The Political Agency of Kurds as an Ethnic Group in Late Medieval South Arabia

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Kurds began to arrive to South Arabia as soldiers for the Ayyubid conquest at the end of the sixth/twelfth century,[1] and continued in this military role for the Rasulid dynasty for the next few centuries. Over the course of this period, references to Kurds in chronicles indicate their increasing autonomy as independent mercenaries who rebelled against the Rasulids and aligned with the northern Zaydis. At the same time, they are also shown to have established a prominent community in the central highlands, which eventually bifurcated, merged with the family of the Zaydi Imam through marriage, and then seemingly disappeared from chronicles altogether. This article examines more closely the role of ethnicity in the promotion and maintenance of the Kurds as an influential group in the late medieval political landscape of South Arabia alongside other ethnic groups such as Arabs and Turks, as well as why the apparent deterioration of the Kurds' ethnic cohesion appears to have led to the end of reports about them in the Yemeni historical record at the end of the eighth/fourteenth century.

Origins

Just before Salāḥ al-Dīn became the first sultan of the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt, his brother, Turānshāh, set foot on the northern Red Sea coast of South Arabia in 569/1173. After already having undertaken an initial military campaign to Nubia, he turned his attention to Yemen, motivated in part by the great wealth to be gained from tax revenues on its fertile landscape and the high-traffic trade passing between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Over the course of the next year, Turānshāh led a campaign down the coastline to Aden and then into the highlands until Sanaa. This military offensive effectively deposed the local dynasties scattered across Lower Yemen and laid the foundation for a gradually more unified rule of the region for nearly the next three centuries: first under the Ayyubids from 569/1173 to 626/1229, and then under the Rasulids, originally a family of officers in the Ayyubid military, from 626/1229 to 858/1454.

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1 Centuries and dates are given in the form of the *hijrī* (AH)/*mīlādī* (AD) calendars.

The Ayyubids were a Kurdish family, originally from present day Armenia, although some of their genealogies trace their roots back to Arab origins much like a seventh/thirteenth-century genealogy of the Turkoman Rasulids.[2] The Ayyubid military that came to Yemen mainly consisted of a mixture of Turkish and Kurdish groups, often collectively described as *ghuzz* in texts written by Arab authors. Originally referring to Turkish Oghuz (an already ambiguous term), *ghuzz* came to be used as an even more general nomenclature for these non-Arab groups. The term *ghuzz* is found in earlier historical literature of medieval South Arabia.[3] But its use becomes much more prominent in the later part of the medieval period as is found, for example, in the title of the seventh/thirteenth-century chronicle describing the Ayyubid occupation and the reigns of the first two sultans of the subsequent Rasulid dynasty: *The Book of the Valuable Necklace of the Reports of the Ghuzz Kings in Yemen*.[4] Henceforth, *ghuzz* then continues to appear in medieval Yemeni chronicles and administrative texts as a common vague ethnic denominator for soldiers in the militaries of the Ayyubids and Rasulids.[5] Unfortunately, at the same time it also largely obscures a more precise understanding of these soldiers' ethnic identity. Even so, there are, thankfully, some exceptions to this pattern that specifically designate individuals or groups as Kurds (*akrād*) and Turks (*atrāk*).

References to specifically Turkish individuals in these medieval texts are regrettably few in number. Nonetheless, they do provide a nuanced, albeit limited, window into the varied roles and alliances they undertook in medieval Yemen. For example, on the one hand, in 601/1205, after the Ayyubids had won a series of battles in the northern highlands, a pro-Ayyubid Turk named Asad al-Dīn Qarāsunqur presented to the Ayyubid ruler Atābak Sunqur a cohort of the Zaydi Imam ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza to be expelled from Saʾda.[6] While on the other hand, in 611/1215, the Turkish prince ʿAlim al-Dīn Sunqur was among a group of *ghuzz* who defected from the Ayyubids and took a pledge with the *imam*.[7] Beyond the military there are also glimpses into the world of Turkish women in two reports. In 598/1202, a Turkish female slave, along with four marble slabs featuring a picture of an ancient house in Makka, was presented to Zaydi Imam ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza by Shihāb al-Jazarī as an act of goodwill after they had formed a new pact.[8] Then, as a possible follow-up in 619/1222, a report mentions

