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Ancient Rites and Old Religions in Kurdistan



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Studia Kurdica. Erfurter Beiträge zur Geschichte und Kultur der Kurden

In der Reihe Studia Kurdica erscheinen kleinere Studien, die Impulse für weitere Debatten geben sollen. Gegenstand sind historische, kulturelle und politische Themen, die auf den geographischen Raum Kurdistan fokussiert sind. Schriften zur Geschichte, Kultur und sozialen Struktur der religiösen und ethnischen Minderheiten gehören zu den Themen, die die Mustafa Barzani Arbeitsstelle für Kurdische Studien mit besonderem Interesse in die wissenschaftliche Diskussion bringen möchte.

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Ancient Rites and Old Religions in Kurdistan

A Preface

Ethnic, religious and linguistic groups with relatively well-attested written histories such as the Armenians, have more often been the subject of scholarly discussions, whereas Kurds and related religious and linguistic groups has scarcely been the subject of scholarly work. At the time when I was conducting interviews for my PhD thesis¹, I came across traces of possibly old religions and various practices of them. In order to communicate these findings and to discuss the place of Kurdistan in the religious history of the Iranian civilisation, I present a discussion of ancient rites and old religions in Kurdistan under the following two titles: “*Black Wednesday and Red Wednesday: Survivals in Kuridsh Tradition of Rites Marking Season Changes*” and “*The Shemsi and Old Religions in Kurdistan*”.

In the first part I discuss the survivals of seasonal rites in Kurdish tradition. Here I focus on the period of the year referred to as *Zîpa*, *Çarşema Reş* (Black Wednesday) and *Çarşema Sor* (Red Wednesday), which are still practised in Kurdistan. Furthermore this part is concerned with various other communities which celebrate or have knowledge of *Zîpa*, *Çarşema Reş* and *Çarşema Sor*. The correspondence between the celebration period of *Zîpa* and a similar celebration in Old Iranian tradition

¹ see Turgut 2011.

(namely *Frawardīgān*), which points to a common Iranian cultural past, is also explored. Here I conclude that Kurdish and Old Iranian traditions are closely related and that Kurdistan played an important role in the religious and cultural history of Iranian area.

In the second part I explore the existence of cultural continuity in the area called Kurdistan and, from this perspective, argue that Kurds have a heritage of a coherent cultural past. This hypothesis is based on both the existence of common religious rituals among different groups in Kurdistan and the historical evidence for an old faith in Kurdistan, known as Shemsi. I present this hypothesis by providing evidence from travellers in previous centuries with testimonies from my own research based on interviews, along with new trends in the scholarship on these early religions.

However, the two parts of the article are neither intended to represent the whole picture of rituals practiced in Kurdistan and their surviving traces, nor describe the old religions of Kurdistan in their entirety. They are merely attempts to fill the lack of orally or traditionally transmitted knowledge about such rites and religions, and to contribute to the discussions on rituals and traces of old religions practiced in Kurdistan from a perspective which takes oral and traditional knowledge more into account. What distinguishes this work from others written on the old religions in Kurdistan is the fact that it contributes to the discussions on the subject by using new material from Kurdish traditions.

I. Black Wednesday and Red Wednesday: Survivals in Kurdish Tradition of Rites Marking Season Changes

Many traces and elements of ancient myths and rites can still be found in Kurdish celebrations marking the change of seasons. Even the existence of autumn and spring songs (*Payîzok* and *Biharok*²) and their particular type of sacred character, and the fact that they are still treated with deep respect in Kurdish society, show that the Kurds had greatly appreciated such myths until recently. We will describe below some living examples that occupy a stable place in Kurdish tradition: the special days of *Çarşema Reş* (Black Wednesday) and *Çarşema Sor* (Red Wednesday) during the time period of *Zîpa*, which we will be discussing later.

I.1. Çarşema Reş and Zîpa

H. Theodor Gaster stated on many occasions that the dangers of winter when everything dies out, and the coming up of spring when nature wakes up, appeared to the first rural communities to be very uncanny in some ways and that this perception gave rise to feelings such as fear and pleasure among the members of these communities³. The following

² I use a developed version of the Hawar Alphabet to transcribe the Kurdish text. In addition to the Hawar Alphabet I transliterate with *š* and with *h̄*.

³ e.g. Gaster 1950: 6-7.

celebration will clearly show us that Çarşema Reş refers to the first agricultural method of production.

Hecî Hezarê⁴, a woman in her 60s from the region of Tor⁵ gives the following information concerning the day Çarşema Reş is celebrated:

“Çarşema Reş di Zîpa de bû. Di Zîpa de pora zarokên xwe jê dikiran, serê xwe nedîşuştin. Dîgo:

Go sibat xelas bû gîskê got:

Tirt û tirt sibatokê

Mi xwar kulîlka ganglokê

Hê bez li ser girçokê

Sibatê gote adarê:

Xwişka adar

Bide mi sê rojê xedar

Da ez gîskokê ji te hî tê de bènime xwar!”

“The black Wednesday took place in Zîpa. During Zîpa we cut children’s hair, that day we did not wash ourselves. It is said that:

While February was ending, the billy-goat said:

O little February

I ate the flower of the colchicum⁶

⁴ Hecî Hezarê was at the time of the interview I conducted with her (July 2002) an approximately 65 years old women from Hesekor (a village of Zaxuran; türkish: Başyurt) in the region of Tor living in France.

⁵ The Kurds name the region of Țûr ‘Abdîn (Mountain or Plateau of God’s servitors) “Tor”. “Tor” is situated in south of Bişêrî, it borders the region of Botan in the east and on the city of Mêrdîn (Mardin) in the West. Midyad (Midyat) forms the centre of the region. In any case the plateau located in east of Mêrdîn is accepted as „Tor”, see Turgut 2004: 3; Göyünç 1969: 1.

⁶ A kind of lily plant, which is called colchium.

