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Author(s): John Limbert

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THE ORIGINS AND APPEARANCE OF THE KURDS IN PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN

John Limbert

At present the Kurds occupy parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the USSR. As the map shows, the area in which the Kurds predominate is a long arc extending roughly northwest to southeast in a band of varying width from central Turkey to western Iran in the Kermanshah and Shāhābād regions. In these last areas, the historic road from Baghdad to Hamadān and beyond divides the Kurds from their Iranian cousins, the Lurs.

Within this extensive, mountainous area the Kurds speak an Iranian language divided into two groups of dialects--northern Kurdish, or Kurmandji, and southern Kurdish, called Kurdi. The dividing line between these two groups of dialects run roughly from the southwest corner of Lake Rezaiyeh to the town of Rowanduz in northern Iraq. Linguists consider Kurdish to be a northwestern Iranian language and therefore quite distinct from Persian, a southwestern language. Within the Kurdish areas there are linguistic minorities such as the Gurani of Iran and the Zaza of Turkey who consider themselves Kurdish, but whom linguists insist speak a non-Kurdish Iranian language.

The basic question concerning the origin of the Kurds is this: are they the descendants of the original inhabitants of all or a part of this extensive area or did they come to this area at an undetermined date from an undetermined place? Furthermore, what, if anything, can be found about the situation of the Kurds in pre-Islamic Iran?

We must be careful to distinguish between the history of the Kurds and the history of Kurdistan. We are concerned with the history of the Kurdish people, wherever they appear. The name "Kurdistan" did not appear until the time of the Seljuqs. Our evidence about the history of the Kurds is very scarce, and what does exist is often of little value. One English traveller asked

John Limbert is a Ph.D. candidate in History and Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University.

a peasant the name of a nearby village. The peasant answered, Nāzānom (Kurdish for 'I don't know'). The traveller dutifully recorded that he had passed the village of Nāzānom. Some scholars, in spite of the Kurds' obvious links with the Iranian peoples, have even claimed that they have found a Kurdish nose that looks like the nose in the relief of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. Thus the Kurds are the Assyrians. Others have felt that, since the Kurdish women are tall and attractive like Georgian women, the Kurds are a branch of the Georgians. Unfortunately, because of the complete lack of anthropological evidence concerning the Kurds, such things can be written. What evidence we do have is linguistic and geographical--but common language in no way implies a common race. The Kurds speak a mutually intelligible language (although sometimes just barely so) over a wide area but within a single tribe there may be a wide variety of racial types. Furthermore, the Kurds have absorbed characteristics from their Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Armenian neighbors.