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2   Al-Ashraf ʿUmar, *Ṭurfat al-aṣḥāb*, ed. Zettersteen. The Rasulid historian al-Khazrajiī further builds upon this genealogical claim of South Arabian origins (Al-Khazrajī , *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 61-62). He states that a South Arabian tribe migrated to Syria, where one of its members converted to Christianity and then moved to Anatolia where his descendants married and assimilated into a local Turkoman tribe. After converting back to Islam, the progeny of this family moved to Iraq where one of them became a messenger (*rasūl*) for the Abbasid caliph. Hence, the title of this occupation became the basis of the family name for the Rasulids.

3   The sixth/twelfth-century historian ʿUmāra states that Jayyash b. Najāḥ invited a group of *ghuzz* to Yemen in order to fight the Sulayhid Sabāʾ b. Aḥmad. Seeing that his own power may be threatened by their large numbers, he ordered them to be poisoned. The few survivors among them settled down in the Tihama (ʿUmāra, *Tārīkh al-Yaman,* ed./trans. Kay, 77). A later Zaydi chronicler puts this event in the year(s) 486/1093-4 (al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī,* ed. ʿĀshūr, 278).

4   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ al-ghālī al-thaman fī akhbār al-mulūk min al-ghuzz bi-l-Yaman*, ed. Smith.

5   For example, the price of a dinar and a half is given for a *ghuzz* shield among other items of armory in a seventh/thirteenth century collection of Rasulid administrative documents (*Nūr al-maʿārif*, ed. Jāzim, 57).

6   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 122.

7   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 163.

8   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 87.

the marriage of a Zaydi jurist to a Turkish woman who was among the slaves of the Zaydi *imam*.[9] In contrast to this small number of explicit mentions of Turks, the larger amount and breadth of references to Kurds in the singular and plural allows for a more extensive examination of what we may understand about the role of this ethnic group in the context of medieval South Arabia.

Recent research on Kurds in the medieval period has concentrated on the changes in the usage and meaning of the term over time and geographic space.[10] In the early medieval period, the term Kurd appears to denote ethnographic attributes that reflect a nomadic way of life, but by the fifth/eleventh century it is more clearly utilized as an ethnonym in distinction to, for example, Arabs and Turks. This development may be correlated to the wider role that Kurds played in the politics and society of the Islamic world, as is most clearly evidenced in the rise of the Kurdish Ayyubids, although the dynasty's ethnicity does not seem to have been emphasized until the following Mamluk period.[11] In any case, the emergence of Kurds as an ethnic group in the late medieval period, who were distinguished through their increased agency and involvement in the military and politics, is likewise mirrored in South Arabia. In this case study, I argue that the reason for the higher visibility of the Kurds in Yemeni chronicles is related to their clear, albeit inconsistent, political actions of increased autonomy away from the powerful, yet floundering Ayyubids and Rasulids and their gradual allegiance to the rising Zaydis. In this way, an approach to exploring the Kurds as an ethnic group in South Arabia is through Walter Pohl's focus on situations of conflict described in chronicles as important contexts for tracing medieval ethnic identities through their collective actions.[12] More broadly, this relational and interactive approach to ethnicity emerges from Frederick Barth's concept that ethnic groups are primarily maintained through their continual actions to uphold their boundaries against other groups and the state and Thomas Hylland Eriksen's emphasis of ethnicity as developed through joint contact between different groups rather than properties that a group developed on their own.[13] Ethnic identity thus is situational and performative, as well as intersects and overlaps with other types of identity (e.g., religious, familial, regional, etc).[14] For the rest of this article, I will focus on examples in the chronicles of how the Kurds' individual, collaborative, and collective actions within this political arena implicitly built up their ethnic cohesion and increasingly maintained the boundaries of their community until they seemingly disappear from the historical record at the end of the eighth/fourteenth century.