There is still fat on kidneys

February said to March:

Sister March

Give me three pitiless days

In order to make the billy-goat fall from the rock”

With this information we can suppose that Zîpa is rather perceived as a frightening or at least as a dangerous period of time. Zîpa and Çarşema Reş are not only known in the region of Tor, but are also celebrated in cities like Cizîra Botan (Turkish: Cizre), Erûh (Turkish: Eruh), Qilaban (Turkish: Uludere) which are part of the region called Botan⁷. In the refugee camp of Mexmûr, near Mosul, we met Saliñ ê Êrsî⁸, a middle-aged man from the district of Siirt, who reported that Kurds of Botan used to celebrate *Newroz* “the new year” on 21st of March and that they used to start the preparations about one month prior to this date. He referred to the Wednesday two weeks before *Newroz* as Çarşema Reş, stating that it occurred in the time of Zîpa. According to his account Zîpa stands for the last four days of February and the first four days of March during which people do not wash their clothes. The daily newspaper Özgür Politika mentions that the Yezidis⁹ from the Tor region do celebrate

⁷ It is called also Bohtan; in its centre is the city Cizîra Botan founded by al-Ĥasan Ibn ‘Umar (Strohmeier 1979).

⁸ A refugee I interviewed in the refugee camp Maxmûr (also Makhmour) near Mosul in Iraq. He was at the time of interview (August 2003) approximately 50 years old and came from the village Êrs in the district Sêrt (Turkish: Siirt) in Turkey. He has lived since 1994 as refugee in Iraqî Kurdistan.

⁹ An important heterodox religious group in Kurdistan. Yezidis are Kurmandji speakers; they live chiefly in Jabal Sancar and Şêxan (Shaykhan), west and east of Mosul respectively (Kreyenbroek 1995: vii). Until very recently a substantial

Çarşema Reş¹⁰, while in other areas they do not know about it. On the other hand, Yezidis also seem to be generally familiar with the days of Zîpa. We can take a look at the perplexing resemblance between the above-cited short rhyme song and the Yezidi proverb collected by Feqîr Hecî:

“Gîskî got: tirim tirim subatê, Adar bi serda hatê, Gîskî çû ji xo ne mezaxtê.

*Subatê got: xuşkê Adarê, bide min sê roja ji rojê xedarê, da ez gîskî bi kêşime ber qinarê.”*¹¹

“The billy-goat said: O little February, which is alternated by March, the billy-goat went of course he did not die.

February said: Sister March give me three of your pitiless days, so I can push the billy-goat on the hook¹²”

Having noted the broad geographical area where the term Zîpa is used, it is useful to consider its dictionary definitions. Many different definitions of the word are offered in various dictionaries. Yusuf Ziyaeddin Paşa writes in his Hadiyat al-Ĥāmidiya that Zîp (Zîpa is probably the oblique form of the plural for Zîp) is the period covering the days between 20th February and 3rd March, which are known as days that bring misfortune (*Ayyām al-xissāt* = mean days)¹³. On the other hand D. Îzolî states in his “Kurdî – Tirkî, Türkçe – Kürtçe Dictionary” that the

number lived in Tor, Bişêrî (turkish: Beşirli), Wêranşar (turkish: Viranşehir) in Turkey, but they have virtually all migrated to Germany (see e.g. Kreyenbroek 2009: 11-12).

¹⁰ *Özgür Politika (Daily Newspaper)* 19th of March 2002,.

¹¹ The original transliteration in the book is preserved, see Feqîr Hecî 2002: 138.

¹² The word *qinar* refers to the hook on which butchers hang meat. Therefore *kişandinî qinarê* figuratively means to kill.

¹³ See Savi 1993.

word Zîp stands for a period between 26th February and 5th March that brings fortune¹⁴. In Torî's Kurdish-Turkish, Turkish-Kurdish Dictionary the word Zîp is simply translated as rigorous winter (Turkish: *karakış*)¹⁵. In his Kurdish-Persian Dictionary, Muhammad Taqî Ibrahîmpûr defines Zîp and Zîpe as the cold period during the 12th month of the Iranian year (*sarmay-i asfand-i mâh*) which corresponds to a month before the 21st March¹⁶.

With regards to the word's etymological origins, we can say that it may be derived from a non-Iranian language. For instance, the Arabic word ذَاب (ب) (za'ba = to melt)¹⁷ could be the origin of Zîpa, on account of the fact that snow starts to melt in March. On the other hand, the Acadian word *zîbû(m)*¹⁸ which means "sacrifice" could coincide with Zîpa, because in the period of Zîpa there are two days of festivities which could be associated with a sacrifice.

I.2 Relation between Zîpa and Old Iranian Traditions

Thus we may suppose that Zîpa could represent the last days of winter which seem to have been a very unfortunate period of time to the first rural communities. But at the same time it is also perceived as a fortunate period because of the nature's revival in spring. On the other hand, in relation with what has been said above, it could also denote a festivity (see above *zîbûm*). At this point it is worth describing the great

¹⁴ Istanbul, 2000.

¹⁵ Istanbul, 1999.

¹⁶ Tehran, 1981.

¹⁷ Beirut, 1977.

¹⁸ Wiesbaden, 1981.

annual Old Iranian celebration *Hamaspāthmaēdaya* because of its similarities with the rites discussed here. It is mentioned in the 13th Yašt¹⁹ of the Avesta, known as *Fravaši-Yašt* that praises good, righteous, strong Fravašis²⁰. According to this Yašt, at the time of *Hamaspāthmaēdaya* these Fravašis linger 10 full nights on earth and they want to know who praises them, welcomes them, and who offers them milk and clothes; they bless those who do all these²¹. If we simply consider Zīpa as standing for the last days of cold winter, then it makes us think of this Old Iranian tradition. The days which refer to the visiting of Fravašis on earth, coincide with the end of the Iranian year, which corresponds to the end of winter. This seasonal coincidence of Frawardīgān (Fravaši days) is also reflected in the Dīnkart²²:

“The coming of the righteous fravašis to the world is during those 10 days at the close of winter, which is the end of the year (rasišn ī ahlaw frawahr ō gētīg andar ān 10 rōz ī zemestān, ī sāl sar)”²³

The Frawardīgān are obviously institutionalized in the religious calendar. In the 8th book of Dīnkart, it is said that the Frawardīgān form the last 10 days of the year. Besides it is stressed that five Gāthā days are included within them²⁴. The Zīpa days in the Kurdish tradition correspond approximately to the same time, which allows us to assume that they may

¹⁹ A part of Avesta, that consists of 21 hymns about spirits, mythological divinities and heroes. Their existence probably dates back to before Zarathustrian period.