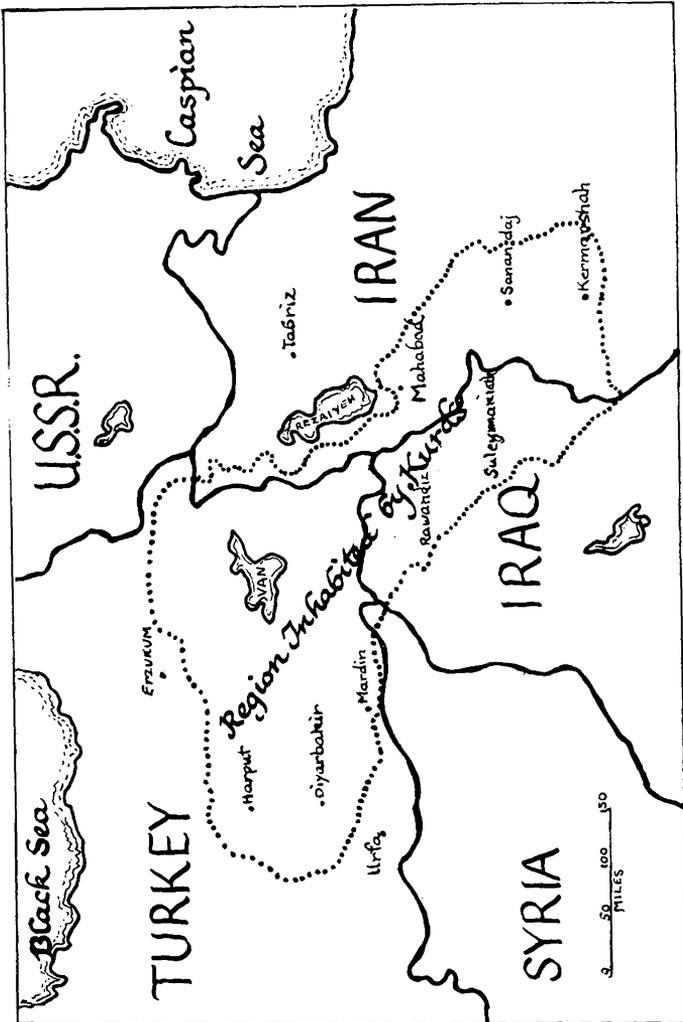
The Origin of the Kurds

The Shāhnāme of Ferdowsi relates the popular Iranian version of the Kurds' origin. The tyrant Zakhāk had two snakes growing out of his shoulders, which had to be fed fresh brains. Thus to protect the tyrant two young people were killed every day. To save some of the youths, sheeps' brains were substituted for human brains and about four hundred young people thus saved fled to the mountains and became the original Kurds.

Some Kurdish tribes have given themselves Arab origins--Arab tribes would go to the mountains, mingle with foreigners, and forget their mother tongue. These Arab geneologies may have a factual basis when we consider that the Kurds are apparently not homogeneous, but an amalgam of various ethnic elements. Minorsky writes,

The classification of the Kurds among the Iranian nations is based mainly on linguistic and historical data and does not prejudice the fact there is a complexity of ethnical elements incorporated in them.¹

At present there are Iranians other than Kurds living in Kurdish areas, and there may well have been non-Iranians who also became part of the Kurdish population. At Soleimāniyeh, Mahābād, and Qotur, there has been observed a social stratification based on newcomers dominating older inhabitants in a feudal relationship.



The "Kurdishness" of this entire area may actually be a unity imposed on ancient, diverse peoples.

The derivation of the word Kurd is not certain. The word itself is Iranian and appears in the Sassanian epic Kārnāmak-e-Ardashir-e-Pāpakān. It also appears among the Arabs at the time of the conquests of the seventh century A.D. with its Arabic plural akrād. Some scholars have suggested that the word comes from the name of the Gūti, a people mentioned in Sumerian tablets as early as the twenty-fourth century B.C., or in Kar-da-ka (or Qar-da-ka) in Sumerian inscriptions of about 2000 B.C. Xenophon uses the name Kardūkhoi for the people living in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan whom his army fought on its retreat in 401 B.C. According to Xenophon, these Kardūkhoi lived as far north as the Centrites (Bohtan) River. The kh ending of their name is apparently an Armenian plural ending of Kardū, for Xenophon writes that he learned the name of the tribe from an Armenian. In later sources the name Kyrtiae appears--Polybius and Livy mention them fighting as mercenaries, first for an enemy of Rome around 190 B.C., the Seleucid Antiochus III, and later for an ally of Rome around 170 B.C., Eumenes of Pergamum. Strabo mentions Kyrtiae in Media Atropatane (Azarbaijan) and in Persis (Fars). He also uses the name Corduene or Gordiaea for the area that is now Turkish Kurdistan.

In spite of the apparent similarity between the words Kurd and Kardū, Kyrtiae, and Corduene, philologists feel that the older terms are distinct from Kurd by reason of the final short vowel which is part of the root of these words, i.e., Kardū (kardū-karduw) and Kyrti. The initial K or Kardū may actually represent Q, in which case there is a connection with the Semitic root QRD*, meaning brave or strong. Furthermore, Kardū may be related to Kart'veli, the indigenous name for the Georgians. The name Kurd probably comes from the Persian Gord, meaning "hero", which would be an Iranian interpretation of the local name, Kardū or Qardū.²

Older scholarship believed that the modern Kurds were direct descendants of the Kardūkhoi. This view was based on the similarity of the names, the obvious geographical relationship, and the fact that Xenophon's description of the Kardūkhoi as wild mountain tribesmen not recognizing outside authority matches in many features the habits of the Kurds as recorded in later histories.

However, this view has been widely disputed since the beginning of the twentieth century. For it has been recognized that any people, regardless of its racial and linguistic affiliations, that lives in the mountains bordering Mesopotamia will have about the

same manner of life. Furthermore, the older view confuses the Kurdish people with Kurdistan, assuming that the area presently inhabited by Kurds has always been so occupied and ignores the migrations and other shifts of populations that occurred in pre-Islamic times. We know, for example, that displacement of peoples was an important part of Achemenian policy.