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9   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 179. It may be speculated that this woman could have been the same one pre-
     viously mentioned, but it is not explicitly stated in the report to which Zaydi imam the slaves belonged. Imam ʿAbd
     Allāh b. Ḥamza already had died in 613/1217, but no new name for an Imam is given in the chronicle at this point
     so the report may be indicating an event that had happened previously to the year in which it appears. In any case,
     there is no other information given that could lead to any firm conclusion about or identification of the Turkish
     woman either way.

10   For example, see: Conermann, Volk, Ethnie oder Stamm; James, Arab Ethnonyms; Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and
     the Ottoman State*, 21-31.

11   James, Arab Ethnonyms, 710-711.

12   Pohl, Introduction – Strategies of Conflict, 45.

13   Barth, Introduction, 9-38; Eriksen, Ethnicity and Nationalism.

14   Gingrich, Envisioning Medieval Communities, 32-35.

Fickle Mercenaries

While Kurds were part of the Ayyubid military in their initial appearances in Yemeni medieval chronicles, often they are shown to not maintain allegiance to their leaders. Ḥakū b. Muḥammad was a Kurdish officer for the Ayyubid military who worked with al-Shihāb al-Jazarī.[15] Described as a man great in courage, cleverness, audacity, and the practice of combat, he was entrusted with and greatly succeeded in handling problems in the rural areas and forts around Sanaa for al-Jazarī. Ḥakū, however, secretly realigned himself to the Zaydi *ashraf* and Imam ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza in 594/1198, and subsequently maintained loyalty, »internally for the Imam but externally for the *ghuzz*.«[16] Hence, Ḥakū began to carve a new political identity for himself away from his allegiance to the Ayyubids and towards a new relationship with the Zaydis. Although at this point it would be over-reaching to associate this realignment with his Kurdish ethnicity, as will be seen in numerous examples in the rest of this article, it does concisely start to introduce the desires for increased political agency and autonomy for which the Kurdish community strove over the course of the following two centuries. Additionally, the phrasing of this statement demonstrates the conflation and vagueness of the term *ghuzz* in late medieval Yemen as an indicator of both political and ethnic identity, with the former connotation here emphasized. Over the course of the year, Ḥakū proceeded to openly work with the Zaydi Imam against the Ayyubid expansion to the north until his death at the hands of other *ghuzz* in Rabīʿ II 595/February 1199.[17] As a substitute, a few months later the Imam would summon to his side another Kurd, Haldrī b. Aḥmad al-Marwānī, from the Tihama.[18]

During this period the Tihama Plain on the Red Sea coast became the center of Kurdish dissent against the Ayyubids. This is most emphatic in 598/1201 when it was the location, just outside of the city of Zabid, where the Kurds assassinated the Ayyubid ruler al-Muʿizz Ismāʿīl b. Ṭughtakīn.[19] It is reported that a Kurdish man named Hindawh and his brother knocked the sultan from his mule, beat him with his own sword, and then beheaded him. The strong hatred by the Kurds in this region toward al-Muʿizz is clearly palpable as the two men were neither condemned by his soldiers nor the other Kurds. Rather, only the personal servant of al-Muʿizz had to be chased down and slain. Furthermore, upon their arrival back to Zabid, it is described that when his decapitated head was presented, a Kurdish woman rotated it to the right and left and then slapped his cheek and face. It is then explained that not only was she was the wife of one of the men who killed al-Muʿizz, but also that she had encouraged it because he had slain their son shortly before his own death.

Following this assassination, Atābak Sunqur, the next Ayyubid ruler in Yemen, initially made peace with the Kurds and did not punish them, largely due to the fact that al-Muʿizz himself wanted to kill Sunqur right before his death. But after a few years, dissension within the Ayyubids grew, as demonstrated by a new alliance that had formed between Shihāb al-Jazarī, an Ayyubid prince in Sanaa, and the Zaydi Imam ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza in 958/1202. At these meetings, Hishām, a Kurd who was assisting the prince, presented robes to the *imam*.

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15   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 45-48.

16   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 46.

17   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 57-60, 62-64.

18   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 67. The vowelization of his name is uncertain.