²⁰ They are the spirits that existed with Ahura Mazda long before the creation of the universium. They are the perfect patterns for the imperfect objects on the earth (Nigosian 1993: 82). Fravašis (Fravashi, Fravarti, Fravahar or Fraohar) could also mean spirits of forefathers. Some avestian texts mention that these and the 13th Yašt are about them (Nyberg 1938: 62-63).

²¹ The celebration of *Hamaspāthmaēdaya* (*Hamaspāθmaēdaya*) is delineated by Boyce (1970: 513-539) and Nyberg (1938: 299).

²² It is a kind of encyclopedia which explores the religious problems of Mazdaism.

²³ Boyce 1970: 530

in fact be identical and a common Iranian cultural and religious notion had existed.

I.3. Çarşema Sor and Zîpa

Another reason which strengthens our abovementioned belief is Çarşema Sor (Persian: *Charshamba Suri*). It is still celebrated nowadays in Iranian villages and cities in the countryside. It is often translated as festive Wednesday, however we avoid this translation, because it is known by the Kurds as the red Wednesday and it is more likely that it presents an antithetic counterpart of Çarşema Reş in the Kurdish context. Çarşema Sor is the last Wednesday of the last month of the Iranian calendar year, or simply the last Wednesday before the Iranian New-Year, *Newroz*. The next quotation will explain the character of this day:

„Man steigt auf die Hausdächer, zündet Feuer an, singt und springt und sagt dabei:

Der Monat Ş afar ist vergangen,
Drohendes Unheil ist auch vergangen.“²⁵

„They go on the house-roofs, kindle a fire, sing and jump and say:
The Ş afar month (the last month of the Iranian calendar year)
passed away,
The imminent disaster also passed away.“²⁶

It originally concerns a rite aiming at driving the demons out. This is confirmed by many other rites practised during Charshamba Suri²⁷.

²⁴ Madan 1911: 683; Boyce 1970: 519-522

²⁵ Eilers 1953: 19.

For Çarşema Sor somehow indicates the end of Zîpa, the above-mentioned rite of Charshamba Suri can also demonstrate the unfortunate character of Zîpa better.

In the same context if we also look at the Yezidi tradition it can be helpful to understand the character of Zîpa. The Yezidis in the region of Tor perceive both Çarşema Sor²⁸ and Çarşema Reş²⁹ as days of mourning. They believe that people had suffered major catastrophes on these days, such as the Deluge experienced by the community of Noah³⁰.

The first Wednesday of April is at the same time part of the New Year celebration (similarly called Çarşema Sor) among the Yezidis³¹. That evening God determines the destiny of all his creatures for the next year³². We know that the Parthians had a calendar which made the year begin on the 1st of April (or rather on the 14th of April)³³. Çarşema Sor is described by the Yezidis as *Çarşema serê Nîsanê*, „Wednesday of the beginning of April“, which clearly shows the close link between Old Iranian culture and the Kurdish tradition today but also Mesopotamian influences. Yezidis generally give a sacred meaning to Wednesdays, which can be perceived as fortunate and unfortunate³⁴. The older generations still avoid washing

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ see Damxudâ 1338.

²⁸ It is noteworthy to say that the Yezidis celebrate the first Wednesday of April as the Çarşema Sor.

²⁹ As far as the author could find information the Yezidis in the region of Tor celebrate this day, which is the first Wednesday of March.

³⁰ *Özgür Politika* 2002

³¹ It should be said that *Yezidis* have another New Year celebration which is not on the 21st of March but on the 14th of April.

³² Lescot 1938: 71-72

³³ Wiesehöfer 1993: 204.

³⁴ See Lescot 1938: 80 and Feqîr Hecî 2002: 135

their body and clothes on Wednesdays. On the other hand Wednesdays are or rather were festive days among all Kurmandji-speaking Kurds³⁵.

Here the difficulty to ascertain whether, in general, Wednesdays bear a nice, fortunate and happy meaning or an unfortunate one becomes explicit. However, it can easily be asserted that, either way, a ‘sacral’ meaning is attached to Wednesdays. Çarşema Reş bears no unambiguous negative connotations, because on that day people celebrate and dance. This day is also the first picnic occasion of the year. We may describe it as a “festive obsequies”, whereby Çarşema Sor is seen as a festivity, as a new beginning, and as the end of the climatic and agrarian dangers of winter.

I.4. Celebration of Çarşema Reş and Çarşema Sor

Our next question is **how the Black Wednesday and Red Wednesday were celebrated in the past** and have been celebrated more recently. We know that these festivities are celebrated in Cizîra Botan and Nisêbîn (Turkish: Nusaybin) and thanks to the nomads from the Hekarî and Botan regions, we know that these festivities were celebrated until

³⁵ **The following song, which is widespread, strengthens the statement about the generally sacred character of Wednesdays among Kurds:**

“Çarşeme xweş çarşeme lo çarşem e; Mala bûkê l’ber çem e lo l’ber çem e; Bûk bi zavê re bi kene lo bi kene; Çarşem rojek pîroz e lo pîroz e; Serê zavê b’koloz e lo b’koloz e; Zava li bûkê bi doz e lo bi doz e; Çarşem rojek çî xweş e lo çî xweş e; Xêl wî hatin bi meşe lo bi meşe; Anîn bûkek keleşe lo keleşe e; Çarşem roja xweda ye lo xweda ye; Deryê xeman dadaye lo dadaye; Kêf û xweşî tê de ye lo tê de ye”

„Wednesday, nice Wednesday, it is Wednesday; The bride’s home is by the river, it is by the river; The bride smiles to the bridegroom, she smiles to him; Wednesday is a holly day, it is holly; The bridegroom is longing for the bride, he is longing for her; Wednesday what a nice day, how nice it is; The procession of the bride came walking, they came walking; They brought a very pretty bride, she is pretty; Wednesday is the day of God, it is God’s; The door of cares is locked up, it is locked up; Brightness and gladness are on this day, they are on this day“ (Broka 2002).

recently in both regions. In Nisêbin they believe that great **misfortune can happen to them on Black Wednesday**, this is why they leave their houses and all go in the *Seyrangehs* (places of celebration and festivity) to have the first picnic of the year. On **the first Wednesday of March**, people make wishes, dance and sing on both sides of the river *Çemê Nisêbînê* (Turkish: Çaçgağ Çayı). At the end of this day they thank God that the day has passed away without any unfortunate event. Some women visit *Girnawas*, a place known as ‘holy’ (kr. *ziyaret*), and they tie strips of cloth on a ‘wishe tree’³⁶. Çarşema Sor is celebrated in the same way but because of the beginning of spring, it is received with much excitement **(in this region it is the last Wednesday before the 21st of March)**. In Cizîra Botan after the Çarşema Reş women and children go on a picnic alongside the river Tigris every Wednesday until the arrival of summer. It is possible that the perception of Çarşema Reş as bringing misfortune is completely abandoned in the present-day Botan region³⁷.

