

Editorial
**On the frontiers of empire: Culture
and power in early modern “Iranian”
Kurdistan**

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Abstract

This article will provide a broad (although by no means comprehensive) overview of the development of modern scholarly historical writing pertaining the Middle East’s Kurdish community prior to the end of the First World War. It seeks to highlight some of the important pioneering scholars who shaped the field during its twentieth century as well as more recent flurry of academic activity that has, since the turn of the twenty-first century, resulted in a publication of a number of important works that have greatly expanded our knowledge of Kurdish history. However, it will also endeavour to highlight some of the deficits in the existing historiography, most notably relating to Kurdistan in the early modern period (the early sixteenth to early nineteenth century) and, more specifically, the relatively underdeveloped nature of the literature on “Iranian” Kurdistan during this era. In doing so, it hopes to provide context for the three articles published in this issue of *Kurdish Studies*, all of which examine issues relating to culture and power in early modern “Iranian” Kurdistan.

Keywords: Kurds; Kurdistan; Iran; Ardalân.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

Li ser sînorên împeratoriye: “Hêmana Îranî” di dîroka pêş-modêrn ya Kurdistanê de

Ev gotar dê nîrxandîneke berfireh (lê ne giştîgir) a nivîsarên li ser dîroka gelê kurd ê li Rojhilata Navîn yê berî xelasiya Şerê Cihanî yê Yekem. Ew dê dêneke taybet bide ser çendîn zanyarên serkêş ku di sed sala bîstan de meydana dîroknivîsiya kurdî ava kirine û herwiha berê xwe bide ser berbelavbûna vê dawiyê ya çalakiyên akademîk –ji çerxa sed sala bist û yekê ve– ku çendîn berhemên girîng jê derçûne û bi vê yekê re zanyariya me ya li ser dîroka kurdan gelek berfirehtir kirine. Lê belê, gotar dê herwiha hewl bide ku hindêk valahiya dîroknivîsiya heyî berçav bike, bi taybetî valahiya xebatên li ser Kurdistana di serdema pêş-modêrn (ji serê sed sala şanzdehan heta serê sed sala hevdehan) de, û, bi rengekî hûrbijêrtir, paşmayîbûna nisbî ya lêkolîn û nivîsarên li ser Kurdistana “Îranî” ya di vê serdemê de. Bi vî awayî, gotar dil dike çarçoveyekê dabîn bike ji bo her sê gotarên di vê hejmarê *Kurdish Studies* de, ku hemû ji berê xwe didine wê mijarê ku em dikarin wê “Hêmana Îranî” di Kurdistana pêş-modêrn de bi nav bikin.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Le ser sînorekanî împiratori: “Hokarî Êranî” le Kurdistanî pêş-modêrn da

Em wutare raçawkirdîneweke giştîye (bellam nek giştîgire) le ser nûsrawekanî sebarete be mêjûy kurdî le Rojhellatî Nawerast ber le axîrî Şerrî Cihanî Yêkem. Wutareke serincêki taybet debexşete ser çend zanyarêki pêşengî ke le sedey bîst da biwarî mêjûnûsî kurdîyan durist kirdûwe, bellam herwa çaw le berfirawanbûnewey em duwayîyey –serî sedey bîst û yekewe– çalakiye akademîkekan dekat ke çendîn berhemî girîngî lê we derçûwe û bew pêçes zanyariyekanman sebarete be mêjûy kurd ziyadîryan kirdûwe. Wutareke hewllî eweş dedat ke hêndek kêmasiyêki mêjûnûsiy hawçerxiş

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2 Culture and power in early modern Iranian Kurdistan

destnîşan bikat, be taybetî ewaney le merr Kurdistanî seretakanî serdemî modêrn (le ewelî sedey şanzde ta ewelî sedey hewde), herwa be rengêkî deqîqtir çaw le paşmanewey lêkollînewe w nûsrawekani le babet Kurdistanî “Êrani” lew serdeme da dekat. Bem şêweye, wutareke çarçowêk dabîn dekat bo her sê le wutarî em jimarey Kurdish Studies, ke hemûyan serinc dedene ew babetey ke detwanîn wekû “Hokarî Êrani” le Kurdistanî pêş-modêrn da be naw bikeyn.