19   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 80-83; Idrīs al-Ḥamzī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman*, ed. al-Mudʿij, 92-93; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 63; Anonymous, *Tārīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 3; al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī*, ed. ʿĀshūr, 357-358).

Shortly after, the *imam* received further allegiance from groups across Yemen including the Kurds in the Tihama. This was communicated in a letter by two of them, al-Qarābilī and al-Daqīq, who were stated to also have been part of the group that was present at the assassination of al-Muʿizz.[20] Consequently, by 599/1203, Sunqur's tolerance for the Kurdish population in the Tihama seems to have declined because he attacked Zabid where current leaders of the Kurds (including al-Qarābilī, al-Daqīq, and Hishām al-Kurdī) were located.[21] In the end, among these leaders, only al-Qarābilī survived. Instead of killing him, Sunqur decided to banish him into exile in Baghdad. This merciful act, however, was questioned by al-Malik al-ʿĀdil, the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt and Syria at the time. In a letter to Sunqur, he reproached him for allowing al-Qarābilī to live, acerbically inquiring: »How could you cut off the tail, but leave the head intact?«[22]

After this massacre, the remaining Kurdish population may have been pacified. But during this period there are only a couple of brief reports in the chronicles explicitly about Kurds to support this conclusion. In 611/1214, a group of *ghuzz* in the Ayyubid army, including the Kurdish officer Muḥammad b. Mūsā, is stated to have travelled from Sanaa to Dhamar.[23] Also, in the same year, the Kurd Sāliḥ b. Hishām was granted the territory of Dhamar to administer. Nonetheless, later on that year, a group of *ghuzz* who defected from the Ayyubids and made a pact with the Zaydi imam, which I previously described to have contained a Turkish prince, also included the Kurdish prince Shams al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Badhal.[24] This report is important to remind us that the Kurds were not the only insubordinate soldiers in the Rasulid military. Nor did the historians of these chronicles implicitly designate the Kurds as solely the ones to take up the nefarious role of violent insubordination in contradistinction to the broader *ghuzz* soldiers, as is found in the writing from other parts of the Islamic world during this period.[25] Rather, the *ghuzz* in general also are mentioned as participating in such insurgencies. For example, during a 674/1275 revolt led by the Zaydis in Sanaa who were threatening to take over the wider regions of the central highlands, ʿAlī ʿAbd Allāh carefully addressed the crowd of gathered fighters in a plea for unity: »All of you shoot from one bow, [regardless if you are] the Imam or the follower, Arab or *ghuzz*.«[26] This statement also provides an example of the historian's maintenance in the text of the trope which projects a paralleled dichotomy between the two groups of the Arabs and the *ghuzz*. That is, in this case, the term *ghuzz* appears to relate more towards its association with ethnicity than a separate political allegiance, in contrast to the statement about Ḥakū above.

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20   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 87-88.

21   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 100-104.

22   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 104.

23   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 155.

24   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 163.

25   Kurds were commonly stereotyped as wildly violent and insubordinate in medieval descriptions (James, *Arab Ethnonyms*, 702-704).

26   Ibn Ḥātim, *Kitāb al-simṭ*, ed. Smith, 486; Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 238.

Further Rebellions and Greater Autonomy

After nearly a century, a reemergence of Kurds playing a more prominent role in the political dynamics of late medieval South Arabia occurred when a group of them undertook one of the biggest and most prolonged rebellions in Rasulid history from 709/1309 to 713/1313.[27] The rebellion began under a misapprehension when Rasulid prince Sayf al-Dīn al-Tughrī arrived to Dhamar in 709/1309 with a detachment of troops in order to collect the regional taxes. During this visit the Kurds grew suspicious and mistakenly believed the soldiers instead had been summoned in order to seize them. As a result, in the middle of the night the Kurds first incapacitated the horses at the garrison's camp outside of the city, and then proceeded to besiege the palace of the sultan at the city gate where al-Tughrī was boarded. At first, the Rasulid soldiers were able to drive the Kurds away, but eventually the majority of the soldiers dispersed after al-Tughrī refused multiple requests to retreat with them. In the morning, al-Tughrī finally emerged from the palace under the pretense of a truce with the Kurds, but was quickly slaughtered along with his brother-in-law, his secretary, the governor (*wālī*) of Dhamar, and four remaining soldiers. Afterwards, the Kurds pillaged the abandoned military camp and took all of their horses and equipment.

