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Editorial

We are pleased to announce to our readers the inaugural issue of the International Journal of Yezidi Studies (IJYS), which aims to bring together in one place the hitherto scattered results of research on Yezidis, their history, culture, and religion, thereby breaking down traditional disciplinary boundaries by providing a comparative and interdisciplinary forum.

While researchers have documented and analyzed the Yezidi experience in various specialized journals, these publications often reach a limited audience. Currently, there is no centralized platform for scholars focusing exclusively on Yezidis, to share their work and engage with others working on similar issues. This gap inspired us to create the IJYS and define our aim, namely to create a central academic space in which scholars who typically study Yezidis and Yezidism, or specific subfields, can engage in dialogue with each other through their shared focus on Yezidi affairs in different contexts, both historical and contemporary. We aim to provide a platform for innovative studies that cover a wide range of time periods, geographical regions, and disciplines. We believe this new journal, dedicated to the Yezidi minority, will offer a space for authors to disseminate their research and for readers to stay informed about significant developments in this field.

We are interested in attracting high-quality manuscripts from an international community of scholars seeking a broader audience for their research on Yezidism and Yezidi tradition. While we certainly encourage traditional research, we also hope the journal will inspire scholars to extend their reach, making their often quite specialized research accessible to peers working on similar questions in related fields.

Religious and ethnic as well as ethno-religious minorities have profoundly influenced the political, social and economic landscape of societies, nations, and states. Despite their significant contributions, many of these groups have experienced discrimination and marginalization by states and majority populations. The Yezidi religious minority is a notable example. Throughout its history, the Yezidi community has faced numerous challenges, including religious, social, and political persecution, military campaigns, and genocides perpetrated by local rulers, states, and central authorities. The first edition of the IJYS appears ten years after the latest genocide against the Yezidi people, which we would like to mourn and commemorate with this edition.

This volume of IJYS provides an overview of a collection of articles focused on Yezidi studies across various scientific fields of interest, including history, society, religion, and heritage, with particular emphasis on issues related to genocide. The collection features contributions from various authors who explore both general topics and specific aspects of Yezidi studies,

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with several scholars reflecting on these topics from diverse disciplines and key areas. The purpose of this is to provide researchers with new information and to foster a better and deeper understanding of the emerging field of Yezidi studies. Through the articles currently accepted for publication, we aim not only to establish a starting point but also to rekindle enthusiasm for further research in Yezidi studies.

This first issue brings together scholars and researchers from Austria, Georgia, Iraq, Poland, Russia, and the USA and comprises of six articles. The first two articles address the historical experiences of the Yezidi genocides, including the most recent mass murder and enslavement of Yezidis in Iraq and Syria under the terror of ISIS, the legal issues in coping with this genocide, and a snapshot of the new return program to Sinjar initiated by the Iraqi federal government. These are followed by a scholarly paper investigating the use of the term 'religion' and its concept (including its history), in the context of Yezidi culture and beliefs. It shows the views of an awakening Yezidi community in a changing social environment, which questions the Western and Russian domination in the studies dealing with them, their culture and religion. Then we provide a short study focusing on the history and significance of the Yezidi sanjaqs in general and the Tawûs Gêran in particular by retracing the tours these images of Tawûsî Melek took and one of them still takes. The fifth article, a historical study, provides a deeper insight into the history of the Yezidis in Eastern Anatolia, where the Yezidi principality of Ezdikhan existed from the 16th to the 18th century. In this context, the article also discusses new documents discovered in the National Archives of Georgia that refer to Khalil Aga, the early leader of the Yezidis who lived in the Erivan Governorate of the Russian Empire. The first issue of our journal concludes with a study that challenges the petrified dogma of the Mithraic origin of Yezidi bull sacrifice by highlighting the diverse cultures and religions from which the Yezidis may have borrowed.

As the editor-in-chief I would also like to extend my gratitude to the international team of editors and advisors as well as to all those involved in the preparation of the IJYS for their dedicated service. Their enthusiasm, creativity, and tireless work have made these issues possible. They are the backbone of the journal and the heart of our team. I would also like to express my appreciation to the IJYS reviewers who, despite their busy schedules and the tight deadlines for producing this journal, provided their expert and nuanced reviews in a timely manner. Their support is invaluable, and I hope they will continue this journey with IJYS in the future. I also thank our copyeditors, scholars, and colleagues from other journals and academic institutions who have discussed with us, and in particular, the Giorgi Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies at Ilia State University for their partnership and their ongoing technical guidance and support. Finally, I would like to thank our authors for their original contributions that will advance Yezidi research.

Majid Hassan Ali
Editor-in-Chief

Majid Hassan Ali

College of Humanities,
University of Duhok, KRI-Iraq & G.T.
Institute of Oriental Studies,
Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia
ORCID: 0000-0001-8061-1431
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32859/yezidistudies/1/1/7-40

Enslavement and Captivity of Yezidi Women by Ottoman Authorities, Local Rulers and Tribes: A Historical Review of the Islamic Contexts

Abstract:
This article addresses the history of the enslavement and captivity of women during the Islamic military campaigns, invasions, conquests and *firmāns* inflicted on the Yezidi religious minority. It focuses on periods of the Ottoman authorities, local rulers, tribes, Kurdish princedoms, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the context of that and because of the vital importance of this phenomenon, this article seeks to shed light and understanding on the historical background of servitude in the legal and juristic provisions of slavery in Islam, and its practices on those who are considered the capture of *ahl al-kitāb* (the People of the Book) such as Jews and Christians, the so-called *dhimmīs* (protected people), and those who were non-*ahl al-kitāb*, such as the Yezidis. A considerable number of documents, original, primary and secondary sources, and the Yezidi oral tradition, have documented many of those *firmāns* and the enslavement of Yezidi women that accompanied campaigns.

Keywords:
Yezidis, Yezidi Women, Captivity, Enslavement, *Firmān*, Genocide, Ottoman Empire, ISIS, Kurds, Islamic law and slavery.

Introduction

Many narratives in the Quran, the Sunna, and the Islamic tradition about servitude and its legitimacy and application in Islam may provide an understanding for its continued existence in various Arab and Muslim countries,[1] despite having been officially banned by the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others of 1951.[2] Despite the curtailment of servitude, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism has encouraged it. In addition,

[1] Gordon 1989.
[2] It was adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 317 (IV) on 02/12/1949 (United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 1949).

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many contemporary Islamic movements, groups, and extremist organizations, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/al-Sham (ISIS),[3] Boko Haram, al-Qaida, the Jihadist Movements, have been inclined or have tended to adopt many details of these narratives and historical incidents that appear in the Muslim sources and in the religious *fatwā* (Ar. pl. *fatāwā*, En. Islamic legal opinion), particularly in their attempts to reinstate servitude and permit slaves (Ar. *sabī*) in the regions controlled by them. Information technology, satellite channels, and social media have played a massive role in transmitting calls for enslavement and servitude among these extremist groups. Muslim jurists (Ar. *fuqahā'*) and scholars (Ar. *'ulamā'*) in speeches have permitted sexual enslavement, and furthermore, they have legalized sexual relations with war captives and slaves.[4]

Throughout history, servitude has manifested in different forms, within various legal provisions, political systems and contexts. However, this research focuses exclusively on the enslavement of women in the Arab world, and in the Middle East in particular. Linguistically, *al-sabī* in Arabic refers to the kidnapped ones. Idiomatically, it refers to the women who are captured during war.[5] Enslaving women during war was one of the features of pre-Islamic times.[6] Women and children were taken captives, then distributed or sold in slave trade markets. Women slaves were essentially war captives who lost their personal rights and their status within the conquering community. They were not allowed to hold any property because they themselves were owned by others. They were at their master's disposal, like any other property. Slaveholders have the full right to use, lease, mortgage, donate, have sex with, beat, and kill them.

In addition to various other historical writings and secondary studies, the books of the earliest Arab and Muslim historians such as al-Ṭabarī,[7] al-Dīnawarī,[8] al-Balādhurī,[9] and Ibn al-Athīr,[10] document a large number of the Islamic invasions and military

[3] The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and by its Arabic acronym Dā'sh (Daesh), is a transnational organization that follows the ideology and doctrine of jīhādist and Salafist groups. They gained global prominence in 2014, when its militants successfully captured large areas in northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria, taking advantage of the sectarian conflicts in Iraq and the ongoing Syrian civil war. During the period between 2014 and 2017 they formed a quasi-state that was not recognized internationally.

[4] See for instance, a *fatwā* issued by Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, dictates the killing of infidels and polytheists, permitting the shedding of their blood if they refuse to convert to Islam (Fatwaksa (2009).

[5] See: Ibn Manẓūr 1970: 13.

[6] The terms 'slavery' or 'slave' do not originate exclusively from Islamic culture. Slavery and enslaving individuals, including women, is a practice that dates back thousands of years and has existed in various societies worldwide, predating the rise of Islam.

[7] See: Ṭabarī 1979: 4.

[8] Dīnawarī 1995.

[9] Balādhurī 1978.

[10] See: Ibn al-Athīr 1976: 4

campaigns (which are called *al-fituḥāt* in the Islamic concept which means conquests), during which women were enslaved. After the emergence of Islam, slavery persisted, as it was permitted by *Sharīʿa* law.[11] Even though slavery was banned by the civil and criminal laws of modern-day Muslim countries[12] (for example, Qatar banned slavery in 1952 and Saudi Arabia followed suit in 1962 in conformity with the aforementioned UN Convention), various forms of servitude have persisted in many of these countries.[13]

Conceptual and Theretical Framework

Although there are research works that deal with the genocide of peoples in the Ottoman Empire[14] which are relevant to this research, most of them do not mention the genocidal campaigns against the Yezidis, as they are a non-Muslim religious minority. Furthermore, they make no reference to, nor do they provide any detail on the captivity of Yezidi women during the Ottoman era.[15] The phenomenon of Yezidi servitude and sexual slavery was commonplace, long before the capture of the Yezidi regions, especially Sinjar, by ISIS in 2014. Because of the enormous impact of this phenomenon on Yezidi women and on Yezidi society as a whole, this research seeks to shed light and understanding on the history of servitude to which Yezidi women have been subjected. During numerous historical periods since the Muslim conquest, many Yezidi women were captured and subjected to slavery during the Islamic invasions and military campaigns. According to the values and concepts of the modern world, such invasions, conquests, and campaigns can be described as genocide campaigns. Within Yezidi parlance, these campaigns are referred to as *firmān*, a general term that in the Yezidi jargon literally means genocidal campaigns, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, and mass killings, and more specifically, it refers to those conducted by the Ottoman and the Safavid states, and by the leaders and princes of the Kurdish principalities.[16]

A *firmān*, at the constitutional level, was a royal mandate or decree issued by a sovereign Islamic state, such as the Ottoman Empire. During various periods in history, they were collected and applied as traditional bodies of law. The word *firmān* comes from the Persian *farman* [فرمان], meaning decree or order, but in Ottoman Turkish it meant edict or a decision. The term *firmān* has its roots in the Persian language, where it originally meant a royal decree or order of *Shāh*, encompassing commands, judgments, edicts,

[11] See: Lewis 1994; *Idem* 1990.
[12] Segal 2002.
[13] See: *Slavery in Arabia – 1964* (a movie available on YouTube).
[14] Jones 2011: 149–177; Ali and Miho 2018: 75–107.
[15] See: Toledano 1982; *Idem* 1998; Erdem 1996; Peirce 2021.
[16] See: Ali 2019: 78.

and documents. These evolved into Safavid *firmāns*, Afsharid-Qajar *firmāns* like those of Nader Shah and successors, Afghan kings' chancery documents from 1745 onwards, and *firmāns* from Karīm Khan Zand and Qajar rulers until World War I. Over time, the term's meaning evolved and shifted, especially with political changes and transformations in the region. The Ottomans borrowed this term from Persian and used it in their context to refer to the Sultan's edicts or decisions.[17] *Firmāns* were issued for various purposes, some positive and others negative, such as appointing Yezidi princes to certain positions of some *sanjaqs* (district), *eyalet* (later vilayets, state), principality, and princedoms with decrees from the Ottoman Sultans, but in subsequent periods the sultans issued many decrees to carry out extermination campaigns against Yezidis. Due to the significant number of *firmāns* issued, the concept of *firmān* eventually became associated with campaigns of genocide in the Yezidi context. This parallels how terms like Holocaust or *Farhūd* in the Jewish context, and *Anfal* in the Kurdish context are used to describe specific instances of genocide targeting particular groups of people. The term genocide itself emerged in the late 1940s as a general concept for ethnic and cultural cleansing processes, but it does not capture the specificity of each event. Therefore, for Yezidis, *firmān* is synonymous with describing genocide, pogroms, and ethnic cleansing.

Although the precise number of *firmān*s against the Yezidis is unknown, Yezidi oral tradition maintains that the minority has endured seventy-two *firmān*s throughout known history. Thus, the number seventy-two has gained a symbolic meaning[18] in Yezidi oral history and collective consciousness. A discrepancy exists in enumerating the pogroms, due to a number of recent events that are sometimes added to the list of *firmān*s, such as the terrorist attack of 2007 in Sinjar, when car bombs exploded in the town centers of Til Ezer (spelled *Girr-ʿIzzir* by the Sinjaris pronounce also known in Arabic as *al-Qaḥṭānīya*) and Sībā-Shikhidr also, Jizira or *Jazīra* (both villages are located in the south of the Sinjar Mount), which killed and wounded around 800 Yezidis. Taking the latter into account, the ISIS attack on the Yezidis in August 2014 would count as the seventy-fourth *firmān*.[19]

During its campaigns, ISIS revived many dormant legal provisions, which had hitherto been studied for decades within the Islamic religious institutes, but were fixed, dormant, unchanged, and hidden and did not undergo scientific study. Among these

[17] For further information on the *firmān* term see: Fragner 2016; Busse et al. 2012.
[18] For the symbolic meaning of the number 72 and its relevance to the 72 *firmān* and the 72 nations see Nicolaus and Rodziewicz 2023.
[19] See: Ali 2019: 77.

provisions which have been applied in Islamic jurisprudence, are the Quranic phrase *milk al-yamīn* (possessed by the right hand) and the concept of *milk al-yamīn*, which in the Islamic context means the validity of non-marital sexual relationships with slave girls. Both concepts were applied by ISIS in their campaigns against the Yezidi. The Yezidi religious minority faced enslavement more than other non-Muslim minorities. The question is, why the Yezidi religious minority faced enslavement more than other non-Muslim minorities? It also calls into question the Islamic jurisprudence and the limits (*ḥudūd*)[20] of the Islamic legal provisions on ethical grounds.

The enslavement of the Yezidi women by ISIS in 2014 was no isolated phenomenon. Rather, the Yezidis have been subjected to genocidal campaigns and enslavement for centuries. Because of their religion, the Yezidis have been 'fair game' in various Islamic campaigns down through history, especially during the Abbasid period, during the Ottoman Empire, and once again in 2014 at the hands of ISIS.

To gain an understanding of the servitude of children and women since the first known Islamic invasions, this research uses historical methodology and official documents, historical reports, original and primary Islamic sources, as well as Yezidi oral traditional and eyewitness accounts. In order to understand what happened to the Yezidis after the ISIS invasion in 2014, some Yezidi survivors were interviewed in Iraq and Germany for this research. Using snowball sampling, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five persons, including four women who had been enslaved by ISIS on 3rd of August 2014 and with one man who survived the Kocho village[21] massacre. All interviews with these eyewitnesses were recorded with their kind permission; in the interests of protecting their privacy, most of the interviewees are not named. I have given them pseudonyms.

The Legal and Juristic Provisions and Clauses Concerning Slavery in Islam

Enslavement and sexual violence were features inherent to most wars waged by ancient tribes, states, and empires. According to Gloria Gaggioli, an international humanitarian law expert, sexual violence has occurred during armed conflicts at all times, on all continents.[22] On the Arabian Peninsula from pre-Islamic periods onwards, the women of the losing party, along with their children, were captured after all battles. After the emergence of Islam, capture became characteristic for the campaigns carried out by the Muslims after the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad to the city of Medina.

[20] *Ḥudūd* (pl. *ḥad*) is an Arabic word meaning limits, frames, boundaries, and borders. In Islamic religion and *Sharīʿa* law, it refers to legal rulings, laws, and punishments under Islamic law and is established and mandated by Allah.

[21] Kocho is located in the south of the Sinjar Mountains in the Nineveh Governorate of Iraq and populated by Yezidis.

[22] See: Gaggioli 2014: 504.

Moreover, Islam acknowledged and approved captivity, capture, and sexual slavery that resulted from these wars. Based on the historical facts, the research question of this part of study is: what was the Islamic provisions regarding the capture of *ahl al-kitāb* (the people of the book),[23] the so-called *dhimmīs* (protected people), such as Jews and Christians, and those who were non-*ahl al-kitāb*, such as the Yezidis?

Despite the denial or justification of the slave-hunting during these military operations, great controversy and contrasting legal opinions exist in relation to the capture and servitude of women in the Islamic jurisprudence. The schools of Islamic jurisprudence differ in their interpretation of the *Sharīʿa* law on the matter of servitude.[24] In this context, it is worth mentioning that resorting to some verses in the Quran does not necessarily mean that the right interpretation is found – even if most exegetists of the text are in agreement. However, they are mentioned in this research to show that many jihadists and fundamentalistic Islamic organizations resort to them and depend on their interpretations to suit their religious ideology. While the Quran does not prohibit the capture and enslavement of women, the corpus of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) gave legitimacy to *fuqahāʾ* and *ʿulamāʾ* who concluded in their interpretation that Islam permitted the capture of women and children during invasions.

Moreover, jurists allowed these enslavement operations by relying on the legal stipulation that says: *"al-aṣl fī al-afʿāl al-taqayyid bi al-ḥukm al-sharʿī"*[25] (En. actions must depend on a legal provision)[26] and by arguing that there was no legal provision or decision that restricted the Muslims from capturing women during their military campaigns. Furthermore, Quranic verses[27] and *hadiths* are considered as the legal basis upon which

[23] It includes all other religions, meaning (from an Islamic perspective) those who do not adhere to a revealed religion.

[24] See for instance Clarence-Smith 2006.

[25] Mdallal 2010: 34.

[26] Quotations from sources have been translated from the original language into English by the author of this article.

[27] Among the Quranic verses referring to female slaves and unmarried women who were captured and kept as concubines by Muslims are: (1) "And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you [among other women], two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]" (*Sura al-Nisa*, verse 3). (2) "And marry the unmarried among you and the righteous among your male slaves and female slaves. If they should be poor, Allah will enrich them from His bounty, and Allah is all-Encompassing and knowing" (*Sura al-Nour*, verse 32). (3) "And [also prohibited to you are all] married women except those your right hands possess. [This is] the decree of Allah upon you. And lawful to you are [all others] beyond these, [provided] that you seek them [in marriage] with [gifts from] your property, desiring chastity, not unlawful sexual intercourse. So, for whatever you enjoy [of marriage] from them, give them their due compensation as an obligation. And there is no blame upon you for what you mutually agree to beyond the obligation. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise" (*Sura al-Nisa*, verse 24). (4) "And they who guard their private parts. Except from their wives or those their right hands possess, for indeed, they will not be blamed" (*Sura al-Muʾminoon*, verses 5–6). (5) There are also other verses in *Sura al-Aḥzab* and *al-Nisa* which prompt the right hand possess, women capture and the marriage of the unmarried slave girls (see: *Sura al-Aḥzab*, verse 52; *Sura al-Nisa*, verse 25). The

Islamic *fuqahāʾ*, *ʿulamāʾ*, and leaders have been basing their decisions as do the present-day and which are used by Islamic organizations to legitimize their actions and practices.

According to the religious interpretations, the phrase *wamā malakat imānukum* (a captive who your right hand possesses) refers to slave girls. The Muslim jurists interpreted that phrase by stating that a Muslim is permitted to marry any slave whom he wants without limitations, in addition to his legal right to marry four women, on certain grounds.[28] In other words, Muslims are permitted to have sexual relations with the captive that *milk al-yamīn* (the right hand possesses) without a marriage contract. Many interpretations, therefore, considered these verses a religious pretext and became the legal doctrine and justification that most Islamic caliphs, princes, and leaders gave when enslaving women as captives of the wars that they waged against the other religions and nations, such as the Yezidi and others throughout history.[29]

In every raid, women slaves were divided according to regulations on enslavement, derived especially from the *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad.[30] For example, *imam* (pl. *aʾimmah*) al-Shāfiʿī permitted the selling of women slaves and forced the 'little ones' (children) and the women of the Magi (Zoroastrians and other non-Abrahamic religions) to embrace Islam. He also permitted killing them, if they refused to convert to Islam.[31] In addition, *imam* al-Awzāʿī permitted the selling of slaves when the owner was in need of money.[32]

Written evidence abounds on the brutality used against female slaves and the violence they underwent when they were sold at the slave markets throughout the Islamic World. These accounts bear all the hallmarks of what is understood as slavery – complete control of one person by another, through the use of physical and psychological violence, and their economic and sexual exploitation. Slaves, including women, were used to dig tombs to bury the dead, or they were conscripted into the army. Children slaves too were conscripted and forced to fight in wars and invasions.[33] Muslim fighters

translation of these Quranic verses is provided by the author of this article and has been compared by seeking help from several translations from the following sources: quran.com; surahquran.com/quran-online; legacy.quran.com (accessed: 12.08.2022).

28 See for instance Shaybānī 1971: 2071–2073; Bayhaqī n. d. (no date): 124–125; Shāfiʿī 1974: 352.

29 For these issues see also Nicolaus and Yuce 2017, in particular subchapters: *The View of Fundamentalist Islam*; *Slaves can Only be Taken in Times of War, and Muslims are Entitled to the Sexual Enjoyment of Their Slave Women*; *No Muslim can be Enslaved*; and *Compliance With the [Islamic] Law Governing Marriage and Progeny*.

30 See: Balādhurī 1978: 147; Ibn al-Athīr 1976: 406; Mdallal 2010: 41–42.

31 See: Mdallal 2010: 62.

32 See: Abū Yūsuf n.d.: 61.

33 See: ʿAsākir 1995: 247; ʿAdīm 1988: 1482; Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. II: 664.

reportedly branded them with their seals on their necks,[34] so that they would be recognized as captives and slaves. This is a practice for which the Muslim leader Qutayba ibn Abī Ṣāliḥ Muslim ibn ʿAmr al-Bāhilī was well known, for example, when he captured many women from the Kashgar (in the Xinjiang region of northwestern China) in 715 AD.[35] In Khwarazm, a large oasis region in western Central Asia, Muslim soldiers stripped the slaves of their clothes, causing a large number to die from exposure to the cold. The sources state[36] that cries and wails were heard from the slaves in Qinnasrin[37] who were tied with ropes and locked up in houses, stables, and mosques.

Historical Background of Slavery in Islam

Primary Islamic resources and historical reports, which were written by the earliest Islamic historians, document each capture after every battle or raid in the Muslim conquest and expansion which was associated with killing, destruction, and capture. For instance, in the raid of Khaybar[38] in 628 (AD) Muslims captured eight hundred women.[39] After the battle of Hunayyn,[40] in 630 six thousand women and children of the Hawāzin tribe and its subsection the Banū Thaqīf were captured.[41] The capture of women continued during the time of the first four caliphs and during the Umayyad and Abbasid rule until the end of the Ottoman state.

In the area of Iraq, where Zoroastrianism and other religions were considered the official religions during the Sassanid period,[42] the Caliph Abu Bakr (632–634) successfully completed a campaign during which many women and children were taken captive.[43] During the time of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (634–644), the capturing of slaves continued and intensified on a large scale. Muslims continued their invasions into the Sassanid Empire, which resulted in capturing thousands of women and children, especially after their victory over the Sassanids in the Battle of Jalulāʾ[44] in 637. Sources state that the leader al-Qaʿqāʿ, ibn ʿAmr ibn Mālik al-Tamīmī sent many women captives to Hāshim ibn ʿUtba ibn Abū Waqqāṣ, the ruler of Mosul (d. 657). The latter distributed

[34] See: Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. VI: 500; Ibn Khaldūn 1984: 85; Balādhurī 1978: 403.
[35] See: Broomhall 1910: 17–22.
[36] See: Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. II: 187; Vol. IV: 31, Vol. III: 656; Ibn Khaldūn 1984: 8; Balādhurī 1978: 407.
[37] A historical town in northern Syria 25 km southwest of Aleppo.
[38] An oasis in Medina Province of Saudi Arabia which was inhabited by Jews until it fell to the Muslim armies under Muhammad.
[39] See: Ibn al-Athīr 1976: 32.
[40] A valley between Mecca and Taif.
[41] See: Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. II: 32; Wāqidī 2004: 53, 242; Ibn Khallikān 1977: 351.
[42] See: Morony 2005.
[43] See: Ibn al-Athīr 1976: 242, 335; Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. II: 327.
[44] Jalulāʾ (nowadays Jalawla) is a town located in Dīyālā Governorate of Iraq and located on the Khurasan Road. The historical texts describe it as the center of a Sassanid Province.

them among his Arab leaders and soldiers and the historian al-Ṭabarī mentions this when he writes that "al-Qaʿqāʿ took women as captives and sent them to Hāshim ibn ʿUtba, who divided them among his leaders, and they had sex with them, and they became pregnant and gave birth to children".[45]

In another account, al-Ṭabarī assures that so many women were taken as slaves in that battle that they could hardly be counted. They underwent the most hideous humiliation and torture. He even reported that the following saying which he ascribed to the Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "*Allāhuma ʾinī aʿūdhū bika min ʾawlād sabāyā al-jalulāʾīāt*"[46] (En. Oh God! I seek refuge from the children of *Jalulāʾs* women captives). As a result of ongoing wars and Muslim expansion during the time of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (644–656), the enslavement operations continued.

During the first four caliphs, the Arab Muslims practiced the capture of women and children from non-Arab regions,[47] which continued during the Umayyad period (661–749) on an even larger scale. In the historical sources, we find the names of quite a number of Kurdish women and girls,[48] who were taken as slaves by the Arab military leaders. Among them was, for example, a Kurdish girl who was seized by the Umayyad leader, Ibrāhīm ibn Mālik al-Ashtar. After his death in 691, she was taken over by Muḥammad ibn Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 719/720) the brother of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (646–705). The Umayyad Caliph at this time (690–710), Muḥammad ibn Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, had a son by her, namely Marwān ibn Muḥammad,[49] who ruled as Marwān II from 744 to 749 – the last Umayyad caliph.[50] Those who kept her as slave referred to her as Lubāba, in reference to her mind-blowing beauty.[51] All we know about her is that she was Kurdish (which may have meant at the time that she came from a pastoral highland people), and that her true name was Raya or Razyiah – her birthplace and how she became a captive is not mentioned in the written sources.

During the Abbasid era (749–1258) the kidnapping of non-Muslim women during military operations continued. One Kurdish girl who was a servant for the Abbasid

[45] See: Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. IV: 28; Ibn al-Athīr 1976: 481; Tewfîq 2013: 24–25.

[46] See: Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. II: 591, 602, 633; Ḥamawī n. d., Vol. II: 37, Vol. III: 61; Dīnawarī 1995: 186; Mdallal 2010: 44–45.

[47] See: Iṣfahānī n. d.: 27; Mdallal 2010: 26.

[48] The Islamic sources refer to them as Kurdish women, meaning women and girls who were captives, and who had either embraced the Magians, the Zoroastrian, pagans, gnostics, including Manichaeans, Marcionites, or the Yezidi religion (peoples and tribes with different customs, traditions and religious beliefs who subsequently became known as Yezidis).

[49] Maybe Lubāba was also the mother of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, the Umayyad Governor of Egypt (685–705). However, most sources indicate Layla bint Zabban ibn al-Asbagh as his mother.

[50] See: Balādhurī 2011: 338; for Marwān II's relevance to the Yezidis see: Rodziewicz 2022: 56, 147, 585, 625.

[51] See: Ibn Kathīr 2014: 104.

caliph Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr (714–775) had a son, who was referred to as "the son of the Kurdish woman".[52] This appellation appears several times in the records of that time. In addition, historical sources refer to the existence of tens of Kurdish women and girls in the palaces of the Abbasid caliphs who worked as singers, dancers, slaves, servants, and also served as 'captives who the right hand possesses' for the Muslim caliphs, princes, and their sons. Sleeping with the captives or slave girls was a tradition and was practiced by caliphs throughout the ages, especially during the Abbasid era.

Early History of the Persecution of Yezidis

Non-Muslim females, including Yezidi women and girls, constituted a large segment of the captured women.[53] The Yezidis endured numerous Muslim campaigns and invasions into their territory because Islamic jurisprudence considered the Yezidi religion to be non-divine and inferior – a religion whose adherents were deemed blasphemers. By contrast, Muslims treated adherents to Judaism and Christianity (considered to be divine religions and whose believers are termed the people of the book) differently. They had three choices when they became the target of a Muslim military attack: converting to Islam, paying *jizya* (tax), or to fight the intruders. The Yezidis had only two: convert or fight. Since Yezidi are considered polytheists and blasphemers, their paying *jizya* would be considered unacceptable.[54] Consequently, over time, the Yezidi population has dwindled to less than a million at the time of writing.

Historical sources mention that many captives were taken from the Yezidi regions in Iraq during military operations. They were kept in palaces as slaves, sold at slave markets, or presented as gifts to military leaders. Religious *fatāwā* (edicts) were issued to permit the killing of those who refused to embrace Islam. One example is the capture of a large number of women, children, and girls from the Dāsniyya people,[55] after the army of Abū Isḥāq Muḥammad ibn Hārūn al-Rashīd,[56] struck devastatingly the forces of the Dāsinī Prince's Mīr Jaʿfar Dāsinī – the latter had previously been victorious in a battle with one of the Abbasid leaders.

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[52] Tewfîq 2013: 70.

[53] See: Ṭabarī 1964–1979, Vol. IV: 184; *Ibid*: 187; Balādhurī 2011: 366; Freamon 2019; Brown, 2019.

[54] See: Brimar 2009: 208–217.

[55] Some sources and researchers consider the Yezidis were known by the name of *Dāsniyya* and ecclesiastical Christian sources still refer to the Yezidis as *Dāsny* or *Dāsniyya*. Most Yezidi princes were called *Dāsniyya* until recently, such as, Mīrzā Beg Dāsinī and ʿAlī Beg Dāsinī, among others. The name may have derived from the principality or mountain of *Dāsniyya* in the province of *Bahdīnān* (Duhok Governorate) in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI).

[56] The 8th Abbasid caliph (833–842), better known under his regnal name al-Muʿtaṣim biʾllāh.

The Yezidis enjoyed widespread authority, both geographically and politically during the reign of Ḥasan ibn Sheikh Adi II, the son of Abu Ṣakhar Bin Barakat (1094–1246) who was killed by the *Atabeg* (ruler) of Mosul, Badr al-Dīn Lūʾlūʾ (1218–1258). Lūʾlūʾ ordered the execution of the Yezidi leader and two hundred of his followers. The assassination of Ḥasan ibn Sheikh Adi II marked the beginning of a huge military campaign against the Yezidis in 1254. The forces of Badr al-Dīn Lūʾlūʾ entered the temple of Lalish, they exhumed the body of Sheikh Adi and incinerated his bones. They crucified and killed the Yezidis whom they found in the temple.[57]

According to historic (written) records, Yezidism has endured persecution on an ongoing basis for hundreds of years. It is astonishing what degree of violence the Yezidis experienced at the hands of most military conquerors and great empires. In 1415, motivated by the call of an Islamic scholar from Egypt, several Kurdish princes and tribes attacked the Yezidis in Shekhan. Al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442),[58] chronicler of these events, reported the religiously motivated nature of this campaign, which resulted in the devastation of Lalish, a massacre, and the enslavement of segments of the Yezidi population.[59]

Enslavement of Yezidi Women and Children

In order to understand the continuity of the enslavement of Yezidi women, it is necessary to provide a deeper insight into the history and pattern of Yezidi persecution, with the main focus on their enslavement by officials of the Ottoman State and local Kurdish rulers and tribes.

The numerous *firmāns* and the military campaigns against the Yezidis during the Ottoman era (1514–1918) were associated with violence, looting, and capture of women by the military rulers and leaders.[60] The Ottomans had a special policy toward the Yezidis. At first, they took the Yezidis on their side and used them in their wars against the rising Safavid state. During the reign of Sultan Sulaymān (1520–1566), the relationship between the Ottoman authorities and the Yezidis changed after the mufti of the Ottoman State, Abū Suʿūd al-ʿAmādy (1490–1574) issued a *fatwā* against the Yezidis permitting their killing in public, capturing their women, and selling them as slaves at the markets. When asked if it was possible for Muslims to fight the Yezidis, the mufti replied, saying:

> The answer, God Knows, is that their killing is considered invasion and the one killed is considered a martyr because their jihad and fighting is a great martyrdom … they are

[57] See: Patton 1991: 65.
[58] See: Maqrīzī 1997: 369–370.
[59] See: Frank 1911: 87–91.
[60] For the texts of some of the Ottoman *firmāns* against Yezidis see: Abca 2006: 166–229.

> unbelievers more than the blasphemers … they are to kill their men and possess their offspring and women and sell them in Muslim markets, like other blasphemers. In addition, they are to getting rid of the infants and wives after selecting slaves *malikāt al-yamīn* (those your right hand possesses) of the *fatwā*.[61]

This is considered the first *fatwā* to address the Yezidis and document the actions taken contextually – it contains even the very minute details. It is evidence for the killing and captive taking that occurred during the invasions and Muslim campaigns in the region in general and against the Yezidis and other religions in particular. In addition, this *fatwā* and others,[62] widened and expanded the gulf between the caliphs, the Ottoman authorities and the Yezidis on the one hand and between the Kurdish Muslim princes and the Yezidis on the other. They caused the dispersal and social separation of the different religions, Yezidism, Islam, and others. Specifically, the *fatāwā* encouraged Muslims to pursue the invasion of the Yezidi territory and the enslavement of their women and girls. In addition, the calls of the Ottoman Sultans and the Muslim ulema for "the jihad against the blaspheming Yezidis and devil worshippers",[63] was greatly received by the majority of Muslims, especially the Kurds, even among the simplest people, who had not known the Yezidis previously and had not been at odds with them.

It can be said that this *fatwā* led to constant Ottoman military pressure on the Yezidis and their territories being considered *Dar Al-Harb* (land of war), and this historical context shaped a complex and often tumultuous relationship between the Ottomans and the Yezidis.

According to the *fatāwā*, the Yezidis became isolated and despised by the surrounding Muslims communities of Arabs, Kurds, and Turks for religious as well as social and economic reasons. The Ottoman officials also considered them to be indignant of the Ottoman State, to the extent that the term Yezidi became one of disapproval, and that everyone from the Yezidi regions was derogatively called by that name. It also became a pretext to destroy any city or town of the Yezidis, kill their men, and distribute their women and children as slaves and war captives. Accordingly, all Yezidi regions became legal battlefields. Later, Ottoman leaders and Kurdish Muslim princes headed several military campaigns against the Yezidis. One of these campaigns was led by the ruler of Diyarbakır Province, Melek Ahmed Pasha (1604–1662) and directed against the Yezidis in the province of Sinjar. The son-in-law of the Ottoman Sultan, Murad IV (1623–1639), the Turkish explorer, Evliya Çelebi, accompanied the campaign and reported the details

[61] For the text of the *fatwā* see *Three Papers in Expiating the Yezidi* (a manuscript in the House of Saddam for Manuscripts, No. 30580, Baghdad, 974 AH), in Damalūjī 1949: 429–430; See also Farhan 2004: 34.
[62] See the full text of another *fatwā* dated 980 AH (1572/1573 AD), *apud* Dehqan 2008: 140–162.
[63] Farhan 2004: 38.

of that campaign against the Yezidis and the attack on Sinjar in 1640/1641. He wrote that Melek Aḥmad Pasha led an army of 70,000 soldiers and took numerous women captives. He killed thirteen thousand of them and kept another twelve thousand as slaves.[64] Çelebi further noted: "Some of the Yezidis, seeing that their wives and children were taken captive, gouged out their own eyes".[65] While the number of Yezidis captured may have been exaggerated, at the same time, it gives a clear image of the catastrophe that the military campaign inflicted upon Sinjar and its Yezidi people.

Ottoman campaigns, along with their *firmāns* against the Yezidis, continued in later years, including the killing of men, and capturing women and children. In 1715, Hassan Pasha, the ruler of Baghdad, carried out a military operation targeting the Yezidis of Sinjar. His mission, however, was not that simple; the Yezidis were determined to resist and confront the attack. They fortified Dayr al-ʿAṣī, the mountain top of Mount Sinjar, and set up barriers and barricades. Subsequently, the two sides fought several battles, but the Yezidis were not able to resist for long against the Ottoman forces, which continued to attack their fortifications, killing a large number of them and dispersing those who tried to seek refuge in the castle of Khātūniyya.[66] The Ottomans besieged the castle, but the Yezidis were determined to resist rather than to surrender. Although they fought fiercely, the Ottomans were ultimately victorious.[67] The scholar Yāsīn al-ʿUmary stated that "people witnessed destruction, looting, and killing which caused their humiliation and the poorness of the [former] rich ones […], they entered the village by force, wielding the sword of revenge. Muslims captured women and children and gained money by selling these women and girls as bondmaids".[68]

It can be said that the enslavement of Yezidi women is a core element of the history of Yezidi persecution. It was a weapon of war against the Yezidis, not only to mark their defeat in the campaigns, but also to degrade them, humiliate them, and break their will. It also laid, by today's standards, the foundation for their extinction. The aforementioned catastrophe had a great impact on the Yezidis, to the extent that they still remember the unfortunate events of the campaign and the kidnapping and capture of their womenfolk in their folk songs called *stirān*. There is, for instance, a famous song that focuses on a Yezidi captive called Ghazāla (or Xezalê/ Gazhāla/ Khazāla) who was kidnapped by the soldiers of one of the Ottoman rulers in the mountain of Sinjar during their campaign. Singers recount that this Yezidi girl, along with thousands of women

[64] See: Dankoff 1991: 167–174.
[65] *Ibid*: 172.
[66] See: Ahmed 1967: 305–306.
[67] See: Ali 1984: 110.
[68] See: Suwaydī 1962: 66; Farhan 2004: 42–43.

of her tribe, were kidnapped by the Ottoman forces, who led them to Mosul and the adjacent cities. They had become slaves and war captives who could be sold and bought at slave markets. This popular song has a long history and has become a symbol for the enslavement of Yezidi women. The song was first mentioned and described in writing by Claudius James Rich who heard it among the Yezidi in Shekhan in 1820. Rich summarized the content of the song as follows: "The first was a Sinjar song, about the carrying off of a very celebrated beauty named Gazhala, from among the Yezidis of Sinjar, by Hassan Pasha (*Ḥassan Pāshā*), father of the celebrated Ahmed Pasha of Baghdad. She was betrothed to a Sinjar chief, and was within three days of her marriage. Her beauty is still much celebrated in song by the Sinjaris".[69] Presumably this song is older, because while the antagonist in this song in 1820 was Hassan Pasha, some 50 years later it was Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā and in contemporary versions he appears as Hafiz Pasha (Ḥāfẓ Pāshā) the Circassian (d. 1866). The different antagonists in this song, who were historically powerful rulers, are proven to have actually fought the Yezidis. The fact that nothing has changed in the main motif of the song, while the antagonists change in the various versions, shows that the campaigns against the Yezidi were always accompanied by the enslavement of their females.

In 1870, two researchers, Eugen Prym and Albert Socin, documented a version of this song that gives us a unique insight into the Yezidi perception of events and demonstrates how these events were perceived. In the song, a Yezidi man mourns the abduction and enslavement of his wife. Interestingly, the song explicitly mentions that Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā's soldiers, involved in this event, were from different ethnicities.[70] Due to the importance of this song, the transcription and translation by Prym and Socin have been revised here.[71]

The German translation of the song introduces a comment by Prym and Socin regarding the character of the "gazelle," who they identify as the poet's wife. They state that Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā of Baghdad had abducted her during his husband's absence. This particular Pasha is described as having lived approximately 150 years ago, according to an unspecified source (E.). However, Carsten Niebuhr's travel description ("*Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Länder*"),[72] does not include a specific Muḥammad ʿAli Pasha among the listed Baghdad *pashas*. Although there are several ʿAlī Pāshās, but none named Muḥammad ʿAlī. The authors note that the song itself is not particularly new, and that it has probably been shortened. Furthermore,

[69] Rich 1836: 86.
[70] Prym and Socin 1890.
[71] I converted the original text to the Kurdish Kurmanji Latin alphabet from Prym and Socin 1890, (a): 263–265 (transcription), and I also, translated the original text from German to English from Prym and Socin 1890 (b): 264–265 (translation).
[72] Prym and Socin 1890b: 264.

Transcription from the original text to the Kurmanji Latin alphabet

Xezalê

1. bejna Xezala min menare, ezê bi du'a çoma li sere bi silave hatime xiware. ez terka çavê di reş-belek nakim heta li ser sîngê min ne êt dangê tefşoye habîbê va nejare. heyla gidîyê Xezalê, şênî [şêrînê] û şepalê. te pê bi şemike nafteng bi kemere pê bi xerxale. ezê bi qurbanî qirka kalebozê deqandî poze dav û lêvê dişekrî, vê subhê ezê pxulama bejn û bale.

2. Xezala min daketî yar dugûnda, min sê jara xiwazgînî şandin mala babe neda. go gelî gûndîya lomê ejmin û xezalê mekin Xezala min di mala babêda pozî bilinde. heyla gidî Xezalê, te pê bi şemike nafteng bi kemere pê bi xerxalê, stû bi zêryokê, ezê bi qurbana qirka kalebozê daqandî pozê dev û lêvê di şekirî, ezê pxulama bajin û balê.

3. Xezala min daketî li ber gola mezin, gavekê di çêrm, gavekê di bezim, ez bi êvarîya sûtarê [mêvanê] gûndê we me sûbehîya seydevanê [nêçêrvanê] zerîya azim. heyla gidî Xezalê, şênyê [şêrînê] û şepalê. ezê bi qurbanî qirka kalebozê, celagê [çelake] gerdenê dev û lêve di şekirî.

4. Xezala min daket bû li vî banî, go Şêrvana minê moxûl û bêjingê xiwe li deşta Qîra li sar deravê min hêlanî, galîye gûndîya lomey ji Xezala ma mekin, çavê Xezalâ min ji 'eslê babêxiwe reşin. hewce nînin subeyan û êvara ji xezala mira bikim bar giranî. heyla gidî Xezalê, şenîyê [şêrînê] û şepalê, te pê bi şimikê nafteng bêkemerê, ezê bi qurbanê qirka kalebozê daqandî pozê, çelagê gerdanê dev û lêve di şekirî.

Translation from the German text into English

Khazāl

1. My Khazāl is like a minaret in stature; I climbed it, invoking God, and came down safe and sound. I cannot give her up with her shining eyes until the sound of Habib the carpenter's small ax can be heard above my chest. Oh, you bad Khazāl, you sweet and lovely one! Your feet are in slippers; you wear a belt around your waist; clasps on your legs. I give myself to her, whose throat […], whose face is tattooed, whose mouth and lips are of sugar; today I am subject to her beautiful form.

2. My Khazāl has gone among the girls (?) of the village. I sent suitors to her father's house three times, but he refused to give them to me. O you villagers! Do not blame me for the Khazāl; my mistress in her father's house is proud. O you wicked Khazāl! Your feet are in slippers; you wear a belt around your waist, clasps on your legs and a chain of gold around your neck. I give myself to her, whose throat […], whose face is tattooed, whose mouth and lips are of sugar; I submit to her beautiful form.

