Chinese, Kurds, Iranians and the Silk Road

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A Historical Perspective

By

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This book is dedicated to the Consulate of China in Iraqi Kurdistan and the esteemed Chinese researchers advancing Kurdish Studies
这本书献给中国驻伊拉克库尔德斯坦领事馆以及致力于库尔德研究的尊敬的中国研究者 (王兰)

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Contemporary historiography predominantly focuses on macro-level international relations and state-to-state interactions, often overlooking the intricate histories of relationships between individual nations or between a state and a nation without formal governance. Recognising this gap, this study illuminates the intricate political, economic, social, and cultural connections between the Kurds—the largest stateless nation in the Middle East—and China since ancient times. This inquiry is significant for its historical trajectory, spanning millennia to the modern era, characterised by the rise of nation-states based on racial and ethnic identities, supplanting traditional imperial frameworks. Throughout history, the Kurds, along with other Middle Eastern populations, have at times occupied regions that modern-day Iran, Iraq, Türkiye, Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan currently govern. However, discussions on historical relations between China and these nations seldom explore Kurdish involvement. Despite the lack of awareness among Chinese individuals about the historical presence of the Kurdish people, the Kurdistan region has long been situated along the Silk Road, facilitating active economic and cultural exchanges between East and West.

This study examines the integration of Chinese traditions, names, characters, and influences into Kurdish folklore, literature, and myths. It traces the routes of the Silk Road and maritime trade, highlighting the Kurds' role in facilitating China's economic engagements with the Middle East. By exploring religious interactions, the study uncovers how faiths have shaped connections between Kurds and the Chinese, particularly through the influence of Kurdish Sufis in converting Chinese individuals to Islam. The research also sheds light on Kurdish scholars who, as religious mentors, welcomed Chinese students, assessing their impact on religious and cultural exchange. This study, employing a descriptive-analytical approach, stands as an innovative scholarly pursuit, delineating a previously unexamined area of focus and subject matter. As a result, this endeavour is distinct in its absence of prior research antecedents, marking its inaugural foray into scholarly publication. Utilising the most recent archaeological findings in China, this study thoroughly investigates the interactions among Iranians, Kurds, and Chinese through an exhaustive examination of historical sources in Persian, Kurdish, Arabic, and readily available Chinese

materials. With the increasing global attention towards China, particularly with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), research concerning the relationships along this route has expanded. Consequently, this study aims to illuminate the historical roots and ethnic composition of the Kurdish people based on documented evidence, striving to examine this relationship from various perspectives. It focuses on the historical trajectory of these connections across two volumes, exploring the ancient era in the initial volume and the modern era from the 20th century onwards in the subsequent one. Given the deeply intertwined historical ties between Kurds and the civilisations of Iran and Iraq, this research holds significance for Middle Eastern and Chinese scholars. The favourable view of Kurds towards China presents an advantageous prospect for Chinese policymakers, offering opportunities to broaden diplomatic ties with established governments in the Middle East and stateless nations in the region. China can effectively cultivate connections and bolster diplomatic relations by leveraging this historical potential.

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INTRODUCTION

As outlined by Muslim geographers, the region historically referred to as Eranshahr [Iranshahr, (Realm/Empire of the Iranians)], spanning from the Ceyhun River [Amu Darya] to the Mediterranean, had Iraq as its central hub, with Ctesiphon (near present-day Baghdad) as its focal point. Present-day Kurdistan essentially constituted about half of this vast Eranshahr territory. The geographic domain where the Kurds settled or established traditional governance extended from the eastern reaches to Hamadan in the western expanse of contemporary Iran and from the western frontiers to Afrin and Jebel Aqra in Syria, encompassing the Mediterranean shores. Its boundaries extended from the southern regions to Khuzestan and present-day Fars and from the northern areas to the eastern Caucasus in Azerbaijan and modern-day Armenia.

The vast territory primarily inhabited by the Kurds, as referenced in ancient Greek texts like Xenophon's Anabasis, is the cradle of ancient societies, witnessing the emergence of notable early civilisations such as the Kassites, Lullubi, Mannaea, Urartu, Guti, Hurrians, and Mitanni, while also being the birthplace and flourishing ground for major dynasties like the Elamites, Medes, Achaemenids, and Sassanids. Although the Parthians originated in eastern Iran, their westward expansion led to the establishing of their government, administration, and court in the mountainous regions of present-day Kurdistan. Their integration into the culture and language of the region was so profound that linguists have denoted the prevalent languages in Kurdish-inhabited areas as Pahlavi, also known as the Parthian language, which attained renown in Arabic as Fahlaviyāt.