It has become almost a cliché to bring to the reader’s attention the plethora of academic literature pertaining to the Kurds and Kurdistan that have been published over the last decade and a half. This is certainly a welcome development. For much of the twentieth century, “Kurdish studies” remained an underdeveloped field on the margins of academia, its development stymied by the prevailing political circumstances in the Middle East. For the nation-states within which the majority of the Kurdish population resided – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – the existence of a distinctive Kurdish community or identity represented an existential threat to the territorial integrity of the state. Thus, western researchers often found it difficult to obtain access to source materials, while those researchers from the region (both Kurds and non-Kurds) found that even relatively benign academic activities could result in legal sanctions and incarceration.¹

Nevertheless, while the Middle East’s Kurdish question remains far from resolved, the recent successes of Kurdish political actors, most notably in Iraq and Syria, and the growing international profile of the Kurdish movement, more generally, has sparked greater scholarly interest in the Kurdish community. Much of this new literature focuses on the development of Kurdish society, politics, and culture since the partition of the Ottoman Empire following the end of the First World War. Such a focus is quite understandable. The reconstruction of the Middle East in the post-war era and, more precisely, the replacement of the multi-ethnic Ottoman imperium with a new regional system of nation states, had a profound impact on the development of both the Kurdish community as well as the new ‘Turkish’, ‘Persian’, and ‘Arab’ nation states within which they found themselves residing. However, growing academic interest in the Kurdish community has also encouraged a new generation of historians to engage with subjects pertaining to the Kurdish community prior to the collapse of the Ottoman order, an area of study that was a veritable *terra incognita* prior to the turn of the twentieth first century.

It should be noted that although scholarly literature pertaining to the Kurds written prior to the early 2000s was relatively sparse, it was by no means non-existent. Over the course of the twentieth century, a number of scholars writing in both European and Middle Eastern languages made extremely important

¹ For instance, government authorities in Turkey imprisoned Turkish sociologist Ismail Beşikçi, who published a number of important academic works on the Kurds in the 1960s and 1970s, for a total of 17 years. See van Bruinessen (2005) and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel and Marie Le Ray (2006).

contributions to the field; laying the foundations for many of the academic works produced in more recent times. A full examination of the academic literature is beyond the scope of this introduction. However, a brief examination of scholarly writing on Kurdish history in English since the end of the First World War may prove helpful in situating the articles presented in this issue of *Kurdish Studies*, articles which seek to shed light on hitherto under-explored areas of Kurdish historical experiences.

Perhaps one of the most significant early figures in modern Kurdish historiography was Russian orientalist Vladimir Fedorovich Minorsky (1877-1966), a former Tsarist official, who settled in Europe following the Bolshevik revolution. Minorsky enjoyed a successful academic career in both France and Great Britain, teaching Turkish, Persian, and Islamic history. Indeed, his reputation as a leading light in the field of Iranian studies earned him an invitation to Reza Shah's Iran as a guest of honour at the 1934 celebration of the thousandth anniversary of the renowned Persian poet Firdowsi's birth. Nevertheless, amongst scholars of Kurdish history, he is most well-known for a series of articles in which he examined various aspects of Kurdish society and culture as well as the role of the Kurds in broader Islamic history.² Minorsky was not the only official-turned-scholar to contribute to our knowledge of Kurdish history. Although writing primarily in French, another former Russian official, Basil Nikitin, also played an important role in the development of "Kurdish studies".³ "It should be noted that it was not only former Tsarist officers that played a critical role in the development of academic scholarship on the Kurds in the English-speaking world. Former British officials, most notably C.J. Edmonds, who served His Majesty's Government in Iraqi Kurdistan during the interwar years, also made significant contributions to the field. Scholars such as Minorsky, Nikitin, and Edmonds, who had first encountered the Kurds whilst serving as agents of their respective governments, had a significant influence on the evolution of Kurdish studies." Indeed, these men were no mere observers of Kurdish society; all had played roles in the shaping of its history. Moreover, as products of the orientalist tradition, their academic interests ranged widely to include culture, society, language, and literature. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, a small number of Anglophone scholars with academic formations within the discipline of history also began to engage with questions relating to the Kurdish past, in particular with the vexed questions relating to the development and evolution of Kurdish nationalism prior to the collapse of the Ottoman and Qajar