3. My Khazāl has gone to the edge of the big pond. Once I graze; the other time I run. In the evening I am friendless in your village; the next day early I hunt the beautiful ones. Oh, you wicked Khazāl! You sweet and lovely one! I give myself to her whose throat is […]; I cling to the neck of her whose mouth and lips are of sugar.

4. My Khazāl have gone to the roof terrace. My Shervan have taken their large and small sieves to the plain of Qira […]. Oh, you villagers! Do not blame my Khazāl! The eyes of my Khazāl are naturally black; I do not need to bring her a heavy burden [eye make-up] in the morning and evening. Oh you bad Khazāl! You sweet and lovely one! Your feet are in slippers; you wear a belt around your waist. I give myself to her, whose throat […], whose face is tattooed; I cling to her neck, to her mouth and to her lips of sugar.

5. Go çîyayekê Şingarê bi dar û bîne, ‘eskerê mehmed ‘elî paşa têgda begler begîne, Mehmed ‘Elî Paşa li bextê teme, Xezala min berde berxêt wê birsîne. heyla gidî Xezalê, di hisnê û cemalê, soxê û delalê, nazê û nazdarê, xwezî bi stûwê şikestî bogerdena xelhay min tfeke nesranî hel negrirt biyaye ez neço biyame ji malê.	5. Trees and willows grow on the mountains of Sinjar. The soldiers of Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā are all noblemen and gentlemen. O Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā! I beg you: release my Khazāl, for their lambs are hungry. - O you wicked Khazāl! You are beautiful and lovely, you are funny and charming, you are fresh and tender! Oh, if I had broken my neck and wrenched my neck and had not seized the […] shotgun and had not left home!
6. Go çîyayekê Şingarê barî bi zozane, ‘eskerê Mehmed ‘Elî Paşa têgda gorane, mehmed ‘elî paşa li bextê teme, Xezala min berde belê li malêda berxî savane.	6. The Sinjar Mountains lie opposite the highlands. Among the soldiers of Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā are Goran Kurds. O Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā! I beg you: release my Khazāl, for there are lambs in the house that drink milk.
7. Go çîyayekê Şingarê wê bêzêvîrke [mufettile]. ‘eskerê Mehmed ‘Elî Paşa çendî jêg firqe, xûdê mala Mehmed ‘Elî Paşa xirab bikit, Xezala min girt û wê kirî li nav bêna xiwe û kurka.	7. The mountains of Sinjar are curved. The soldiers of Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā, how different they are from each other! God destroy the house of Muḥammad ʿAlī Pāshā! He has captured my Khazāl and killed them.

the authenticity with regard to the surviving verses and the order in which they were originally sung, is uncertain.[73]

*Firmān*s, capture, enslavement, and violence against the Yezidi continued in the nineteenth century. The most severe campaign against them was led by the Ottoman leader, Hafiz Pasha in 1837. The British traveler and archeologist Austen Henry Layard, who visited Sinjar in 1844, stated that half of the city's population was killed by bullets and the soldier's bombs. Some of them sought refuge in caves, but the soldiers besieged them and set the area in which they were hiding on fire. They died either by burning or suffocation by smoke. The soldiers then took women and children to the cities to sell them.[74] Another British traveler, who was in the area during the campaign of Hafiz Pasha, describes the same incident, saying villages were demolished and soldiers raped women and killed the men.[75] In his recent history, the contemporary historian John S. Guest claimed that the captives of this campaign arrived in the slave market in the city of Mardin in Turkey after they were taken as war captives and made bondmaids by the forces of Hafiz Pasha.[76]

[73] *Ibid*: 264.
[74] See: Layard 1849: 277–278; Guest 1987: 70–71.
[75] See: Miho 2009: 54.
[76] See: Guest 1987: 71.

Campaigns of killing and capturing the Yezidi continued in the regions of Shekhan, Sinjar, and other Yezidi regions in Northern Iraq. The history of the Yezidis was full of tragic events that were all characterized by *firmān*s allowing brutal force and resulted in the capture of women and children. In addition, the Yezidis were not only victims of the Ottomans but also of the Safavids as well as of local Muslim Kurdish princes and Arab rulers. During the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts, Ahmad Khan (1617/18–1637), the prince of the Kurdish Princedom of Ardalan and one of the allies of the Safavid Shah Abbas I (1587–1629), attacked the Yezidi regions, seizing women and goods.[77] During Shah Abbas I reign, conducted various military campaigns to expand and strengthen the Safavid Empire, he occupied Baghdad in 1623/4, briefly after that, one of his military commanders, Qārchī Qāy Khān carried out another campaign targeting Yezidis in Sinjar killing a large number of men and capturing women and children.[78] In addition, after the campaign of Nader Shah Afshar (1688–1747) against the Yezidi in nowadays Iran and Iraq in the period from 1733 to 1743, historical sources indicate that in 1743, Nader Shah dispatched an army of 12,000 horsemen to Mount Shabkan,[79] a mountain range situated between the cities of Dohuk and Akre, known as a stronghold of the Yezidis. The army launched a surprise attack, resulting in casualties and captives among the Yezidis. In response, a significant number of Yezidis rallied under their leader's guidance. A decisive battle ensued in the Shabkan Valley, culminating in the defeat of the Yezidi forces. Subsequently, Nader Shah commanded the execution of all prisoners and directed his troops to conduct raids on Yezidi villages, leading to the capture of 30,000 individuals, including women and boys. The Yezidi communities ceased to exist in those regions following these events.[80]

James Justinian Morier,[81] the British official in charge of the affairs in Tehran (1807–1817), mentions in his novel *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, a Yezidi woman by the name of Zeenab, who became enslaved in Persia after the members of her Yezidi tribe had been killed by Muslims and the women taken captive. The account speaks about

[77] See: Sanandajī (1375 Persian [1996]): 479.

[78] See: Nêrwey 2001:167.

[79] The name of this mountain was mentioned in the source as "Shablan", but the correct name is Shabkan Mountain.

[80] For more information see: Wazīrmrrū (1364 Persian [1986]): 893–898; Ali 2019.

[81] James Justinian Morier (1782–1849) was a former British diplomat who resided in Iran for nearly six years (1808–1814). He authored several notable novels, including *Zohrab, the Hostage* published in 1832, *Ayesha: The Maid of Kars* published in 1834, and *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* written in 1824. While *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* is a work of fiction, it can be regarded as an informative resource on Iran during the Qajar period due to its portrayal of certain characters under fictionalized identities, such as the Yezidi woman slave Zeenab. For further insights into the Yezidi woman slave Zeenab, one can refer to Morier's novel (see: Morier 1897).

the suffering of Zeenab as a bonded woman and how she was humiliated by her owners because they considered her to worship the devil.[82]

The Kurds of the Ottoman-Persian borderlands also enslaved Yezidis.[83] The Yezidis lost vast areas of territory and many of them were killed in campaigns led by Kurdish princes. Historical sources documented how the Kurdish prince of the Soran Princedom, Muḥammad Pasha of Rawanduz, known as Mīr-i-Kura (the one-eyed prince, Ku. *Mîrê Kore*),[84] after he occupied the Yezidi region in Shekhan. During a two-year period (1832–1834), he captured about 10,000 Yezidis – men, women, and children along with their prince Ali Beg.[85] The captured Yezidis were sent to the town of Rawanduz, the center of the Soran Princedom, where they were tortured and humiliated, causing the majority to abandon their religion and embrace Islam instead of being killed. The Yezidi Prince Ali Beg chose death over abandoning his religion and was killed by one of the Mīr-i-Kura's soldiers in the valley of Geli Ali Beg (Ku. *Gelî Êlî Beg*) 130 km north of Erbil. The Yezidi captives were then distributed among the Kurdish Muslims.[86] This campaign, just like the previous ones, was supported by a religious *fatwā*, issued by the *mufti* of the Soran Princedom, Mulla Muḥammad Khatī. The campaign exterminated about 90 percent of the Yezidis in Shekhan, with Damalūjī indicating that 5 percent of the Yezidi escaped the campaign of Mīr-i-Kura.[87] Later, during the reign of the Kurdish prince, Bedir Khan Beg (*Badrkhān Beg)*, who ruled the Princedom of Būtān (1821–1847), many Yezidis were captured and forced to embrace Islam, while some were made his personal servants. The historian Saferstian reported that missionaries,[88] who were working in the city of Urmia (northwest Iran), also visited the palace of Bedir Khan Beg (1814–1889) in the Princedom of Būtān,[89] in 1846 and saw there about forty Yezidi who had embraced Islam and were given special treatment by the prince to the point that it raised the envy of the other servants.[90] Other sources stated that Prince Bedir Khan himself married one of the captives from the Yezidi princely family. She was the grandmother of the well-known Kurdish writers of the Bedir Khan family, Jallādat and Kāmirān Bedir Khan Beg.[91]

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[82] See: *ibid*: 140–154, 163–165, 174–178, 197–206, 221, 311–321, 370–379, 413, 426–427, 441, 447, 505.
[83] See: Garnett 1909: 224; Erdem 1996: 46–47, 60.
[84] See: Ali 2019: 77–91.
[85] See: Nebez 1970: 56–58, 156.
[86] See: Farhan 2004: 117–118; Mā'ī 1999: 148; Damalūjī 1949: 463; Ahmed 1971: 91.
[87] See: Damalūjī 1949: 469.
[88] His report described by Guest 1987: 92.
[89] Also: Cizre Buhtan, Bokhti, (*Jazīrat Ibn ʿUmar*), modern Cizre, also known as Cizîra Botan in Kurmanji.
[90] See: Guest 1987: 92.
[91] Hadank, Karl (1938), *Untersuchungen zum Westkurdischen: Bōtī und Ēzādī [Studies on Western Kurdish: Bûtî and Êzidî]*, Berlin, *apud* Guest 1987, footnote 38 of chapter 7: 232.

As illustrated in the foregoing, the enslavement of Yezidis was a feature of almost all confrontations between the Yezidis and the Ottoman authorities. As the Yezidis did not have the status of *Raʿāya*[92] (subjects in the Ottoman Empire) they could neither enjoy protection nor protest their enslavement.[93] This unprotected status of the Yezidi has also been evidenced by the fact that Christian prisoners were passed off as Yezidis by Muslims in order to make their enslavement acceptable.[94]

If one looks at Ottoman archive documents, the extent becomes even clearer. They also serve as an insight into how the Yezidis were enslaved and traded within the Ottoman legal system. The court records of the *Şer'iyye Sicilleri* archives (meaning the archives of the court and judicial records) are particularly important here. The analysis of court records relating to the enslavement of women in Diyarbakır in the 18th and 19th centuries reveals that the proportion of Yezidi women was, with almost 36%, the largest.[95] It is astonishing that the Yezidis formed the largest fraction of captives here, despite their being a comparatively small population in this region. It testifies to the defenselessness of the Yezidis and to the general acceptance of such brutal practices by the Ottoman population and authorities. In addition, these documents confirm that Yezidi women were captured mainly during military confrontations between the Ottoman authorities and the local population. They also evidence the phenomenon of the ownership of Yezidi slaves by both men and women. The court records also document how the acquisition of Yezidi slaves took place though the court system. The Yezidi origin of the women had to be proven and confirmed by witnesses in order to be able to legitimize the enslavement on religious grounds. The resale and prices of Yezidi slaves were meticulously documented.[96] Almost all Yezidi communities living in the Ottoman Empire were affected by these practices. The capturing and enslavement of Yezidi women went on unhindered until 1849, when a Yezidi delegation set

[92] In the context of the Ottoman Empire, *raʿāyā* did not exclusively refer to non-Muslim subjects, but rather encompassed all members of society, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews. These groups were indeed taxed to support the Ottoman State, but the term itself does not specifically denote non-Muslim subjects alone. However, in contemporary and historical usage outside the specific context of the Ottoman Empire, *raʿāyā* is commonly associated with non-Muslim subjects, particularly those belonging to the People of the Book, which includes Christians and Jews, and sometimes referred to collectively as *dhimmī*.

[93] See: Erdem 1996: 25, 46.

[94] For example, in 1815 the Armenian Patriarch Bogos petitioned the Ottoman government and complained about the illegal enslavement of the Armenian *Raʿ*āya in the Diyarbakir Province. According to this document, the Kurdish irregulars and soldiers who were sent against the Yezidis by the local authorities had made it a habit to enslave *Raʿ*āya wives and children on their way and selling them in Diyarbakir and other places as Yezidi captives (see: *Ibid*: 25).

[95] See: Güler 2021: 29–56.

[96] The documentation of the enslavement of Yezidis was primarily recorded in the following court recordings: *Diyarbekir-Âmid Şer'iyye Sicilleri* (DŞS), documents No. 3767, 3803, 3707, 3725, 3726, 3747, 3757, 3796, *apud* Güler 2021.

off for Istanbul to persuade the British ambassador in Istanbul, Stratford Canning, to intervene on their behalf. Canning agreed, and a *firmān* (decree) was obtained which, among other things, prohibited the enslavement of the Yezidi. The letters of thanks from the Yezidi to the British ambassador and the Ottoman Grand Vizier testify to the fact that liberation and the ban from slavery was one of the Yezidis' main concerns. In the words of the Yezidi:

> We were very glad […] that our Master the Sultan felt kindness towards us and ordered a ban on the sale and enslavement of our children and that no one may interfere in our religious affairs.[97]

Although the enslavement of the Yezidi was thereafter officially banned, the Yezidi faced the problem that the decree intended to protect them from capture and enslavement could never be enforced among the local Muslim rulers and tribes. Thus, Ottoman governors such as ʾAyūb Beg 1890, Omar Wahbi Pasha (appointed 1892/3), Bakir Pasha 1894, and al-Ḥaj Ibrahim Pasha 1917 continued to enslave the Yezidis.

The campaigns and *firmān*s against the Yezidi from the beginning of the Ottoman Era until the arrival of British forces and the establishment of modern Iraq amounted to more than ten genocidal campaigns. These campaigns served to stir up hatred among the Muslims in the region against the Yezidis and the term 'Yezidi' became a derogatory accusation, which was used to attack, demolish, kill, and capture Yezidi men and women.[98] It characterized every campaign or attack. Yezidi women and girls in particular were the victims of these *firmān*s, which permitted physical and psychological assaults against them. In many cases, the Yezidi women preferred death to captivity and sometimes committed suicide before the soldiers could reach them. For example, a large number of Yezidi women committed suicide by throwing themselves into the Tigris during the Kurdish attack against the Yezidis in the village of Bāsā,[99] which belonged to the governorate of Siirt in Turkey in 1915. Their bodies were found in an area close to Zakho. Their families, who ran away, settled in the town of Sharya, which now belongs to Duhok Governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where their descendants still live. These descendants recalled those incidents, having heard them from their elders who had personally witnessed them.[100]

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[97] Guest 1993: 217.
[98] See: Çelebî 1979: 81–2, 264–265.
[99] It is the name of a village and the name of a clan as well.
[100] This information is based on an interview conducted on May 11, 2015 with Jūqī Khammū Maḥmūd Bāsī, a Yezidi resident of Shariya Town.

The downfall of the Ottoman State and the establishment of modern successor states led to a cessation of most of the violent campaigns against non-Muslims. Therefore, capture and enslavement were not common in the twentieth century. From the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1921 until the American occupation in 2003, the Yezidi were exposed to military campaigns by the Iraqi Army, such as in 1925, 1935, 1966, and 1972, However, they did not experience these kinds of human rights violations. The modern state had submitted to the criteria of warfare of modern and secular states mainly as a result of the two World Wars. However, because of the absence of law enforcement mechanisms as well as the lack of social justice and sense of equality, every now and then Muslim Arabs and Kurds kidnapped Yezidi girls and young women and forced them to embrace Islam. Similarly, the Yezidis of Turkey began migrating to western countries as a result of similar violations of their personhood which were inflicted upon them by their Muslim neighbors, mainly fundamentalist Kurds.

ISIS Revives the Historic Practice of Capturing and Enslaving Yezidi Women and Children.

After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the emergence of al-Qaida, Iraq became a fertile ground for jihadist groups such as ISIS, which culminated in the takeover, albeit temporary, of large parts of Iraq in 2014. In its propaganda and practices, ISIS applied and adhered to decisions that stemmed from the *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad, from *fatāwā*, and religious texts. The latter included those pertaining to and regulating capture and enslavement, practices which had remained dormant since the end of the Ottoman Era. Notwithstanding the theological foundation of ISIS ideology, much of it was based on the literal meaning of the ancient texts concerned and was taken out of context. Nevertheless, since ISIS itself has been interpreted as an isolated phenomenon of sorts, it is worth mentioning that the groundwork for its inception and development, as well as the severity of its extremism had been laid in Iraq and the Kurdish regions much earlier. After the second Gulf War in 1991, the Iraqi government's so-called *al-Ḥamlāt al-ʾīmāniyya* (Faith Campaigns),[101] contributed to the establishment of a conservative community, who, along with extremist Islamic organizations in the Kurdish regions, looked to a number of imams such as ibn Taymīya Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahāb, as well as some new religious leaders who had established themselves as public persons of considerable influence. They used conventional media channels and social media in spreading their religious dogma. This contributed to an environment

[101] For more information on them, see: Zaman 2016: 72–77.

in which ISIS could establish itself, while regional countries neighboring Iraq and the global powers made use of ISIS existence for reasons that are unclear at present.

ISIS had its reasons for targeting the Yezidis, rather than other groups.[102] According to Muslim religious and historical concepts, the Yezidis, being considered blasphemous and therefore had to be attacked following *Sura* 9:5 which reads: "Then kill the disbelievers wherever you find them, capture them and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in each and every ambush".[103] Accordingly, the ISIS dealt with this group as the majority of *fuqahāʾ* have indicated how *mushrikīn* (polytheists) should be dealt with. Unlike the Jews and Christians, there was no room for *jizyah* (tax) payment. Also, their women could be enslaved unlike female apostates who the majority of the *fuqahāʾ* say cannot be enslaved and can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword. After capture, the Yezidi women and children were then divided according to the *Sharīʿa* amongst the fighters of the ISIS who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one – fifth (Ar. *Khums*) of the slaves were transferred to the ISIS's authority to be divided as *khums*.[104]

On the morning of 3 August 2014, following the sudden withdrawal of the military forces and the security forces of the KRI, ISIS attacked the city of Sinjar and the Yezidi towns, villages, and countryside in the Plains of Nineveh and took them over, one after the other, there was neither resistance nor fighting. Rather than defending them, which was their duty by law, the Kurdish security and military forces turned their backs on the defenseless people of the Plains of Nineveh, and left them to their fate at the brutal hands of ISIS; although the reasons for this attitude remain unknown, it is patently clear that the KRI forces plus the collaborating Sunni Muslim Arab and some Kurdish clans[105] facilitated the takeover of Yezidi regions by ISIS.

Hundreds of thousands of Yezidis fled to northeastern Syria to a region known as Rojava and to the cities of the KRI. Furthermore, according to estimates, around 100,000 to 150,0000 Yezidis were left besieged on Mount Sinjar without food or water. Due to the hot weather many children and many elderly people died.[106] In attacking the towns of Sinjar, ISIS captured thousands of civilian men, killed, and buried them in

[102] ISIS offered the Christians who lived in Mosul to either pay tax, convert to Islam, or leave. Therefore, it is unlikely that they targeted Christian women because they were considered *ahl al-kitab*, which ISIS confirmed in its online magazine *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 2014: 15. See also Taheri 2014. *Dabiq* is an online magazine published by ISIS for propaganda and recruitment purposes. It was first published in July 2014; website: jihadology.net/category/dabiq-magazine.

[103] Quran, *Sura al-Tawba*, verse 5.

[104] See: Dabiq, issue 4, 2014: 16.

[105] "Şêxêkî Ereb: xelkî dû gûnd destyan le revandinî kiçe Êzidîyekanda hebû [One of Arab Sheikhs confessed that some Arab villages had a role in kidnapping the Yezidi women and enslaving them]" (Rudaw TV 2015).

[106] Spencer 2014.

mass graves.[107] Mass graves sprung up all over Sinjar. Young men and elders were beheaded and their bodies were abandoned and left on the streets and pavements. ISIS then took thousands of women and children as slaves and war captives. They also looted possessions and demolished people's homes and burned their villages. According to statistics, 350,000 to 400,000 Yezidis have been displaced from the region of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains since the ISIS invasion, while some 100,000 Yezidis have left Iraq. During the first days of the attack, 1,293 people were killed, 2,745 children were left orphaned, and 6,417 people were abducted (3,548 females and 2,869 males). According to the latest statistics of the Office for the Rescue of Abductees, the 3,509 survivors include 1,192 women, 337 men, 1,033 girls and 947 boys, while 2,908 (1,323 girls and 1,585 boys) are still held in slavery. To date, 80 mass graves have been discovered in Sinjar. In addition to dozens of individual grave sites, 68 Yezidi religious shrines were razed to the ground by ISIS.[108] According to these statistics, more than 7,000 Yezidi women and children from Sinjar were kidnapped. They were moved to detention camps and distributed among the ISIS soldiers thereafter. Moreover, some of them were sold at slave markets, which were set up and run by ISIS in Tal Afar and Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, as well as in other Iraqi and Syrian cities.

In this context, ISIS issued a regulation booklet by the Office of Research and *Fatāwā*, entitled *Question and Answer on Captivity and Slaughter of Slaves*, providing answers to thirty-two questions about ISIS's rules and regulations. Intended to attract more foreign fighters, the booklet focuses on captivity and how to deal with slaves, dividing captive unbelievers into appropriate groups and ways to convert them to Islam.[109]

Interviews with some survivors reveal that the captured women were exposed to inhumane treatment and to physical and psychological torture. They were raped, severely beaten, and humiliated. Many chose to commit suicide. For example, Ms. A. is 19 years old and managed to escape. She is the mother of a young child and she was pregnant when she was captured. Her husband had been slaughtered by ISIS. Ms. A. talks about her story after she managed to escape from an old man who intended to take her with him to Syria to sell her. She says:

> We were among the ones who failed to escape to the mountain of Sinjar to which hundreds of thousands of the Yezidi escaped after ISIS attacked our regions. I saw, with

[107] Milmo 2014.
[108] See: Ali 2022: 82–83.
[109] *Sū'āl wa-jawāb fī al-sabī wa al-riqāb [Question and Answer on Captivity and Slaughter of Slaves] n. d.*



FIGURE 1.
ISIS brochure about women and slaves issued by the Islamic State, Dīwān al-Buḥūth wa-al-ʾiftāʾ (Bureau of Research and Fatāwā/ legal opinion), called *Sūʾāl wa-jawāb fī al-sabī wa al-riqāb [Question and Answer on Captivity and Slaughter of Slaves]*, https://archive.org/details/2SabiyReqap01/Reqap_03-01.jpg (accessed: 27.08.2023)

my own eyes, how men, elderly, and disabled women were slaughtered, even children who were no more than 10 years old. Among the slaughtered ones was my husband and his family. Besides, we [women] were taken by cars to Mosul where we were locked up in a big hall.[110]

Ms. A. stated that they were forced to embrace Islam so that they could be married to the members of ISIS thereafter. One woman who refused to convert was threatened with death, along with her children. Many times, they were forced to call and tell their families about the rapes they had to endure. This was part of the psychological war against them and their families. Ms. A. adds:

> Our numbers were huge; we were more than two thousand. We were all Yezidis. There were no Christians or Turkmen with us in prison. I saw with my own eyes how Yezidi girls were sold for only 10,000 or 15,000 Iraqi Dinar [about 10 USD] for one night only. In this way, they were being sold more than one time, and every time, they were raped. Other times, members of the ISIS organization of different nationalities used to come to the place where the Yezidis were kept with that amount. After that, they were sold in Syria and other countries for 200 dollars.

Mr. B., a man who survived the massacre of Kocho, recounts:

[110] Interview conducted in Duhok on October 22; Ms. A. was captured by ISIS on or around the 3rd of August 2014 and managed to escape in October 2015.

> They gathered us in the village school (men on the ground floor and women on the upper floor), then they brought a number of cars of the Kia brand and carried us – 12 in each car. They took us to the outskirts of the village and from there they drove us for some 50 kilometers to the place of a mass grave. They asked us to run and shot us collectively. Hundreds died as a result. I was injured by three bullets in my knee, but miraculously made it out of the heap of dead bodies.[111]

In another account, Ms. C. recounts that the fighters of ISIS treated them very harshly and violently, raped them, and tortured them physically and psychologically during their deportation from Kocho to Tal Afar and then to Mosul city. She said:

> They took us to a building in the institute of Tal Afar, ordered the unmarried to separate from the married ones. However, we refused. My mother strongly refused to separate from me, and when one of them tried to molest my sister and uncover her head, my mother tried to prevent him. As a result, he slaughtered my mother and my brother in front of us […] They took us by pickup cars to a house in Mosul. We were about 500 Yezidis. The members of the ISIS organization asked us to stand up so that each of them could choose the one whom he would marry. If one refused, she was beaten. Girls, especially virgins, were taken in batches to a destination unknown to us […] However, sometimes some girls, who were raped by the members of the organization, used to come back. One of them was little – she was 15 years old. She was raped by four ISIS members. I still remember the marks of the severe beatings on her body. She was beaten with weapons.[112]

In another testimony, Ms. D., a girl, recounted the story of her capture, from which she, like hundreds of surviving women and girls, managed to escape. She said:

> We were more than 100, and a week later, the young girls were separated from the older ones and children above nine years old, saying that we will teach them the teachings of Islam. […] Two days after separation, an armed man (prince, as they said) came to us and announced that it is the time to make us embrace Islam to let us marry the members of ISIS. He threatened that each one who refuses to do so will be executed. We had nothing but to announce our accepting Islam out of the fear of death. Then he used to come on a daily basis to take a number of girls who are between 16 and 20 years old to distribute them among the members of ISIS, who took them to their houses and treated them severely. They raped, beat, and humiliated them.[113]

ISIS openly and candidly acknowledged all the assaults against the Yezidis, namely killing and enslaving them in *Dabiq*, the mouthpiece of the organization. They justified the killing and enslavement as a religious legal provision, based on the Islamic

[111] Interview conducted in Duhok on October 1, 2014.
[112] Interview conducted in the Khanke Camp (Duhok governorate), February 2, 2015.
[113] Interview conducted in the temple of Lalish, May 4, 2015.

teachings and the opinions of *fuqahāʾ* (legal experts) and imams who permitted the killing of the blasphemers as well as the enslaving of the females and their distribution among fighters. ISIS stated in its publication *Dabiq* that "one has to remember that enslaving the families of the blasphemers and capturing their women are one of the cornerstones of *Sharīʿa*, and the one who denies or ridicules this means that they are denying and ridiculing the verses of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's Sunna",[114] In the same context, many documents of ISIS, which were discovered after the liberation of Mosul, serve to verify the survivors' accounts, of which the following document is an example:

> This deed is held at the legal court of the state of Nineveh at the office of marriage contracts on Tuesday to confirm the possession of brother Abū al-Zūbair of the slave Najma Saʿid Ismaʿil who is 20 years old. She has honey-colored eyes, slim and short, 130 cm. In 12/ *Dhū al-ʾUqda*/ 1437 After Hijra corresponding to 16/8/2016. In accordance with the above, the deed of possession had been given […] I, the notary, do hereby acknowledge that brother Abū Munʿim (the legal owner), along with brother Abū al-Zūbair (the buyer), were present before me and agreed to sell what the right hand possesses (Najma Saʿid). Brother Abū Munʿim sold his possession to brother Abū al-Zūbair for the sum of (500.00) five hundred American dollars only, and the amount had been received in full. Accordingly, the possession had been transferred from brother Abū Munʿim to brother Abū al-Zūbair with the testimony of brother Abū Tayba and brother Abū ʿizz al-Dīn.[115]

This tragedy, the psychological and physical torture, and the daily assaults against Yezidi women and girls by ISIS compelled many of them to consider committing suicide, "preferring death to living with those harsh men".[116] Indeed, some girls committed suicide, while others tried to, but failed. The case of a young Yezidi woman by the name of Jīlān from the Yezidi town of Til Ezer, a village located in southeast of Sinjar District of the Ninawa Governorate in Iraq, is such an example. She was almost 17 years old when ISIS killed twenty members of her family, including her brothers, uncles, and cousins. Subsequently, she was taken as a slave and was forcibly moved from Sinjar to Tal Afar and later to Mosul. There she remained, together with a number of other girls, who had been bought by a man from Baʿaj town. She committed suicide in his house,

[114] ISIS based their acts on the Quranic verses that are mentioned in this research and on the scholarly interpretations that justify their actions against the non-monotheistic religions. They regarded their actions toward the Yezidis as a religious duty since the Yezidis are considered blasphemers and devil worshippers. See chapter titled *The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour*," (*Dabiq*, issue 4, 2014: 14–15).

[115] The Islamic State, Dīwān al-Qaḍāʾ wa-al-Maẓālim [the Bureau of Judiciary and Grievances], the Legal Court of Mosul, *Ḥija Mulkīyya* [Possession Deed], Number 221, Date: 12/11/1437, Corresponding to: 16/8/2016. Confirmed by Steven Nabil, an Iraqi journalist who accompanied the Iraqi Military Forces to free Mosul from ISIS in 2017.

[116] See: Dūmilī 2015: 132–33.

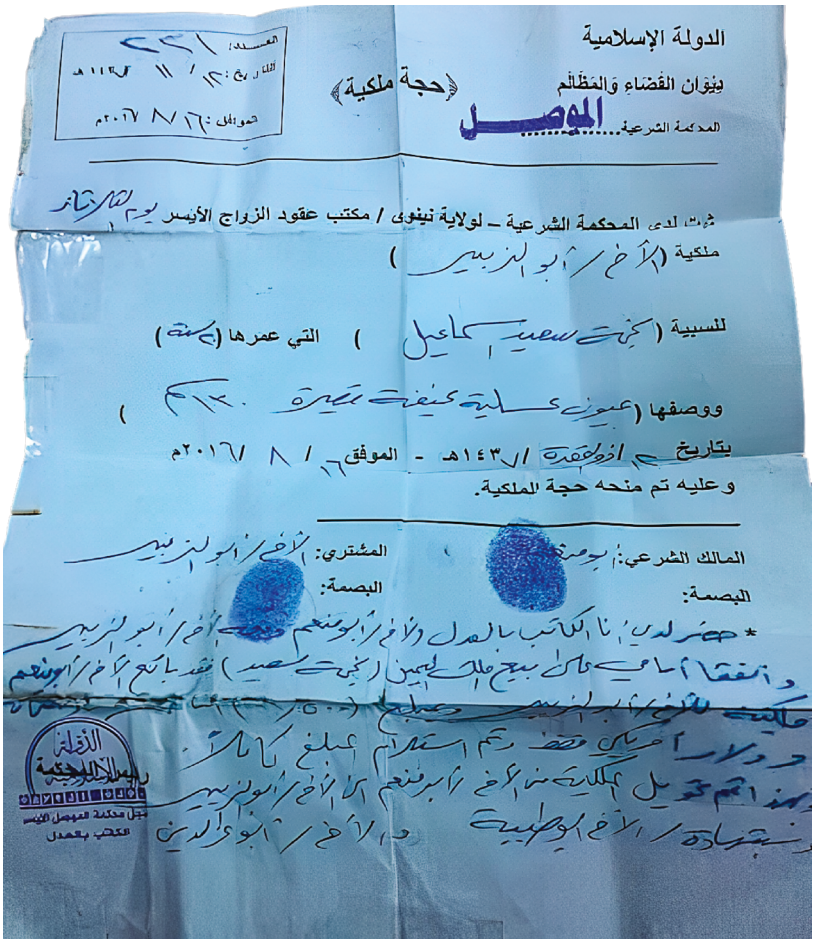

الدولة الإسلامية
ديوان القضاء والمظالم
المحكمة الشرعية... الموصل
حجة ملكية
ملكية (الأخ / أبو البريس)
للسبية ( ) التي عمرها ( )
ووصفها ( )
بتاريخ ... الموفق ... ٢٠١٦م
وعليه تم منحه حجة الملكية.
المالك الشرعي: المشتري: الأخ / أبو البريس
البصمة: البصمة:

FIGURE 2.
Document referring to the purchase of a Yezidi woman by a member of ISIS, confirmed by Steven Nabil.

"preferring death to living at the mercy of ISIS members"[117] who practiced all kinds of torture and violence against these captive young women.[118]

Ms. F. from the village of Zorava (Maharkān tribe) also tried to commit suicide and that more than once. However, she was treated in a hospital and did not die. She said:

> I still remember that moment when my father and brothers died in our village. Then they moved us by cars to Mosul. I was bought by an old man for 100,000 Iraqi Dinar.

[117] Interview conducted with Ms. E. in Duhok, April 11, 2015. She was kidnapped by ISIS together with Jīlān, who committed suicide. Ms. E., however, managed to escape in February 2015.
[118] *Ibid*.

> In the beginning, he said that I had to work in the house as a maid and become a true believer. Several days later and after his attempt to rape me, I tried to commit suicide. I took some poisonous medications, but I found myself alive in the city's hospital. […] Three weeks later, the man sold me to a Turkmen from Tal Afar. The latter made use of my weakness and illness and tried to rape me, but I refused and did not allow him to do so. After many attempts, I entered the bathroom one night and cut one of my veins. I bled profusely. I passed out. When I became conscious again, I found myself being treated at a health center.[119]

The trauma and tragedy of these sufferings reverberates among the inhabitants of the region in general and especially within the Yezidi communities, where no family has gone unscathed by the loss of family members and friends during the onslaught of ISIS. Undoubtedly, it shall reverberate for many generations to come. Moreover, the co-operation and collusion between ISIS and the Muslim tribes who lived in close proximity to the Yezidi poses an ongoing danger to the relations between these communities.

Conclusion

Enslavement existed prior to Islam and continued to be practiced after the birth of this religion. Despite the religious provisions and legislation within Islam that sought to curtail it, enslavement remained common practice in many Muslim countries until the mid-twentieth century. This article examined the captivity and enslavement of women, since the emergence of Islam. It has evidenced the enslavement of women by caliphates, princes, and the leaders of the Muslim armies and has reconfirmed that these cruelties mainly occurred during wars and military operations. It also corroborated existing research which evidenced the targeting of non-Muslim groups, and in particular, ethnicities and creeds that were not considered *ahl al-kitāb*. This research also presented a snapshot of the views of some of the Schools of Islamic jurisprudence concerning capture and enslavement, along with the legal provisions and socio-political and socio-religious developments pertaining to it. In addition, by examining various Islamic resources relevant to this subject, such as the Quran, Sunna, and religious *Fatāwā*, among many others, it has shed light on those atrocities committed by ISIS against the Yezidis. The research further reveals that the killing of the Yezidi men and the enslavement of women and children in recent years by ISIS was no isolated phenomenon, but rather a continuation of countless similar operations that the Yezidis were frequently subjected to, which spans 632–1918 Years, the period beginning with the Islamic invasions and conquests of present day Iraq (the time of the first four caliphs and during the Umayyad and Abbasid rule) until the end of the Ottoman State.

[119] Interview conducted in Sharya Camp (Duhok governorate), February 5, 2015.

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მაჯიდ ჰასან ალი (Majid Hassan Ali)

ოსმალეთის ხელისუფლების წარმომადგენლების, ადგილობრივი მმართველებისა და ტომების მიერ ეზიდი ქალების დამონება და დატყვევება: ისლამური კონტექსტის ისტორიული მიმოხილვა

აბსტრაქტი: ეს სტატია ეხება ეზიდი რელიგიური უმცირესობის წინააღმდეგ წარმოებული ისლამური სამხედრო კამპანიების, შემოსევების, დაპყრობების და ფირმანების (firmān) ფარგლებში ეზიდი ქალების მონობისა და ტყვეობის ისტორიას. სტატია მოიცავს ოსმალეთის სახელმწიფოს, ადგილობრივი მმართველების, ტომების, ქურთული სამთავროებისა და ერაყისა და სირიის ისლამური სახელმწიფოს (ISIS) პერიოდებს. სტატიის მიზანია, ამ კონტექსტისა და ფენომენის მნიშვნელობის გათვალისწინებით, ნათელი მოჰფინოს და ისტორიული კონტექსტის ფონზე გაანალიზოს ისლამში მონობის ლეგალური და სამართლებრივი საფუძვლები; განიხილოს მისი პრაქტიკული მხარე მათ მიმართ, ვინც წიგნის ხალხად (ahl al-kitāb) მიიჩნევა, მაგალითად - ებრაელები და ქრისტიანები, ე. წ. დაცული ხალხი (dhimmīs), და - მათ მიმართ, ვინც არ იყო წიგნის ხალხი (ეზიდები). უამრავი დოკუმენტი, პირველადი თუ მეორადი წყაროა, ეზიდური სიტყვიერი გადმოცემა ინახავს ფირმანებისა და ეზიდი ქალების მონობის ისტორიას, რაც თან ახლდა სამხედრო მოქმედებებს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ეზიდები, ეზიდი ქალები, ტყვეობა, მონობა, ფირმანი (firmān), გენოციდი, ოსმალეთის იმპერია, ISIS, ქურთები, ისლამური კანონები და მონობა.

Majid Hassan Ali

Koletî û dîlgirtina jinên êzidîyan ji aliyê desthilatdarya Osmanî, rêber, mîr û eşîrên herêmî va: pêdaçûneke dîrokî di çarçoveya îslamî da

Abstrakt: Ev lêkolîn derheqê dîroka koletî û dîlgirtina (kenîzekirna) jinên êzdî di serdemên operasyonên leşkerî yên îslamî, dagîrkirin û fermanên ku li ser kêmanîya êzdî ya dînî hatine kirin behs dike. Dîsa ev lêkolîn balê dikişîne ser serdemên desthilatdariya Osmanî, mîrên herêmî, êl û eşîr, mîrekîyên kurdan û heta Dewleta Îslamî li Îraq û Şam (DAIŞ). Di kontêkst û çarçoveya wê da û ji ber giringiya dîyar û berçav ya vê diyardeyê, ev lêkolîn hewl dide, ku ronahî û têgihîştina paşxaneya dîrokî ya koletiyê di hukmên qanûnî, huqûqî û şerî yên koletiyê da di Îslamê da bike. Herweha praktîzekirin û kiryarên wê yên li ser kesên ku wekî kenîze û dîl têne hijmartin, grûpên wek ehlê kitabê, bo nimûne, cihû û krîstiyanan, yên bi zimmî (ankû mirovên parastî) tên navkirin û yên ne ehlî kitab bûn, wek êzidîyan. Gelek dokûment û belge, jêderên degme, orîjînal û yên duyemîn, herwisa serhatiyên ezberî yê nav êzdiyan da, gelek ji wan ferman û koletiya jinên êzidî yên ku bi kampanyên leşkerîda hatine dokûmênt kirin.

Peyvên sereke: êzdî, jinên êzdî, dîlgirtin, kole kirin, ferman, cênosayd, Împêratoriya Osmanî, DAÎŞ, kurd, qanûnên îslamî û koletî.

Serkan Yuce
Independent scholar
ORCID: 0009-0002-7870-5548
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32859/yezidistudies/1/2/41-61

A Tale of Ten Years: The Global Response to the Yezidi Genocide

Abstract:
The present contribution looks at the legal and administrative landscape for the victims of the ISIS-perpetrated genocide, and in particular the domestic and international efforts aimed at securing justice and compensation for said victims. It also provides a snapshot of the current state of return for the displaced population in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) to Sinjar which, at the time of writing, is gearing up.

Keywords:
Genocide, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Iraq, Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), Refugees, Returnees, Yezidis, Syria

Decade-long Lamentation

I have previously, along with Peter Nicolaus, provided a detailed overview of the Yezidi genocide committed by ISIS in 2014,[1] as well as a cursory description of the politics at play during and after the occupation of Sinjar.[2] Our goal, with regard to the latter publication, was to highlight, through a poignant aide-memoire, the incomprehensible pain and suffering of the Yezidis. We stressed with great distress that the Yezidi genocide was slowly fading from the international stage. Furthermore, we analysed the disinterest and inactivity of the USA at the time of the looming ISIS assault; the intrigues of the then Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) trying to exploit the Islamic State (ISIS) attack for their own political gain; the clandestine withdrawal of the Peshmerga from Sinjar on the eve of the ISIS invasion; the flight of the entire Yezidi population from Sinjar; and the rescue of 50,000 Yezidis by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the People's Defense Units (YPG), as well as the liberation and division of Sinjar among the political and military ascendancy. Thus, having already expounded on the narrative of the genocide, I will now attempt to provide a broad strokes review of the developments

[1] Nicolaus and Yuce 2017: 196–229.
[2] Nicolaus and Yuce 2024.

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within the past decade regarding the administrative and legal progress towards justice and restitution within Iraq, Syria, and members of the international community.

The Legal Response to the Genocide – Nationally and Internationally

It has been a decade since the international community first came to recognize the atrocities that ISIS had unleashed upon the ethnic and religious minorities of Iraq and Syria, and especially against the Yezidis, as, *inter alia*, genocide. In that time, while the Yezidis have witnessed some positive steps in the right direction, things are still a far cry from the meaningful strides needed to obtain justice and restitution for the victims of the unfathomable atrocities committed by ISIS. This section will provide a brief overview of the domestic and international developments related to the recognition of genocide, as well as actions taken to rectify the injustices committed by ISIS. The largest focus will be on updates to the legal landscape in Iraq and Syria, as they, along with the KRI, contain the best venues for dealing with the sheer volumes of perpetrators.[3]

Syria – Little Hope for Justice:

Prior to the spread of ISIS, Yezidis in Syria lived mostly in two areas: Afrin, which is situated north-west of Aleppo, and Jazirah, which is located in Al-Hasakah province.[4] Lack of official government statistics leaves Yezidi population data murky when attempting to assess the impact of the genocide on the Syrian Yezidi population. However, from what information was made available by local entities, there has been a substantial reduction in the Yezidi population of Syria. According to the Yazidi Justice Committee (YJC) report on *State Responsibility and the Genocide of the Yazidis*, one Syrian study estimated the population to be between 45,000 and 50,000 Yezidis; while the Yezidi Council in Syria estimated that around 150,000 Yezidis inhabited 110 villages and towns in the Aleppo and Al-Hasakah regions until unrest erupted in 2011.[5] Yazda[6] estimates that fewer than 5,000 Yezidis remain in Syria. What is clear is that after the deathly pallor of ISIS was lifted from the region, only the shadow of once-thriving Yezidi communities remained.[7] When these numbers are combined with the sheer

[3] "Moreover, local and domestic courts, if properly resourced and supported, are more likely to have the capacity to deal with the large number of cases involved here" (Borda 2022).
[4] Cf. Yazidi Justice Committee 2022: 89.
[5] Cf. *Ibid*: 90.
[6] Founded in 2014, Yazda is a nonprofit (in the U.S.), nongovernmental (in Iraq) entity that focuses on providing humanitarian aid, including medical and psychological support, education, and relief efforts. They also work on documenting human rights abuses and raising awareness of the plight of Yezidis through their advocacy work. The organization aims to empower Yezidi communities, help them rebuild their lives, and ensure their rights are protected.
[7] Cf. Yazda 2017: 27.

volume of troubling information coming from ISIS-controlled areas prior to the invasion of Mosul – sourced from media outlets, reports by international and domestic organizations, and internal intelligence gathering – it becomes clear that "the Syrian Government knew or should have known of the impending risk of genocide to the Yezidis, early in 2013, and certainly by June 2014 at the latest, when the Special Advisers to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect expressed deep concern at the situation of the Yezidis and the serious risk to them from ISIS."[8] However, the Syrian Government had already made a strategic choice to reduce its military presence in north-eastern Syria, and to focus on other parts of the country. There were no regime forces deployed to protect the Yezidis from ISIS attacks. It also behoved them to allow ISIS influence to spread in the region, as Bashar al-Assad wanted the Syrians to think that he was the only viable leader, as the alternatives were murderous jihadists. Even once the impending risk merged into the full-scale commission of the crime, the central government led by Bashar al-Assad barely batted an eye. According to the YJC report, there are apparently no indications that the Syrian Government played any role in the rescue of Yezidi victims. Also, unlike Iraq, the regime never sought assistance in handling ISIS, and did not support the Global Coalition against ISIS in their bombing runs.[9] In light of this, it is not surprising that neither Bashar al-Assad nor Syria's Majlis al-Sha'b[10] has made any official declarations or passed any resolutions condemning the violations committed by ISIS as genocide. Further, there are no existing national laws to punish the act of genocide, or a mechanism for Yezidis to seek compensation specific to said crime, nor any indication that the Assad's government has taken substantive efforts, even after the fall of ISIS in Syria, to investigate the crimes in pursuit of prosecution.[11] In other words, Syria has not enacted legislation giving force to the provisions of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (Genocide Convention),[12] thus failing in its obligations under Article V of the convention to enshrine the relevant provisions into their domestic legal framework. They have also failed in their Article I obligations to

[8] Yazidi Justice Committee 2022: 100.