Some resources document that in history, Kurds considered Wednesday as a day of rest. In this context, Şerefxan mentioned Wednesday as a special day. He says that the prince of Hekarî, Mîr Izeddînşêr rested on this day³⁸. While his principedom is attacked by the Aqqoyunlu and people ask him to act in order to protect the country, he responds in a way that demonstrates the signification of Wednesday for him. Accordingly Wednesdays are not days to fight, because they do not possess any fortune; they result in nothingness. According to Şerefxan this attitude of the prince caused the occupation of his land by the

³⁶ See *Özgür Politika* 19th of March 2002.

³⁷ *Özgür Politika* 24th of July 2003.

³⁸ Bedlîsî 1998: 137.

Aqqoyunlu³⁹. As subsequently Esededdînê Çengzêr reconquers the country on a Saturday, Şerefşan described this in a rhyming fashion as: “Saturday revenged Wednesday”⁴⁰.

Ihsan Çölemerikli give us very insightful information on the Çarşema Reş. According to him there are two Çarşema Reş in the region of Hekarî: the last Wednesday of February and the first one of March⁴¹. According to the information he provides, people believe that the creation of the world took place on these days and that it will also come to an end on the same days. This is why good and the bad, fortune and misfortune are believed to coexist on these days. Good acts should be performed on these days and bad ones should be avoided, one should be aware of dangers. In Hekarî, a traditional family reunion is held in these days. Çölemerikli also refers to a Diyariya Çarşemê (Wednesday’s gift) for newly-wed young women. Some of the acts which should be avoided on the night of Çarşema Reş are: too much boiling of water and handling sharp tools⁴². These acts are regarded as sins. It should be clearly recognized that people did try to protect themselves from misfortune and did celebrate the fortune. People’s motivations in acting in such a way may be related to the Old Iranian religious beliefs, according to which spirits of ancestors come to the world on these days (see above Frawardīgān).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 138.

⁴¹ Çölemerikli 2006: 53.

⁴² There are examples of similar practices in all over the world; for instance in Cambodia, the first three days of the year (which begins in mid-March) are a period of solemn abstinence; At this time sexual relations are forbidden; while during the first seven days no living thing may be killed, no business should be concluded, and all litigation and controversy should be suspended (see Gaster 1950: 8).

I.5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is clearly seen that many ancient rites still survive among the Kurds. We can observe their presence during the celebrations of the change of seasons. These rites, whose origins probably date back to the first rural communities, exhibit a common cultural past whether they were Sunni, Alevi or Yezidi Kurds. In the case of the days of Zîpa, it is particularly obvious that there is a close relation with the Iranian tradition; on the other hand there seems also to have been some influence from old Mesopotamian tradition. We can even affirm that Kurdistan and the Kurdish mountainous country (especially south of the Zagros Mountains) have always been one of the centres of Iranian civilisations. The example of Black Wednesday attests to the important role Kurdistan has played in the religious and cultural history of the Iranian area.

II. The *Şemsî* and old religions in Kurdistan

In the first paper, I concluded that Kurdistan was one of the centres of Iranian cultural and religious production⁴³. The reason for this conclusion was the very existence of rituals marking the change of seasons, which were clearly identical with those of the old-Iranian pre-Zoroastrian period. In this paper I will discuss the possible existence of cultural continuity in the area called Kurdistan and argue that Kurds have a heritage of a coherent cultural past. This hypothesis is based both on the common religious rituals of different groups and the existing historical evidence of an old faith in Kurdistan. I will present this hypothesis by supplementing evidence from travellers in previous centuries and testimonies from my own oral history research, along with new trends in the scholarship on these early religions⁴⁴.

II.1. Sun-worship

Deyr-ul Zaferan nearby Mardin and some other churches in the region of Tor⁴⁵ and also in Diyarbekir (officially Diyarbakir) are built upon what remained of ancient sanctuaries of sun-worshippers. Deyr ul-Zafaran Monastery nearby Mardin is built on top of a Temple of sun-worshippers in the 5th century. On a wall of Mor Gabriel Monastery in Tor there is a sun-symbol and several churches and monasteries in Tor have

⁴³ See also Turgut 2011: 229-237.

⁴⁴ e.g. Kreyenbroek and Rashow 2005.

⁴⁵ ܛܘܪ ܥܘܕܝܢ (Mountain or Plateau of God's serviteurs).

such signs and reliefs⁴⁶ on them, which attest the existence of a widespread sun-cult at the early Christian age in this region. In Diyarbekir the Ulu Cami mosque, which is known as the first mosque in Anatolia, was a sun-worshipper-temple before it was turned into the cathedral of Mar Toma⁴⁷. Andrew Palmer states that for many Christian churches in the region of Tor, there are legends which tell their Zoroastrian origins⁴⁸. We do not know much about this (probably common) religion and its followers. We know that at the beginning of the 17th century an Armenian traveller by the name Polish Simeon⁴⁹ and in the second half of 18th century the Danish scholar Carsten Niebuhr⁵⁰ reported the existence of adherents of the Shemsi faith, so that Bruinessen stated that Simeon and Niebuhr are *virtually the only sources* of the existence of the believers of this faith. He is right when he says, we do not even know which language they spoke⁵¹. Some scholars tend to believe that they were Armenians⁵² but there is in fact no reliable evidence of that. We can mention here that Sabians in Harran, who seems to have had worshipped stars and the sun as their chief deity⁵³, spoke Arabic, but some scholars hold that early Aramaic or Islamic sources did not differentiate the Sabians and the Harranids (members of a religion similar to Shemsi or even another name for the same religion), which the latter were worshippers of the sun, moon and stars⁵⁴. At the beginning of the 19th century Campanille mentioned the

⁴⁶ Erol 1993: 30-31.

⁴⁷ See Çayır, Yıldız and Gönenç 2007: 161-177.