² Minorsky was one of the first modern scholars to seek to address the evolution of the term Kurds, suggesting that in early Islamic sources it was primarily a socio-economic designation (as opposed to constituting an ethnonym). See Minorsky (1943). Minorsky also conducted pioneering research in the some of the major Kurdish dynasties of the medieval Caucasuses. See Minorsky (1953). Minorsky also contributed the article on "Kurds, Kūrdistan" to *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition* (1913-1938).

³ Nikitin's most well-known work *Les Kurdes: étude sociologique et historique* first published in 1957.

4 Culture and power in early modern Iranian Kurdistan

empires in the early 1920s. One notable landmark in this regard was Wadie Jwaideh's *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development* (2006), a work that dedicates seven out of its sixteen chapters to events prior to the end of the First World War. This volume constituted the fruition of Jwaideh's doctoral studies at Syracuse University in upstate New York, work that he completed in 1960. Significantly, although Jwaideh's impressive study was only published in 2006, following Jwaideh's death five years earlier, an unpublished version of the manuscript circulated widely in the university libraries of Europe and North America. Consequently, his influence on subsequent generations of scholars cannot be underestimated. Another significant contribution to the development of the field was Robert Olson's *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925* (1989). Olson who, like Jwaideh before him, drew primarily on British archival sources, sought to chart the 'rise' of Kurdish nationalism from the Sheikh Ubeydullah Revolt of the 1880s to the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Republic of Turkey in the early 1920s. Thus, Olson, too, has had a profound effect on Kurdish historiography.

However, perhaps the most significant work on Kurdish history published prior to the end of the twentieth century was Martin van Bruinessen's groundbreaking study, *Agba, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (1992). To a certain extent, although the works by Jwaideh and Olson were well researched and possessed narrative coherence, to modern scholars they appear somewhat dated. On one hand, both works relied heavily on English-language sources, although it should be recognised that at the time both these works were written, political circumstances in the Middle East made it difficult, if not impossible, to access important regional archives such as the *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* in Istanbul. On the other, they lacked theoretical sophistication, especially in terms of their understanding of nations and nationalism, a topic that has received a significant degree of scholarly attention in recent decades. Moreover, these studies were characterised by what might best be described as "methodological nationalism" in that they were predicated, at least implicitly, on the notion of a well-defined Kurdish community and identity as a clearly defined unit of study.

In contrast, Bruinessen's masterpiece, completed in 1978 (although only published fourteen years later), is rich in terms of not only its use of diverse sets of primary sources from which it draws, but also in its ambiguous scope and its theoretical depth. Although a work of anthropology, *Agba, Shaikh and State. The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, has had a defining influence on subsequent generations of historians. For instance, building on secondary literature in English, French, German, and Turkish, in addition to important primary sources in both European and Middle Eastern languages (primarily Ottoman Turkish and Persian), Bruinessen sought to examine the evolution of political and institutional relations between the Kurds and their various historical overlords prior to the early twentieth century. Moreover, he