The Sassanids, regarded as the successors of these ancient states, are identified as Kurds in historical records, solidifying a profound connection between Kurds and these territories. The cultural, historical, and civilisational roots of ancient Iran, predating the Islamic epoch, are firmly entrenched in Kurdistan or the western half of Eranshahr and its governing territories. Over time, this influence expanded westward and eastward to the borders of China. Notably, specific Greek texts designate most of the mountainous expanse of Kurdistan as the Zagros Range. In contemporary geographical delineations, the Zagros Mountain constitutes an extensive mountain range, commencing from the vicinity of the Persian Gulf shores

in Khuzestan and Fars and extending in a northwestern direction to the Ararat Mountains near Van in present-day Türkiye.

The name Zagros originates in the Sagartian tribe (Sagartioi), also documented as Zakrtu and Zakrutī in Assyrian inscriptions. Deioces, credited as the founder of the Median state, ruled over the Zakrutī stronghold, with his name appearing in Assyrian records during its conquest. It seems that the Zakrutī (Sagartian) tribe and its territory served as the cradle of the Median royal dynasty. Furthermore, the name Sagartian or Sgarta appears in the list of provinces of the Achaemenid Empire on Darius's inscription at Persepolis, with its territory situated east of the Tigris, precisely corresponding to the present-day Zagros region. Notably, in this inscription, Zagros not only denotes a mountain but also signifies an area, territory, and state. In the Behistun inscription, where Darius I discusses quelling opposition to his rule, two individuals from the Medes Sagartian milieu are introduced, distinguished by their attire.

Hence, following the Achaemenid regime's fall at the hands of the Greeks, the appellations Sagarti or Zagroti were erased from Achaemenid administrative and legal documents, transposed into the Greek language and ethos. The term Zagreus or Zagros in Greek literature precisely designates both the mountain range and the juncture of the Pataq Pass along the path from Kermanshah to Sar-e Pol-e Zahab in contemporary Kurdistan, Iran. The significance of Zagros extends beyond linking Kurdistan's terrain and populace to ancient regional powers like the Medes and Sassanids, reaching into the post-Sassanid era when Arab Muslims referred to a region called Zagros in the local Kurdish dialect and Greek as ‘Jibal’ (Mountains), identifying the Kurds as the ‘Residents of the Jibal.’ Subsequently, Persian sources in the 13th century replaced the term ‘Jibal’ with ‘Kurdistan.’ Notably, a significant stretch of the Silk Road, linking China to Europe, passed through the foothills of the Zagros, with the Kurds pivotal in bridging the eastern segment of the Silk Road to its western counterpart along the Mediterranean Sea and Anatolia.

With the fall of the Kurdish Sassanids to the Muslim Arabs, the cultural and civilisational centre of Iran in western cities like Eranshahr and Ctesiphon became detached as the Arabs extended their control over the entire land of Kurdistan and other regions of Iran. The trajectory of the last Sassanid king, Yazdegerd III, indicates his attempt to seek Chinese support in securing the borders of his realm and repelling the Muslim Arab threat from the east, hoping to reclaim the central territories of his rule in the west. Despite his optimism, this alliance did not materialise, and with Yazdegerd's death, the Islamic Arab Caliphate replaced the unified Sassanid realm. Subsequent efforts by Yazdegerd's descendants in China proved fruitless,

leaving the Sassanids unable to regain power. It appears that the role of the Chinese in supporting Yazdegerd and his descendants positively impacted the Kurds' favourable view of China in their history and folklore.

During the Islamic Caliphate era, the Kurds initially resisted the authority of Arabs, compelling the Caliphate to acknowledge their sovereignty over their territories. Concurrently, as the Saffarids and Samanids gained control of the former Sassanid realm's eastern territories, and the Dailamites dominated its central region, Kurdish dynasties like the Hasanwayhids, Annazids, Rawadids, Shaddadids, Hazbanians, and Marwanids governed over the western part, consolidating control over their ancestral lands. These Kurdish rulers held sway from Hamadan to Afrin and from Khuzestan and Fars to the eastern Caucasus over two centuries (9th - 11th centuries). However, with the invasion of the Turkic Seljuks, all these Kurdish states were obliterated, and their territories fell under Turkish occupation.

A century later, emerging from the aftermath of Turkish rule, the Kurds experienced a resurgence, as Kurdish Ayyubids in the 12th century reclaimed dominion over western Kurdistan, encompassing present-day Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. Concurrently, Kurdish governments like the Ahmadilis, Khorshidis [or Shahs of Little Lorestan], Fazluyeh [Fadluyis], and Shabānkāra extended their authority over eastern Kurdistan, spanning from the northern to the southern regions of the Zagros. Thus, the Kurds regained sovereignty over their land and people. However, with the Mongol invasion led by Chinggis Khan and his successors, notably Hulagu, Kurdish governments were once again dismantled, and the Mongols established hegemony over the entirety of Kurdistan.