[9] "There is no evidence of the Syrian Government seeking any external assistance to make gains within north-eastern Syria and to address the rise of ISIS within its territory" (*Ibid*: 108).

[10] 'The People's Assembly', the legislative authority in Syria.

[11] "There has been no evidence that Syria has taken any steps to investigate, let alone prosecute any crimes committed against the Yazidis in Syria even after significant cessation of hostilities" (Yazidi Justice Committee 2022: 119).

[12] "Neither the 1953 Syrian Penal Code nor the 1950 Military Penal Code contain provisions for the prosecution (domestic or international) of war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide" (*Ibid*: 121).

avert the crime,[13] to protect vulnerable and targeted populations from the crime,[14] and to punish the commission of said crime. To those on the ground, it seems an intentional omission, and, as mentioned above, reflective of a larger government strategy.[15] There is also no information indicating that the Syrian Government has assisted other nations in their prosecution of returning fighters.[16] Without official recognition, relevant laws to pursue violators of international law, and a willingness to cooperate with the international community, it is unlikely that Syria will take meaningful steps towards securing domestic justice and compensation for the Yezidis – at least not without more pressure from abroad, and potentially with proceedings under the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Iraq – Small Steps Towards a Larger Resolution:

In Iraq, the crime of genocide was not actually tethered to the nature of the prohibited acts perpetrated by ISIS against ethnic and religious minority groups until quite recently, with the enactment of the 2021 Yezidi Female Survivors Law No. 8 (YSL). First, it must be noted that Iraq is a party to the Genocide Convention. Therefore, just like Syria and other State parties, Iraq has a duty under Article V of the Convention to enact legislation that gives effect to its provisions, namely, criminalizing and punishing the act of genocide. On the 10th of December, 2003 Iraq ratified the Statute of the Iraqi Special Tribunal, which acknowledges and punishes the crime of genocide, among other crimes against humanity.[17] It also established the Iraqi Special Tribunal for Crimes Against Humanity,[18] granting it jurisdiction over Iraqi nationals and residents poten-

[13] "Again, this was a political choice made by the Syrian Government not to prevent the growth of ISIS within its territory at the expense of any protection of Yazidis as a group at serious risk. As a Yazidi political actor in Rojava explained: The Syrian State officially never mentioned the Yazidi Genocide. They were taking care of themselves: trying to protect themselves and to get rid of IS. There has never been any statement from Syria on Yazidis. They are a State. They could ask for support from abroad and outside [other States, international institutions]. They only observed it. They don't care that people are escaping. This is the case with their own population and as well as us. They were only caring about holding on to their own power. The people escaped here and the Syrian Government never mentioned it" (*Ibid*: 109).

[14] "Direct confrontation with ISIS was rare and often limited to strategic aerial bombing as Government forces focused their efforts elsewhere and at other military targets, such as anti-regime forces. In fact, it was estimated that only about 6% of 982 Syrian counter-terrorism operations conducted between November 2013 and November 2014 targeted ISIS" (*Ibid*: 102).

[15] "ISIS was not a priority target of the Syrian Government. It has been surmised that the Syrian regime might have benefitted from the radicalisation of the rebellion, since it suited the 'Assad's narrative that its opponents were terrorists,' and that the Government might even have, to a degree, developed a policy of fomenting a jihadi element in the rebellion" (*Ibid*: 103).

[16] Cf. *Ibid*: 120.

[17] Cf. The Statute of the Iraqi Special Tribunal 2003: Articles 11–13.

[18] Cf. *Ibid*: Article 1a.

tially guilty of violating international laws, including genocide.[19] Unfortunately, as it was primarily intended to prosecute Saddam Hussein and members of the Ba'ath Party, the Tribunal's jurisdiction is temporally limited to acts committed between the 17th of July 1968 and the 1st of May 2003. This means the Tribunal has no jurisdiction over crimes committed after that date, including by ISIS. There is currently no other criminal statute that gives legal effect to the Genocide Convention in Iraq.[20] Until the introduction of the YSL, Yezidis, as well as other minority groups impacted by the actions of ISIS, could only expect to see criminal convictions under the Anti-Terrorist acts of the IFG and KRI.[21] Unfortunately, they are poorly drafted, and create unwieldly legal frameworks, riddled with issues, that do not address genocide at all. Both are fairly harsh laws,[22] with broad definitions of culpability;[23] and both provide a fairly limited scope for the courts to consider such potentially mitigating factors as degree of participation.[24] This allows for the application of extreme sentences for those that were, for example, coerced into non-violent, administrative roles.[25] These also fail to provide appropriate structures to help prioritize the prosecution of the most serious, and highest-ranking offenders: "Instead, the system is processing people who worked for ISIS as cooks and janitors in the same way that it is processing murders, rapists, and human traffickers. In many cases both types of detainees are simply being convicted of affiliation to a terrorist group, and are being sentenced to death or to life imprisonment."[26] Sources indicate that some of the most senior leaders of ISIS have been able to use influence and resources to navigate out of the judicial system.[27] Neither of these criminal laws are set up to provide accountability for violations of international law. Where one obtains mere convictions of ISIS members on terrorist charges, one ignores the full breadth of their crimes.[28] There is no actual accountability for their roles in the commission of the

[19] Cf. *Ibid*: Article 10.

[20] There have been multiple drafts reportedly in the works to incorporate a legal framework and mechanisms to bring international crimes under the auspices of the domestic court system (Borda 2023). For instance, since its proposal in October 2020, a draft piece of legislation aiming to integrate international crimes into Iraq's domestic legal framework has sat stagnant in the Iraqi Parliament. (cf. Security Council Report 2024).

[21] Federal Counter-Terrorism Act Law No. 13 of 2005, and the Law on the Combat of Terrorism in the Iraq Kurdistan No. 3 of 2006 (cf. United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) 2020: 4).

[22] For example, the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Act requires the mandatory application of the death penalty for any person who committed any of the acts detailed by the law [Article 4] (cf. *Ibid*: 10); while Article 13 of the KRI Anti-Terror law "allows for confessions extracted under duress to be used in court if they are supported by other evidence" (*Ibid*: 6).

[23] "The broad definitions related to criminal offences under the existing anti-terrorism laws enlarge the scope of the proscribed conduct and make them susceptible to subjective and overly discretionary interpretation"

[24] Cf. *Ibid*: 5.

[25] Cf. Younis 2019: 63.

[26] *Ibid*: 66.

[27] Cf. *Ibid*: 65.

[28] The intention was not merely to visit horror upon the Yezidis, but to annihilate them.

most serious crimes against the Yezidi people. As the court does not have to consider the crimes committed against the Yezidis, there is also no need for testimony, or in-depth investigation to flesh out the details of the case in relation to targeting Yezidis. Genocide trials and subsequent guilty verdicts also play an important role in helping to cement the narrative of Yezidi suffering within national history. Judicial recognition is important in validating the pain of those communities that endured genocide. There is also a psychosocial benefit when a community like the Yezidis can see local, palpable justice enacted before their eyes, instead of hearing about convictions abroad or in international courts.[29]

New and more positive legal developments in Iraq:

However, in recent years there have been some positive developments in seeking to recognize and mitigate the plight of the Yezidis in Iraq. The most notable of which was the passing of the Yezidi Female Survivors Law. Prior to its implementation, victims of ISIS had to rely on Iraqi Law No. 20 when seeking restitution. This piece of legislation provided a broad framework for fiscal compensation for material damages stemming from injuries, death, kidnapping, forced disappearances, property damage, and loss of education or employment opportunities. In 2015, Iraq passed an amendment that mandated the Martyrs Foundation[30] with the responsibility of processing claims related to anyone who has lost a family member to the Ba'ath regime, anyone that has died fighting with the Peshmerga and the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and all those killed by ISIS.[31] This gave the Yezidis a mechanism for economic compensation to help set them back on the road to reintegration and relative normalcy.[32] Unfortunately, its proper implementation has been hindered by corruption, poor budget allocation, an ever-growing backlog of submissions, understaffing, lack of administrative capacity, and the fact that many victims of ISIS lost most, if not all, legal documentation.[33] Long wait times see additional issues arise: those tired of waiting in tents try to rebuild their homes before assessors arrive to review the validity of the claims; additional expenses inevitably accrue; and prices rise while waiting for compensation, making initial

[29] Cf. Borda 2022.
[30] The Iraqi Martyrs Foundation is an organ of the Iraqi Council of Ministers that was established in 2005 to provide support and compensation for victims of war operations, military errors, and terrorist operations.
[31] Cf. Zaza 2020: 12–24.
[32] "People interviewed cited the government's failure to provide compensation as a primary barrier to their return, in addition to a lack of essential services and security risks in Sinjar" (Human Rights Watch 2023a).
[33] They were either destroyed in ISIS attacks or lost while fleeing (cf. Zaza 2020).

restitutive calculations potentially inadequate.[34] Passed in March 2021, the YSL takes things further than Law No. 20, with the enactment of a more far-reaching legislation that specifically recognizes international crimes committed by ISIS against four communities: Yezidi, Turkmen, Shabak, and Christian.[35] It is an administrative reparation program that was initially only intended for Yezidi females, but subsequent modifications enhanced the scope to include the three other minority groups impacted by ISIS; so long as the crime was committed after or on 3rd of August 2014.[36] It is also the first piece of Iraqi legislation that is specific to the conduct of ISIS against Yezidi communities, and the first to provide reparations for survivors of, among other things, sexual violence.[37] A unique feature of this law is that Article 3 establishes a directorate, under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, to oversee the implementation of the law; one that must be run by a director of Yezidi ethnicity. This gives the Yezidis governmental representation in seeking restitution and justice. The YSL offers victims[38] more than just financial compensation. It provides recompense through a monthly stipend; it provides recognition by officially declaring the acts of ISIS as core international crimes;[39] it creates venues for rehabilitation by asking the directorate to set up mental and psychological health services for female victims. The act also enshrines the need to ensure survivors are given educational, as well as employment opportunities; in addition to either free housing, or a mortgage loan to obtain land, thereby trying to make survivors whole. This would help to re-establish the social and economic wellbeing of victims, particularly those who have been made to feel alienated and alone in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) with no future prospects.[40] The YSL also attempts to satisfy the demand for justice by directing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to handle and coordinate, including with any special tribunal, the prosecution of related criminal cases;[41] it further contains measures directing the search for members of the four communities who are still missing, and to excavate mass graves to return victims to their families. Of course, there is still no current criminal framework in Iraq to guide such

[34] "One Sinjari man, Khalil Hasan, said he was displaced by ISIS from the village of Tel Banat in 2014, and his home and shop were destroyed during military operations. He completed the compensation process in early 2023, but he has not yet received any money" (Human Rights Watch 2023a).

[35] Cf. Elias 2023: 3.

[36] Cf. Yazidi Female Survivors Law, Iraq Law No. 8 of 2021 (hereinafter: YSL) 2021: Article 1.

[37] Cf. Ceasefire Centre for Civilian and Minority Rights Group International (hereinafter: Ceasefire) 2021.

[38] Article 2 of the YSL defines those that may avail themselves of the law: All female Yezidi survivors that were kidnapped by ISIS; Women and girls from the other affected communities targeted by ISIS; Yezidi children that were under the age of 18 when kidnapped, as well as all genders from these communities that survived targeted killings by ISIS (cf. YSL: Article 2).

[39] Cf. *Ibid*: Article 7.

[40] Cf. *Ibid*: Articles 5 and 6.

[41] Cf. *Ibid*: Article 1.

prosecutions, and the provisions of YSL do not provide steps for legal reform or prosecutorial measures that would contribute to convictions under one of the core international crimes. One great step comes in the vein of recognition. Article 8 cements the 3rd of August as a National Day of Remembrance for the Yezidi genocide. It also requires the Ministry of Culture and other agencies to immortalize the victims of ISIS through statues, monuments, and so on. In this way, imbedding the recognition of Yezidi suffering within the very landscape itself. It is definitely a step in the right direction, and one that the IFG seems determined to support,[42] but the act is not without its flaws. For example, the eligibility requirements of the YSL have been narrowly interpreted to exclude those children born during captivity to women that were pregnant at the time of abduction.[43] Also, several NGOs have, since its enactment, signed a statement that raised concerns over the lack of adequate judicial and evidentiary mechanisms,[44] as well as the undue burden created by the requirement for victims to first provide paperwork proving they have already filed criminal charges.[45]

International classification and inert steps towards justice:

Unfortunately, despite the international consensus on the nature of ISIS considered being *hostes humani generis* (an enemy of mankind), there has not been as much recognition and accountability as one would have hoped from a community of 153 State parties to the Genocide Convention. The first, and somewhat most important step, is to name the crime; so as to give credence to the hoarse voices of those survivors that have been crying out to a seemingly apathetic world. Recognition of the victims of atrocities is an important step in both restoring the Yezidi sense of human dignity; and pushing forward the collective obligations of 153 nations under international law to intervene against and punish the perpetrators of these most heinous crimes, as well as to aid the victims. International organizations, non-governmental organizations, the Yezidis themselves, and pertinent bodies of the UN were sounding the alarm on the potential for the commission of core international crimes well before the invasion of Sinjar. Warnings rang out from the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary General on

[42] The IFG announced in June 2023 that they would allocate 25 billion Iraqi dinars (19 million US dollars) towards supporting the implementation of the act (cf. Elias 2023: 5).

[43] "In two cases the Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF) consulted, the mother was told that the child born during captivity is not eligible. Considering that thousands of Yezidi women were kidnapped as of 3 August 2014, there are likely several women who were pregnant when ISIS abducted them and who gave birth while in captivity. These children were born into dangerous conditions, survived grave human rights violations, and were deprived of a healthy and stable childhood" (*Ibid*: 6).

[44] Human Rights Watch 2023c.

[45] Cf. Elias 2023: 5.

the Prevention of Genocide, the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary General on the Responsibility to Protect,[46] the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,[47] and other such entities that acts committed by ISIS could constitute genocide. Subsequent investigations and reports were produced by UN bodies like UNITAD,[48] the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic[49], as well as non-governmental organizations like Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.[50] These all officially concluded that, based on extensive investigations, ISIS committed genocide. There were, and still are, calls to try ISIS members before the International Criminal Court (ICC). As previously stated, neither Iraq nor Syria is party to the Rome Convention, and therefore the ICC has no territorial jurisdiction to prosecute issues of genocide from those regions.[51] The UN Security Council (UNSC) has the power, under Article 13 of the Rome Statute[52] to refer the matter to the ICC, and thereby confer jurisdiction. To date, there has only been one attempted UNSC vote at a resolution to do so, and it was vetoed by China and Russia.[53] Iraq has also continuously articulated, in its requests for help from the international community, that they maintain jurisdiction over prosecution of ISIS crimes within their borders.[54] The IFG may have some apprehensions over providing jurisdiction to an international body, with potential concerns over their own violations under international law. It is therefore unlikely that either state will bring itself under the auspices of the Rome statute, or have ISIS members within its territorial jurisdiction referred to the ICC by the UNSC; and time is very much of the essence in dealing with this atrocity. Other potential avenues for international prosecution include the creation of an ad hoc treaty-based international criminal tribunal, an ad hoc UN international criminal

[46] Cf. United Nations 2014, Statement by Adama Dieng and Jennifer Welsh.

[47] Cf. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2014.

[48] UNITAD – United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL – was established by the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2017 with resolution 2379, which tasked the UN Secretary-General with creating a specific investigative team to promote accountability from the international crimes committed by ISIS in Iraq (cf. United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL 2021 and 2024). Unfortunately, resolution 2697 of September 2023, which extended UNITAD's directive until September 2024, explicitly states that it does so without the possibility of renewal. Prior to the passing of resolution 2697, Iraq formally communicated its desire to limit any further extension to one final year. The communication emphasized the necessity for UNITAD to surrender all evidence collected within Iraq's borders since its inception. Additionally, Iraq requested that UNITAD refrain from disseminating additional evidence to other nations and provide full disclosure of previously shared evidence to Iraqi authorities (cf. Security Council Report 2024).

[49] Cf. Human Rights Council 2014.

[50] Kikoler 2015.

[51] Cf. Yazidi Justice Committee 2022.

[52] Cf. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court 1998.

[53] Cf. Kaufman 2021.

[54] "We call on you to ask the international community to provide assistance, so that we can make use of international expertise in our effort to prosecute the terrorist entity ISIL […] Iraq must maintain its national sovereignty and retain jurisdiction, and its laws must be respected, both when negotiating and implementing the resolution" (*Ibid*).

tribunal, or an ad hoc hybrid tribunal – a court that combines domestic and international laws and staff as, for instance, in Cambodia.[55] Despite calls under all options to create a body to prosecute ISIS, there have been no real steps taken to create any.[56] There were some countries, as well as the European Union, that officially classified the acts as genocide fairly early on. For example, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament acknowledged the systematic nature of ISIS' actions as genocide in a resolution passed in January and February 2016, respectively.[57] By March 2016, the US House of Representatives had passed House Concurrent Resolution 75. This declared that the acts committed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria against Christians, Yezidis, Turkmen, Shabak, Sabaen-Mandeans, and Kaka'i, among others, constituted war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.[58] It also called on other governments to recognize the international violations, and to further take measures to fulfil their duties to prevent and prosecute genocide. That July, the US Senate adopted a companion resolution that, among other things, directed the Attorney General to begin investigations and criminal proceedings into perpetrators, or those complicit in the crimes of ISIS within US jurisdiction.[59] It was with the signing of House Resolution 390 that the US officially passed legislation aimed at providing aid, as well as pushing to establish ISIS culpability abroad. The law authorizes the State Department and US Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide financial and technical assistance[60] to entities engaged in investigating ISIS' crimes or furnishing aid to vulnerable groups in the region. The act also directs the State Department to identify threats of persecution, genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria.[61] Armenia passed a resolution in 2018 recognizing the Yezidi genocide before many European states.[62] Other governments were relatively slow to achieve the same conclusion (e.g. the governments of the United Kingdom,[63] Germany,[64] Belgium, the Netherlands[65] and France). Part of the stated reason for the delay related to the fact

[55] Cf. *Ibid*.
[56] Cf. *Ibid*.
[57] Cf. Resolution 2016/2529(RSP) 2016.
[58] Cf. US House of Representatives 2016.
[59] US Senate 2015.
[60] Conducting criminal investigations; developing indigenous investigative and judicial skills to adjudicate cases consistent with due process and respect for the rule of law; and collecting and preserving evidence for use in prosecutions (cf. *Ibid*: Section 5).
[61] Cf. US Congress 2018.
[62] Cf. Armen Press 2018.
[63] The UK Government formally acknowledged the atrocities the Yezidis faced at the hands of ISIS as genocide in August 2023 (cf. Loft 2023).
[64] The German lower house of parliament passed a resolution recognizing the Yezidi genocide (cf. Le Mond 2023).
[65] Belgian Parliament voted on 30/06/2021, and the Dutch Parliament House of Representatives voted on 06/07/2021 unanimously to recognize the genocide (cf. Free Yezidi Foundation 2021).

that governments wanted international and domestic courts to recognize the issue first. However, even with late official recognition, western nations were already looking into how to prosecute returning and potentially extradited fighters. By 2021, the world began to see the successful prosecution of ISIS in courts in the West for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide targeting the Yezidis. Germany was the first state to successfully convict a former ISIS member on the specific crime of genocide against the Yezidis.[66] The trial against Taha A., an Iraqi national, was remarkable for many reasons, but especially because it is the first instance of the application of universal jurisdiction[67] to an ISIS member accused of genocide. In fact, German courts convicted a second ISIS returnee, German-national Jalda A., of genocide in July of 2022.[68] Additionally, Germany oversaw the conviction of 5 additional ISIS members for crimes against humanity and war crimes against Yezidis. Such victories show non-state actors that there is no impunity for *hostes humani generis*. To facilitate domestic proceedings, several EU nations have formed Joint Investigation Teams (JITs)[69] to coordinate efforts to investigate, identify, and potentially prosecute foreign terrorist fighters, like ISIS, that have targeted the Yezidis. The teams' focuses on core international crimes, including genocide. France, Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands are part of a JIT, and their coordination efforts have already led to some successes.[70] Obviously, while the international community is taking steps in the right direction with regard to recognition, legislation regarding aid for victims and support for investigative teams, as well as prosecution of returning nationals, the domestic courts are not an adequate venue to deal with the totality of perpetrators. International extradition will not be an adequate avenue to handle the large quantity of those involved in the commission of genocide. Convictions carried out within borders of their nations will allow the Yezidis to provide their narratives in trials, and help the Yezidis feel like they are part of society once more; a society that not only recognizes and rallies around their pain, but stands up for them. For things to change, there will still need to be an amalgamation of pressuring and helping the governments of Iraq and Syria develop the necessary legal

[66] Cf. Clooney et al. 2023.

[67] Universal jurisdiction is an exception to the general international principles of state sovereignty.

[68] Cf. *Ibid*.

[69] A JIT is formed by an international agreement for cooperation between competent authorities of the State parties to said agreement. They coordinate efforts between the judicial and law enforcement branches of two or more nations, and usually have a specific scope of investigation (cf. European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation 2021).

[70] "In France, a Yezidi victim of a French jihadist couple, already prosecuted under terrorism offences, could be identified. Charges of genocide and crimes against humanity were added to an existing case" (European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation 2023).

framework to handle the proper investigation, evidentiary preservation, and prosecution of genocide domestically.

Sinjar: A Homecoming

According to both the KRI Government (KRG) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) 105,150 Yezidi IDPs (21,100 families) are registered across 14 camps that were almost exclusively established for the Yezidis.[71] However, it should be noted that almost all IDPs registered in a KRG camp when they first arrived from Sinjar, and that a large number[72] of them have since, without deregistering, departed from the camps to integrate into the surrounding communities. Therefore, the figure of 105,150 does not accurately reflect the actual number of IDPs residing in camps. Instead, it appears to primarily represent all Yezidi IDPs living in the KRI. [73] This figure is relatively small compared to the total number of IDPs and refugees from Syria in the KRI, which stands at 631,174 individuals, predominantly of Arab-Muslim origin.

Unlike refugees, IDPs in Iraq can avail themselves of the basic human rights guaranteeing freedom of movement. They cannot be forced to return to Sinjar. Hence, the decision to return is left solely up to them. For IDPs who have found their niche within the KRI, and do not face economic constraints, the decision is quite easy. They will move to Sinjar only if and when they feel that they will be able to match, maintain, or achieve a better living standard than what they currently have in the KRI. This may also influence the return-decision of their parents and siblings, who are still in the camps. In most cases, they are dependent on their relatives for support. For the majority of the camp population the question is whether or not they want to exchange the auspices of the camp (including food security, health care, education, physical security, and minimal but secure shelter), for a place where they would have their own land, but where they will still be lacking most of this infrastructure provided in the camps. In many interviews the IDPs stated that their desire would be to return home. It is the absence of shelter, employment, financial support, and compensation for injustices suffered that hindered their return. Concepts such as overall security, the dangers posed by mines, etc.[74] were never a real issue in discussions concerning the return of Yezidis to Sinjar. These issues were only raised when KRG officials or KDP members were involved in the

[71] Cf. Nicolaus and Yuce 2024.
[72] The KRG indicates about 70% (cf. Rasul 2024).
[73] A margin of error around 8 to 12% came up repeatedly during informal discussions with NGOs and the IOM in 2022.
[74] Cf. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2019, as well as Ali 2022: 76–89, analysing in detail the situation in Sinjar.

discourse. In the event of return, most IDPs would place their trust in the protection offered by the Iraqi police, PMU, and the militias controlling various parts of Sinjar, such as the Êzîdxan Protection Force (HPÊ) and the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ).[75] A number of my friends and international colleagues have visited Sinjar over the last three years and can attest to both the improved security situation, as well as to the deficient, and in some places, completely absent, state of the existing infrastructure. Furthermore, there are no overt efforts by the IFG to overcome these impediments to a Yezidi return. Nonetheless, approximately 148,000 IDPs have returned to the Sinjar district, with an increasing number of villages moving towards some semblance of their former normality – farming and sheepherding have recommenced, houses are being renovated or rebuilt, schools have opened once more,[76] shops are now offering more than just basic necessities, and in the evenings, one can sit peacefully to enjoy some warm tea with the local inhabitants. Despite these positive developments and interviews with IDPs, it's important to note that they do not outweigh the findings of the survey conducted by the United Nations High Commisioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2019. This survey concluded that only 3% of the IDP population intended to return, highlighting ongoing challenges and reservations among the displaced community. [77]

The individual Yezidi freedom to decide whether to return is influenced, or even negated, by the policies and politics of both the federal government and the KRG. The dispute between these two actors arises from the question of which entity should govern the disputed territories. The situation in Sinjar further complicates matters, as one party controls the land while the other controls the people. The IFG encourages people to return, while the KRG is attempting to stall the process. For instance, the latter "put a blockade on the roads leading to Shingal [Sinjar] so that the Yezidis who survived the genocide will not get any services or assistance,"[78] and find returning home to be very

[75] In the part of the Sinjar district controlled by the YBŞ, IDPs expressed greater fear of Turkish cross-border operations and bombings.

[76] However, there is the prevalent issue of unqualified instructors providing inadequate education at these schools. Many qualified teachers actually contract out their position to unqualified persons in order to accept a better paid non-governmental job, without losing insurance and pension benefits. While a common practice that is usually accepted by local education administration, it remains an unknown, and likely unacceptable, practice to the Education Directorate in Mosul.

[77] The reasons for this included: the presence of mines (42%); lack of security forces (41%); damaged or destroyed houses (33%); fear of discrimination (29%); and no financial means (13%) (cf. UNHCR 2019: 11, as well as Travers 2022).

[78] Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) 2018. The report continues, emphasising that "for more than a year, the closure of the Suhaila Road has been a barrier to the return of Yezidis in camps to Shingal" (apud United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) (2018)). Abid Shamdeen (Executive Co-Director, Nadia's Initiative) stated to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development of the House of Commons of Canada: "I feel that Yezidis are held captive in these IDP camps, because, first, their areas have not been rebuilt; there is no security and the access has been blocked

difficult.[79] In April 2023, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani allocated the equivalent of 34.2 million USD for the reconstruction of Sinjar. However, the KRG has, based on an agreement between the two parties dating back to 2020,[80] so far prevented the use of said funds.[81] At the same time, the KRG stressed that IDPs cherish "the support and respect from the Barzani Charitable Foundation and the warm reception from the Kurdistan Region which have been invaluable, offering the freedom to stay or return home."[82] The Iraqi federal government in Baghdad has also not been forthcoming with the timely provision of promised housing assistance for the IDPs. For instance, approximately 10,500 applications seeking compensation under Iraqi Law No. 20 have been submitted by IDPs upon their return to Sinjar, with approximately half of these applications already approved so far, "but not a single family has yet received a payout. This stands in stark contrast to other areas of Iraq, which have all seen at least some compensation awarded."[83] However, in January 2024 the federal government made another move and issued the Cabinet Decision No. 24007 of 2024, as well as pertinent mechanisms for implementation.[84] According to the relevant terms, this legislation applies to returning displaced families registered with the Ministry of Migration and Displaced Persons Database, and that reside in refugee camps in the KRI.[85] If the family decides to voluntarily leave the camps and return to their original regions (or another area of their choice), they will receive 4 million Iraqi Dinar (3,050 USD). Among the provisions of the resolution aimed at the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Sinjar district (e.g. building low-cost housing units, improving the education situation, individual job creation, and protection of disadvantaged returning IDPs), there is a mandate that the Ministry of Finance must release compensations for those IDPs returning to damaged homes. Finally, these legal instruments emphasise that by the end of July 2024 all camps in the KRG will be closed, and that the IDPs residing there should be informed that this decision is binding and final.[86]

to Sinjar. The roads that lead to Sinjar from Kurdistan, from the IDP camps, have been blocked since 2014 on and off, but since 2016 or 2017 these roads have been completely blocked." (cf. House of Commons of Canada 2024).

79 Cf. Westcott 2018.

80 This agreement stipulates that the federal government and the KRG must come to a consensus on how reconstruction and rehabilitation funds are spent.

81 Cf. Human Rights Watch 2023b.

82 Rasul 2024.

83 Coogle 2023.

84 Cf. General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers 2024.

85 Individuals who are not or no longer part of a family also receive the grant.

86 For more detail cf. *Al-Sudani's government assesses ministries and takes decisions regarding displaced individuals in Kurdistan* 2024.

As of April 2024, the first cohort of 450 IDP families have voluntarily[87] gone back to Sinjar, after receiving 4 million Iraqi Dinar, with some of these returns being facilitated by the IOM and its Return Program. The homecoming process has been gaining momentum, and at the time of writing[88] some 1,050 families (approximately 5,250 individuals) from various camps in the KRI returned to their respective villages in Sinjar.[89] The Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) has confirmed that the planned closure of the camps will proceed as scheduled in the summer of 2024,[90] but also insists that any return would be strictly voluntary. They also clarified that IDPs who chose to remain in the KRI or relocate to another region in Iraq would still receive their cash grant, but would not be permitted to stay in the camps slated for closure.[91] However, it remains to be seen whether this new approach will actually be implemented in full, and whether the KRG, led by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), will indeed agree to the closure of the camps predominantly inhabited by Yezidis. The closure of the Ashti IDP Camp on the 21st of May 2024 does not necessarily reflect the KDP's willingness to cooperate, as the Yezidi population comprised less than 10% of the camp's inhabitants.[92] Additionally, its location in Sulaymaniyah, which is under the control of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a group that both opposes the KDP and is also allied with the IFG, further complicates any such interpretation. In the context of the intended camp closures, it is important to recognize that the camps represent a significant form of leverage for the KRG in its strategy to reclaim influence in Sinjar, particularly following the setback suffered after the unsuccessful attempt towards Kurdish independence in 2017.[93] Consequently, now that the IFG has settled on a final date to shutter the IDP camps and announced that they will also stop providing IDP-related funds to the KRG, the KRG could still decide to fund the camps from its own budget. It could simultaneously seek contributions from international donors, as well as aid from international organisations. However, the latter possibility could easily be undermined by the IFG — it will likely prove challenging to secure international donors, or convince international NGOs and UN agencies to operate in the camps in Kurdistan without agreement from

[87] This information was shared during informal discussions with IOM in Sinjar and the Directorate of Migration in Duhok.
[88] Mid-June 2024.
[89] This was established during a telephone conversation with an MoMD representative on 12/06/2024.
[90] In telephone conversations, representatives mentioned that MoMD was no longer focused on a specific date for the implementation of the camp closure.
[91] The US Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Ms. Uzra Zeya, who met with the MoMD Minister Ms. Evan Faiq Jabro in Baghdad on 09/05/2024, did not seem to have any objections to this approach (cf. US Embassy & Consulate in Iraq 2024).
[92] Cf. Iraqi News Agency 2024.
[93] Cf. Nicolaus and Yuce 2024.

the Iraqi federal government. The uncooperative stance of the KRG is reflected in its management of the camps, where it does not actively facilitate the departure of IDPs, and even seeks to discourage them from leaving the camps. The KRG officially advises the IDPs that the areas of return are unsafe, and that they do not recommend undertaking the journey back to Sinjar. On the other hand, IDPs in the KRI have received the news regarding the commencement of the IFG supported return process with great interest, sparking significant activity in the area. Individuals who left the camps years ago are now showing up in the camps more frequently, while those who deregistered are making frantic efforts to be reregistered. Additionally, IDPs who were never registered in a camp are exploring both legal and illegal avenues to obtain a backdated registration – 4 million Iraqi Dinars is a significant amount for a destitute population. [94]

What We Plant in the Soil of Contemplation, We Shall Reap in the Harvest of Action[95]

The Yezidis have languished for far too long while international and domestic actors 'thoughtfully' contemplated the best path for attaining justice and restitution. The unwavering implementation of the Yezidi Female Survivors Law, as well as the Cabinet Decision No. 24007 of 2024, among the other legal instruments and administrative initiatives, would provide these tormented peoples the ability to restart their lives with dignity. Now that IDPs are receiving funding to facilitate their return to Sinjar, in addition to the potential for reparations under the YSL, it would seem that for the first time in a decade, there is real potential for the Yezidis to begin the reconstruction of their shattered world. It also means that if things progress without additional delays, then humanitarian intervention can potentially be scaled down, so that the focus can shift to regional development and infrastructure assistance. This is not the first genocide these resilient people have weathered, and, with the steadfast commitment to assistance and justice from the local and international communities, this too shall pass.

[94] Cf. *Ibid*.
[95] A sentence attributed to Eckhart von Hochheim (Master Eckhart).

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სერქან იუჯა (Serkan Yuce)

ათი წლის ამბავი: ეზიდების გენოციდის გლობალური გამოხმაურება

აბსტრაქტი: მოცემული ნაშრომი იკვლევს, როგორია ლეგალური და ადმინისტრაციული ლანდშაფტი ISIS-ის მიერ განხორციელებული გენოციდის მსხვერპლთათვის; კონკრეტულად კი, თემატიზებულია მსხვერპლისთვის სამართლისა და კომპენსაციის მოსაპოვებლად ადგილობრივი და საერთაშორისო ძალისხმევა. სტატიაში ასევე განხილულია, თუ რა ვითარებაა ერაყის ქურთისტანის რეგიონში (Kurdish Region of Iraq) გადასახლებული მოსახლეობის სინჯარში დაბრუნებასთან დაკავშირებით. აღნიშნული რემიგრაციისთვის მზადება ამ სტატიაზე მუშაობის პერიოდში მიმდინარეობს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: გენოციდი, იძულებით გადაადგილებული პირები (IDP), ერაყი, ლტოლვილები, KRI, სირია.

Serkan Yuce

Serhatiya deh salan: dengvedana global ya ferman û cênosayda êzdiyan

Abstrakt: Ev gotar landşafta yasayî û îdarî ji bo qurbaniyên cênosayda ku ji aliyê DAIŞ va hatiye kirin lêkolîn dike, bi taybetî hewlên navxweyî û navdewletî yên bi armanca dabînkirina dadwerî û e'dalêtê, qerebûkirina qurbaniyên navbirî dinêre. Herwisa dîmenek ji rewşa niha ya vegera nifûsa merivên e'warebûyî li kampan li Herêma Kurdistana Îraqê (HKI) bo Şengalê peyda dike. Di dema nivîsandinê da hazirîya vegera wan kesên e'warebûyî tê kirinê.

Peyvên sereke: cênosayd, e'ware, Îraq, penaber, KRI, Sûrya.



Gevorg Dzhalilov
Independent scholar
ORCID: 0009-0001-1307-520X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32859/yezidistudies/1/3/63-79

Yezidi Understanding of the Concept of Religion

Abstract:
When referring to their religion, Yezidis do not self-identify using one unifying name or term. This article examines this phenomenon. It also explores the terminology used to designate the Yezidi religion in academic contexts, and considers why some Yezidis reject such terminology outright. The article also reviews the historical development of the concept of religion itself and its meaning across different time periods, considering the current understanding in academic environments and its general applicability in Yezidi studies. In the interests of integration, mutual tolerance and understanding, it ultimately seeks to determine how Yezidi diasporas worldwide can identify and align themselves with the concept of religion per se.

Keywords:
Religion, Yezidis, Yezidism, *Şerfedîn, Êzdiyatî, Milet, Dîn*.

Introduction

Although Yezidis have been the subject of various studies for quite a long time, the question of their religious self-identification has rarely been raised. As a rule, the authors of various works have assigned names themselves to Yezidi beliefs and cults; for instance: 'the Cult of the Peacock Angel' or simply 'Yezidism'. However, the most common designation used to describe the object of research has been 'Devil Worshippers'. Given heterogeneity and the origin of these terms, it is interesting to consider how Yezidis themselves consider the concept of religion per se.

For this purpose, the first step is to examine the very concept of religion, tracing its historical development and origins. Then, we explore whether the Yezidis themselves have an equivalent term in their language and an understanding of the general concept of religion within their worldview. Ultimately, addressing these fundamental questions can potentially contribute to the establishment of a clear religious identity for Yezidi diasporas worldwide, which accords with the general understanding of religion and foster integration, mutual tolerance and understanding based on shared terms of reference and on the extant conceptual framework of what religion is.

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The Term Dîn (Religion) and its Environments in the Yezidi Context

Nowadays, when we ask a Yezidi about their personal religious affiliation, the immediate answer often varies. Some interviewees simply say 'Yezidi', identifying their religious belonging using their endonym. Others, with a certain degree of probability, will respond with '*Êzdiyatî*' (Yezidiness). Additionally, a number of interviewees, especially those from post-Soviet countries and the Sinjar region, may answer with '*Şerfedîn*'.[1]

Such ambiguity in religious self-identification among Yezidis highlights the very novelty of this concept for them. It raises questions about which word should be used to define their faith and, more broadly, what religion means to Yezidis themselves. To explore this, we must consider the Yezidi worldview paradigm. Let's begin by examining the three fundamental components of Yezidi faith: îman (unshakable conviction), *atqat* (sincere faith with all the heart), and *dîn* (religion).[2] These three aspects of faith are personified as follows: îman is represented by *Tawûsî Melek*, *atqat* by *Siltan Êzîd*, and *dîn* by Şerfedîn.[3] Among these, the third element *(dîn)* is typically translated from Arabic as 'religion' and is also perceived by some of Yezidis as the equivalent of the term religion, but how much this reflects reality and is actually applicable to Yezidis remains unclear. Therefore, the meaning of dîn needs to be considered in more detail.

The word *dīn* itself is an Arabic word that has entered the Yezidi language. However, even in Arabic it has a kind of overlapping meaning since it incorporates both classical Semitic denotations (law, duty, judgment, including the judgment of the last day) as well as the meaning of the Middle Persian word *dēn*, (faith, vision, true believers, and religion).[4] For the purpose of this research the A. Jeffery's translation the word *dēn* as 'religion', because of the modern undefined paradigm of its understanding, will be deliberately ignored as an unnatural term for people not from the Christian world, originating from Western Europe. Besides, if we consider the origins of the word *dēn*, we should refer to the Avestan *Daēnā*, which is the genius of faith of Zarathushtra,[5] in addition to being the escort of the soul to the other world. Appearing in the form of a maiden, *Daēnā* presents her beauty commensurate with the good thoughts, good words, and good deeds of the soul during the period of their earthly life.[6] In addition, it should be emphasized that in the language of the *Gāt* (Early Avestan) mainly abstract concepts

[1] In the Yezidi tradition, he is a savior who is currently absent from this world but will certainly return at the end of time (see: Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 4, 33).
[2] See: Пирбари and Щедровицкий 2016: 249.
[3] *Ibid*.
[4] See: Jeffery 1938: 131–3.
[5] See: Dhalla 1914: 123.
[6] See: *Ibid*: 176.

prevailed, while in Late Avestan already a transition to more concrete qualities with new associations took place. Bearing in mind that these qualities became expressed in personifications,[7] it should be concluded that *Daēnā* initially denoted a simple vision and became a personified phenomenon thereafter, whereby the term began to acquire additional mythological connotations.

Returning to the Arabic *dīn* and turning to the Qur'an, we can undoubtedly see this word very often in a variety of contexts and meanings, which make it altogether difficult to pinpoint a single definition of this word. At the same time, there is much scope for interpretations of Qur'anic texts in this regard. Thus, the term *dīn* was interpreted by many as a set of three components, the set and understanding of which varied depending on the position of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence to which the author belonged. For example, Hanafites[8] authors emphasized the importance of faith, Ash'arites[9] authors focused more on the importance of observing the rules, while Hanbalites,[10] and later Ibn Taymiyya dwelled upon the importance of 'true tradition' of the Qur'an and Sunnah.[11]

Within Yezidi tradition, the term *dīn* holds a significant place as a fundamental element of faith, albeit with a certain duality. Firstly, it refers to the performance of certain actions that are associated with tradition, such as the rites of *sunet* (circumcision) and *biskhildan* (cutting off a tuft of hair from a one-year-old boys). Similarly, it also refers to *mor kirin* (blessing with water from *Kaniya Sipî*[12] in Lalish), and the prerequisite that all "Yezidis must have five priests (*şêx, pîr, hosta* (teacher), *merebî* (mentor), *yar-birê axretê* (brother in the beyond) all of whom belong to the castes of sheiks and pirs)".[13] It also extends to the celebration of various (religious) holidays, observing fasts, performing prayers and so on. Thus, in this context, the word *dīn* can be defined within the framework of the Yezidi paradigm and Yezidi practice, as a duty to be observed. Secondly, the term can be applied in the context of belief in the coming of a savior on the Day of Judgment, whom the Yezidis call Şerfedîn.

Speaking about how the word *dīn* came to Europe, we should turn to the history of translations of the Qur'an. The *Surah al-Fatihah* was translated by Salman Farisi into Middle Persian as early as the 7th century, and the flourishing of the variety of

[7] See: *Ibid*: 76–7.
[8] Representatives of the Hanafi Madhhab (see: Abdal-Haqq 2006: 26).
[9] Representatives of the theological school of Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari (see: Halverson 2010: 14–22).
[10] Representatives of the Hanbali Madhhab (see: Abdal-Haqq 2006: 28–9).
[11] See: Милославский et al. 1991: 70.
[12] 'The White Spring' is the holiest spring of the Yezidis It flows out of the Mshat mountain in the Lalish valley (see: Pirbari et al. 2008: 34–5).
[13] *Ibid*: 13.

translations of the complete text of the Qur'an into various languages began in the 16th century. The first translation of the entire text of the Qur'an into a European language was done by Robert Ketton. It is a translation into Latin, which dates from 1143.[14] Later this translation was prepared for printing by Theodore Bibliander in 1543 and published by Johannes Oporin. As early as 1550, the translation was improved in terms of content and form, and subsequently republished.[15] It was from this time onwards that Europeans actively translated the Qur'an into various European languages. Initially, these translations were secondary in nature, as they were made from Latin translations. This approach resulted in a significant loss of intellectual depth and led to the ambiguity of some Arabic words, including *dīn*, which came to be interpreted in different ways.