endeavoured to highlight how these interactions profoundly impacted the evolution of Kurdish society, and he moved away from what might be described as the ‘imperial perspective’ in an effort to make a start with the construction of a social history of the Kurds, a history from ‘below’. Since the completion of *Agha, Shaikh and State*, Bruinessen has continued to contribute greatly to the field. For instance, in 1988, he published *Evliya Çelebi in Diyarbakir* with Hendrik Boeschoten. Two years later, he contributed to the volume *Evliya Çelebi in Bitlis* edited by Robert Dankoff. These two volumes were significant in that they both included critical translations of those sections from Evliya Çelebi’s seventeenth-century travelogue relating to his travels in Kurdistan and articles contextualising these writings. More generally, Bruinessen pioneered several areas of study, ranging from highlighting the trans-regional connections between Kurdish and Indonesian versions of Islam and fascinating macro-histories, such as his work on Abu Bakr Efendi, a Kurdish religious scholar dispatched by the Ottomans to serve as a religious leader for the Muslim community residing in British South Africa in the 1860s.⁴ Moreover, in his studies of the evolution of the Kurdish identity, he was one of the first scholars to integrate some of the theoretical insights provided by scholars of ethnicity and nationalism such as Anthony D. Smith. In this regard, Bruinessen, described by one scholar as the ‘doyen of Kurdish studies’ (Ateş, 2014), was one of the founding fathers of an emergent Kurdish historiographical tradition. That is a tradition that combines diverse sets of primary sources in both European and Middle Eastern languages with a critical approach and a cognisance of the broader historiographical and theoretical debates within which scholarship on the Kurdish community can be situated.

While the scholarship of earlier authors, especially that of Bruinessen, remains required reading for those wishing to conduct historical research on the Kurds, the selection of English language literature available in 2017 is much greater than it once was, both in terms of volume and, more importantly, the diversity of topics and perspectives with which scholars engage. The origins of this ‘renaissance’ can be traced back to the late 1990s, a period in which a new generation of academics began to re-examine the existing historiography pertaining to the Kurds and, more specifically the origins of Kurdish nationalism. This, as might be expected, included a re-examination of the existing historiography relating to Kurdish ‘nationalism’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Since the early 2000s, there has been a string of important publications which examined, either directly or as part of a broader historical narrative, Kurdish cultural and political activism in the late Ottoman period. Early examples of such work included Martin Strohmeier’s *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes* (2003), Hakan Özoğlu’s *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities,*

⁴ ISIS press, an English language academic publisher based in Istanbul, produced a collection of van Bruinessen’s articles on the Kurds under the title *Mullas, Sufis and Heretics: the Role of Religion in Kurdish Society* (2000).

Competing Loyalties and Shifting Boundaries (2004), and Janet Klein's path-breaking article, "Kurdish nationalists and non-nationalist Kurds: rethinking minority nationalism and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1909" (2007). More recently, these have been joined by works such as Michael Reynold's *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908–1918* (2011) and Kamal Soleimani's *Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East, 1876-1926* (2016). These works differ from earlier studies in a number of ways. At a most basic level, the authors made much greater use of hitherto under-exploited primary sources. However, it was not only in terms of sources that these studies differed from their predecessors. Their works also sought to problematise the Kurdish identity, drawing upon modernist/constructivist scholarship on ethnicity and nationalism, which had been in the ascendancy within academia since the early 1980s, as well as a growing body of scholarship which critiqued existing accounts of the 'rise' of nationalism amongst the various peoples and communities of the Ottoman Empire. The outcome of such studies has been a far more nuanced account of the development of Kurdish activism in the years leading up to the First World War, one that focuses on the construction of the modern Kurdish political identity as well as the complex relationship between Kurdish elites and Ottoman establishment.