When the fleeing soldiers reached Sultan al-Muʾayyad in the Rasulid capital of Taʾizz, he compensated them for their losses and prepared a double-pronged attack involving Rasulid forces coming from the north and south. When they arrived back to Dhamar, however, they discovered that the Kurds had fled to Wādī al-Ḥarr in the northern part of the Dhamar Plain as well as had taken over and provisioned the nearby fortress of Hirrān. For three days a battle ensued until the Kurds fled to the north and the Rasulid armies returned to Dhamar. During this time, however, the Kurds also had been in correspondence with the Zaydi Imam Muḥammad b. al-Muṭahhar. Hearing of the conflict, his forces, composed of local Arab tribes, had also begun to attack Sanaa. Hence, even after the sultan finally arrived to stabilize first Dhamar and then Sanaa, the Rasulids had to continue to fight with the colluding Kurds and Zaydis for the remainder of the year at various locations in the northern highlands.

Not until October of 710/1310 was a truce made between Sultan al-Muʾayyad and the Kurds, who finally submitted on the condition that they could continue to occupy the fortress of Hirrān near Dhamar in exchange for five hostages to remain with the Rasulids in Lower Yemen.[28] Two years later, however, a separate peace agreement was reached between Imam Muḥammad b. al-Muṭahhar and Sultan al-Muʾayyad. This removed any protection the Zaydi imam provided for the Kurds, making them vulnerable to further attacks by the Rasulids. Consequently, in 712/1312, Sultan al-Muʾayyad arrived with two hundred horsemen and a contingent of Arab foot soldiers, and was also joined by a Rasulid officer who brought his own forces from Sanaa.[29] In response, the Kurds sought out a local Arab shaykh to intervene,

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27 Idrīs al-Ḥamzī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman*, ed. al-Mudʿij, 141-143; Ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Bahjat al-zaman*, eds. al-Ḥibshī and al-Sanabānī, 259-261; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 445-465. There may be significance for the lack of references to Kurds during the long reign of the Rasulid Sultan al-Muẓaffar in both Ibn Ḥātim and the rest of the Rasulid chronicles, but this remains uncertain. From an authorship perspective, this was the period during which Ibn Ḥātim was directly involved in Rasulid political affairs, so he would have been aware of any events involving Kurds. Thus, if these did occur, there is no obvious reason why he would have purposely edited them out of this very extensive and detailed section of his chronicle.

28 Idrīs al-Ḥamzī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman*, ed. al-Mudʿij, 143; Ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Bahjat al-zaman*, ed. al-Ḥibshī and al-Sanabānī, 265; Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 452-453.

29 Idrīs al-Ḥamzī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman*, ed. al-Mudʿij, 145-146; Ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Bahjat al-zaman*, ed. al-Ḥibshī and al-Sanabānī, 268; Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 460.

and a truce was settled based on the conditions that reveal further details of their, at least current, geographical distribution. First, the Kurds should not enter Dhamar nor the nearby town of Radaʾ to the east. Second, the Kurds must evacuate the province of Sanaa. And, third, their hostages should still remain with the Rasulids at al-ʿArūs. After this agreement was settled, Sultan al-Muʾayyad sent a new governor to Dhamar. In the following year, however, the sultan was still not satisfied, although unfortunately no details are given in the chronicles as to why. He ordered his governor to attack the Hirrān citadel using a catapult, resulting in its destruction.[30] While the Kurds murdered the governor of Sanaa in retaliation, they once again decided to surrender unconditionally. This time another Arab shaykh wrote on their behalf to the sultan, who in turn granted them amnesty, and the Kurds returned to Dhamar.