It should be emphasized that at the same time, the Reformation[16] was actively underway in Europe, within the framework of which a global rethinking of the role of the church in the social life of Europeans took place. Against this backdrop, a transformation of the term *religio* occurred in Europe. The word *religio* itself, has an unclear etymology and derives either from *relegere* (to turn constantly or deliberately observe), or from *religari* (to bind oneself back), or from *reeligere* (to choose again).[17] However, this is in principle not very important for the purpose of this research. Rather, it is much more valuable to trace how this word has come to mean somewhat different concepts throughout its history. Thus, in the period of the pre-Christian Roman Empire, the term *religio* denoted more fear and anxiety about something,[18] the obligation to perform certain ritual actions,[19] as well as taboos.[20]

A new form of understanding of the term *religio* was introduced by Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius in his work *Divine Institutes*, written between 303 and 311 AD, in which he used *religio* for his apologetics and as a concept to connect with God through the bonds of God piety.[21] In addition, through Lactantius's *Divine Insititutes*, the concept of *religio* became associated with Christianity. Later, Jerome of Stridon, in one of the first translation of the Bible from Greek into Latin, in the late 4th century, used *religio* in the sense of ritual, translating the Greek word *threskeia* (religious observance, ritual practice, way of worshipping) in the New Testament and the Old Testament into various

[14] See: Bibliander 2010: i.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] For the concept of the Reformation (see: Clark et al. 1922: 1–22).
[17] See: McBrien 1994: 359.
[18] See: Fowler 1911: XV–I.
[19] See: *Ibid*: 198.
[20] See: *Ibid*: 34.
[21] See: Lactantius 2007: 296.

terms for ordinance and ritual prescription,[22] further associating the term *religio* exclusively with the Christian world of Western Europe.

Later, during the High Middle Ages, the term took on new meanings, such as a life associated with monastic vows and monastic orders.[23] For instance, Thomas Aquinas interprets *religio* as an important moral virtue associated with justice.[24] Nevertheless, it is only during the Reformation that the term takes on the shape of a modern concept,[25] whereby the use of the word *religio* became increasingly synonymous with the word 'faith' in English.[26] It should also be noted that although research on numerous peoples such as the Yezidis utilizes 'religion' as a category, these peoples have no similar equivalent in their languages at all.[27]

To conclude, it can be said that the concept of religion per se appeared in the Western world and continued to be developed in the academic environment, and is therefore a product of Western culture. However, from the beginning of its existence in the academic environment, the term 'religion' and its concepts have yet to acquire a unified meaning; in one definitions and theories we can find shifts of emphasis on the concept of the sacred and on ritual practice, as Emile Durkheim established.[28] Authors such as Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and Mircea Eliade contributed in a different way, attributing significance to the belief in the supernatural.[29] In addition, some critical scholars question the value of the term 'religion', such as John Hinnells wrote:

There have been numerous debates about definitions and presuppositions in the study of religion. Many scholars have questioned whether there is any such 'thing' as religion, there are only the religions. But some have gone further and questioned the value of the term 'religion' at all. In various languages, in Sanskrit for example, there is no word for 'religion'. Is 'religion' a Western construct imposed on various cultures as a part of intellectual imperialism? It has been said that 'words mean what we want them to'. My own opinion is that the word 'religion' is useful, but should be used with caution.[30]

The uncertainty around the concept of religion can also be traced throughout the study of religions, beginning with the 19th century, when the discipline of religious studies was born. At that time, it was already considered that Christianity would not be the

[22] See: Smith 1991: 28.
[23] See: Huizinga 1922: 86.
[24] See: Harrison 2015: 7–8.
[25] See: Insoll 2004: 6.
[26] See: Taylor 1998: 271.
[27] See: McCutcheon 2001: 10.
[28] See: Pals 1996: 99.
[29] See: *Ibid*: 164.
[30] Hinnells 2005: 2.

only religion, but the only so-called world religion. In addition, it was held that there were also two national religions, namely Judaism and Islam. Furthermore, scientists derived a third group of religions, which were considered to be various idolatrous beliefs. With the beginning of research on Buddhism, a substantial shift occurred whereby the scientific community began to perceive Buddhism and Islam within the framework of world religions, alongside Christianity. Later, the category 'world religion' was supplemented by Shintoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Judaism. However, in recent scholarly activity, the typology of world religions has come to be considered no longer useful.[31]

Over time, as scholars discovered new beliefs of different peoples, they faced even greater methodological uncertainties in identifying what could be considered a religion and what not. Things became particularly complicated in the 20th century, when various secular ideologies emerged that had the trappings of religion, but the representatives of these ideologies rarely considered themselves religious. This is especially true of nationalism[32] and Marxism,[33] which some scholars define as secular religions.

In summary, the term 'religion' and its definitions were unknown to the Yezidis themselves until recently, as they are a product of Western culture. However, they were familiar to Western explorers who came into contact with the Yezidis to study Yezidism as a religious and social phenomenon. Contact between Yezidis and Western travelers, explorers, missionaries, and adventurers began to gain momentum in the 18th century, and from the 19th century onwards, research of an academic nature on the Yezidis gained momentum. In the early days, such research on the Yezidi community did not have a definite term religion of the Yezidi people. Moreover, whether the Yezidis were considered to have had a religion from the point of view of Western-centered researchers is unclear. For the enclaving Muslims the Yezidis were just "apostates",[34] pejoratively called "devil worshipers"[35] i.e., a dubious Middle Eastern sect.

Considering the written accounts listed below as well as in other early sources which mention the Yezidis, we may clearly observe that there are no specific words for their religion. Neither Yezidism, nor Şerfedîn nor any other term is used by the authors themselves, much less by the Yezidis with whom the authors came into contact: *Nineveh and Babylon: With Travels in Armenia, Kurdistan and the desert: Being the Result of a Second Expedition Undertaken for the Trustees of the British Museum* (1853) and N*ineveh and its Remains: With an Account of a Visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis,*

[31] See: *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* 2006: 1148.
[32] See: Smart 1998: 22–5.
[33] See: *Ibid*: 25–6.
[34] Frank 1911: 1.
[35] Badger 1852: xxi.

or Devil-Worshippers, and an Enquiry Into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians (1849) both by Austen Henry Layard. This also applies to *The Nestorians and Their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan* [*Kurdistan*] *in 1842-1844, and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850; Also, Researches on the Present Condition of the Syrian Jacobites, Papal Syrians, and Chaldeans, and an Inquiry Into the Religious Tenets of the Yezeedees* [*Yezidis*] (1852) by G. P. Badger. *Persia Past and Present: A Book of Travel and Research, With More Than Two Hundred Illustration and a Map* (1906) by A. V. Williams Jackson also belongs to this category. In addition, in the 20th century, on the territory of the USSR, a controversial issue arose regarding the ethno-nationality of the Yezidis, with the Yezidis being viewed by some as an independent ethnicity and by others as ethnic Kurds – so-called Yezidi Kurds,[36] with the latter considering the word 'Yezidi' itself to be the name of the original Kurdish religion. However, if we trace the history of how the Soviets were disposed towards Yezidis and Kurds, the uncertainty regarding the definition of the ethnicity of each of the two groups is undeniable. Thus, according to the 1926 USSR census, Yezidis and Kurds were considered separate peoples, while in subsequent USSR censuses of 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979 and 1989, both Yezidis and Kurds were listed together as Kurds.[37] With the independence of the former Soviet republics, they were again defined as independent peoples in the countries where the Yezidis mainly reside.[38] This fact suggests that the definition of Yezidi ethnic and religious identity was based more on political than on scientific grounds.

Returning to the origins of the early Yezidi studies, we should emphasize the difficulty of studying these people due to their culture of secrecy. The Yezidis also tried, through deception and cunning, to lure people into delusions regarding their beliefs.[39] The closed nature of their relations with outsiders often led researchers to collect quite contradictory information regarding the beliefs of the Yezidis and their sacred figures; in addition to the fact that the information obtained was very limited, i.e. it was based on individual interviews rather than on quantitatively substantial data. In this regard, an aura of mystery grew around the Yezidis, which led researchers to conflicting theories, in which some saw Yezidism as a remnant of ancient Eastern cults (Mazdeism and Manichaeism). Others used Nestorian documents, attributing Christian sources to the Yezidis, whereas alternative perspectives perceived Yezidism as Muslim heresy.[40] Thus, one can agree with Kreyenbroek that, in many ways, "Modern Yezidism, therefore,

[36] See: Ali et al. 2021: 259–60.
[37] See: Амоев and Мосаки 2014: 16–58.
[38] See: *Ibid*: 59–78.
[39] See: Lerch 1856: 48.
[40] See: Lescot 1938: 19.

was widely thought of as the debased form of an older and more impressive cult which scholars – consciously or unconsciously – set out to reconstruct".[41] Unfortunately, this approach steered the study of the Yezidi community into the realm of speculation.

Few researchers have approached the study of the Yezidi community in a comprehensive manner with research and scientific substantiation of such facets of Yezidi culture as language, ethnicity, nationality, religion and how the Yezidis define themselves. Thus, research to date reads as if these are already settled issues. Neglecting the need for such fundamental studies, unsubstantiated assertions have frequently been made about the Yezidi, such as Khanna Omarkhali's claims that the majority of Yezidis to Kurdish identity, and call the term *Êzdikî* a regional subdialect.[42] However, it is obvious that this word for Yezidis, who use it is the linguonym,[43] replaces the scientifically established word 'Kurmanji'. In conclusion, addressing the lack of in-depth research in the aforementioned issues could shed light on many aspects of Yezidi identity,[44] and in turn, could ultimately serve to assist the Yezidi community itself to integrate into modern contexts.

Continuing the search for a word to designate the Yezidi religion in the academic environment and within the Yezidi community itself, it should be emphasized that currently, the term 'Yezidism' is used in the academic environment to designate the Yezidi religion. The term itself is derived from the ethnonym 'Yezidi' by adding the suffix '-ism' to it. It should, however, be noted that the term exclusively exists in the academic environment. Such word formation within a framework of academic research is a normal practice in various disciplines, in particular when the subject of study does not yet have an established name. For example, we can cite Buddhism, which understandably had no such name in the era of formation and flourishing, and scientists arrived at it through a word formation, namely by adding the suffix '-ism' to the name of the main protagonist of this doctrine. Subsequent to the establishment of the term 'Buddhism' in 1821, other '-isms' of a similar kind followed, such as Hinduism in 1829, Taoism in 1839, and Confucianism in 1862.[45]

The first to introduce the term 'Yezidism' into academic circulation was Isya Joseph in his 1919 book with the (not particularly pleasant) title *Devil Worship*, which he used

[41] Kreyenbroek 1995: viii.
[42] See: Омархали 2023: 19–20.
[43] The specific unit of metalanguage that designates a specific language as an object of description; linguonyms make up the nomenclature of a language (see: Жеребило 2010: 180).
[44] Certainly, there is some influence, as the Yezidis do not exist in isolation and are also a subject of academic study. However, the specifics of how academic research influences various groups within the Yezidi population is a substantial topic for further investigation. Therefore, it may be inappropriate to explore this issue in greater detail within the scope of this article.
[45] See: Taylor 1998: 276.

to describe the Yezidi faith. Thereafter, the term 'Yezidism' was picked up by other authors, including, R. H. W. Empson, who was one of the first to use it. Empson pointed out that the Yezidis have no religion and no God in the usual sense of "civilized peoples", but rather believe in and worship the Prince of Evil.[46] Throughout the work he refers to Yezidism as "The Cult of the Peacock Angel".

In addition to the word 'Yezidism' in Yezidi historiography, there was once present the term 'Yezidstvo', which was introduced by the Soviet linguist and ethnographer O. L. Vilchevsky. To describe the Yezidi religion, he used the Russian word 'Езидство' [Yezidstvo] (Yezidiness) based on the Russian words 'Христианство' [Khristianstvo] (Christianity) and 'Мусульманство' [Musul`manstvo] (Islam), in the journal "Atheist" No. 51 of 1930. It should be noted that Vilchevsky presents the definition of 'Yezidstvo' in a very ambiguous way, i.e. "not as a specific religion, which has come down to us in the form of a sect despised by all, whose teachings are professed by several tribes lost in the mountains of Kurdistan, but as a once powerful interaction of ethnic collectives of Asia Minor and Transcaucasia with their national patron gods, against the idea of an interethnic religion",[47] or as one of the national religions of Kurdistan.[48] Later, in scientific studies in the Russian language devoted to Yezidis, this term was replaced by the term 'Yezidism'.

In turn, a similar word is also present in the Yezidi language – *Êzdiyatî*, which can be interpreted as 'Yezidiness'. Here, the Yezidi religion is not referred to as a noun, but as an adjective characterizing anything that is related with Yezidis in general. However, we can safely say that this word was in fact only recently introduced into the Yezidi community, as it would seem that such an important word has yet to be found in the Yezidi *qewls*.[49] *Êzdiyatî* was used in the scientific environment by X. Silêman and X. Cindî Reşo in their 1979 book *Êzdiyatî: Liber Roşnaya Hindek Têkstêd Aîniyê Êzdiyan*. However, as previously mentioned, there is the word Şerfedîn, in the Yezidi language, which is very often used by the Yezidis of Sinjar and the post-Soviet countries to designate their religion. This word is found repeatedly in both Yezidi prayers and *qewls*, but it has, until recently, never appeared in the scientific literature as a name for the Yezidi creed.

Nevertheless, the term 'Yezidism', which has become entrenched in academia, tends to anger a number of ultra-nationalist Yezidis, for many of whom the term 'Yezidism' is an imposition, the origins of which stem from Kurdish assimilation policies. Accordingly,

[46] See: Empson 1928: 77.
[47] Вильчевский 1930: 88.
[48] See: *Ibid*: 81.
[49] Hereinafter in the text: the Yezidi sacred hymns (see: Rodziewicz 2022a: 90–9).

such perspectives consider academic research on their people with skepticism. This antagonism towards the term 'Yezidism' is illustrated in the slogan "*Мылəте мын – Эзди, Зымане мын – Эздики, Дине мын – Шəрфəдин*"[50] [Kurm. *Miletê min – Êzidî, Zimanê min – Êzdikî, Dînê min – Şerfedîn*] (En. My nationality is Yezidi, My language is Yezdiki, My religion is Şerfedîn), which can be seen as an attempt to express their national, linguistic and religious identity. Similarly, the word *milet*, is not fully connected with the terms denoting nationality or nation, although in the Kurdish-Russian dictionary of K. K. Kurdoev the word *milet* is translated as nationality.[51] It should be recognized that such an interpretation is a product of the Soviet policy aimed to obliterate unwanted religious connotations from this Arabic word, which is translated as 'religion, faith, a nation, people'.[52] The word *milet* stems from the Arabic *milla*, used by Muhammad fifteen times in the Qur'an. It is necessary to emphasize that the word *milla* itself is most likely a borrowing by Muhammad from Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac. It means 'word' but can be used figuratively for the religious beliefs of a person.[53] Interestingly, the Syriac term *melltā* constitutes a translation of the Greek word *logos*,[54] which in fact can mean 'word'. And in turn, the word *logos* itself, which have deep philosophical thought of ancient Greek philosophers, the understanding of which varied depending on the philosophical thoughts of one or another philosopher,[55] and as well as the meaning of *Logos* in Christianity – a parallel of which can be found in the Yezidi cosmogonic myth.[56]

Similar to the word words *religio*, and *dīn*, the word *milla* changed over time in numerous ways as linguistic, religious, and political contexts changed. Thus, in addition to meaning 'utterance' and 'word', *milla* came to refer to the religious beliefs of a person, then it became a community of people, and in recent times, it is used to refer to a nation. In turn, in the Yezidi paradigm, the word *milet* is, in particular, used in the formula "*Miletê min Êzidî*". Thus, *Miletê min Êzidî* can mean 'my religious society/association of believers in *Siltan* Êzîd', as well as 'my nationality/nation/ethnicity is Yezidi'. Consequently, the term *milet* when currently used in relation to the Yezidis, is best understood as an ethno-religious and/or a national-religious concept.

In addition to self-identifying themselves through the word *milet*, Yezidis also use this word to designate other communities, thereby distancing and distinguishing

[50] The slogan of the ԷԶԴԻԽԱՆԱ (Ezdikhana) newspaper published by the Yezidi National Union of Armenia (Հաջոյան 2013: 1).
[51] See: Курдóев 1960: 540.
[52] See: Richardson 1777: 1834–5.
[53] See: Jeffery 1938: 268–9.
[54] *Ibid*.
[55] See: Armstrong 1999: 518.
[56] See: Rodziewicz 2022a: 433–69.

themselves from other peoples, thereby declaring their uniqueness. A similar distinction can be traced back to the myth about the origin of the Yezidis, in which they do not consider themselves as the descendants of the union of Adam and Eve as part of the 72 *milets* that emerged from this union.[57] They rather believe to be the descendants of Adam only, through his son Shahid bin Jarr.[58] Also in the *Qewlê Şêşims*[59] we can find other *milets*, and how the Yezidis see them:

Here Turke, here Tetere
Ew xafilêt bê nedere
Ewan jî Şêşims mfere.

All Turks, all Tatars
They are ignorant, without the views
Sheikh Shems is their refuge also.

Here ʻErebe, here ʻEceme
Ewin xafilêt bê kereme
Ewan jî Şêşims pêşqedeme.

All Arabs, all Persians
They are ignorant, without mystical power
Sheikh Shems is their leader also.

File ku filene
Bi keşîş û abû nene
Ew jî li dû Şêşims diherine.

The Christians, being Christians
Have priests and monks
They also follow Sheikh Shems.

Cihû ku cihûne
Di selefxor û buxtan û nebûne
Ew jî bi Şêşims bi recûne [...]

The Jews, being Jews
Are usurers, slanderers and liars
They also have hopes of Sheikh Shems [...]

Heftî û du milete
Heştî û duhezar xulayaqete
Şêşims hemûya mor dikete.

Seventy-two nations
Eighty-two thousand creatures
Sheikh Shems ʻbaptizesʼ them all.

Of course, speaking about other *milets*, it would be incorrect to consider them from the position of modern national and religious concepts, since such concepts did not exist when the Yezidi *qewls* were written. Furthermore, in this *qewl* the Yezidis only describe certain communities and tribal associations of their time, which limits the terms explanatory power.

When considering the skepticism of a number of Yezidis towards academic research on their people, it would be unfair not to mention that such skepticism is not

[57] More about the myth of the origin of the Yezidis see Spät: 2002.
[58] The Yezidi Forefather in the Yezidi tradition (see: *Idem* 2018: 287–92).
[59] See: Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005: 205, with a corrected translation by the author.

unfounded.[60] The younger generation of Yezidis were not convinced by the theories propagated by some researchers, pursuing of exclusive discoveries or linking Yezidi beliefs with the religions of other peoples. The current generation of Yezidis increasingly turn to outside resources to find answers to questions about their religion and origins. Perhaps the situation for young Yezidis can improve in the near future. With the establishment of the International Yezidi Theological Academy (*Akadêmiya Teolojiya Êzdîtiyê ya Navdewletî*) in 2019, Yezidis can begin to better understand the principles of their religion and may also feel a desire to live according to them.[61]

Analysis and Outcome

Based on the above, it can be summarized that the term 'religion' has a long history and in different periods the understanding of the meaning of the word has changed. In addition, in the modern academic discourse, the term has not received an unambiguous interpretation and hence, we can agree with J. Z. Smith that "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy".[62]

Similar to theories dealing with other religions, the theory of a Yezidi religion exists only within the academic environment; it is the product of its attempts to grapple with the disorganized nature of the world. Consequently, it is not so important which word is used to refer to the Yezidi religion within the academe. For the Yezidis themselves, concepts such as religion do not exist at all. Their worldview paradigm is in many ways still anchored in pre-modernity and is based on their beliefs, cults, and customs, which are largely determined by tradition.

Confirmation of this can be found in the Yezidi *qewls*, in which the words *sunet* (tradition) and *sunetxane* (literally 'house of tradition', which in a semantic translation means *sunet* society, *sunet* people, *sunet* world, i.e. 'people of tradition' – Yezidis) in relation to themselves, which are derived from the Arabic word *sunnet*, meaning 'nature, habit, custom, manner, institution, regulation, and mode of living'.[63] This should not, however, be confused with the *Sunnet* of Muhammad, which orthodox Muslims consider an addition to the Qur'an, giving it almost the same authority, thus the name

[60] What I mean is that several researchers have aimed to be the first to examine supposedly sacred Yezidi texts and present them as sensational discoveries, or to study sacred Yezidi hymns, often relying on very dubious informants. All of this has been and is being done for their career advancement, rather than to help the Yezidi community understand themselves through the lens of academic scholarship.

[61] See: Rodziewicz 2022b: 105–6.

[62] Smith 1982: xi.

[63] See: Richardson 1777: 1047.

'Sunnis'. Yezidis, however, by using the words *sunet* and *sunetxane* emphasize the importance of naturally formed habits, customs, and manners that regulate their way of life, which they pass on from generation to generation through oral tradition.

In addition, being a people of tradition in theological and metaphysical aspects, the Yezidis refer to the tradition of transmitting as *sur*, which is a borrowing from the Arabic word *sirr*, which has two meanings. The first notion is that of secret, mystery, or *arcana*, in the sense of a teaching, a reality or even a doctrinal point, hidden by nature or which is kept hidden from persons considered unworthy of knowing it.[64] The second notion is that of a subtle organ, one of the layers of the heart, making up the human spiritual anatomy, which may be translated by "secret, inner consciousness".[65] "In the Yezidi *qewls* and stories it denotes a pure divine essence that has its own personality and will, described as the light (*nûr*) coming from a source imagined as a lamp (*qendîl*) and called *Sura Xudê* ('*Sur* of God')".[66]

Regardless of this world view, it is impossible for Yezidis to completely entirely ignore established societal concepts such as religion, ethnicity, and nation. Both globalization and scientific discourse require that peoples in transition, like the Yezidi, to identify themselves ethnically and religiously. The question of whether internal or external forces will dominate in this process i.e. whether Yezidi beliefs based on tradition within community, or the influence of outside stakeholders will prevail, remains to be seen.

If we define Yezidis within the framework of an ethnic and religious nomenclature in an unbiased manner, we can assert that the Yezidis are on their way to identifying as an ethno-religious minority;[67] this includes an awareness of both an ethnic and a religious self-identification, as well as an interconnectedness of these two concepts. This development is a phenomenon which is also worthy of academic research.

A term or identifier which would be deemed satisfactory by the majority of the Yezidi community that jointly designates their ethnonym and their religion could be beneficial to the Yezidi and to society as a whole. Clarity and unity of designation can help foster unity among the Yezidi, as well as mutual understanding, tolerance and integration in the countries and societies in which Yezidis reside. It can also serve to aid their interaction with mainstream society as well as their self-organization and the advancement of their interests in times of need.

[64] See: Amir-Moezzi 2004: 752–4.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] Rodziewicz 2018: 301.
[67] See: Ali et al. 2021: 15.

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გევორგ ჯალილოვი (Gevorg Dzhalilov)

რელიგიის ცნების ეზიდური გაგება

აბსტრაქტი: ეზიდები, საკუთარ რელიგიაზე საუბრისას, თვით-იდენტიფიკაციისთვის არ იყენებენ ერთ საერთო სახელსა თუ ცნებას. ეს სტატია სწორედ ამ ფენომენს აანალიზებს. სტატია ასევე განიხილავს ტერმინოლოგიას, რომელიც გამოიყენება ეზიდური რელიგიის განსასაზღვრად აკადემიურ კონტექსტში, და - თუ რატომ უარყოფენ ასეთ განსაზღვრებას ეზიდები. სტატია ასევე მიმოიხილავს თავად რელიგიის ცნების ისტორიულ განვითარებას, მის მნიშვნელობას სხვადასხვა დროსა და სივრცეში და ეზიდური კვლევების დარგთან მის ზოგად შესაბამისობას. ინტეგრაციის, უერთიერთტოლერანტობისა და გაგების ინტერესების გათვალიწინებით, სტატიის მიზანია იმის გამორკვევა, თუ როგორ იაზრებს თავის თავს მსოფლიოში არსებული ეზიდი დიასპორა რელიგიის ცნებასთან მიმართებაში.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: რელიგია, ეზიდები, ეზიდიზმი, Şerfedîn, Êzdiyatî, Milet, Dīn.

Gevorg Dzhalilov

Têgihîştina têgeha dînî bal êzdiyan

Abstrakt: Dema ku êzdî behsa bawerîya xwe dikin, xwe bi nav û têgeheke yekgirtî bi kar nayînin. Ev gotare vê fênomênê lêkolîn dike. Herwisa ew termînolojiya ku ji bo destnîşankirina dînê êzdiyan di çarçova akademîk da tê bikar anîn vedikole, û dinêre egerê ku bo çi hindek êzdî evê termînolojîyê bi tevahî înkar dikin. Dîsa ev gotar pêşveçûna dîrokî ya têgeha dînî bi xwe û me'nîya wê di qonax û serdemên cuda da nîşan dike, tevî berçavwergirtina fehm kirina niha heyî û nirxîndina wê di derdor û atmosfêra akademîk da, pêkanîn û cîbicîkirina wê ya giştî di nav êzdiyan da. Ji bo giringîpêdan û berjewendîyê întêgrasyon, tolerans û têgihîştina hevdû, ev lêkolîn di dûmahîyê da hewl dide, ku diyar û eşkere bike, ka êzdîyên dîasporayê li hemû dinyayê çawa dikarin xwe bi têgîna dînî bi xwe bidin nasîn û ser vê pirsê li hev bikin.



Peter Nicolaus

Retired United Nations Official,
Salzburg (Austria) and Washington D.C. (USA)
ORCID: 0009-0006-6885-9139
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32859/yezidistudies/1/4/81-112

Quo Vadis Tawusi Melek? The Catchment Areas of the Yezidi Sanjaqs

Abstract:
This contribution tries to examine the routes different *sanjaqs* took, and which two of them still take, on their procession through the territories where Yezidis dwell or once dwelt. Where this is no longer feasible the article indicates at least the areas which were – according to the memory of Yezidis in the diaspora – visited by a sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* in the past. It further touches upon the rites and ceremonies by which the sacred images are venerated during their journey, and finally briefly discusses possible future arrangements for veneration in the diaspora. The present article does not deal with peacock figurines kept in the possession of individual families or shrines, like the one in the *Khazina al-Rahmani* mentioned below.

Keywords:
Sanjaq, *Tawus Gerran*, Yezidi, Northern Iraq, Armenia, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Germany, Diaspora

A Short History and the Political Importance of the Sanjaqs

Sanjaqs resemble brass candleholders often found in churches in the Middle East – albeit the latter without the I mage of a bird on its top.[1] They are about 80 cm to 1 m long and weigh 6 to 8 kg.[2] Out of a conical or hemispherical base a shaft protrudes which consists of a number of orbs as well as conical or cylindrical elements. On a small plate on top of the last orb stands the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek*, a small brass figurine of a standing bird, which surprisingly does not resemble a peacock – at least not the *Sinjar Sanjaq*[3] and the one in Armenia.[4]

[1] Already Sandreczki (1857: 250f.) observed this striking similarity in a Nestorian Church in Konak (Qudshanis) in the Hakkâri Province of nowadays Turkey: "To my amazement, I saw a candle holder on display that was exactly the shape of a Yezidi rooster or peacock candle holder" (translated by the author).
[2] According to Pir Mamou Othman, only the *Margeh Sanjaq* is heavier and weighs about 10 kg (email 21/06/2015).
[3] This "sanjak resembled a duck rather more than a peacock" (Spät 2009b: 110). In this context cf. also MacLeod 1933: 258.
[4] The *Aleppo* and the *Margeh Sanjaqs* look more like peacocks (cf. Spät 2014b: Fig. 1 and Fig. 3). For a more detailed description of the *sanjaq* in Armenia cf. Nicolaus 2008: 247-250.

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Margeh Sanjaq on Tawus Gerran in Sharya (© Hassan Sleman Hassan)

The seven *sanjaqs* are considered the holiest of the holy ritual objects of Yezidism[5] and symbolize the Yezidi heptad of divine beings, and ultimately *Tawusi Melek*, the Peacock Angel, since all other angels can be seen as his emanation. The mysticism and secretiveness displayed by the Yezidis with regard to these artefacts[6] as well as their origin and history, in particular the peacock symbolism, has been shrouded in mystery. Van Bruinessen pinpoints to Sufi connections and considers that "it is possible that the Yezidis' representation of Tawûsê Melek, the *sanjaq*, [coming from India] reached the Yezidi community of present northern Iraq through Christian channels."[7] Others suggest that the candlestick-like stand, on which the images perch, symbolize the Tree

[5] The veneration of these images has always triggered the dismay and even hatred of their Muslim neighbours. For instance, already in the 16th century the *Fatwa of Mala Salih al-Kurdi al-Hakkari* accuses the Yezidis of prostrating themselves before a *sanjaq* and concludes that "it is obvious that such prostrations are similar to prostrations before idols, or the sun; in fact, it is exactly the same" (Dehqan 2008: 147).

[6] Meek in his article *A Visit to Satan* (1933: 118) points out that "the Yazidis have an image of Satan in the form of a peacock which they hold in great reverence, but this has never been shown to an unbeliever." Though this statement is incorrect, it reflects the perception of many non-Yezidis, still prevailing in the 20th century. In the context of breaches of this secretiveness, it should, *inter alia*, be noted that members of the Babawat tribe, followers of the Ahl-e Haqq creed, in Sinjar "made offerings to the Yazidi men of religion living in Balad, and to the sacred image of Malak Tawus when paraded in the district of Sinjar" (Fuccaro 1999: 53). Since 2014, "the specific form of the pro-Êzîdî Shiite heterodoxy of the Babawat has increasingly made room for an orthodox Shia" (Schmidinger 2022: 44) which seems mainly due to the continued absence (non-return) of the Yezidi majority in Sinjar as well as to mainstream Shia pressure.

[7] Bruinessen 2020: 215.

of Life on which the Persian *Simurgh* roosts,[8] or point out that "the similarity between the sanjaks and the [Babylonian] 'Iynges', are remarkable."[9] However, Rodziewicz has recently shown that the shape of the *sanjaq* itself can be traced back to Hellenistic cultural areas, and that the Yezidi cult of the seven angels could originate in Harran, where the beliefs of the so-called Harranian Sabians was a mixture of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism paired with Mesopotamian astrological cults. Most Harranians, who refused conversion to Islam or Christianity, started leaving their city to less accessible areas in Western Armenia and Kurdistan already in the 11th century and the last group left Harran after the Mogul conquest in the 13th century. While the first groups continued their religious practices and may have already blended into the Armenian[10] and Kurdish non-Islamic milieu, the latter group moved when the followers of Sheikh Adi, the Adawiyya Sufi order, had already established themselves and were gaining religious and political influence within a Kurdish-Islamic and Christian-Arameans environment. In this context, Rodziewicz points to a manuscript, most probably written in Mosul at the turn of the 13th century, which contains a miniature painting depicting Mercury riding a peacock and holding a black snake. Hence, it seems very probable that this representation of Mercury, most probably influenced by Harranian astronomers and astrologers, has melded into Yezidi symbolism.[11] Furthermore, and underlining the link to astrology, there are, as shown below, indications that the time allotted for the 'parade of the peacock' (*Tawus Gerran*)[12] symbolises the year[13] and that this could mean – as Rodziewicz suggested to me in a private conversation – that the seven *sanjaqs* represent the seven planets of the old cosmology travelling through the year, and thereby protecting the places they visit. Some of the Yezidis themselves, like Mir Anwar bin Muawia al-Yezidi,[14] consider the seven images of *Tawusi Melek* as pre-Islamic deities of the Quraysh which were venerated and displayed at the Kaaba. During the Islamisation of Mecca these peacock images were saved from destruction by Abu Sufyan the grandfather of Yazid ibn Mu'awiya,[15] the second caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate and one of

[8] Cf. Collins 2001: 181.

[9] Parry emphasised, in addition, that both "Layard and Badger draw attention to the 'Iynges' or golden images of birds in the palace of the king of Babylon, said to be powers animated by God, and used in consequence for divination" (1895: 360).

[10] The enigmatic group of heretics called Sons of the Sun (*Arevordi*), or Worshippers of the Sun (*Arevapasht*) may originate from these Harranians (cf. Rodziewicz 2021: 1022f.).

[11] Cf. Rodziewicz 2022b: Chapter 8 (*Crossroads of traditions – from Harran to Lalish*) and Crowfoot 1901: 147.

[12] Cf. below.

[13] The *Margeh Sanjaq* takes 52 days (symbolising maybe the 52 weeks of the year) to complete one *Tawus Gerran* and the *Khaltan Sanjaq* – according to a legend narrated by the late *Baba Sheikh* – operated for 365 days.

[14] This is the name which this member of the Chol familiy carried in France and Germany and under which he published his book "Zarathustra zu uns sprach. Gute Gedanken. Gute Worte. Gute Taten". He is also known as Amir Ba-Yazid al-Amawi and wrote under this name his Arabic article "The peacock Sanjaq of Yazid".

[15] For further details and a translation cf. Rodziewicz 2022b: 79-80 and 2021: 993.

the most venerated figures in the Yezidi pantheon. Through him they – according to this author – ended up in the possession of the Yezidis.

In the past the seven *sanjaqs* were sent on so-called *Tawus Gerrans* to most Yezidi villages and this parading of the peacock was "an important tool for religious standardization and maintaining the unity of Yezidi religion."[16] Furthermore, it ensured that the contact between these communities and their secular and religious leadership in Ba'adra and Lalish could be maintained.[17] In this context, Fuccaro rightly suggests that the Yezidi *mir* derived his authority and legitimacy as the absolute leader from the fact that he possessed the *sanjaqs*, which also served as the major source of his income.[18] The *Tawus Gerran* is the only instrument through which the *mir* can regularly collect contributions from Yezidi communities – he has neither the administration nor the power to implement and impose a taxation system. Hence, the *mir* provides the inhabitants of the villages visited the possibility to worship and to give him his share. These contributions are collected by the *qewwals* conducting a *Tawus Gerran* according to the following process: the *mir* contracts the *sanjaq* out to the highest bidding group of *qewwals*,[19] who in turn can keep all the donations and revenues received[20] through the parading of the peacock. In 2011 a *Tawus Gerran* in Sinjar was granted to *qewwals* who offered and paid 300 million Iraqi Dinar which was at that time the equivalent of 206,000 USD. However, this changed in 2022 – at least for the *Margeh Sanjaq* as outlined below.

When not on a *Tawus Gerran* or displayed in the sanctuary of Lalish, the *sanjaq*s were kept and venerated in the Treasury of the Most Gracious (*Khazina al-Rahmani*) in Ba'adra located in the complex of buildings and ruins which once formed the palace of Mir Ali Beg. For the last four decades, Mira Salwa Najman Beg has been the *mijewra* of this shrine and in charge of the *sanjaqs*.[21] In May 2022, she reported

[16] Spät 2009a: 64. On the institution and history cf., *inter alia*, Browski 1889: 479, Layard 1853: 39f., Nicolaus 2008: 218-221, Rodziewicz 2021: 992-994, and Spät 2009b: 111-113 and 2010: 98-101).

[17] "It is clear that the Parading of the Peacock was an important tool for religious standardization and maintaining the unity of Yezidi religion, as far as this is possible in an oral tradition, through ensuring a continuous contact between the religious centre and periphery, limiting independent religious development in the latter" (Spät 2009a: 64).

[18] Cf. Fuccaro 1999: 17. The origin of this collection system is unknown. However, the narratives recounted by Edmonds (1967: 39) and Guest (1993: 36) are highly improbable as they place the introduction of the institution of *Tawus Gerran* in the mid-19th century, even though it was well underway by then (cf. Nicolaus 2025).

[19] According to some highest-ranking religious dignitaries, like the *Ekhtiare* of Georgia and *Sarhad Yezdikhan*, this was not always the case and has with certainty only been practiced since the beginning of the last century. However, since it is not known what arrangement predates the one in question, and knowing that the *mirs* depended on the revenues yielded by the *Tawus Gerran*, and knowing that the *qewwals* traveled without security escort, it can be assumed that a similar arrangement was used before the 20th century.

[20] For instance, the payments for being granted the honour to cater for the entourage of the *sanjaq*.

[21] The *Mijewir* of the *Khazina al-Rahmani* is always a female (*mijewra*) of the extended *mir*-family (the present one is from the *Dawood* branch).



Mira Salva in the Khazina al-Rahmani 2022 (© Dietmar Cerjak)

that "all the seven niches for the seven *sanjaqs* have been empty since the ISIS onslaught on Sinjar in 2014 – some of them for longer than people remember." She further explained that in previous times a sheep was sacrificed on the 6th of May every year in order to celebrate the day when the Ottomans returned the confiscated *sanjaqs* in 1914.[22] After the sacrifice, the *sanjaqs* were taken to Lalish and baptised[23] and then again displayed in the *Khazina al-Rahmani*. At present, the only *tawus* (peacock) image kept in the shrine is not a *sanjaq*, but a figurine of a *hamsa*-bird from India which she received as a present from a Yezidi who lives in Germany.[24]

[22] In September 1892, Ottoman troops raided the Yezidi sanctuary at Lalish and confiscated five *sanjaqs* (for more details cf. Guest 1993: 136f.).

[23] Cf. also Parry 1895: 363f.

[24] Hence, the picture of this *hamsa*-bird (illustrating an article in Wikipedia) entitled "Statue von Melek Taus in einem Heiligtum für Khiz Rahman in Baadre" (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religi%C3%B6se_Feste_der_Jesiden accessed: 13/07/2023) is quite misleading.

The Parades of the Seven Sanjaqs[25]

For these parades or *gerrans* each *sanjaq* had been assigned a certain territory, which it visited at least once a year. This practice resulted in an identification of each *sanjaq* with the territory allocated.[26] In other words, there is, or rather was, one particular *sanjaq* for, and named after, each region where Yezidis dwell, or once dwelt.

During any *Tawus Gerran* the entourage of the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* always consists of a number of *qewwals* and other religious dignitaries. For instance, the *Tawus Gerran* of the *Margeh Sanjaq*[27] comprises of:

- Six *qewwals*,[28] consisting of a *sanjaq baki*, a *qwelbesh*, two qewwals beating the *defs* (tambourines), and two playing the *shibabs* (flutes). During celebrations, where music is performed the former two sit to the left of the *sanjaq* and the latter to its right.
- The *sanjaq baki*[29] is responsible for leading and conducting the ceremonies. Upon request and after receiving donations, he also prays for people and provides religious advice and guidance. During the ceremonial display of the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek*, he sits to the left of the *naqib*.[30] Furthermore, the *sanjaq baki* represents the *baba qewwal*[31] and observes that the procedures are followed and that the head of all *qewwals* receives his share from the donations and revenues.
- The *qwelbesh* is, as already the title indicates, the reciter of the holy hymns. He is certainly very versed in the *qewls* and their presentation. There is no specific sitting

[25] The information provided is based, if not indicated differently, on interviews carried out with the late *Baba Sheikh*, the new *Baba Sheikh*, *Baba Chawush*, *Baba Qewwal*, and a number of *qewwals* (in particular Qewwal Behzad Sulayman, the late Qewwal Salim, and Qewwal Falah) as well as Mira Salwa, during the author's 9 months mission to Erbil in 2003, and his frequent visits to northern Iraq during the period from 2015 to 2023.

[26] The term stems from the Ottoman governmental terminology denoting an administrative division of the Ottoman Empire.

[27] In Sinjar the composition of the entourage of the *sanjaq* was much simpler and consisted only of nine *qewwals* and the sheikh *wezir*.

[28] In spring 2004, also two *nûfers* (*qewwals* in training) participated.

[29] Rashow (1997: 36) refers to him as *Begê Senjaqan* and, according to him, "there would always be only one *begê senceqan* who is the second in the hierarchy of the *qewwals* and whose authority supersedes the one of the *mir* and *baba sheikh* during the parade of the peacock. He must be from the Hakkari or Dumli tribes and should have an excellent knowledge with regard to religious matters" (translated by the author). However, according to the present *Baba Qewwal* (interviewed on 12/03/2024) every *qewwal* could become a *sanjaq baki* for a specific *Tawus Gerran*, provided he is of good character and has a good knowledge of the *qewls* and the Yezidi religion in general. In other words, the summer *parade of the peacock* in Shekhan may be led by another *qewwal* than the spring one.

[30] The Arab term *naqib* denotes the one who investigates and verifies. Furthermore, it can mean chief or leader and is used in some Arab armies, like Saudi Arabia and Iraq, as a term specifying the rank equal to captain. The Yezidis use the Arab term or its Kurmanji equivalent (*neqîb*) for the person who provides security to the *sanjaq*. In this the *naqib* is the personal servant of the *sanjaq* and hence Kreyenbroek's translation "personal servant" (1995: 242, n 34) makes perfect sense. The incumbent of this position must always be a *pir* from the *Hajiali* (Kurmanji: *Haciyal*) lineage and is appointed annually by the *baba sheikh*.

[31] Also referred to as the Great *Qewwal* (*Mezinê Qewala*).

arrangement for him, but he quite often sits with the *qewwals* playing the tambourines or plays himself this instrument in order to relief one of his colleagues.

- The *peshraw*[32] is always a member of the resident *feqir* family in Lalish, whose head is both the *Metbekhchi* and the *Mijewir* of the sanctuary of Sheikh Adi. In the past years and in the spring of 2024, it was always the *metbekhchi* himself who acted as *peshraw*. He announces the arrival of the *Tawus Gerran* in each village and selects the host for the *sanjaq* and its entourage. He also kindles the wicks in the house of the host and in the shrines nearby[33] and distributes *berat*,[34] holy water[35] from a metal jar (*sherpik*), and blessed wicks from his sanctuary. During the display of the *sanjaq* he sits on the rights side of the image of *Tawusi Melek*. His involvement and the sitting arrangement ensure that the eminent role of the *Metbekhchi* and the *Mijewir* of Lalish is recognised and that he and his family receive part of the donations and revenues earned through the *Tawus Gerran*.[36]
- The *naqib* is responsible for the security and policing since he has to ensure that none of the other participants divert donations or uses the *sanjaq* for his own benefit. In order to ensure that he, as the representative of the *mir*, receives all the donation and revenues and keeps record on them village by village. Furthermore, he is the one responsible to assemble the artefact when the *Tawus Gerran* arrives in a village and dismantle it when they leave. During the display of the sacred image, he sits to the left of the *sanjaq*.
- The Mijewir of *Kaniya Spi* travels within the *Tawus Gerran* in order to offer his services to those believers who were unable to visit Lalish during the past year. In other words, for a pecuniary contribution he distributes the sanctified water to the believers and baptises the children who were not taken to Lalish for this rite of

[32] According to the *Metbekhchi* of Lalish himself, the term means something like 'proclaimer'.

[33] A responsibility he, or one of his family members, carries out in Lalish daily together with the *day kabani* (head of the *faqras*).

[34] For *berat* in general cf. Rodziewicz 2022a.

[35] The informants could not agree whether it would be water from *Zemzem* or from *Kaniya Spi*. The *Metbekhchi* of Lalish was firm that it was water from *Zemzem*, while the *Mijewir* of *Kaniya Spi* assured that it was from his well. Since this holy water is distributed by the *metbekhchi* it would seem logical that it, indeed, stems from his domain.

[36] Bearing in mind that in order to become the resident *feqir* in Lalish (*Metbekhchi* and *Mijewir* of Lalish) the incumbent must win the annual auction at which this office is auctioned and then pay a significant sum to the *mir* (in 2019, *Feqir* Sheikh Hessen won the bid with 250 million Iraqi Dinars which is more than USD 200,000), it seems quite reasonable that the incumbent tries to recover some of his expenses in religious celebrations which foremost benefit the *mir*.

passage[37] with the holy water of *Kaniya Spi*. There is no special sitting arrangement for him during the display of the *sanjaq*.

- The *qahwaji*[38] who serves coffee to the people who come and venerate the *sanjaq*. He is selected by the *naqib* who also requests in each village the host of the *Tawus Gerran* to provide a considerable quantity (2 to 3 kg) of coffee beans to the *qahwaji*. The latter prepares the typical strong coffee of the region and serves it to the visiting believers. In return, he always receives a little money, 50% of which he gives to the *naqib*.

As aforementioned, the *Tawus Gerran* of the *Margeh Sanjaq* is no longer auctioned out but the donations and revenues are now divided as follows: the mir takes 50%, *baba qewwal* (through the *sanjaq baki*) 25%, the *metbekhchi* 12.5%, and the *naqib* another 12.5%. At present, *Baba Qewwal* Bahzad Sulaiman Sivo, after having taken his share, distributes the remainder remuneration, among the participating *qewwals*.