Following the decline of the Ilkhanids, the Kurds seized an opportunity to reclaim governance over their territories; however, their resurgence was short-lived as they faced renewed oppression during the invasion of Timur, leading to widespread devastation and a significant loss of population. Subsequently, dominance over Kurdistan shifted to the Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu Turkomans. Yet, the Safavids, of Kurdish lineage, ascended to power and not only asserted authority over Kurdistan but also expanded their control across western, central, and eastern Iran, reaching into Afghanistan at the onset of the 16th century. However, this revival proved temporary, as the Ottomans, triumphing over Shah Ismail in the Battle of Chaldiran, occupied Kurdish territories in present-day Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq, leaving only the portion within present-day Iran under Safavid rule.

The wars between the Safavids and their successors, including the Afghans, Afsharids, Zands, and Qajars, resulted in the partitioning of Kurdish territories across borders. In western Kurdistan, Kurds aligned with

the Ottomans clashed with their counterparts in eastern Kurdistan, loyal to the ruling authorities. These conflicts thwarted any prospects of Kurdish reassertion of power, mirroring previous periods of division. Subsequently, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish territories within its former domain were absorbed into the post-Sykes-Picot states, including Iraq, Türkiye, Syria, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, relegating their historical identity to the nations created by these new entities.

Henceforth, interaction between the Kurds and other nations became defined within the confines of the respective countries of their residence. However, the primary focus of this research lies in exploring the Kurds' historical relationship with China during the pre-modern era, both within the framework of governmental structures and as an ancient nation. The innovativeness of this research, coupled with the dearth of preceding inquiries into the connection between the Kurds and China, necessitated a more extensive preparatory effort than initially envisaged. The intricacy and challenge of the task were such that, at times, exhaustive exploration of numerous primary historical sources was imperative to uncover even a singular piece of information. Even this research's inaugural notion and conceptualisation were unprecedented, with no written or oral discourse having previously contemplated the feasibility of undertaking such a study. Nonetheless, through diligent labour and unwavering interest, the authors have crafted a publication that is not only original in its subject matter and ideas but also unveils new horizons for researchers, particularly those with a keen interest in Sino-Kurdish relations. Diverging from prior studies that concentrated on the bilateral relationship between two governments, this work delves into the relationship between the Chinese government and the people residing in various countries, devoid of a distinct national government and a language of their own.

Drawing upon the latest archaeological discoveries in China, alongside an array of historical documents, our investigation extended to visits to various museums along the Silk Road. A comprehensive review of Kurdish publications also informed our exploration of relevant literature. Furthermore, the scrutiny of over 20 Diwāns was undertaken to discern the influence of Chinese motifs on Kurdish poetry and literary traditions. The study incorporates a diverse array of data collection methods. Questionnaires were administered to gather insights from relevant communities, while interviews with individuals well-versed in the region's history provided valuable perspectives. Extensive use of library resources supplemented our archival investigations, enriching the depth of analysis. Furthermore, interviews with ordinary people about the oral heritage of folklore offered invaluable glimpses into the cultural fabric of the Silk Road

regions. Integral to our methodology, field research provided firsthand experiences and observations essential for understanding the lived realities of these historical interactions. In this section, a concise overview of the chapters is deemed necessary.

Chapter One: The primary aim of the inaugural chapter centres on delineating the essence of Kurdish identity. Questions surrounding the identity of the Kurds, including their origins and lineage, are rigorously examined. Various perspectives from the regions of Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Arab world are scrutinised to shed light on these inquiries. Some hypotheses propose the Kurds as descendants of those fleeing the rule of Zahhāk, while others posit an Arab lineage. Among these theories, intriguing and occasionally eccentric notions surface, including views that attribute certain Kurdish lineages to supernatural entities like jinn and demons or even associate them with Iranian shepherds. This chapter not only delves into these conjectures but also investigates historical realities, evaluating different dynasties historically linked to the Kurds, such as the Medes and Sassanids, based on the available historical evidence.