In this series of episodes, it is clear that the Kurds at this point have well-established themselves in the central highlands as a powerful, although not yet fully autonomous, population. While they were making new alliances with the Zaydis, evidently these were not very strong ones. Over the next few decades, however, the Kurds went on to situate themselves as more independent mercenaries that fought for both of the opposing forces of the Rasulids and Zaydis. In this way, they begin to appear to act along more pragmatic lines instead of showing consistent loyalty to any other group, much like the ambivalent actions of various Arab tribes at this time. In 723/1323, for instance, a large force of Kurds joined a rebellious Rasulid prince in his siege of Taʾizz against the new Sultan al-Mujāhid.[31] But then in 724/1324, Kurds fought for Sultan al-Mujāhid in the western highlands against this same rebellious movement.[32] Even more revealing, still, is what occurred in 726/1325 when they were again fighting with the sultan against rebels in the area of Aden.[33] Here apparently new doubts in their loyalty to him were beginning to show. At first, Sultan al-Mujāhid became suspicious of them when a kidnapping of the son of an officer took place, although no direct explanation is given in the chronicles as to how or why the Kurds would be connected to this. Later, the sultan left the area altogether when news arrived of the approach of the Zaydi Imam Muhammad b. al-Mutahhar with reinforcements for the opposing side, and Sultan al-Mujāhid feared that the Kurds would consequently change their allegiance. Nevertheless, this trust seemingly was not yet entirely destroyed. Four years later in 1329, a report lists Kurdish horsemen among the parts of the sultan's military as they rode together to Taʾizz, along with Turks (*atrāk*), Arab tribesmen, and Zaydi *ashrāf*.[34] Interestingly, for whichever reason by the author of the chronicle, in this passage, instead of using the more broad term of *ghuzz*, specific ethnonyms are given for both the Kurds and Turks.

Yet, a turning point in the relationship between the Kurds and the Rasulids came in the next decade in 739/1338, when a second rebellion took place in Dhamar.[35] In an apparent response to local unrest not directly reported in the chronicles, Sultan al-Mujāhid sent to Dhamar four hundred horsemen and eleven thousand foot soldiers equipped with a catapult, who successfully retook control of the city and the nearby fortress of Hirrān. Nonetheless,

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30 Idrīs al-Ḥamzī, *Tārīkh al-Yaman*, ed. al-Mudʾij, 146-147; Ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Bahjat al-zaman*, ed. al-Ḥibshī and al-Sanabānī, 277; al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 464-465.

31 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 519.

32 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 529.

33 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 549-550.

34 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 564.

35 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 577-578.

afterwards, a new governor was appointed whose conduct was so bad that it provoked another much more successful rebellion. After the Kurds drove the governor away back to Ta'izz, the Rasulids did not return to Dhamar, except for one unsuccessful punitive campaign into the region almost forty years later. Thus, from here, a new phase began for the Kurds as they increasingly became intertwined with the Zaydis, although did not yet entirely disassociate themselves from the Rasulids.

Bifurcation and Reorientation

As we move into this phase, reports from Zaydi biographies and chronicles as an additional source to the Rasulid texts, allow us to understand the structure and non-military practices of the Kurdish population with a bit more depth. While the Zaydi imams had been intermittently making attempts to establish their own authority in the Dhamar Plain since the arrival of the first Imam al-Hādī in 284/897, not until the mid-eighth/fourteenth century were more measured strategies attempted. In 750/1349, Imam al-Mahdī ʿAlī b. Muḥammad, ostensibly in an attempt to avoid the same problems that led to the exit of the Rasulids from Dhamar just a decade earlier, made a truce with the local Kurds, who are now reported to consist of the Banī Asad and the Banī Shukr.[36] Beyond this preemptive measure, in order to create even closer and stronger ties to this local population, his son al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Muḥammad married a local woman named Fāṭima. A daughter of the Kurdish prince al-Asad b. Ibrāhīm, she would become mother of the future Zaydi Imam al-Manṣūr ʿAlī b. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Additionally, it is reported that she sponsored in 776/1374-5 the construction of a mosque in Sanaa, now named the mosque of al-Abhar but originally known as the mosque of Bint al-Amīr.[37] We next hear of Zaydi-Kurdish relations in 754/1353, when the Kurdish leader al-Asad b. Ibrāhīm went to Saʿda in the northern highlands seeking help from Imam al-Mahdī ʿAlī against the rival Kurdish group of the Banī Shukr.[38] In response to this plea, the *imam* descended to Dhamar, took the Banī Shukr under custody, and imprisoned them in the fortress of Hirrān. Then, at this time, Imam al-Mahdī ʿAlī and his son are reported to have finally settled in Dhamar.