Some religious dignitaries play important roles in certain proceedings related to the *Tawus Gerran*, while others may just join the *sanjaqs*' entourage. The first category includes, for example, the *baba sheikh*, who appears to be a central figure during the ceremony held in the Valley of the Peacock mentioned below, as well as *baba gavan* who is a key figure for the *Tawus Gerran* since, without him present, no peacock image can be baptized and leave Lalish.[39] Dignitaries of the latter group, such as Pir Murat, the *Mijewir* of *Kaniya Spi*, attend the peacock parade in 2024 to keep in touch with the faithful and to offer their services and advice. Dignitaries in both categories are allowed to keep the donation they receive for themselves, which prompted one of the author's informants to remark, "They hunt for alms on their own."

During a *Tawus Gerran*, the sacred image stays for its veneration in the house of the individual, who offered the highest amount of money as donation.[40] The highest bidder also has to host the *sanjaq* and its entourage overnight and to provide a meal for them and the worshippers (at least one sheep is slaughtered in each location).[41] In the house of the host *sama'*s are performed whilst the *sanjaq* rests leaning against a pile of pillows[42]

[37] For baptism outside Lalish cf. Fisher and Zagros 2019: 205. The water is also distributed by the *qewwals* to unmarried young man with the wish that God should give them slim and faithful girls as brides (cf. Aysif 2012: 213).

[38] An Arabic term which means: 'the person who pours coffee for guests'.

[39] In the context of *baba gavan*'s involvement in the baptism of *sanjaqs* during New Year cf. Açikyildiz (2010: 109) and Rodziewicz (2016a: 187).

[40] This was already observed by Grant: "It is carried from place to place on special occasions, or whenever a Yezidee pays enough to have his mansion blest by its presence" (Laurie 1853: 218).

[41] Already in the early 2000s this practice was abolished with regard to Bashiqa and Bahzani since private houses at these locations did not have the capacity necessary to receive and host large crowds of worshippers. Now, the *sanjaq* is venerated in large local shrines; however, the highest bidder will have to provide a sumptuous meal for the entourage of the sacred image and selected celebrants.

[42] Aysif reports that seven lamps, the Lamps of Knowledge (*Çirayên Me'rîfetê*) are lit beside the *sanjaq* in the evening (cf. 2012: 213). However, the author has never witnessed these lamps.

of different colour which are quite often, but not exclusively, arranged in the following order: yellow at the bottom, then red, green, and finally white on the top.[43] During the ceremony where music is played, the *qewwals* – as indicated above – sit on both sides next to the *sanjaq*, play their instruments, and recite the *qewl* and the *qesidas* which constitute the particular *sama'*[44]. It seems that at each location particular *sama's* are conducted, like in Bahzani the *Sema'ya Qanûnî* (*Sama'* of the Law) also known as *Sema'ya Şêx Adî* (*Sama'* of Sheikh Adi) as well as the *Sema'ya Şêx Şems* (*Sama'* of Sheikh Shams) and in Bashiqa again the *Sema'ya Qanûnî* and *Sema'ya Şerfedîn* (*Sama'* of Sherfedin).[45]

1. The *Margeh*[46] or *Shekhan Sanjaq* – also known as ***Tawus Welatê Sheikh***[47] was – according to Mira Salwa Najman Beg, the guardian of the *sanjaqs*, taken from the *Khazina al-Rahmani* in Ba'adra to the residence of the *mir* in Ain Sifni in 2014, when ISIS attacked the Sinjar region. When the security situation deteriorated further, the artefact was moved to Erbil where it was stored and guarded in an apartment particularly rented for this purpose and the compound was protected by heavily armed Yezidis belonging to the *mir's* security guards. In early 2022, the *sanjaq* did not return to Ba'adra, but was taken to the area in the Ninawa Governorate, where Yezidis are the majority, namely to Bashiqa and Bahzani. It was kept in Bashiqa at the house of *Peshimam Margeh*[48] until April when this *sanjaq* went again on a *Tawus Gerran*, for the first time in eight years.[49]

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[43] These were the colours, and the order of the cushions displayed at many locations visited by the *Margeh Sanjaq* during its parade, and several informants indicated that the colours and their sequence would reflect the flag of the Shamsani sheikhs. However, it seems that this is more coincidental as there are pictures of the *Margeh Sanjaq* circulating on the internet where the colours differ and the pillows are arranged in another order (e.g., yellow, dark green, light green, and red).

[44] The execution of the ceremony seems exclusively in the hands of males. However, during *Tawus Gerrans*, like during the procession of the *bere shibake* to Lalish, only females are allowed to carry a *tawa'* (censer) and to ritually clean the path of the sacred items by burning incense.

[45] For *sama's* in general cf. Eedo 2017: 49f. and 2011: 148f.; Omarkhali 2017: 164ff.

[46] The term "Margah" or "Mergehê" was already known in the late Sasanian period and denominated a subdistrict northeast of Duhok and above the Greater Zab (cf. Morony 1984: 133). It survived into the Islamic period as the name of the Nestorian diocese of Margha belonging to the metropolitan province of Adiabene. However, the geographical context seems forgotten and there are hardly any ordinary Yezidis who are able to denote the *Margeh* area. Only high-ranking religious dignitaries equate it with "the territory of Lalish and its surroundings" (Pir Dima Pirbari in a private correspondence in February 2024). The term is more used as an honorific title for the highest-ranking religious dignitaries (e.g., *Akhtiare Margeh* and *Peshimam Margeh*), underlining the dignity of the holder as well as the ancient roots of the office.

[47] Which translates to "the Peacock from the Sheikh's Country".

[48] Some informants indicated that a place under the federal government in Baghdad was more secure than Kurdistan and that this move would forestall pressure and blackmailing from the Kurdish Regional Government as they could not threaten to confiscate the holy artefact. However, Mira Salwa indicated that this may less be due to security concerns but connected with the power struggle between the new *Baba Sheikh* and *Peshimam Margeh*.

[49] However, during this period (2014 to 2022), the *Margeh Sanjaq* was presented to the believers at the sanctuary of Sheikh Adi in Lalish on the occasion of religious holidays and festivals (e.g., during the *Cejna Cimayê* in 2018 and 2019, as observed by the author.

During its *gerran*, the image of *Tawusi Melek* visits the Yezidi villages in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as well as the urban area of Bashiqa and Bahzani twice a year: the first visit commences after the *Sare Sale* (Yezidi New Year Festival) in April,[50] and the second one begins after the *Cejna Çileyê Havînê* (the Forty Days of Fasting in Summer[51]) which ends on the 3rd of August.[52] Each parade of the *Margeh Sanjaq* visits, takes 52 days and symbolizes, according to the late Qewwal Salim, the 52 weeks of the year: "The tawus protects the villages in Shekhan throughout the year." It begins with its baptism[53] at *Kaniya Keloke*[54] in Lalish, from where it is taken to the Valley of the Peacock on the same day.



Margeh Sanjaq 2023 (© Artur Rodziewicz)

There, in front of the peacock image carved into the western steep face of the valley,[55] a short ceremony (lasting for about one hour) is held and usually attended by several of the highest-ranking religious dignitaries, like *baba sheikh*, *peshimam margeh*, and

[50] For this celebration and its meaning cf. Rodziewicz 2020.
[51] During which religious dignitaries fast. Cf. also Kreyenbroek 1995: 151f.
[52] A delay of up to 10 days was quite common in previous times as this was the time needed to prepare and arrange for the *Tawus Gerran*.
[53] The water, in which the *sanjaq* was baptised, is kept, and is supposed to have curative powers (cf. Empson 1928: 191; Aysif 2012: 213).
[54] The water comes through a conduit from *Kaniya Spi*.
[55] GPS coordinates: 36.46504497132641, 43.343273662106206.

baba gavan as well as the entourage of the *sanjaq* during the *Tawus Gerran*. In this ceremony the parts of the *sanjaq* are assembled and a *diroza* (prayer) and the *Qewlê Sincaqa*[56] are recited. From there the procession with the *sanjaq* proceeds to the shrine of Pir Bub where the *Sama'* of Sheikh Adi and the *Sama'* of Sheikh Shams are performed, whilst the sacred image is venerated by the public of Bahzani. It stays there overnight and is moved the next day to the shrine of Melek Sheikh Sin in Bashiqa where it is worshipped by the local population and where it again stays overnight. In Bashiqa the *Sama'* of Sheikh Adi and the *Sama'* of Sherfedin are performed.

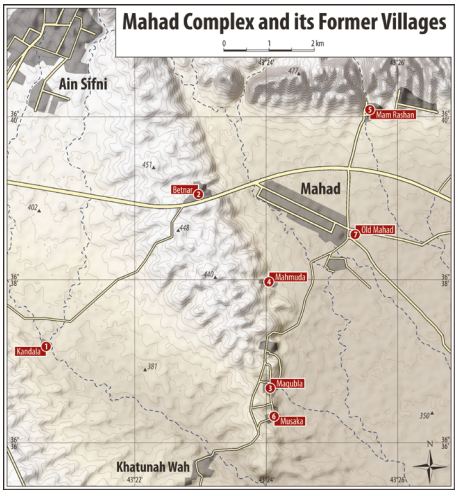


Peacock carved into a rock at Peacock Valley 2022 (© Dietmar Cerjak)

Then, the *Tawus Gerran* continues to the Mahad Complex where the *sanjaq* stays for six nights. This settlement was, like many others, established in the second half of the 1970s, when the former Iraqi regime forcibly resettled Kurds and Yezidis in order to cut off support for the guerrillas. Their villages were destroyed and the displaced were

[56] Also known as *Qewlê Malê Bava*, *Qewlê Xoş Malê Bava*, and *Qewlê Distrême* praising Sheikh Adi (cf. Omarkhali 2017: 603). However, Rashow (2013: 432-435 and 424-428) lists the *Qewlê Distrême* (*Qewlê Sincaqa*) and *Qewlê Xoş Malê Bava* as different *qewls*.

forcefully relocated into so-called complexes.[57] Nevertheless, the parade of the peacock follows the tradition and visits the seven quarters to the Mahad Complex, populated by those who originate from the now destroyed seven hamlets of Kandala, Betnar, Maqubla, Mahmuda, Mam Rashan, Musaka, and Old Mahad,[58] in this sequence. The *qewwals* still refer to these quarters they visit with the *sanjaq* as villages. After the visit to the Mahad Complex, the object of veneration moves on and is displayed at the below listed locations in the following order:[59] Ain Sifni, Beristek, Essian (Asyan), Nusayri, Jarahiya, Taftiyan (Qaftiyan), Beban, Bozan, Khorza, Gabara, Shaykha Complex, Nifiriya, Khoshaba, Sreshka, Dughat, Khatara, Babirah Complex, Khanke Complex, Sharya Complex, and Ba'adra.[60]



In order to grant the large Yezidi population in Khatara and Ba'adra the possibility to see and celebrate the *sanjaq*, the sacred image remains in the former for two and in

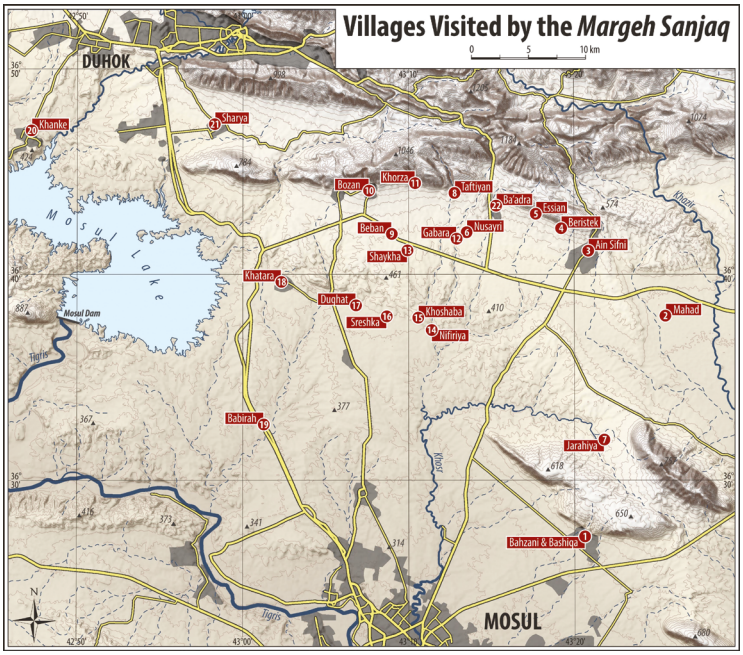
[57] Officially, these crude new settlements, located on the main highways (easy to control by the army), were called *mujamma'ats*. The Arab word literally means "amalgamations" or "collectives", but these settlements are now generally referred to as "complexes". "The destruction of villages and the traditional economy of the mountain farmers on the Sinjar Mountains began already in 1957, continued in 1965, and also went on under the rule of the Ba'th Party. These measures were not always specifically directed against the Êzîdî as a religious minority, but guided by an ideology of progress that regarded isolated mountain villages as backward and was aimed at the complete penetration of the whole Iraqi territory" (Schmidinger 2022: 46).

[58] GPS coordinates for these locations (nowadays only used by some shepherds and very few returnees): Betnar (36°39'06.3"N 43°22'57.1"E), Kandala (36°37'11.9"N 43°20'38.2"E), Mam Rashan (36°40'08.1"N 43°25'29.0"E), Mahmuda (36°37'58.7"N 43°24'02.5"E), Maqubla (36°36'41.6"N 43°24'04.3"E), Musaka (36°36'21.1"N 43°24'09.5"E), Old Mahad (36°38'48.5"N 43°25'24.0"E).

[59] On the maps the routes taken become apparent by following the numbers added to the names of the villages. If not indicated differently, the *sanjaq* stays in a place for one night.

[60] GPS coordinates for locations not or inaccurately shown on common maps: Jarahiya (36°32'2.544"N 43°21'49.031"E), Nusayri (36°41'49.6"N 43°13'14.23"E), Nifiriya (36°37'31.8"N 43°11'19.5"E), Taftiyan (36°44'02.8"N 43°12'47.6"E), Shaykha (36°41'14.769"N 43°10'0.687"E).

latter for three nights.[61] In the complexes, like in Mahad, it also stays several nights and visits the quarters of the destroyed hamlets from where large segments of the population originate. At the Shaykha Complex the *sanjaq* stays for three nights and visits the quarters the people from Khorza, Karsafa, and Old Shaykha; at the Babirah Complex it stays for five nights and visits the quarters of Old Babirah, Jakgan, Daka Mazan, Daka Kajik, and Mashirfa (most of these former villages are by now submerged by the Mosul Dam Lake); at the Khanke Complex it stays for ten nights and visits the quarters of Old Khanke, Rubaybiyah, Khanich (Zaynan), Khairafath, Mam Shivan Merida, Kabarto, Surkah, Gutba (Qutba), Qasryazdin, and Mam Shivan Perah; and at the Sharya Complex stays seven nights and visits the quarters of Qalaat Badri, Old Sharya, Shaykh Xeder, Sina, and Rakva Kafn. In the morning of the last day of its journey, the *Margeh Sanjaq* is taken first to Lalish, where it is briefly displayed and then returned to the *Khazina al-Rahmani* – at least this was the procedure before the ISIS onslaught.[62]



[61] None of the interlocutors of the author could explain why the artefact says in Ain Sifni only for 1 night, although it has more Yezidi inhabitants than Khatara and Ba'adra together. The reason may be that Ain Sifni has a sizeable Muslim population too (about 25%) and that the Yezidis may not want to provoke this Islamic segment of the population and endangering the *sanjaq* by staying there longer with the image of *Tawusi Melek*, identified by Muslims with *Iblis* (Satan).

[62] In 2022 and 2023 the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* was kept in Bashiqa at the house of *Peshimam Margeh*, when it was not on a *gerran*.

Although the route of the *Tawus Gerran* seems clearly defined and has been followed by generations of *qewwals*, it is not carved in stone and the following two examples provide evidence that there is some flexibility built into the schedule of the *Tawus Gerrans*. In 2023 during the first parade of the *Margeh Sanjaq* the tiny hamlet of Kharani[63] on the Duhok-Mosul Road 4 km north of Jambur was visited for a few hours and the sacred image displayed. This onetime addition to the list of villages to be visited happened because there was plenty of time and allegedly the villagers had promised considerable donations. Furthermore, during the same *Tawus Gerran* and after the visit to Dughat the *sanjaq* did not go to Khatara since there was a three-day *tawaf* at the shrine of Hakim Ferees.[64] Hence, the procession first moved to the Babirah Complex and returned from there to Khatara only after the *tawaf* was over.

2. The *Sinjar Sanjaq* had just commenced a *Tawus Gerran*, when ISIS terrorists attacked Sinjar (Kurmanji: *Shingal*)[65] in August 2014.[66] Since then, its whereabouts remain a secret, but according to Mira Salwa it is hidden somewhere in the Sinjar District and the Sinjarians refuse to give it back to the *Khazina al-Rahmani* as they do not trust the new *mir* and the new *baba sheikh*. Nevertheless, she expressed the hope that this year (2022) the *Sinjar Sanjaq* would go on its journey and then return to her to be housed again at the Treasury of the Most Gracious – a wish which unfortunately did not materialise since no *Tawus Gerran* took place in Sinjar in 2022 and 2023.[67]

Before the ISIS onslaught, the *Sinjar Sanjaq* paraded the Sinjar district and five villages in the Duhok Governorate twice a year. The latter villages were previously covered by the *Tawus Gerran* of the below-mentioned *Khaltan Sanjaq* but were added to the territory of the *Sinjar Sanjaq* after WW I, when they became difficult to access due to the new border, separating Iraq from Turkey.

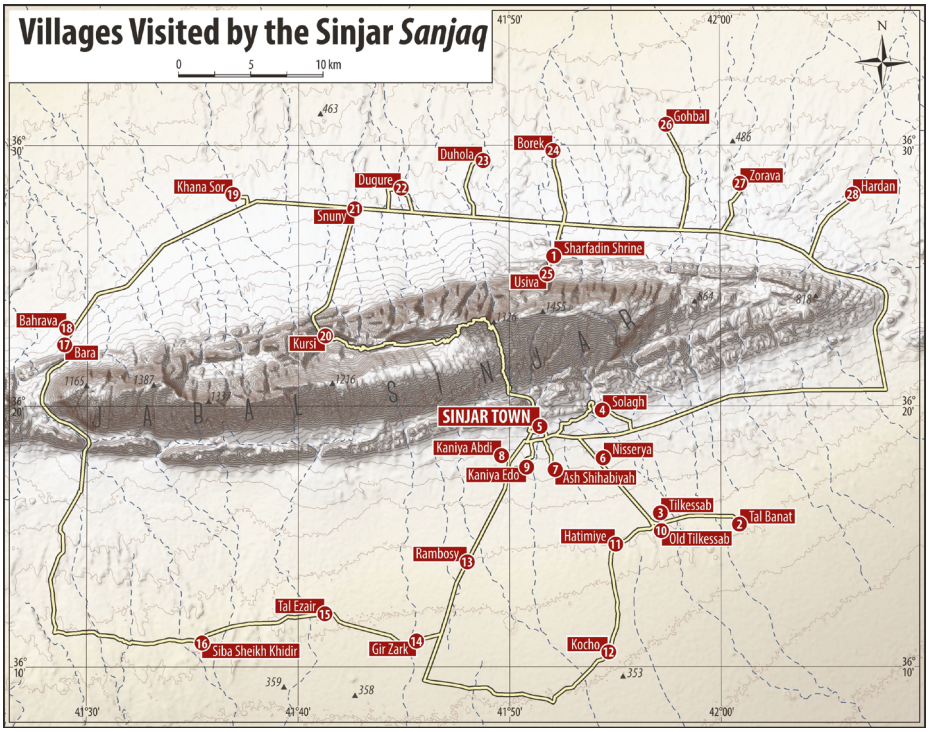
[63] GPS Coordinates: 36°44'04.0"N 42°56'05.0"E.

[64] According to the people of Khatara, Hakim Ferees came to them from Lalish. He was a strong and brave man who protected the Yezidis in this area. Today, sick people, regardless of the disease they suffer from, come to his shrine to find healing.

[65] For unknown reasons most Yezidis, in the Nineveh Governorate and Kurdistan, rather do not use the term *Shingal* but the Arab word *Sinjar*.

[66] According to Maisel (2017: 66) the *Sinjar Sanjaq* "did not tour the villages from 2005 until 2010 but in 2011 and 2012."

[67] Although, no parade of the peacock in Sinjar was envisaged for 2024, a Tawus Gerran took place in the second half of the year (however, it visited only selected places which were considered safe).

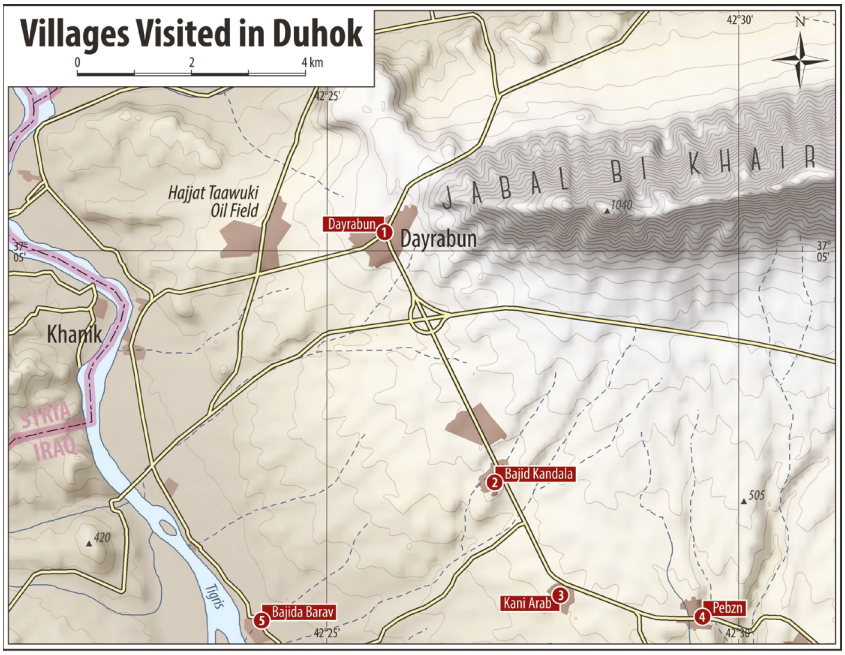


The first *Tawus Gerran* of the *Sinjar Sanjaq* usually commenced shortly after the feast in honour of Khidr Ilias (20th of March) and the second journey was undertaken, like the second tour of the *Margeh Sanjaq*, after *Cejna Çileyê Havînê*. In order to free the *qewwals* for important religious events and to allow the population in Sinjar to attend these festivities, both yearly *Tawus Gerrans* were interrupted for about one week; the first one during the Festival of the New Year (*Sare Sale*) in April and the second during the Festival of the Assembly (*Cejna Cimayê*) in October.[68] Furthermore, the parading of the peacock came to a halt for five days after the completion of its tour in Sinjar, before visiting the last five villages in Duhok.[69] Whilst the *qewwals* return to Bashiqa and Bahzani or Lalish, the *sanjaq* was kept, or rather hidden, somewhere in Sinjar until the tour recommenced.

For the preparation of its *Tawus Gerran* the *Sinjar Sanjaq* was taken from the *Khazina al-Rahmani* to Lalish where it was, like the *Margeh Sanjaq*, baptised with water from *Kaniya Keloke*. Then, on the same day – without visiting the Valley of the Peacock – the artefact was moved to Bashiqa where it stayed overnight in the house of *Baba Qewwal*.[70]

[68] Needless to say that also the journey of the *Margeh Sanjaq* came to a halt during the Festival of the Assembly.
[69] According to the late Qewwal Salim the breaks were longer and corresponded to a halt of 20 days which would mean that the *Tawus Gerran* would have lasted 104 days – two times the weeks of a year.
[70] Interview with Baba Qewwal Bahzad Sulaiman Sivo in May 2022.

The next morning the *Tawus Gerran* started at the shrine of Sharfadin in Sinjar and from there the *sanjaq* proceeded to 33 main locations and stayed in its area for 84 nights (not including the days of the breaks). At the places the *sanjaq* stayed overnight it was host-



ed by the highest bidder who was in most of the cases the *mukhtar* of the village.[71] Upon the completion of the Parade of the Peacock, the artefact was moved straight back to *Khazina al-Rahmani* – without visiting Lalish. The places and the order by which they were visited (indicated on the map by the numbers added to the village names) were as follows:[72] Sharfadin Shrine (daytime), Tal Banat (3 nights), Tilkessab (4 nights), Solagh (2 nights), Sinjar Town (daytime), Nisserya, Ash Shihabiyah, Kaniya Abdi, Kaniya Edo, Old Tilkessab, Hatimiye (daytime), Kocho, Rambosy, Gir Zark, Tal Ezair (7 nights), Siba Sheikh Khidir (7 nights), Bara, Bahrava (daytime), Khana Sor (12 nights), Kursi (2 nights), Snuny (4 nights), Dugure (6 nights), Duhola (4 nights), Borek (7 nights), Usiva (daytime), Gohbal (5 nights), Zorava (4 nights), Hardan (daytime), Dayrabun, Bajid Kandala, Kani Arab, Pebzn (Pebizne), Bajid Barav.[73] The tour to these 33 locations is

[71] A practice already reported by Badger 1852: 123.

[72] If not indicated differently, the *sanjaq* stays in a place for one night.

[73] GPS coordinates for locations not, or inaccurately, shown on common maps: Bajid Kandala (37° 2'46.69"N 42°27'1.45"E), Bahrava (36°22'44.76"N 41°29'23.315"E), Kaniya Abdi (36°18'33.296"N 41°49'46.696"E), Kaniya Edo (36°18'7.589"N 41°50'59.996"E), Gir Zark (36°10'51.701"N 41°45'38.869"E), Nisserya (36°18'12.65"N 41°54'38.67"E), Old Tilkessab (36°15'12.68"N 41°56'50.24"E), Pebizne (37°2'26.405"N 42°29'23.83"E), Rambosy (36°13'53.78"N

somewhat confusing, in particular the one south of Mount Sinjar, but all *qewwals* interviewed confirmed that this has always been the route and that nobody would be able to explain why.[74]

3. The *Halab* or *Aleppo Sanjaq* went to nowadays Syria[75] and visited the Yezidi communities in this country. There is confirmation that the *Tawus Gerran* visited Al-Hasakah, Amuda, and Ras al-Ayn, whilst Aleppo and Afrin were left out because the Yezidis there were violating the marriage taboos.[76] However, it remains unknown whether the *sanjaq* proceeded to the Yezidi settlements in western Syria, like the Yezidi community in the Jebel Seman hills immediately west of modern Aleppo.[77] With regard to *Tawus Gerran* to the Yezidi pockets north of Aleppo and adjacent to the Turkish border, Alexander Eliseev, a Russian officer, medical doctor, and traveller[78] reports that he saw a *sanjaq* in the Afrin area in 1886/7.[79] He continues that he had even earlier, "managed to see the statuette of Melk-Tauz in the Caucasus in the Yezidi village of Dzhemushli, and later at different places in Anatolia." This all is quite unlikely and, if these images were not decorative peacock statuettes privately owned,[80] one has to concur with Asatrian and Arakelova that his encounters with the Yezidis were somewhat doubtful.[81] Aside of that, there are only vague pieces of information concerning the *Aleppo Sanjaq*. For instance, Pirbari, Grigoriev, and Ivasko mention *en passant* that "sometimes a group of kawals may be sent to Yezidians in Syria."[82] According to informants in Bashiqa and Ba'adra, a long time ago a party of *qewwals*, carrying the *Aleppo Sanjaq*, was prevented

41°47'40.37"E), Solagh (36°19'54.592"N 41°54'31.554"E), Tal Banat (36°15'18"N 42°0'59"E), Tal Ezair (36°12'8.15"N 41°41'23.56"E), Usiva (36°25'15.024"N 41°51'54.972"E).

74 Parts of the Sinjar *Tawus Gerran* was documented by Eszter Spät in her 2013 video documentary "Following the Peacock" released in early 2014 (2014a).

75 The presence of Yezidis in nowadays Syria was already confirmed in the early 17th century by the chaplain William Biddulph (1609: 41) who reported: "In the Mountaines betwixt Scanderone [Cilicia] and Aleppo, there are dwelling a certaine kind of people called at this day Coords, coming of the race of the ancient Parthians, who worship the Devill" (*apud* Maclean 2019: 119).

76 Pir Dima Pirbari in a private correspondence in February 2024. Maisel (2017: 45, 74, 95) points out that these violations of the marriage rules only affected extra-caste marriages, but not marriages with non-Yezidis, which were still considered utterly sinful and completely forbidden, while Schmidinger (2022: 22) reports: "In Syria, there are marriages between Muslims and Êzîdî. Particularly in the socially quite liberal Efrîn […] the relationships between the Muslim and the Êzîdî Kurds were so close that there were fairly frequent marriages between them; even though these were frowned upon, they were at least possible."

77 Cf. Guest 1993: 140 with further sources.

78 Cf. the short biographical résumé concerning Eliseev by Andreeva (2005).

79 Cf. Елисеев 1888: 54.

80 Eliseev seems to indicate that some of the figurines belong to "pilgrims returning from Lalish" and that these "statuettes of the fallen angel are made of copper, iron, even wood, rarely gold and silver" (*Ibid*).

81 "In his travel notes, the Russian officer A. V. Eliseev wrote about the nocturnal mysteries of the Yezidis, with torch lit processions, dedicated to the spirit of evil that he allegedly secretly observed in Afrin" (Asatrian and Arakelova 2003: 220).

82 Pirbari et al. 2008: 11.

from crossing the border by the Syrian and in order not to be held up, they tried to enter Syria via Turkey. When this proved unsuccessful too, they left the sacred image with a pious family in a Yezidi village in Turkey where it still remains immured in the wall of the basement of a house. If there is some truth in this narrative, then the last journey of a *sanjaq* to Syria must have happened before the 1980s when Turkey became almost depopulated of her Yezidi inhabitants. On the other hand, Spät provides a more recent picture of the *Aleppo Sanjaq*[83] which somewhat contradicts this narrative.

4. The *Khaltan* or *Diyarbakır*[84] *Sanjaq* visited the territories where members of the *Khalti* tribe, or rather federation, constituted the majority of the Yezidi population. These areas where mainly located in the Ottoman province of Diyarbakır (*Eyalet Diyâr-ı Bekr*) which consisted mainly of the present Turkish provinces of Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Şırnak, Siirt, Bingöl (with the exception of Kiğı district), Mardin, and Tunceli, as well as the eastern half of the Şanlıurfa and the district of Kemaliye town in the Erzincan Province. In addition, the *Khaltan Sanjaq* seem to have plied the areas of what are nowadays the Adıyaman and Gaziantep provinces. It is no longer feasible to exactly identify the settlement area of the Yezidis in this vast territory and to determine – even vaguely – the route of the *Khaltan Sanjaq*. Only with regard to a few provinces, like Batman, Mardin, and the eastern part of Şanlıurfa, a picture emerges – though a quite hazy one. Through interviews with Yezidis from the diaspora in Germany as well as visits to Yezidi villages and hamlets in Turkey[85] the author received confirmation of a *sanjaq* plying some route in Turkey until the mid-1970s. While some of the older generation emphasised that they had seen a *sanjaq* in their childhood,[86] younger ones remembered that their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents had told them about these major events in their village of origin as well as in neighbouring hamlets. According to the information provided by the interviewees the table below was established and the probability that a village was included in the route of the *Khaltan Sanjaq* suggested. In

[83] Spät 2014b: Fig. 3.

[84] Cf. Ainsworth 1861: 13 (equating *Khurzen* with Diyarbakir), 20; Heard 1911: 207; Pirbari et al. 2008: 11; Tolan 2006: 145.

[85] Quite a few reinhabited by mostly elderly Yezidis who returned from Europe and rebuilt their houses – some of them like palaces. Most of them only live there in summer and proceed in winter to their families in the respective country of refuge. As reasons for their return many of them stated that they want to spend their sunset years in their ancestral homeland and "show the Muslim that we are still here" (a returnee in Çayırlı in 2018). To very few other villages, like Kaleli, Yolveren, Oğuz, and Üçkuyular, some Yezidi families returned for good – a difficult undertaking as they face discrimination and hostile attitudes from the local administration and the Muslim Kurds who were using their grazing grounds when the owners lived as refugees in Germany.

[86] These memories were not always positive because many stated that their *sheikhs* and *pirs* had prohibited them to attend school which made their new start in Germany as illiterates very difficult. They were told that they would not need to go to school as the priests [*qewwals*], coming with the *sanjaq*, could tell them all what they needed to know.

this context 'confirmed' means that at least two persons from different families provided some information that a *sanjaq* visited the village in question, whilst 'vaguely confirmed' means that only one person provided the information and "unconfirmed" that the persons interviewed replied with "maybe".

Province	District	Village	GPS
Adıyaman	Besni	Yoldüzü (Mirixtil)	37.661907243106214, 37.910011842666385
Adıyaman	Sur	Bahçecik	37.93766619357096, 40.44350220493767
Batman	Batman	Yolveren (Çinare)	37.808059605701956, 41.27870633091603
Batman	Beşiri	Deveboynu (Gedûkê)	37.86564065790361, 41.30975258337368
Batman	Beşiri	Ekinciler (Inap)	37.983502569490334, 41.29839216487799
Batman	Beşiri	İkiköprü (Aviskê)	37.9635201385251, 41.33982861871302
Batman	Beşiri	Kumgeçit (Bazivan)	37.83087256393527, 41.479447360059844
Batman	Beşiri	Kurukavak (Hamdunan)	37.857259383686504, 41.5747128741908
Batman	Beşiri	Kuşçukuru (Kelhok)	37.94924689219373, 41.290722128214064
Batman	Beşiri	Meydancık (Duşa)	37.818231677559865, 41.5090584686214 75
Batman	Beşiri	Oğuz (Şımız)	37.83491885174623, 41.36810189451485
Batman	Beşiri	Onbaşı (Şahsîm)	37.82391454088599, 41.40179877704907
Batman	Beşiri	Üçkuyular (Fakîran)	37.8206744446644474, 41.311869048695044
Batman	Beşiri	Uğrak (Texerî)	37.93356270971843, 41.29034200495306
Batman	Beşiri	Uğurca (Qoruk)	37.9848555713485525, 41.331007825263 18
Batman	Beşiri	Yalınca (Savdik)	37.82594943125902, 41.6364952341406
Batman	Beşiri	Yolkonak (Hacrê)	37.942036576699308, 41.31385913286676
Diyarbakır	Bismil	Ataköy (Darakol)	37.99029417605642, 40.526027942729 21
Diyarbakır	Bismil	Başköy	38.00820344962326, 40.912470824865935
Diyarbakır	Bismil	Yasince (Haydarkol)	37.90753768928805, 40.54727821284826
Diyarbakır	Çınar	Höyükdibi (Melkiş)	37.715227934020724, 40.25952298617052
Diyarbakır	Çınar	Aşağı Mollaali	37.74625275051315, 40.24173793068522
Diyarbakır	Çınar	Gürses (Davudi)	37.67483001692382, 40.34729239082561
Diyarbakır	Yenişehir	Diyabakir Town	37.91536394556961, 40.217415513261116
Gaziantep	Nizip	Kızılin (Zagê)	37.23156673197317, 37.783108432352314
Gaziantep	Nizip	Tatlıcak (Caxut)	37.18500953722, 37.74957855878734

Province	District	Village	GPS
Mardin	Midyat	Pelitli (Barbunus)	37.36095008533523, 41.397904282321534
Mardin	Midyat	Yemişli (Nehile)	37.32890825463241, 41.34175278924161
Mardin	Midyat	Yenice (Xerabya)	37.3881887295853, 41.47518433536109
Mardin	Nusaybin	Arpalı (Qudb)	37.170477471637135, 41.59901081730557
Mardin	Nusaybin	Balaban (Birêgiriya)	37.12908894177185, 41.511843730860555
Mardin	Nusaybin	Çilesiz (Mezrê Mihoka)	37.142970260121224, 41.54281696046536
Mardin	Nusaybin	Değirmencik (Qolika)	37.153818899659974, 41.61933665050689
Mardin	Nusaybin	Dibek (Badibe)	37.21777958852785, 41.44367240445037
Mardin	Nusaybin	Güneli (Geliyê Sora)	37.173181630716066, 41.52109661852398
Mardin	Nusaybin	Güzelsu (Habap)	37.23825936194484, 41.462628334446165
Mardin	Nusaybin	Kaleli (Efşê)	37.246288800858125, 41.49094784218051
Mardin	Nusaybin	Kayadibi (Memdikan)	37.12785266771701, 41.34912362474528
Mardin	Nusaybin	Kocadağ (Gelîye Pîra)	37.20012360926688, 41.66015227400103
Mardin	Nusaybin	Mağaracık (Berhokê)	37.13319607112035, 41.53956205985472
Mardin	Nusaybin	Sapanlı (Fiskinê)	37.17434628986617, 41.59646177582713
Mardin	Nusaybin	Yakınca (Elin)	37.25332035302 48, 41.50814188699481
Mardin	Nusaybin	Yerköy (Binardkê)	37.10367175469501, 41.535478140696874
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Altınbaşak (İşxen)	37.28682198966699, 39.8432141103943
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Ballıca (Baluca)	37.45700372007783, 39.86845121348897
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Bozca (Xirbe Belek)	37.19658654920875, 40.01671077756318
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Burç (Birç)	37.272884092631166, 39.77196217672772
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Diktaş (Kevirbel)	37.302084530377666, 39.782368880494516
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Dinçkök (Gede)	37.25440170639757, 39.9075796163166
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Elgün (Edşanê)	37.168452956503515, 39.82963862515565
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Gedenaso	37.23348855085973, 39.89690146485417
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Işıklı (Zevra)	37.3030252841505, 39.9014106447808

Province	District	Village	GPS
Gaziantep	Nizip,	Güder (Kuştam)	37.415204698246384, 37.76059888755316
Mardin	Derik	Ballı (Zorava)	37.37818524615711, 40.157700200224966
Mardin	Derik	Bayraklı (Giresor)	37.314457439466764, 40.26950779106O1
Mardin	Midyat	Bağözü (Trîwa)	37.58398197694711, 41.776586253420 66
Mardin	Midyat	Çayırlı (Kefnaz)	37.3556422795748 94, 41.44959242992694
Mardin	Midyat	Çörekli (Denwan)	37.31412390510924, 41.43570448810835
Mardin	Midyat	Güven (Bacin)	37.37965381049733, 41.38912796065524
Mardin	Midyat	Koçan (Derebaşı)	37.360008584034 92, 41.42950785221825
Mardin	Midyat	Midyat Town	37.59495786105123, 41.36422772897852
Mardin	Midyat	Oyuklu (Taqa)	37.42111016993287, 41.466568761854134
Mardin	Midyat	Yemişli (Nehile)	37.32890825463241, 41.34175278924161

Province	District	Village	GPS
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Konakyeri (Tilcafer)	37.31105043823016, 39.75410208978022
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Mehmetçik (Gedeosman)	37.27079736018344, 39.95916613754815
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Oğlakcı (Olakci)	37.26130316448474, 39.804261539175066
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Tepeyolu (Tiltirik)	37.228930057495695, 39.889731362545795
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Üçgül (Minminik)	37.287264991309804, 39.88442130005856
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Yaban	37.19033868851945, 39.93265884316997
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Yukarı Koşanlar (Mozik)	37.23446671367696, 39.92234917501311
Şanlıurfa	Viranşehir	Yukarışölenli (Axmazût)	37.31715540420229, 39.81485090085291
Siirt	Eruh	Kılıçkaya (Divik)	37.76691563430851, 41.938904575637906
Şırnak	İdil	Mağaraköy (Kiweh)	37.28114300353686, 41.56979227290092
Con-firmed	Vaguely Confirmed		Unconfirmed

When the *Zozan Sanjaq* mentioned below ceased to parade at the beginning of the 19th century, villages in the present Şırnak province[87] and in the north-western part of Duhok were added to the catchment area of the *Khaltan Sanjaq*. However, after WW I, due to the new boundary between Turkey and Iraq, the villages in the Duhok region were transferred to the area covered by the *Sinjar Sanjaq*. The loss of these 5 villages had no impact on the importance of the *Khaltan Sanjaq* since it continued accommodating the religious needs of a large Yezidi community in Turkey. However, its heyday was over when the civil war started in Turkey in 1978, and the subsequent exodus of the Yezidi population to Europe (mainly Germany) in the 1980s, rendered the parade of the *Khaltan Sanjaq* obsolete and its whereabouts became unknown. In June 2015 the late Baba Sheikh told the author that legend had it that there were 365 Yezidi villages in the Khalti area and that the sanjaq had to visit one village every day of the year. Therefore, it had to stay in the area and never returned, like all the other sanjaqs, to the *Khazina al-Rahmani* – a storyline Mira Salwa strongly disagreed with, pointing to the empty niche of the sanjaq in question. However, in April 2017 Rodziewicz visited the Yezidi village of Bozca in the Şanlıurfa province and was told by the inhabitants that there was a sanjaq hidden in a place nearby[88] but that they could not show him the sacred image in the absence of a pir or sheikh. They added that all their religious dignitaries had moved to Germany and hence, the *sanjaq* is only displayed and venerated

[87] Şırnak Province was created in 1990, with areas that were formerly part of the provinces of Siirt and Mardin.
[88] This could also refer to the *Aleppo Sanjaq* mentioned above.

when a *pir* or *sheikh* from Germany visits and that this rarely would be the case.[89] If a sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* truly exists, hidden near Bozca, then the late *Baba Sheikhs* narrative about the 365-day journey or the aforementioned account with regard to the disappearance of the *Aleppo Sanjaq* would gain another dimension, leading to the need to reconsider the above.

About the parade of this peacock in a more distant past only a short reference by Sir Austen Henry Layard is known. He unknowingly witnessed a *Tawus* Gerran in Redwan or Rıdvan[90] north of Cizre and south of Şırnak town and was even allowed by his *qewwal* friend to sketch it.[91] Apparently, he was the first foreigner to see one of the sacred images,[92] namely the very *Khaltan Sanjaq* in 1849.

5. The *Zozan* or *Hakkari Sanjaq* travelled to the areas of Hakkari, Şırnak, and Duhok in times long gone. It seems that already at the beginning of the 19th century the Yezidi population in Hakkari and Şırnak began to dwindle due to economic reasons[93] and the tense security situation between the Ottoman and the Persian Empire, culminating in the Ottoman-Persian War (1821–1823).[94] In addition, and more importantly, increasing persecution by Muslim Kurds, in particular through the Goyan tribe, and the massacres committed by Bedir Khan Beg and his henchmen forced many Yazidis to migrate to Shekhan and Sinjar[95] as well as to Serhed (Wan and Bayazid) and towards Mardin.[96] Hence, the *Tawus Gerran* of the *Zozan Sanjaq* no longer yielded significant revenues and became redundant. In other words, Hakkari and Şırnak were depleted of their Yezidi residents and the few remaining believers were covered by



Layard's Sketch

[89] Email of 16/08/2020.

[90] "Rıdvan itself is presently a hamlet, with a few dozen inhabitants. No traces seem to be left of the castle of the Bey and the church described by Layard [1853: 39]. Rıdvan is situated in the area that will be flooded by the Ilısu Dam reservoir" (cf. https://www.jelleverheij.net/travel-snap-shots/ridvan.html – accessed: 11/09/2023).

[91] For the printed picture cf. Layard 1853: 48.