The Kurds themselves claim to be descendants of the Medes (Persian *Mād*), who, as Herodotus describes, eventually overthrew the Assyrians in 612 B.C. and who later were absorbed by Cyrus the Achemenian into his empire of the "Medes and the Persians." We have very little information about the Medes. The first mention of them in the sources is in 844 B.C. in an inscription of the Assyrian king Salmesr, who made war on a tribe called the *Amādā*, which lived east of the Assyrians both in the mountains of present-day Iranian Kurdistan and on the plateau further to the east.

Although some scholars have dismissed the Kurds' claim of Median descent, linguistic and geographical evidence supports these claims. All Kurdish dialects have maintained the basic characteristics of Kurdish despite the wide dispersion of the tribes. This fact suggests that there was an ancient and powerful language from which the dialects evolved. Kurdish could well be descended from the Median language or languages which spread into Asia Minor after the fall of the Assyrian empire in 612 B.C. Geographically, this is very interesting, since according to Herodotus the western frontier of the Median empire was the Halys River (*Kizil Irmak*), which is just about as far west as Kurds are found today. An Armenian manuscript of the fifteenth century, probably copied from a much older work, contains a monophysite liturgical prayer in seven languages, one of which is called "the language of the Medians." This language is a North Iranian dialect which affinites to North Kurdish (*Kurmandji*).³ The Median language, of which we have very few traces, apparently stood in the same relation to old Persian as Kurdish does to modern Persian, that is, northwest to southwest Iranian.

The Kurds could have been formed by amalgamations among Iranian and non-Iranian indigenous tribes as the former moved west from the Persian plateau into the Zagros mountains and the anti-Taurus ranges of Turkey. In this shadowy period the Iranian Medes may have absorbed the settled Mannans of Iranian Kurdistan. The Iranian scholar Rashid Yāsami (himself a Kurd) says that Deioces, who, according to Herodotus, organized the Median kingdom, was the same as "Dia'aku" who is reported to be a chief of the Mannans in Assyrian sources at the time of Sargon I (c. 715 B.C.).⁴

In central Kurdistan there could have been an Iranization of tribes of different nationalities but bearing a similar name (Kardū). Minorsky says,

It is very possible that the Kurdish nation is formed from the union of two tribes, the Mardi [descendants of the Manneans?] and the Kyrtaie [of the Bohtan area] who spoke Median dialects very close to each other. It is certain that in their expansion to the west the Kurds incorporated many indigenous elements.⁵

Minorsky also speculates that Kurmandj, the present word for North Kurdish, represents the union of Kurd with Mede and Mannean.

The theory of Kurdish east-to-west migration is an attractive one, especially as the Median capital of Ekbatān (Hamadān) was located east of present Kurdish areas. But there is no way we can establish how or when the Kurds spread west of the Median portion of the Iranian plateau. We can only guess that at the time of Xenophon, what is now Iraqi Kurdistan was not yet Kurdish. It is very interesting that Livy separates the Kyrtaie from the Medes when both are fighting against Rome in the army of Antiochus III. At that time (190 B.C.) the Kyrtaie are mercenaries, used as infantry, and auxiliaries, but the Medes are picked men in the cavalry.

The "Kurds" of Fars

The Arab and Persian historians who wrote during the early centuries of Islam frequently mentioned Kurds living outside of Kurdistan, especially in Fars. According to these histories, the Kurds had lived in many places outside of Kurdistan in Sassanian times. The historians Mas'udi and Istakhri, writing in the middle of the tenth century A. D., tell of Kurds living in Kerman, Sistan, Khorasan, and Fars as well as in Kurdistan proper. Rashid Yāsami believes that the Kurds' original home was Fars. He cites as evidence the Persian historian Beihaqi (c. 1000 A.D.).

Each region and area has something associated with it: the wise men of Greece, the painters of China...and the Kurds (akrād) of Fars.⁶

According to Yāsami, not only were the Kurds of Fārs a major support of Sassanian power, but Ardashir I, the founder of

the empire, was himself a Kurd. He says that Sasan, Ardashir's grandfather, married Rām Behesht of the Bāzanjān Kurds, who, according to Istakhri, were one of the five Kurdish tribes of Fars. Their son Pāpak took advantage of his Kurdish connections and sent his son Ardashir as governor to Darabgerd (Darab), which was the center of the Chupānān, or Shabānkāreh, the large federation of tribes to which the Bāzanjān belonged and who had been Sasan's original protectors. These same Kurds of Fars now became Ardashir's supporters in his revolt against Ardavān V, the Arsacid ruler. After Ardashir had proclaimed himself king of kings, Ardavān wrote an insulting letter to him which called attention to Ardashir's Kurdish ancestry.