⁴⁸ Andrew 1990: 29-30.

⁴⁹ Simeon 1999.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr 1776 II: 321-322 and 328.

⁵¹ See van Bruinessen 1988: p. 31.

⁵² Andrew 1990: 30.

⁵³ Green 1992: 101.

⁵⁴ Çayır, Yıldız and Gönenç 2007: 163-164.

existence of the Shemsi as a small religious group in Mardin⁵⁵, which was some twenty years later confirmed by Southgate⁵⁶. **What we do know about this religious group very clearly shows that it is a sun-cult, which in the Kurdish context reminds us of the Yezidis**, but also of the Kurdish Alevis and even of Kurdish Sunnis, because all of these religious groups have a common sun-cult or the traces of a sun-cult found all over Kurdistan. The very existence of the aforementioned sun-cult allows us to assume that a rather less institutionalized religion as Alevism potentially was fundamentally based on the observed sun-cult among the Kurds⁵⁷.

However, we can only offer a limited answer to the question of what the Shemsi religion is. As the name implies, it is a sun-worshipping faith⁵⁸. Simeon spoke of worship places for Shemsis in Mardin and Diyarbekir,⁵⁹ from which we are able to ascertain that the Shemsis had some kind of church to practice their faith. The remains of the temple building in Diyarbekir could be seen until the road to Mardin was widened

⁵⁵ Campanille 2004: 124-127.

⁵⁶ Horatio 1840 II: 284-285.

⁵⁷ For Alevis worshipping sun see Chater October 1928: 498. Yezidis face the sun symbolized by Sheikh Shems for pray (see e.g. Kreyenbroek 1995: 71), testimonies of Hazar Turgut and Semira Turgut from the region Tor, both Sunni Kurds show that they used to take oath on the sun.

⁵⁸ We will discuss in this paper the Shemsi religion and other related faiths in Kurdish context, which do not ignore the importance of other religious groups practices' in Kurdistan and around Kurdistan such as the Armenian religious group of the *Arewardik*, which could be translated as "the Children of the Sun". But it goes beyond the framework of this study. It is just worth to mention that the Persian imposition of Zoroastrian faith in Armenia during the second part of the 5th century, which is well attested by the Armenian chronicles may have as a result that among Armenians, especially heterodox groups some traces of sun-worshipping (not only among *Arewardik* but also among Tondrakian who were accused to worship the sun because they identified Christ with the sun). For more about Tondrakian and *Arewardic* see Nersessian 1987: 66-67.

⁵⁹ Simeon 1999.

in the 1960s⁶⁰. Niebuhr states that at the time he visited Mardin, Shemsis remained only in the town of Mardin, whereas an informant assured him that until a short time ago they had been settled in several villages in the proximity of Mardin. He says that Shemsis constitute a separate religious group which was only apparently Jacobite. The story about the fate of Shemsis told by Niebuhr would be retold by several scholar and travelers afterwards: Sultan Mustafa⁶¹ decided to force all non-Muslim people of his empire to either become Muslim or to leave. His counselors reminded him that Islam protects the people of the book. After that he ordered all non-book people to convert to a religion of the book or to leave. Shemsis who were too weak to resist this order, accepted the Jacobite patriarch and began to dress like Jacobites while maintaining their Shemsi religion. In appearance they baptized their children and buried their dead in the presence of a Jacobite priest. According to Niebuhr there were a hundred Shemsi families in Mardin in the second half of the 19th century⁶². A French traveler who stayed two days in Mardin in the year 1807 reported that Shemsis constituted 800 of 27000 inhabitants of Mardin⁶³. Niebuhr states that a small community of Shemsis was settled also in Diyarbekir, where they similarly were under the protection of the Jacobite church⁶⁴. We learn from him that they had their own cemetery in Mardin, they did not marry into other religious groups, and constituted a separate group. Niebuhr's Christian informants assured him that Shemsis always build their houses with the main entrance facing the sunrise and that they turn

⁶⁰ Diken 2002: 58.

⁶¹ Sultan Mustafa who reigned before Simeon visited Ottoman Empire was the brother of Sultan Ahmet I. He reigned first between November 1617 and February 1618 and after that between Mai 1622 and September 1623.

⁶² Niebuhr 1780 II: 321-322.

⁶³ Dupré 1819 I: 80.

their face to the sun when they pray. Some information regarding Shemsis' burial practises are, that they pluck off the hairs of their dead and place a couple of ducats in their mouth⁶⁵.

Campanille explains this "rite" telling that they pluck off the hair of their dead because they thought their sins were contained in their hair. According to him they put a ducat in the hand of their deaths so that they can pay the entrance fee into heaven⁶⁶. Campanille gives other vague information about the rituals of Shemsis which are presented entirely from an occidental-Christian point of view: Three times a year they secretly build an idol from dough in the form of a lamb. Covering only the head, they place it in a big stannous-boiler. They pray, kneel down in front of it and kiss it with great respect. At the end of this ritual, twelve leaders of the community break it into parts and place them in the mouths of the assistants⁶⁷. Campanille observes that the women of this community distinguish themselves from other women by wearing a white coat. Furthermore Dupré states that they claim to be the descendants of Ismail⁶⁸. More importantly, all sources agree that their religion involved genuflecting in front of the sun.

Campanille stressed that Shemsis loved to pass their time singing and entertaining themselves⁶⁹. This rather pejorative remark from Campanille reminds us of Layard's observations on the Yezidis: "*The chants and hymns – the only form of prayer, which as far as I could*

⁶⁴ Niebuhr 1780 II: 328.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 321-322.

⁶⁶ Campanille 2004: 126-127.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Dupré 1819 I: 80.

⁶⁹ Campanille 2004: 126.

*ascertain, they possess – are, as I have observed in Arabic.*⁷⁰ The language of *chants* and *hymns* of Yezidis is of course not Arabic, but the fact that for an external observer they constitute the *only form of prayer* can allow us to interpret Campanille's assumption about Shemsis' love to sing and passing their time with entertainment, as an outsider's observation which most likely misinterpreted several rites and celebrations of the Shemsis and is probably an attitude he inherited from previous Western travellers, scholars and missionaries. Hence we can readily assume that Shemsis, similar to Yezidis and Alevi Kurds and also to Sunni Kurds, prayed in the form of songs⁷¹.

