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Observations on Kurdish Origins

Paul J. White

There is considerable scholarly dispute about the origins of the Kurds. This article will examine how scholars have approached this controversial subject. As will be shown below, the conclusions of researchers have varied as much as have their methods. At one time or another, disciplines ranging from anthropology through to philology, history and political science have been mobilised in attempts to solve the puzzle of Kurdish origins. It will be shown that — while the results are far from satisfactory — there is surprising unanimity on one crucial conclusion.

Some writers consider that the ancient people of “Gutium”, (the “Gutis”), who established a kingdom in Sumeria (c. 2250-2120 B.C) were in fact Kurds.¹ One writer who mentions this view adds that Babylonian tablets dated in the sixth century B.C. refer to “Kardakas” in the Babylonian royal guards. He implies that people variously referred to as “Carduchis” “Cardaces” and “Kurtoi” by Greek and Roman writers, during the Persian Achaemenid Empire were Kurds.² He goes on to add:

In post-Achaemenid times, the form *Gordyene* was more commonly employed by historians; it remained the dominant form until the beginning of the Islamic age, when the form Kurdistan was finally established for the country.³ Another, quite popular, explanation has the Kurds descending from the Medes of antiquity, who lived in what is today northern Iraq and the north-west of Iran.⁴

This view is disputed by others, most notably by D. N. Mackenzie,⁵ who objects primarily on philological grounds, due to the uncertainty of historical data. In Mackenzie’s view, the Kurdish language (and, by implication, the Kurds themselves) is probably closer to Persian than to the language of the Medes.

Taufiq Wahby⁶ suggests that the problem is further complicated by confusion due to the differing origins of various Kurdish linguistic sub-groups. Wahby asserts:

The areas where the Kurds imposed themselves were to become the modern Kurdistan in the widest meaning of the term. But the Kurds did not impose their name on all Medes. In what became Northern Azarbaijan, a part of the inhabitants were later to become Turkified.

Other areas around the north-west and western shore of the Caspian Sea and in Central Iran were not called Kurdish, although some of these dialects are related to Kermānī. But over a wide area the name of Kurd embraced that of Mede and of other Aryan tribes. I would suggest that the name Mede was absorbed under the Kurds in a way reminiscent of developments in France, where the name of Frank superseded that of Gaul.⁷

Chèref-ou'ddine, *Chèref-Name ou Fastes de la Nation Kourde*

The classic account of the Kurds' origins, society and history is *Şerefnâme*, written late last century in Persian, by one Chèref-ou'ddine.⁸ This author discusses various theories of the origins of the Kurds, mentioning various accounts — namely *Prairies d'Or*, of Mas'ôûdy, *Oriental Geography*, of Abou Is'haq'-al-Farsy and two dictionaries, *Qamoûs* and *Borhan-i-q'âthi*. Chèref-ou'ddine seems to find all these sources useful, choosing freely from the various explanations offered — including a legendary account in which King Solomon ejected 500 magical spirits (*jinns*) from his kingdom. These *jinns* eventually settled in Kurdistan, upon orders from the king.⁹

Despite the romantic appeal of this legend, Chèref-ou'ddine does not seem to be any more satisfied with it than he is with any other single explanation. It is perhaps instructive that not even such an authority as Chèref-ou'ddine can pin down one single origin for the Kurds. The author of the *Şerefnâme* is, however, certain that the Kurds, after discarding their original mother tongues, adopted “a language which is their own, that it to say Kurdish.”¹⁰

A more contemporary Turkish scholar, Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, has written a critique of the *Şerefnâme*.¹¹ Kırzioğlu disputes the claim that the Kurds' ancestors were either Medes or Persians. He claims that the ancient Kurds were in fact enemies of both the Medes and the Persians. According to him, the Kurds were simply Turkic nomadic warrior tribes.

Vladimir Minorsky comments that:

the term “Kurd” is of ancient usage, for it is known since the Arab conquest, if one does not wish to go further back ... it seems that, historically, the name Kurdistan or “land of the Kurds” dates from the time of Sultan Sandjar (d.552/1157)...¹²

According to Minorsky, it seems that the Kurds were given some limited form of recognition in the Ottoman and ancient Persian Empires:

In the 17th. century the Turkish administration gave no more than 3 liwa's to the *eyâlet* of Kurdistan: Darsim, Mush and Diyarbakir. In the same way, in Iran in the 16th. century, Hamadan and Luristan were detached from Kurdistan and the name was reserved for the region of Ardalan with Sinna as its capital.¹³ He states quite clearly that “In Turkey, the Kurds inhabit the whole of the eastern region of the country.”¹⁴ However, he adds that no “completely scientific map of Kurdistan exists”.¹⁵ According to him, the Kurds incorporate “a complexity of ethnical elements”.