Chapter Two: In the second chapter, we explore the historical narrative detailing the political interactions between the Kurds and China. Given that the Kurds inhabited territories governed by ancient Iranian administrations and acknowledging the ethnic lineage connecting the Medes and Sassanids to the Kurds, it is reasonable to suggest that any political engagement between ancient China and Iran during that period inherently involved this ethnic group. Whether Chinese ambassadors and merchants traversed the territories of the Parthians or Sassanids, encounters with the Kurds in the western regions were inevitable. Moreover, the Kurds played significant roles in the administrative and military structures of various dynasties, including the Parthians and, notably, the Sassanids. Consequently, their engagement with China through Iranian representatives and ambassadors was plausible and an inherent aspect of the historical context. Transitioning into the Islamic era, the Kurds assimilated into the new political framework, actively contributing to shaping the political landscape in the Middle East under Iranian governance and the independent Kurdish states they established.

Furthermore, the Ayyubid Kurdish state, which exerted dominance over Western Asia and North Africa for approximately half a century, controlling the western section of the Silk Road and the spice trade route, was an integral part of Kurdish political identity and had connections with the Eastern world, particularly China. This situation persisted during the Safavid period, wherein the founders of the Safavid dynasty had Kurdish origins, and an examination of Iran-China relations during this era

necessitates consideration of the Kurdish element in Iran. As far as China is concerned, following the Mongol invasion of Iran and their settlement in Kurdistan, a direct relationship was established between this region and China, which was then under the rule of the Mongol united government.

Chapter Three: The theme of the third chapter revolves around the social and economic relations between the Kurds and China, with a primary focus on the examination of the Silk Road's role in fostering mutual ties. The various branches of the Silk Road traversed the western regions of the Iranian plateau, which were inhabited by diverse Kurdish communities. The Kurds played a significant role in ensuring the security of this trade route while, at times, contributing to its instability. Exploiting the advantages of the Silk Road, the Kurds engaged in levying tolls and customs on caravans and exporting their products to China. Notably, the prevalence of Chinese industries and products bearing names typical of the originating culture indicates the Kurds' utilisation of tools and commodities manufactured by the Chinese.

Considering the Kurds' historical dominance over the strategic island of Hormuz for several consecutive centuries, their significant involvement in maritime trade with China is undeniable. Moreover, socially, a segment of Iranians who embarked on journeys to China hailed from the Kurdish society. Generally, the elite Kurdish class, well-versed in Arabic and later Persian, considerably influenced this relationship. This influence was particularly pronounced in religious matters, with Kurdish scholars serving as religious studies instructors in Mecca, Medina, Istanbul, Baghdad, and Damascus. Additionally, students who travelled from East Asia often studied under Kurdish scholars and, upon their return, propagated a Kurdish-influenced interpretation of Islam. This phenomenon is notably prevalent in Indonesia and other parts of East Asia, where the term ‘Kurdi’ is commonly used, and Kurds carry out a substantial portion of Islamic dissemination in those regions. The impact of Kurdish mystics and Sufi leaders was also significant in spreading mysticism in China. Influenced by their Buda-influenced spiritual beliefs, the Kurds exhibited a keen interest in establishing connections with East Asia, particularly India and China. The Suhrawardiyya, a Sufi order led by a Kurdish Sufi named Sheikh Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi, surpassed other Sufi orders in its proliferation across East Asia. The concluding segment of this chapter delves into the presence of diverse religions in China, including Manichaeism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorianism, drawing from Chinese records. It thoroughly investigates the reciprocal impact of these religions between Eastern and Western cultures.

Chapter Four: This Chapter is dedicated to examining the process of the reflection of Chinese history and culture in Kurdish poems and folklore. A case study of some narrative folk stories in Kurdish folklore, such as 'Khorshid-i Khāvar', 'Bahram and Golāndam,' 'Shirin and Farhād,' and 'Sultan Ibrahim and Nooshāfarin,' demonstrates that China was an ideal and distant utopia for the Kurds. The protagonists of Kurdish folklore narratives encountered formidable obstacles and adversities in their quest to reach China. Envisioning this territory as an alluring and auspicious destination, these Kurdish figures undertook arduous journeys, traversing maritime and overland routes. Throughout their odyssey, these heroes encountered perceived adversaries, whom they metaphorically designated as demons obstructing their passage to China. Habesha people [Abyssinians] were symbolically labelled as the 'black demon,' while Turks were designated as the 'white demon,' engaging in confrontations on their way to China and impeding their access to their beloved, the Chinese prince or princess.

In Persian narratives featuring Kurdish protagonists such as Hussein Kurd Shabestari, the voyage to China emerges as a pivotal motif. Analogously, within Kurdish mythological accounts transcribed in prose, China assumes a foundational role, with the predominant protagonists depicted as of Chinese descent. The recurrent thematic presence of China within Kurdish folklore underscores a notable cultural and historical affinity, where protagonists frequently trace their origins to China, thus accentuating the enduring ties between the Kurdish and Chinese cultures.