[92] There were, however, reports on *sanjaqs* which predate this event. Cf. for instance Homes (1842: 340): "Many have told me that they worship a peacock, calling him the Melēk Taous, or King Taous. Some say they put it on a stand, like a high candlestick, and repeat their devotions before it, perhaps a few times in a year. The figure of the peacock may be made of metal or on stone or on paper."

[93] Many of the Yezidi settlements in these mountainous areas were, due to the transhumance, only inhabited during the summer. In this context cf. also Nau and Tfinkdji 1915–17: 187.

[94] Cf. Ateş 2013.

[95] Cf. Demir 2013.

[96] Pir Dima Pirbari in a private correspondence in February 2024.

Tawus Gerran of the *Khaltan Sanjaq*, whilst most of the Duhok area was visited by the *Margheh Sanjaq* with the exception of the five villages in the west of Duhok which were added to the catchment area of the *Khaltan Sanjaq*. The inhabitants of these five villages are aware that they are served by a *sanjaq* from another region. Hence, they refer to the sacred image as the "peacock from the other side" (*tausa terefî*). Elders from Bajid and the *mukhtar* of Kani Arab explained in this context that the expression "the other side" would mean "from the other side of the river Tigris" but that it meant in previous times "from the other side of the mountain", since before the border between Iraq and Turkey was established, the *sanjaq* came from the north of Mount Bkhier.[97] This seems to indicate that the collective memory of the Yezidis dwelling in this area is still aware that they were once visited by a *sanjaq* from nowadays Turkey – first by the Zozan and then by the *Khaltan* one.

The route and the whereabouts of the *Zozan Sanjaq* are unknown and, as Mira Salwa emphasised, its niche in the *Khazina al-Rahmani* had been empty for more than 100 years.

6. The *Tabriz Sanjaq* used to visit the Yezidi villages in the Persian Empire until Yezidism died off there in the first half of the 19th century when a number of Yezidi tribes, like the Sipkis, originating from the Iranian side of the border and moved into the Ottoman Empire between 1816 and 1820. The last Yezidis in Iran lived west of Khoy (West Azerbaijan Province) and joined the Yezidis from the Van and Bayazid area when the latter moved to the Russian Empire[98]. Only Lescot mentions something different, namely the Yezidi village Jabbarlu in the Ardebil province.[99] However, *Baba Chawush* stated in 2018 that Yezidis from Iran are still visiting Lalish but would not tell from which area or village they originated – maybe these were *Ahl-e Haqq* of the *Gûrân* district who venerate *Tawusi Melek*,[100] or maybe it was just wishful thinking. The whereabouts of the artefact are unknown. In 2022, some informants whispered that a previous *mir* had sold this sacred image and incidentally, the French vice-consul in Mosul, Nicolas Siouffi, acquired a *sanjaq* in 1879.[101]

7. The *Misqof Sanjaq* was previously known as *Serhedê Sanjaq*. Although it visited parts of Transcaucasia too, the artefact was named after the territory called by the Kurds

[97] Interviews in October 2023.
[98] Cf. the Sipki example *apud* Nicolaus 2025.
[99] Lescot 1938: 3.
[100] Bruinessen (2014: 17) reports: "Malak Tâwûs, was a manifestation of the spirit that in the period (*dowre*) of Soltân Sahâk was embodied in Dâwûd. In the shorthand used by most of the Gûrân with whom I spoke, Malak Tâwûs was Dâwûd."
[101] Cf. Guest 1993: 126. However, this could also have been the *Zozan Sanjaq*.

Serhed which translates to "on the head", of the meaning "on the border". It encompassed the Ottoman areas of Ağri, Ardahan, Bingöl, Bitlis, Doğubayazıt, Erzurum, Hınıs, Iğdır, Kars, Muş, Van, and Varto. While Iğdır had already fallen to the Russians after the Russo-Persian War (1826-1828) and constituted a part of the Armenian Oblast, Ardahan and Kars were annexed by the Russian Empire as a result of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878). This meant that the Yezidis dwelling in these areas came under the sway of the Russian Empire. Furthermore, Yezidis from the regions where Russian troops had to withdraw from – as stipulated by the Treaty of Berlin (1878) – followed them in order to live in safety. This meant that the Yezidi population in the Ottoman part of Serhed declined sharply and that the *sanjaq* had to be rechannelled to the Yezidis living within the Russian Empire – subsequently its name was changed to *Misqof*[102] *Sanjaq*.[103]

This sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* was lost in 1845, when the last *Mir* of Bitlis, Sharif Beg, intercepted *qewwals* returning from a *Tawus Gerran* in Transcaucasia. He had all members of the mission assassinated and seized all their belongings, including the *sanjaq* and the donations and revenues collected from the Yezidis of the Russian Empire. Whilst Layard's attempt to recover the lost *sanjaq* during his stay in Bitlis 1849 failed,[104] a Sheikh of the Sipki tribe was more successful. He, most probably, bought the artefact from Sharif Beg or his marauders but was not prepared to hand it back to the Yezidi *mir*. This forebear of the Ozmanyans, a sheikhly family which nowadays lives in the Republic of Armenia, kept the sacred image, and sent his younger son, Sheikh Osman, accompanied by some of his *murids* and other tribesmen, within the safety provided by the retreating Russian army, across the border, at the end of the Russo-Ottoman War (1878). Osman was entrusted with the most valuable items, including the *sanjaq*, as well as with the womenfolk and children of his brothers. The parents and the older brothers stayed behind to liquidate their property and to organise the movement of their extended family and *murids*. Unfortunately, the plan did not work out as Sheikh Osman's older brothers became involved in the fighting with marauding Kurds and Ottoman troops, and eventually they and their parents died before they could reach the safety of

[102] It is at the first glance confusing why the *sanjaq* was named after Moscow, considering that Saint Petersburg was the capital of the Russian Empire at this time. However, the term "*Misqof*" means "Russia" in Kurdish and Syriac (cf. Geographical Section of the Naval Intelligence Division 1920: 449) and it seems that this meaning was introduced already before Peter the Great moved the capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg in 1713. Also, Joseph (cf. 1909: 227 and 229) translates the Arabic term "*ala bilad al-masqofi*" in the apocryphal Meshefa Resh as "Russia".

[103] However, Stelle für Jesidische Angelegenheiten (2020) seems to indicate that the name was already in use 200 years ago. This may be explained by the fact that this *sanjaq* initially covered 2 areas, namely Serhed (Ottoman Empire) as well as Transcaucasia and Iğdır (Russian Empire) and that one of these two names was applied depending on the area the artefact visited.

[104] Although he pretends differently (cf. Layard 1853: 35).



Misqof Sanjaq 2007 (© Peter Nicolaus)

the Russian Empire. Sheikh Osman settled down in Bash Sinak, a village in the Surmalu District of the Erivan Province[105] He later became initiated as a *feqir*[106] and concluded his life as a respected and adored religious leader. His son, Sheikh Haso, inherited the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* as well as his father's *murids*, and moved together with them to better grazing-grounds at Tandurek in the Surmalu District, a village nowadays called Yaylacık in the Tuzluca district of the Iğdır province in Turkey. From there he moved further to the Digor district of Kars where he, his family, and his *murids* stayed in a village with a mixed Armenian-Yezidi population. From there he and the

[105] Nowadays, the village still exists under the same name and at the same location in the Turkish Iğdır province.
[106] His sacred clothes, *hula* and *tāj*, are still kept and venerated by his descendants in Armenia. For more details on the items kept by the Ozmanyans cf. Omarkhali 2008: 41.



Misqof Sanjaq 2007 (© Peter Nicolaus)

sanjaq escaped the genocide by fleeing to Kaniashir in nowadays Armenia.[107] The movements of the family and their image of *Tawusi Melek* from Kaniashir, via Yeraskhahun, to Jrarat, where it is still kept and venerated, is well documented and does not need further explanation.[108] Although the *mir* and the Yezidi hierarchy operated with a replica, they never gave up on returning the original to the Yezidi heartland and a few unsuccessful attempts were made by them to recover the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek*.[109] Even today the Armenian *sanjaq* is not forgotten: the Yezidis in Transcaucasia venerate it, whilst the Yezidi leaders in Northern Iraq appreciate that the artefact exists but have diametrical different views concerning the genuineness of this object.[110]

[107] The authors research on this topic is still ongoing but will hopefully be published with the essential sources in 2025 (cf. Nicolaus 2025).
[108] Cf. Nicolaus 2008.
[109] For details cf. Nicolaus 2008: 223, 233, 239f., 241, 245.
[110] *Idem* 2025.

When the original *Misqof Sanjaq* was lost in 1845, it was – as mentioned above – immediately replaced by a replica and only one year later plied the former route of the Yezidi villages of Transcaucasia. In the aftermath of the First World War the artefact arrived in nowadays Armenia between 1920 and 1922 and stayed marooned in Transcaucasia together with the accompanying *qewwals*, who visited Yezidi dwellings and displayed the *sanjaq*.[111] For instance, Field, based on eyewitness accounts, reports visits of the *sanjaq* in summer of 1919 (before it arrived in Armenia) and in 1928.[112] Only in 1929 the accompanying *qewwals* managed to leave the Soviet Union by ship and proceeded via Cardiff to Baghdad. However, before their departure the *sanjaq*, was confiscated by the Soviet authorities and disappeared in the dungeons of the Gubernsky prison in Tbilisi.

The Future of the Sanjaqs – an Open Question

The purpose of the above elaboration is to rescue the already meagre information about the seven *sanjaqs* from being lost to oblivion and it is, of course, out of the question that those *sanjaqs* which have lost their territory will regain it – the Yezidi exodus from Turkey to Europe and overseas is virtually concluded and the few aforementioned Yezidi families and retirees trying to move back will not reverse the tide. The same seems true with regard to the Yezidis in Syria. The migration pattern there was not as distinct as the one prevailing in Turkey during the 1980s. However, in Syria the numbers are much smaller (some 12,000 people at best)[113] and the latent civil war, the dire economic situation, and the Turkish operations in the Syrian border areas are certainly strong factors fostering the wish to leave and find a new life in another country. In the Yezidi heartlands of Sinjar and Shekhan a similar mood prevails. Although there are still substantial numbers of Yezidis (about 550,000) in Northern Iraq, there is hardly one of them who does not have a family member or friend in Europe (in most cases Germany) and the majority of the Yezidis there contemplate leaving their homeland. Furthermore, the ISIS and post-ISIS induced pause in the *Tawus Gerran* has shown that the common people can easily live without *sanjaqs* visiting them. Since 2014, no *sanjaq* has come to Sinjar and the people there have not complained about this – they take it as fate and consider it a minor mishap. However, this does not mean that they

[111] Cf. Nicolaus 2008: 233.

[112] Cf. Field et al. 1943: 13, Field 1953: 87.

[113] Since 2014, some 40,000 Yezidis from Iraq have sought refuge in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to escape the genocide of Yazidis by ISIS. At this point in time there were about 40,000 Yezidis in Syria (primarily in Al-Jazirah). However, most of them have returned to Iraq subsequent to the 2019 invasion of the north-eastern part of Syria by Turkish troops.

have stopped venerating the sacred images of *Tawusi Melek* and the elongated queues of pilgrims eager to revere and donate to the *Margeh Sanjaq* displayed at the Sheikh Adi sanctuary in Lalish during the *Cejna Cimayê* evidence this clearly. Some of these pilgrims come from Syria as well as from the diaspora in Europe (mainly Germany) and North America (most of them from Canada). In view of this, one could argue that the Yezidi leadership should – in order to accommodate the diasporas – design and introduce parades of the peacock in the countries to which a considerable Yezidi migration had taken place during the last fifty years and in which a sizeable Yezidi community dwells, like Germany (120,000 individuals) and Russia (50,000). However, the *sanjaqs* visited, and the *Margeh Sanjaq* still visits, villages according to a fixed route and a fixed schedule – tradition determines all of this, and tradition apparently cannot be changed. As mentioned above, the *Margeh Sanjaq* has always visited seven old villages in the vicinity of the newly created Mahad Complex. After the inhabitants of these villages were forced to abandon their homes and move to the complex, the *Tawus Gerran* no longer visited the deserted villages, but the tradition was strong enough to dictate that the *qewwals* should stay within Mahad Complex for seven days and pretend to visit each day one of these villages. In other words, the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* is taken to seven different quarters within the complex, where the population mirrors the one in the old villages. It seems that the places visited during a *Tawus Gerran* for centuries are in a sense sacred, and sacred places can simply not be relocated, as Spät points out, albeit in a different context.[114] Presumably, it would even be more difficult to design an entirely new route for the parade of the peacock in a country where Yezidis only recently migrated to. Hence, the Armenian model seems more promising: The last *Tawus Gerran* in Transcaucasia was conducted in 1928 or 1929 and when the *qewwals* left the area, their sanjaq was confiscated and only the one kept by the Ozmanyans stayed behind. The Yezidis of Armenia venerate this sacred image of *Tawusi Melek* by making pilgrimages to the house of the keeper of the *sanjaq* in Jrarat in Armavir Marz or venerate it when it is displayed to the public, like in 2022, when a grand presentation of the Armenian *Sanjaq* took place in the *Quba Mêrê Dîwanê*, the world's largest Yazidi temple built in Aknalich in Armavir Marz in 2019.[115] However, since the revenues yielded by

[114] Spät 2018: 353.

[115] Cf. video https://www.facebook.com/groups/491240771036644/posts/2070254409801931/ (accessed: 25/01/2024). The temple owned by Mirza Sloian, an Armenian businessman of Yazidi origin, living in Russia, who bought the land and funded the construction. Given that the temple is privately owned and managed, it is still not fully recognized as such by parts of the local Yezidi community – despite the fact that Mir Tahsin Beg personally inaugurated the shrine on 29/09/2012 (http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/news-2012.php and http://www.tert.am/en/news/2012/09/15/ezdi/).

the Armenian *Sanjaq* stay with the keeper of the sacred image in Armenia,[116] the Yezidi hierarchy, in particular the *mir*, would presumably be quite reluctant to agree to such an arrangement. Hence, before discussing any display of *sanjaqs* in the diaspora, the question of the proceeds would have to be agreed upon. However, this is – as one of the *qewwals* interviewed mentioned – a very sensitive matter since the leadership does not want the people to know how much money (donations and revenues) they earn by displaying the sacred image of *Tawusi Melek*.

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[116] He demands a sheep as sacrifice and charges about 300 USD for the display of the sacred image to an individual or a family.

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პიტერ ნიკოლაუსი (Peter Nicolaus)

Quo Vadis Tawusi Melek? (Quo Vadis ტაუსი მალაკ?)

ეზიდური სანჯაყების გავრცელების არეალი

აბსტრაქტი: ნაშრომის მიზანია, გამოიკვლიოს, თუ რა გზას გადიოდა სხვადასხვა ეზიდური სანჯაყი და, კერძოდ, რა გზა გაიარა ორმა მათგანმა ერთ დროს ეზიდებით დასახლებულ ტერიტორიებზე ან - სადაც ახლა ცხოვრობენ. სადაც გზის დადგენა შესაძლებელი აღარაა, სტატიაში მითითებულია ის ტერიტორიები, რომლებსაც, ეზიდური დიასპორის მეხსიერების მიხედვით, ტაუსი მალაკის წმიდა სიმბოლო ადრე სტუმრობდა. ნაშრომი ასევე ეხება რიტუალებსა და ცერემონიებს, რომლებიც ამ გზის გავლისას საკრალური გამოსახულებების თაყვანისცემას უკავშირდება; დაბოლოს, ნაშრომი მოკლედ განიხილავს თაყვანისცემის მომავალ შესაძლო გეგმებს დიასპორაში. მოცემული სტატია არ ეხება ფარშევანგის ფიგურებს, რომლებიც კონკრეტულ ოჯახებსა თუ სალოცავებში ინახება, როგორიცაა, მაგალითად, ქვემოთ ნახსენები Khazina al-Rahmani (ხაზინა არ-რაჰმანი).

საკვანძო სიტყვები: სანჯაყი, ტაუსგერანი, ეზიდი, ჩრდილოეთ ერაყი, სომხეთი, თურქეთი, სირია, ირანი, გერმანია, დიასპორა

Peter Nicolaus

Quo Vadis Tawusi Melek? Cîyên belavbûna sincaqên êzdiyan

Abstrakt: Ev gotar hewl dide lêkolînê bike li ser rêyên ku sincaq lê digeriyan, bi taybetî du ji wan sinceqan, li ser gera wan di nav deverên ku êzidî lê diman, yan jî heta demekê lê mabûn, herweha li wan deverên ku êzdî lê hebûn û êdî ne diyarin yan nemane. Lema ev lêkolîn bi kêmasî wan deveran destnîşan dike, li ku jî li gorî bîranînên êzdiyên li dîasporayê da mane – wextekî bi sembola pîroz ya Tawisî Melek va hatine ziyaret kirin. Ev lêkolîn bêtir li ser rê û resmên, ku sembola pîroz di geryana wan de têne pêşwazî kirin, dike, û di dûmahyê da bi kurtî derheqê planê tewaf kirina wane paşerojê li diyasporayê da dike. Ev lêkolîna hanê behsa wan fîgûrên teyrê tawis nake, yên ku di destê malbatan yan jî di perestgehan da hene, yên wekî li Xezîna al-Rehmanî ya ku di gotarê da hatiye behs kirin.

Peyvên sereke: sincaq, tawisger, êzdî, Îraqa Bakûr, Ermenistan, Tirkiya, Sûrya, Îran, Almaniya, dîaspora.

Nodar Mossaki

Institute of Oriental Studies
Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia, Moscow
ORCID: 0000-0001-8268-006X

Dimitri Pirbari

G. Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies
Ilia State University, Georgia, Tbilisi
ORCID: 0000-0002-6629-8415

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32859/yezidistudies/1/5/113-159

The rulers of Sarhad Yezdikhan: The history of the Yezidi Lineage of Kok-agha

Abstract:
The article analyses and introduces previously unknown historical and scientific documentation from the National Archives of Georgia on which it provides new insights into affairs of Khalil-agha, one of the Yezidi leaders in the Russian Empire and a sous-lieutenant (*podporuchik*). Among them the Russian translations of two charters issued to the ancestors of Khalil-agha by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and the Shah of Iran, attesting to the existence of a semi-independent Yezidi principality, recognized by both the Persian and Ottoman powers, known as Ezdikhan (Yezdikhan) in eastern Anatolia from the 16th to the 18th century. Together with previous research, the discovery of these documents represents the missing link in the documented history of the Yezidis in Eastern Anatolia, which spans no less than five centuries.

Keywords:
Yezidis, Sarhad, Yezdikhan, Ezdikhan, Ottoman Empire, Kok-agha, Avdal-agha, Khalil-agha, Choban-agha, Abagha, Mahmudi, Khoshab.

Introduction

The political history of the Yezidis begins after the consolidation of the Yezidi community in the 12th–14th centuries. From the end of the 13th century, the Yezidis living in the former principality of Dasin in the northwestern part of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan founded or revived their own political unit and gave it the new name Sheikhan, derived from the name of the most important Yezidi saint, Sheikh Adi. Nevertheless, for centuries, in chronicles and historical sources, the title 'Emirs of Dasni' continued to be used to refer to the rulers of Sheikhan. The Kurdish chronicler Sharaf-Khan ibn Shamsaddin Bidlisi mentions the Yezidi rulers, including, for example, Mir Hussain-beg Dasni (16th

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century).[1] In addition to the principality of Sheikhan, there were other Yezidi principalities and territorial entities. However, Sheikhan was a religious center, and the Emir of Sheikhan presided both spiritually and politically over all Yezidis. Nevertheless, Yezidi territorial units which were geographically remote from Sheikhan, were in fact independent of it. This situation was due to the feudal fragmentation characteristic of the Ottoman Empire and Iran, where there were various large and small principalities, emirates, and principalities. After the victory over Safavid Iran in the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the geopolitical landscape of the Turkish-Iranian border region began to change. The Ottoman Empire consolidated its new frontiers, largely inhabited by Armenians, Kurds, Yezidis, and Assyrians. A major role in the defense of these new borders of the Ottoman Empire was assigned to the Kurdish tribes which were moved there from other regions (mainly from the south) to the new frontiers, including the border with Transcaucasia (South Caucasus). It seems that the Yezidi tribes were also included in what is historically known as the migration of Kurds to the border regions of Transcaucasia.

During the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman Kanuni,[2] who contributed to the large-scale settlement of belligerent Kurdish tribes in these areas, the presence of Kurds in Eastern Anatolia, in the so-called Sarhad,[3] was increased to prevent raids by the Georgians and Persians. In this sense, Suleiman I continued the work of his father Selim I (r. 1512–1520) and grandfather Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512), who based their strategy on the fact that the Kurds from Persia defected to the Ottoman side, because of Idris Bidlisi, a famous political figure of Kurdish origin. Thus, while expanding their empire to the east, the Ottoman sultans carried out significant ethno-political, ethno-confessional, and geopolitical changes in the new territories, forming a complex and multilayered system, by creating a somewhat unpredictable and turbulent balance of power by supporting some groups, only to abandon them shortly afterwards in favour of others. The policy of the Ottoman Empire towards the Kurdish tribes (as well as towards the Sunni Kurds) was more flexible compared to that of Iran. This engendered and strengthened pro-Ottoman sentiment among the Kurds. In turn, local princes and rulers also exhibited variability in their allegiance to the dominating powers in their regions, recognizing the power of one or the other sovereign at different times.[4] This

1 See: Бидлиси 1967: 325–327.

2 Suleiman I the Magnificent, r. 1520–1566.

3 The term 'Sarhad' ('Serhed') comes from two words from Kurmanji *sar* – 'on' and *had* – 'border', which means 'on border', or 'on the frontier': the Yezidis and Kurds called the northern borders of their compact settlement. *Sarhad* (this word has become a geographical concept among the Yezidis and Kurds) covers the lands of the Van Vilayet, Bayazid Sanjak, Arzrum (Erzrum), Igdir, and Kars.

4 See: Васильева 1967: 44.

was also characteristic of the local Yezidi rulers, whose territories extended over northern Mesopotamia, northern Syria, numerous areas of Asia Minor in eastern Anatolia, regions bordering Iran, and even some areas in the northwest of Iran. The Ottoman sultan was the caliph of all Muslims and the ruler of the Ottoman Empire, which was inherently Muslim, albeit with a sizable Christian component. "Unlike the West […] there was no separation of secular and religious power and [no] clear demarcation between administrative and religious functions."[5] Sharia was the basic law of the state.[6] Thus, the disposition of the Ottoman ruler towards the Yezidis was ambiguous at best, in particular from the 15th to the 16th century. However, there are some cases on record showing that Yezidi mirs and leaders were treated kindly by the sultans. This has been evidenced by recently discovered historical documents.[7]

For about two centuries after the territories inhabited by the Yezidis were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire (in the 16th and 17th centuries), the attitude of the Ottoman authorities towards the Yezidis was not based on their religious affiliation, but rather on their submission and recognition of the supremacy of Ottoman power.[8] However, from the 18th century onwards, the dynamic between Ottoman state and the Yezidi community was in addition characterized by religious pressure on the Yezidis[9] to convert to Islam. The *Sharafnama* provides information about the relationship between the Sultan and the head of the Yezidi community, Hussain-beg Dasni. After the Sultan conquered Baghdad in 1534/5, the ruler of the Erbil Sanjak, Izzadin Shir enraged the Sultan for which he was executed. Subsequently, the Sultan granted the Erbil district to the Yezidi Mir (En. Prince) – Hussain-beg Dasni. Soon after this, Izzadin Shir's brother, Suleiman Beg died and the Sultan "united the entire vilayet of Soran to the Erbil district and granted [it to] Hussain-beg Dasni."[10] However, Emir Sayfaddin, son of Suleiman-beg, after gaining power, managed to recapture Erbil and expel Hussain-beg, who, according to Bidlisi, was executed by the Sultan. During this struggle, Emir Sayfaddin fought under the banner of Islam against Hussain-beg and the Yezidis.[11]

It should be noted, however, that information about the greatest Yezidi figure in the Ottoman period – Hussain-beg, which was previously available only in *Sharafnama*, now is partially disproved and amended.[12] Thus, according to the identified archival

[5] Иванов 1993: 237.
[6] See: *Ibid*: 235.
[7] See below.
[8] See: Akman 2021: 122–123.
[9] See: Orpak 2021: 6–7.
[10] Бидлиси 1967: 325.
[11] See: *Ibid*: 325-326.
[12] Hassan 2022a; Idem 2022b; Dehqan and Genç 2019.

documents, Hussain-beg Dasni, before taking possession of the Erbil Sanjak, ruled the Mosul Sanjak; moreover, he was not executed by the Sultan and he and his sons ruled over various regions of the Ottoman Empire.[13]

As Vasilyeva rightly noted, Sultan Suleiman, an ardent supporter of the dogmas of Islam, handed over control of these territories to the head of the Yezidis, despite the maxim of "divide and rule" otherwise carefully observed by the Ottomans. In other words, favouring the Yezidi Dasni Hussain-beg, in order to break the resistance of the rulers of Soran seemed more important than religious zeal. Hussain-beg Dasni suffered heavy losses in the war with the rulers of Soran. Although the ruler of Amadia was also sent to Soran to support Hussain-beg, it ultimately proved impossible to reconquer Soran. However, "the Turkish rulers had another, more important result in mind namely that through these wars, the opponents would weaken each other",[14] not least since the Ottoman Empire represented itself as a "conglomerate of different nationalities and regions, united by the supreme power of the Sultan".[15]

Bidlisi also mentions in *Sharafnama* a number of other territories which were ruled by Yezidis, as well as the rulers who were Yezidis or descended from them, but subsequently converted to Islam. The rulers of Jezire[16] and Kilis[17] originated from the Yezidis. In the latter case, "the governance of the Kurds to one of the descendants of Yezidi sheikhs – a certain Sheikh 'Izzaddin", whose authority was recognized by "several apostates from the Yezidi Kurds", was handed over by the Circassian rulers.[18] The large Yezidi tribes in Syria, which became subsequently Kurdish (Kurdish-Muslim), were the Mahmudi and Dumbuli,[19] who later governed large areas in Eastern Anatolia and the adjacent northwestern Iran. "The hereditary principalities of Khoshab, Ashut and, somewhat later, Albak […] were, since the time of the rulers of the Kara-Koyunlu dynasty, fiefdoms of the emirs of the Kurdish tribe of Mahmudi, who came to these areas from Syria or Jezira."[20] To the northwest of Khoy was the hereditary principalities of Sokmanabad – *ocak* of the Dumbuli tribe, that also came from Syria or Jezire at the beginning of the 15th century during the time of Kara Yusuf Kara-Koyunlu and who later received Khoy region from Shah Tahmasb.[21]

[13] Hassan 2022a; *Idem* 2022b; Dehqan and Genç 2019.
[14] Васильева 1967: 57.
[15] Иванов 1993: 239.
[16] Бидлиси 1967: 175.
[17] *Ibid*: 275–276.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] *Ibid*: 83.
[20] Васильева 1967: 43.
[21] *Ibid*: 44.

Ezdi Mirza (first half of the 17th century), who was recognized as the leader of the Yezidis by Sultan Murad IV (r. 1623–1640), and who was appointed by the Ottomans as a ruler of Mosul in 1649. It should be noted here, that in the Ottoman Empire "the implementation of the prerogatives of the Sultan has always been delegated through two lines of power independent from each other: through the line of 'political power' (*hukm al-siyasa*), directly from the imperial council (*divan*) headed by the Grand Vizier, and through the line of 'Sharia power' (*hukm al-Sharia*), coming from the Sheikh ul-Islam of the capital".[22] It is obvious that the political power was delegated to the Yezidi leaders by the *divan* and that the Sharia power was omitted.[23]

This article examines the history of one of the Yezidi leaders, Avdal-agha,[24] who was favoured by Sultan Murad III[25] and his family. They were known under the name of the Kok-agha lineage, apparently in honour of Avdal-agha's grandfather bearing the same name.

Review of the Archival Documents Concerning a Descendant of the Kok-agha Family.

In the National Archives of Georgia, we discovered a file of a descendant of this family – Khalil-agha,[26] which preserved, without doubt, unique and previously unknown documents dating back almost 300 years. This file sheds light on many previously unknown questions, both on the history of this family, and on the Yezidis in general, as well as interactions and relations between the Ottoman sultans and the Yezidi leaders in the late Middle Ages. This file contains certified translations of the charters issued to representatives of the Kok-agha lineage by Sultan Murad III (grandson of Suleiman I, and son of Selim II) at the end of the 16th century, and also by Mohammed Shah in 1836. Using these archival documents and other information known so far, both from documents and folk tales, we will try to reconstruct the history of this family and thus the history of the Yezidis of Sarhad in general.

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22 Иванов 1993: 240.

23 Certainly, from this period (from the 15th to the 18th century) there should be more examples rewarding Yezidi leaders, rulers, heads of tribes and military squads and providing them with certificates, which, hopefully over time, will be proven thanks to archival documents. A significant part of the documents should be in the Ottoman archives of Turkey, as well as in Iran.

24 Agha – in the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran, the title and designation of a tribal nobility on par with the title *bek*, *bey*, *biy* or *beg*. In different eras, the meaning of the term changed and was sometimes used as title for a military leader.

25 Murad III was born in 1546 and died in 1595 (reign 1574–1595).

26 National Archives of Georgia – Central Historical Archive (NAG-CHA), f. 5, op. 1, d. 1, 6112, ll. 1–40. Sources from the Russian-language archives are described in following format: 'f.' stands for *fond* [*фонд*] – archival collection, 'op.' for *opis'* [опись] – register or series, 'd.' for *delo* [дело] – file, 'l.' for *list* [лист] – page number, 'l. ob.' for *oborot lista* [оборот листа] – back (verso) page number.

Khalil-agha: Historical Background

To properly analyse the historical documents in the archival file, it is important to introduce the person to whom the document relates.

Until now, there has been very little information in the literature about Khalil-agha, the son of Amar (Omar)-agha, and even what is available has so far been ignored by researchers on the history of the Yezidis. We found the first mention of him in a well-known piece of Kurdology literature, namely the *Rules for the Management of the Kurdish Tribes, Compiled by Order of the General Muravyov, by Colonel Loris-Melikov November 30, 1855*.[27] In this text, Loris-Melikov lists ten nomadic communities within the Russian borders, one of which are the 'Yezidis'.[28] At the end his account Loris-Melikov provided a list of the communities of Kurds living in the Yerevan province and the Pashalik of Kars, with an estimation on the number of households in each of the areas. He also explained who would control them and where they would migrate in the winter and summer. Loris-Melikov estimated the total number of Kurdish communities in Yerevan Province and the Pashalik of Kars at 3,220 households, including 740 Yezidi families. In this text, the Yezidis were in turn divided into two communities: *Yezidis 1* were under the leadership of Teymur-agha, who had winter and summer migrations in the Surmalu *uezd* (district), and comprised of 400 houses, and *Yezidis 2* were under the leadership of Khalil-agha Omar-agha-ogly, who settled and lived permanently in the Abaran part of Sardarabad area comprising of 340 houses.[29]

Khalil-agha was also mentioned in the work of Egiazarov,[30] moreover, Egiazarov mistakenly called him the head of the younger branch of the Hassani[31] tribe,[32] although Khalil-agha was the head of the tribal association *(êl)* Mahmudi, whose name was transformed over time into Mahamdi. This tribal union was also called *êla Kok-axa*.

Egiazarov noted that Khalil-agha enjoyed "the respect of his subjects."[33] Nevertheless, it is clear that Egiazarov considered the head of the senior branch of the Hasan tribe, Hasan-agha, to be more influential than Khalil-agha. Although the Khalil-agha lineage occupied a special place in the history of the Yezidis and the Khalil-agha line was significantly more famous and influential.

[27] *Акты* 1888: 427–428.
[28] The remaining nine were tribes or tribal unions of Muslim Kurds (*Ibid*: 427).
[29] *Ibid*: 428.
[30] See: Егиазаров 1891: 197.
[31] Hassani – a union of Yezidi tribes that inhabited the Surmalu *uezd* in the 19th century, which moved to the Russian Empire in 1829 from the Bayazet *pashalyk*.
[32] See: Егиазаров 1891: 197.
[33] *Ibid*: 203.

Khalil-agha is also mentioned in a book of a descendant of his family (his great-nephew, grandson of Khalil-agha's brother – Karaman-agha). Although lacking scientific character and based on oral transmissions (and therefore replete with unreliable and/or contradicting statements) the book is nevertheless of significant interest, as it provides insight into the narratives circulating among the Yezidis at the time it was written.[34] Despite its shortcomings, the book makes an important contribution to the study of this little-researched topic. For the purposes of this study, given the nature of S. Kagramanyan's book, we will refer only to the content that is historically verified.

In particular, the book states that Amar-agha, who had moved to the Russian Empire, sent his two sons to the Russian army and that the older one, Khalil-agha, who succeeded Amar-agha after his death, was appointed lieutenant colonel.[35] The author seems to have confused the epaulettes of a sous-lieutenant (second lieutenant, junior lieutenant) (Russian: *podporuchik*) with those of a lieutenant colonel (Russian: *podpolkovnik*). After Khalil-agha's death, his son Rizgan became tribal chief.

Khalil-agha is also reflected in two genealogies of this lineage, compiled as part of the study of his genealogy by Karim Ankosi. In the first, Khalil-agha is mentioned as one of the six sons of Amar-agha, and in the second, his sons and their sons are mentioned alongside him.[36]

As can be seen from the archival documents, Khalil-agha was a *podporuchik* in the *militsiya* and was received by the Grand Duke (Kniaz) and Viceroy of the Caucasus in November 1880.[37] On this occasion he submitted a petition for a lifelong pension.[38] While considering the petition of Khalil-agha, the Chief Office of the Caucasian Viceroy,[39] sought evidence through official channels upon which to base its decision.

Thus, on the 20th of March 1881, the Chancellery of the head of the Chief Office of the Caucasian Viceroy sent Khalil-agha's petition to the governor of Yerevan, in whose territory Khalil-agha lived, with a request to provide information about the petitioner,

[34] Каграманян 2013.
[35] *Ibid*: 54, 85, 71.
[36] See: Анкоси 2004: 58, 31.
[37] Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich Romanov (1832–1909), son of Emperor Nicholas I and brother of Emperor Alexander II, who was Viceroy of the Caucasus in 1862–1881.
[38] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 3 (both sides) 3, 8, 10, 12, etc.
[39] Chief Office of the Caucasian Viceroy is an administrative institution under the Viceroy, created in 1858 to exercise his powers as the highest official in the region, determine the main directions for the assimilation and development of the Caucasian region, ensure the execution of orders of the emperor and the highest bodies of state power. See: Абазов 2019: 44–45. More about the Chief Office of the Caucasian Viceroy, see: *Ibid*.

his family, and his financial situation. Some of the information about Khalil-agha is contained in his petition, some in the letters of the governor, Major General Shalikov.[40]

In the response the governor of Yerevan governor replied on the 22nd of July 1881 and the 5th of March 1884, it was noted that the family of Khalil-agha, who lived in the village of Mirak[41] to where they had moved from the village of Abagha in the Van vilayet, numbered 14 members. He had a wife and three sons – Rizgan-agha[42], Haji-agha and Ali Amrat-agha[43]. The first son had a wife, two sons and four daughters; the second son had a wife but no children. In addition, the certificate of the governor stated that Khalil-agha lived in the new place like other resettled Kurds from the Vilayet of Van and did not own any property.[44] In other words, the property status of Khalil-agha was assessed as equal to other Yezidis[45], his financial hardship[46] was emphasized, and he himself, as a justification for his pension, noted the need to prevent his family from merging with the common people due to poverty.[47] In a letter dated the 3rd of July 1882, the governor presented the service records to the administration of Viceroy Khalil-agha.[48]

According to the petition of Khalil-agha, submitted to the Viceroy of the Caucasus on the 11th of November 1880, his father Amar (Omar)-agha, together with 275 Yezidi households, moved from the village of Novshor in the Abagha area of the Van vilayet to the Armenian region (*oblast*)[49] in 1839 and accepted the citizenship of the Russian Empire. These Yezidis were settled in nine villages in the Aparan region (in present-day western Armenia); in one of these villages, Mirak the head of this Yezidi community settled.[50]

[40] Mikhail Yakovlevich Shalikov (1831–1909) – Russian statesman and military leader. Since 1875 major general, in 1880–1890 (that is, during the researched period) – governor of the Yerevan Governorate (gubernia).

[41] Nowadays it is part of the Aragatsotn region of the Republic of Armenia, the administrative centre of which is the city of Ashtarak.

[42] In the archival documents in question, the name is spelled as 'Ruznali', which, obviously, is not correct and we consider the information of Karam Ankosi and Suto Kagramanyan to be more correct. See: Анкоси 2004: 62; Каграманян 2013: 88.

[43] It should be noted that the genealogy of Khalil-agha, compiled by Karam Ankosi, indicates four sons – in addition to the already mentioned Rizgan. Hajo is indicated in archival documents as Haji, Sheko, or Asho. See: Анкоси 2004: 62.

[44] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 8–10 (both sides), 18 (both sides).

[45] See: *Ibid:* l. 12 (both sides).

[46] See: *Ibid:* l. 8–10 (both sides), 18 (both sides).

[47] See: *Ibid*.

[48] See: *Ibid:* l. 12 (both sides).

[49] The Armenian region (oblast) with its centre in the city of Yerevan was formed in 1828 after the end of the Russian-Persian War (1826–1828) and existed until 1840. As of 1839, it was divided into 6 districts, including Yerevan, which included the Aparan area with villages in which the Yezidis from Abagha settled. In 1840, the Georgian-Imeretian gubernia was formed, which, among others, included the Yerevan uezd, from which the Alexandropol uezd was separated in the same year. In 1846, after the abolition of the Georgian-Imereti gubernia, the Alexandropol uezd became part of the newly formed Tiflis gubernia, and in 1849 the Yerevan gubernia.

[50] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 29.

Khalil-agha "under the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasian Army, Count Vorontsov […] participated in cases against the highlanders."[51] This apparently refers to the Dargo campaign of 1845,[52] however, it is conceivable that some other operations "against the highlanders" are meant here. Another letter from the governor of Yerevan stated that Khalil-agha had "served in the militia since 1846."[53] He also served during the Turkish Campaign of 1854–1856.[54] During the Crimean War, Khalil-agha participated in repelling an attack of the Kurds of the *Zilan* tribe on the border villages of the Alexandropol *uezd* in 1854,[55] which made it possible for residents of the border villages to move to the Russian side. Consequently, "according to the testimony of the governor of Yerevan, General Kolyubakin," Khalil-agha was appointed to the rank of *praporshik* (warrant officer) of the police,[56] in 1859. This is indicated by the materials stored in the Russian State Historical Archive. The Viceroy of the Caucasus, Alexander Baryatinsky, awarded Khalil-agha based on a report from the military governor of Yerevan. In addition for commanding a hundred men during the Crimean War, the rank was given to him for his relationship with "the 246 families" resettled in the Russian Empire 18 years prior, engaged in agriculture, which had among them "not a single exile, suspect, or even any person involved in a criminal case"[57] – a very rare phenomenon in this region at that time.

For his military service in the Crimean War, Khalil-agha was awarded a medal "in memory of the war of 1853–1856" on the ribbon of St. Andrew.[58] It should be noted that in the Acts collected by the Caucasian Archaeography Commission, a letter from General Muravyov to Prince Dolgorukov, dated the 22nd of June 1855, refers to Khalil-agha deployment on the Saganlug ridge,[59] and notes, inter alia, the presence of two hundred Yezidi fighters.[60] Referring to this episode, the famous Russian military

[51] *Ibid*.
[52] See: *Ibid*.
[53] *Ibid:* l. 27 (both sides).
[54] See: *Ibid*: l. 29.
[55] On the actions of the Kurds, including the Kurds of the Zilan tribe against Russia during the Crimean War, see, for example, Мосаки 2018: 159–170.
[56] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 29. Here, obviously, Nikolai Petrovich Kolyubakin is meant, who in 1858 was appointed military governor of Yerevan, remaining there in the rank of major general until 1861. Moreover, in 1854, Colonel N. P. Kolyubakin headed the headquarters of the Yerevan detachment and, apparently, knew Khalil-agha.
[57] РГИА, f. 1268, op. 10, d. 180, ll. 1–3 (both sides). It should be noted that the archival case regarding the awarding of Khalil-agha was mentioned by A. Pobedonostseva Kaya (see: Победоносцева Кая 2016: 63).
[58] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 12, 18 (both sides). The medal "In Memory of the War of 1853–1856" was a mass award, it was awarded to a wide range of people, both those who fought in the Crimean War and those who were on home front. The medal on the St. Andrew's ribbon was second in importance – after the medal on the St. George's ribbon and before the medal on the Vladimir ribbon.
[59] See: *Акты 1888:* 357–359.
[60] *Ibid*: 358.

historian Lieutenant General M. I. Bogdanovich in his fundamental work about the Eastern War, mentions the presence of a hundred "Yezidi Kurds",[61] having previously also indicated the presence of another one hundred Yezidis in the 2nd Kurdish regiment;[62] which was part of the Alexandropol detachment.[63] These Yezidis, we can assume with a considerable degree of confidence, were commanded by Khalil-agha.

During the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) Khalil-agha "was in the Alexandropol Cavalry Irregular Regiment", in which he commanded a hundred men.[64] For his devotion and bravery he was awarded the rank of *podporuchik* (lieutenant) and the Order of Saint Stanislaus (III degree with swords and a bow).[65]

In conclusion, Khalil-agha began his service in the mid-40s and participated in the Crimean War (1854–1856) and the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878). Although the case file does not indicate the year of his birth, it can be assumed that he was born in the first half or in the mid-1820s. At the time of Khalil-agha's application for a lifetime pension, his military service totalled approximately 35 years.

In addition to his merits in service, when considering Khalil-agha's request, the "special honour and respect" of his family was emphasized, as well as his position as a leader of "these Kurds," i.e. the Yezidi, and a possible "political" role in terms of his influence over those living in the province, as well as on fellow Yezidis living abroad. Considering his "honourable position" and "devotion" to the Russian government, the governor of Yerevan deemed the request worthy of respect.[66]

The deliberations pertaining to Khalil-agha's request for a pension took about four years in total. From the available archival materials and the legislation of the time, it emerged that Khalil-agha would not have been entitled to a pension. However, given his status as head of the Yezidis of the Alexandropol Uezd and the possibility of exerting

[61] Богданович 1876: 262.

[62] As is known, during the Crimean War two Kurdish regiments were formed: the 1st as part of the Yerevan detachment under the command of Major Jafar-agha (future major general) and the 2nd as part of the Alexandropol detachment under the command of Ahmed-agha Suleiman-agha ogly. See: РГВИА, f. 15099, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 9 (both sides), 15, 40; *Ibid*, d. 22, ll. 6, 10, 14; Богданович 1876: 238–239; Мосаки 2018: 168.

[63] See: Богданович 1876: 239.

[64] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 27, 29. The Alexandropol detachment included, among others the two hundredth Alexandropol division (see: Колюбакин 1906: 121; *Материалы для описания русско-турецкой войны 1877–1878 гг. на Малоазиатском театре с планами 1904:* 233), one hundred of which, as stated in archival documents, were commanded by Khalil-agha. It is difficult to say whether this hundred consisted of Yezidis, as one might assume, or also included people of different ethnic origin. At least, we were unable to establish any documentary evidence on this. It should be added that the Kurdish regiment was part of the Yerevan detachment. See: *Ibid*: 121.

[65] The Order of St. Stanislaus, III degree, was the lowest in the order of seniority of orders of the Russian Empire and was awarded more often than others. The total number of the recipients of this medal was several hundred thousand people, although it is worth noting that the share of non-Christians was very small – up to 3–4%.

[66] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 12 (both sides), 24.

his political influence also on the Yezidis living abroad,[67] the governor of Yerevan supported the granting of a pension to a Khalil-agha.