You've bitten off more than you can chew
and you have brought death to yourself.
O son of a Kurd, raised in the tents of
the Kurds, who gave you permission to put
a crown on your head?⁷

However, not all Kurds supported Ardashir. Both the Shāhnāme and the Kārnāmak-e-Ardashir tell of Ardashir's defeat by and eventual conquest of the Kurds. In the Shāhnāme account Ardashir wars with the Kurds before subduing the neighboring areas of Kermān and Sīstān--therefore the reference is probably to the Kurds of Fars. But in the Kārnāmak account Ardashir makes war on the Kurds of the land of Māsī, which the translator and editor, Sadeq Hedayat, interprets as Mādi, an area in Kurdistan.

Although it is possible that the Kurds of Fars are related to the tribes of Kurdistan, it is more likely that the groups are distinct and that the tribes of Fars are not true Kurds, but Iranian tribes speaking southwest Iranian dialects, perhaps related to modern Luri. Such southwest dialects as Luri and Bakhtiari are much more closely related to Persian than to Kurdish. If we reconstruct the ancient linguistic division, then the Kurds of the north spoke a language related to Median--that is, north-west Iranian, and the "Kurds" of the south spoke a language related to Persian, or southwest Iranian.

Of course it is impossible to prove that the tribes of Fars were not true Kurds; they might have been. But before the beginning of the twentieth century, no basic distinction was recognized between Kurdish and Luri.⁸ Only recently have these two languages been found to follow the N.W.-S.W. or Mede-Persian division. Furthermore, there is simply no trace of Kurdish speakers at present either in Fars or on its borders. One of Istakhri's five Kurdish tribes of Fars is the Jiloya; at present there is a Lur tribe in the same area with the name Kuh-Giluyeh,

whose origin and whose time of coming to Fars are unknown.

Most conclusive of all is the fact that Kurd in the older Persian or Arab sense meant simply nomad with no particular ethnic connotations. In this case, Ardashir V's letter becomes more insulting, since in effect he is calling Ardashir an ignorant nomad. The term was not even restricted to Iranian nomads--according to a tenth century work, the Persians called the Mesopotamian Arabs the "Kurds of Suristan." Thus it is reasonable (but hardly certain) that the so-called Kurds of Fars of Sassanian times were not true Kurds at all, but were Iranian nomads speaking dialects related to Persian.

From what has been said, it should be clear that the early history of the Kurds cannot be reconstructed with any certainty. Unfortunately, the scarcity of evidence and the romanticizing of the Kurds by Americans and Europeans (they are seen as straightforward, outgoing, jolly-good-fellows in opposition to the conniving, double-dealing, cowardly Persians) has resulted in an outpouring of pseudo-scholarly nonsense, propounding wild theories that can never be conclusively disproved. But we can draw two conclusions:

- 1) The Kurds were formed by an amalgamation of Northwest Iranians, migrating from the east, who absorbed various elements from the indigenous population of the Zagros mountains and imposed a linguistic unity upon them. Linguistically and geographically there is no basis for making a distinction between Kurds and Medes.
- 2) The Kurds that the Islamic historians mention as living in South and Southwest Persia were probably not true Kurds, but were nomadic tribes speaking Southwest Iranian dialect related to modern Luri and Persian.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ V. Minorsky, "Kurds", Encyclopedia of Islam, p. 1132.
- ² To follow the derivation of the name in more detail, see Minorsky, Nikitine, and Driver.
- ³ MacKenzie, D.N., "The Language of the Medians", 354-5.
- ⁴ Yāsami, Rashid, Kurds, 70.
- ⁵ Cited by B. Nikitine, Les Kurdes, 12.
- ⁶ Yāsami, op. cit., 172-3.
- ⁷ Ibid., 171.
- ⁸ The Sharafnameh, a sixteenth century history of the Kurds, calls the Lurs a branch of the Kurds.

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