This chapter also explores the incorporation of Chinese motifs within classical Kurdish poetry. Virtually every Kurdish poet has made some reference to China within their verse. In the realm of Kurdish poetic imagination, phrases such as Khatā [Cathay, Khitay 契丹], Khotan, Turkestan, and Mongolia, alongside the figure of the prophet Māni, have been conceptually subsumed under the rubric of this land, with mentions of China recurrently interspersed throughout poetic compositions. Within the poetic oeuvre of Kurdish writers, Māni is depicted as a Chinese artisan renowned for capturing the quintessence of the beloved through his paintings. At times, figures like Farhād from the renowned narrative of Khosrow and Shirin are allegorically associated with Chinese heritage. The temples are revered as repositories of exquisite sculptures and paintings, while the aroma of Khotan symbolises fragrant breezes and pleasant scents, with Khotan symbolising a bastion of literacy, culture, and artistic expression. The Khāqān of China, emblematic of both formidable power and widespread popularity, serves as an aspirational figure for Kurds, likened to sagacious leaders. It can be posited that within Kurdish poetry, China epitomises beauty and embodies the benevolence of the world,

intimately intertwined with themes of love and camaraderie. The imagery of Kurdish caravans from China laden with fragrances and precious commodities like ambergris, as well as the portrayal of Chinese merchants importing diverse goods into Kurdistan, constitutes an integral facet of Kurdish poetic discourse.

CHAPTER 1

PROBING KURDISH IDENTITY AND HOMELAND: CONCEPTS, ANCESTRY, AND HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

The precise etymology and historical evolution of the term 'Kurd' remain elusive despite its relatively clear contemporary usage (Rashid Ahmad, 2009; Saeed, 2019). This complexity is compounded by modern studies that conflate the Kurds with ancient states spanning Mesopotamia, Arminiyeh[1], and Iran, leading to ambiguity and scholarly debate (Dartash, 2017; Hamarash, 2013; Qabisi, 2014). Some scholars propose that 'Kurd' originates from the Sumerian term 'kur,' meaning 'mountain.' However, the Sumerians associated 'kur' with foreignness and peril due to the mountainous regions surrounding Sumer, which gradually led to its connotation as 'alien' or 'stranger' (Kramer, 1956, 135). Nonetheless, in the Kurdish language, 'kur' retains its original meaning of 'high mountain,' evident in the numerous mountains and fortifications prefixed with 'kora' or 'Kura' across Kurdistan, reflecting the enduring influence of Sumerian concepts on Kurdish topography (Sharafkandi, 1990, 628; Kramer, *op. cit*. 135).

The appellations of tribes inhabiting the Zagros Mountains, such as the Lulubians, Gutians, and Elamites, feature prominently in Sumerian texts and, more broadly, in Mesopotamian records, denoting 'mountain dwellers' (Dyakonov, 1992, 100; Cameron, 2002, 37; Malekzadeh, 2015, 209). By acknowledging the correlation between the Sumerian term 'kur' and the designation 'Kurd', diverse interpretations of this designation can be

[1] Or Armenia; it is a vast region situated east of the Euphrates River, bordering to the north with Diyarbakir, Kurdistan, and Azerbaijan, to the west with Shirvan, and to the south with Georgia. It is divided into two parts: Greater Armenia and Lesser Armenia. Tbilisi and its environs are referred to as Greater Armenia, while the areas of surroundings are known as Lesser Armenia.

delineated across the geographical expanses of Iran, Mesopotamia, and the Arab world.

Mesopotamia Region

Within the expanse between the two rivers, the Babylonians and Chaldeans emerged as the successors to the Sumerian legacy. In this context, certain scholars draw connections between the Babylonian-rooted term 'Kurdo' (Qurdo) and the designation 'Kurd.' Arabic historical sources recurrently mention the region of 'Kurda' or 'Qurda' adjacent to the Tigris River (Rashid Yasami, 1984, 89-92).

Fig.1-1 The Zagros Mountains, east of Mesopotamia, have been a vital habitat for societies since the Lower Paleolithic Period.

Following the reign of the Sumerians and Babylonians, the Assyrians rose to prominence in Mesopotamia (Figure 1.1), incorporating the term 'Kurti' into their inscriptions and texts, notably within the annals chronicling the rule of Ashurnasirpal I, an Assyrian monarch. Additionally, references to the Kurti, or Qurti, feature prominently in inscriptions commemorating the ascension of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BCE). Victorious over the Hittite Empire in the late 13th and early 12th centuries BCE, the Kurti, or Qurti, also played a significant role in Assyrian military campaigns. Notably, within the Assyrian context, the Kurti, Phrygians, and Guti warriors (referred to as Kurdi or Kurdiya) were under the command of Gurdios (Kurdios) during the 7th century BCE. The territory of the Phrygians extended from the northern reaches of the Tigris and extended north-westward to the Euphrates (Toynbee, 1999, 47-49, 140-141).