On the 26 of October 1884, as a result of a 4-year consideration period, Khalil-agha was granted a lifelong pension of four hundred and fifty Rubles per year.[68]

Lineage of Kok-agha

The archival materials related to the pension application are undoubtedly of considerable interest for the study of the history of the Yezidis in the Russian Empire: their settlement in the particular villages, the entry of the Yezidi leaders into the Russian military service, their participation in wars, as well as their awards and ranks. Although information about the resettlement of the Yezidis to the territory of the Russian Empire is known to some extent, new information about the activities of famous people and the clan leaders expands our knowledge of this important period in the history of the Yezidi community and its history before the Russian October Revolution. In this sense, even the mere discovery of the documents directly relating to Khalil-agha is of great historical interest. However, these archival materials are not limited to the biography of this Yezidi tribal chief. The archive file contains documents from the Ottoman Sultan and the Iranian Shah, as well as supplementary information on the history of his ancestors, which Khalil-agha provided to support his request. Additionally, there is information about these ancestors and, therefore, the Yezidi community of Eastern Anatolia is also reflected in his petitions. Considering the foregoing, it would not be an overstatement to say that the documents analysed in this article are one of a kind. These documents make it possible to connect various pieces of Yezidi history with each other, as well as to identify previously unknown aspects of Yezidi history in general. As already noted, prior to this article, only limited information about Khalil-agha existed – some of which was incorrect. His true identity and significance remain unknown to this day as Egiazarov mistakenly attributed him to the Hassani tribe.

Not only was Khalil-agha a representative of the Yezidis of the Yerevan province, but he was also an officer in the Russian military and a tribal leader who was considered politically significant both locally and beyond. Within the oral history of the Yezidis, and in particular that of the descendants of Khalil-agha and his brothers, it is well known that they were from the clan of Kok-agha and that they played an important role in the wars between the Ottoman Empire and Iran. This oral history also maintains that the clan of Kok-agha ruled a territory of 366 villages, and that they received

[67] See: *Ibid:* ll. 25–27.
[68] See: *Ibid:* l. 36 (both sides).

various awards from the Ottomans and the Iranians. However, the published literature, some of which is not without error, merely focusses on isolated aspects of this topic.

Brief reference was made to the clan of Kok-agha by Eskerê Boyîk in his article devoted to a different research question[69] in particular, to the 366 villages in Abagha, the fortress that the Kok-agha family possessed, their good relations with the Ottoman authorities, the battle with the "Muslims"[70] for Zarif-khatun (more on this below), their migration to Iran and subsequently to the Russian Empire, to the village of Mirak, and the name of their tribe – Mahamdi.[71]

Karam Ankosi's research connects Khalil-agha with the Kok-agha lineage. In a brief description of the "Aglar/Agalari" (*ax'lerî*) clan, he explains that this is the name of the descendants of the "Kok-agha lineage", representing a "noble, ancient princely family[…] by origin-agha (rulers)" and ruling "366 villages". As K. Ankosi wrote, this lineage belongs "to the union of the Mahamdi tribe", lived in "Abakha" (Abagha), and comes from the Avdal-agha family and traces its ancestry to Mir Choban-agha.[72] True, the author did not indicate which Choban-agha is being referred to, but based on the genealogy, apparently, the grandfather of Amar-agha is meant here (the father of Kok-agha which was the father of Amar-agha).[73]

The history of this family is described in more detail.[74] It was compiled, among other narratives, on the basis of stories of the Yezidi elders, Nadirê Dao (Nadir Usoev) and Fetla son of Jangir-agha which were recorded in 1999.

Suto Kagramanyan (Agalari) also correctly traces this family back to the family of Kok-agha and Mîro Choban, who settled in the "Abakha" (Abagha) plain "in Van *uezd*",[75] however, for some reason he incorrectly indicates the name as "Chupan", "Chupani" or "Chupa", apparently wanting to avoid associations with the word 'shepherd', as 'choban' means shepherd.

In general, Kagramanyan faithfully conveys the performance of the "Kok-agha family" in the second half of the 16th century: their struggle on the side of the Ottoman Empire in the confrontation with Iran under the leadership of Shah Abbas and the "Documents and Orders for Eternal Rule" granted to the Kok-agha family by the

[69] Boyîk 2004: 238–240. This article by Eskerê Boyîk was first published in the Armenian literary newspaper Գրական Թերթ (Grakvan Tert), February 23, 1990, No. 9 (2361).
[70] Obviously, Eskerê Boyîk deliberately used the word 'Muslims,' avoiding 'Kurds,' that is, Muslim Kurds.
[71] See: Boyîk 2004: 239.
[72] Анкоси 2004: 31.
[73] See: *Ibid:* 58
[74] See: Пирбари 2008: 118–127.
[75] Каграманян 2013: 75.

Turkish Sultan.[76] However, he erroneously indicates that the Yezidi leader was awarded by Sultan Murad IV, although it was Murad III – as evidenced by archival documents. However, in the absence of any previous information on this aspect of Yezidi history and considering the manner in which it was compiled (based on oral traditions), it can be concluded that the Yezidi oral tradition has been generally confirmed over several centuries. In this regard, it should be noted that the Yezidi oral history contains a story about the presentation of a charter by the Turkish Sultan to the Yezidi leader, Choban-agha, whose real name was Mîro, and not his grandson Abdal-agha, as is in the documents on Khalil-agha. According to this oral history, either the Sultan, or some pasha traveling around his territories, stopped for the night in the mountains, where he met a shepherd named Mîro, who gave him a warm welcome and, at his request, prepared a dish of sheep kidneys for him, because the Sultan said that he would not eat meat, but only sheep kidneys. Amazed by the shepherd's generosity, he rewarded Mîro with gold and handed him a letter stipulating the right to visit him. Mîro, the shepherd, visited the Sultan, who awarded him the title of -agha and made him the head of the local Yezidis and named him Choban-agha (Mîr Çoban Axa) – from the word 'choban' (Tur. shepherd).[77] The Sultan's visit is confirmed by a letter that we found in the archive. However, it showed that Sultan Murad visited the house of Avdal-agha and that the charter was issued to him, not to Choban-agha. At the end of this document states:

> This charter was given to Avdal-agha Amar-agha-oghlu Amar-agha Mîr Choban-oghly Mir Choban Avdal-agha-oghly Avdal-agha Avdal-agha-oghly Avdal-agha Haji-agha-oghly Haji-agha Mirza-agha sons of Kiovkan-agha and all his hereditary successors.[78]

Moreover, the document says that it (the charter) was awarded to Avdal-agha for the valour and bravery shown by him and his people in the war against the Persians. It is difficult to determine which event the orally transmitted story is related to and whether it has anything to do with the archival documents examined in this article. To date, documentary confirmation remains incomplete. However, while some distortion of the original events appears to have occurred during the oral transmission process over several generations, it does not appear that the story is pure fiction.

Based on the ancestors of Avdal-agha listed in the Sultan's charter, it is clear that even before the Sultan bestowed the title of -agha on Avdal-agha for his service in the fight against the Persians, this family was of noble origin. Each of Avdal-agha's

[76] *Ibid:* 77–79.
[77] The story was recorded from the words of Nadirê Dao in 1996 in Tbilisi.
[78] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 32 (both sides).

ancestors had already borne the title 'agha'; the name 'Kiovkan-agha' is apparently a distorted form of the name of their ancestor, known in Yezidi history as Kok-agha. It should be added that Kok-agha is also known among the Iraqi Yezidis. However, he is referred to there as the Yezidi Ashiret Dinan and therefore it is difficult to determine whether this name is attributed to the same historical figure or whether they are different people.

Currently, numerous oral histories have been published on *YouTube* by descendants of this clan or by people interested in the history of the Kurds or Yezidis. In addition to commonly known facts and stories, there is also new information, some of which is of a fantastic nature.[79]

As indicated above, two Choban-aghas are known in the history of the Sarhad Yezidis: the first is the grandfather of the Avdal-agha who received a charter from the Sultan Murad III. He is the first Choban-agha and lived approximately in the first half or the middle of the 16th century. The second is the grandfather of Khalil-agha, who was in correspondence with the Georgian King Erekle II (Heraclius II) in the 1770s regarding the possible creation of an anti-Ottoman coalition.

In Khalil-agha's petition addressed to the Viceroy of the Caucasia, Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich, dated the 11th of November 1880, he briefly described the history of his family. The petition noted that his ancestors held a "high-ranking title" in Turkey, were at the leaders of a "large Yezidi tribe", "ruled in Abagha, that is, the eastern half of the Van vilayat and were known as invincible heroic knights".[80] As Khalil-agha wrote, in 1593, one of his ancestors, Avdal-Agha, son of Amar-agha son of Mîr-Chapan, fought in the famous battle of Sultan Murad with the *Ajems* (Persians) and performed courageous deeds. Thus, he contributed significantly to the victory over the enemy. In return, as an expression of his gratitude, the Sultan granted him and his descendants a number of towns and districts, as well as all state revenues and taxes and the subordination of all Yezidi tribes of the Ottoman Empire for ever. The Sultan, on his return from Persia with triumph, came to Abagha[81] and visited Avdal-Agha with all his retinue; in a letter to his

[79] See for example: Ayhan Erkmen channel, Mala Kok Axa, published on 25th February 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okrcOXdIJ_w&t=26s (accessed: 17/09/2023); Orhan Basî channel, Kelha Kok Axê,Xalti/Xaldi, published on 4th February 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUpaAAGl-lM&t=59s (accessed: 10/01/2024); Xiret Media channel, Belgek ji dîroka mala Kok Axa: Mamedê Îvo, published on 23rd Aygust 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ1wrmvusWM (accessed: 03/03/2024); Ezidxan TV Official channel, MALA KOK AXA – Piştî gelek salan xizmên hevdu dîtin, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_m7OakqEXI (accessed: 3/032024).

[80] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 28.

[81] Abagha is a district in eastern Turkey, north of the city of Van, another and current name of the city of Abagha is Çaldiran.

mother[82] in Constantinople in which he wrote about his victories over the Persians, he also mentioned the house of Amar-agha.[83]

After listing the merits of Amar-agha in the war against the Persians, the Sultan's charter granted him eternal and hereditary possession of the Abagha region, which included 366 villages, as well as a number of towns with marketplaces, including Mahmudiya.[84]

In fact, we can say that this charter marks the establishment of the Yezidi principality under the leadership of the noble Amar-agha family and grants them the claim to the Abagha region, including tax and economic privileges. Moreover, in addition to the territorial possessions, Amar-agha was also granted extraterritorial power over all the Yezidis of the Ottoman Empire, although, as far as we are aware, this kind of power did not extend beyond the borders of Eastern Anatolia.

Comparing the charter granted by the Sultan to Avdal-agha at the end of the 16th century and the correspondence of Choban-agha with Georgian King Erekle II after almost two centuries, it can be understood that these were the representatives of the same ruling family that was leading the Yezidi tribes of Sarhad for at least three centuries, notwithstanding the shrinking of their territory and the waning influence of this family over time. These conclusions are confirmed by the following circumstances:

Choban-agha's appeals to Erekle were due to the growing influence of the kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti (East Georgia) after its unification in 1762 under the leadership of the outstanding statesman King Erekle II, and the aspirations of the non-Muslim peoples, namely the Armenians, Assyrians and Yezidis, in relation to this Georgian king.

Mahmudi Region

In his letter to King Erekle II dated the 13th of August 1770, the Assyrian bishop Isaiah[85] wrote that he "went to Mahmedian Kurdistan".[86] As Vasilyeva wrote in the preface to *Sharafnama*, even after the administrative reform that was aimed at strengthening

[82] It is known that the mother of Sultan Murad III, Nurbanu Sultan had great influence during the reign of her son.

[83] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 28–28 (both sides). See also the sultan's charter itself, *ibid*: ll. 31–32 (both sides).

[84] It should be noted that Sharaf-khan Bidlisi wrote that the Abgay (Abagha) district in 1005 A.H. (1596–97) belonged to Vali-bek from the Dumbuli tribe (see: Бидлиси 1967: 313) which apparently is not true. Obviously, the discrepancies between some information from the Sharafnama and real historical events confirmed by Ottoman archival documents, especially regarding the Yezidis, requires additional study.

[85] It should be noted that Armenian historiography considers him to be an Armenian bishop. See: Иоаннисян 1989: 233.

[86] Мачарадзе 1989: 49. Macharadze, based on the peculiarities of the Georgian language, mistakenly translated the word 'Mahmed' as 'Mohammedan', that is, 'Muslim Kurdistan' (see: Мачарадзе 1989: 49), although it is clearly 'Mahmudi Kurdistan'.

control over Kurdistan, "Kurdish principalities and emirates remained, which the Turkish authorities failed to fragment"; in particular, in the Van vilayet – Hakkari, Mahmudi, and Penyaneshi[87] of Kurdistan that was known as the Mahmudi region, the region of the Mahmudi tribe.[88] Thus, in the Van vilayet the matter was about a separate principality. In his *Description of a Journey Along the Turkish-Persian Border*, Mehmed Khurshid Efendi mentions the "Mahmudi River, which flows near Van from Khoshab-Kale, in the Mahmudi district, into Lake Van".[89]

In Chirikov's *Travel Journal*, as well as in the maps attached to it, the region, area, sanjak, or fortress of Mahmudi are mentioned repeatedly.[90]

In the second half of the 17th century the once vast Mahmudi region of the Van vilayet, as we can assume, included territories occupied by both the Muslim part of this tribe and the Yezidi Mahmudi, concentrated around Abagha. This is confirmed by Choban-agha's letter to Erekle II, dated the 13th of August 1770, in which he calls himself Choban-agha of Abaghlu.[91] Valerian Macharadze, not knowing this geographical name, could not explain the word 'Abaghlu', therefore he put a question mark on it. In addition, in the same letter, Choban-agha speaks about his community, when he writes: "we are Mahmud Yezidis".[92] Macharadze again incorrectly assumes that the word 'Mahmud' supposedly means "Mohammedan,"[93] that is, Muslim – which makes the phrase a misnomer: 'we are Muslim Yezidis'.[94] Our argument that both Choban-aghas belonged to the same clan of Yezidis-Mahmudi are confirmed by the description of Khurshid Efendi, according to which "Mahal[95] Abgay, or Abagha," consists "of a vast steppe […] assigned to the Van sanjak and located in the vicinity of the Bargiri sanjak, on the south side of Ala-dag, and of numerous *yaylaks*[96] located in the surrounding mountains," which the local residents call Mahmudi and Mehemdi-*dyuzlyugyu*.[97] Khurshid Efendi also wrote that Yezidis earlier lived in the Abag territory "who filled this area with their villages, cultivated it, and even built a sufficient number of fortified castles

[87] Васильева 1967: 53.
[88] The word 'მაჰმედა (-mahmeda)', used in the bishop's letter, is similar to the Georgian word 'სამაჰმადიანო (-samahmadiano)' – 'Mohammedan'. It should be added that the Kurds called the Mahmudi district Mahamdan, and Chapter III of the Book on the New History of Kurdistan by Mela Mahmoud Bayezidi was called: Description of the events that occurred in the Mahmudi district, which the Kurds call Mahamadan and the main city of which is Khoshab [see: Васильева 1991: 35].
[89] Хуршид-эфенди 1877: 287.
[90] Чириков 1875: XLIV, LXXXII, 482, 484, 486, 584–587, 592.
[91] See: Мачарадзе 1989: 50.
[92] *Ibid*: 51.
[93] *Ibid*: 51.
[94] On this see also Пирбари 2008: 121–122.
[95] In this case, a community or district with a certain level of self-government.
[96] High mountain pastures for summer season.
[97] Хуршид-эфенди 1877: 290.

in it to protect themselves from the attacks of the Ashirets hostile to them,"[98] which obviously refers to the Kurdish Muslim tribes.

Similar information about Abagha was also available in the work of another Ottoman officer engaged in the process of defining the Turko-Iranian border in the mid-19th century.[99]

Kurdish and Yezidi elders said that the Choban-agha family ruled over 366 villages.[100] It is noteworthy that 360 Yezidi villages in Abagha were mentioned in the description of this area by the afore-mentioned Ottoman officer named Dervish Pasha.[101] One of the villages of Abagha, cited by Khurshid Efendi, bears the name of Choban-agha (*Kalê* Chopan-agha),[102] the fortress of Choban-agha, apparently, the village of the Choban-agha family.

Khurshid Efendi also pointed to the presence of graves of Yezidi *beys* (tribal chiefs) in the Abagha area, over which *qubbes* (tombs or shrines) were built, one of them had an inscription indicating the deceased's demise in 1114 AH (1734).[103]

Part of the Mahmudi region from Van vilayet was transferred to Hakkari. The seat of the administration of this area was the Khoshab fortress.[104] In his letter to Erekle II, Bishop Isaiah conveyed that Choban-agha would ask the Georgian king to assist him in the conquest of the Khoshab fortress.[105] Apparently, the Khoshab fortress once belonged to the Choban-agha family, who later lost it and moved north. Choban-agha, wanted to regain his native lands. Moreover, not long before this, in 1762, Choban-agha captured the son of the ruler of Khoshab. Subsequently, the ruler of Van launched a campaign against Abagha, took the fortress, and Choban-agha was forced to flee.[106]

Ezdikhan: Yezidi Principality

For a long time, the territory around Abagha, northeast of lake Van was the fiefdom of the Yezidi princely family Kok-agha, who led the Yezidi part of the Mahmudi tribal union. This fact is even noted as a place name – Ezdi-khan or Yesdi-khan on various maps listed below. Furthermore, the place name "Ezdikhan" was not previously known for any area, especially not in Eastern Anatolia, which is far away from

[98] *Ibid*.
[99] See: Fener 2015: 143–144.
[100] Perhaps they mention the number 366 (as well as 72) as the oral tradition due to the large number of villages.
[101] See: Fener 2015: 143–144.
[102] See: Хуршид-эфенди 1877: 422.
[103] See: *Ibid*: 291
[104] See: *Ibid*: 292.
[105] Мачарадзе 1989: 49.
[106] See: Մանր ժամանակագրություններ 1956: 490.

Sheikhan and Sinjar (Shangal). It should be noted that it was characteristic for Yezidi rulers in general to call their territories, which had a certain level of independence, Ezdikhan or Ezidkhan (Êzdîxan). This was also the name of the Yezidi principality in Sheikhan. Apparently, such a name was intended to assert the distinction from the Kurds (Muslims). Ezdikhan literally translates as 'House of the Yezidis', but in this case means 'Yezidi World'.

On another map this territory is designated as 'Yezdi Khan Principauté, that is, the Principality of Ezdikhan.[107]

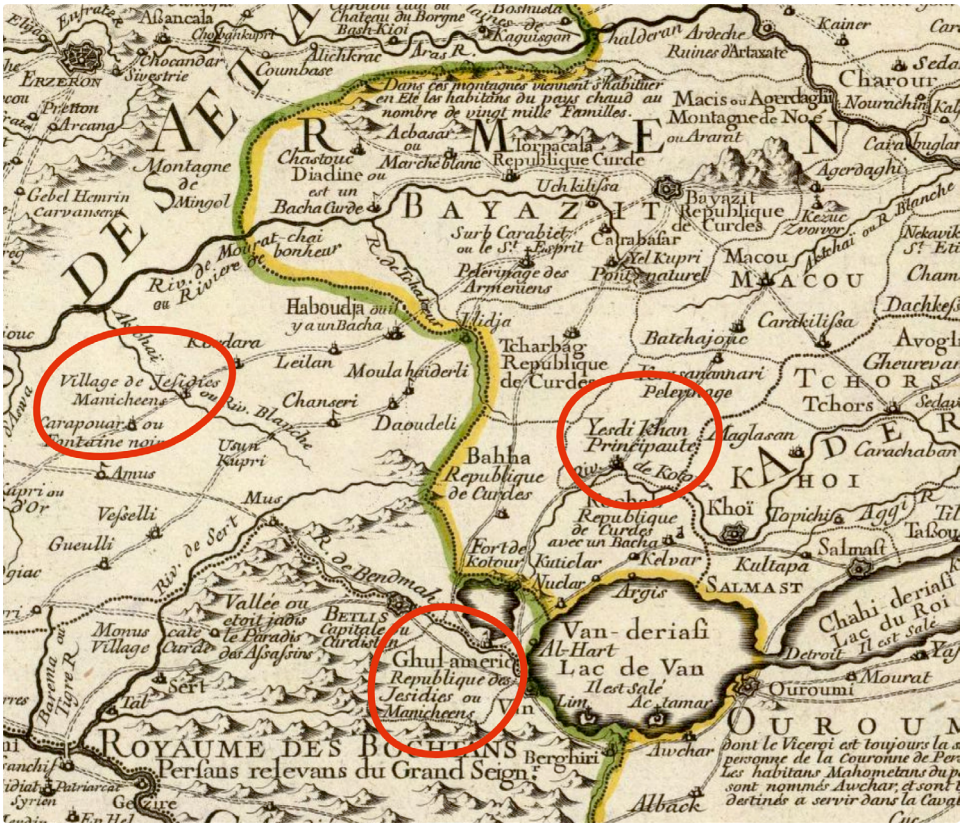


Figure 1. Part of a map by *Guillaume de L'Isle, Mer Caspiene, Pays voisins*, 1723.[108] On another map, the area is simply labelled as Ïezdi-kan.

[107] The same map shows toponyms referring to Yezidis and Manichaeans.

[108] David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, https: //www.davidrumsey.com / luna/servlet / detail / RUMSEY~8~1~2906~300042:Carte-des-Pays-voisins-de-la-Mer-Ca (accessed: 11/10/2023).



Figure 2. Part of a map by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, *Asie 1*, 1751.[109]



Source bibliotheque-numerique.diplomatie.gouv.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 3. Manuscript map of the surroundings of Lake Van and the sources of the Tigris, 18th century.[110]

[109] David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~4416~410005:Premiere-partie-de-la-carte-d-Asie (accessed: 22/09/2023).

[110] Author: Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d' Anville, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8592844b (accessed: 18/08/2023).

In the Russian *Map of Asian Turkey*,[111] compiled in 1793, the area between Van in the south and Maku in the north is designated as 'Yezdikan' (Ездикан).

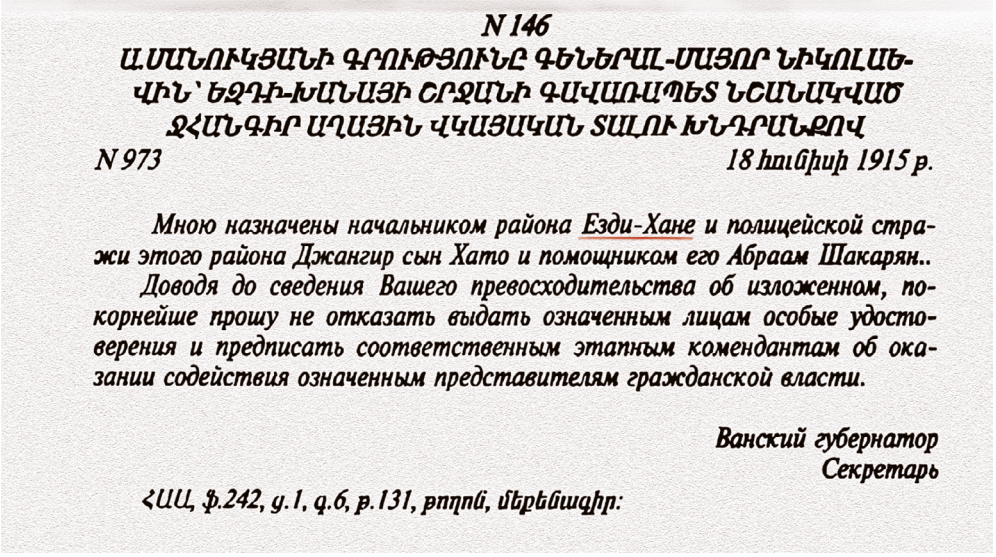


Figure 4. Part of *Map of Asian Turkey*.[112]

Moreover, on the 26th of December 1843, at the 10th conference between the plenipotentiaries of the Ottoman Empire and Iran on border disputes, the Iranian side, listing, among other things, the borderlands, added that "Mahmoudi et Abakaï, dits aussi [also called] Yézidi Khana".[113]

Thus, thanks to the Kok-agha family, which ruled vast territories to the north and east of Van, this region was called Ezdikhan on various maps in the 17th and 18th centuries. Apparently, this toponym appeared in this territory already in the 16th century, during the period when the Kok-agha family held the most power. Moreover, the term 'Ezdikhan' denoting densely populated areas in the Van vilayet continued to be used even at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, in 1915, the so-called "Armenian governor of Van" issued an order, appointing Jangir-agha as "chief of the Ezdi-Khan region".[114]

[111] Figure 4.
[112] Map of Asian Turkey (Карта Азиатской Турции), Anatolia, including Armenia, Kurdistan, Aljazira, Iraq-Ajami, from the New Atlas, or collection of maps of all parts of the world, Saint-Petersburg 1793, https://geoportal.rgo.ru/record/9976 (accessed: 12/10/2023). This atlas is a Russian translation of a French one of the same name, printed in Paris in 1762 (British Library, London – Maps C. 27. f.3).
[113] Extracts From Correspondence Relative to the Turco-Persian Boundary Negotiations (Extracts) 1912: 105.
[114] Մանուկյան 2009: 162.



N 146
ԱՄԱՆՈՒԿՅԱՆԻ ԳՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ԳԵՆԵՐԱԼ-ՄԱՅՈՐ ՆԻԿՈԼԱԵՎԻՆ՝ ԵԶԴԻ-ԽԱՆԱՅԻ ՇՐՋԱՆԻ ԳԱՎԱՌԱՊԵՏ ՆՇԱՆԱԿՎԱԾ ՋՀԱՆԳԻՐ ԱՂԱՅԻՆ ՎԿԱՅԱԿԱՆ ՏԱԼՈՒ ԽՆԴՐԱՆՔՈՎ

N 973 18 հուլիսի 1915 թ.

Мною назначены начальником района Езди-Хане и полицейской стражи этого района Джангир сын Хато и помощником его Абраам Шакарян..

Доводя до сведения Вашего превосходительства об изложенном, покорнейше прошу не отказать выдать означенным лицам особые удостоверения и предписать соответственным этапным комендантам об оказании содействия означенным представителям гражданской власти.

Ванский губернатор
Секретарь

ՀԱԱ, ֆ.242, ց.1, գ.6, թ.131, բողոք, մերենացիք:

Figure 5. Translation of the Russian text: I have appointed the head of the Ezdi-Khan district and the police guards of this region, Jangir son of Khato and his assistant Abraham Shakaryan. Bringing the above mentioned to the attention of Your Excellency, I cordially ask you not to refuse to issue special certificates to the said people and to instruct the relevant staging commanders to provide support to the above-mentioned representatives of the civil authorities.[115]

History of the Mahmudi Tribe and the Kok-agha Lineage

The period of strengthening of the Mahmudi tribe - Conversion to Islam – The future fate of the Kok-agha family

It should be noted that in his chronicle, Sharaf-khan Bidlisi devotes one of the chapters to the emirs of the Mahmudi tribe.[116] Therein, he indicates their genealogy and points out their Yezidi religion. According to the *Sharafnama*, during the time of the Turkmen dynasty (Kara-Koyunlu which ruled in the territory of Kurdistan) a certain Shaikh Mahmud received from Kara Yusuf (1389–1420) the Ashut and Khoshab districts as an emirate. Furthermore, his son Hussain-beg received the Albak district, which had been taken from the Hakkari rulers.[117]

The Iranian shahs, despite their best efforts, failed to establish real authority over the Mahmudi tribe and eventually settled for mere formal subordination.

[115] Մանուկյան 2009.
[116] See: Бидлиси 1967: 349–358.
[117] See: *Ibid*: 349.

When presenting the history of Shaykh Mahmud's descendants, Sharaf-khan Bidlisi, states that Hasan bin Iwaz-bek bin Mir Hamid, "eliminated the Yezidi heresy in the tribe [of] Mahmudi."[118] Thus, the Mahmudi tribe was entirely Yezidi before the rule of Hassan Beg around the middle of the 16th century. Sharaf-khan. Bidlisi also mentions the escape of Hasan-bey to the court of Shah Tahmasp (1524–1574), who granted him the administration of Mahmudi and the Khoshab fortress,[119] an event that, according to Açikyildiz-Şengül, took place around the year 1550.[120]

This period during the reign of Suleiman I can be described as the time when the Mahmudi tribe became stronger on the border between Turkey and Iran. Evliya Çelebi, mentioning this tribe several times in his work, writes about the transfer of the fortress of Maku to a *bey* from this tribe after his submission to Suleiman I. These Makhmudi *beys* also owned Malazgirt.[121] It is also worth to recall that after the first mention of the Mahmudi tribe by Evliya Çelebi, Soviet authors noted that it was "one of the largest and most powerful Kurdish tribes in the 16th and 17th centuries, leading a nomadic life east of Lake Van. Because the tribe was Sunni, in the wars between the Persians and the Turks, they often supported the latter."[122]

The Ottoman archives contain extensive documentation on various emirs of the Mahmudi tribe in the 16th century who played an important role in the Ottoman-Iranian border region. Among these documents are some who were previously unknown in historical literature.[123] The works in Ottoman archives devoted to the subject of the Principality of Mahmudi (Khoshab) contain certain aspects related to our topic.[124] In the middle of the 16th century, after having supported the Ottoman Empire against Iran, the Mahmudi tribe was granted the opportunity to build the Khoshab fortress. Part of the tribe, along with the rulers, soon converted to Islam and the proportion of the Yezidi population in the Mahmudi region decreased over time. However, it had still a presence there until the early twentieth century.[125] Very important is a work on the religious architecture of the "Yezidi Mahmudi dynasty" in Khoshab, which contains pre-Islamic Yezidi elements.[126] There is also an article that analyses the Khoshab fortress and the

[118] *Ibid*: 354.
[119] *Ibid*.
[120] See: Açikyildiz-Şengül 2016: 370.
[121] See: Челеби 1983: 107.
[122] *Ibid*: 110.
[123] See: Dehqan and Genç 2019: 90–91.
[124] Şen 2018; Şen and Tekin 2020: 141–162.
[125] See: Şen 2018: 37–39; Şen and Tekin 2020: 156–158.
[126] Açikyildiz-Şengül 2016.

findings (fragments of ornamented stucco) of the excavations in 2017 which also includes a history of the Mahmudi principality.[127]

Thanks to its diplomatic manoeuvring between the Ottomans, Iranians, and local Kurdish rulers, the "Kurdish Yezidi Mahmud dynasty" managed to maintain its control over the Van region for quite some time.[128]

The Mahmudi tribe, or more precisely its growing Muslim branch, was a powerful unit in Eastern Anatolia and the border regions of Iran. Evliya Çelebi also mentions several thousand "armed and excellent [Kurdish] warriors from the Mahmudi tribe" in Khynys in the Erzurum vilayet.[129] He writes about their residence in the Araks region[130] and, recounting a legend, mentioned the enormous size of the horses of the Mahmudi tribe.[131] Considering the role of the horse at that time and in that region, this can be seen as a sign of the Mahmudis' glory and power.[132]

In the second half of the 16th century, a split occurred in this large and powerful tribe, when a part of the Mahmudi tribe moved away from the Mahmudis of Khoshab who had converted to Islam. The Mahmudis, who remained faithful to the Yezidi faith, moved to Abagha in the north of Khoshab under the leadership of the Kok-agha family. Very interesting information about Mahmudi-Van Yezidis can be found in a famous 18th century chronicle, namely the "Van Tarihi" (The History of Van) by İbn-i Nuh.[133] The chronicle reports on the conflicts between the Ottoman forces under the governors of Van and Diyarbakir and the Yezidis, in particular the attack of the Yezidis of Khoshab on the fortress of Van in 1042 AH (1632/3), the battles between the Ottoman troops of Van and the Yezidis of Khoshab in 1127 AH (1715), the defeat of the governor of Van by Yezidi fighters in 1128 AH (1716); the defeat of the Yezidis by Ottoman troops, and the upraising of the Yezidis of Khoshab against the Van administration shortly thereafter.[134] As mentioned above, from about the middle of the 16th century, Khoshab belonged to the Muslim Kurds, while the surrounding area was inhabited by the Mahmudi Yezidis. According to a number of sources, these Yezidis collaborated at times with the Kurds against the Ottoman authorities.[135] The presence of Yezidis in the vicinity

[127] Top and Telli 2020: 275–299.
[128] Orpak 2021: 9.
[129] Челеби 1983: 224–225.
[130] See: *Ibid*: 109.
[131] See: *Ibid*: 249.
[132] Information about the various rulers of the Mahmudi tribes and Khoshab is widely present in the famous work on the history of Iran. See: Monshi 1978: 856, 863, 878–879, 897, 911–912, 118. Also, an article on the Mahmudi sanjak and its rulers has recently been published. See: Kaya 2023: 764 – 777.
[133] İbn-i Nuh 2003.
[134] *Ibid*: xv–xvii.
[135] See: *Ibid*: 86–88; Aykan 2022: 692.

of Khoshab is also confirmed by Russian pre-revolutionary literature. In one of the sources on the history of military operations in Asian Turkey in 1828–1829, there is a "Table of Kurdish *taifas*", according to which "at the Koshab [Khoshab] fortress behind Koshab on the border of Albag lives a Yezdi *taifa* numbering 200 families and the chief of them is Khidir-agha."[136] Apparently, this was the part of the Mahmudi Yezidis that remained and continued residing not far from Khoshab.

Ottoman archival materials also contain documents about various actions of the Yezidis in Eastern Anatolia against the Ottomans, indicating their quite significant military strength and influence in the region. In particular, there is information about one of the most famous personalities of this region named Abdi Oğlu Mahmud who lived in the early 18th century[137] and who can be assumed to have been a representative of the Kok-agha clan.

Some information is also available on personalities of the Kok-agha clan in the Ottoman documents published by Amed Gökçen.[138] One of the documents refers to a Choban-agha from Abagha of Van, who went to Khoy in Iran but soon after returned to his lands[139] – an information which generally corresponds to the one provided below. The second document seems to refer to Choban-agha's sons, in particular to Avdal-agha (Abda-agha) and his passage to Iran[140] and his and his brother's return to the Ottoman Empire – very much to Abbas-Mirza's discontent.[141] Although, it would appear that Avdal-agha and his brother returned because they were unhappy with Abbas Mirza.[142]

Relations Between Choban-agha and Erekle II, the King of Kartli-Kakheti

In the 17th and early 18th centuries the Yezidis represented a significant ethnic element and an important military force in four regions of the Ottoman Empire: in Van, in the mountainous area stretching from Amadiye (Imadiye) to Hakkari, in the area located between the districts of Kilis and Ruha (Urfa), and the area between Mosul and Sinjar.[143] However, in the 18th century, the situation of the Yezidis began to seriously deteriorate due to the increase of the Kurdish-Muslim demographic element.

The history of the Yezidis of Sarhad in the second half of the 18th century was preserved within the archival materials, thanks to the correspondence of Choban-agha

[136] *История военных действий в Азиатской Турции в 1828 и 1829 годах 1836*: 129.
[137] Kaya 2021: 982.
[138] See: Gökçen 2012: 241, 244.
[139] See: *Ibid*: 241.
[140] See: *Ibid*: 244.
[141] See: Azap 2021: 38, 144.
[142] See: Azap 2021: 38, 144.
[143] See: İbn-i Nuh 2003: 86–88; Aykan 2022: 693.

with Erekle II, the King of Kartli-Kakheti,[144] and the work of the Armenian Catholicos Simeon Yerevantsi (Simeon of Yerevan, 1710–1780),[145] who mentioned the correspondence between "Abagha's" ruler "Choban-agha" and the Georgian king.[146]

It is noteworthy that the famous Armenian historian Abgar Ioannisyan wrote about Joseph Emin based on Simeon Yerevantsi Etchmiadzin's *Memorial Book*.[147] Therein, he recounts a story about Choban-agha, "the ruler of Abagha" ("պարոն Ապաղու")[148] and the subsequent resettlement of Choban-agha, due to the oppression of the pashas and khans in Khoy. In contrast to Macharadze's work, Ioannisyan has not yet been taken into account by researchers on Yezidi and Kurdish history. Thus, his chronicles have gone unexamined. Besides, in the same work, Ioannisyan wrote that several years before Choban-agha's correspondence with King Erekle II, the famous Armenian clergyman Hovnan[149] "assigned to the Yezidis, as well as to the Assyrians, a very important role in the joint uprising against the Turks that they were preparing for" and "conducted some negotiations with the Yezidis (obviously, with Choban-agha). In 1764 he wrote with confidence to Emin that the Yezidis also agreed to join them together with the Armenians and take up arms."[150]

There is also information about a letter from Choban-agha to Erekle II, dated the 23rd of September 1770, in which he agrees "to the proposal of a joint fight against Turkey" and expresses hope "for the patronage of Erekle II".[151]

Yerevantsi also wrote about Choban-agha's correspondence[152] with an Armenian clergyman and about monetary aid provided to Choban-agha,[153] as well as on Choban-Agha's appeal to the Georgian King Erekle II through the Armenian abbot who interceded on his behalf. The abbot noted that "the ruler of the country Abagha Yezidi Choban-agha suffered great damage multiple times from the rulers of all the surrounding

[144] Мачарадзе 1989.

[145] He was the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church in 1763–1780.

[146] Սիմէօն Կաթուղիկոս Երեւանցի 1913: 133, 376–377. Yerevantsi is also the author of a work on the history of the Armenian church [Ереванци 1958].

[147] See: Иоаннисян 1989: 234.

[148] The mountainous Aladag region, south of Diadin and southwest of Bayazid.

[149] Abbot of the monastery of St. Karapet in Mush, which was one of the centres of the Armenian liberation movement.

[150] *Ibid*.

[151] Чатоев 1985: 70. Thus, besides in the work of Yerevantsi, this is the first mention in scientific literature of the correspondence of the Yezidi ruler Choban-agha with the Georgian king Erekle II. Moreover, Choban-Agha's letter with the indicated date is not contained in Macharadze's work. It is noteworthy that Khalit Chatoev provides only a reference and not to an archival document referring to Choban-agha's letter, but in the History of the Armenian People, published in 1951 (though without indicating the author of the chapter) it is said that the abbot of the monastery Surb Karapet Hovnan, along with the Kurds, hoped to persuade the Yezidis and Assyrians to act together with them against the Turks. See: Иоаннисян 1951: 261. The context of Hovnan's negotiations with Emin and Erekle is analysed there, as well as the attitude of Catholicos Simeon to it. See: *Ibid*: 261–262.

[152] Yerevantsi lists him as "Chopan-Agha", but we use the generally accepted name.

[153] See: Սիմէօն Կաթուղիկոս Երեւանցի 1913: 133.

states, be it from pashas or khans", in connection with which he remained completely helpless. Choban-agha had previously appealed to King Erekle II with requests to proceed with his people to the king's domain. Having received no help, the Yezidi-agha became disillusioned with the king. Oppressed in his own land, Choban-agha abandoned his homeland and headed for Khoy, destroying the surrounding terrain before his departure.[154] Having reached Khoy, he again sent a messenger to Erekle II, asking him to receive him and his people. In November 1778, the Georgian king sent a small detachment to Khoy to fetch Choban-agha, but the Khan of Khoy, Ahmat-khan, opposed Choban-agha's departure and Erekle's detachment returned without Choban-agh. The Georgian king informed Choban-agha that the Khan of Khoy intended to kill him and disperse his people, upon which Choban-agha fled to King Erekle and stayed with him for about six months, until May 1779.[155] Then, Erekle sent his men accompanied by Choban-agha to the Khan of Khoy with a request to allow Choban-agha to take his people with him. Initially, the khan reluctantly agreed and granted permission for 200 families to leave, but soon changed his mind. Thus, Choban-agha and the representatives of the King returned empty handed. Sometime later, Choban-agha returned to Khoi. However, before this, the Pasha of Van requested the Armenian abbot in a letter to intercede with King Erekle II to allow Choban-agha to leave so that he could return "to his country" and rebuild it under the patronage of the pasha. The Armenian priest did so and on the 5th of June 1779 Choban-agha and the representative of Erekle II began their return. By then, Choban-agha did not even have a horse of his own and the Armenian Catholicos had to provide him with a steed.[156]

King Erekle II perceived Choban-agha as a passible natural ally. This is evidenced in a significant postscript by the Georgian king in a letter dated August the 13th of 1770, which truly reflects the aspirations of the Yezidis of Eastern Anatolia towards their Christian neighbors, Georgians, Armenians, Assyrians and subsequently the Russian Empire: "This Choban-ogly, whose last name is Yezid, is neither a Christian nor a Muslim. More a supporter of Christians and an enemy of Muslims. He also wants to join us, since they are oppressed by Muslims".[157]

[154] It is precisely this part of S. Yerevantsi's book that Ioannisyan refers to.

[155] Yerevantsi does not indicate the precise year, but since the events of this chapter refer to 1778, Choban-Agha's stay from November [1778] to May implies 1779.

[156] See: Սիմէօն Կաթուղիկոս Երեւանցի 1913: 376–377. Choban-agha is also briefly mentioned in another part of the chronicle of Catholicos Simeon Yerevantsi. About his correspondence with the Armenian Catholicos and the exchange of gifts in 1767 see: Idem: 1908: 53–54.

[157] Мачарадзе 1989: 51–52. It should be noted that the author of one of the most informative books about the Yezidis, John Guest, mentions Choban-agha only once, and – although with reference to Marietta Shaginyan – mistakenly classifies Mîr Choban-agha Beg as a member of the Hassanli tribe (see: Guest 1993: 198). Also incorrect is his statement that the Choban-agha's tribe migrated from Van to Georgia (apparently, he meant

Despite the weakening of the tribe led by Choban-agha, two hundred years later, in the middle of the second half of the 19th century, it still played a role in the region and in the potential formation of an anti-Ottoman Armenian-Georgian-Yezidi coalition. However, due to pressure from the Kurds starting during the Choban-agha period, the Yezidis continued to seek resettlement opportunities in the interest of self-preservation. In other words, they prepared for the possibility of having to leave their territories.[158]

The seizure of pastures belonging to Yezidis in Abagha by the increasing number of nomadic Kurds and the migration of local Yezidi residents, to Bitlis, Mush, Van, Khoy, and Ovadzhik (Avachikh). The movement of about four hundred families to the latter already envisaged by Khalil-agha in his petition to the viceroy) and the migration to Russia is also attested in Turkish sources.[159] In the beginning of the 19th century, about fifty or sixty years before Khurshid Efendi wrote his book, Kurdish *aşirets* (tribes) came with their herds in the summer to the Abagha region, which was famous for its air and abundance of pastureland. Since seasonal grazing was no longer enough for them, they coveted the Yezidis' land and began to take away their property. This led to conflicts between Yezidis and Kurdish *aşirets*, whose numbers increased every year. "Hindered and ravaged by the atrocities of outsiders," the Yezidis eventually left and the Abagha area became permanently settled by Kurdish *aşirets*.[160]

The Narrative of the Kidnapping of Zarif-khatun

It should be added that, apart from the above-mentioned reason for the struggle for territory, orally transmitted Yezidi accounts reflect a story that can be taken as the reason that started the war between the Kurdish bey and the Choban-agha family, known among the Kurds and Yezidis of Sarhad as 'şerê ser Zerîf-xatûnê' (war for Zarif-khatun).[161]

Abagha at the foot of Mount Ararat, which was under Iranian rule) and that he had to return to the place of his former residence near Mount Ararat, due to the oppression of the Georgian King Erekle II (see: *Ibid*: 198). We can also add that the information about the Mahmudi tribe (as well as the Dumbulis) given by Guest is only based on information provided by the Sharafnama (see: *Ibid*: 45–48).

