtraîzmê di kevneşopiya dînê êzdiyan da têne dîtin. Hewisa ev şirove di nav êzidiyan da jî fehm kirina dînê wan di bin bandora awtorîteya zanistî û siyasî da, wek têorîyeke bê şik, daye qebûl kirin. Lê belê, ev bawerî bi çavdêriyên mine şexsî û lêkolînên ser dîn û rîtûalên êzdîtiyê li Lalişê min kirine, vekolînê qewl û tekstên êzdiyan yê dînî, vê yekê red dike. Ew têorî bi van belge û delîlan dibe ciyê şikê û rexnekirinê. Wekî din jî, min ji alîyê xweve şiroveyên altêrnatîv pêşkêş kirîne bi balkişandina hevsengiyên û wekhevîyên di navbera rewşit û tîtalên dînê êzdiyan û efsaneyên cihûtîyê, îslamê û krîstiyanîyê, dîn û baweriyên Herranê û mîsterîyên kevnar da.

Peyvên sereke: ga, qurban, qebax, Cemaya Şîxadî, mîtraîzm, zerdeştî, taurobolium, hec, mîtolojiya kosmogonî, erd, behemot, Îbrahîm, Îsa, guhastina paradîgmê.