II.2. Similarities between rituals

In his function as god (or angel) of the (sun's) light, Mithra, as the Old-Iranian god of light is known, has a strong connotation of the sun⁷². The existence of some kind of veneration and worshipping of the sun and light, including that of the moon⁷³ and stars, can be linked with the

⁷⁰ Layard 1849 I: 305.

⁷¹ *Qewl* of Yezidi Kurds, *nefes* and *gulbang* of Alevi Kurds and *Qesîde* and *Bêlûte* of Muslim Kurds all religious songs or hymns sung with or without accompaniment of instruments.

⁷² see e.g. West's translation of Pahlavi Texts (Pahlavi Text Part III 1885: 76.), where *mithra* is translated as "sun" or see *ibid.*: 162, where *mitrô* is called the angel of sun's light.

⁷³ Even in today's living memory of some Alevis we see some signs of veneration versa moon and sun. Arî Mezin remember a oath-form of his sister, saying "*bi serê hîv û rojê be* (by [the head] of the moon and the sun)"(2001: 38.), which can interpreted as rests of a star and planet worshipping faith or a faith in which moon and sun have played a central role. Kalender Pehlivan a 60 year old Alevi from Kurdish Village Harûnan (Turkish Harunuşagi) in the district of Kurecik in Malatya, stated that his mother used to pray full moon in the following form: *Hîva panzê derdê mira çare bivîne* (full moon find a solution to my sorrow). He mentioned that older generation used to interpret the light of moon as *nûra mihemed* (the light of Mohamed).

ancient Mithras-cult. It is attested that in the time of Xerxes, son of Darius I, people in Kurdistan were not orthodox Zoroastrians and appear to have followed a pre-Zoroastrian old-Iranian faith (most likely with Mesopotamian influences) which was condemned by Zoroastrians⁷⁴. It is of course not mentioned that there was indeed no Zoroastrian influence, but pre-Zoroastrian rituals and beliefs appear to be decisive in maintaining such a sun-cult (or sun worshipping religion). I would like to handle this issue in the Kurdish cultural context. Kreyenbroek concludes that “it seems likely that, during the centuries before the advent of Zoroastrianism, the Western Iranians continued to practice a cult derived directly from the Indo-Iranian tradition”⁷⁵. He furthermore states that “it seems very probable that elements of this older faith survived in the isolation of the Kurdish mountains”⁷⁶. Therefore, it can be suggested as a hypothesis that such elements have probably not only survived among Yezidis and the Ahl-e Haqq, but also among Alevis, (and perhaps Shemsis).

We do not have to search long in today's Kurdish society to find indications and evidence of the sacred character of the sun among different religious groups. In the region of Tor the oath-forms “bi vê roja malûm (by this obvious sun)” or “bi vê roja ha (by this sun there)”⁷⁷ exemplify the

⁷⁴ In a inscription Xerxes tells that whereas previously the *daēvas* had been worshipped within the Empire, this must stop: “Within these provinces (includes Kurdistan) there were places where previously the *daivas* had been worshipped. Then by the will of Ahura Mazda I uprooted that cult of the *daēvas*, and I made a proclamation [saying]: The *daivas* shall not be worshipped.” (Zaehner 1961: 159).

⁷⁵ Kreyenbroek 1995: 59.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ The author remembers that people regarded the sun in this region as a somehow sacred being. Hazar Turgut, a 70 years old woman from the same region mentioned these oath-forms which approved this sacred character of the sun in this region. Such a oath form is directly related to the faith, “*bi vî nanê ha*” (by this bred there) signify the same form as “*bi vê îmanê*” (by this belief) were bred is seen as directly to be the symbol of the belief. In that way, we can assume that in

sacred perception of the sun among Sunni Kurds. The fact that Yezidis turn their face to the sun for praying, and that they have a holy being named Sheikh Shems, which represents the sun itself⁷⁸, are also well-known. One of the most interesting reports of such a sun-cult in Kurdistan dates from the year 1928. The journalist Melville Chater observed in a Kurdish village nearby Malatya that:

“As the sun rose, each man, woman and child turned eastward, bowing to it a polite good-morning, then resumed the day’s routine.”⁷⁹

There are few doubts about the sacred character of the sun among different Kurdish religious groups, but was there indeed a common sun-cult or a cultural continuity in Kurdistan? We cannot answer this question with certainty, but certain indications of the existence of such a common cultural and religious past are worth being mentioned. In his attempts to understand the early history of Yezidis, Kreyenbroek quotes Barhebraeus, a Christian Primate who reports the existence of large group of tribal Kurds who followed their traditional pre-islamic religion⁸⁰. Barhebraeus who died 1286 reports that the *race of those Kurds* called *Tayrāhids* have caused, in the year 602 of the Hidjra (1205-1206 C.E.), much destruction in Mosul. **In the same mountainous area, the existence of admirers of Yazīd b. Mu^cāwiya is also attested⁸¹.** This means that even after the arrival of Sheikh ^c*Adī b. Musāfir*, large groups of Kurds, as followers of their traditional faith and admirers of Yazīd b. Mu^cāwiya, coexisted in the

the oath form “*bi vê roja ha*” (by this sun there) sun signify directly the belief itself.

⁷⁸ Kreyenbroek 1995: 71.

⁷⁹ Chater 1928: 498.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 28.

⁸¹ see e.g. **Lescot 1938: 21.**

Hakarî mountains.⁸² What is important is that this group of tribal Kurds who attacked Mosul are described as follower of *idolatry* and the religion of Magi (*mgwšwt*)⁸³. We have already mentioned that all sources described Shemsis as followers of idolatry⁸⁴. It is very likely that traditional religion (or religions) in Kurdistan were considered as an act of idolatry by those of Christian and Muslim faiths.

Similarities between Yezidism and Ahl-e Haqq are well known. Every Yezidi must have a *sheikh* and a *pîr* and similarly each member of the Ahl-e Haqq community has a *pîr* and a *dalîl*⁸⁵. In Alevism a similar religious figure with the same function appears as *pîr* and *rehber*⁸⁶. In Yezidism and the Ahl-e Haqq there are seven holy beings (heptad of Yezidism and Heftan of Ahl-e Haqq), and the religious instruments of both groups have a sacred character. In both religions there is an institution of “brother (sister) of hereafter”⁸⁷. According to Alevis there are also seven holy-beings (*yediler*⁸⁸), they have the institution of “brotherhood” which is called *musahip*⁸⁹ and their instrument of ritual, *saz*

⁸² This is also concluded by Kreyenbroek (1995: 28).