[158] Probably, Choban-agha, manoeuvring between different forces, was also for some time in the vicinity of Sheikhan. There are oral stories about this. Moreover, representatives of the Yezidi tribes of Iraq, the Jasanis and Haskis, claim that they are relatives of Choban-agha. In Sarhad, and later in Armenia and Georgia, the Choban-agha family had close kinship relations with the aşirets (tribes) of Kandali and Mamrashi. Representatives of these tribes believed that they had a common origin. It is interesting that the ethnonyms of all these tribes might originate from the names of three neighbouring villages in the Sheikhan region – Mamrasha, Mahmuda, and Kandala, since Yezidi tribal names are often derived from toponyms.

[159] See: Fener 2015: 143–144.

[160] Хуршид-эфенди 1877: 290.

[161] This story was told to us by Nadirê Dao Mandikî (1929–2023) and Fetla-beg (1924–2002), the son of Jangir-agha (Tbilisi, 1996; Yerevan, 1997).

Thus, in the early 19th century, the Kurdish *bey* Ali-agha, son of Badr-khan-beg,[162] planned to kidnap a girl named Zarif-khatun from the Yezidi family of Kok-agha, son of Choban-agha. The Ali-agha invited the Yezidi agha to his son's wedding. At the wedding, the host paid due respect to the Yezidi agha but had treacherously ordered his servant to steal the Yezidi leader's rosary during the feast and go to the latter's house where Zarif-khatun lived. In case she would refuse to leave the house, the servant was ordered to show the girl her father's rosary in order to gain her trust. The plan was successful, and the girl went with the servant. When the Yezidi agha saw his daughter dancing in a circle and realized the Kurdish *bey's* intentions, he sent a messenger to Khatib-agha, the head of the Yezidis of Karasu district, who lived in the village of Chibukhli. Khatib- agha and his men immediately rushed to the aid of their co-religionist. Although the Yezidis defeated the Kurds, the losses suffered during the battle meant the end of their military power. Thus, they were forced to leave their territories and move to the Russian Empire (the present-day territory of Armenia), finally settling in abandoned Turkic and Kurdish villages in Aparan at the beginning of the 19th century. The first description of this event was given in the work of the French author M. Ernest Chantre in the 19th century, based on stories from local residents. According to this account, the Kurds of the Haideranli tribe kidnapped Zarif-khatun, the daughter of Kok-agha, the head of the Yezidi settlement in Abagha. This resulted in a conflict which ended in the defeat of the Yezidis, who were forced to leave their fertile plain and migrate to Russia and Iran.[163] In 1902, this story about the war for Zarif-khatun was published in Armenian by the Russian Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in the *Eminyan Ethnographic Collection*, which contained Armenian folk tales collected by the ethnographer and collector Sarkis Haykuni.[164]

Furthermore, the story of the war for a girl from the Choban-agha family is also recorded in Kurdish folklore. Two stanzas of one of the songs preserved in Alexandre Jaba's collection of Kurdish manuscripts relates it from a Kurdish perspective:

[162] Not to be confused with the infamous Badr-khan.
[163] See: Chantre 1881: 293–294.
[164] Հայկունի 1902: appendixes 123–126.

Şer'ek bûye li zozanan	There was a battle in the pastures
Ça'v nabir'e ji mij û dûmanan	Fog made it hard to see,
Ewqas meriv hatine kuştin,	How many people were killed,
Teyr naxwin goştê însanan	Birds don't eat human flesh
Kela Wanê çardeh derî	Van fortress with fourteen gates,
Lê digerê Nasirê xemî cotek zerî	Nasirê Hêmî and a couple of maidens walk there
Qîza Mîr Çoban xwişka Gok Axa,[165]	Daughter of Mîr Choban, sister of Gok-agha,
Bûye hêviya E'lî Axa Heyderî[166]	Became the second wife of Ali-agha Haydari[167]

Another Kurdish folk song is entirely devoted to the story of Zarif-khatun, in which the Kok-agha clan is represented as the oppressor – this can be explained by the Kurdish-Yezidi rivalry, and the religious overtones.[168]

Stories similar to those told by the Yezidi elders have been preserved among the Kurds of this region, leading to the conclusion that with the capture of Zarif-Khatun and the subsequent battle, the backbone of the Kok-Agha clan was broken and the clan never recovered.[169]

In addition, there are also derogatory remarks against Yezidis[170] that are understandably absent from the Yazidi narrative but are included in the Kurdish one, underscoring their religious prejudices against Yezidis.[171]

[165] This song says that Zarif-khatun is the daughter of Choban-agha. However, as we know, she is the daughter of Kok-agha and the granddaughter of Choban-agha.

[166] Öztürk 2018: 191.

[167] *Ibid*.

[168] TRT Kurdî YouTube channel, Dengbêj Cemalê Wanê-Zerîfa Kok Axa, published on 22nd November, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrxTnr7Mahg (accessed: 5/01/2024). It should be added that this song was composed by the artist himself.

[169] See: *Ibid*: 126.

[170] See: *Ibid*: 89.

[171] Information about the fight for Zarif-khatun, which is associated with the defeat of the Kok-agha family (father of Amar-agha, grandfather of Khalil-ogly and son of Choban-agha) the only time in the Soviet period, has been recorded by us only. See: Boyîk 2004: 239. This is discussed in more detail in: Каграманян 2013: 83–84; Abasyan 2005. There is also a story about this war in Taar Abasyan's book (see: Abasyan 2005). Although Taar Abasyan incorrectly reflects the opponent of the Kok-agha family, he is named Badrkhan-beg (similar confusion in names was observed in the stories of Yezidi elders. Nadirê Dao also called him Badrkhan-beg Haydar-khan). In fact, Badr-khan was the father of Ali-agha, and Haidari was the name of their tribe while Ali-agha, is the son of Badr-khan from the noble clan of "Torna mala Sharo" (T'or'ina Mala Şero) (torn means a high-born aristocrat). The context of the confrontation, narrated in Taar Abasyan's book, is conveyed close to reality. More precisely, this story says that the Kok-agha family owned Abagha, which was the center of 366 villages. However, Zarif-khatun, because of whom the confrontation started, is not mentioned as Kok-agha's daughter, but as his sister and the daughter of Choban-agha (see: *Ibid*: 44).

Yezidis of Kok-agha in Russian Empire

In any event, it is the war for Zarif-khatun that is unanimously named as the incident that put an end to the Yezidis in Abagha and forced them to move to the east.

From the 1820s and 1830s onwards, Yezidi tribes from the Vilayet of Van and later from the province of Kars as well as from the Surmaly district of the province of Yerevan gradually moved to Aparan at the foothills of the Alaghez (called Aragats in Armenian), since the meadows there were an excellent pasture for cattle. Aparan belonged to the Alexandropol district of the Yerevan province and with time, a new union of tribes emerged there, called Ela Akhbarane or *Êla Axbaranê* (lit. union of the tribes of Aparan).

Based on the information provided above, it can be argued that one of the first Yezidi settlers in Armenia were the Yezidi tribes led by the Kok-agha clan. Although, as the elders said, a small number of Yezidis already lived in Aparan at that time.

Amar-agha, son of Kok-agha, after moving to Armenia, built a fortress near Stepanavan, called Amar-agha's fortress (*Kela* Amar-agha). Currently, only ruins of this fortress remain.

In Aparan, the Yezidis settled in the former villages of the Caucasian Turks or Tatars (now Azerbaijanis), who left these places due to the harsh climate. The names of the villages, now belonging to Yezidi, testify to the fact that they formerly belonged to Turks: Chobangyalmyaz ('the shepherd left and did not return'), Korbulach ('blind spring'), Sangyal ('you have come'), etc. Over time and already inhabited by Yezidis these names further changed: Sangyal to Sangyar, Chobangyalmaz to Chobanmaz, Jamushlu to Jamushvan, etc.

The descendants of Choban-agha settled in the village of Mirak, where, along with them lived various tribes (Dasni, Kandali, Masaki, Khani, Suhani, Mamrashi, etc.), as well as families of Yezidi sheikhs and pirs.[172]

The settlement of the Kok-agha clan people in the new places was reflected in various pre-revolutionary Russian publications. In the *Caucasian Calendar for 1855* in the Sardarabat section among the nomadic Kurds the tribe "Yezidi or Megemdanli" (Mehemdanli) is indicated, of "a little known Yezidi faith", and Kurdish-speaking.[173] Apparently, this refers to the Mahamdi/Mahmudi tribe and the Kok-agha clan. According to the list of populated places in the Yerevan province, compiled in 1869 the Yezidi villages in the Alexandropol district were Mirak, Kurubogaz, Dzharzharis (Dzhadzhiris), Chobankyarakmaz (Cheboran-Keryakmaz), Kurdish Pamb (Kurdi-Pamb), Jamushli,

[172] The sheikhs of the Kok-agha clan are sheikhs from the Shekh Ale Shamsa family, and the pirs from the Pir Hasanta'lki family.

[173] Кавказский календарь на 1855 год 1855: 316.

Kondokhsaz (Kondaksaz), and Korbulag (Kor-Bulag). They comprised of 260 houses in total,[174] although it should be noted that the preface to this list noted that for technical reasons about a third of the population was not included in the desk research,[175] meaning that the number of houses in these villages was actually closer to 350. The following villages along the Abaran (Aparan) river with a Yezidi population can be found in the list of settlements of Yerevan province as of 1873: Greater Jamushli (19 households/196 inhabitants), Small Jamushli (19/157), Kondaksaz (30/323), Kor-bulag (21/193), Mirak (66/572), Chobankermakmaz (33/316), Kurdish Pamb (33/292), Kuribogaz (57/471), Jarjaris (65/441). Another Yezidi family (6 people) lived in the Armenian village of Aparan (Dzhangi-tepe).[176] Obviously, the Yezidis who lived in the indicated villages (344 households, 2961 inhabitants) formed the community headed by Khalil-agha. Bakhtadze, describing the settlements of the Kurds, noted that it was mainly "Yezidi Kurds" that lived in the Alexandropol district, and they were divided into six communities: Mahmudli, Pivazli, Sipikli, Balanli, Hassanli, and Kushkinli, almost all of which moved from Turkey, mainly in 1830 and some a little later. They lived in nine villages, Mirak, Kurabogach, Jarjaris, Choban-Gyakarmaz, Pamba, Kondaksaz, Greater and Small Jamushli and Korbulag.[177] The publication of the Caucasian Artisanal Committee, devoted to the carpet trade of the Kurds of Surmali, Echmiadzin, and Alexandropol districts of the Yerevan province, contains a table on population, land use, cattle breeding and payments, in which three Yezidi villages are indicated in Alexandropol district, namely Kuchuk-Jangi, Mirak and Pamb. At the same time, the union of the village of Kuchuk-Djangi is indicated as Haji-Khalil.[178] Such a name was previously unknown to us, however, a village with the same name, but with a slightly different pronunciation is also present in another pre-revolutionary source: Hojakhalil.[179]

However, in the list of populated places in the Yerevan province, the population of the village of Haji-Khalil is noted as completely Armenian.[180] Mirak and Pamb are assigned to the Mirak union of villages.[181] In these three villages there were 138 households in which 1,381 people lived.[182] For various reasons, discontent grew towards the *agha* clan among the Yezidis of Aparan and finally, in 1912,

[174] See: Эриванская губерния. Список населенных мест губернии1869: 11.
[175] *Ibid*.
[176] See: Сборник сведений о Кавказе 1879: 98.
[177] Бахтадзе 1888: 77.
[178] See: Кустарная промышленность на Кавказе 1903: 36.
[179] See: Заваров 1899: 424.
[180] See: Сборник сведений о Кавказе 1879.
[181] See: Кустарная промышленность на Кавказе 1903: 36.
[182] See: *Ibid*.

the inhabitants of Mirak revolted against them. Because of this, the clan resettled to a nearby territory. Later, their village would be called *gundê axa* (village of *agha*).[183] The Soviet Kurdologist Aristova compiled a list of tribes that inhabited certain villages, based on the results of her field research. Mirak was inhabited by the Mahamdi (Mahmudi) tribe.[184]

In his petition, Khalil-agha also wrote that due to the hostile actions of the "Kurds" – by which he meant Muslim Kurds – "and Persians", the power of his family, which occupied the border area between Turkey and Persia, had been weakened. He continued that in 1813 the Iranian crown prince Abbas Mirza led Persian troops and attacked the Van, Bayazid, and Mush pashaliks; he did not come across Turkish troops anywhere and finally devastated the Amar-agha domain, taking many of its inhabitants captive. Khalil-agha concluded that because of this his Yezidis subjects began to move from the Abagha region to other places, namely to the Mush and Bayazid pashaliks and the Yerevan Khanate.[185]

We could not establish the mentioned campaign of Abbas Mirza in 1813, especially since in late 1812 and early 1813 he was commander-in-chief of the Persian army and busy with the war against Russia. The latter defeated the Persians and in October 1813 the Treaty of Gulistan was signed as a result of months of negotiations.[186] Most likely, the date given by Khalil-agha for the end of the rule of his family (1813) is an approximation.

The End of the Yezidi Principality

On this basis, we can assume that Khalil-agha somewhat inaccurately indicated the year of the Persian troops' campaign in Eastern Anatolia. Apparently, the end of the Yazidi principality is closely connected with the events that took place in the second half of the 19th century in connection with the Dervish Pasha revolt and later in the Vilayet of Van and the surrounding areas. In 1816, the commander (muhafiz) of the Van garrison, Dervish Pasha, started a revolt and drew the tribe of Iranian Kurds called Sipki to his side. As a result of the uprising, his troops, as well as the opposing forces of the Mush government, devastated several regions of Mush and Van. In addition, Dervish Pasha's troops crossed the Iranian border, which led to a Persian invasion of the territory of the Ottoman Empire in retaliation. The result was the capture and destruction of the

[183] See: Чачани 1977: 85.
[184] See: Аристова 1963: 47.
[185] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 28–28 (both sides).
[186] In this sense, the absence of Yezidi historiography poses great difficulties and highlights the need to select information about the Yezidis bit by bit from various sources, including those where the Yezidis are not clearly identified. In the Kurdish historiography, information about Yezidis seems to be hidden or silenced. In this sense, one can also mention Sharafname which contains gaps in chapters devoted to the Yezidi tribes of Mahmudi and Dumbuli.

fortress of Sedmatesh by the Persians and the forced resettlement of several thousand families,[187] which probably considerably weakened the position of Choban-agha's descendants. We could not identify the fortress of Sedmatesh, but it may have belonged to the property of the descendants of Choban-agha.

The Ottoman authorities eventually crushed Dervish Pasha's revolt and, as the Soviet-Armenian historian Bodzholian outlined,[188] subsequently executed or subordinated to the central government such famous derebeys as Tekeli oglu, Dagdeviren oglu, Ismail-bey Serezli and Çapan oglu.[189] It is conceivable that Chapan-oglu refers to one of the descendants of Choban-agha.

Substantial information on this topic can be found in a very informative monograph by Sabri Ateş,[190] in particular about the fortress of Khoshab, which is one of the important possessions of the Mahmudi tribe. The Yezidi part of the tribe was represented by the Kok-agha lineage, which used to own Khoshab. He notes that Dervish Pasha, who devastated the Hakkari, Van, and Urmia regions in 1816–1819, invited the Kurdish Sipki tribe to move from the Iranian-owned neighbouring areas of Yerevan to Erjish in the Van vilayet – an invitation they followed. When Dervish Pasha refused to return them to their former places of residence, Abbas Mirza sent his army of several thousand men to besiege the fortress of Erjish and later an army under the command of Hussayn Khan, the Sardar (tribal leader) of Yerevan, to the "fortress of Khoshab, the center of the Mahmudi dynasty".[191] Dervish Pasha and the Mahmudi Kurds were able to repel the Iranian attack, but Constantinople soon crushed Dervish Pasha's revolt. The Sipki tribe remained in the new territories and another Kurdish tribe, the Haydaranlu, joined them. According to another source, in 1820 the Kurdish Zilanli tribe was sent by the Yerevan sardar at the behest of Abbas-Mirza to ravage Kars and Shuragel. The Yezidis of Abagha suffered seriously as a result of this.[192]

Pursuant to Khalil-agha petition and after the above-mentioned destruction of his father Amar-agha's property, the latter went to Tehran and presented himself to Feth Ali Shah (1797–1834). He succeeded in freeing some of the captive Armenians and Yazidis and, with the Shah's permission, subsequently settled in the Khoy Khanate in Avachikh (Ovadzhik). There, privileged by his lineage, he ruled over the Yazidis in Persia and had the hereditary right to appropriate all the taxes available to the treasury.[193] Although the

[187] See: Боджолян 1984: 61–63.
[188] Referring to the work of Abdurrahman Şeref *Tarih-i devlet-i Osmaniye* (published in 1897 in the Ottoman language) as part of the fight against the "feudal separatists" during that time.
[189] *Ibid*: 64.
[190] Ateş 2013.
[191] *Ibid*: 50.
[192] See: Azap 2021: 144.
[193] See the attached Russian translation of Mohammed Shah's (1834–1848) charter provided to Amar-agha in 1836. See also: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 28 (both sides).

charter issued by the Shah has no connection with the charter of the Sultan, it is clear that when Iran issued privileges to Amar-agha, his previous position in the Ottoman Empire was obviously taken into account.

Since the phrase "managed in time to" in the Khalil-agha petition is used, one can conclude that Amar-agha went to Feth Ali Shah shortly before the Shah's death in the early 1830s. As already mentioned, it is unlikely that the Kok-agha clan's rule over Abagha ended in 1813 - it probably happened a little later. It is also unlikely that Amar-agha was vying for the Shah's favor 20 years after the devastation of his region and the captivity of his people. Moreover, the population under his control, as we can see, consisted not only of Yazidis, but also of Armenians. Most likely, the Kok-agha clan ultimately lost its possessions in the late 1920s, when Iran's influence in these territories was weakened as a result of its defeat by Russia. The Ottoman administration took advantage of this fact and strengthened its control over them.

As for the shah's granting of the right to Amar-agha to settle in the Khoy Khanate, it should be noted that this decision of the shah was made due to historical and geographical conditions. The Khoy Khanate, founded in the mid-18th century, was, as already mentioned, the hereditary possession of the Kurdish Dumbuli tribe, previously a large Yezidi tribe (notably mentioned in the Sharafnama), which moved from Syria and Jezire to the north-western part of Khoy in the 15th century and was connected by many threads with the Mahmudi tribe. In addition, the territory in the Khoi region allocated to the Amar-agha by the Shah formed, in a sense, a unified region with the former Van possessions of this clan. This was reflected in particular in the demarcation of the Turkish-Iranian border.[194] In addition, in the 16th century, the rulers of these and neighbouring areas, for instance in Maku, were also "Kurdish emirs of the Mahmudi tribe"[195] which was documented by Chirikov.[196]

However, the historical hatred of the Shiites towards the Yezidis, whom they perceived as descendants of the Umayyad Caliph Yezid, who killed the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad and the sons of the fourth Caliph Ali, Hassan and Hussein, forced Amar-agha to return to the "ruined Abagha village of Nowshor". In 1839,[197] Amar-agha moved from there "with 275 houses of his subjects to the Armenian province and became a subject of the Russian Empire". His Yezidi subjects "were settled in nine villages

[194] See: Ateş 2013: 58–59.
[195] Monshi 1978: 878.
[196] See: Чириков 1875: 584, 587.
[197] Within a margin of one or two years, based on the date of receiving the official letter from the Shah, which we assume he received in 1836.

in the Aparan section," and Amar-agha himself and his six sons settled in one of them, in Mirak.[198]

With regard the Yezidi–Kurdish relations, it should be noted that Khalil-agha is referred to in the archival documents[199] as "the head of the Yezidi Kurdish community of the Alexandropol district".[200] Apparently, he was given this title by the authors of his petitions for two reasons: first, because of his illiteracy, he was perceived as such by those who drafted these documents for him, and second, because the Russian Empire considered the Yezidis to be Kurds. Khalil-agha himself, as his petition shows, clearly distinguished the Yezidis from the Kurds, not least because they were the cause of his clan's problems. He states that it was the "hostile actions of the Kurds […] that contributed to the weakening of the power" of his clan.[201]

Conclusion

By using newly discovered and analyzed archival documents and comparing them with existing literature and oral traditions, we can now trace the history of the Yezidis in Eastern Anatolia over five centuries, beginning in the 16th century. In 1593, during a tour of the areas bordering Iran, the Ottoman Sultan granted Avdal-agha (from the Kok-agha family) a region of 366 villages centered in Abagha, as well as a number of other adjacent areas, for his services in the war against the Persians (which are reflected in the Yezidi folklore). In addition, as Mahmudiya-agha, he was given power over all Yezidis in the empire. This is the first documented case in history where the Yezidis were granted legitimate power. The Kok-agha line belonged to the Mahmudi tribe, which settled in Eastern Anatolia at the beginning of the 15th century. When Avdal-agha received the sultan's charter, his clan obviously already had a certain influence and power and bore the title of agha. A few decades earlier, in the middle of the 16th century, the Kok-agha split from another part of the tribe, which had converted to Islam and continued to rule in Khoshab. Soon after, he and his subjects migrated from Khoshab to the north of Abagha. However, some Yezidis of his clan and lineage remained in the vicinity of Khoshab for a long time. In fact, the sultan's charter created a Yezidi principality in the Van region, as can be seen on various maps from a subsequent period. Based on the analysis of documents, it has been established that Choban-agha, who corresponded

[198] NAG–CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 28 (both pages).
[199] See: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 8, 10, 12, 18, 24, 27, 28 (both sides), 3, 23, 36.
[200] Alexandropol district was at that time an administrative unit within the Yerevan province with its centre in the city of Alexandropol (now Gyumri). The district included 12 villages populated by Yezidis. In addition, the Yezidis also inhabited the Surmaly district of the Yerevan province, headed by a representative of another lineage, Hassan-agha.
[201] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. ob. 28.

with Erekle II, King of Kartli-Kakheti, is a representative of this lineage. Weakened by the clashes with the Kurds and the armed forces of the states, the tribe was forced to move to the neighbouring territory on the Iranian side. Three years later, in 1839, they moved again, this time to the territory of the Russian Empire. This continued the settlement of Yezidis in Russia that had begun ten years earlier, in 1829, under the leadership of the head of the Hassani-Hassan tribal union.

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Appendixes:

The above-mentioned archival file of Khalil-agha was compiled in connection with his application for a pension for life. The file contains correspondence from the authorities of the of the Caucasian viceroyalty of the Russian Empire, petitions from Khalil-agha to the governors, as well as translations of charters issued by Sultan Murad III and Mohammed Shah to the ancestors of Khalil-agha. The uniqueness of these documents lies not only in Khalil-agha's story about himself and his lineage mentioned in the petitions, but also and above all, in the certified translations of Ottoman and Iranian charters. Moreover, an Ottoman charter dating back to the end of the 16th century allows us to trace the history of this lineage up to the period of its greatest power. Thus, due to the lack of information about the originals of the charters of the Ottoman sultan issued to this Yezidi family (due to various vicissitudes, representatives of this family were lost), we have the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with them through certified translations made by members of the Russian administration and enclosed to the Russian viceroys in the Caucasus.

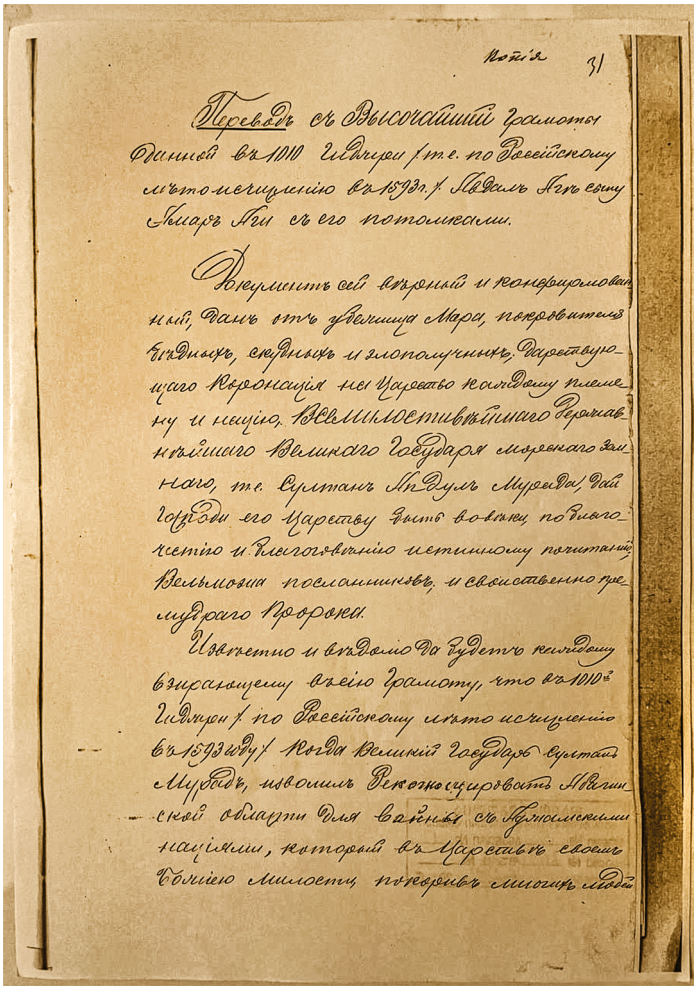


Figure 6: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 31–32 (both sides).

Translation:

Translation from the Highest Charter given in 1010 Hijra (i.e. according to the Russian chronology in 1593) to Avdal-agha son of Amar-agha and his descendants:

This document is true and confirmed, given from the haven of the World, the patron of the poor, the meagre, and the unfortunate, who grants the Coronation of the Kingdom to every tribe and nation, the Most Merciful, the Most Sovereign, the Great Sovereign of the sea, the earth, i.e. Sultan Abdul Murad, may God grant his Kingdom to be forever, according to piety and reverence, true veneration, the Noble of the messengers, and character of the wise Prophet.

It is known and will be known to everyone looking at this Diploma that in 1010 Hijri year (according to the Russian chronology in 1593) when Sultan Murad, the Great Emperor, disposed to the exploration of Abagha region for war with Adjam nations, who in his kingdom, by God's grace, subdued many people and conquered cities and towns up to the Kaplat region. In all the movements of His Majesty, and in all the battles that happened with the Ajam nations, Avdal-agha, the son of Amar-agha, the son of Mîr Chaban, participated, showing exemplary courage and courage against the enemies of the Sultan and acted with the tribe entrusted to him with fearlessness. Thus, having achieved victory over the enemies of Sultan Murad and cutting off 5,000 enemy heads from the Ajams, they gained enormous property and numerous wealth, with the capture of many people, and after the pacification of the Ajams and their subjugation, the Great Sovereign Sultan Murad returned to Abagha, stayed with his entire retinue in the Dar-Kazan [Dergezîn] fortress and in the house of the Highly Honoured and victorious Avdal-Agha, where the court ministers and honourable principal officers of the State Court, in examination and praise of all successful and brave actions of Avdal-agha, who distinguished himself against the enemies evenly, and of the cutting off of 5,000 enemy heads. When His Majesty Sultan Murad was informed of this, an extraordinary love for Avdal-agha awoke in His Majesty, who, in addition to various honours and huge gifts, as a reward for the differences he made in battle, and what happened through him to the Ajam nations, most gratiously deigned to grant to Avdal-agha a permanent and hereditary possession, namely: A) the province of Abagha with 366 villages, B) the towns of Turdchin with all their properties, lands and markets, called Kurkit, Sakimanis and Mahmudiya, with the exemption of their inhabitants from the entire financial system and from all state taxes and duties, which henceforth shall not flow into the state treasury, but directly into the hereditary position of Avdal-agha as an honorable and worthy person in the state; which is why he bestowed upon Avdal-agha this most merciful right of inheritance. Moreover, he showed his most generous (p. 32) and most gracious mercy especially upon all the high ranks and commanders who were subordinate to Avdal-agha and rewarded their work with huge and numerous gifts. Then His Majesty Sultan Murad, returning to the city of Constantinople, and of all the exploration that had taken place, notified his mother, and thus, aroused in her a pleasant feeling and extreme joy. And therefore, we have deigned to grant Avdal-Agha and his direct heirs, in addition to all the honors with respect to all the Yezidi tribes, the same rights that were granted to him with respect to the aforementioned areas, the city and the region, which we grant and establish with this charter; we command all our rulers and the noble classes to honour this charter as inviolable and valid, and no one should dare from now on to

demand anything from the lands granted by this charter to Avdal-Agha and his descendants, as well as from the inhabitants We command all our rulers and the noble classes to honor this charter as inviolable and valid, and no one should dare from now on to demand anything from the lands granted by this charter to Avdal-Agha and his descendants, as well as from the inhabitants in his area and his financial system in general. This Charter was given to Avdal-agha Amar-agha-oglu Amar-agha Mir Choban-ogly Mir Choban Avdal-agha-ogly Avdal-agha Avdal-agha-ogly Avdal-agha Haji-agha-ogly Haji-agha Mirza-agha sons of Kiovkan-Agha and all his heirs.

This certificate is translated correctly. Translator of the Caucasian military people's administration Major Sharif-agha Gaishbashi.

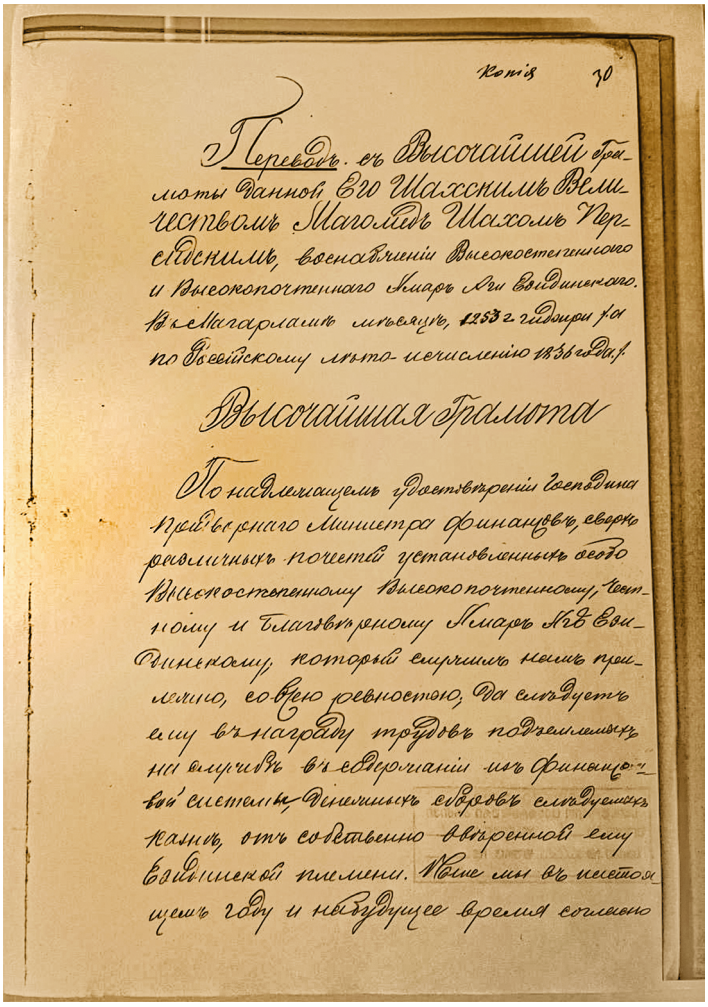


Figure 7: NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, ll. 30 (both sides).

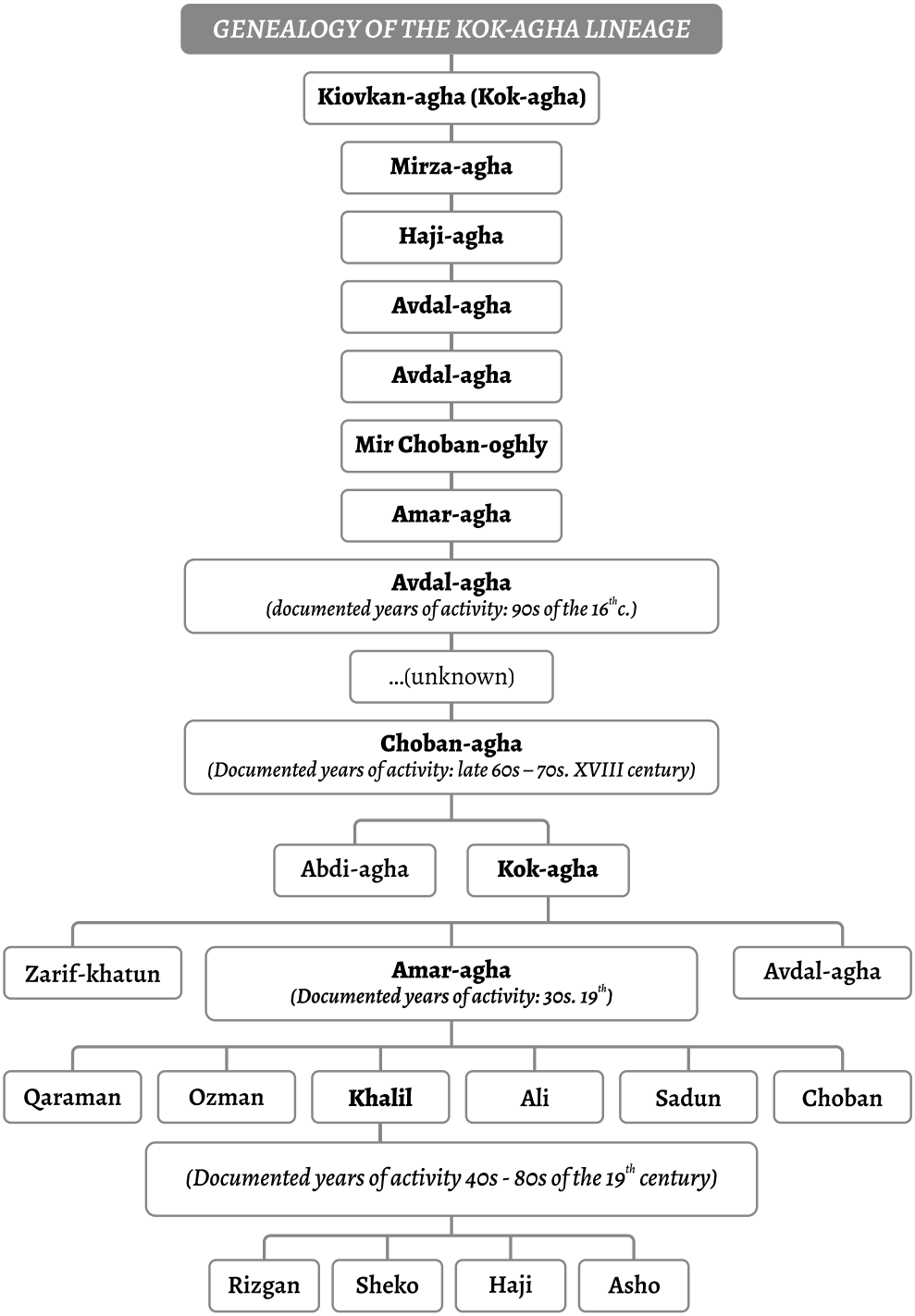
Translation:

Translation[202] from the Highest Charter given by His Shah's Majesty Mohammed Shah of Persia, supplied by the Honorable Amar-agha of Yezidi. In the month of Maharram, 1253 of *Hijrah* (according to the Russian chronology of 1836)

Highest Charter [203]

Upon proper certification of the Court Minister of Finance, in addition to the various honours established especially for the Noble and Highly Honourable, Honest and Honoured Amar-agha Yezidi; Who has served us diligently, with all zeal, may he be rewarded for his labours in the maintenance of their financial system, the money collected for the treasury from the Yezidi tribe proper entrusted to him. Now, in the current year and for the future, in accordance with the conclusion and decision of the Minister of Finance of the Court, we have kindly welcomed and established the following: we exercise our public service by allowing him to keep the monetary dues [collected] from the said tribe, which are due to the treasury, so that he may use this allowance annually for his subsistence. We hereby grant and establish this Charter, commanding all our governors and clerks of the State Chancellery, upon recording this Charter in a proper book, to recognize and honour it in a proper manner, as a loyal subject should.
This charter is approved
By the Seal of Mahomed Shah.
This charter has been translated correctly.
Translator of the Caucasian Military People's Administration Major Sharif-agha Gaishabashi.

[202] The archive file contains a Russian translation of charters to employees of the Caucasus administration. There is no information about the language from which these charters were translated. This article translates these charters from Russian into English.
[203] NAG-CHA, f. 5, op. 1, d. 6112, l. 30 (both sides).


GENEALOGY OF THE KOK-AGHA LINEAGE
Kiovkan-agha (Kok-agha)
Mirza-agha
Haji-agha
Avdal-agha
Avdal-agha
Mir Choban-oghly
Amar-agha
Avdal-agha
(documented years of activity: 90s of the 16th c.)
...(unknown)
Choban-agha
(Documented years of activity: late 60s – 70s. XVIII century)
Abdi-agha
Kok-agha
Zarif-khatun
Amar-agha
(Documented years of activity: 30s. 19th)
Avdal-agha
Qaraman
Ozman
Khalil
Ali
Sadun
Choban
(Documented years of activity 40s - 80s of the 19th century)
Rizgan
Sheko
Haji
Asho

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ნოდარ მოსაკი და დიმიტრი ფირბარი (Nodar Mossaki and Dimitri Pirbari)

სარჰადის ეზდიხანის მმართველები: ქოქ-აღას დინასტიის ეზიდ თავადთა ისტორია.

აბსტრაქტი: სტატიაში წარმოდგენილი და გაანალიზებულია საქართველოს ეროვნული არქივში მოპოვებული და აკადემიურ წრეებში აქამდე უცნობი ისტორიული დოკუმენტები, რომლებიც ახალ ინფორმაციას გვაწვდის რუსეთის იმპერიის ერთ-ერთი ეზიდი ლიდერისა და პოდპორუჩიკის, ხალილ-აღას მოღვაწეობის შესახებ. ორი ოფიციალური წერილის რუსული თარგმანი, რომელიც ხალილ-აღას წინაპრებს გადაეცათ ოსმალეთის იმპერიის სულთანისა და ირანის შაჰისგან, ადასტურებს ნახევრად დამოუკიდებელი ეზიდური სამთავროს არსებობას, რომელიც აღიარებული იყო როგორც სპარსეთის, ისე ოსმალეთის იმპერიების მიერ. აღმოსავლეთ ანატოლიაში XVI-XVIII საუკუნეებში განთავსებულ სამთავროს ეზდიხანი (იეზდიხანი) ერქვა. აქამდე არსებულ კლევებზე დაყრდნობით, ეს აღმოჩენა საშუალებას გვაძლევს, შევავსოთ აღმოსავლეთ ანატოლიის ეზიდების თითქმის ხუთსაუკუნოვანი, წყაროებით დადასტურებული, ისტორია.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ეზიდები, იეზიდები, სარჰადი, იეზდიხანი, ეზდიხანი, ოსმალეთის იმპერია, ქოქ-აღა, ავდალ-აღა, ხალილ-აღა, ჩობან-აღა, ერეკლე მეორე, აბაღა, მაჰმუდი, ხოშაბი.

Nodar Mossaki û Dimitri Pirbari

Desthilatdarên Êzdîxana Serhedê: dîroka dînastîyeke arîstokratên êzdî – malbata Kok-axa

Abstrakt: Ev lêkolîn analîz, şirove û nasîna dokûmêntên dîrokî û zanistî yên kevn û heta niha nenas dike, yên ku Arşîva Gurcistanê ya dewletê da têne parastin û agahîyên nû derheqê kar û barên Xelîl-axa dide. Xelîl-axa yek ji serok û rêberên êzdiyên Împêratoriya Rûsyayê bû û rutba wî ya eskerî pod-porûçîk hebû. Di nav wan dokûmêntan da du belgeyên wergerayî bi zimanê rûsî îsbat dikin, ku ew bona bav û kalên Xelîl-axa ra ji alîyê Siltanê Împêratoriya Osmanî û Şahê Îranê va hatine derxisitn. Di wan belgeyan da tê xuya kirin, ku mîrgeheke êzdiyan ya nîv-serbixwe hebû, kîjan jî him ji aliyê şahên faris û hem jî ji aliyê siltanê osmanîyan va dihate naskirin û qebûl kirin. Ew mîrgeh ji sedsala 16 heta sedsala 18 li Anatoliya Rojhilat bi navê Êzdîxan (Yezdîkhan) dihate naskirin. Peyda kirin û derxistina van belgeyan dîroka êzdiyaye nêzîkî pêncsed salî li Anatoliya Rojhilat eşkere û dokûmênt dike.

Peyvên sereke: êzdî, Serhed, Êzdîxan, Yezdikhan, Împêratorya Osmanî, Kok-axa, Avdel-axa, Xelîl-axa, Çoban-axa, Êrêklê II (Îraklî II), Ebexe, Mehmûdî, Xoşab.



Artur Rodziewicz
Department of Iranian Studies
Faculty of Oriental Studies
University of Warsaw
ORCID: 0000-0002-5907-3664
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, *tauroboli-um*, 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 ῾Ηλίῳ 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 'atīq*].
>
> 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-ʿ* 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: "᾽Ο μόσχος ᾽Ιησοῦς 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.

Contributors

Gevorg Dzhalilov is a jurist and legal specialist. He earned a bachelor's degree in jurisprudence with a specialization in state law from the All-Russian State University of Justice (RLA of the Ministry of Justice of Russia) in 2017. Email: panerai22@yandex.ru

Dr. Majid Hassan Ali completed his doctorate on religious minorities in Iraq at the University of Bamberg, Germany. He lectures at the University of Duhok in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He is also an associate member of the Center for Yezidi Studies at the Giorgi Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies, ILIA State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. His research examines the challenges faced by religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, such as Iraq. In addition to a monograph on Kurdish Political Movements, he has published several articles on Yezidi identity, religious extremism, migration, and the captivity and enslavement of Yezidi Women. Email: majidhassan.ali@gmail.com

Dr. Nodar Mossaki is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia. He has published several books and articles on the Kurds, Yazidis, and various Middle Eastern issues. Email: nodarmossaki@gmail.com

Dr. Peter Nicolaus served as a diplomat for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Northern Iraq, and Turkey and has been professionally and privately in close contact with the Yezidi communities in these countries since 1986. He has published quite a number of articles on their community and religion as well as on the tragedy of the recent Yezidi genocide. However, the opinion expressed, and statements made in his article are not necessarily those of UNHCR or the United Nations. Email: peter.e.nicolaus@gmail.com

Dimitri Pirbari is a PhD candidate at Ilia State University in Tbilisi. He is the head of the Center for Yezidi Studies at the Giorgi Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies at Ilia State University. He has authored and published several articles and monographs on Yezidi religion, identity, and history. Email: dimapir@gmail.com

Dr. Artur Rodziewicz has obtained his habilitation in 2024 on the basis of the monograph *Eros and the Pearl: The Yezidi Cosmogonic Myth at the Crossroads of the Mystical Traditions* (Berlin 2022), devoted to the Yezidi cosmogony, its symbolism and its relationship to the cosmogonies of other cultures and religions of northern Mesopotamia. He currently holds the position of Associate Professor at the Department of Iranian Studies, Faculty of Oriental

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Studies, University of Warsaw. His main area of research is Yezidism, the Yezidi community in Georgia, Platonism, and the legacy of Greek philosophy in the Middle East. Email: a.rodziewic2@uw.edu.pl

Serkan Yuce is a human rights and antitrust lawyer based in Washington, D.C. He dedicates his spare time to researching and publishing on the Yezidis, particularly focusing on the legal dimensions of the genocide and Yezidi identity. Email: sayucejd@gmail.com