Until 799 BCE, Assyrian dominion in the region remained steadfast, leading to the establishment of the Bit-Zamani (Figure 1.2) state, headquartered in Diyarbakir. However, subsequently, Urartu reclaimed control over these territories, extending their influence to the vicinity of Diyarbakir. The ongoing conflicts between Assyria and Urartu saw the emergence of the Gurdiks as the prevailing force, led by their commander, Gurdios. Historical accounts highlight the mountainous expanse between the Tigris and the Bohtan River, renowned as Gordyene or Corduene. Between 696 and 675 BCE, Assyrian incursions repeatedly devastated the Gurdin region in the Sakarius Valley.

Fig.1-2 Bit-Zamani, an Aramean state in Tur Abdin, included Amida (now Diyarbakir) and fell under Assyrian control by the 9th century BCE.

In 695 BCE, Sanherib endeavoured to displace the Gurdiks (Kurds) from the 'Greimo' mound, situated at the junction of the Kizilirmak (Halys) and Takhmasu Rivers, but his efforts were futile. Subsequently, under the reign of Ashurbanipal, the Kurds launched assaults on the heart of the Assyrian government from the northwest, eventually encountering the Saka tribes south of the Bitan River, followed by the Medes. Strabo, a 1st-century CE Greek writer, refers to the Kurti (Kurtioi) inhabiting regions from Azerbaijan to present-day Fars province. Notably, Strabo highlights the presence of the Kurti in Fars (Strabo, 1949, 157, 305). Some scholars propose that these Kurtis may be synonymous with contemporary Kurds (Dandamayev, 1990, 806; Schmitt, 1993, 515; Brunner, 2004, 311). Rashid Yasami suggests that since Strabo regarded the Kurti as part of the Medes, his statements about the Medes inherently encompassed the Kurds (Rashid Yasami, *op. cit*. 165).

Fig 1.3. Perched upon an escarpment in the Upper Tigris River Basin, an essential segment of the valued Fertile Crescent lies the fortified city of Diyarbakir. Its environs have held prominence since the Hellenistic epoch, enduring through successive eras, including the Roman, Sassanid, Byzantine, Islamic, and Ottoman periods, and continuing into the modern era. Diyarbakir was considered the final point of Kurdistan in ancient times, where the Silk Road caravans would converge.

Fig.1- 3 Diyarbakir, a fortified city in the Upper Tigris Basin, has thrived since the Hellenistic era, serving as a key point on the Silk Road and a historic boundary of ancient Kurdistan.

Some scholars have proposed a connection between ‘Haldi,’ the founder of the Urartu state centred in Van at the foothills of the Ararat Mountains, and the Kurds. Alternatively, another line of inquiry traces the etymology of the term ‘Kurd’ to Kurchikh, an area associated with Armenians. Adonts, in his work History of Armenia, references the district of Kurchikh in ancient Armenian geography, suggesting that it encompassed ‘Kurtich’ and ‘Aykh,’ referring to the Kurds. This region extended into the foothills of Ararat, near the Island of Ibn 'Umar (Cited by Rashid Yasami, *op. cit*. 92, 97).

Moreover, the contemporary pronunciation of the term ‘Kurd,’ which also has historical roots in Mesopotamian geography, is documented in the writings of Xenophon, a Greek author from the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. Xenophon played a role in the conflict between Artaxerxes II and his brother Cyrus the Younger for the Achaemenid throne. Serving as one of Cyrus the Younger's commanders, Xenophon chronicled his adventures and those of his troops in the book Anabasis (Cited by Clark, 1859, 233-235).

In his work Anabasis, Xenophon encounters the people of Kurdokhi [or Kurdxoi], who posed challenges for him and his companions in the northern territories of the Tigris. Scholars propose varying interpretations regarding the identity of the Kurdokhis mentioned by Xenophon. Some suggest that since the latter part of the word Kurdokhi is in Armenian and appears in plural form, and considering the likelihood that the Greeks might have acquired this term from the Armenians, Xenophon's usage of 'Kurdokhi' may refer to the Kurds. Conversely, another viewpoint posits that the Kurdokhis encountered by Xenophon in the Gordyene mountains were the Gurdiks (Kurtis) referenced in Assyrian records. This interpretation suggests that the term 'Gordyk' entered the Greek lexicon as 'Kurdukhē' or Kurdokhi. However, some scholars dispute the association of Kurdokhis with the Kurds, instead proposing that they were a distinct ethnic group inhabiting the region of South Caucasus or Armenia. Alternatively, others argue that they resided on the border of Assyria and Media. Moreover, certain researchers assert that Kurti, Kurdi, Gurdik, Kurdiya, and Khalidi originally denoted the same ethnic group, and despite phonetic alterations over time, they collectively indicate the presence of the Kurds (Cited by Rashid Yasami, *op. cit*. 93).