Despite this more intricate relationship with the Zaydis, there are still reports from the Rasulid chronicles of Kurds in the Rasulid military, starting in the same year of this Zaydi settlement.[39] Here the Kurdish horsemen are stated to have participated in a Rasulid campaign in the southern highland region of Mikhlāf, but flee back to Dhamar when the sultan's camp was ambushed by men from the Arab tribe of Shi'r. Then in 764/1362[40] and 765/1363[41], Kurds are again said to have accompanied Rasulid officers in their travels to, respectively, Ta'izz and Zabid. This latter report, however, is the last time Kurds specifically are mentioned

36 Al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī*, ed. ʿĀshūr, 515. These Kurds recently have been speculated to be the remains of the original Ayyubid campaign by Tūrānshāh in 569/1174 (Al-Ḥalū, Dhamār fī al-tārīkh al-ḥadīth, 185). Additionally, it is should be emphasized that the descriptions of these two factions as »Banī«, possibly insinuating that they had a type of tribal or genealogical structure, should be received with caution because this descriptor comes from a Yemeni historian and not the Kurds themselves. How they precisely called and conceived of the division and composition of these two groups remains unknown.

37 Lewcock *et al.*, Smaller Mosques of Ṣanʿāʾ, 370-371.

38 Al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī*, ed. ʿĀshūr, 517.

39 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 609-610.

40 Anonymous, *Tārīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*, ed. al-Hibshī, 29.

41 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 642.

in the sources to be associated with the Rasulid military. Perhaps, this is due to the political tension created when the new Zaydi Imam al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn began to make raids into the Rasulid highland and coastal territory of Lower Yemen in 776/1374 and 777/1375.[42] In response, the new Rasulid Sultan al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās reacted by sending a large group of soldiers to ransack the Dhamar Plain in January of the next year, but this pillaging was put down by July, ending in a massacre of the Rasulid soldiers and the seizure of their leader.[43] This was the final raid of Rasulid forces into the Dhamar Plain. Curiously, however, Kurds are not specifically mentioned in these reports, nor in another report of a further Zaydi campaign that led all the way to Aden in November 789/1387.[44] Instead, the final report involving Kurds in medieval Yemeni sources appears in 791/1388 when the death toll of a failed Zaydi siege of the city of Zabid included, within the Zaydi ranks, a Kurdish chief who was a brother-in-law or father-in-law of the *imam*.[45] Although this is not directly stated, the married sister may have been the previously mentioned Fatima, but there is no other name given for the fallen Kurd. Conversely, *ghuzz* soldiers are mentioned twice more in the ninth/fifteenth century.[46]

Layered Agency and Apparent Assimilation
The case of Kurds in medieval South Arabia provides a unique historiographic reconstruction of the appearance and disappearance of an ethnic group. While it may be attributed to the various ways different historians wrote their histories, a fascinating build-up can be seen in the story of their accumulative agency as a political force. In the beginning, reports are mainly framed around Kurdish individuals, separately and in collaborative action, at first absconding away from their military allegiances to the Ayyubids and then outright rebelling against them. In the second act, the Kurdish community as a whole is described as revolting against the Rasulid governors and sultans until they effectively achieved independence. Then, in the final act, separate groups within the Kurdish community are revealed to be in dispute, which leads them seek outside resolution from the Zaydis. Hence, there appears to be a clear historicity for the diverse layers of agency and people within the Kurdish community, interacting with themselves and outsiders, as it slowly cohered together. Boundaries for this ethnic group were laid down and repeatedly fought for as their political currency rose in diverse conflicts across South Arabia.