⁸³ Kreyenbroek correctes the translation “la religion de Zoroastre” of F. Nau and J. Tfindjji (“Recueil de textes et de documents sur les Yézidis”, *Revue de l’Orient Chrétien* ser. 2, vol. 20, 1915-1918, pp. 142-200, 225-275) on the page 188 as “the religion of Magi” (Kreyenbroek 1995: 28).

⁸⁴ e.g. Campanille 2004: 126 and Niebuhr 1780 II: 321-322.

⁸⁵ Kreyenbroek 1995: 52.

⁸⁶ e.g. Bumke 1979: 530-548.

⁸⁷ Kreyenbroek 1995: 52-53.

⁸⁸ Some Alevis see *Allah, Muhammed, Ali, Haticet’ul Kubra, Fatimat’uz Zehra, Salman-i Farisî and Kanberdir* as the seven holly-being and for others *Hatayî, Nesîmî, Fuzulî, Kul Himmet, Vîranî, Yemînî* and *Pîr sultan Abdal* are seven holly-beings (see Arslanoğlu, last modified: 28-May-2010). Balî calls them *heftan*: “Li ber postî ocaxî Heq, bi demê Sisêyan, Pêncan û *Heftan* zelal û ronî ...” (Balî 2005: 17). “Sisêyan û Pêncan li me guhdar bin, *Heftan* bi dil û roniyê xwe heval bin, ...” (*ibid.*: 80)

⁸⁹ The institution of being *musahip* (also *misahîb*) is for all married Alevi-couples imperative and its meaning is brotherhood in this World and hereafter (for more

(in some areas called also *tenbûr*) has a somehow sacred connotation. There exist further similarities between these groups, but certain parallels between these groups and the Shemsis are breathtaking. We already mentioned that Alevis and Yezidis pray with their faces turned to the sun. There is another well known practice among Kurdish Alevis which is called *loqmeyê heqq* (bit of the God *or* of the Rightful). At the culmination of a *cem*⁹⁰, the *rehber* (lit. *guide*) asks permission from the *pîr* (saint) to distribute *loqmeyê heqq* by uttering a sacral formula. Pîr gives him the permission and *loqmedar* (person who is responsible for the ritual of *loqmeyê heqq*) distributes *loqmeyê heqq* whilst reciting *gulbangê loqmedar*⁹¹, which represents a sacrificial meal, among the community present in the ritual⁹². Henry Riggs heard from a Seyyid of Dersim at the beginning of the 20th century that *loqmeyê heqq* was in fact a piece of bread⁹³. Campanille also wrote about a ritual of Shemsis, in which they distributed lambkin made out of dough among the attendants of the ritual. Sunni Kurds from the region of Tor (where Shemsis must have sought refuge after they had been threatened to leave Diyarbekir⁹⁴) make a battering ram figure out of a stick of vine and dip it in vine syrup, which is called then *beranok* (“small ram”) or *berankê helîlê* (“small ram made of dried raisin dough”). Ram and sheep figures are also used among Kurdish

see Mélikoff 1998: 210-2015 and Kehl-Bodrogi 1997: 119-137). *Musahips* children until seventh generation cannot marry each other, which is similar to the *kirîvantî* among Yezidi and Sunni Kurds.

⁹⁰ Religious gathering of Alevis.

⁹¹ It is a religious poem through which *loqmedar* asks permission and acts.

⁹² Bali 2005: 66-67.

⁹³ Riggs 1911: 734-744.

⁹⁴ In the translation of the work of Armenian-Polish traveler Simeon it is written that Shemsis were obliged to leave Diyarbekir and went to Iran, Assyrian Land (Tor), Tokat and Merzifon (1999: 165).

Alevîs in Dêrsim to shape gravestones⁹⁵. These bread rituals, which are very widespread in Mesopotamia and the Middle East, are also common among different Kurdish communities (very likely to be found in an Iranian context rather than in a Christian or Jewish one⁹⁶) and lambkin, ram or sheep figures seem to play a symbolic role in all of the aforementioned communities, which I cannot explain with my present state of knowledge.

In the abovementioned region of Tor, in some rituals carried out to hinder negative effects of the moon, we notice another similarity with the religion of the Shemsîs. In this ritual, “moonsick children”⁹⁷ are signed with soot on their foreheads between the eyes, on their hand and with a soot line on their belly. The interesting part of this ritual is when someone bites a few strands of hair off of the concerned child and throws them saying “*biçe ji gawiran re*” (go to the unbelievers)⁹⁸. We already mentioned that Campanille wrote about a rite involving plucking off hair of the dead, because Shemsîs thought that the sins of the dead were stored in their hair⁹⁹. The close similarity between these two rituals and their motivations is very clear: sins, bad spirits are contained in the hair and one can take them away by plucking them or cutting them up.

⁹⁵ See pictures published by Metin Kahraman (Mezartaşlarındaki Alevîlik ‘Sir’lari, published 21.09.2008, available at: <http://metinkahraman.blogcu.com/mezartaşlarındaki-alevîlik-sir-lari/4111251> (last visited 03.03.2013)

⁹⁶ e.g. *drôn* [consecrated bread] ritual during which the lay-people present in the fire-temple may partake in the *drôn* (For more see Hultgård 2004: 367-388).

⁹⁷ It was apparently believed that new moon (*heyv bi nû*) and last moon (*heyv bi reş*) had a negative effect on the children, so that they could fall ill.

⁹⁸ Semira Turgut, a 37 year old mother of four kids, from the Kurdish town Nisêbîn (Turkish Nusaybin) since 1994 living in France, gave this information on 10.01.2011 in Montigny sur Loing near to Fontainebleau.

⁹⁹ Campanille 2004: 126-127.