In addition, a growing number of scholars have sought to move beyond the question of Kurdish nationalism to look more broadly at the impact of social and political change on Kurdish society during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For example, Janet Klein's *Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (2011) offered a thoughtful examination of the *Hamidiye* regiments, the rationale behind their formation as well as their effect on society in Eastern Anatolia in the decades leading up to the First World War. In a similar vein, Sabri Ateş' *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914* (2015) shed new light on the border-making process on the Ottoman-Iranian frontier as well as its impact on the "borderlanders" such as the Kurds. While these works draw on different historiographical debates, they are united in their sophistication. Moreover, they also share a concern with avoiding the pitfalls of 'methodological nationalism' by linking the Kurdish story to broader imperial narratives as well as those various communities and groups alongside which the Kurds resided. Indeed, this "poly-centric" approach is very apparent in two recent edited volumes that touch on important historiographical questions pertaining to the Kurds, *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870-1915* (Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij (eds.), 2014) and *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century: Societies, Identities and Politics* (Yaşar Tolga Cora, Dzovinar Derderian, and Ali Sipahi (eds.) 2016). Hence, today, our knowledge of the Kurdish community prior to the end of the First World War is most certainly much greater than it was at the beginning of the century. Indeed, Israeli scholar Michael Eppel's *A People Without a State: The Kurds from the Rise of Islam to the Dawn of Nationalism* (2016), recently endeavoured to

synthesise much of this new scholarship into a grand narrative that takes the reader from the seventh to twentieth century.

Nevertheless, major gaps in our historical knowledge remain as much of the recent literature focuses exclusively or at least primarily on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are, of course, important exceptions. Boris James (2014, 2016) has published important pieces, which challenged long-held assumptions about the Kurdish community and identity in the medieval period. With regards to the early modern era (roughly 1500 to 1800), Ebru Sönmez's work (2012) on the sixteenth-century religious scholar and specialist on Kurdish affairs, İdris-i Bitlisî, has provided us with new insights into the establishment of Ottoman sovereignty over much of Kurdistan in the early sixteenth century. One might also highlight Michiel Leezenberg's important contributions to the religious and cultural history of the Kurds during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (2014), as well as Ariel Salzmann's *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire: Rival Paths to the Modern State* (2004), which includes an examination of the nature of Ottoman rule in Kurdish Anatolia in the eighteenth century. Yet, our knowledge of Kurdistan prior to the nineteenth century remains limited at best. It is with these points in mind, that the articles presented here in this issue of *Kurdish Studies* seek to address some of the deficits in our historical knowledge, particularly as they are related to the Kurds and Kurdistan during the so-called 'early modern' era.

Periodisation can be a controversial subject amongst historians. Indeed, the term early modern, referring to the period roughly between the early sixteenth and late eighteenth century, is far from readily accepted by all quarters in academia. Nevertheless, with regards to the periodisation of 'Kurdish history' or, perhaps more accurately, the regions of Eastern Anatolia and Western Iran within which the majority of the Kurdish community live, there is certainly a strong case for treating the period between the early sixteenth and the early nineteenth centuries as a cohesive historical era. The period opens in the 1500s with the Ottoman-Safavid struggle for hegemony over the Middle East's Kurdish zone, a struggle which was ultimately resolved to the advantage of the Ottomans. Nevertheless, Ottoman sovereignty over the various Kurdish held enclaves across the mountains was not absolute. The Safavids, as well as their successors, were, for the most part, able to maintain influence over Kurdistan's more easterly districts. Thus, Kurdistan was emerged as a frontier region, one which separated the Sunni Ottomans from the Shi'ite rivals in Iran.

Perhaps one of the most significant political characteristics of this frontier region was the relative stability of the political order established in the region. The stability might best be accounted for by the nature of the administrative settlement arrived at in the region by both imperial powers, one in which Ottoman and Iranian officials shared authority with local Kurdish notables. It would be misleading to claim that the relationship between Kurdish leaders and the imperial overlords were always harmonious. The Ottoman official Aziz Efendi complained bitterly that the avaricious of the centrally appointed