The land of Iran

The Iranian rendition of the Sumerian Kur is Gor, hence establishing a linguistic connection between Kurd and Gord. Certain Kurdish sources, such as the *Sharafnama*, interpret 'Kurd' as 'gord,' connoting bravery and heroism. Sharaf Khan Bidlisi[2] further elucidates this association, suggesting

[2] 夏拉夫汗·比德利西شەرەفخانی بەدلیسی Şerefxanê Bedlîsî Or Sharaf Beg Bedlisi (1543 – 1603), a Kurdish Emir of Bitlis (in eastern Anatolia; 25 km southwest of the west shore of Lake Van), chief of the Rūzagī tribe of Kurds, demonstrated multifaceted intellectual prowess as a historian, writer, and poet, exclusively employing the Persian language in his literary endeavours. He commenced his scholarly trajectory at an early age, receiving education at the court of the Safavids. His seminal contribution to the historiography of medieval Kurdish societies is exemplified by the Sharafnama [Šaraf-nāma], a magnum opus penned in 1597. This work serves as a pivotal elucidation of Kurdish life and dynastic intricacies during the 16th century. Beyond the confines of Iran and Kurdish-speaking regions, Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's intellectual legacy resonates through the translations of his works by erudite scholars, thereby influencing not only Kurdish literature but also the broader socio-cultural milieu. In addition to his literary pursuits, Sharaf al-Din Khan distinguished himself as a polymath, demonstrating proficiency in diverse disciplines such as mathematics and military strategy. His erudition encompassed a

that the appellation ‘Kurd’ stems from the inherent courage and valour of the tribe. He elaborates by stating, ‘Due to their abundance in bravery and courage, which are inherent to this tribe, they were called Kurds.’ In another instance, Bidlisi underscores the valorous nature of the Kurds, asserting that the term 'Kurd' epitomises bravery, as many esteemed heroes of the era hailed from this tribe. Notably, figures like Rostam-e Zal, a prominent character in Persian mythology, are attributed to the Kurdish lineage, with Ferdowsi Tusi, a revered Persian poet, bestowing upon him the epithet 'Rostam-i Kurd (Bidlisi, 1964, 21, 28-29).

The interpretation of the Sharafnama indicates that ‘Kurd’ is akin to ‘gord’ in other Persian sources, where the interchangeability of ‘k’ and ‘g’ in the Pahlavi language is noteworthy. Interestingly, later Sumerian and Assyrian records, often depicting conflict with mountain-dwelling groups, employ ‘karda’ (kerda) to denote a champion or horseback warrior, possibly reflecting an Iranian interpretation of the term. Rashid Yasami posits an Iranian origin for the Kurd phenomenon, suggesting that names similar to ‘Kurd’ in Mesopotamia were initially viewed as unrelated to the Kurds before the arrival of the Aryans. He contends that terms like ‘karda’ do not represent tribal names but rather geographical regions, thus not indicating Kurdish precedence over the Medes and Persians. According to Yasami, the Kurdish presence in Mesopotamia likely emerged alongside Iranians, following migrations from the Zagros, persisting after the disappearance of indigenous populations (Rashid Yasami, *op. cit*.89-98).

Arab World

Some Arabic sources propose that the term ‘Kurd’ originates from the Arabic root karad‘كَرَد- كرداً,’ signifying expulsion or driving away, with the participle ‘كَرد’ meaning to drive and remove (Hosseini Zobeidi, 1993, 221; Kabir Madani Shirazi, 2005, 217). Ibn Nubata al-Farooqi's writings (1278-1366) assert that the term 'akrad' refers to the same people known as ‘Kurds’ due to their migration to the mountains (لكَردهم الى الجبال) (Ibn Nubata, 1998, 76). Conversely, others suggest that ‘Kurd’ stems from the root makāradat ‘مَكارَدة,’ implying distancing and making someone flee (Aftasi, 2005, 283). Narrations attributed to Umar bin Khattab by Ragheb Isfahani[3] mention Solomon ordering them to be driven to the mountains 'أكردوهم إلى الجبال',

comprehensive understanding of historical narratives, thereby underscoring his eminence as a Renaissance figure in the annals of Kurdish intellectual history