So, what happened to the Kurds? Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a clear answer to this question. But an educated guess may be offered based on their overall narrative arc as found in the chronicles. After the Kurds initial entrance into South Arabia as professional soldiers, reports show their gradual distancing from acting as subordinates to the Ayyubids and Rasulids, and slow development into establishing a more independent autonomy in the central highlands. Here they increasingly appear to act with no clear loyalties within

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42 Al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī*, ed. ʿĀshūr, 525.

43 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 670; al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī*, ed. ʿĀshūr, 525-526.

44 Al-Khazrajī, *Al-ʿuqūd al-luʾluʾiyya*, ed. al-Ḥibshī, 711.

45 Anonymous, *Tārīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*, ed. al-Hibshī, 48. The last references to Kurds by the ninth to tenth/fifteenth to sixteenth-century Tahirid historian Ibn al-Daybaʿ is in 726/1325 (Ibn al-Daybaʿ, *Kitāb qurrat al-ʿuyūn*, ed. al-Akwaʿ, 432), and by the eleventh/seventeenth-century Zaydi chronicler al-Ḥusayn is in 764/1362 (Al-Ḥusayn, *Ghāyat al-amānī*, ed. ʿĀshūr, 519).

46 An anonymous Rasulid chronicle has reports about *ghuzz* soldiers in 822/1419-20 and 837/1433-34 (Anonymous, *Tārīkh al-dawla al-Rasūliyya*, ed. al-Hibshī, 108-109, 161).

the political landscape in a way that echoes the pragmatism of the local Arab tribes in the chronicles. Soon, however, there are descriptions from Zaydi sources of the bifurcation of the Kurdish population into the Banī Asad and the Banī Shukr, and then the integration of the former with the Zaydis through political truces and marriage, which is emphasized in the final report about them. Hence, in the broader terms, it may be proposed that the Kurds became assimilated and absorbed into Yemeni society where their ethnicity no longer was an important part of their identity nor directly connected to their actions. This sort of social transformation is described in earlier works of Yemeni history, where a tribe merged or became absorbed into another tribe.[47] Here I do not wish to conflate the ideas of an ethnic group and tribe in the South Arabian context, but rather merely emphasize the concept of social assimilation and absorption to have precedent in this history.[48] Thus, this relatively short window of explicit reports seems to point to an overall story of the emergence, cohesion, and eventual dissolution of the Kurds as a specific ethnic group within Yemeni society as a whole.

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47 For example, in the fourth/tenth century al-Hamdānī states that in the process of the expansion of the Madhḥij tribal confederation into the Yemeni central highlands local tribes entered (*dakhalū fī*) or became Madhḥij (*yata-madhḥajūn*) (Al-Hamdānī, *Al-Iklīl*, ed. al-Akwaʿ, 2:50-51, 123; ibid., *Ṣifat jazīrat al-ʿArab*, ed. al-Akwaʿ, 180).

48 Andre Gingrich has discussed a comparison of tribes and ethnic groups in South Arabia, emphasizing the former's tendency toward social distance, while the latter does not necessarily imply it (Gingrich, Envisioning Medieval Communities, 35-39). Nonetheless, there seems to be many similarities and intersections between both of these types of social identification. Unfortunately, in the case of the Kurds in the late medieval period, there is not enough information for a more thorough analysis on this matter. But rather, there are only faint clues, such as the external description by a non-Kurdish historian of the separation of the Kurdish community into two groups using tribal terminology (*banī*), which may be more directly translated as sons or descendants. A similar problem of external descriptions of Kurdish groups as tribes arises when another non-Kurdish seventh/thirteenth-century Yemeni historian, al-ʿArashānī, describes a group in Yemen called Shānkān as »one of the tribes [*qabāʾil*] of the Kurds who belong to the Arabs« (Heiss and Hovden, Political Usage, 69). But in this case there is a clear ideological message in his declaration because he goes even further and ascribes the Kurdish group a northern Arab genealogy (Nizār b. Maʿadd b. ʿAdnān), making them closer but still separate from the southern Arabs of Yemen.

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