provincial governors weakened the region's Kurdish aristocracy, whom he regarded as key military allies in the struggle against the Iranians.⁵ Indeed, the folkloric epic, the Epic of Dimdim Castle, a work given literary form by the poet Feqiyê Teyran (d.1631/1632), celebrated the forlorn resistance offered up by Emir Khān (Mîr Lepzêrîn), the ruler of the Bradost tribal confederation, to the encroachments of Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629). Nevertheless, while politics on the frontier could be cutthroat, the general system in which Kurdish notables enjoyed a significant degree of economic and political autonomy in their ancestral lands remained intact well into the nineteenth century. Much of the existing literature on early modern Kurdistan has focused on the Ottoman side of the equation. This tendency is understandable considering not only the fact that most of Kurdistan lay within the Ottoman zone of influence but also the extensive nature of Ottoman records, at least when compared to the records maintained by the Safavids and their successors. Nevertheless, this has meant that the story of those Kurdish communities residing within the Iranian sphere of influence has been somewhat less well covered. It is this gap in the literature more that this small collection of articles will seek to address, through an examination of the interplay between power and culture in early modern Iranian Kurdistan.

The first piece, by Sacha Alsancaklı, examines the *Sharafnāma* (*Şarafnāma*) a Persian language history of Kurdistan's ruling dynasties written by the Kurdish prince of Bitlis, Sharaf Khān (Şaraf Xān) in the late sixteenth century. While Alsancaklı notes that this text was 'discovered' by orientalists in the nineteenth century, he observes that, with minor exceptions, "many important aspects of the work await further study." In this regard, Alsancaklı's piece attempts to shed light on the intellectual and cultural world that shaped Sharaf Khān's writing. In particular, he explores the influence of the Qazvīnī school of historical writing, a school which emerged at the Safavid court (where Sharaf Khān spent much of his youth) during the second half of the sixteenth century on the *Sharafnama*. In this way, Alsancaklı provides not only new insights into the intellectual influences that shaped Sharaf Khān's writing but also the broader historiographical tradition within which the *Sharafnama* can be situated.

The pieces presented by Sara Zandi Karimi and Farangis Ghaderi shift the focus to the Ardalāns, a Kurdish princely house that ruled the town of Sine (Sanandaj) and its environs, primarily as vassals of the Iranians, throughout the early modern era. As the preeminent Kurdish client of the Iranians, the Ardalāns occupy an important place in the history of early modern Kurdistan. Yet, literature on the Ardalāns in English is limited. Hence, the contributions of both scholars on the historiography is noteworthy. Zandi Karimi's piece consists of an introduction to and translation of a *ṣayl* (appendix) to the *Sharafnāma*, written by a scribe in service to the Ardalān ruler, Amānullāh Khan

⁵ See Rhoads (1985).

II (r. 1799/1800-1824/1825). The commissioning of appendices to the *Sharafnāma* by Kurdish noble houses was not uncommon in the centuries that followed the work's competition in 1597 (Soltani, 2006). However, scholars of Kurdish history have yet to fully explore this genre, although it represents a vital source upon which a more detailed account of early modern Kurdistan can be constructed. Thus Zandi Karimi's translation will bring to a wider audience a document which will not only provide new insights into the relationship between the Ardalāns and their Iranian overlords but also more broadly the overarching social and political conditions prevailing in Iran's Kurdish borderlands. Ghaderi's piece, although also centring upon the Ardalān, is a work of literary history. More specifically, she focuses on the development of a literary tradition (both written and oral) in the Gorani (*Gūrāni*) dialect of Kurdish, a dialect which she notes is, today, in danger of extinction. Ghaderi examines various influences on the development of the Gorani tradition, challenging some of the long-held assumptions of early scholars. However, Ghaderi also brings to light the influence of political structures and, more specially, the role of the Ardalān patronage on the evolution of Gorani poetry. Indeed, Ghaderi highlights the important links between the demise of the Ardalāns in the mid-nineteenth century and the rapid decline and degeneration of the Gorani tradition, thusly placing the rise and fall of the Gorani tradition in a broader historical context.

While much research remains to be conducted on early modern Iranian Kurdistan, it is our hope that the articles presented here might serve to not only to illuminate, but also to inspire further academic inquiry into this under-explored area of Kurdish history.

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10 Culture and power in early modern Iranian Kurdistan

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