Consequently, the Kurdish ‘type’ “varies visibly from place to place”. He continues:

It is probable that the expansion of the Kurd element took place from east (Western Persia) to west (Central Kurdistan) but there is nothing to have prevented the existence in Central Kurdistan, before the coming of the Kurds, of a nationality of different origin but bearing a similar name (Kardü) which later amalgamated with the Iranian Kurds.¹⁶

Minorsky mentions two Sumerian inscriptions from around 2000 B.C., which refer to a country *kar-da-ka*, and to another incident a thousand years later, involving a people known as “Kur-ti-e”. He cannot definitively identify these peoples, however. He adds that Herodotus in the 5th. Century B.C. mentions no name like this, but, “according to him”, a people in the Archaeminid Empire could be the Bokhtân (Bohtân), whom Minorsky implies were Kurds, or possibly precursors of the latter.

He states:

The retreat of the Ten Thousand described by Xenophon (401-400 B.C.) made famous the name of Karduchoi ... whose country lay to the east of the Kentrites (Bohtân). From this time onwards we continually find the name on the left bank of the Tigris near Mount Djudi ... In Aramaic the district was called Beth-Kardû and the present town of Djazîrat Ibn ‘Umar, [was called] Gazartâ of Kardû. The Armenians has the name Kordudh...¹⁷

It is possible, Minorsky speculates, that the ancient Kardû were a Semitic people. Even so, however:

It is certain that the land of the ancient Karduchoi is at the present day one of the principal centres of the Kurds. It has therefore been concluded that the Karduchoi were identical with the Kurds, and this view was still considered axiomatic at the beginning of the 20th. century...¹⁸

“Going a step further”, Minorsky believes that the Kurds were related to the Chaldi (Chaldeans). He cites nineteenth century research to back this assertion, but does not attempt to prove it.¹⁹

Minorsky’s main point is that the Kurds of today are a product of the amalgamation of the various peoples he has mentioned as their precursors.²⁰ Eventually, these different peoples and tribes merged into one people, so that by about the time of the Arab conquest “a single ethnic term Kurd” was being applied to an amalgamation of different tribes.²¹

Thomas Bois concedes that the origin of the Kurds has puzzled many historians “for half a century”. He believes that today’s Kurds came from many sources, which amalgamated in the course of centuries. Bois concludes that the end result of this protracted process was the emergence of a distinct ethnic or national identity.²²

Minorsky seems to be saying that, while some of these “Kurds” were probably Persian, Semitic or Armenian, the remainder might have been a distinct people — albeit one with its own internal differentiation.²³

Minorsky notes the existence of different physical types among the Kurds: The Western Kurds ... have been distinguished from the Eastern and Southern types. The former are a blond, blue-eyed, dolichocephalic type. The others are of a brown, black-eyed, brachycephalic type.²⁴

Nevertheless, he seems to agree with Ariëns Kappers, that despite these physical differences, the Kurds do “constitute a truly distinct race”. But he also cautions:

Despite everything ... anthropological researches on the Kurds are too fragmentary and uncertain for us to be able to conclude from them what may be the origin of these people.²⁵

Basile Nikitine's epic study²⁶ reviews a stunning array of theories about the Kurds' origins. He probably mentions most of the supposed historical references to the earliest Kurds — and a few more. Xenophon's retreat of the ten thousand is discussed, as are the Medes, the Karduchoi, the Chaldeans and many other ancient peoples. The relationship between the Kurds' ancestors and these ancient peoples (especially the ancient Georgians and Armenians) is considered. Nikitine examines the problem of the Kurds' origins from several angles — from the anthropological and sociological through to the historical and linguistic. He even remarks that Marco Polo "spoke moreover of Christianity among the Kurds in the mountains in Mosul".²⁷

After having discussed and assessed the theories of the "important linguists of the period", E. Rödiger and A. F. Pott, and those of the Russian scholars Kunik and Minorsky, and the Pole A. Smieszek, Nikitine comes to the two explanations he considers to be the most probable. This is quite useful for contemporary Kurdologists, as the two schools of thought represented here (the views of V. Minorsky and N. J. Marr respectively) are also the two principal contending theories among scholars researching today's Kurds.²⁸ Nikitine states:

In short, two theses are presented to us on the problem of the origins of the Kurds. One insists on their Iranian (Indo European) origin and their removal in the seventh century B.C. from the region of Lake Urmiya to Boht'n (Kentrites); the other asserts the autochthonous character of the Kurds, related to such other Asian people as the Khaldes, the Georgians, the Armenians, and of the language they spoke, which was later replaced by an Iranian one.²⁹

Having narrowed the problem down in this manner, Nikitine immediately qualifies his preceding statement, by conceding that the two theses cited are not mutually exclusive. He notes how Minorsky, "in effect" admits the possibility of asiatic influences upon the Kurds, while Marr³⁰ — who asserts the autochthonous (native) character of the Kurds — nevertheless suggests a possible Medean connection and:

recognises that the *japhétique* stratum in the Kurd shows itself less clearly, whereas in its Indo-European part the Kurd defines himself excellently as Iranian.³¹

Discussing Nikitine's research, Derk Kinnane has commented:

With so much yet to be learned about the early history of this part of West Asia the safest thing for the laymen to say is that from the beginning of history the mountains above Mesopotamia were inhabited by people who fought and sometimes defeated the empires of the plains, the Babylonians and the Assyrians. In any event, either by assimilation or by displacing the previous inhabitants the heart of Kurdistan was settled, probably by the seventh century B.C., by Iranicised tribes. These tribes are the cultural progenitors of the modern Kurds.³²

In the circumstances, Kinnane's conclusion seems like sound advice not just for "laymen", but also for scholars, given the present state of knowledge. It seems that scholars who have researched the question seem unable to solve the vexed problem of the origins of the Kurds beyond reasonable doubt. However, the majority of them appear agreed that — wherever they and their language originated — an ethnically distinct Kurdish nation eventually emerged. Nevertheless, the tantalising gap in Kurdish studies deserves to be resolved once and for all.

Part of the reason why this has not happened, of course, is that none of the countries which have absorbed Kurdistan are very keen to open their doors to researchers on Kurdish origins and identity. This is not an adequate explanation, however. For substantial material is available for perusal by scholars outside Kurdistan — especially in the West.

If the puzzle of the Kurds' origins is ever unravelled, it is the view of this writer that it will be established that the Kurds are an amalgam of various tribes and peoples, (probably including the Medes and the Karduchoi), who had evolved into a distinct people in their own right by the 7th.Century A.D.³³

Notes

1. See: Mehrdad Izady, "Kurdistan" in the *The Encyclopaedia of Asian History*, p. 373.
2. Izady, op. cit., p. 373.
3. Izady, op. cit., p. 373.
4. See Vladimir Minorsky, "Kurds" and "Kurdistan", in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Taufiq Wahby, *The Origins of the Kurds and their Language*, passim.
5. D. N. Mackenzie, "The Origins of Kurdish", in "Transactions of the Philological Society", cited in Taufiq Wahby, *The Origins of the Kurds and their Language*, pp. 2-3. See also D. N . Mackenzie, *Kurdish Dialect Studies*, Vols. I & II, passim.
6. Wahby, op. cit., pp. 4-6.
7. Wahby, ibid, pp. 5-6.
8. In his entry "Kurds, Kurdistan" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. V, p. 439, Vladimir Minorsky comments that the *Şerefnâme* "occupies an exceptional place among the sources for Kurdish history".
9. I am here citing the 1868 French translation of a large portion of *Chèref-Name ou Fastes de la Nation Kourde*, pp. 15-16. "Kourde" in the title is an antiquated form (equivalent to the old English form "Koord") of the modern French "Kurde". The same story of King Solomon and the *Jinns* is also mentioned in Margaret Kahn's book, *Children of the Jinn, In Search of the Kurds and their Country*, p. xi.
10. Chèref-ou'ddine, *Chèref-Name ou Fastes de la Nation Kourde*, p. 15.

11. Kırzioğlu M. Fahrettin, *Kürtlerin Kökü*, passim, but especially p. 6.
12. Minorsky, “Kurds, Kurdistan”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. V, p. 439.
13. Op. Cit, p. 439.
14. Op. Cit.
15. Op. Cit, p. 446.
16. Op. Cit, p. 447.
17. Op. Cit.
18. Op. Cit, p. 448.
19. Op. Cit, p. 448.
20. Op. Cit, pp. 448-49.
21. Op. Cit p. 449.
22. Thomas Bois, *Connaissance des Kurds*, p. 7.
23. Minorsky, Op. Cit, p. 449.
24. Op. Cit., p. 446.
25. Op. Cit., p. 446.
26. Nikitine, Les Kurdes. *Étude Sociologique et Historique*.
27. Nikitine, ibid., p.7.
28. Ismail Besikçi, arguably the most eminent of present day Kurdologists in Turkey, is a strong partisan of the native character of the Kurds. He has spent literally years in jail for his research. He recently spent yet another period in prison for his book, *Kurdistan — An Inter-State Colony*. At his last trial, he explained his understanding of the Kurds’ origins:

The Kurdish population in the Middle East is in excess of 30 million. The Kurds have lived in Kurdistan for 4,000 years, whereas the Turks started to move from Central Asia through Khorasan into Iran, Kurdistan, Iraq, Syria and Anatolia in the second half of the 11th. Century (Besikçi, 1990).

This is also the view promoted generally by Kurdish nationalists.

29. Nikitine, op. cit., p.15. Marr’s analysis is based in part on the alleged Japhetic character of Kurdish. Whether this language group actually existed, is a point of some contention among linguists. The Japhetic linguistic family is considered by some

linguists to have preceded both the Indo-European and Semitic language groups. According to those who assert that this linguistic family existed in antiquity, the Japhetic group is situated in the Western Asia and Europe of the time.

30. N. J. Marr, *Der japhetische Kaukasus*.

31. Nikitine, op. cit, pp. 15-16.

32. Derk Kinnane, *The Kurds and Kurdistan*, p. 21. 33. This is also the view of David McDowall in *The Kurds*. Minority Rights Group Report, No. 23, p. 7.

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