[3] He was a Muslim scholar of Qur'anic exegesis and the Arabic language, active in the eleventh century.

hence earning the designation 'Kurds' (Raqeb Isfahani, 1999, 426). In another part, it is mentioned as 'يكردون الجبال' [they drove to the mountains], and that is why they are called Kurds (Hosseini, 19996, 202). These narrations employ verbs like 'أكرد akrad' and 'يكرد yakrad,' which connote driving away, consistent with the Arabic language. Scholars such as Zamakhshari regard 'kardگرد' and 'طرد tard [deportation]' as interchangeable usage (Zamakhshari, 1991, 152). Consequently, some sources refer to them as 'Kurds of Assyria'[4] or 'Iraq,' indicating Arabs compelled to reside in the mountains of Assyria (Hamze Isfahani, 893, 180).

Origins and Ethnogenesis of the Kurdish People

The examination of Kurdish lineage presents a multifaceted challenge within the scholarly dialogue. Scholars, especially those delving into Arabic historical accounts, encounter a diverse and conflicting array of narratives regarding the origins of this ethnic group. This raises a fundamental inquiry: why does such ambiguity persist regarding the lineage of a populace residing within a defined geographical domain? Each historical source presents its unique interpretation, attributing varying origins and rationales for the Kurdish identity. Consequently, Kurds are sometimes classified as Arabs by some, Persians by others, and even linked with mythological entities such as jinn and demons by certain factions. This section aims to elucidate the prevailing myths and legends surrounding Kurdish ancestry, delving into the historical and geographical records contributing to this intricate mosaic of narratives.

Kurds, Fugitives from Zahhāk[5]

The tale of Zahhāk's defeat by Kaveh the Blacksmith stands as a cornerstone narrative in both the *Shahnameh* and Kurdish epic literature, resonating across the expanse of Iran. Scholarly discourse persists on whether Zahhāk embodies a purely mythical figure, a historical persona, or an amalgamation of both realms (Saidi Sirjani, 1989, 51). Nevertheless, its paramount importance lies in its role in the genesis of an ethnic group or

[4] اکراد سورستان

[5] In Persian mythology, ضحّاک, also recognised as Zahhak the Snake Shoulder (Zahhāk-e Mārdoush), represents a malevolent character deeply rooted in ancient Persian folklore, identified as Azhi Dahāka (Persian: اژی دهاک) in the Avesta texts. According to Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmah*, Zahhāk is depicted as the offspring of a ruler named Merdās.

community. According to legend, Zahhāk's reign marks the symbolic genesis of the Kurdish people, who are depicted as fleeing his oppressive rule. This narrative, predating its appearance in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, finds its roots in Arabic sources such as al-Masudi's renowned work, *Muruj al-dhahab wa-maadin al-jawhar [The Meadows of Gold]* (Mas`udi, 2005, 96). Notably, Masudi's account closely parallels the formation of the Kurdish identity as poetically depicted in Ferdowsi's epic. The convergence of this myth across Arabic sources and Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* underscores the necessity of exploring its origins in the religious texts and inscriptions of the Sasanian era (Bahrami, 2009, 90).

The narrative, resonating through Ferdowsi's works and various Persian and Arabic texts, finds resonance among early Kurdish writers as well. Bidlisi, following the tale of Zahhāk and the flight of his victims to the 'Qelal Jibal'[6], elaborates on their assimilation into the Kurdish fabric: 'Over time, a diverse array of individuals from different locales and linguistic backgrounds congregated, intermarried, and their progeny flourished. This collective came to be identified as Kurds.' Bidlisi's interpretation of the Zahhāk legend crucially dismisses the notion of linguistic homogeneity among the Kurdish refugees, instead emphasising their shared refuge in the mountains. Similarly, Mastooreh Ardelan, in the preface to her work *Tarikh-e Ardalan [Ardalan History*], adopts this ancient narrative concerning the Kurdish origins, stating, ‘Terrified of the ruthless Zahhāk, the liberated people fled under cover of night to the Qelal Jibal. Legend has it that among them was a figure named Kurd, whose lineage, through intermarriage and successive generations, is said to have spawned the entire Kurdish populace (Ardelan, 1953, 4-5). As per Dinawari's writings, Ermayil[7], the minister of Zahhāk, secretly sent two of the four individuals whose brains were meant to be consumed by Zahhāk to the mountains daily. He instructed them not to approach towns and villages and considered them to be the core of the Kurds (Dinawari, 2012, 4-5).

[6] قلل الجبال
[7] إرمايل