Menant offers us very interesting but also confusing information from the year 1892. He quotes an Armenian scholar Casandjian who states that Yezidis are made-up of four different tribes, two of which he states to be the Shemsi and Alevi¹⁰⁰. Casandjian apparently spoke the Kurdish language, had some contact with Kurds, and was at the same time a member of the Ottoman Parliament in Istanbul.¹⁰¹ We can presume that he did not invent these categories himself, and somehow Yezidis, Alevi and Shemsi were considered by their neighbors or people outside their communities to belong to the same group¹⁰². One of these groups is called *Kirazi* and its members are thought to have worshipped the moon in the way Shemsis worshipped the sun¹⁰³. This could help explain the feelings of fear that was observed among some villagers in Qers (Turkish: Kars) towards the moon. One of my interviewees from Qers remembered that his parents salute the new moon and all shapes similar to it with respect and

¹⁰⁰ Menant 2006.

¹⁰¹ During the first Ottoman Parliament experiment in 1877 was a certain Taniyel Karaciyani deputy from Erzurum, which Menant very probably mistakenly wrote as Casandjian (in Turkish Kazanciyani).

¹⁰² It is undoubtedly true that the categories created or imagined by outside communities are problematic for arguing any detailed similarity between concerned groups, but it doesn't deny that there are some shared characteristics, symbols and rituals. Apparently some concerned groups were also aware of this state and tried to distinct themselves in pursuing sectarian religious purposes. A passage from treatise written in Zazaki (two sections written probably 1798 and 1831) about *Kizilbaş-Alevism*, analyzed and some passages translated by Mustafa Dehqan, obviously show the concern of Author and legitimate partly our assumption:

“Relations between *Qizilbaşhs*, Yezidis, Shamsis, pagans, and Christians have been studied by the Ottoman *muftis*. Since they have so much in common in a shared culture, there rose the particular need for *Qizilbaşh* leaders and priests to draw strict demarcation lines to serve the self-definition of the various groups. The understanding of this process will certainly disturb the incorrect view of *Qizilbaşh* doctrine as a form of heretical Islam, the origins of which go directly back to Arabia and its Arab community.” (Dehqan 2010:298-299)

an element of fear¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, Casandjian states that the sun, moon and ox, are all considered sacred by Alevi¹⁰⁵. Chater mentions witnessing an occasion in which Alevi Kurds salute the rising (very probably full-) moon, by making low bows¹⁰⁶. We know that in old-Iranian traditions there is a link between the moon, the sun and death. In Pahlavi texts it is told that the spirits of dead people, having traversed the bridge of *Djinwād*, go to the stars, and if they are good spirits they will first go to the moon and then to the sun; most virtuous among them could even reach the light of Ahura Mazda *garōdmān*¹⁰⁷. Maintaining a critical view on these sources, we can conclude that on account of the similarities between the different religions of the Kurds, even in the late Ottoman period, they were somehow seen from the outside as followers of the same religion.

Despite the general hypothesis which argues that the Shemsi melted away within the Assyrian community in Mardin, we have information that Shemsis survived in the Mardin-Urfa region even up to the 1960s. **Amed Gokçen wrote about an incident when in the 1950s the Yezidi *Mîr* (Prince) came to Turkey and during his stay visited Yezidi communities in Urfa and Mardin. There he was told about the existence of a community with rituals similar to those of the Yezidis and also that the members of this community wanted to intermarry with Yezidis and build blood ties.**

¹⁰³ Menant 2006: 118.

¹⁰⁴ Hayrettin Kiliç, in his forties from the village *Çingili Köyü* of district *Kağızman* was interviewed in Mai 2009 in the local of Center of Kurdish Culture – Ahmet Kaya in Paris. The village *Çingirli* is near the modern Armenian-state and is in the historical Armanian-country. That is why Casandjian could have heard of these groups in Armenia.

¹⁰⁵ Menant 2006: 118.

¹⁰⁶ Chater 1928: 497.

¹⁰⁷ See chapter 34 of *Dâdistan-î Dînik* in: West's translation of Pahlavi Text Part II (1882: 76) and Malandra 2000 available at: <http://www.iranica.com/articles/garodman->

According to Gokçen, the *Mîr* decided to visit the village of this community and subsequently consented their entrance into Yezidism. He also recalls that there were tribes in Urfa called Shemsi until the arrival of the *Mîr*, which in due course started referring to themselves as Yezidis¹⁰⁸. Conversion to Yezidism is inherently not allowed, so the fact that the Yezidi community accepted all the members of another community into their faith very likely points to a large degree of similarity between the two groups.

II.3. Conclusion

While it is very difficult to prove the existence of a common pre-religion or faith in Kurdistan, similarities exist between the rituals and religions of such groups as the Yezidis, Ahl-e Haqq and Alevi across Kurdistan, and there are some indications among the Muslim Kurds of a religion (or faith) forming the common base of many religions (or faiths) practiced in Kurdistan before the emergence of Islam. Of course the mutual influence of Turkish and Kurdish Alevis on each other cannot be denied, but we should at the same time be aware that it has been attested by scholars that many religious beliefs of the Alevis in the Balkans have Iranian origins¹⁰⁹. Consequently, some beliefs shared in common by the Kurdish and Turkish Alevis may have derived from this early Iranian origin and influence. Similarities between the now extinct Shemsi faith, existent religions and other traditions in Kurdistan are breathtaking. It is therefore possible, that followers of this pre-Zoroastrian faith were entirely isolated in the mountainous areas of Kurdistan or that they actually converted to the

¹⁰⁸ See interview conducted by Yankin and Kiliç, quoted in [Racho 2010: 10](#).

¹⁰⁹ Dvornik 1959 II.: 47-49.

Zoroastrian faith but continued to tell their ancient myths and practice their ancient rituals. However, it seems more likely that the Western Iranian followers of this old faith were somewhat isolated from the official Zoroastrianism and followed their ancient faith, but were nevertheless influenced by both Zoroastrian and Mesopotamian beliefs. Furthermore, the existence of pre-Zoroastrian elements of an early Iranian faith in the beliefs of religious communities in Kurdistan such as the Yezidis, Ahl-e Haqq, Alevis, and even Sunni Kurds points to the existence of a common cultural and religious base in Kurdistan and is evidence of its continuity in the present. One of the central elements of this common religious base appears to be a light cult with the sun at its centre, which does not rule out the existence of an early Mithra-cult among communities in Kurdistan. We can already anticipate that research into the archeological remains of pre-Christian temples in Tor and other regions of Kurdistan, and into the rituals of various Kurdish religious communities will contribute to our knowledge of this (or potentially these) ancient faith(s), and also the cultural role Kurdistan played in the ancient history of the Near East.

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